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Adolescence in Jewish medieval society under Islam

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ABSTRACT. *Adolescent experience has been the subject of an intensive interdisciplinary discourse for the last century; a subject whose roots go back to the basic issue of 'nature versus nurture'. In examining this topic in Jewish medieval society under Islam, an incongruity is revealed between the normative attitudes at the time and the reality. The normative attitudes, as exhibited in religious law* (halakha) *and in the moral literature represent man's life as a journey which peaks upon reaching full adulthood. The different stages of life along the way are acknowledged but they are perceived as subsidiary, sometimes even dangerous. But the reality does not concur: adolescents were far from invisible during this period. Indeed, their presence was prominent and reflected in the poetry and the prevailing images of youth from the time. Jewish society had developed an efficient system for socializing its adolescents, which included an apprenticeship system, higher education* (the beit midrash) *and early marriage.*

Two major studies written in the last century challenge the universality of adolescent experience and attempt to limit it to a specifically modern, Western phenomenon. One is the anthropological work done by Margaret Mead in the 1920s, as recorded in her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*.[1] She describes a homogenous, simple and stable society, in which the adolescent experience is free of the tensions and stress which are characteristic of modern, industrialized Western society. About 40 years later, Philip Ariès argued in his book about childhood and familial life in medieval France that the recognition of childhood as a separate stage in life and the willingness to satisfy the special needs of children are but a matter of cultural conditioning, recognizable only from the eighteenth century

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onwards. Prior to that, he holds, people were indifferent to the very existence of children, never mind their special needs. Consequently, he argues, medieval society did not discern between different stages of childhood nor did it recognize a separate period of adolescence.[2]

Both theories aroused much criticism, stimulating a vivid inter-disciplinary intellectual discourse concerning the nature of adolescent experience.[3] The present article offers a contribution to this discourse by discussing a society in which this particular issue has not yet been explored.

In his monumental work *A Mediterranean society*, S. D. Goitein sketches in a virtuous fashion Jewish society around the Mediterranean during what he calls 'the middle middle ages', the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. He portrays a homogeneous society interconnected by tight commercial, judicial, cultural and matrimonial relations. We may then safely consider it a coherent sociological unit in spite of the extensive geographical space it covers.

Of the five rich volumes that comprise Goitein's work, only one paragraph is dedicated to the experience of adolescence in this society. There Goitein states that 'girls and boys entered economic life at a very early stage. Childhood came to an end soon … The sooner it was terminated the better.' He thus appears to assume that adolescence, as a life stage, did not exist at the time or, if it did, it was brief. 'And yet', he continues, 'the education of adolescents was no less a concern than that of children.'[4]

In this article I shall try to examine the nature of the adolescent experience in medieval Jewish society and assess whether Goiten's two apparently contradictory statements may be explained. It should be noted that the discussion here concentrates on adolescent boys, since little information exists on adolescent girls. We may assume though, relying on the abundant documents which testify to the marriage of minor girls, that an adolescent period was almost non-existent for them.[5]

THE LEGAL VIEW: HOW *HALAKHAH*[6] VIEWS ADOLESCENCE

Two halakhic (Jewish legal) works concerning adolescence were written in the eleventh century: *Kitab al-Bulugh wal-Idrak* (*The Book of maturity*) by Shemuel ben Hofni Gaon,[7] head of the Sura Academy of Baghdad, and *Kitab al-Asnan* (*The Book of the years*), by Yehudah Ha-Kohen Rosh Ha-Seder of Fustat.[8]

Ben Hofni's work is a halakhic monograph dedicated exclusively to the passage from childhood to maturity. In his introduction, the author offers some philosophical-theological reasons for writing the book. God brings

adolescents' minds and bodies to full maturity in order to enable them to perform the rational and revealed commandments (*mitzvot*) and derive its benefits. This theological introduction aside, along with some purely medical chapters, *Kitab al-Bulugh wal-Idrak* is essentially a halakhic work. Its main concern is to define the boundaries of childhood and the criteria for determining where that stage ends and adulthood begins, so as to establish a person's halakhic status at any given stage of his life.

Yehudah Ha-Kohen's book, in spite of what we might conclude from its title, is nothing like the literary genre found in medieval Christianity and Islam on the theme of the ages of man. This genre, deeply inspired by Greek philosophy, reflects the view that the division of the ages of man was an indispensable part of a comprehensive cosmology which saw the ages of man – as well as the seasons and stars – as part of a general abstract cosmic order.[9] By contrast, Yehudah Ha-Kohen's *Book of the Years* is a typical halakhic work. Its point of departure is not the cosmic order but rather the Jewish man and the commandments (*mitzvot*) imposed upon him at any particular stage of his life, in line with his changing halakhic status. A reconstruction of this book, only some of which survives, reveals that it is concerned only with the stages of life until the age of 20 – namely, childhood and adolescence.

The framework of the present article does not allow a detailed exposition of these two interesting books. I shall try, however, to sketch their main points regarding the social status of adolescents.

Ben Hofni's principal concern was to determine the exact boundary between childhood and adulthood. Apparently, he did not recognize any intermediate stage between the two, except a brief transitional period of six months called *na'arut*, which applied only to females. During this period, the girl was no longer considered a minor (*qetanah*) in matrimonial matters such as her right to refuse (*me'un*) a betrothal imposed on her by her mother or brothers (in case her father had died) or her right to perform *halizah*.[10] At the same time, however, she was not yet considered an adult (*bogeret*) with respect to economic rights, which means that her father was still entitled to profits deriving from any property and other income she might have. That is, she was still economically dependent on her father but, being physically mature, she was considered a *bogeret* as to certain aspects of her matrimonial life.

