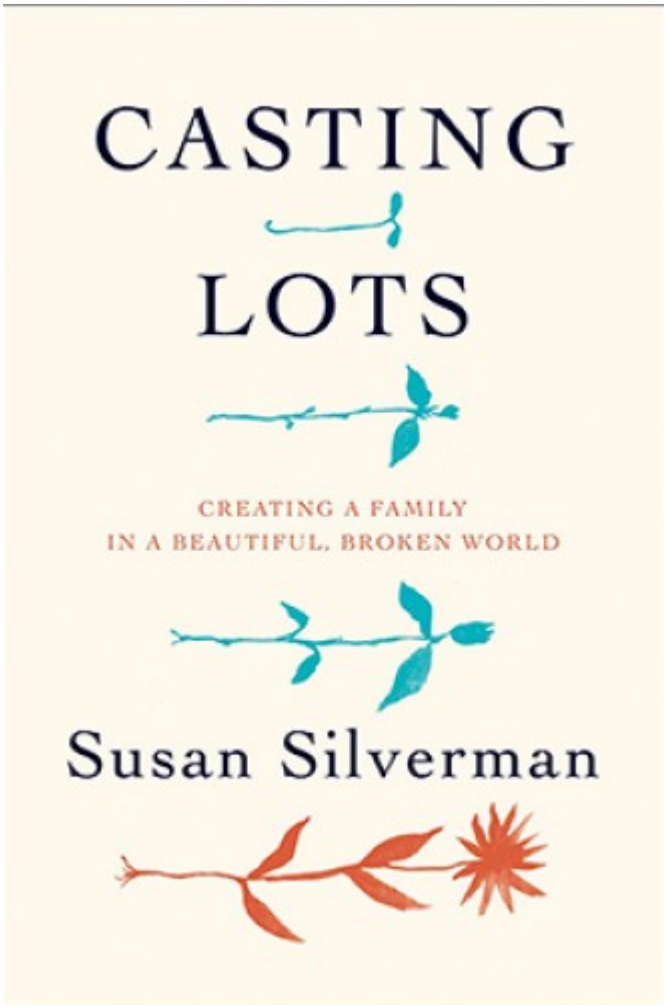
A rabbi’s memoir of making a family

Anyone with a complicated life and family—all of us—will find a home in Susan Silverman’s story.

by Arianne Braithwaite Lehn in the February 1, 2017 issue

In Review



Casting Lots

Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World

By Susan Silverman
Da Capo Press

Not many memoirs leave readers with the question “How will I respond?” This one does.

Our most basic human right is to grow up with a loving parent, Susan Silverman asserts, but there are currently 153 million orphans across the globe. Her passion is to alleviate this crisis. Because she believes one’s personal story can touch people in ways facts or figures never can, Silverman entrusts us with hers.

This moving memoir highlights a family’s journey through international adoption. A Reform rabbi, author, and activist, Silverman wanted to adopt a child ever since she was a little girl. After a childhood in which many things fell apart, Silverman desired nothing more than to build and create a family. With her husband Yosef, three birth daughters, and two sons adopted from Ethiopia, she has done that and more.

The title flows from her family being matched with Adar, their first adopted son, on the Jewish holiday of Purim, which literally means “lots.” They were taking a chance, throwing in their lots with one another, to build this family. They faced great risk with utmost trust.

While the story circles around Silverman’s experiences with adoption, the book, more broadly, is a call to welcome the surprises and complexity of life with open arms—to grip the hands of those you love and together lean into a God who is constant. It’s the story of the “class flirt” and child of atheist parents deciding to become a rabbi. It’s about the messy, glorious reality of parenthood, where appreciating mystery and honoring a child’s need to struggle are the ways we love our children best. And it’s about the grounding power and daily rhythm that Silverman’s faith tradition brings when nothing else is predictable.

Of the 153 million orphans worldwide, only 250,000 are adopted each year. Silverman grieves the “adoption cliff,” the steep drop-off of international adoptions in the United States in recent years. She attributes this human rights tragedy to government and NGO policies based on misguided mind-sets.

The book tackles these mistaken arguments, such as: *children have a right to their cultural heritage* (but institutionalization, mental illness, sex trafficking, crime, and early death do not make a valuable cultural heritage); *adoption robs countries of*

their most precious resource (but adults aren't claimed as property, so why are children?); and *international adoption is corrupt* (while abuses exist, completely closing international adoption is cruel).

Silverman encourages us to think about what we would want for our own children should they be left alone. She believes more people would adopt if they knew the extent of the need and if there were accessible paths to do so.

Though not discussed in the book, Silverman's launching pad for helping the adoption crisis is her innovative nonprofit organization, Second Nurture. In this model, multiple families from a synagogue, church, school, or community center adopt children from the same orphanage. By doing so, they create a community where adopted children grow up with other families that look like theirs, adoption is a natural part of conversation, the children's birth culture is present in communal events, and the community works to support a humanitarian organization in the children's birth country.

Silverman shares a gift for humor with her sister (comedian Sarah Silverman) and puts it to use in a skillful way. Her witty way of writing helped me handle the heavy and intense reality of her subject matter. I found myself laughing aloud while simultaneously aching with the pain of it all. (The first line of the book: "My whole life I felt like God's bitch.")

The organization of this book see-saws between Silverman's childhood and the adoption of her first son. With both of these periods so emotionally concentrated, I found it difficult to reacclimate with each chapter. Braided through the book's entirety, however, is the trajectory of Silverman's relationship with God.

Readers witness the growth of a partnership between God and Silverman. "I don't think of Judaism as a faith," she writes. "More as a way of life, a communal orientation in a chaotic world. To me, being Jewish means standing up with and, sometimes, against God. Saying, this is my world, too, and I think it needs to change. Being a partner in the ongoing work of creation." Interspersed Hebrew words, songs, phrases, and blessings illumine her integration of this ancient faith tradition into her family's daily life.

Anyone with a complicated, messy life and family—namely, all of us—will find a home in Silverman's story. Grief and joy, trust and despondency, brutality and compassion all speak their piece. Silverman doesn't try to tidy up the paradox. She

shows us how to live within it, pointing us to the life that is truly life.

I bring up this book in conversations at neighborhood play dates and over dinner with my family. Thoughts and prayers about this book arise on my early morning runs. Can my husband and I adopt? Can our church partner with adoption agencies? How will I use my voice for the voiceless? Silverman’s story compels me to change my own. I’m still figuring out what that means, and it makes me nervous. But that’s the beauty of this story. We pray, we cast our lots, and we open our arms to the children belonging to all of us.