

A new era for adoptions

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Until 1996, Israeli adoption law gave total responsibility for adoption services to the government. Originally lodged in the Adoption Service of the Ministry of Welfare (now the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs), this social work service placed thousands of homeless and neglected children with childless couples yearning to be parents. It also oversaw the adoption of large numbers of children by relatives, the second-largest source of

parent children declared available for adoption by the courts.

Meanwhile, with only an average of 70 babies available each year for non-relative adoptions, thousands of couples decided not to wait for over six years on the ministry's waiting list or face the restrictive eligibility criteria and screening procedures. Instead, they went abroad to various underdeveloped countries to seek a child privately.

Unofficial figures point to over

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Israeli adoptive parents.

In the early years of the state, there were more children "available" for adoption than couples wanting to adopt. For many years following the mass immigration from Middle Eastern countries, most of the adopted children were of Sephardi origin, while most of the adopting couples were Ashkenazim. However, as the population and the number of couples seeking to adopt increased, the number of children available for adoption significantly decreased.

Unfortunately, the ministry's adoption social workers and the political hierarchy did not understand that the future direction of modern adoption services is tied to intercountry adoptions and a partnership between "sending" and "receiving" countries. Unlike most other Western nations, the ministry entered into a period of tightening criteria for adopting and avoiding serious involvement in developing the intercountry adoption option. It even changed its name to "The Service for the (Israeli) Child."

It did, however, develop adoption services for mentally and physically handicapped and "older" Israeli children, and tried less successfully to increase the number of institutionalized depen-

10,000 private foreign adoptions. Unfortunately, unrestricted and unsupervised private adoptions also led to illegal activity, racketeering, exploitation and even imprisonment of many Israeli couples abroad.

As a teacher and researcher (and former adoption social worker in the US) of child welfare policy and practice, I was convinced that there was a need to change the adoption law to allow professional, government-licensed, nonprofit organizations to do intercountry adoptions. Thus began a 10-year effort to educate MKs and induce them to introduce private legislation.

The 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoptions was very helpful in making the case for the acceptance of nonprofit organizations in international adoption work. Legislation patterned on the Hague Convention was finally introduced by MKs Anat Maor and Limor Livnat in 1994.

Then-minister of labor and social affairs Ora Namir gave it her blessing, overruling most of her social work staff's opposition to losing their historical monopoly over adoption. The law was then expertly refined in the Knesset Law



Committee and unanimously passed into law in May, 1996.

After great delay by the ministry, a draft of the bylaws necessary for licensing nonprofit adoptions agencies was finally submitted to the Law Committee for discussion in late 1997, and approved for implementation as of January 1, 1998.

THE ESSENCE of the new law is that licensed, professional nonprofit groups can provide all the services necessary regarding intercountry adoptions. Adoption of Israeli children still remains in the hands of the ministry. A licensing committee reviews applications from interested nonprofit associations and decides if they meet the criteria.

A maximum agency fee of \$20,000 was approved for intercountry adoption work, and there are clear requirements regarding board members, professional staff, capital, evaluation of applicants, relationship and recognition from

sending countries, government supervision and accountability.

By design, there is nothing in the adoption law that relates to conversion, and this is left strictly to the adopting couple to decide, after the adoption.

The new situation has many implications for expanding the relationship between government and the nonprofit sector, for innovation in adoption services, intercountry social work cooperation, private philanthropy, research and training, and future social legislation.

Most of all, this is a time for joy for thousands of Israelis, present and future, for abandoned children abroad in search of homes, and for the social work profession.

The transfer of intercountry adoption work to the nonprofit sector represents a significant policy shift by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Plans are underway to contract out foster care services as well, and thus end the poor record of fol-

low-up and service to children in foster homes. Contracting out has already been used successfully by the Ministry's Rehabilitation Division for several years.

The essence of these changes is that the ministry retains responsibility for standards, licensing and supervision, while purchasing services for welfare clients from nonprofit associations. I believe that this is a step in the right direction, so long as the ministry does not hold back funding from the contractors. It will be up to the public and the media to serve as watchdogs over this process.

I hope that the decentralization of adoption work will lead the way to many other partnerships between the ministry and the nonprofit sector, and to great innovations in social work practice.

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