Although this transition period applied only to females, we may discern some possible intermediate stage for males as well. Ben Hofni makes a clear distinction between three different criteria for adulthood: the cognitive criterion, or as he calls it 'the perfection of the mind' (*kamal al-'aql*); the chronological criterion, that is, attainment of the age of 12 for girls or 13 for boys; and physical development, determined by physical

signs such as the presence of two pubic hairs that serve as proof of physical maturity. This distinction permits, as a matter of fact, some transitional phase for males as well. For instance, a boy who was already 13 but is not yet able to demonstrate the necessary proof of his physical maturity is granted only some of the privileges accorded to adults. Thus, for example, he was allowed to trade in movable chattels, but he could not sell real estate. On the other hand, moral responsibility is imposed on any child who is mentally mature, regardless of his chronological age or physical maturity. Or, as Ben Hofni himself puts it, at any time in which God perfects a person's mind, the rational commandments (*mitzvot*) will be imposed upon him. Rational commandments are those which are considered reasonable and can be known by means of the mind alone, such as the distinction between good and evil. This means that there is a possible transitional stage during which a person carries moral responsibility as an adult but is still considered to be a minor in matrimonial and property matters; this, in other words, is being adolescent.

In his introduction, Ben Hofni testifies that it was reality which stood before his eyes then writing his book, his aim being to benefit people. This means that the book does not offer abstract deliberations on theoretical halakhic cases but rather a clarification and summation of the laws in order to influence and direct reality. If we attempt to follow the vague, ambivalent talmudic sources which Ben Hofni tries to clarify, deciding in favour of one side or the other, we shall see that in most cases he tends to severity and seeks to limit the adolescent's privileges. Thus, for example, concerning the right of *me'un*, he prefers to impose the rather strict chronological criterion and asserts that a girl of 12 is considered an adult in this matter regardless of her physical or mental maturity. Consideration of the other criteria could have prolonged the period through which she was entitled to refuse the marriage imposed on her by her mother or brothers. On the other hand, when dealing with *halizah*, Ben Hofni insists on physical maturity as well and even demands the very problematic examination of the girl's body.[11] In this case, relying on the chronological criterion alone could have prolonged the span of time during which the girl is already entitled to perform *halizah*, a right which Ben Hofni does not seem to be in a hurry to grant her.

Ben Hofni takes a very interesting stand concerning the right to engage in commercial transactions. He admits that his primary inclination was to forbid adolescents from wheeling and dealing until they reached the age of 20, that is, long after reaching physical and chronological maturity. After a reconsideration of the talmudic sources, however, he changed his mind and allowed them property rights from the age of 12 or 13, when they were able to prove their physical maturity. It would seem that Ben

Hofni reveals in this case a more mitigated approach toward adolescents since he is ready to fix an earlier point in time at which they might attain economic independence. As a matter of fact, though, he clings to his original strict stand in this matter as well since, as we shall see further on, it was a general trend to introduce boys and girls into the economic world while they were still dependent on and subordinated to grownups.

Only five non-consecutive fragments have survived from Yehudah Ha-Kohen's *Book of the years*. These scant remains do not enable us to discern fully the author's policy toward adolescents. Fortunately, internal evidence makes it possible for us to reconstruct the book's original structure from which some conclusions referring to this policy may be drawn. The book is composed of two main parts: one dedicated to males and the other to females. Each chapter in these two parts deals with a specific age and its relevant commandments, starting with a newborn and ending with those at the age of 20.[12]

This division indicates a perception of 'growing up' as a gradual process, with every year entailing a different halakhic status. In such an approach there is no single point of passage from childhood to adulthood. In chapter nine, Yehudah Ha-Kohen deals with 'a boy of 13' but, although he discusses in detail the signs of physical maturity, it seems that this age is but one of many leading to adult life and not a one-time threshold between childhood and the adult world. As to the issue of property rights, Yehudah Ha-Kohen is aligned with Ben Hofni's final position and states that a boy of 13 years who is physically mature is entitled to property rights and should not be prevented from engaging in commercial activity until he is 20. In economic matters, Yehudah Ha-Kohen, like Ben Hofni, tends to include adolescents in the world of earning a living as early as possible.[13]

Hai Gaon, Ben Hofni's contemporary, did not write a book dedicated exclusively to adolescence. However, in his work on sales and purchases, *Kitab al-Buyu' wal-Isharia* (translated into Hebrew as 'Sefer haMekah ve haMimkar'), he discusses this issue at length.[14] From this discussion, it turns out that Hai's predecessors, including the renowned Sa'adya Gaon, used to prevent boys and girls from engaging in commercial trading prior to the age of 20. Hai declares this position to be absolutely wrong and allows that any boy or girl of 12 or 13 who is physically and mentally mature may practise trade.[15] Indeed, he permits this even for a child of six, with four conditions: (1) that he is clever enough to understand commercial negotiations ('Im I' hyeh zariz bederekh massa' u-matan'); (2) that he trades only in movable goods; (3) that doing so is necessary to sustaining himself (On this point Hai is lenient and allows a child to become involved in trade and practise how to conduct commercial

transactions; we shall see later that this particular mitigation well reflects the reality in Hai's time); and (4) that the child has no guardian (Here, too, Hai is lenient and agrees to leave this to the judge's discretion; in doing so he, actually neutralizes it). Thus, the basic condition for the right to engage in commerce, according to Hai, is the mental and intellectual maturity of the minor. When 'mature', even a six-year-old has the right to trade with minimal restrictions; without maturity, this right is denied even to an adult. This means that the criteria for the right to engage in trade were very practical and realistic: any qualified person could do so; his chronological or physical maturity were marginal considerations.

