



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

בשביל החיים
Walking with Life

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CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1990, eight Jewish leaders were invited to Dharamsala, India, to meet with the Dalai Lama, the political and spiritual leader of Tibet. The Tibetans had lost their land to China, their religious leader was in exile, and now they feared they would lose their identity as a people. Conscious of the parallels to Jewish history, the Dalai Lama asked the Jews for help: “Tell me the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile.”

The secret revealed to the Dalai Lama was the Jewish home. In Judaism, God is found at home, encountered in family, celebrated at the kitchen table. Jewish spirituality is deeply embedded in family life. Jewish religious life is woven into the rhythms of the year and into the cycle of life through symbols and rituals practiced in the home. In Deuteronomy, just as we are commanded to love God with heart, soul and might, we are commanded to “teach these words diligently to your children.” Spirituality, family, and education are inseparable.

Take a moment to appreciate the Dalai Lama’s discovery. To those familiar with Judaism this connection of spirituality with home and family is virtually invisible. So central is family life to Jewish practice, so natural a setting is the home to Jewish values, we take for granted the profound and radical spiritual choice made by our ancestors to locate God at home. It takes an outsider, like the Dalai Lama, to point out to us the genius of a tradition that understood domesticity - home, marriage, family, child-rearing, caring for elders - not as a distraction from spiritual life, but as the ideal place for its cultivation and nurturance. It takes an experience of exile, as suffered by the Dalai Lama, to grasp how Jewish home life has protected our spiritual and cultural identity.

How central is child-rearing to the heart of Jewish spirituality? There is no word for “parenting” in Hebrew. “Parents,” in Hebrew, are *horim*. The noun abstract would have to be “Torah.” Torah, the very name of the sacred tradition itself, is the best semantic equivalent of “parenting.” This has profound implications. It means, first, that the Jewish tradition could not separate a discrete set of skills and techniques that make for successful parenting. For all its attention to children and education, there is no tractate of Talmud, no section of the *Shulhan Arukh*, devoted to solely to parenting skills or strategies. The entire spiritual tradition is about parenting. The way to successful parenting is to absorb the full wisdom of the tradition. Second, it means that no activity is more sacred, more revered, than parenting. To parent a child is to do Torah. Parenting brings God into the world.

A word about gender: The rabbinic tradition did not treat men and women, or boys and girls equally. Men were preeminent. Women, though respected, were relegated to secondary roles. In speaking about raising children and educating children, the rabbinic tradition focuses primarily on boys. Boys were taught literacy. Girls were prepared for roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. In the discussion and texts that follow, we have endeavored to re-translate these texts into egalitarian terms.

CHILDHOOD

The Jewish wisdom on childhood and child-rearing is spread throughout the tradition. To help us focus, we will reflect on one representative expression of Jewish faith and culture that reveals this wisdom. Consider the Passover Seder. The Seder is central to Jewish life and faith. The purpose of the Seder is to retell and reenact the Jewish master story – our slavery in Egypt and our redemption. The Seder reflects the important aspects of the Jewish way of childhood.

1. In his classic study, *Centuries of Childhood*,¹ historian Philippe Aries argues that pre-modern European cultures did not understand childhood as a distinct stage of life with its own unique character. In dress, education, play, manners, children were treated as little adults. According to Aries, it wasn’t until the 18th century that the concept of childhood was, as it were, “invented.” This is not the Jewish experience. At the Seder, the child is welcome. The child is recognized and celebrated. The child has a place at the table. The child’s presence is central to the Seder, as it is central to Jewish life. The very purpose of the Seder is to fulfill the Biblical injunction: “And you shall explain to your

¹ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, Jonathan Cape Limited, New York, 1962.



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son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'"² In the Biblical injunction and in its Rabbinic fulfillment, the commemoration of the Exodus is inseparable from the imperative to teach the Exodus story, and all its attendant values, to our children.

In the Judaism of the Talmud, childhood is recognized and celebrated as a phase of life. Childhood is not just preparation for adulthood. It is its own reality, distinct from adulthood. Moreover, the Rabbis of the Talmudic tradition recognized that childhood itself is marked by developmental stages. But unlike the developmental schemes of modern psychology which conceive of the child as a lone individual developing internally, the Talmudic tradition characteristically recognized the child as a social being, a member of a community, maturing through the social roles of communal life.

