

Zoe and Marlyn
Kress share a
mother-daughter
moment. Opposite,
Zoe lights the
Shabbat candles.



HOW THREE YOUNG WOMEN, ADOPTED FROM CHINA, ARE APPROACHING THEIR

ZOE KRESS IS A TYPICAL JEWISH GIRL, RAISED ON A DIET OF MATZO BALL SOUP AND KNAIDELECH, along with that other standard “Jewish” fare, wonton soup and pot stickers. She’s excited about heading to Israel this year with her eighth-grade day school class, and she had the time of her life at her bat mitzvah last spring, where she read from the family Torah. The party following the ceremony was especially meaningful for Zoe, because the theme—China—holds particular significance for her. • Zoe is one of the many Chinese children who were adopted by Jewish families in the late ’90s and are now embracing their Jewish faith as they prepare for and celebrate their bat mitzvahs. However Chinese and Jewish traditions are being woven together—whether it’s a »

■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHRYN GAMBLE AND COLBY KATZ



THEIR JEWISH COMING-OF-AGE

Born (Chinese) and Raised (Jewish)



■ BY LAMBETH HOCHWALD



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—JANE ARONSON, M.D.

Mandarin reading during the service or a party menu that includes both brisket and Peking duck—these kids have a better sense of their dual identity than adopted children ever did before.

“Things have definitely changed,” says adoption-medicine specialist Jane Aronson, M.D., who is director of international pediatric health services in New York City, CEO and founder of the Worldwide Orphans Foundation (www.orphandoctor.com), and clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University. Aronson has evaluated over 6,000 children adopted from abroad and has traveled to orphanages in Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Latin America.

“When the children came here in 1975 with the Vietnamese airlift, their culture wasn’t yet as well integrated into our culture,” she says. “We learned a lot from them. Today’s adopted

children who are coming of age know where they’ve come from.” Children adopted by Jewish parents also know that being from a far-off land and a different culture doesn’t mean they can’t embrace their Jewish identities wholeheartedly.

Aronson’s family is a case in point: She’s the mother of two children, one adopted from Ethiopia and the other from Vietnam. “My sons go to Hebrew school and they see themselves as Jewish,” she says. “They don’t say, ‘I’m Jewish *but...*’”

“It’s so important for these children to understand their roots as an Asian, Jewish, and American person,” Aronson observes. “It’s incumbent on the family to recognize these differences and embrace them in their own way.”

Here are the stories of three girls—two who have already had their bat mitzvahs and one who will celebrate hers in the spring. Each of their families had its own approach to integrating its adopted daughter’s cultural heritage into her life,

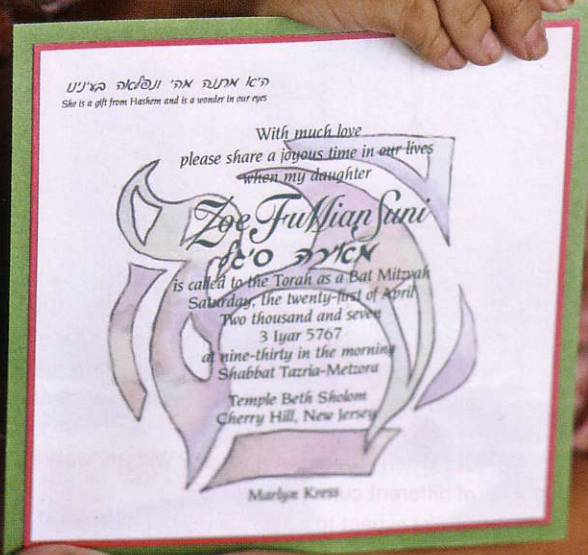
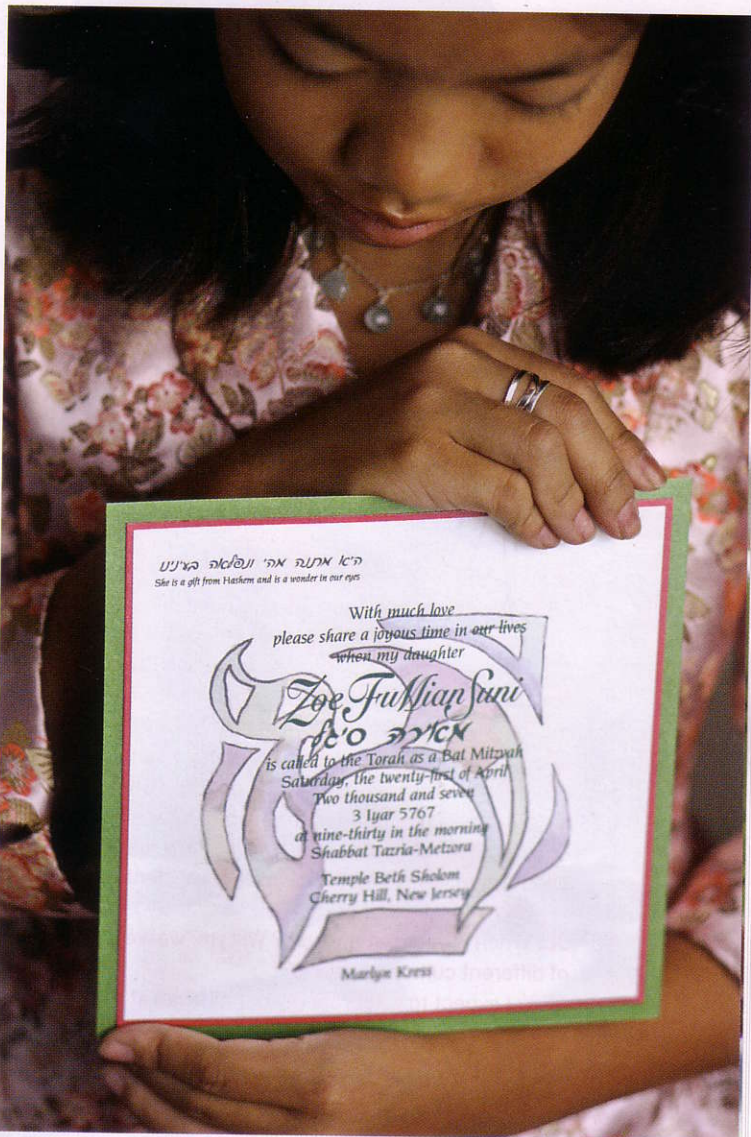
and each story speaks volumes about the joys and challenges of doing so.