We can thus discern in the eleventh century a trend towards facilitating and speeding up entry into the world of trade and commerce – the main source of livelihood for the Jews at the time – and basing the right to engage in trade on practical considerations.

Such was not the case regarding legal rights. For example, for the right to testify in court about trade in movable goods, the Gaons (Hai and Ben Hofni) demanded the fulfillment of all three criteria for adulthood (the cognitive, the chronological and the physical). In reality, this meant that a boy who had already engaged in trade independently would be denied the right to testify about his business because he was not yet 13 or not yet physically mature.[16]

Even less did rabbinical authorities like to see young men performing social roles that carried with them a degree of social prestige and honour. Thus, for example, Maimonides was asked whether a man past his 20s who has not even one hair on his face may serve as *shaliah zibbur* (leader of public prayers). He responded that such a man does indeed have the right to do so since he is considered a *saris hamah* (eunuch) but an adolescent (*al-shabb al-baligh*) may not perform this honorific role unless he already has a 'full beard' ('ad she-ymla' zekano'). In matters of social prestige, then, the two pubic hairs which were usually sufficient to prove a person's physical maturity did not suffice. A male was expected to display a full-fledged beard, a condition which no doubt created a significant delay in the receipt of this right.[17]

The trend described above, to fix entry into the adult world at the youngest possible age, thus concerned only economic rights. In legal rights and issues of personal status and social prestige the tendency was, on the contrary, to delay and restrict these rights.

The halakhic writings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries display two major trends which are not necessarily contradictory. On the one hand, there was the tendency to facilitate the entry of young people into commerce as early as possible and, on the other, efforts were made to restrict and postpone other rights concerning matrimonial and legal

affairs. Needless to say, the threshold is still very low compared to that commonly found in the early twenty-first century. A boy or girl of 12 or 13 who was believed to be physically and mentally mature was considered an adult. Still, crossing the threshold into adulthood was neither automatic nor represented in a single event. On the contrary, it was subjected to a series of limitations and restrictions which left a gap for a potential period of liminality and adolescence.

THE IMAGE OF YOUTH

In the Middle Ages 'adolescence' was not perceived as a distinct stage of life. Nonetheless, in the many references to 'youth' one can find attributes that correspond to today's accepted psychological and functional definition of 'adolescence'. The image of youth in Jewish medieval society under Islam varies considerably according to the author and literary genre concerned. The moral literature transmits a negative and dangerous image. Sa'ld ben Babshad, who wrote his proverbs in early-eleventh-century Iraq, speaks of the intoxication of youth:

> Be strong enough to push him aside, lest he do so to you.
> Rush to ravish him, before he does so to you.
> For youthful corruption is not forever
> And with the passage of time, bitterness leaves.
> Beware, my son, of youthful deceptions.
> And protect yourself well from aberrations.[18]

Youth is conceived, then, as a most deluding and dangerous period, a period of intoxication (*Shikhron*), corruption (*kilkulim*) and aberrations (*setiyot yetzarim*). Youth is described as an independent identity, a kind of lurking tempting devil trying to trap the young man. The basis for this image is the assumption that the primary stage of a person's life is adulthood, while youth constitutes a kind of perversion. Man has to educate himself in order to overcome the dangers of this phase and arrive safely at the desired normal stage of adulthood and even old age. As Ben Babshad puts it: 'awake, my son, from the sleep of youth',[19] and in the words of the prominent Shemuel Ha-Nagid:

> God will bless old age, and silver hair will be compensation and redemption for youth
> Calm the youthful waves of tumult from the heart, and slay the lion of adolescence.[20]

The most desired stage, which receives God's blessings, is the calm stage of old age – the ultimate target of life. Youth, by contrast, is an imperfect state, as is womanhood:

That which attracts the heart of young boys and women
Would be avoided by a wise man.[21]

The conception is one of polarity, of two conflicting stages, one wholly positive and the other wholly negative:

In youthful hearts there is constant foolishness
And merry-making joy in burning hearts
A rarefied spirit in the heart of sages
And a humble spirit in the hearts of the pure.[22]

Young men, then, are associated with foolishness, their gaiety equivalent to stupidity, while adults are associated with wisdom, humility and spiritual perfection (*temimut*). This polarity is part of an overall cosmological view and any attempt to undermine it is conceived as a threat to the universal order. That is why:

It is not befitting for youth to behave elderly
Nor for a grey-haired man to behave immaturely.[23]

and similarly:

Three whose evil ways are unsurpassed:
A wise heart scorned by scoundrels,
An old man teased by the young,
And an eminent person cursed by rogues.[24]

Trespassing the boundaries and destroying the hierarchical order was conceived as disastrous. Still, we may find at the same time another conception, that of gradual transformation, accompanied by an awareness that the youth of today are the grownups of tomorrow. They should therefore be treated with the utmost respect.

When I spoke to a youngster I belittled him, when he spoke to me I was shamed
From youth – a king, from youth – a sage, from youth – an archer.[25]

This single proverb is exceptional in its positive attitude. Most of the moral literature perceives youth as the negative pole of adulthood and old age and describes it in the most negative terms: of stupidity, sleep, intoxication and perversion.

