

Adolescence – A Major Jewish Turning-Point

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The transition from childhood to adolescence on the path to adulthood, is a confusing and difficult one for all concerned. For the child in question, it is a time when he or she finds him or herself going through many unfamiliar changes.

Initially, we need to summarize these changes as they present themselves, before addressing their perception in Jewish tradition.

Some of the changes are physical: the body starts behaving in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways, related to puberty. For boys, the growth of facial and bodily hair, a growth spurt, voice changes and muscular development are central differences. Girls experience increased growth, as well as specific and general changes in body shape and menstruation.

At the emotional level, moods tend to swing, often violently. Strong feelings of the desire for independence alternate with feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, which tend to reinforce the sense of the individual as a child.

All this is very confusing and very worrying for the young person. She or he realizes that others are going through the same set of changes, but it often seems an extra source of anxiety, rather than a source of support.

Because a sense of embarrassment so often accompanies these changes, many adolescents constantly wonder whether the changes happening to them are exactly the same as those happening to their friends and neighbors: Are they faster or slower, smaller or larger, than the changes occurring to the bodies of others? For many youngsters passing through this stage of change there appears to be a particular sensitivity connected with the idea of being different from others: they need to feel that they are the same as everybody else.

This is, perhaps, entirely natural:

Previously, children have grown gradually and consistently, in general, with the support of parents to reassure them at each step. At this point, however, they cannot find the same comfort in parental support and reassurance as at previous stages of development, with the urge for independence being so integral a part of adolescence.

Moreover, parents themselves are often uncertain about their reactions. They are often pained by their sometime rejection by the adolescent child, or bewildered by the violent changes in mood and behavior they perceive. In addition, with the undertone of sexuality connected to these changes, parents may feel uncomfortable in dealing with the new situation.

Thus, the traditional sources of parental support, at this most critical of times, are less available than usual.

With all these factors combined, this period of change becomes a time of great anxiety and therefore a threshold fraught with potential crisis in the life of the maturing child.

Throughout the entire social system where the individual is situated, there is a sense that this is a time of change - and that the earlier support mechanisms which allowed, fostered, and sustained change are no longer functioning. The system is in crisis and something specific is required to come forward and replace, or at least augment the existing structures, in order to allow this period of change and potential crisis to be negotiated smoothly.

Anthropologically speaking, almost all traditional social systems respond to this need for a catalyst at this stage, through a life-cycle ceremony of major significance, which recognizes and addresses these changes personally and in the community, and offers a new social role to the maturing adolescent.