EMMA'S ALL-AMERICAN BAT MITZVAH

Emma's bat mitzvah was the culmination of a huge dream for her parents, Andrea and Robert Colton of Boca Raton, Fla. The mother and father of five wanted it to be the best day of Emma's life. Held on May 19, 2007, the ceremony turned out to be the perfect blend of all that Emma loves: horses and family—but no Chinese rituals.

"Emma didn't want her bat mitzvah to have anything to do with her Chinese background," says Andrea, a dermatologist. "She wanted it to be like everyone else's—and that was fine with us."

Recently, Emma told Andrea that she thinks of herself more as a Jewish Boca girl than a Chinese girl. "That makes sense, since she did exactly what my other (biological) daughters did—they all went to Jewish preschool, then Hebrew school," Andrea says.



Zoe Kress, left, at the bimah, and above, holding her bat mitzvah invitation, which sports

her chop, a stamp with her name in Chinese. Opposite, Emma Colton reads the Torah.



"Growing up in Boca as a Chinese girl, I felt like any girl growing up in Boca," Emma says. "It felt normal. In Hebrew school, no one ever asked about my background."

Emma loved learning her haftorah and Torah portion in preparation for her bat mitzvah, and says that one of the hardest parts was learning how to chant. "Even harder was getting up on the bimah in front of all of my family and friends and singing everything I learned," she says. "But in the end, it turned out to be really fun and I didn't mess up once. I had the greatest time of my life."

Her dad, Robert, an internist, did discuss Emma's roots in his speech. "I talked about the profound ways Emma has affected everyone's life," he says now.

From the start, the Coltons did whatever they could to >>

Adoption 101

Here is a starting list of adoption agencies and support organizations that specialize in working with Jewish families.

- Families With Children From China www.fwcc.org
- Jewish Childcare Association www.jccany.org
- Stars of David www.starsofdavid.org





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—SUSAN SACHS

ently. Last June, two weeks after Emma’s bat mitzvah, the whole family returned to China, this time to adopt 4½-year-old Connor, their newest addition. “Emma tried to learn as much Mandarin from her sisters as possible so she could communicate with her little brother,” Andrea says. “This year, she’s studying Mandarin instead of Spanish in school.”

This English- and Hebrew-speaking Boca girl, who will soon be conversant in Mandarin as well, may feel perfectly “normal,” but she’s anything but average.

HANNAH’S BUMPY PATH TO BAT MITZVAH

When Susan Sachs, an executive search consultant in Mount Kisco, N.Y., started thinking about her daughter Hannah’s bat mitzvah, she had just had her own. “I had a bat mitzvah to complete something that never really had a chance to happen—namely, my formal ‘statement’ that I was a committed Jew,” she says. “I also hoped that in doing so, Hannah would see this as a continuation of a family tradition and would take her place on the bimah when it was her time.” (Continued on page 95)

Susan's husband, Shelly, a vice president of business development for a business support company, has a strong affiliation with the culture of Judaism but not with the religious aspects.

"Hannah went to Hebrew school for about two years and hated it," Susan says. It started to look like a bat mitzvah might not be in the cards. "For the most part, she was bored, so she was resistant on those grounds. But a year or so into her religious education, it became clear to us that part of her resistance had to do with the fact that she was the only non-Caucasian in the school and she was having trouble understanding how she fit in."