It seems that this was the image that prevailed in people's consciousness at the time. Most of the wishes and blessings found in personal letters were to reach a good and respectable old age. 'May God give you a good ending' ('*yeitiv ha-e'l aharito*') was one of the most common. The image of the young man whose beard has not yet grown was that of an imperfect,

inexperienced person of low social status. 'From the day I joined a commercial partnership for the first time, more than 60 years ago', writes a respectable old merchant of Fustat, Isma'il ben Ishaq al-Andalusi, 'never was I sued and never did I owe anybody a single penny. Such has been my reputation since I was a beardless young man.'[26] 'Old man' (*zaken* in Hebrew; *sheikh* in Arabic) was used as an honorific. On the other hand, *ghulam* (young man) and *sabi* (child) were sobriquets given to servants or apprentices, that is, to persons of low social and professional status.[27]

When Abu Nasr ben Ibrahim, one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Alexandria, described the riots which occurred in that city in the mid-twelfth century, he said, 'Things here are very bad. The common people attack respectable men and every young man sticks his tongue out.'[28]

A more cheerful and sympathetic attitude towards youth is reflected in other literary genres. Al-Harizi, in his book of *maqama*s titled *Tahkemoni*, recalls his youth as a happy time of pleasure and recreation for which he hopelessly yearns:

> In the days of my youth and my boyhood my heart would chase after pleasures with friends on the hills … Making love in the villages surrounded by roses and farms and grazing deer while time was still my slave[29]

and similarly:

> The pleasures of youth and adolescence, and the sweetness of youth – my crown and witness – drove me to ride on ships, to pass ships and navies … while the branch of youth flourished and the buds of adolescence [*dudai'm*] yielded a fragrant smell. While the light of youth glitters, the sun of the silver-haired does not conceal the radiance of the moon.[30]

The associations related to youth here are those of blossoming, of strong sexual attractions (*dudai'm*) and of bright light. It is conceived as a period one finds difficult to leave behind and for which one later yearns.

This strong desire to preserve youth and the deep sorrow for its loss is particularly emphasized in the secular Spanish poetry dedicated to homosexual love. The image of the beloved young boy, the *tzvi*,[31] whose fresh cheeks start to grow buds of hair, is a frequently repeated motive in this poetry:

> Children of time, in the face of the deer, be abashed
> And see the shape of a bridle on his face
> The hair inscribing on both his cheeks:
> Know that things will not remain forever[32]

and:

> Childhood will flee adolescence

And my two cheeks wore darkness
I asked my beloved, are you not
The slave of my cheeks since youth
And he said, it is so but the cheeks sprouted
And wrote us a bill of manumission.[33]

The image of youth as blossoming prevails in personal letters as well. When one sends greetings to somebody else's son, he calls him 'the fresh flower'.

It is thus not possible to talk about one uniform image of youth in this society. We may find different and even contradictory images in different literary genres and sometimes even within the same genre.

PEER GROUPS

In the introductory lines of communal letters, greetings are usually extended to the various groups which constitute the community, including 'the young men' (*bahurim*). The letter sent by Yosef ben Ya'akov in 1028 to the community of Aleppo mentions:

They, the congregations of Aleppo, the respected and venerated, the pleasing and graceful. Their wonderful elders. Their esteemed ministers. Their elected gentlemen. Their honest aged. *Their elected young men* And their true progeny.[34]

This group is also addressed in a letter, dated 1025, by Shelomoh ben Yehudah Gaon of Jerusalem to the community of Fustat:

To all the multitudes of God's people living in Fustat: the nobles of [tribes of] Judah and Ephraim, the chosen friends of the [unclear], the lords, the scribes, the financial officers, the elegant elders, the clerks and the merchants, the aged and the *young men* who reside in Fustat …[35]

These *bahurim* were very conspicuous. They used to congregate, especially on Sabbaths and holidays in the synagogue compound. A merchant on his way to India wrote to his young brother back in Alexandria, 'Every Sabbath and holiday when I enter or leave the synagogue, I cry, full of sorrow, because I see all the young men [*bahurim*] meeting together, each one with his brother. I turn left and right looking for you, but I cannot find you.'[36]

The presence of the *bahurim* was not just passive. Quite frequently they used to interfere in communal disputes. Though only fragments remain, a letter written in 1020 by Yoshiahu Gaon tells the following story:

And the prayer [formula] was thus established, [remaining] until now, and the people came … ignoramuses and stupid *young men* from the margins of the people. He came to […] and that very day was dangerous […] a day on which […] the synagogues of Ramleh […] and

all the people in their houses […] the eminent and the elders, to uphold our [formula] of prayer.[37]

It seems that a dispute had erupted in the community of Ramleh concerning the rendition of prayers to be recited in synagogue. The *bahurim*, whom the *gaon* calls 'fools and ignoramuses from the fringes of the community', tried to change the traditional rendering of the prayer while the 'old men' (*zekenim*) insisted on retaining it. The 'young men' constituted an element of ferment which demanded change, while the 'old men' tended to cling to the traditional, conservative ways. Finally, the young men pressed their demands quite violently, to the point where the people of Ramleh were obliged to hide in their houses, even refraining from going to the synagogue.

