



VAYISHLACH

BAR AND BAT MITZVAH: TOO YOUNG?

A Jewish Conception of Maturity and Adulthood

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayishlach

Jacob returns to the Holy Land after a twenty-year stay in Haran and sends angel-emissaries to Esau in hopes of a reconciliation. But his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with four hundred armed men. Jacob prepares for war, prays, and sends Esau a large gift (consisting of hundreds of head of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Jabok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies the spirit of Esau, with whom he wrestles until daybreak.

Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Israel, which means “he who prevails over the Divine.”

Jacob and Esau meet, embrace, and kiss, but part ways. Jacob purchases a plot of land near Shechem, whose crown prince—also called Shechem—abducts and rapes Jacob’s daughter Dinah. Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves. Jacob journeys on. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin,

and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem.

Reuben loses the birthright because he interferes with his father’s marital life. Jacob arrives in Hebron to his father, Isaac, who later dies at age 180. (Rebecca has passed away before Jacob’s arrival.)

Our parshah concludes with a detailed account of Esau’s wives, children, and grandchildren; the family histories of the people of Se’ir, among whom Esau settled; and a list of the eight kings who ruled Edom, the land of Esau’s and Se’ir’s descendants.

Is this age a
significant
milestone in our
maturity curve?



TEXT 1A

GENESIS 34:25

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיּוֹתָם כְּאַבִּים, וַיִּקְחוּ שְׁנֵי
בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב שִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֶחָי דִּינָה אִישׁ חֲרָבוֹ,
וַיָּבֹאוּ עַל הָעִיר בְּטַח וַיַּהַרְגוּ כָּל זָכָר:

And it came to pass on the third day,
when [the inhabitants of Shechem] were
all in pain, that Simeon and Levi—two of
Jacob’s sons, brothers of Dinah—each
man took up his sword. They came upon
the city with confidence and slew every
man.

TEXT 1B

IBID., 34:31

וַיֹּאמְרוּ, הֲזֹנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת אֲחוֹתֵנוּ?

And they said, “Will our sister be made into a harlot?”

QUESTION

How old do you think *Shimon* and Levi were at this point?

TEXT 2

RASHI, TALMUD, NAZIR
29B

שלא מצינו בכל התורה שיהא קרוי איש בפחות
מבן י"ג. אבל בבן י"ג מצינו שקראו הכתוב איש,
כדכתיב: "ויקחו שני בני יעקב שמעון ולוי איש
חרבו" (בראשית לד, כה).

וגמירי, שמעון ולוי בההיא שעתא בני י"ג שנה הוו.
והרוצה לחשוב, יצא ויחשוב.

In all the Torah, we find no instance in which someone younger than thirteen is called a man. However, we do find that the Torah describes a thirteen-year-old as a man, as the passage states, "And Simeon and Levi—two of Jacob's sons . . . each man took up his sword" (Genesis 34:25).

We have it by tradition that Simeon and Levi were thirteen years old at that point. One who wants to calculate it may calculate it [and will conclude that they were, indeed, thirteen].

The process of maturation is a long journey—it takes several years for it to complete and be visible on the surface, but the journey begins at this age.