Hannah acknowledges that the toughest part about going to Hebrew school was that she was the only Asian person there. "I stood out," she says. "Also, kids asked questions about whether it's 'legal' to be Chinese and Jewish at the same time. That was hard."

Ultimately, Susan and Shelly decided to take Hannah out of the synagogue school and hire a tutor who was also a dear friend. When the tutor fell seriously ill, Hannah became discouraged and decided that she was no longer interested in studying for her bat mitzvah. This was wrenching for Susan. "To me, given Hannah's early beginnings, I wanted her to feel that she had roots in a world community to which she would always belong," she says. Still, Susan respected Hannah's wishes.

"I felt like I was letting go of one of those dreams we all have for our children," Susan said. "But if we had any hope of drawing her to Judaism, I realized, we had to let it happen naturally."

This past year, Hannah started attending her friends' bar and bat mitzvahs. And one day, she announced that she would like to have one after all.

Susan and Shelly found her another tutor. "This one has engaged Hannah at her pace," Susan says. "They sit on the floor together in our family room, talking, laughing, studying, and Hannah is making remarkably quick progress learning her prayers, her haftorah and her Torah portions. She studies her Hebrew every night before she goes to bed, and a few weeks ago on a family vacation,

she was singing the prayers in the car."

On May 24, 2008, Hannah will have her bat mitzvah in the synagogue where Susan and Shelly got married, Hannah had her baby naming, Susan's parents renewed their vows for their 50th wedding anniversary, and where, five years ago, Susan's mother, then 78, celebrated her bat mitzvah.

"Hannah is going to experience her bat mitzvah in one of the most meaningful places that exists for my family," Susan says. "I will take the tallit that both my mom and I wore out of the needlepoint case that we both made, and put it around the shoulders of my beloved Jewish daughter who was born in China."

There may just be some Chinese traditions woven into the day. "We are looking for ways to make Hannah's Chinese heritage an important part of this event," Susan says. "We always hoped that she would embrace Judaism and her Chinese heritage."

Susan says there was never one way to ensure that Hannah would feel "Jewish." "We've had to live our lives the way that's right for us—to a large degree that is defined by Jewish values. Sure, we've had to change direction several times with her bat mitzvah and that has required a great deal of creativity and flexibility."

It has also given the family an understanding that there's more than one path. "The traditional route to Judaism doesn't always work," Susan says. "But that's okay."

THE YIN-YANG STORY OF ZOE

For Marlyn Kress, a single mom from Mount Laurel, N.J., planning her daughter Zoe's bat mitzvah was the culmination of every hope she had for the baby she adopted at 8 weeks.

"I knew that whatever child I had, biological or adopted, was going to be raised as a Jew," says Marlyn, a sales executive who adopted Zoe from China after years of trying to have a baby. "I wanted her to be proud of where she came from and who she is, but I also wanted her to make a life as a Jew—not just to practice as a child, but as she grew up and had a family of her own."

Zoe, who was converted in an Orthodox ceremony at a mikvah when she was a year old, attended a Jewish nursery school and then a Solomon Schech-

ter day school. Her bat mitzvah on April 21, 2007, paid tribute to the yin-yang story of her life.

The service was entirely traditional in custom and ritual, right down to Zoe's decision to twin her bat mitzvah with a girl who perished in the Holocaust. (Tibor Rubin, the brother of the girl Zoe honored, is a Congressional Medal of Honor winner. He's become like a grandfather to Zoe, and he attended her bat mitzvah.)

"Both Zoe and I learned so much about *tikkun olam*. And we learned that you may not know why you do things, but that what you receive back is a thousand-fold," Marlyn says. Add to that a discovery that a family Torah, appropriated years earlier, was found in the Torah vault at Marlyn's synagogue, and that Zoe read her *parsha* from it, and you have an event steeped in ancient ritual, spirituality, and personal revelation.

"Being Jewish is a big part of my life and I'm proud of it," Zoe says. "As a young kid, I always looked forward to my bat mitzvah. When you become a bat mitzvah, you become a woman in the Jewish world. You take on the responsibilities of an adult and people treat you as one. It is hard to imagine my life without its Jewishness. It's hard to explain how I feel. All I can really say about it is that being Jewish is a part of my heart."

While the ceremony was all Jewish, the party was a tribute to Zoe's Chinese background. The handmade invitation was written in Hebrew and English and adorned with Zoe's Chinese chop, a stamp with her name in Chinese. Zoe wore a pink floral dress made of Chinese silk and the tables were named for Chinese cities. Fortune-cookie-shaped place-card holders were made of Chinese fabric, and the tables were adorned with Chinese lanterns and vases of orchids.

Zoe says she loved sharing pieces of her Chinese background with her family and friends. "My favorite part about my bat mitzvah was definitely my party," Zoe says. "As much as I enjoyed the service, the party was so much fun."

"I wanted her to know who she is and how she got here," her mother says. "I wanted her to be proud of both sides of herself. She's an American-raised Chinese-Jewish girl." ●