

# D-I-Y Parenthood

*Radical Single-Parenting by Choice, Deliberative Half-Time Mothering, Cross-Continental Spuncling. What's Up With "Family"?*

The majority of Jewish women, myself included, marry men and beget joint biological children. We live within the safety—and anesthetic—of cultural norms, so thinking about alternative ways we might parent or partner rarely occurs to us. We don't, for example, ponder the following:

"Would I be a better parent if my 'romantic partner' and my 'parenting partner' were two different people?" "Would I be a better parent if I only parented half the time and found a 'parenting partner' in another household to do the other half?" "If I raised my kids communally,



From left: Jenifer Firestone and daughter, Hannah; Julie Greenberg's family; Hannah with her co-parents; the Greenberg brood, still germinating.

but without a partner, would that be a better fit?" These are questions so distant from our brain pans that we're more likely to ask if Bubbie ever fought the Boers.

Heterosexual and fertile, we are also never really challenged to find out to what degree our behaviors are determined by what other people think—a question I contemplated a lot as I interviewed women whose parenting and coupling choices are wildly different from just about everybody else's. Plus these norm-indifferent folks are enviably confident.

In the stories about 'differently conceived' families that follow, Julie Greenberg and Jenifer Firestone describe creating kinship systems that break a million rules, but also roost upon sturdy new ones: *Always do a gut check. Do what's best for the child. Don't sweat what other people think.* Zoe Greenberg, 18, writes about growing up in her out-of-every-conceivable-box-in-the-world family. And would-be 'spuncle' Avi Levinson talks about finding—and then losing—the niche that fit him better than fatherhood.

These self-determining souls have something important to teach the ovine rest of us. Read on and be challenged.

—SUSAN SCHNUR

*Lilith's writing on adoption and related subjects is made possible by a grant from The Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation.*

# Breaking the Norms Confidently

*How one mother, with a series of female lovers, two rabbinic sperm donors, two adoptions and one gay parenting partner, raises five exceptional kids.*

by SUSAN SCHNUR



Lighting Hanukkah candles:  
(from left) Rosi, Zoe, Julie,  
Raffi, Mozi (Joey not shown).

When Julie Greenberg was eight, her newly-divorced mother, an activist in the civil rights movement, moved the family to rural Mississippi for two years. It was 1965, the year after three young civil rights workers (one Black and two Jews) were murdered there. That first summer the family took up residence in a racially integrated community—something unheard of in the deeply segregated South. Julie was the oldest of four. After her came Miggie (7), Katie (5), and Liza (4). Later there was a fifth daughter, Gwen. “A half-sister by another not-in-the-picture dad,” is how Julie puts it. “The ‘not-in-the-picture’ was my mother’s plan.”

Julie’s mother, Polly, a founder of Head Start and well-known child educator, came to Mississippi to implement a radical-activist nursery school project for Black, rural families; a population so poor their homes had no plumbing or electricity. Bringing enrichment programs to communities like these was revolutionary, but equally so was one of the project’s core tenets: that children need to experience their parents as empowered. To that end, Polly ran the component of the project that organized and trained the pre-

schoolers’ uneducated parents to work as teachers, administrators, bus drivers and cooks—all the roles vital to a community. (In early-childhood education circles, the Child Development Group of Mississippi was, and remains, renowned.)

Every weekend, Polly would put the four girls into her Ford station wagon and they’d drive from one impoverished outpost to the next—wherever programs had been seeded. Julie remembers hot, dusty rides through endless cotton fields “and we’d be singing! Singing the folk songs of the civil rights movement.” She also recalls, she says, “seeing whole families transformed. I was only eight, but it was powerfully formative.”

Now 53 and living in Philadelphia in a racially diverse, limited equity co-op building committed to affordable housing, Greenberg also sees as formative her exposure to her mother’s mothering, the latter’s independence from cultural norms, and her attitude about life choices.

“I got with my mother’s milk that you ‘live your priorities’—that was my mother’s motto—and if you do that, you grow more and more into *yourself* as you get older.