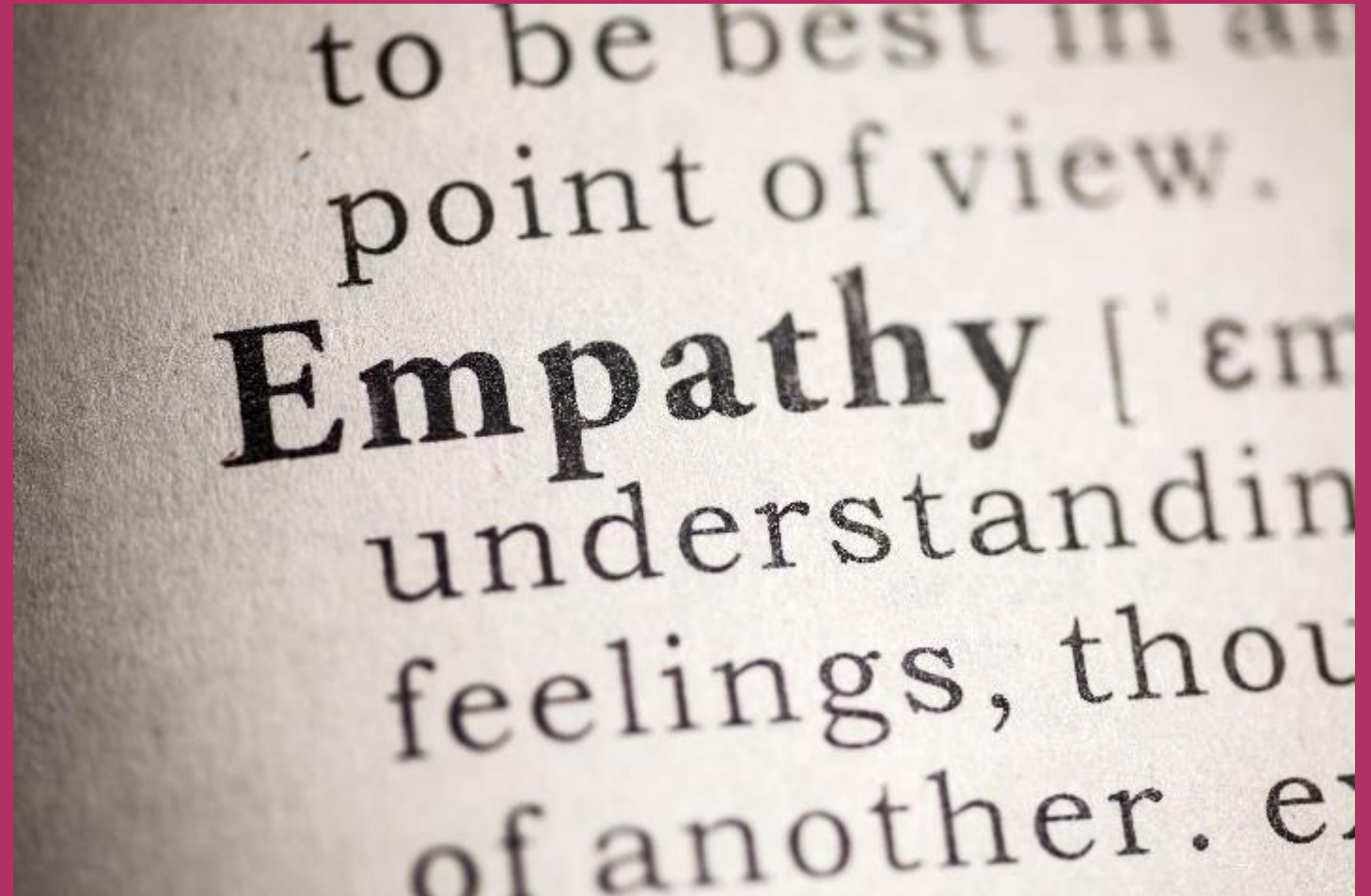
TEXT 3

THE REBBE, RABBI
MENACHEM MENDEL
SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI*
SICHOT 15, P. 289

דאס הייסט, אז צו י"ג שנה דערגרייכט ער צו
דער מעלה פון א דערוואקסענעם, פון א גדול
אין (שכל און) דעה — דעריבער ווערט ער דאן
מחוייב בכל המצוות

The commandments become obligatory at
the age of thirteen because that is when
we reach maturity in terms of
understanding and empathy.

When the Torah speaks of maturity in this context, it is talking about our ability to empathize. The Torah isn't looking for intellectual prowess, but for emotional intelligence—the ability to relate to things outside of oneself.



