

"NO TIME FOR KIDSTUFF"

At the end of his life, Jacob sees Joseph's children and asks <sup>מִי אֵלֶּה</sup> - "who are they?" When they are identified by their father Joseph, he blesses them and says:

<sup>הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגּוֹאֵל אוֹתִי מִכָּל רָע וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בֵּהֶם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אֲבוֹתַי אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק...</sup>

"May He whose angel redeemed me from all evil, bless these lads, and let my name and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac be called upon them" (Gen. 48:16)

The story is well known. Permit me to analyze this narrative, from a contemporary perspective, as a special message to young people.

Ephraim and Manasseh are, in a manner of speaking, the first teenagers as such. They are the biblical prototypes of adolescents -- an age-group which has become differentiated and thrust into prominence since the Industrial Revolution. This is a group whose members are no longer children, not yet adults; usually affluent; at home in their native cultures; very much "with it." Manasseh derived his name because <sup>נָשַׁנְי אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי</sup> "God let me forget all my toil and my father's house." He is a youngster who has overcome the disadvantages and limitations of an alien culture. Ephraim derived his name from

<sup>הַפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ נִי</sup> "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction," symbolizing a lad who is success-bound and self-assured.

These are the characteristics and this is the context that are conducive to prolonged childishness, to over-extended youthfulness.

So Jacob remembers how he himself was propelled precipitously from childhood into adulthood -- one day he basked in the intimacy and warmth of his parental home, and the next he was wandering, lonely, pursued, and hunted. So he blesses his grandchildren: "May He whose angel redeemed me from all evil" -- who was with me as I experienced the anxieties and the dread of life -- "bless the lads," these adolescents who are still children. May they learn to shed their childishness soon, "and may my name and the name of Abraham and Isaac be called upon them" -- may they be like unto their ancestors, growing up quickly. There is no time for "kid-stuff!"

Most of us seem to believe that adolescence is a biological fact of life. That is simply not so. At puberty, a person becomes a biological adult. Only when you inhibit maturity and put a childish mind into an adult body, do you have an adolescent.

Our culture romanticizes this period, idealizes it, and is somewhat in awe of it. Industry caters to it, magazines focus on it, schools indulge it.

If reality could be legislated, I would repeal the social and economic conditions that have created this category and that prolong adolescence progressively into the mid-20's and mid-30's -- and even beyond. I would banish adolescence. Jewish life especially cannot afford the luxury of such lingering frivolousness. There is no time for kid-stuff. There is too much Torah to study, too much good to do, too much community to create, too much evil to battle, too much life to enhance.

Of course, I am not speaking necessarily about young people as such, but rather about the distinguishing features of adolescence that have, especially in the last five or eight years, insinuated themselves into the fabric of all of society, so that there are people in their 40's or 50's and 60's who effectively live the ethos of adolescence!

What are some of the features of youthfulness that we could do without?

For one thing, American youthfulness tends to be ahistorical. Young people, especially adolescents, incline to ignore the past. Perhaps it is a combination of the American emphasis on youth and future, with the absence of young people's experience of grandparents, which deny them the intuition and feelings of time and past and tradition. And so we have a "now" generation to which all that is past is irrelevant. But Judaism can not survive without historical memory.

When Jacob failed to recognize Ephraim and Manasseh -- "who are they?" -- he knew that in all probability they did not recognize him too. So he must remind them: "may you be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac." Link up into the chain of history!

Another symptom of overlong adolescence and contemporary kid-stuff is -- instant gratification. An adult knows how to

defer his pleasures and plan ahead. A child must have an instant satisfaction of every whim and caprice. It is true in every area. In education, for instance, an adolescent attitude is that every course must be immediately relevant, either in terms of "fun" or practical value. In interpersonal relationships, an adolescent-type cannot wait for natural growth. He must have an immediate consummation of a relationship.

This instant gratification was a major goal of the late Counter-Culture, still lingering with us. What Aristippus and Epicurus were unable to attain in antiquity, the youthful followers of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse have achieved today: the unification of will with primitive wish, the removal of distance and time between stimulus and pleasant response, the instant joining of desire and fulfillment.