“My mother modeled how to follow your heart and live by reasonable passions,” Greenberg says. “I loved my childhood. I loved being part of a close pack of siblings. I loved the culture of my family; we enjoyed each other. And I got my love of motherhood from my own family’s values—generations of educators who knew a ton about child development.

“As I thought about my vision for my life, mothering was an essential part. I felt that my mother’s being a single mom had gone well; she was a wonderful mother. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I had become passionate about wanting to be a single mom, too. It was a priority, a high, high value.

“I like partnering,” Greenberg adds, “but I just didn’t see it as a prerequisite to parenting. I would have done anything, anything—work in a five-and-ten, whatever I needed to do economically—to be able to raise a brood.”

At 25, Greenberg applied to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and she remembers being asked, during her interview, if she planned on having a family. It was the kind of question that the admissions committee had started asking in an effort to suss out the unduly flaky; there was concern that the student body was listing towards the fringe.

“My answer was ‘yes, definitely,’” Greenberg says, chuckling, “but of course I knew, and they didn’t, that their idea of a family and my idea of a family had little in common. They were accepting someone whose norms were really, really different.”

In her first or second year at R.R.C., Greenberg began looking for a sperm donor. “Kids like to know where they come from,” she says, plainspoken. “It’s better. So I preferred the path of a known

donor to an unknown one, but it was important that it not be someone who could threaten me, as a mother, in a patriarchal court system.”

Her lover at the time was married to an older man—a well-known rabbi with grown kids. (It was an open marriage.) “She said to me, ‘Why don’t you ask \_\_\_\_\_ to be your donor?’” Greenberg relates. “He was fertile, healthy, with good genes, beauty, brains. He lived a few blocks away; I was close to him. He was a Holocaust survivor and he immediately understood:

“Jack immediately got it, too,” Greenberg says. “Life! This wasn’t like other sperm donors I’d heard about who go to an agonizing place: *‘What will the child think?’ ‘I don’t know if I can stay uninvolved.’ ‘I will want to parent.’* My sperm donors didn’t agonize about any of this. Neither did I.”

Because Greenberg’s second donor was younger and more open to parenting, Greenberg protected her parental rights by legally buying her donor’s sperm under the auspices of a doctor. She gave birth to

Meanwhile, Greenberg had become romantically involved with Rebecca, a divorced woman with two children who lived four blocks away. The relationship lasted four years, but then foundered over incompatible visions of their future. Rebecca saw herself as moving out of her role as parent; Greenberg saw herself as just warming to the task. “There was hurt and anger,” she says. “We were at different stages of the parenting journey.

“But we were all very close and we remain so,” Greenberg explains. “I was a significant person to Rebecca’s kids and she was and is significant to mine. But we were not,” she says, flashing her underlying clarity of role, “parents to each other’s kids.”

When asked how she thinks the shifting *dramatis personae* in her romantic life—as well as the casually defined role of her children’s donors—has affected her kids, Greenberg is sanguine. Well, more than sanguine...celebratory.

“I was in four significant relationships with women, and they remain my best friends to this day. Relationship stuff is about adding relationships; it’s like building a web. An army of ex-lovers can never be defeated. I believe in building sustainable relationships. You’ve built all this love

*“My kids didn’t have angst about their donors—having a donor was normal for them.”*

“This is life! Yes!” he said, when I asked him. It was a primal response. We didn’t discuss logistics until later.

“I knew from the beginning that I would be the parent,” Greenberg explains. “I would be responsible for executive management, funding, parenting. I didn’t expect his participation, but he was welcome to participate as much as he wanted.”

Once pregnant, Greenberg ran into opposition from the board at the synagogue where she worked as Education Director. “I was considered an unwed mother. They had never heard of anything like me,” she says. “They had a whole board meeting, should they fire me. But they had hired me to be an educator and I had done a fabulous job, growing their brand-new Hebrew school from five students to over a hundred. They ended up giving me a baby stroller.

“People have a straight and narrow idea of what a life is supposed to look like,” Greenberg says. “To me, my choices seemed normal.” She had no doubt that they were responsible.