TEXT 4A

RABBI SHALOM DOVBER
SCHNEERSOHN,
KUNTRES HATEFILAH 5

וההרגשה זהו ענין הדעת, כי יכול להיות שמבין את הדבר היטב ומכל מקום אינו במורגש אצלו. וכמו תינוק חכים שמבין הכל, ומכל מקום אינו מרגיש עצם הענין . . . ואף על פי שהוא חריף ובעל השגה ותפיסא . . . מפני שאין לו דעת. והוא, שאין לו הכרה והרגשה . . . גם במילי דעלמא, בממון וגדולה — אף על פי ששכלו בטוב ההשגה והבהירות, מכל מקום, אמיתת הענין של ממון וגדולה רחוק ממנו, כי לא יכיר וירגיש בהם כגדול.

וכן בהיפך, שהוא השפלות והדלות, אף על פי שמבין היטב חסרונם — אינו בהרגש אצלו עדיין כמו בגדול, שמרגיש היטב חסרון השפלות והדלות כו'.

To empathize is to really know. One can have a concrete understanding of something and still be unable to experience it emotionally. For example, wise children can understand something well, but they can't experience it emotionally . . . despite being intellectually sharp and smart. . . . This is because children lack the ability to really know, namely, to develop emotional intimacy and feel the subject on a personal, emotional level.

The same applies to worldly affairs such as wealth or power. Children might be bright and smart, they might understand wealth and power, but they aren't emotionally attached to it. They don't have the same relationship with money that adults do.

The same is true of the other side of the coin. Children might understand the problems associated with lowliness and poverty, but they aren't distressed by such problems. They don't feel them as adults do.

TEXT 4B

THE REBBE, RABBI
MENACHEM MENDEL
SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI*
SICHOT 15, P. 289

ער האט נאך ניט די הכרה והרגשה, סיי אין דער
טייערקייט און מעלה

פון קיום המצוות, און סיי אין דעם חסרון אין
העדר הקיום זייערן.

Children lack the ability to perceive and feel how precious and valuable a mitzvah is, and how much we lose when we fail to observe the Divine commandments.

To be obligated to do a mitzvah, we need to be able to feel its gravity and importance. We need to learn how to feel and be moved by something outside of us. For that, we need to develop empathy.



Today's leading psychologists assert that children become capable of abstract thought and empathy as they enter their teens. In other words, this ancient Torah teaching is echoed by modern psychology.



TEXT 5A

THE ROHR JEWISH
LEARNING INSTITUTE,
*THE JEWISH COURSE OF
WHY*, LESSON 6

The notion that a shift in a child's development occurs around the age of twelve fits with popular models of developmental psychology. One notable example is the work of Jean Piaget, who mapped out four stages of a child's cognitive development. He called the final stage, beginning around age eleven, the "formal operational" stage. While children in earlier years mostly used inductive reasoning (drawing general conclusions from personal experiences and specific facts), at this age they become capable of deductive reasoning (drawing specific conclusions from abstract concepts using logic). While children tend to think very concretely and specifically in earlier stages, at around age twelve they become capable of abstract thought and begin to consider possible outcomes and consequences of actions.

TEXT 5B

*JEWISH COURSE OF
WHY, IBID.*

A parallel to Piaget's work in the field of cognitive development is Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development. Kohlberg found that until adolescence, children are motivated primarily by self-interest. They behave well because they are rewarded and avoid misbehaving to avoid punishment. As children enter adolescence, they become more concerned about maintaining relationships and take other people's perspectives and intentions into account when making decisions. They also begin to conform to social standards of behavior and understand right from wrong.

TEXT 6

SARA B. JOHNSON, PHD,
“ADOLESCENT
MATURITY AND THE
BRAIN: THE PROMISE
AND PITFALLS OF
NEUROSCIENCE
RESEARCH IN
ADOLESCENT HEALTH
POLICY,”
*JOURNAL OF
ADOLESCENT HEALTH*
(45:3), SEPTEMBER 1,
2009, PP. 216–221

Throughout childhood and into adolescence, the cortical areas of the brain continue to thicken as neural connections proliferate. In the frontal cortex, gray matter volumes peak at approximately 11 years of age in girls and 12 years of age in boys, reflecting dendritic overproduction. Subsequently, rarely used connections are selectively pruned[,] making the brain more efficient by allowing it to change structurally in response to the demands of the environment. . . .