2. "Children are to be seen but not heard." Perhaps in other cultures, but not Jewish children. Jewish children are given a voice. The principal teaching of the Seder begins with a child's question: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The panoply of Seder symbols is a brilliant educational device designed to inspire this question – to elicit the child's curiosity. And the drama of the Seder ritual is offered as its vivid and colorful answer. The child is led to recognize that the asking of questions is the beginning of spiritual awakening. The Rabbinic tradition introduced children, even at early ages, to its dialectical style of learning.

Answering the question and educating the child is the primary responsibility of parents. But the task of education is shared with the entire community. The Rabbinic tradition maintains that we access God's wisdom through the study of holy books. Spirituality demands literacy. The first Jewish public school system was established by Joshua ben Gamla in the first century.³ Child development was conceived by the Rabbis as a curriculum of holy texts to be learned at the appropriate ages: Bible by five, Mishnah by ten, Talmud by fifteen. Above all, schooling was to be an experience of sweetness. A child's first day of school was celebrated by the entire community with symbols of sweetness.

3. Children are not all the same. A popular midrash in the Passover Haggadah fastens upon the fact that the Torah repeats four times the imperative to tell the Passover story to our children. This, explains the midrash, refers to four kinds of children:

The Torah tells of four types of children: one is wise, one is wicked, one is simple, and one does not know how to ask.

The Wise One asks: "What is the meaning of the laws and traditions God has commanded you?"⁴ You should teach him all the traditions of Passover, right up to the last detail, "one is not to eat anything after the Passover-lamb."

The Wicked One asks: "What does this ritual mean to you?"⁵ By saying, "to you" he has excluded himself from his people and denied God! Challenge him [lit: "blunt his teeth"] and say to him: "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt..."⁶ "For me" and not for him - for had he been in Egypt [with that attitude], he would not have been freed.

The Simple One asks: "What is this?" You should tell him: "It was with a mighty hand that the Lord took us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."⁷

As for the One Who Does Not Know How To Ask, you should [take the initiative and] begin the discussion with him, as it is written: "And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'"⁸

² Exodus 13:8

³ Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 21a

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:20

⁵ Exodus 12:26

⁶ Exodus 13:8

⁷ Exodus 13:14

⁸ Exodus 13:8



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The midrash suggests that a family can produce children of different temperaments, different aptitudes, different orientations, even different values. But they all have a place at the table. In answering each child's individual question, none is banished. A family must make room for all kinds of children, even the most alienated. The parent's obligation is to find an answer, a response, appropriate to each child's character. In Judaism, faith is not discovered anew by each believer. Jews don't wait for personal revelation. Rather, faith is transmitted and nurtured in the fabric of family life.

The book of Genesis carefully weaves together the drama of covenant with the drama of family. This carries interesting implications, for family life is never simple and never has been. Genesis is unsparing in its depiction of family tension, conflict, dysfunction. Whereas Sigmund Freud maintained that the driving force of human development is the Oedipal conflict, the drive of the young boy to conquer his father and marry his mother, Genesis understands the central dynamic of family life as sibling rivalry: two (or more) brothers competing for one blessing. The Torah offers a series of seven brother stories: Cain and Abel, the sons of Noah, Abraham and his nephew Lot, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and Moses and Aaron. Far from spiritual perfection, these brothers betray jealousy, conniving, thievery, fratricide. At the end, Genesis reaches toward a conclusion of reconciliation and peace. "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together."⁹

4. Every child's favorite part of the Seder rite is the search for the *Afikoman*. A piece of matzah is hidden, and every child at the table is challenged to find it and ransom it back to the family, for without it, the Seder cannot end. The Talmudic tradition, for all its spiritual profundity, understood that play is part of life. Children need play. And the wise parent understands this:

There was once a man who made a will saying that his son should inherit nothing until he became a fool. Rabbi Yosi ben Yehudah and Rabbi Yehudah the Prince went to Rabbi Joshua ben Karha to ask the meaning of this instruction. They saw him outside his house, and noticed that he was crawling on his hands and feet with a reed in his mouth, and following after his son. When they saw him, they hid themselves. Later, they went to him to ask about the will. He laughed and said, "The matter about which you ask has happened to me! You see, when a man lives to have children, he acts like a fool!"¹⁰

5. The Seder is about celebration, gratitude, and faith and in the end, about hope. The Haggadah is replete with powerful expressions of faith in a future Messianic redemption. The door is open, and Elijah, the Messiah's precursor, is invited into the home. In the Seder's last song, *Had Gadya*, the angel of death is vanquished by God. The Seder's closing line is, *L'shanah ha-ba'ah bi-Yerushalayim*, "Next year in Jerusalem!" The presence of children at the Seder table is significant in this context, for children are seen by the Jewish tradition as the most powerful symbol of hope. Children are our reach into the future, our contribution to the world's redemption.

