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Israeli gay couple gets a son in India

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MUMBAI: Israeli gay couple Yonatan and Omer Gher are categorical about their dislike for Section 377 of the Indian law that makes homosexuality a criminal offence, but they like the `desi' regulation that allowed them to hire a surrogate mother to deliver their child here.

Evyatar, which means "more fathers" in Hebrew, was conceived with a Mumbai-based surrogate mother. (TOI Phto)

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Their first-born, Evyatar, was conceived with a Mumbai-based surrogate mother in Rotunda, a fertility clinic in Bandra, proving once again that India is a preferred destination for infertile couples as well as gay couples seeking surrogacy.

The proud fathers are aware of the scepticism involving same-sex parents. "Some say it is a disadvantage for a child to have gay parents. We think it is an advantage as we can't have a child by accident. Since there is so much planning, preparation and travel involved, the child is more appreciated," said Yonatan as he lovingly cradles Evyatar in his arms and feeds him milk from a bottle in their Santa Cruz apartment.

Yonatan, who heads Israel's largest gay rights organisation, feels it's time India changed Section 377, all the more because India is so "diverse and pluralistic and shouldn't outcast" 10% of its population.

Yonathan (30) and Omer (31) have been together for the past seven years and recently decided to start a family. "Israel doesn't allow same-sex couples to adopt or have a surrogate mother. So we started scouting and found that only India and US offer surrogacy to same-sex couples," said Yonatan.

They heard about Rotunda clinic through friends and say it was the `personal touch' that appealed to them. "We also thought we could get a surrogate mother here rather than in the US, which is more prosperous." The cost too was a consideration. The entire process cost nearly half of what it would have been in the US. "India was also closer to home," they said.

India, with its easy availability of surrogate mothers, easy paperwork and cheap costs have earned a reputation for its surrogacy programme, with Anand in Gujarat often being referred to as the `surrogacy capital of the world'.

Same-sex couples are the latest trickle. The Rotunda clinic itself has seen 40 same-sex couples since 2005. The clinic's Dr Gautam Allahbadia said they receive frequent requests from same-sex couples from France, Spain and Sweden.

But infertility specialist Indira Hinduja who recently received requests from two gay couples from Switzerland and France says she is sceptical. "There are several factors to consider--will the child get citizenship in their home country? So also, since the surrogate is Indian, the features of the child will be Indian," she said.

Yonathan and Omer first came to Mumbai in January for an IVF cycle when Yonathan donated his sperm. "We were in constant touch over email, sending them the ultrasound," said Dr Allahbadia, who said the couple is now keen to have another child and theyVe requested the same donor so that they could have "real siblings".

The couple took their time over selecting a surrogate. A psychologist, Omer charted out a questionnaire which they e-mailed to three anonymous `mothers' and finally zeroed in on one. "As you can see," said Omer, pointing to Evyatar, "we made the right choice."

The good news spread cheer in their respective families, said Omer who explained that the most common fear that parents harbour when their children come out of the closet is that they won't have any grandchildren.

They returned to Mumbai in September in time for birth. A 3.8 kg boy was born at Hiranandani Hospital in Powai on October 12. They named him Evyatar (which means `Father is great' in Hebrew), "as it was appropriate in our case", said Yonathan.

Taking him back involved a lot of "bureaucracy", said the new parents, as the Israel government requires them to do a DNA test to prove their paternity. "We Fedexed the copy to them, following which we could clear his passport and other documents," they said.

The duo now has their duties all chalked out. While Omer handles the morning shift, Yonathan takes over baby-sitting at night. "He's quite a character," says Omer. On Monday night, they flew back to Israel. "We will look for a school which has a good mix of students. In Israel the 13th birthday of a child is very important and we will bring him back to Mumbai then," said Yonathan before he left for Israel.

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