



## Pardes's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Bamidbar. When Does Adulthood Begin?

At what age does a child become an adult? The classic Bar mitzvah speech used to be "Today I am a man!" but, really? Do you know any 13-year old who is an adult?

Our parsha counts Jewish males "from 20-years old and upwards, from when one enters the army." So, is twenty-years the time at which we become adults? Why is the age of twenty chosen?



Some years ago, David Brooks, the NYTimes columnist, wrote about a new period of development in the lives of young people; he coined it "The Odyssey Years":

There used to be four common life phases: childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. Now, there are at least six: childhood, adolescence, odyssey, adulthood, active retirement and old age. Of the new ones, the least understood is odyssey, the decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.

During this decade, 20-somethings go to school and take breaks from school. They live with friends and they live at home. They fall in and out of love. They try one career and then try another.

Their parents grow increasingly anxious. These parents understand that there's bound to be a transition phase between student life and adult life. But when they look at their own grown children, they see the transition stretching five years, seven and beyond. The parents don't even detect a clear sense of direction in their children's lives.<sup>1</sup>

Here in Israel, for many young people, there is military service and not infrequently post-army travel and pre-university requirements, and a young person might not start a degree until their late '20's.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/opinion/09brooks.html>

Interestingly, Jewish sources seem to back the notion of the Odyssey Years, the '20's as a period of flux and formation.

Take for example the Levites. In one place (Num 8:24) the Levites start work at age 25, but in another verse (Num 4:3), they begin their service at age 30:

**From the age of twenty-five years:** Elsewhere it says, "From the age of thirty." How can this be reconciled? However, from the age of twenty-five they came to study the laws of the service; they would study for five years, and at the age of thirty they would begin work. From here we learn that a student who does not experience success in his learning for five years, will never experience it. — [Source - Chul. 24a]

Army at 20, study from age 25-30. Sounds precisely like the Israeli model! Or take this Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni paragraph 929):

Until what age is a person a "youth – na'ar"

Rabbi Akiva says – twenty-five

Rabbi Meir says – thirty

Rabbi Yishmael says ... Twenty, "from twenty years, all who go to the army." (Num 1:3)

Why does the draft begin at age 20? Ramban raises two possibilities:

"At age twenty, the body is strong enough to wage war, as in the phrase: From twenty, one engages in pursuit" (Avot 5:21). Alternatively, it could suggest that twenty is the age that a person enters society, because adolescents do not gather with the adult community."

So the criteria seems to be the undertaking of adult life, the moment at which a young person feels part of society, "settling down", seeing themselves as a player in adult life – work, marriage etc.

To some worried parents it might come as a relief that according to David Brooks, the Odyssey years end.

"Yet here is the good news. By age 30, the vast majority are through it. The sheer hardness of the "Odyssey Years" teaches people to hustle. The trials and errors of the decade carve contours onto their hearts, so they learn what they love and what they don't. They develop their own internal criteria to make their own decisions. They fear what other people think less... Finally, they learn to say no. After a youth dazzled by possibilities and the fear of missing out, they discover that committing to the few things you love is a sort of liberation. They piece together their mosaic."<sup>2</sup>

Please discuss:

At what age is a person an adult?

- When they get their driving license?
- When they become financially independent?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.chron.com/opinion/outlook/article/Brooks-How-adulthood-happens-The-Odyssey-Years-6324477.php>

- When they set up their own home?

I am sure that this topic will raise many avenues of discussion.

Shabbat Shalom!