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## Awareness growing, local rabbi says



Livya Zeitler, 6, of Elkhart shows the Hebrew word for cat in her Hebrew coloring book to a Tribune reporter. Her mother, Melanie Zeitler, right, is shown at the South Bend Regional Art Museum, where she is director of development. Zeitler, who is Jewish, is raising her daughter in the Jewish faith. Tribune Photo/JANAR STEWART

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Every Friday at sunset, 6-year-old Livya Zeitler of Elkhart helps her mother, Melanie, light candles to welcome Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath.

Together they pray over wine and the traditional chalah bread, covering their eyes to show God respect. Livya has been able to recite these prayers since she was 3 1/2.

At South Bend Hebrew Day School, an Orthodox elementary school, Livya studies oral and written Hebrew and learns about Jewish customs, traditions and history.

As traditional as her upbringing is, Livya's starting point with Judaism isn't. She was adopted from China.

Livya's just one example of numbers of racially and ethnically diverse Jews in the United States. Today, more American Jewish communities reflect the fact that not all Jewish faces are white. **Who is a Jew?**

Diversity in Judaism is a given. The story of the Jewish people "is filled with interracial and intercultural mixing," according to the book "In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People" by Diane Tobin, Gary A. Tobin and Scott Rubin (Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2005).

According to the Web site of Jewish & Community Research, "In Every Tongue" "explodes the myth of a single authentic Judaism." And in exploring the question of "Who is a Jew?" the book reminds readers of the worldwide spread of Judaism in ancient times.

After the enslaved Jews fled Egypt, they journeyed for 400 years "from Asia to Africa and back again." Jewish regions were conquered by the Greeks, Romans, Turks and others, and "had long and deep connections with other Mediterranean and European cultures."

With each encounter with different peoples, Jews intermarried and picked up other cultural practices. In the United States, however, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population, 80 percent of an estimated 6 million Jews, are Ashkenazi Jews from eastern Europe, according to a 2002 survey by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research.

That leaves 20 percent of Jews who are racially and ethnically diverse -- including African, African-American, Latino, Asian, American Indian, Sephardic (Jews of Spanish descent), Mizrahi (Jews of Middle Eastern origin) and mixed-race Jews by heritage, adoption and marriage.

Although "In Every Tongue" does not provide specific data, it cites the study as saying those diversity figures are growing.

Even so, the book's interviews with diverse Jews give a candid look at the challenges they face, particularly with having to "prove" their Jewishness because of their skin color, ethnic background and/or different customs.

**It's much better now** Rabbi Stanley Halpern, of Temple Israel in Gary, a Sephardic Jew, understands both sides.

"I think there is a suspicion among a lot of Jews of individuals who they don't perceive as being originally Jewish," he says. That suspicion is "very often" directed to converted Jews and even "families of Hispanic Jewish heritage that go back hundreds of years but don't eat the same food as Jews out of eastern Europe, have different last names and didn't speak Yiddish."

But, "Maybe any group that is routinely persecuted is suspicious," he says.

Perhaps in response to that memory of persecution, synagogues with mixed congregations such as Temple Israel congregation tend to be very welcoming. Temple Israel's congregation is largely Caucasian, but "in comparison to the other congregations in this area, we probably have a lot more of Hispanic and African-American families," Halpern says.

Plus, Jews and non-Jews alike have become more aware of diversity in Judaism, he says. "It's much better now." **A desire to embrace**

Any doubt that Judaism reflects every skin color would be cleared up by looking at Israel, says Rabbi Michael Friedland of Sinai Synagogue in South Bend.

"All you have to do is take a trip to Israel to see the diversity in the Jewish world," he says.

In his 10 years in South Bend, Friedland has had African, African-American and Asian members at his temple. Though the numbers haven't been large, he says they're significant for a community the size of South Bend.

He has seen increasing acceptance of diverse Jews. "In today's Jewish world, there is such a desire to embrace. There's a sensitivity to the fact that Jews in the United States are so homogenous. ... The reaction is not to put up obstacles, but just the opposite." **A pleasant experience**

Livya has never had a problem being accepted as Jewish.

"It has been a most pleasant experience," Zeitler says. And she's not surprised by this.

"I think that it's typical in that in most Jewish families ... it's part of your duty to welcome all, to welcome what you call K'lal Yisrael, 'all of Israel,' " she says.

Zeitler is passionate about her daughter having a stronger connection to Judaism than she had when growing up. Although she was very aware she was Jewish and they celebrated the High

Holy Days, her family was more culturally Jewish, she says. They didn't attend temple regularly, she did not study Hebrew, nor was she bat-mitzvahed. Even though there were holes in her knowledge about Judaism, Zeitler picked up on her heritage and never felt as if she were an outsider.

As an adult, she studied the Torah and was bat-mitzvahed. She's now working toward a master's degree in Jewish studies.

As to future challenges with a Chinese-born, Jewish-raised girl, Zeitler says it will be a matter of balancing Livya's born identity with her family identity.

Right now, "I don't think it's complicated for her," Zeitler says. "It's more, again, what the outside world brings in upon you."

**Religious rebel** Born to a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father, Susan Enamorado, of New Carlisle, grew up in New York. Her experience, or non-experience, with Judaism was similar to Zeitler's.

"Religion was kind of taboo in our house," she says. Her interest in it made her "the rebel as far as religion."

Like Zeitler, Enamorado has always felt as Jewish as anyone else, gaining her Jewish identity through her grandfather and going to a school with a high number of Jewish students.

When she was a new mother, she wanted her sons -- 11-year-old Sebastian and 6-year-old Alex -- to have a religious background.

She chose Judaism because it touched her core through "Hebrew songs or Jewish songs or songs from hidden Jews in Russia," she says. "I kind of call it reverberations." She visited many churches, but "I didn't feel the same kind of emotional and spiritual response," she says. She hopes her multiracial, multispiritual sons feel the same about Judaism.

Enamorado's husband, Roberto, is a Latino/African native of Honduras who was raised Catholic but claims Jewish ancestry as well as spiritual roots in Africa.

Enamorado is dedicated to giving her sons a greater connection with Judaism than she had growing up. She and the boys attend Sinai Temple, a Reform temple in Michigan City. They study Hebrew and celebrate Jewish holidays.

Though people "have gone out of their way to make sure we feel welcome," she says, Sebastian at times has wished to be "like everyone else," whether speaking of religion or race. It helps that her sons know other minority Jewish kids, she says.

Enamorado won't force bar mitzvah on her sons, though she hopes they'll choose it someday. She'd like to be bat-mitzvahed herself. Neither will she pressure her sons to marry Jewish when the time comes, though she admits "it's crossed her mind" that she'd love it if they did find Jewish partners to preserve their faith.

Ultimately, "I trust their judgment," she says, "and I want them to pick a good person no matter what race, what religion."

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