Hence, the unpopularity of romance and courtship leading to fulfillment in marriage. Courtship, companionship, commitment, are considered archaic. No development, no growth, no patience, no deferment, no postponement. There is only -- yes or no, and "now!"

This Anschaauung is expressed as, "be; don't become!" Live now, for now, instead of deferring things for later. Life must be like a checking account, not like a savings account into which you put every day a part of your life, expecting to draw upon your capital later on. When you are older, you will have no energy and no vitality to enjoy the things that you can now enjoy. Hence, the popularity of drugs, as an intensification of experience, even at the expense of health and longevity. Hence too, the "new morality," according to which man is disinhibited, and his gratification becomes instant.

A very wise writer, Sylvano Arieti, in The Will To Be Human, has referred to this as "Pinnochean philosophy," after Pinnochio, the animated doll who had no past and no future, only a present. But if we accept this philosophy, then man is indistinguishable from a cat or a dog or a horse. Animals hardly ever change, they experience very little growth or planning or future. It is the ultimate immaturity, for "no maturity is possible without the ability to postpone."

That is why Jacob blessed his grandchildren with his name and the name of his ancestors. One of the most remarkable facts

of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is that they lived on the strength of a divine promise, which was denied fulfillment until centuries and centuries later!

In addition to ignoring the past and instant gratification, another element, and one of considerable importance for the Jewish community, in the context of adolescence or kid-stuff, is: activism or militancy.

Now, I am not a pacifist, and I do not believe in passivity. My credentials are adequate for those who care to inspect them, especially with regard to Soviet Jewry. But I believe in activism only for a proper cause, only with reason and responsibility. Above all, I deny militancy as an end in itself. That is kid-stuff -- a catharsis of excessive libidinal energy, protesting just "for kicks."

Not every cause requires extreme activism. It is possible to over-react too, even on behalf of a good cause. And activism without considering consequences, without being aware of the possibility of being counter-productive, is an act of childish irresponsibility.

We have had plenty of occasion to demonstrate for or against causes in recent years. Unfortunately, if as seems likely, the United States and Israel will drift apart, we will have many more excuses for demonstrations and activism. As United States citizens, we should by no means remain passive and silent. But our decisions should be guided by experience and maturity and responsibility, and an awareness of the risks we are taking.

Impetuousness and impulsiveness are charming in youngsters, but dangerous in communal leadership.

That is what Jacob wanted to educate his grandchildren away from! There is a fascinating Midrash (Ex. R., ch. 20; Yalkut Shimoni, I Chronicles) that tells us that the youthful hyper-activism of Ephraim became characteristic of his descendants many years later. In Egypt, just before the Exodus, the Ephraimites had it comparatively easy. Nevertheless, when their kinsman Joshua ben Nun came to inform them of the redemption that was at hand, they reacted too quickly, too militantly! In their arrogance, knowing that they were of royal descent and powerful warriors, they immediately arose and took their families with them and left Egypt -- before anyone else. וַיֵּצְאוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְהָרַגוּ כָּל גִּבּוֹרֵיהֶם, whereupon the Egyptians decimated all their heroes and strong

people. It is a terrible price to pay for well-intentioned irresponsibility.

No wonder that Jacob felt he had to give the major blessing to Ephraim!

It is fatuous and foolish to say that all youthfulness is wrong or misdirected. Such blanket statements are nonsense. But certain features of childishness should be avoided.

Judaism is a religion for men, not boys; for women, not girls. It is an adult discipline, not a pediatric exercise. That is why the Torah recognizes that 12 and 13 years as the cutoff date between childhood and adulthood. It simply does not know of adolescence.

When R. Hayyim of Volozhin built the famous yeshiva in that town, one of the things he instituted is that a student no longer be called *בן ישיבה* (a yeshiva boy), but a *איש ישיבה* (a yeshiva man).

So with us, we must encourage youngsters to become men and women -- not high school children, not college "boys" or "girls." There is no time for kid-stuff. Judaism needs vigorous, intelligent, vital, responsible adults.

May He whose angel redeemed Jacob from all evil bless all our children -- and, in calling down upon them the name of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, allow them to emerge from childishness into responsible Jewish adulthood. *יגדלו ויבטחו ויגדלו*  
May their tribe increase!