In al-Mahalla (in Egypt) the 'young men' prevented the head of the community, Abraham Ha-Kohen, from properly welcoming the *nagid* (the head of all the Jews in the Fatimid Empire) in protest against what they viewed as his derogatory attitude towards their community. Their subversive activity seriously damaged Abraham Ha-Kohen's authority and leadership.[38]

The young men's agitation did not always take the form of opposition to the traditional leadership. Sometimes it was manifested in anarchic lawlessness, such as a drunken brawl which occurred in Alexandria at the beginning of the twelfth century which caused a lot of trouble for the local leaders. Abraham ben Natan, a resident of Alexandria, recounted the event of his brother in Fustat:

> They testified against R. Hiyya. He sent his son, his nephew and a certain apprentice who was with judge Mansur […] until some armed people attacked them. They fought them […] they were all drunk. One of them belched and all the people started to shout: Oh dear, they have killed him! He is dead! […] A lot of people gathered […] There was a savage brawl and the head of the police arrived […] They took some of the people to jail […] He was able to free them. Thank God for all that.[39]

Alexandria, a seaport with a cosmopolitan and secular character which served as a major transit station, attracted many young men, including Jews, and they would meet in typical youth peer groups. This is well illustrated by the painful experience of a father whose son was swallowed up in such a group. In a long and moving letter written in 1131, Makhluf ben Musa al-Nafusi Ibn al-Yatim tells of how he had to escape from the tax farmer to the Western Desert. While he wandered there penniless, his son back at home sold his house and property and fled to Alexandria. There he joined a group of young musicians who spent their days making music and drinking wine. The father was forced to pay all his son's debts to the wine merchants and tried to find him a decent job. The letter depicts a reality in which groups of youth constituted a real social burden: they

did not work, they were regularly drunk and they sustained a coherent sub-culture in which music was one of the main features. The crisis in the relations between father and son was a classic adolescent phenomenon. In one of his outbursts, the son insolently proclaimed to his father, 'As long as you live I shall remain a good-for-nothing. Only after your death shall I succeed!' What we have here is rebellion against paternal authority combined with salient Oedipal features.[40]

Needless to say, this phenomenon was not confined to Alexandria. A boy from Minyat Zifta (in Egypt) who was sent to Fustat to learn a profession ran away from his grandmother's house to join 'a group of young men of ill repute'.[41] From Sunbat (in Egypt) we also hear of sons of the local elite – the beadle and the cantor – who were involved in a drunken brawl. The latter was so drunk that he did not wake up even after being dragged to prison and brought before the head of police.[42]

Marriage was a common social criterion for leaving adolescence and entering adulthood. A marriage contract (*ketubbah*) usually included stipulations that attempted to formalize this new status. In fact, these stipulations represent an excellent source of information concerning adolescent behaviour at the time.

In one such contract, dated 1047, the groom promised his bride never to enter a house of dubious persons again, nor to join them in eating, drinking or other wanton behaviour.[43] In another betrothal agreement, the groom agreed to pay his bride a penalty of 10 dinars every time he associated with persons of bad repute.[44] No doubt these stipulations grew out of a reality in which future grooms went through a stormy adolescent period before entering married life.

A somewhat less stormy youthful rebellion is reflected in two letters written by the future *gaon*, Netanel ben Moshe Ha-Levi, while still a young student. His father grounded the boy so that he would study and not roam in the streets. His father promised him a stipend of 25 dinars on condition that he did not leave the house, 'not even to go to the bathhouse'. This confinement separated young Netanel from a group of very close friends. The letters are addressed to two of them and express his yearning. He even arranged a secret meeting with one of his friends early one morning when his father, a doctor, was busy at the hospital. The letters mention names of seven close friends who were bound together in an intimate social group. They referred to each other as 'brother' or 'dear brother' and it seems that they were involved in some sort of intellectual interaction as a great deal of the correspondence is dedicated to books they had lent one another.[45] We may safely assume that this was a clique, a small informal circle based on interaction which tends to develop its own social norms. Cliques of this kind constitute an important and central part

of the adolescent experience. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century they are characteristic of a transitional stage between dependence on parents and full independence as adults.[46]

MECHANISMS OF SOCIALIZATION

Pupils of the Beit Midrash

Communities around the Jewish world used to maintain an institution of higher learning called the *beit midrash* (literally, house of learning). The most renowned and well documented among them is probably the Qairawan *Beit Midrash* which functioned as early as the ninth century. Its pupils came from all over the world. They constituted a very involved segment of the community, usually representing protest and opposition.[47] Nevertheless, they held considerable power and authority over the local population. People used to ask their opinion on different issues and customs, especially in matrimonial affairs. In the eleventh century they also held punitive power which they tended to wield particularly in matters of domestic and public morality. Thus, for example, they determined that someone who was caught drinking and singing in taverns of the *goyim* (gentiles) should be flogged. The same punishment applied to any man who swore he would no longer live with his wife but did not have enough money to pay her the sum stated in the *ketubbah*.[48]

In her article on youth peer groups in sixteenth-century France, Nathalie Zemon Davis pointed to the internal social functioning of youth fraternities in the rural communities as early as the twelfth century. These fraternities were entrusted with the task of keeping order in the community, especially in matters of domestic and public morality. They held judicial and punitive power over the local population. In this way the community enabled its adolescents to practice their future role as adults, as fathers and husbands. These prolonged 'rites de passage' channelled their sexual instincts and provided them an arena in which they could function autonomously before entering adult life. Or, as Davis puts it, 'They socialized them to the conscience of the community, making them the raucous voice of that conscience.'[49]

I would like to suggest that, in Jewish context, the young pupils of the *beit midrash* fulfilled a similar social function. That is, they served as the voice of public conscience and at the same time participated in a prolonged rite of passage which enabled the group's members to practise and understand their future role as adults by dealing with domestic affairs and, in our case, also acting professionally as future communal leaders and judges.[50]

Beit midrash pupils generally took extreme and strict stands.[51] Such

puritanical positions held by adolescents should not surprise us. Erik Erikson defined adolescence as 'a psychological stage between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult'.[52] As such, the adolescent is involved in a constant search for an integrated and absolute world view. An extreme and clear ideology helps him to crystallize his own self-identity.[53] Like the *beit midrash* pupils, adolescents often hold these extreme and puritanical positions.