Neural connections that survive the pruning process become more adept at transmitting information through myelination. Myelin, a sheath of fatty cell material wrapped around neuronal axons, acts as “insulation” for neural connections. This allows nerve impulses to travel throughout the brain more quickly and efficiently and facilitates increased integration of brain activity.

QUESTION

Why do we infer the age for the beginning of religious worship from a bloody and violent event?

TEXT 7

RABBI ASHER BEN
YECHIEL, *HALACHIC*
RESPONSA 16

וששאלת, מאין לנו דבן י"ג שנה ויום אחד הוא
בר עונשין, אבל פחות מכן לא?

דע כי הלכה למשה מסיני הוא, והוא בכלל
שיעורין . . . שהן הלכה למשה מסיני. דשיעור
וקצבה לכל דבר נתן למשה בעל פה.

With respect to your query: How do we know that we only become liable for our transgressions at the age of thirteen, but not before?

Know that this is a ruling that G-d gave to Moses on Mount Sinai [and was passed down orally through the generations]. For G-d taught Moses a minimum measure for every requirement in the Torah.

TEXT 8

THE REBBE, RABBI
MENACHEM MENDEL
SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI*
SICHOT 15, PP. 291–292

די דערמאנטע צוויי דיעות בעבודת האדם — זיינען
צוויי אופנים אין דעם סדר ווי עס דארף זיין די
התחלת העבודה פון א אידן אין קיום התורה
והמצוות:

לדיעה הראשונה איז עס אן אופן של עבודה על פי
טעם ודעת — דאס הייסט, וויבאלד אז זיין חיוב
צו מקיים זיין מצוות איז אפהענגיק אין טבע
שלימות השכל ודעת, אז ווען ער האט א הכרה און
הרגשה אין ענין המצוות לייגט מען אויף אים
ארויף דעם עול מצוות — איז פארשטאנדיק אז
דער אנהויב פון זיין עבודה איז אין אן אופן פון
טעם ודעת.

לויט דער צווייטער דיעה אבער, איז דאס וואס א
בן י"ג שנה מוז מקבל זיין אויף זיך דעם עול
מצוות איז עס הלכה למשה מסיני, דערפאר וואס
אזוי איז דער ציווי הקדוש ברוך הוא — קומט
אויס, אז זיין אנהייב צוגאנג צו קיום המצוות איז
לויטן סדר העבודה פון קבלת עול.

These two opinions about [the starting point of] our obligation to worship G-d represent two entry points into Divine worship.

According to the first opinion, worship should begin from a standpoint of reason and knowledge. The ability to serve G-d this way depends directly on the state of our intellectual and emotional maturity. Thus, we become obligated to perform *mitzvot* when we mature enough to intuit the meaning of the *mitzvot* and to relate to them emotionally. [According to this opinion,] it follows that the portal to Divine worship is reason and knowledge.

The second opinion is that a thirteen-year-old accepts the yoke of *mitzvot* in obedience to a Divine edict related to Moses at Sinai. [According to this opinion,] it follows that the portal to Divine worship is discipline and obedience.

TEXT 9

RABBI YOSEF YITZCHAK
SCHNEERSOHN, *SEFER*
HAMAAMARIM 5685, P.
264

האנשים בעלי מוחין הנמצאים עתה צריכים להניח
שכלם, ולא לילך אחר הטעם ודעת, כי יכולים
להטות חס ושלום על פי שכלם לפי רוח הזמן
והמקום, לומר שצריכים עתה להתנהג באופן כזה.
וביני לביני יכול לנטות חס ושלום מהדרך האמת
מעט מעט, עד כי חס ושלום מרה יהיה באחרונה.

ולזאת צריכים לעמוד על נפשם במסירות נפש
ממש, שלא לנטות חס ושלום מן השולחן ערוך
אפילו כקוצו של יו"ד. כי התורה היא נצחית בכל
עת ובכל זמן, ולא יבוש מן המלעיגים עליו

Intellectual Jews today must set aside their deductions and refuse to follow their reason and knowledge. This is because they are liable to stray, G-d forbid, by following the prevailing culture of our time and place, and conclude that we must change our practice. With time, this can cause them to stray completely from the true path, G-d forbid. It might begin with a minor adjustment, but it can lead slowly and progressively to a bitter end, G-d forbid.

