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## Dozens of Cousins



by Betsy R. Rosenthal

**Imagine all the "Cheaper By the Dozen" kids grown up, married and with kids of their own. That's my family. My mom is one of a dozen,**

and I'm one of the children of the dozen. And maybe not that surprisingly, my mom chose to have only two children (me and my brother) and my husband and I limited our brood to three.

Since most of my family lives in the L.A. area, it makes Los Angeles a pretty small town really. Just the other night, a Wednesday, when few people go out, my husband and I coerced our two teenagers into watching their 10-year-old brother while we went with another couple to dinner and a show. When we got to the restaurant, there was my cousin; he told me I just missed my aunt, who was picking up food. When we got to the theatre, there was another cousin waiting out front. Then in conversation

against the wallpaper, leaving permanent grease spots? Who put the carp (destined to become gefilte fish) in the bathtub to save its life?

The curse of my extra-large family plagues us when we're planning a holiday celebration or a milestone event. For Passover, we clear all the furniture out of our family room and squeeze 30-something of my closest (geographically speaking) cousins, aunts and uncles around folding tables. One year, some people had to stand while we awaited the arrival of the cousin who was bringing extra chairs. She was so late we ended up begging chairs from our neighbors so we could start the seder. We always reserve a space for my husband's one cousin.

Growing up I thought he who has big house must sacrifice it to big family. But I've since learned that there are cousins and aunts and uncles with houses much larger than ours, who want their carpets to stay clean and their knickknacks to remain unbroken. This past year we got snookered into serving as celebration central

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with our friends, we discovered that their business partner is dating yet another cousin of mine.

Sure, I'm related to every other person in Los Angeles (not to mention a crowd of people in Dallas, Baltimore and even South Africa), but is that a blessing or a curse? After nearly 20 years my husband still hasn't met all my first cousins, and I doubt he ever will. There are some I wouldn't recognize even if they bumped into me headfirst. Now I can empathize with my grandfather, who never did learn the names of all 25 of his grandchildren.

I have so many relatives that my husband still grouches about the size of our wedding. The bimah was groaning under the weight of the wedding party. Each time my husband describes our wedding to someone, he embellishes the number of guests. At last count we were up to 1,000 guests and most of them, according to him, were my relatives. His entire extended family huddled at one small table.

I shouldn't complain. Although our family gatherings are monumental affairs, the fun flows freely. The childhood stories and gags trigger tear-streaming laughter, no matter that the same stories are retold countless times by my mom and her siblings. And no story gets told without frequent interruptions, because there are 12 sides to every story in this family. Each time, arguments break out over whose story it really is. Did Jack crash Lenny's new bike, or was it Sol? Who threw peanut butter balls

for both the Passover seder, catering to the Jewish contingent, and the December holiday party, for the masses. Everyone else had an "I'd do it, but..." excuse. Aunt Sherry hinted that it was up to me to carry on the family tradition. It was one of those "Godfather"-like offers you can't refuse. Luckily for us, the family long ago abandoned the holiday party gift-giving ritual. As a kid, I used to marvel at the Mount Everest of presents, stacked up, something for every one of us cousins from each one of our aunts and uncles. If that tradition had continued, I calculated that I'd have to buy 46 gifts merely for the children of my first cousins.

When we put on our now-16-year-old's bar mitzvah, we had neither the space nor the means to invite most of our friends, and we had to limit the number of his friends, too. Family comes first, and our dance card was nearly full just with close relatives. If we left family off the guest list, we would undoubtedly ignite a family feud, with resentments simmering far into the future. It happened once with a wedding slight. Even kooky relatives like the teenage cousin who wore the leprechaun-green suit to our daughter's bat mitzvah, the former call girl and the aunt who's been married more times than Henry the Eighth, must be included because, after all, family is family.

Sometimes our kids are resentful. My 15-year-old daughter would much prefer an intimate gathering to celebrate a holiday. Sorry, dear, but you were born into the wrong family. We don't know from intimate. We took a family cruise once and filled up half the ship.

But would I trade in my King Kong-sized family for a tiny compact one like my husband's? I'll have to answer that question later. I'm late for my eye examination, and the optometrist, of course, is my cousin. ■

Betsy R. Rosenthal is the author of two children's books, including the recently released "It's Not Worth Making a Tzimmes Over!" (Albert Whitman & Company, \$15.95).