In one rabbinic legend, God awakens each morning and decides to destroy the world, but on hearing the sounds of children learning in school, God relents and allows the world to exist for another day. In another legend, Rabbi Akiva heroically saves a lost soul by locating his abandoned child, teaching him Torah, and setting him before the community to declare his faith. In classic Greek mythology, those who offend the gods are punished relentlessly and eternally. Sisyphus and Prometheus must bear their torment without mercy. By contrast, Akiva uses the power of Torah to redeem even the worst of evil-doers by teaching his child a life of holiness. The child is the savior of the parent. Finally, one of the most famous midrashim plays on the Hebrew words *banayikh* and *bonayikh* – "your children" and "your builders." Our children are our builders, for they will build the world of peace that has been our dream:

Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Wise scholars increase peace in the world, as it says, "And all your children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children."¹¹ Read not *banayikh* – "your children" but *bonayikh* – "your builders."

⁹ Psalms 133:1

¹⁰ Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 92:14



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ADOLESCENCE

The Bar Mitzvah boy stands on the synagogue bimah, stretches to his full five-foot height and proclaims in his cracking voice, “Today I am a man!”

Not exactly. The Jewish tradition recognized some changes that come at the age of thirteen. Certain business contracts can be completed by thirteen-year-olds. At thirteen, teaches *Avot d’Rabbi Natan*, the boy can control his *yetzer ha-ra*, his natural impulses, for the first time. After twelve, according to Talmud *Ketubot*, the style of education changes.¹² And, as one text puts it:

Rabbi Isaac stated: It was ordained at Usha that a man must bear with his son until [he is] twelve years [of age]. From that age onwards he may threaten his life.¹³

Puts a new spin on Bar Mitzvah, doesn’t it?

Despite these changes, it is clear from a close reading of the rabbinic texts that a teen still lived with his parents and under their authority. Jewish tradition did not consider the child at thirteen to be fully adult. Instead, he is beginning the process that would lead to adulthood. For both the Biblical and Rabbinic traditions, the age of twenty was the legal age of adulthood. In the Bible, twenty was the age at which one was counted in the census¹⁴ and eligible for military service.¹⁵ In the Talmud, twenty is the age at which one is permitted to sell property inherited from a deceased father.¹⁶ Twenty is also the age when one may stand before the community as *shaliach tzibur*, to lead prayer, or to recite the Priestly benediction.¹⁷ And most significantly, twenty is the age when one seeks a marriage partner.

Yet just as the rabbinic tradition recognized childhood as a significant phase of life, it recognized adolescence as well. The rabbinic concept of adolescence is revealed in the midrash. Thirteen is recognized as the beginning of a new phase of moral and spiritual life.¹⁸ According to *Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer*, thirteen was the age when Abraham smashed his father’s idols.¹⁹ It was at that age when Jacob and Esau separated – Jacob to a life of Torah and Esau to the practice of idolatry.²⁰ Thirteen is the age Levi was when he and his brother Simeon attacked the people of Shekhem to avenge their sister. And thirteen was the age at which Bezalel gained the artistic skill to build the Mishkan, the tabernacle. Each of these images is remarkably suggestive. Together, they describe a vivid picture of adolescence:

1. Like Abraham’s experience, adolescence is a time of rebellion. To find his own truth, the young person must smash the idols of conventional wisdom and accepted custom. The youngster sees himself or herself as a pioneer, the first to set foot on new moral territory. He or she seeks ideals, a sense of mission, a clear voice of conscience to follow. Teens have little tolerance for the false, the compromised, the superficial.
2. Like Jacob’s life, adolescence is a time of spiritual search and a quest for identity. Somewhere out there is a truth waiting for him or her. God is waiting at the end of the wilderness. But the quest demands we leave home and endure a journey fraught with peril and uncertainty.
3. Like Levi, adolescence is a time for moral absolutes. There is good, there is evil, and there is no ground between. Evil must be encountered and destroyed. Compromise, accommodation, gradualism are not acceptable. Judgmental,