We must, therefore, be fiercely determined, even to the point of self-sacrifice, not to stray even an iota, G-d forbid, from the code of Jewish law. The Torah is eternal to every era and epoch, and so we must stand firm and never feel shame before those who mock us.

TEXT 10

RABBI SHNEUR ZALMAN
OF LIADI, *SHULCHAN*
ARUCH HARAV,
ORACH CHAYIM 4:2
(*MAHADURA TINYANA*)

שְׁגֵמֶר וְעִיקָר כְּנִיסַת נֶפֶשׁ הַקְּדוּשָׁה בְּאָדָם, הוּא בִּי"ג
שָׁנִים וַיּוֹם אֶחָד לְזָכָר וִי"ב לְנִקְבָּה. שְׁלֹכֵן נִתְחַיֵּבוּ
אֲזַי בְּמִצְוֹת מִן הַתּוֹרָה.

The primary and final state of the sacred soul's entry into the body is at the age of thirteen for a boy and twelve for a girl. This is why they become obligated in the Torah's commandments at that age.

The ability to surrender to a higher power even when the mind is filled with doubts cannot come from the mind itself. It must come from a point that transcends the mind.



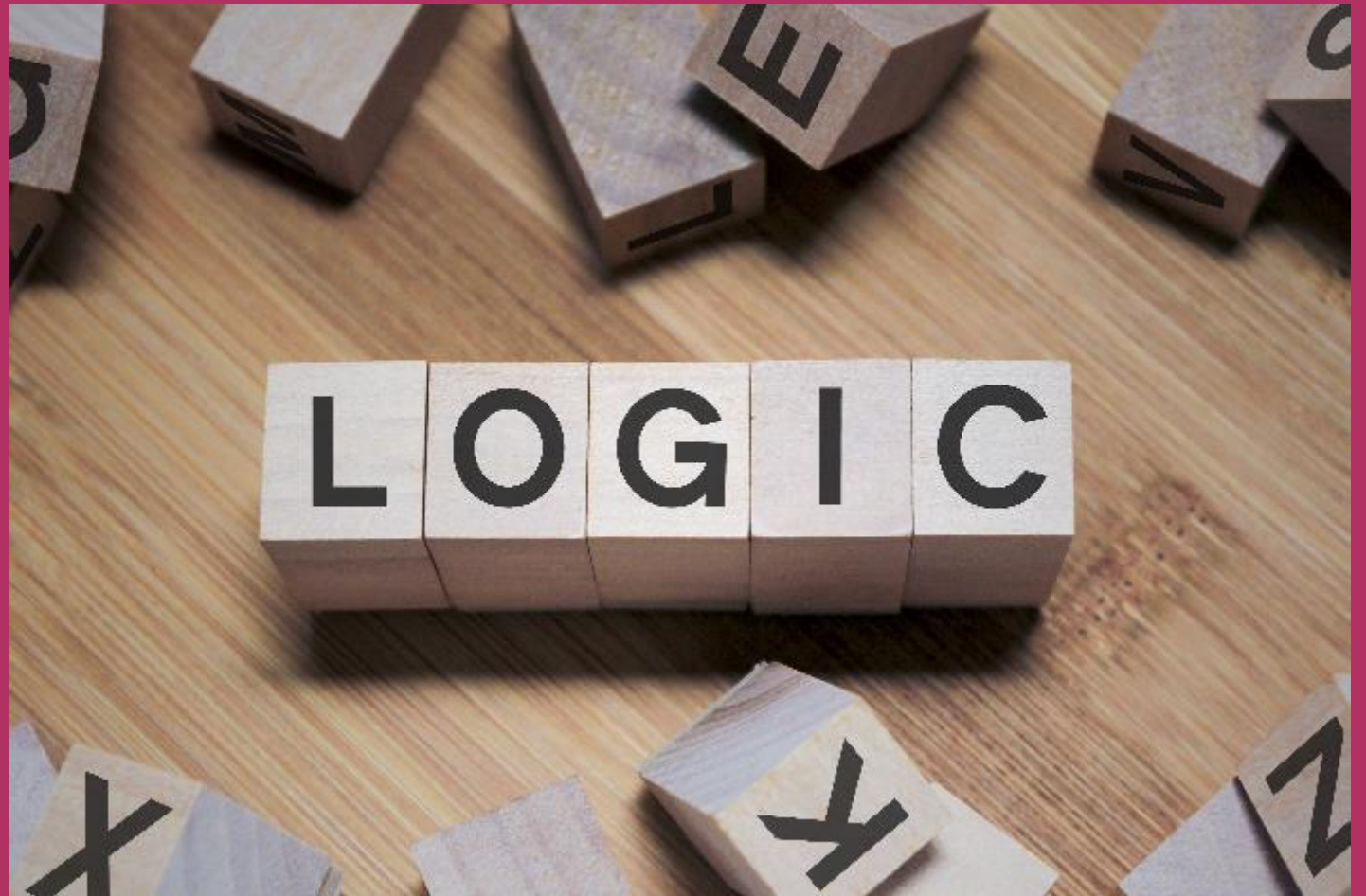
TEXT 11

THE REBBE, RABBI
MENACHEM MENDEL
SCHNEERSON, *LIKUTEI*
SICHOT 5, PP. 161–162

דער ענין פון "הכזונה יעשה את אחותנו" האט זיי דערנומען אזוי שטארק, אז "נהגו עצמן כשאר אנשים שאינם בניו" (של יעקב); זיי זיינען געווען דורכגענומען אינגאנצן מיט דעם געפיל ובמילא איז ביי זיי ניט געבליבן קיין ארט אויף קיין שום אנדער זאך אויסער "ויקחו איש גו". און דאס איז אויך דער טעם וואס דעם זמן פון התחלת החיוב במצות לערנט מען אפ . . . פון אט דעם פסוק, ווייל דאס איז א הוראה פאר יעדער בר מצוה, דאס הייסט, פאר יעדן איד ווען ער האלט ביי תחלת העבודה, אז בשעת עס האנדלט זיך וועגן "הכזונה" — וואס דאס מיינט באמת יעדער עבירה, וואס קומט דאך פון תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זונים אחריהם, און דורך וועלכע מען ווערט אפגעריסן, רחמנא ליצלן, פון אויבערשטן אין דער דוגמא ווי א "זונה" וואס איז "אסורה לבעלה" ("זה הקדוש ברוך הוא") — דארף מען זיך