The institution of apprenticeship

We have very scant information concerning apprenticeship in the crafts. It seems, however, that this fact indicates the limitations of the Genizah documents (our main source) rather than the reality of the times. Still, the few documents which have survived are adequate to support the assumption that such an institution did exist and function.

A marriage contract between a man and a divorced woman concluded in 1110 imposes on the groom the responsibility of taking care of the bride's son and enabling him to be apprenticed to a craftsman.[54] In a judicial agreement between a husband and wife, the wife – Labwah, daughter of Abu Ghalib – agrees to finance the study of her elder son with a silversmith.[55] Only one actual apprenticeship contract, signed in Fustat in 1027, has been discovered. It establishes that the father would hire out his son to a weaver for four months, in return for a monthly payment of 15 dirhems, to be upgraded later to the regular wages of a workman.

We have enough information on apprenticeship in commercial trading to see that it was not only part of the mercantile system but also an integral part of the machinery of socialization, which prepared the adolescent for adult life. Sons of merchants were sent, as a rule, to some well-known commercial firm or to an experienced merchant in order to serve as apprentices and learn the ways of trade. Joseph, son of the prominent merchant Ishma'el ben Joseph ben Abi 'Uqba, was apprenticed in the firm of the Bani 'Awkal. In a letter sent to the head of the firm, Joseph Ibn 'Awkal, the father writes, 'Concerning my son Joseph, please do not spare him your good advice. My son is your son and my honour is your honour. Oh, my illustrious elder, in the name of God, you know the boy, you know it is his first commercial voyage …'.[56] Another apprentice in the same firm was Musa Ibn al-Majani, who eventually became renowned as a merchant himself.[57]

It seems that sending a son as an apprentice to a firm was a sign of friendship and intimacy between the two families involved. In a letter sent by Musa ben Barhun al-Taherti to the Tustari brothers, he refers to Yehudah ben Joseph Ha-Kohen, one of the leaders of Qairawan: 'This

man seeks your friendship … He wants to make a connection with you and to benefit from your high prestige and good advice … If he had a son to serve you, no doubt he would have sent him to you and be honoured by that …'.[58]

Close and special relations usually developed between merchant and apprentice. The apprentice called the merchant 'my teacher' (*mu'allimi*) and the relationship was referred to as 'education' (*tarbiyya*). Due to this tarbiyya, the two felt deep commitment and intimacy to each other for years. Expressions like 'I owe him my *tarbiyya*' are common phrases in merchants' letters.[59] Sometimes the apprentice eventually became the merchant's principal partner. In other cases it was the father who served as his son's teacher in the ways of trade. The boy would be given some merchandise and allowed to trade with it on his own. In many letters we find fathers asking their colleagues to help their sons, the novice merchants, with good advice and guidance. It should be noted that in such cases the father always saw to it that the son acted independently and that their accounts were completely separate.[60]

Apprenticeship in trade served as an efficient agent of socialization for the adolescent, whether the son was separated from his original family but remained in a quasi-familial frame or whether he stayed with his family but substituted the father–son relationship with work and service relations. In both cases, this transitional period was carried out in complete integration with the adult world and under the close surveillance of his family or of the social and professional milieu in which his family lived. I do not mean to idealize this institution or to claim that the relationships between merchant and apprentice were always harmonious. On the contrary, the prevalence of severe treatment towards apprentices led fathers to plead for lenient attitudes towards their sons. Furthermore, many letters testify explicitly to a harsh and exploitative attitude.[61] Still, the adolescent always found himself in familiar surroundings. It should be noted that the big merchant families were connected in a very tangled network of marital and business ties based chiefly on personal trust. These connections created a kind of 'big family',[62] into which the adolescent was absorbed at a very early stage. Indeed, in some cases he found himself married to his master's daughter.[63] The entrance of boys into the commercial world, early as it was, could thus be carried out under very close supervision and control.

CUSTOMS AND CEREMONIES

Finally, I would like to draw attention to two phenomena that point to the basic conception of adolescence. The first is the total absence of separate clothing for children or for adolescents. During our period people used to dress in the same way all their life: only the size of the clothes changed. An eleventh-century Qairawanese merchant asked his brother in Egypt to send him 'a small mantle for a boy … and small shoes'.[64] The term he uses for mantle is *rida*', the same as was used for an adult's mantle. This betrays a conception which views human life as a gradual development towards the ideal stage of adulthood. Earlier stages are merely preparatory. There is no need to emphasize them by special outward signs such as different clothes. A young man should try to resemble an adult, thereby de-emphasizing his youth, which is perceived as a defect.

The other phenomenon is the absence of any rite of passage from childhood to adult life. The Genizah documents do not mention any *bar mitzvah* rite, and we may assume that it did not exist, even though the people of that time were very much aware of birth dates, as demonstrated by the abundance of astrological treatises.[65] This phenomenon was grounded in the conception that adolescence is a gradual and individual process, which differed from one person to the next, and which did not occur at a single point in time. This concept of slow transition to adulthood rather than abrupt entry which we observed in the halakhic literature leaves little need for a dramatic one-time ceremony symbolizing the passage from one phase of life to another.

