

Casting Lots:
Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World
Rabbi Susan Silverman

Book Group Discussion Guide

Making Our Way through God's Beautiful, Broken World

Susan experienced loss, the tenuousness of life, and the brokenness of the world through the death of her brother, the uprootedness of a foster child, her parents' divorce, and the immense loss suffered by children and birth parents inherent in adoption.

She dealt with that loss through a variety of means, including: *Bargaining – Denial – Acceptance – Seeing Opportunity – Desperation – Fear – Spiritual/Traditional Context*

- Which ones strike you as mature? Immature? Empowering?
- What models resonate with you – for better or worse?
- Do you recognize any of these ways of deal with loss from your life or from the lives of people you know? What did you learn from it?
- How is adoption a microcosm of the beauty and the brokenness?

Destiny

In adopting Adar, Susan sensed that her destined son was out there and she needed to chart a course to *him*. But when she adopted Zamir, she took the spiritual tools of her life and let them lead where they may, to any child who may be found.

- Do you believe in destiny? What does that mean?
- Does the role of destiny help shape your experience of God?

Who is a Jew? Or: What is a Jew?

The book presents a selection of possibilities of what it means to be a Jew including: *Bloodline – Conversion – Belief – Rituals – Community – Metaphors/Paradigms*

- Do any of these speak to the way you experience your own Jewish identity?
- How might they strengthen – or undermine – each other?

Susan and Yosef did not hold an Orthodox conversion for their sons.

- What would you have done?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages involved?

Relationship with God, History, and Tradition

Susan's relationship with God deepened over time while becoming less literal.

- Is that a paradox?
- Is tradition undermined or enriched by seeing it as a constellation of stories, rituals, and values – but not fact or history?

Susan believes that “knowing” God is a form of idolatry because holding God's image, or even God's will, in your mind is as literal as holding God in your hands.

- Is that counter to religion as you understand it?
- What might happen to the world if we started looking at our religions as metaphors, rituals, and values to orient ourselves in an unknowable world and not as “true”?

Language and Names

Susan used Jewish stories, biblical and rabbinic, such as *Creation, the binding of Isaac, Jacob's wrestling, exodus from Egypt, standing at Sinai, and Moses smashing the tablets*, to provide a framework to derive meaning for her family's experience.

- Do you use stories and myths in this way?
- How important is it that they be (largely) drawn from a particular tradition?

Growing up, the song *Help Me Rhonda* would sometimes play in Susan's head. She hoped to instill something with more meaning for her kids to "hear" during tough times, like *Kol HaOlam Kulo*, "the world is a very narrow bridge and the important thing is to be unafraid."

- When things are difficult in your life, what do you "hear"?
- Does it make a difference if your "song" is part of a larger framework and/or touches on something you understand as an eternal truth?

Susan and Yosef gave their sons new names. Adar had the name Daniel until he was nine months old, and Zamir had the name Kedir until he was over four years old.

- Was this okay to do?
- Was it unfair?
- What purpose might it serve?

The last sentences of the book are a quote from Psalms: "From the narrow place I call to God. God answers me from the expanse."

- What does that ending mean to you?

Memory and Empathy

One of the powerful experiences of family life is having shared memories – even if those past experiences impacted us differently. Orphans are not likely to have anyone who share their early memories.

- How do you imagine that affects the act of remembering?

Susan wondered if knowing someone is essential to loving them.

- What do you think?

Susan wrote of her infant brother's death when she was two years old. She does not remember him in her mind, but his death is in her bones.

- Have you or someone you know had an experience like that?
- What has been the impact of that experience?

Adoption

The heart of this story is adoption.

- Throughout the book, how did you feel about adoption?
- Did you find yourself imagining the adoption experience from various points of view (child, adoptive parents, birth parents)?
- Did your sense of and assumptions about adoption change after reading *Casting Lots*?