

CHAPTER I

*Theorizing the Jewish Child*¹

If there are no small children, there will be no disciples;
 If there are no disciples, there will be no sages;
 If there are no sages, there will be no Torah;
 If there is no Torah, there will be no synagogues and academies;
 If there are no synagogues and academies, the Holy One will no long
 allow his
 Present to dwell in this world (Leviticus Rabbah 11:7)

Delight in your childhood, young man, and
 Let your heart rejoice in your adolescence ...
 For childhood and adolescence are vanity. (Ecc. 11:9–10)

This chapter explores how rabbinic literature framed childhood. It is not a survey of modern theories of childhood.² I am asking how the stages of childhood were woven into the fabric of lifecycles, how the concept of minority was integrated into a web of discourses about vows, purity and procreation, and how numbers relating to childhood acquired significance and complexity. I start with a famous rabbinic configuration of a five-based lifecycle, pondering its conventionality and originality and how its design was calculated to highlight a particular course of socialization into the rabbis' envisioned society. In dealing with the meaning of minority, I evaluate the criteria by which childhood was measured, its length and its stages. To complete the presentation of rabbinic theories of childhood, I turn to the Mishnah and to a passage which examines cardinal moments in the life of Jewish children. Underlying the investigation is the question of how these theories and childhood-related rules anchored a child's evolution in the particulars of Jewish life.

¹ Title borrowed from a lecture by Martin Bloomer entitled "Theorizing the (Roman) Child."

² C. G. Mooney, *Theories of Childhood. An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky*, 2nd edn. (St Paul 2013). Google under "childhood theories" is likewise useful.

Prelude: Biblical Valuations of Childhood

Rites of religious life, often the subject of biblical commandments and cautioning, excluded an orthodoxy of childhood. Ecclesiastes' call to enjoy childhood since, like life itself, it too was fleeting, reduced the early phases of life into a single-minded pursuit of happiness. Life, in Ecclesiastes' justly famous exhortation to do and feel, amounted to a list of timely actions and emotions (Ecc 3:1–8).

Yet in antiquity a desire to set humans in a context of nature elicited countless configurations of lifecycles. One widespread ancient enumeration divided the human lifecycle into seven stages, each consisting of an equal number of years, from infancy through to childhood, adolescence, youth and the varieties and vagaries of adulthood and old age.³ Each phase was endowed with its own physiognomy. Questioning origins and endings, these neat schemes set the stages of childhood between birth and one's readiness to engage in birthing.⁴ These were engaging projections whose relationship to the realities of either childhood or adulthood was far from assured. There were also gaps, most notably a specifically female lifecycle.

In the prosaic setting of Leviticus, with its definitive program of rituals informing the making and being of a Jew, childhood was weighed, literally, in monetary terms. In the Leviticus calculation of the value of vows, children, like adults, were cast as traded bodies. According to Leviticus 27:1–8, the lifecycle of vowing consisted of segments of five and ten, each with a redemption value based on the age of the vowed being.⁵ The ladder of the redemptive vows assigned the lowest monetary value, five silver shekels, to infants between the age of one month and five years, female and male. A much higher redemption value, namely twenty silver shekels, was placed on children and adolescents between the ages of five and twenty if male, but only ten shekels if female. The highest redemption value, fifty for

³ On the significance of the digit seven as a foundational figure of the human lifecycle, F. Boll, "Die Lebensalter, Ein Beitrag zur antiken Ethologie und zur Geschichte der Zahlen," *Kleine Schriften zur Sternkunde des Altertums* (Leipzig 1950), 156–224; L. Overstreet, "The Greek Concept of the 'Seven Stages of Life' and Its New Testament Significance," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.4 (2009) 537–63; and C. Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire*, 77–99. On numerical divisions also into four, five, seven and ten stages, C. Laes and J. Strubbe, *Youth in the Roman Empire. The Young and the Restless Years?* (Cambridge 2014), 23–30, counting some 50 Greek and 120 Latin relevant texts. See also the excellent discussion of Horn and Martens, "What Is a Child?" in *Let the Little Children Come*, 1–40.

⁴ On their banality, T. Parkin, "Life Cycle," in *Cultural History of Childhood and the Family in Antiquity*, ed. M. Harlow and R. Laurence (2010), 97–114; on their use as a pedagogical tool to inculcate distinctions of age and status, B. Rawson, "Ages and Stages," in eadem, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford 2003), 134f.

⁵ For a brief summary of opinions regarding vows, ages and values, P. Heger, *Women in the Bible, Qumran and Early Rabbinic Literature: Their Status and Roles* (Brill 2014), 38.

males and thirty for females, was attached to adults between the ages of twenty and sixty, while the redemption value of vows undertaken on behalf of females and males older than sixty decreased to ten for the former and fifteen for the latter. Girls under twenty, then, and women above sixty fetched the same redemption value.