CONCLUSION

In medieval Jewish society under Islam, as in any other human society, there can be no complete congruence between the ideal and the actual social structure. By 'ideal structures', I mean those which relate to the way in which a system of actors believes that a specific phenomenon – adolescence in our case – should take place. By 'actual structures' I mean those which relate to the way in which this phenomenon really takes place.[66]

According to halakhic perception, the early part of human life is a prolonged journey towards a peak which occurs in full adulthood. Certainly, there is an awareness of the different stages of life preceding adulthood. There is also a recognition of a possible liminal stage between childhood and adult life, since not all types of maturity (physical, chronological or mental) are reached simultaneously. These stages, however, in and of themselves are only subsidiary. They are important

only as far as they lead the person toward his adulthood. The halakhic legislation seeks to control closely and to supervise this sensitive passage and to integrate the person as early and efficiently as possible into the world of adults by skipping the hurdle of adolescence. The moral literature emphasizes the dangers of adolescence and warns of its temptations, and this attitude fits in with the halakhic conception and even hones it to a certain degree.

Jewish society possessed adequate institutions and instruments to implement these perceptions. The most salient among them was the apprenticeship in commercial trade which enabled a young man to integrate into adult life smoothly and under close surveillance. Marriages of minor girls probably served this purpose in the same way. The *beit midrash* constituted a different kind of socialization mechanism for male adolescents.

It seems that the actual structures functioned in a completely different fashion. Poets, who were not engaged in the writing of moral literature, tended to recall their youth positively, using phraseology such as 'blossom' and 'vitality', images that prevailed in routine expressions and in personal letters as well. The adolescents themselves were not always absorbed into the socializing frameworks which society prepared for them. They were far from being 'invisible' (as described by Ariès). On the contrary, their presence was very pronounced and they underwent the experience of adolescence with the same intensity as their counterparts through the ages.

ENDNOTES

1 M. Mead, *Coming of age in Samoa* (New York, 1981).
2 P. Ariès, *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life*, trans. from the French by R. Baldick (New York, 1962).
3 On the various views supporting and opposing these theories, see I. Krausman Ben Amos, *Adolescence and youth in early modern England* (New Haven, 1994), 4–9, and M. Kleijwegt, *Ancient youth: the ambiguity of youth and the absence of adolescence in Greco-Roman society* (Amsterdam, 1971), 1–24.
4 S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean society* (Berkeley, 1978), vol. 3, 236–7.
5 A. Grossman, 'Child marriage in Jewish society in the middle ages until the thirteenth century' (in Hebrew), *Peamim* **45** (1990), 108–26.
6 *Halakha* – Jewish law – encompasses civil and ritual law, based on rabbinical legal decisions and extending also to all customs, ordinances and decrees for which there is no authority in the Scriptures.
7. A *gaon* is the official head of the *yeshiva* (Jewish academy), a role that includes his authority as the interpreter of the Holy Scriptures. Thus he fills the role of legislator.
8 Both texts are included in Tirzah Meacham-Yoreh ed. (and Miriam Frenkel trans.), *The book of maturity by Rav Shemuel Ben Hofni Gaon and the book of years by Rav Yehudah Ha-Kohen Rosh Ha-Seder* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1999) [hereafter Meacham-Yoreh].

9 Ariès, *Centuries of childhood*, 18 ff. For Islam, see A. Giladi, *Children of Islam: concepts of childhood in medieval Muslim society* (Basingstoke, 1992), and H. al-Shuraydi, 'The medieval Muslim attitude toward youth' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1970).
10 *Halizah* is the ceremony in which the widow of a man who has died childless removes her brother-in-law's shoe, thus releasing him from the obligation of marrying her and freeing her to marry whomever she desires.
11 See Meacham-Yoreh's Introduction, 41.
12 See the reconstruction of this book's chapters in Meacham-Yoreh, 191.
13 See Meacham-Yoreh, part 1, chapter 10, 11. 1–23. The extended discussion on *me'un* by both Yehudah Ha-Kohen and Ben Hofni illustrates the frequency of marriages of minor girls. See Grossman, 'Child marriage in Jewish society'.
14 S. Abramson, 'The Arabic source of the book of sales and purchases by Rav Hai Gaon' (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* **20** (1950), 296–315.
15 Rav Hai's willingness to present an opposite opinion to that of the prominent Rav Sa'adya reflects his determination in this case. See also Meacham-Yoreh, Introduction, 56–9.
16 H. Modai ed., *Sha'arey Tzedek* (Saloniki, 1802), vol. 4, part 7, no. 20.
17 Rav Moses ben Maimon, *Responsa*, ed. Jehoshua Blau (Jerusalem, 1986), no. 177. For a similar responsa, see S. Emanuel ed., 'Newly discovered geonic responsa and writings of early Provençal sages' (Jerusalem and Cleveland, 1995), no. 736.
18 Ezra Fleischer, *The proverbs of Said Ben Babshad* (Jerusalem , 1990), 206, 11.1–10.
19 Ibid., 192, 1.85.
20 Dov Yarden ed., *Divan Shmuel Hanagid 993–1056* (*The collected poetry of Samuel the Prince 993–1056*) (Jerusalem, 1982), vol. 2: *Ben Mishle* (*Son of Proverbs*), no. 528.
21 Fleischer, *Proverbs*, no. 8, 11. 28–30.
22 Ibid., no.8, 11. 18–22.
23 Ibid., 216, no. 6, 11. 52–4.
24 Yarden, *Schmuel Hanagid*, vol. 3: *Ben Qohelet* (*Son of Ecclesiastes*), 435.
25 Yarden, *Schmuel Hanagid*, vol. 2: *Ben Mishle* (*Son of Proverbs*), 435.
26 Moshe Gil, *In the kingdom of Ishmael: studies in Jewish history in Islamic lands in the early middle ages* (Tel Aviv, 1997), vol. 4, no. 708 (Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schecter Collection [hereafter Cambridge TS] AS 147.4). Gil's translation differs from my own.
27 Compare terms used in feudal European society, such as 'journeyman', '*petit garçon*', etc. (Ariès, *Centuries of childhood*, 18). See Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 1, 93.
28 Cambridge TS 12.290.
29 Rav Judah al-Harizi, *Tahkemoni*, ed. I. Toporovski (Tel Aviv, 1952), 38.
30 Ibid., 202.
31 This is probably a play on words between the Hebrew *tzvi*, deer, which hints at the delicate appearance of a young boy, and the Arabic *sabi*, which means boy or lad. See J. Schirmann, 'The ephebe in medieval Hebrew poetry', *Sefarad* **15** (1955), 55–68.
32 H. Brody ed., *Diwan des Abu-l-Hasan Jehuda ha-Levi* (Berlin, 1820), 210, n. 53
33 Ibid., 308, no. 91.
34 Italics mine. Oxford, Bodleian Library Ms Heb a 3, f. 37, published in M. Gil, *Palestine during the first Muslim period* (*634–1099*) (Tel Aviv, 1983), vol. 2, no. 273.
35 Cambridge University Library Or. 1080 J 6, published by S. Abramson, *Bamerkazim uva-tefusot bi tekufat ha- geonim* (Jerusalem, 1965), 137, 1. 16, n.10.
36 Cambridge TS 13 J 28, f. 15.