Rosi was born in 1987, and Greenberg fairly immediately got in gear for her second—her mother, after all, had had four children under the age of four. Her sperm donor’s extensive travel commitments, though, made optimally-timed inseminations difficult, and he eventually made a *shiddukh* to someone else—a rabbinical student of his, someone who had also survived the Holocaust, but as a toddler.

Raffi when Rosi was two. Then she used Jack’s sperm again, and twenty months later had Zoe.

“My donors have been extraordinary,” Greenberg says. “It’s been the best it could possibly be; it couldn’t have been better. They were both wonderful, wonderful donors. The kids have relationships with these people, but in no way were they Daddies. They would send Hanukkah and birthday presents; they’d visit, they’d call. Little things. The kids felt cared about.”

---

## Thirteen Ways of Looking at Good Mothering

**“So many things make somebody a good mother. Unconditional love and commitment. Parenting from a steady state, being able to self-soothe, having your own centered confidence. Knowing who you are. Being yourself is good for kids to see—they become themselves. Noticing your individual child, being very present, tuning in to who they are. Having both high expectations and lots of flexibility. Expecting to be in a real relationship with your child where you respect them and you expect them to respect you. Problem-solving collaboratively.**

**“Finding a balance between being the leader and taking them into account so they feel heard and significant. Having kids feel like an important part of the whole.**

**“Giving kids meaningful chores. Really integrating them into the work of family life. Connecting them into doing good for the world, even at a young age. Putting lots of effort into finding them meaningful ‘mitzvah work,’ helping them see it has an impact. Connecting them to kinship networks, community networks. Embedding them in a place where they belong. Putting a lot of effort into keeping everyone connected—uncles, aunts, grandparents.**

**“Reaching out for wisdom and therapy when you need support. Finding the right resources for each child.”**

—JULIE GREENBERG

and care, it just goes through a transformation. The people you've loved are lovable.

"I wanted a big, close family where the kids could play with each other and have each other as a support system," Greenberg adds. "There is huge stability in our family. I'm the one parent in the house always, and we've always lived in this house. It wasn't disruptions. Same home, same mother. I was the one and only."

As for the sperm donors, Greenberg says, "The relationships have gone through different permutations. Both men have moved, but they are always a nice background presence in our lives. Rosi, Raffi and Zoe didn't have angst about their donors—having a donor was normal for them. They knew where they came from; that was huge, that settled the issue. None of them made much use of their donor relationships, but they were there. At times it was painful for my first three kids—when they looked at a hetero-normative family they felt different; young kids don't like to be different. What they minded was being *different*, not their lives."

Greenberg explains a maternal strategy. "I'd have conversations. 'Do you ever wonder what it would be like to have a dad living here?' I made the space. I didn't want to make anything taboo or impose a party line on them—'Rah, rah, this family is perfect.' I want them to live life, experience joy, sorrow, sadness, yearning, gratitude—all the different things.

"Having a dad in the house—or out—there are blessings and challenges. If you have a dad, you're pretty much stuck with that dad, whatever the match of temperament, personality, interests. Without a dad, you have a wider realm of who you choose as a mentor. Raffi went through a stage of missing having a dad in the house, as any kid would, going through mourning and longing. It was very fluid. I was able to be there for him as he moved through those feelings.

"I always had many males in Raffi's life," Greenberg continues. "Grownup versions of his own possibilities. The blessing is that Raffi was able to choose a mentor who is a dear, dear, beloved family friend. He ended up choosing an ideal man—ideal for Raffi—to pattern himself after. Michael and Raffi had an affinity; they shared interests. Raffi had huge

respect for Michael, for who he was as a person. And Michael took Raffi on. From age nine through his adolescence, Raffi would go up to Boston to be with him for a week. They'd go to the US Open, they'd talk on the phone, he'd consult Michael on sports and romantic issues; they had passionate conversations. Raffi was in Michael's wedding party. He was the perfect person for Raffi and a better match than his genetic forebear."