¹¹ Isaiah 54:13

¹² Babylonian Talmud *Ketubot* 50a

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Exodus 30:14

¹⁵ Numbers 1:8 ff

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 155b-156a

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud *Hullin* 24b

¹⁸ see David Kraemer in David Kraemer (ed.), “Images of Childhood and Adolescence in Talmudic Literature,” in *The Jewish Family*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989

¹⁹ *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 26

²⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10



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intolerant, demanding, teens can also be deeply loyal, passionately dedicated, and aggressive in their pursuit of a better world.

4. Like Bezalel, adolescence is a time when every creative impulse flowers. Practicality, realism, will come later in life. For now, no dream is beyond realization, no plan is out of reach. In adolescence, each of us dreams of building a dwelling place for God in the world in our own way.

The connection between adolescence and mitzvah is significant. In contrast to the materialistic, narcissism of contemporary teen culture, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a counter-culture. It offers a radically different concept of adulthood, a different sense of self: a life of mitzvah. Mitzvah is an act of self-transcendence. Mitzvah demands that we reach and become more than we are – more moral, more holy, more Godly. In doing a mitzvah, we discover our power to touch the world and heal its brokenness. We discover that we matter. The paradox of mitzvah is that in performing a selfless act, we discover a bigger and better self. Bar/Bat Mitzvah offers a life of *Simcha shel mitzvah* – the joy of mitzvah.

CONCLUSION

In a beautiful image, the Talmud proposed that an invisible angel stands besides each blade of grass and whispers, “Grow!” How much more so each growing human soul!

The Jewish tradition understood childhood not solely as a corridor into adulthood. The child is not just a miniature adult, or an adult-in-training. Childhood and adolescence are unique moments in the life of a human being — moments of their own character, filled with unique music. The Jewish tradition maintained that the growth of a youngster into adult is a revelation of the divine, of divine love and power. Each of these moments has its own holiness; God is present in them all. The nurturing of a child’s growth through parenting, teaching, is the essence of “Torah.”

The youngster who grows from childhood into adulthood is initiated into a live of *mitzvah*. Mitzvah means more than “commandment” or even “good deed;” Mitzvah is the way Jews nurture the growth of the soul through adulthood. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “No one is lonely when doing a mitzvah, for mitzvah is where God and the human being meet. To meet God means to come upon an inner certainty of God’s realness, an awareness of God’s will.”²¹ The child who stands before the community as Bar or Bat Mitzvah to assume a life of mitzvot begins a lifetime of spiritual growth and moral development. Because no human being is ever finished. Because the task of growing deeper and more Godly is the lifetime task of the Jew.

²¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, Farrar Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1976, p. 312



CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE – TEXT 1

משנה אבות ה:כא

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, בֶּן חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים לְמִקְרָא, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִי לְמִשְׁנָה, בֶּן שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְמִצּוֹת, בֶּן חֲמִשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְתַלְמוּד, בֶּן שְׁמוֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה לְחֻפָּה, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים לְרִדּוֹף, בֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים לְכַח, בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים לְבִינָה, בֶּן חֲמִשִּׁים לְעֵצָה, בֶּן שְׁשִׁים לְזִקְנָה, בֶּן שִׁבְעִים לְשִׁיבָה, בֶּן שְׁמוֹנִים לְגִבּוֹרָה, בֶּן תְּשַׁעִים לְשׁוֹחַ, בֶּן מֵאָה כָּאֵלוֹ מֵת וְעֵבֶר וּבִטָּל מִן הָעוֹלָם:

MISHNAH Avot 5:21

He [Rabbi Yehudah ben Teima] used to say: At the age of five, [study Tanakh], at ten, [study] Mishnah, at thirteen, [take on] the mitzvot. At fifteen, [study] Talmud, at eighteen, [enter] marriage, at twenty, [begin a career], and at thirty, [one reaches] strength. At forty, [one achieves] understanding, at fifty [one can give] counsel; at sixty [one is] elder/ly; at seventy [one reaches] old age; at eighty [one has] renewed vitality; at ninety [one has] a bent body; at one hundred, [one is] as good as dead, having passed and ceased from the world.