37 Cambridge TS 10 J 32, f. 8–9, published by Gil, *Palestine*, vol. 2, no. 38. […] indicates words missing.
38 Cambridge, Westminster College, Frag. Cairens. 51, published in M. Cohen, *Jewish self-government in medieval Egypt* (Princeton, 1980), 223.
39 Cambridge TS NS J 24, to be published in a forthcoming volume devoted to the Jews of Alexandria, by the Ben-Zvi Institute. […] indicates words missing.
40 A similar case can be found in Cambridge TS 10 J 14, f. 12 and 10 J 13, f. 10.
41 Cambridge TS 13 J 28, f. 12. See Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 2, 368–9.
42 Cambridge University Library, Or. 1080 J 80. See Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 2, 368–9.
43 Cambridge TS 20.106, published in M. A. Friedman, 'Pre-nuptial agreements with grooms of questionable character: a Geniza study'. *Diné Israel* **6** (1975), 106–22.
44 Jewish Theological Seminary Library, New York, ENA, 2806, f. 11 and ENA 2727, f. 18, published in Friedman, 'Pre-nuptial agreements', 115–22.
45 Cambridge TS Misc k 25.64: British Library, Or. 55560 13, f. 30. See Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 5, 427–8.
46 B. Bradford Brown, 'Peer groups and peer cultures', in S. S. Friedman and G. R. Eliott eds., *At the threshold* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).
47 Menahem Ben-Sasson, *The emergence of the local Jewish community in the Muslim world: Qairawan, 800–1057* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1996), 233–7.
48 Ben-Sasson, *Jewish Community*, 247–9.
49 N. Z. Davis, 'The reasons of misrule: youth groups and charivaris in 16th century France', *Past and Present* **50** (1971), 41–75.
50 About a similar development among the urban youth fraternities in sixteenth-century France, where the age group turned into a means of preparing urban adolescents for entrance into a certain social-professional circle, see Davis, 'Reasons of misrule', 63.
51 Ben-Sasson, *Jewish community*, 174, 248, 273.
52 Erik Erikson, *Childhood and society* (New York, 1963), 261–3.
53 On the strong attraction of seventeenth-century London apprentices to Puritanism, see S. R. Smith. 'The London apprentices as 17th century adolescents', *Past and Present*, **61**, (1973), 149–61, and especially p. 156.
54 Cambridge TS 12.494, published in S. D. Goitein, *Sidrei-Hinukh* (Jerusalem, 1962), 122.
55 Goitein, *Sidrei-Hinukh*, 121.
56 Cambridge TS 13 J 29, f. 9, published in Menahem Ben-Sasson, *The Jews of Sicily 825–1068* (Jerusalem, 1991), no. 51.
57 On their mutual relationship, see N. A. Stillman, 'East-west relations in the Islamic Mediterranean in the early eleventh century' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1970), 79–82.
58 Gil, *In the kingdom*, n. 28.
59 Ben-Sasson, *Jews in Sicily*, no. 12.
60 Goitein, *Sidrei-Hinukh*, 125
61 Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 1, 163.
62 Ibid., 164–9.
63 Ben-Sasson, *Jewish Community*, 112, n. 13.
64 Gil, *In the kingdom*, n. 562; Ben-Sasson, *Jews of Sicily*, no. 562.
65 Goitein, *Mediterranean society*, vol. 5, 29.
66 I owe this useful theorem to Marion Levy; see Marion J. Levy Jr, in A. J. Coale et al. eds., *Aspects of the analysis of family structure* (Princeton, 1965), 1–63.