ניט רעכענען מיט קיין שום חשבונות און מדידות, אפילו ניט מיט מדידות פון תורה, נאר מען דארף ביי זיך ארויסרופן דווקא די תנועה פון מסירת נפש. נאכדעם ווי מען האט ביי זיך שוין מעורר געווען דעם כח המסירת נפש — דאן דארף מען טאקע יעדער זאך טאן על פי טעם ודעת, במדידה והגבלה, על פי תורה; אבער בכדי אז די עבודה שעל פי טעם ודעת זאל זיין ווי עס דארף צו זיין, מוז זיין צום אלעם ערשטן, גלייך ווי מען ווערט נאר אן "איש", דער ענין פון מסירת נפש שלמעלה מטעם ודעת

The concern, "Will our sister be made into a harlot?" was so distressing to Simeon and Levi that they responded like strangers—like people who were not the sons of Jacob. They were so consumed by distress over the violation of their sister that their only choice was, "each man took up his sword." This is precisely why we derive the age of bar and bat mitzvah from this passage. It is a message for every bar and bat mitzvah child, which includes all Jews at the beginning stages of their spiritual progression. The lesson is that when we "stray after our hearts and eyes with lustful urges" (Numbers 15:39) and are tempted to sin, we face the risk of being made into a "harlot." Just as harlotry drives a wedge between a woman and her husband, so does sin form a barrier between us and G-d. When we are confronted by such temptations, we mustn't tolerate any rational justification or moderate response. Our only response can be stubborn resistance to sin, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Only after being inspired to self-sacrifice do we have the luxury of serving G-d in a fashion that follows our reasoning and the measured pace of the Torah's dictates. However, for our reasoned service to G-d to endure, our very first approach, even at the age of bar and bat mitzvah, must be stubborn determination that transcends all reason.