קהלת רבה א:ב

ר' שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר רַב יִצְחָק מִתְּנִי לָהּ בְּשֵׁם ר' שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר שְׁבַע הַבָּלִים שֶׁאָמַר קֹהֶלֶת כְּנֶגֶד שְׁבַע עוֹלָמוֹת שֶׁאֵדָם רוּאָה, בֶּן שָׁנָה דוֹמָה לְמֶלֶךְ נִתּוֹן בְּאִיסְפָּקְרָפְסִטִי וְהַכֹּל מְחַבְּקִין וּמְנַשְׁקִין אוֹתוֹ, בֶּן שְׁתַּיִם וְשֹׁלֵשׁ דוֹמָה לְחִזִּיר שְׁפוּשֵׁט יָדָיו בְּבִיבּוֹן, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִי שָׁנָה קוֹפֵץ כְּגֵדִי, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים כְּסוּס נָהִים מְשַׁפֵּר גְּרִמִּיה וּבְעֵי אֵתְתָא, נָשָׂא אִשָּׁה הָרִי הוּא כְּחִמּוֹר. הוֹלִיד בָּנִים מְעִיז פָּנָיו כְּכֹלֵב לְהַבִּיא לָחֵם וּמִזּוֹנוֹת, הַזְּקִין הָרִי הוּא כְּקוֹף. הִדָּא דִּתִּימָר בְּעַמִּי הָאֲרָץ, אֲבָל בְּבִנֵי תוֹרָה כְּתִיב (מַלְכִים א' א') וְהִמְלִךְ דָּוִד זָקֵן, אַע"פ שֶׁהוּא זָקֵן מְלִךְ.

KOHELET RABBAH 1:3

Rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Isaac taught in the name of Rabbi Samuel ben Eleazar: The seven ‘vanities’ mentioned by Kohelet correspond to the seven worlds which a man beholds:

- At a year old he is like a king seated in a canopied litter, fondled and kissed by all.
- At two and three he is like a pig, sticking his hands in the gutters.
- At ten he skips like a kid.
- At twenty he is like a neighing horse, adorning his person and longing for a wife.
- Having married, he is like a beast of burden [lit. “an ass”].
- When he has children, he grows bold like a dog to supply their food and wants.
- When he has become old, he is [bent] like an ape.

What has just been said holds good only of the uneducated; but of those versed in the Torah it is written, “Now king David was old” – although he was old he was still a king.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In the first text, how is each type of learning suitable for each stage of childhood?
- Why is 40 the age of understanding? What do we understand then that we didn't before?
- Why does the idea that Torah learning changes the way we experience each stage appear at the end of the second text? What can we learn from that?
- Compare the list of life stages in both texts. What is the underlying idea of human development in each? Which do you prefer, and why?

¹ Kings 1:1



CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE – TEXT 2

INITIATION

At age five or six, a Jewish boy living in medieval Germany or France might begin his formal schooling by participating in a special ritual initiation ceremony. Early on the morning of the spring festival of Shavuot (Pentacost), someone wraps him in a coat or talit (prayer shawl) and carries him from his house to the teacher. The boy is seated on the teacher's lap, and the teacher shows him a tablet on which the Hebrew alphabet has been written. The teacher reads the letters first forwards, then backwards, and finally in symmetrically paired combinations, and he encourages the boy to repeat each sequence aloud. The teacher smears honey over the letters on the tablet and tells the child to lick it off.

Cakes on which biblical verses have been written are brought in. They must be baked by virgins from flour, honey, oil and milk. Next come shelled hard-boiled eggs on which more verses have been inscribed. The teacher reads the words written on the cakes and eggs, and the boy imitates what he hears and then eats them both.

The teacher next asks the child to recite an incantation adjuring Potah, the prince of forgetfulness (*sar ha-shikhehah*), to go far away and not block the boy's heart (lev, i.e., mind). The teacher also instructs the boy to sway back and forth when studying and to sing his lesson out loud.