This biblical system of exchange of words for hard cash delineates a lifecycle comprising four stages: infancy, childhood-youth, adulthood and old age. Their valuation depended on potential work capacity, deemed at its peak for males and females between the ages of twenty and sixty. At the heart of the society envisioned in Lev 27 was a childhood that lasted two decades and was conducted in two distinct stages.⁶ The completion of childhood at twenty entailed, in the case of males, recruitment, census and tax liabilities.⁷ Twenty was also the age at which adolescents were expected to reach intellectual maturity, namely the ability to discern good from evil.⁸

Such permutations did not mean that minors under twenty were exonerated from legal prosecution. The Bible provides a series of cases that appear to relate to children considerably younger than twenty. Deut. 21:18–21, for example, unfolds a procedure dealing with “rebellious sons” without specifying the age at which a son would be held accountable for “rebellion” against parental authority.⁹ Rabbinic exegesis of these verses (M San 8.1) exonerated both daughters and minors from liability, implying an age well under twenty.¹⁰

To be a citizen, (round about the second-century BCE) according to the sectarians of Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls community), also meant manhood at twenty. Twenty represented the culmination of a decade of guided meditation.¹¹ By then the youngster should have become well

⁶ J. Fleishman, “The Age of Legal Maturity in Biblical Law,” *JANES* 21 (1992), 35–48.

⁷ Num 1:22 (military service); 1:2–3, 18 (census); Ex 30:13–14 (“Temple” tax).

⁸ Evil: Deut 1:39; Num 14:31, where children are defined as “*taf*,” a category including everyone under twenty destined to survive the desert meandering vs. those above twenty destined to die there. Cf. the same categories as those defining passive and active audiences in 1QSa 1.4.

⁹ The accusation hinged on conspicuous consumption, or gluttony, hinting at matters of maintenance and of inheritance, J. P. Burnside, “The Wrath of God on the Sons of Disobedience: Seriousness of Offence and Deuteronomy 21: 18–21,” in idem, *The Signs of Sin: Seriousness of Offence in Biblical Law* (Sheffield 2003), 37–78; C. A. Reeder, *The Enemy in the Household. Family Violence in Deuteronomy and Beyond* (Grand Rapids 2012), 38–45, among many discussions of these biblical verses.

¹⁰ M San 8.1 assumes that a minor is a prepubescent child. BT San 71a asserts that Deut 21:18–21 was merely a “lesson to be learnt” but not to be implemented. Rabbi Yochanan, perhaps jokingly, stated that being an orphan is a blessed state of being since one is not bound by obligations vis-à-vis parents, BT Kid 31b. Cf. T Hag 1.4 on puberty as a symbol of maturity interpreted in terms of liability to fulfill ritual commandments.

¹¹ 1QSa 1–12: “according to his age, each one will acquire familiarity with the statutes of the covenant/ and each, according to his intellect, will be taught its laws. For ten years he will study among the *taf*/at twenty he will be counted and numbered among members of the congregation ...” Text in J. H. Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls I. Rule of the Community and Related Documents* (Tübingen 1994), 110.

versed in the rules of the congregation, having reached the age of discernment.¹² This was an age of marriage, of legal capacity to testify and to stand trial, and of voting in the assembly.¹³

No such consideration shaped the lifecycle proposed by Philo of Alexandria (first century CE, Alexandria) who anchored childhood in human physiology, specifically marked by teething, puberty and bearding.¹⁴ Merging Greek theories of seven-staged lifecycles with the biblical emphasis on discernment as the crucial criterion of adulthood, Philo presented childhood as a battlefield between evil and good.¹⁵ Children were a group closely linked with evil, a trait which only reason and education could eradicate. Philo's articulation of lifecycle was prompted by interest in the roots of ethical behavior and morals rather than in childhood per se. There is no evidence that he wrote a treatise on grooming children to be Jewish in Alexandria.¹⁶ Does the gap indicate that the place and role of children was whittled down? That Philo failed to overcome a language which denied children a name and a place, restricting them to a prop in a conventional counting of the stage of the life lived by all humans?

At the end of the first century, Josephus reminded his readers that at fourteen he dazzled everyone with his intellectual precocity and at sixteen he delved into the "philosophies" of contemporary Jewish sects, spending the next three years as an apprentice of a desert hermit, returning to the city at nineteen ready for public life (Vita 8–14).¹⁷ The numbers bear little affinity with biblical projections of childhood and adolescence. They rather resemble Roman concepts of puberty as a liminal stage between fourteen

¹² 1QSa 9–12. The concept of "good and evil" as age markers has been associated with *daat* or knowledge/understanding already in Genesis (Gen 2:9; 3:5, 22). M Avot 5.21 postpones discernment (= *bina*) to age forty.

¹³ Fleishman, "Legal Maturity," 38. Cf. S. Metso, *The Serekh Texts* (London 2007), 53–4. The Rule of the Congregation further regards age twenty-five as age of service, and thirty as age of legal judgments.