After her romantic relationship with Rebecca ended, Greenberg found a third sperm donor, but he lived four hours away. "He'd drive two hours. I'd do the same. We'd meet in a cornfield in this beautiful place, under a full moon. My cycle happened to coincide with the full moon," Greenberg says. "We kept trying and trying. I finally got pregnant, but had a miscarriage at three-plus months. It felt tragic, very, very tragic to lose that kid."

---

## The College Essay You Write When Your Mom's Super-Unconventional

Three of Julie Greenberg's children are currently in college (Brown, Yale, Yale—can you believe it?), and their college essays were each about their mother's extraordinary single-parenting and rich, wildly unconventional household. Here, slightly abridged, is **ZOE GREENBERG's** essay:

---

**"We realized how frail a word is when faced with the thing it names." —Julia Alvarez**

*My mom decided to be a single mother, and she never does anything half-heartedly. She had my two older siblings and me with donor dads, but she wasn't done yet. She adopted my youngest two siblings from Guatemala and we became a big, multi-racial family. Every week on the Jewish Sabbath, my mom lights the candles and sends prayers to "all the people who helped make this family," which includes a long list of Spanish and English names.*

*The six of us live in a cooperative apartment building, committed to racial and economic diversity. We have become masters at using space creatively, because we all share a three-bedroom apartment, and we can't waste an inch. We keep our hermit crab and turtle in our non-working fireplace in the living room, and we store luggage in a shower stall.*

*Although we don't have a lot of physical room, I value the abundant space for human relationships: the late-night ethical discussions, the political debates at the dining room table, and the imaginative problem-solving in family meetings.*

*My family doesn't end at our apartment door. When I was about six, my mom chose a "parenting partner"—a gay man named Dove—who has been my "father figure" for the past eleven years. My little siblings call him Dad, but my older siblings and I are stuck grasping for words.*

*"He's my Dad-like figure," I said for a while, but people looked at me quizzically.*

*"He's family," I'd say, but they wanted to know how.*

*"This is my Dove," I finally said, which says both everything and nothing.*

*I've learned from my family that there are so many happy ways to lead a life. I can't always explain how everyone's related to me, but I've realized that what's most important goes beyond words. I am so proud to be a part of this lifelong, loving, un-nameable family.*



Julie & Zoe at Zoe's high school graduation, 2009.

The miscarriage, though, opened a new door for Greenberg: adoption. “I thought, ‘This is another great path. I need to do it.’ It’s a different path. I was full-force ahead. Joey [Jonah] was born in 1996. He’s from Guatemala. We have the names of his birth parents. I spent a day with the birth mother, but the social worker—our middle person—died, and we lost all connection.”

In 2000, Greenberg adopted a second child, Mozi [Mozelle], also from Guatemala, from an orphanage for babies. “I was lucky to get her at three-and-a-half months,” Greenberg says.

“The trajectory and profile, emotionally, of adopted kids is very different because you have a huge loss of your connection with your own birth parents and culture,” Greenberg explains. “That’s huge. Joey has a great life. He’s incredibly good at handling this, but it’s definitely painful. And adoption can feel more stigmatizing; that’s bigger to deal with, too.”

“Every time we light Shabbat candles, I send light to all the people who helped start this family. I say the names—Marta Eliza and Jose Lopez, Orbelina del Carmen Rivera, \_\_\_\_\_, and Jack. And we send lots of light out. I came up with this as a way of normalizing the family structure,” says Greenberg, “and of bringing all of who we are into our precious ritual moments.”

“When Joey and Mozi came into the family we became multi-racial,” she adds. “I’m grateful to live at a time when the Jewish community is opening up to more diversity. It makes it possible to raise a Jewish family, though there’s still a lot of work to be done.”

This summer, the whole Greenberg clan is traveling to Guatemala. As usual, Greenberg’s attitude is both gimlet-eyed and improvisatory. “We’ll learn some Spanish, get a feel for the birth-land, spend time in the places I stayed when I got Joey and Mozi. We’re all very, very excited. We’ll see what emerges....”