We must develop a fierce loyalty to G-d that transcends every logical reason or explanation. A bond that is, simply because it is. All explanations come later.



TEXT 12

THE REBBE, RABBI
MENACHEM MENDEL
SCHNEERSON,
RESHIMOT 19

אָצַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, גָּדוּל לִי"ג שָׁנָה . . . מֵה שְׂאִין בֶּן
בֶּשָׂאָר אֹמֹת הָעוֹלָם, גָּדוּל לִכ' שָׁנָה, כ"א שָׁנָה,
וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָּזֶה.

הַטַּעַם: אֹמֹת הָעוֹלָם נַעֲשׂוּ לָעַם עַל יְדֵי שְׁמִתְחֻלָּה
מִתְּיַשְׁבִּים עַל אֲדָמָתָם אַחֲרֵי הָיִיתָם נוֹדָדִים וְרוֹעִי
צֹאן, בּוֹחֲרִים לָהֶם מֶלֶךְ וְכו', וְאַחֵר כָּךְ מִיִּסְדִּים
לָהֶם תּוֹרָה וְחֻקִּים. בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיוּ בְּהֶפֶךְ — תָּכֵף
כְּשִׁיצְאוּ מִעֲבָדוֹת מִצְרַיִם, בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה,
הִתְחִילוּ בְּתוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת . . . וְזֶה הָיָה יְסוֹד וְהִתְחַלֵּת
הָיִיתָם לָעַם.

וְלָכֵן לֹא בֶן כ' לָכַח בְּמִלְחָמַת הַקִּיּוֹם נַעֲשֶׂה גָדוּל,
אֲלֹא בֶן י"ג, כְּשֶׁהוּא בָר דַּעָה לְהַבִּין גּוֹדֵל הַזְכוּת
וְגוֹדֵל הָאַחֲרִיּוֹת שֵׁיֵשׁ עָלָיו, עַל יְדֵי הָיִיתוֹ אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Jewish children reach maturity at thirteen years of age, unlike other nations where the age of adulthood is twenty, twenty-one, etc.

The reason: The nations form their national identity by first settling on a common land rather than wandering about or shepherding, then they appoint a king, and finally establish a constitution and laws. The history of the Jewish people is the opposite: As soon as they left Egypt, while still in the desert, they began to follow the Torah and its commandments. . . . This was their foundation and portal into nationhood.

This is why Jews don't enter into adulthood when they are twenty and strong enough to defend the land; rather, by the age of thirteen, when they are mature enough to begin to understand the great privilege and responsibility of being a Jew.

KEY POINTS

1. The legal age of bar mitzvah—thirteen—is informed by the story in the Torah of Shimon and Levi killing the entire city of Shechem.
2. The Torah’s concept of “maturity,” as far as religious responsibility is concerned, is not intellectual maturity, but emotional/spiritual maturity—the ability to relate to things outside of oneself.
3. Empathy is a hallmark of this maturity, and it begins at the onset of teenage years, which accounts for the ages of bar/bat mitzvah.
4. Modern science has uncovered physiological and neurological changes that reflect this.
5. Understanding and empathy, however, are not enough to be a Jewish adult. First and foremost, it requires fierce loyalty that transcends understanding, guaranteeing loyalty to G-d despite all odds.

KEY POINTS

6. The story of Simeon and Levi reflects this tenacity and transcendence.
7. This concept of maturity flows from the Torah, as opposed to other cultures that value other things (e.g., land ownership), which accounts for the older ages of “maturity” in their cultures.

