

“STAGES OF LIFE”

Confucius, in recounting the stages of life, begins with “At 15, I set my heart on learning.” Solon, the legendary Greek lawgiver, speaks about budding manhood, “up to seven, a boy is unripe, then at seven he sheds his milkteeth and begins to show signs of manhood.” For Shakespeare’s soliloquy on life’s stages, the child is a “whining schoolboy, with his satchel, and shining morning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school.”

Listen how different rabbinic tradition is (Avoth 5:21): “Five is the age for learning Scripture. Ten for learning Mishna. Thirteen for the mitzvot. Fourteen for Gemara...” Growth is defined by learning. We seek to shape our young through education, a process that then continues throughout life.

The poet Coleridge once encountered a man who was against formal religious education. He argued that each child should be left to choose what they would. Rather than disagree, Coleridge invited the man to see his garden. “You call this a garden?” the man asked -- “there are nothing but weeds here!”

“Well” answered Coleridge, “I did not wish to infringe upon the liberty of the garden in any way. I gave it a chance to express itself and choose its own production.”

Better, at 5, begin Torah.