Understanding that her two adopted children would have to metabolize both loss and a more complex and intensive experience of ‘being different’ than was the case with her biological kids, Greenberg decided that the resource she needed was something called a dad. “I was open to that,” she says. (Finding the right resource

to match each child is core for her; she enrolled Raffi, for example, in an all-boys’ school. “He was my first boy-child and I freaked out,” she says. “I put him in a school where I felt partnered in raising him. I had a team; they were the best of the best.”) A friend of Greenberg’s—a “celibate gay male” named Dove, whom Greenberg neologized as a “parenting partner”—formally became the “Dad” in 2000. He lived three blocks away.

“We didn’t know what we were doing,” Greenberg says about the early days of the arrangement. “I’d been in many relationships with women. It was shocking to be partnering with this gay man. The family boundaries grew and changed, there were huge challenges and obstacles. It wasn’t easy sailing.

“Our agreement was that I would be the primary parent in terms of funding, nurturing and decision-making, but Joey and Mozi would call him Daddy. You say, ‘Mommy and Daddy,’ it means something very deep. We both grew into primary parents in the hearts of the youngest two kids, and our roles got more flexible. It evolved organically. Dove is very involved in the kids’ lives; he’ll buy them shoes, groceries. We have family dinners now and then. He’s a wonderful, wonder-

ful dad, a beloved family member. We now co-parent seamlessly. I’m really really proud of what we built together.”

As a part-time rabbi and part-time family therapist (Greenberg went back to school and became licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist), Greenberg’s single-parent income has required familial sacrifices, but the clan has consistently risen to the occasion of living modestly. The apartment is inarguably sardine-tight for six people—there’s a “bed-chamber” for two built into the dining room which also functions as the playroom and harbors the washer and dryer—but the apartment is also immaculate and army-barracks organized.

“I’m an optimist when it comes to life,” Greenberg says. “I was willing to live simply. A byproduct of my choices has been giving up financial rewards. I will never have status or economic clout in my neighborhood, and I produce programs in the Jewish community that I can’t afford to go to. I will never be in a certain inner circle. But you know what?” she says cheerfully, “I don’t care.”

A standard source of financial anxiety for many middle-class Jewish families is the specter of college tuition. How to afford it? In Greenberg’s case that will

*“I’d always been in relationships with women. It was shocking to be partnering with this gay man.”*

From left: Dove, Mozi, Zoe, Rosi, Joey, Raffi and Julie.



get multiplied by five. But so far, to paraphrase a dreydl, “a big miracle happened in New Haven.” Raffi got into Yale on a full scholarship, followed by Zoe doing likewise. Rosi, at Brown, had a full scholarship for two years and took out loans for the other two. Joey and Mozi are not college-bound yet, but it will probably work out. Their mother’s an optimist.

When asked what she has learned through 22 years of unconventionally mothering a brood of five, Greenberg grows pensive.

“My worldview seems so normal to me, I hardly remember that to others it isn’t. In the early years, I did feel that I had to defend my choices, that everything had to be perfect because it was so alternative. But I grew into relaxing about that. I stopped feeling any need to hide or minimize problems. I came to a deeper place of trust because everything was going great, there was nothing that needed to be defended or marketed. I saw that a lot of people’s lives are less conventional than they look on the surface.

“I’ve always had huge confidence as a mom, much more than about partnering. Some of my kids would have liked the model of physical affection between two heterosexual partners, of a long-term commitment of two adults in their own home. But I was able to give them a different blessing: You can be completely fine in yourself and your life. It’s not necessary to have a partner; you can be whole and happy as yourself. When I look at the world, a lot of kids never learned that message; they are seeking their other half. That is not the life I’ve modeled for my kids.

“I have pride about what I could give my children. In a life, there are always things that are there and things that aren’t. Some have a spiritual life, some don’t. Some have a sexual life, some don’t. Some have a dog, some don’t. You find what fits for you—it might not be optimal for your kid.

“But they’re resilient, they’re fine. We can hold it all—the hard emotions. It will be okay. You’ll get through it.

“As a therapist, I know that liberation—from your own mental constructs, from what is possible—is a part of the work. There are bigger worlds to open.

“What’s possible is always way bigger than what you think.” ■