As a reward, the child gets to eat fruit, nuts, and other delicacies. At the conclusion of the rite, the teacher leads the boy down to the riverbank and tells him that his future study of Torah, like the rushing water in the river, will never end. Doing all of these acts, we are told, will "expand the child's heart."

- from Ivan G Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 1

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Can you detect a rationale behind the first list? What is it?**
- **Why do you think the 'swimming' was added? What kind of swimming does it refer to?**
- **How does the second text relate to the first?**
- **What other acts on the part of a parent 'expand the child's heart'? Why is this important?**



CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE – TEXT 3

ירמיהו א:ד-י

ד וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: הַ בְּטֶרֶם אֶצְוֶרְךָ [אֶצְרָךְ] בְּבֶטֶן וַיְדַעַתִּיךָ וּבֶטֶרֶם תֵּצֵא מִרֶחֶם הַקֶּדֶשׁ שִׁתִּיךָ נָבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וַאֲמַר אֶהְיֶה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַנֶּה לֹא-יִדְעֵתִי דְבַר כִּי-נָעַר אָנֹכִי: ז וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי אֶל-תֹּאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תִּלְדָּה וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹר: ח אֶל-תִּירָא מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי-אֲתָנֶה אֲנִי לְהַצִּילָךְ נְאֻם-יְהוָה: ט וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיַּגֵּעַ עַל-פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי הִנֵּה נִתְּתִי דְבָרִי בְּפִיךָ: י רְאֵה הַפֶּקֶדֶתִיךָ | הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל-הַגּוֹיִם וְעַל-הַמְּמַלְכוֹת לְנִתּוֹשׁ וּלְנִתּוֹץ וּלְהַאֲבִיד וּלְהַרְוֶס לְבָנוֹת וּלְנָטוּעַ:

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

The word of the Holy One came to me, saying:
Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;
Before you were born, I consecrated you.
I appointed you a prophet over the nations.

I replied, Ah, Lord God!
I don't know how to speak,
I am still a boy.

And the Lord said to me:
Do not say, "I am still a boy,"
But go where I send you,
And speak whatever I command you.

See, I appoint you this day
Over nations and kingdoms:
To uproot and to pull down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does Jeremiah mean when he says, 'I am still a boy'?
- Why do you think that God objects to this?
- What tasks will Jeremiah perform that will stop him being 'still a boy'?
- In this text, adolescence seems to be associated with prophecy. In what ways are adolescents our prophets?



CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE – TEXT 4

אליהו זוטא (איש שלום) פרשה כה

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה נָטַל אַבְרָהָם הָאֱלוֹהוֹת וְהֵלַךְ אַצְּל תְּרַח אָבִיו, אָמְרוּ לוֹ בְּנָיו לְאַבְיָהֶם, זֶה אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְמַכּוֹר אֱלוֹהוֹת, בֹּא וְנַעֲשֵׂה אוֹתוֹ כּוֹמֵר. אָמַר לָהֶם מָה מְלַאכְתּוֹ שֶׁל כּוֹמֵר, אָמְרוּ לוֹ מְכַבֵּד לַפְּנֵיהֶם וּמְרַבֵּץ לַפְּנֵיהֶם וְנוֹתֵן לַפְּנֵיהֶם מֵאֲכָל וּמִשְׁתָּה. אַבְרָהָם כִּיבֵד לַפְּנֵיהֶם וְרִיבֵץ לַפְּנֵיהֶם וְנָתַן לַפְּנֵיהֶם מֵאֲכָל וּמִשְׁתָּה, אָמַר לָהֶם רְצוּנְכֶם טָלוּ וְאֲכָלוּ קַחוּ וּשְׁתּוּ מִמֶּנִּי וְתַרְצוּ לִי כְּשֵׁם שְׂאֵתָם מִתַּרְצִין לְבְנֵי אָדָם. וְלֹא הָיָה בָהֶם שְׁנוּטָל. מִיָּד פָּתַח וְאָמַר, פֹּה-לָהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יֵרְאוּ אֲזַנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אָף לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְיחוּן יְדִיהֶם וְלֹא יִמִּישׁוּן רַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִהְלְכוּ.