¹⁴ J. Laporte, "The Ages of Life in Philo of Alexandria," *Society of Biblical Literature. Seminar Papers* 25 (1986), 278–90.

¹⁵ Horn and Martens, *Let the Children*, 6–9. M. Hadas-Lebel, *Philo of Alexandria. A Thinker in the Jewish Diaspora* (Leiden 2012), 167–8 on the popularity of the figure seven.

¹⁶ *Reading Philo. A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria*, ed. T. Seland (Grand Rapids 2014) provides a useful overview of this and many other questions relating to the shape and meaning of Philonic Jewish identity.

¹⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Life of Josephus*, trans. and commentary by S. Mason (Boston 2003), 12–20, esp. 12, comparing Josephus' self-attested course of study with "the conservative Roman idea" for aristocrats of the Republic which planted the family firmly as the cradle of all education and the inculcation of the *mos maiorum* in order to groom a man capable of assuming public responsibilities.

and sixteen when a youth would have donned the *virilis* to signify the end of childhood.¹⁸

Rabbinic lifecycles I: A Meditation on Mishnah Avot 5.21

At *five* years old [a boy is ready or fit] for Scripture.
 At *ten* [a boy is ready] for mishnah;
 at *thirteen* [a child is ready to undertake] Commandments;
 at *fifteen* [he is ready for] talmud;
 at *eighteen* [he is ready to enter] matrimony;
 at *twenty* to pursue [a calling, profession, undertaking];
 at thirty [he is ready to assume] authority,
 at forty [he is fit for] discernment,
 at fifty [he is fit to give] counsel,
 at sixty [he becomes] an elder,
 at seventy [his hair is sprouted] with grey,
 at eighty [he reaches the peak of his] strength,
 at ninety [he starts] to bend,
 at hundred he is all but dead, a man who once lived and is no more.
 (M Avot 5.21)

How did these figures accommodate reality? These lines were essentially an expansive rabbinic recasting of familiar patterns of ancient lifecycles crowned by an assumption of exceptional longevity. Yet the detailed division of fourteen stages undergirds banality with irony. Did Jews really live to be a hundred?¹⁹ What was the role of the two nonconforming figures of thirteen and eighteen within a carefully constructed cycle neatly based on multiples of five and ten components?

What makes this rabbinic lifecycle remarkable is the casting of childhood as a period of intimate relations between children (male) and text. To produce an accomplished child, the rabbinic road of M Avot charts a mental progression that grapples with the increasing difficulties of foundational texts from the Torah to Oral Torah (or scriptural exegesis, mishnah and talmud). Even within the rabbinic corpus, the lifecycle of Avot 5.21 is unique in matching readings with specific ages.²⁰ Literacy and intellect emerge in

¹⁸ F. Dolansky, “*Togam virilem sumere*: Coming of Age in the Roman World,” in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*, ed. J. Edmondson and A. Keith (Toronto 2008), 47–70.

¹⁹ On the numerological context of this passage, A. Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics and Historiography. Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford 2004), 17–87, concluding that the tractate is skillfully composed of earlier elements woven together to create a sophisticated tissue of earlier rabbinic sayings.

²⁰ Cf. T Sot 7.21; Sifre Deut. 161. See Chapter 3.

this vision as crucial keys of mental maturation, a prelude to a life worth living. The rabbis themselves contradicted this ideal with a calculation that out of a thousand who began to study Scripture only one hundred continued to study mishnah and of these only ten continued to talmud study.²¹ A rabbinic child, then, is one in a hundred, likely also a euphemistic statistic.

If in this reckoning the birth of a Jewish male heralded a childhood of learning, reaching the age of twenty implied an index of labor when one ought to embark on a “pursuit,” presumably of livelihood, through the acquisition of a craft or a profession.²² This may have been a discreet nod to reality. Prior to twenty, a youngster faced two turning points in his life: one at thirteen with the undertaking of Commandments (*mitzvoth*), and the other at eighteen with entering the state of matrimony. Both ages were transformative. At thirteen, a child became a member of a community abiding by Torah precepts. Marriage made an adolescent the head of a household.²³ But these too appear as figures of an idealized life course. Recent research has shown that in Roman Palestine men married mostly in their late twenties, although in Babylonia fathers were urged to marry off their sons already at sixteen.²⁴

He who is twenty years of age and is not married spends all his days in sin. In sin? Can you really think so? Rather say that he spends all his days in sinful thoughts. Raba said, and the School of R. Ishmael concurs,²⁵ that: Until the age of twenty God sits and waits for a young man to take a wife. Once he has reached that age and has not married God exclaims, Blast be his bones! R. Hisda (Babylonian sage, late 3rd/early 4th) boasted: The reason that I am superior to my colleagues is that I married when I turned sixteen. Had I married at fourteen I would have taunted even Satan. Rava said to R. