

TWINS Mintesinot and Betelhem play together in their new American home. Right, Mark Petersson and wife Natalie Cash Petersson hold their newly adopted children Mintesinot and Betelhem while still in Ethiopia.



Two for the Road

Habesha or Ferenji?

By Natalie Cash Petersson

Amesegenallo. It was the first word I learned in Amharic in preparation for the adoption of our Ethiopian son and daughter. Not only did I desperately need to know how to say “thank you” in response to the warm hospitality and effortless kindness that I discovered engrained in Abyssinian culture, I had often been told that I looked “habesha” myself and was counseled that I should learn at least a few words; not only to communicate with the kids, but also to explain the fact that I am American and justify my shoddy Amharic.

Each night as I studied from flash cards and books, I absorbed more than just vocabulary and pronunciation. Learning the characters of the fidel, I was also exposed to the poetry of the language, the rich treasure trove of proverbs and unique forms of word play endemic to Amharic. I gained new insights into the traditions and history of our children’s birth place. This led me to muse how the twins would be thought of and how they would identify themselves as they grew into adulthood.

When we began the adoption process, we knew from the start that we wanted the twins to truly honor and value their heritage throughout their lives. It was important for us to keep the names given them at birth, Mintesinot and Betelhem, to connect them to their homeland and birth family.

In New York, we filled our home with Ethiopian artwork, music and literature. Our Ethiopian friends showered us with gifts of gabbay and berbere. And we reached out to American friends who had also adopted from Ethiopia so the twins would not find their home life too unusual during the tumult of adolescence. We still plan to enroll them in Amharic classes at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Medhane Alem in New York when they reach school age, not only to root them to an Ethiopian community in the United States, but also so they will be able to converse fluently with their birth family in Ethiopia when they return to visit.

Growing up, they will have so many questions about their birth parents — their personalities, their appearance, the sound of

their laughter — that we as adoptive parents cannot easily answer.

At the same time, I am aware that in America, to neighbors, schoolmates, teachers, friends and, to some extent, our own families, they will be thought of as African Americans and not Africans or even Ethiopians. This is the culture they will be raised in and exposed to on a daily basis. As a mother, I want for them to be proud of who they are, but at the same time I want them to be strong and not conflicted by the dual nature of their heritage and upbringing. I want for them to feel equally comfortable jumping on a subway for a free jazz concert in Central Park as they would drink coffee at a bunna bet in Addis.

Nature or nurture, indeed. Can I really have it both ways without being Ethiopian myself to pass on these important cultural markers? Will Amharic lessons, Ethiopian food and





role models be enough? I imagine my own mother agonizing over the same decisions with me and my siblings as she raised us in an integrated society, so different from the America that she had come up in. In a sense, every parent must grapple with extracting the best from their lives and passing that on to their children to make it better. My fear stems from the challenge of passing onto them something so precious but that I only know as an outsider.

Among adoption circles, there is often talk of the “adoption triad,” an invisible bond that is formed between the birth family,

adoptive family and child. For our family we are extending that triad to encompass culture as well — the culture of birth, our culture as parents and how our children choose to combine those elements into something entirely their own.

In the end, it will be the twins who ultimately decide how much they identify with either culture. As parents, all we can do is make sure the opportunities for in-depth exploration are provided and supported. As an interracial family, we already have experience blending cultures and finding the harmonious mix that honors the best of who we are. To that end,

our Ethiopian friends have been and continue to be a blessing. It is through them that we discovered when we adopted from Ethiopia, Ethiopia adopted us as well. For this and for everything, I can only say “Amesegeenallo.”

Natalie Cash Petersson is mom to 3-year-olds Mintesinot and Betelhem, twins whom she and her husband, Mark Petersson, adopted from Ethiopia in March 2007 through Wide Horizons For Children. The family resides in New York City. This article was previously published in Parent's Corner, a quarterly magazine published in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia that Cash Petersson contributes to regularly.