ELIYAHU ZUTA (ISH SHALOM) 25

...Then Abraham took all the gods and brought them back to his father Terah. Terah's other sons said to their father: This Abraham does not know how to sell gods! Come, then, and let us make him a priest. Abraham asked: What is a priest's work? They replied: He waits upon the gods, offers sacrifices to them, and serves them food and drink....Abraham waited upon them, offered sacrifices to them and set food and drink before them [the gods] and said to them: Please, take and eat, take and drink, so that you may be able to bestow good upon me as you do to human beings. But not one of them took anything. Then Abraham began to recite the verse, "They have mouths but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not; they have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not."¹

בראשית רבה לח:ג

...חַד זָמַן אֶתְּא חַדָּא אֶתְּתָא טְעִינָא חַד פִּינְדָּ דְסַלְתָּ, אֶמְרָה לִיה: הָא לָךְ קָרַב קְדָמְהוֹן. קָם נָסַב בּוּקְלָסָא בִּידָהּ וְתַבְרָהוֹן לְכַלְהוֹן פְּסִילָא, וִיהַב בּוּקְלָסָא בִּידָא דְרַבָּה דְהוּהוּ בִּינְהוֹן. כִּינּוּ דְאֶתְּא אַבּוּהָ אָמַר לִיה: מֵאֵן עֲבַד לְהוֹן כְּדִין? אָמַר לִיה: מָה נְכַפּוּר מִנְדָּ? אֶתְּא חַדָּא אֶתְּתָא טְעִינָא לָהּ חַד פִּינְדָּ דְסַלְתָּ וְאֶמְרַת לִי: הָא לָךְ קָרַב קְדָמְהוֹן. קָרַבְתָּ לְקְדָמִיהוֹן, הוּהוּ דִין אָמַר: אֲנָא אַכּוּל קְדָמָא, וְדִין אָמַר אֲנִי אַכּוּל קְדָמָא, קָם הִדִּין רַבָּה דְהוּהוּ בִּינְהוֹן נָסַב בּוּקְלָסָא וְתַבְרָנוּן. אָמַר לִיה: מָה אַתְּ מַפְלָה בִּי, וְיִדְעִין אֲנּוּן! אָמַר לִיה: וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אֲזַנְיָךְ מָה שֶׁפִּידָ אֹמְרִי!!

MIDRASH RABBAH BEREISHIT 38:13

...A woman came carrying a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it up to them [the gods]. At that, Abraham seized a stick, smashed all the images, and placed the stick in the hand of the biggest of them. When his father came, he asked: Who did this to them? Abraham answered: Would I hide anything from my father? A woman came with a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it up to them. When I offered it, one god said, "I will eat first," and another said, "No, I will eat first." Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others. His father replied: Are you making sport of me? Do they know [how to do this]? Abraham answered: Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- The tradition understands that Abraham was 13 at the time of these events. In what ways is his behavior characteristic of a 13-year old?
- Are there any ways in which it is not characteristic?
- What 'idols' do all adolescents need to smash?
- What 'idols' have you smashed yourself?

² Psalms 115:5-7



CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

KALLAH RABATI 2:9

Rabbi Akiva was once walking in a certain place [a cemetery], when he met a man who was carrying a heavy load of wood on his shoulders, but he could not move forward; and the man was moaning and sighing. Akiva said to the man, “What did you do [when you were alive]?” The man replied, “There was no prohibition that I did not breach in that world, and now guards have been set over me and they will not let me rest!” Rabbi Akiva said, “Have you left a son?” The man replied, “Don’t delay me! I am frightened that the angels will beat me with fiery lashes and ask me why I am not walking quicker!” Rabbi Akiva said to him, “Tell me, who did you leave behind?” The man replied, “I left my wife with child.”

Rabbi Akiva went off and found the place [where the man had lived]. He asked, “Where is that man’s wife?” People replied, “May that bloodsucker’s memory be erased!” “Why?” asked Rabbi Akiva. They answered: “That man was a robber! He ate people alive, he caused everyone misery, and once he even seduced a woman who was engaged to somebody else – and on Yom Kippur, too!”

Rabbi Akiva went to the man’s house. He found the man’s wife, who was indeed with child. He stayed until the child was born, whereupon he circumcised the child, and, when he grew up, took him to the synagogue to worship with others [ie the child will have recited the *Barekhu*].

Later Rabbi Akiva went back [to the cemetery]. The man appeared to him, and said, “May you always have a tranquil mind, because you have made my mind tranquil.”





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



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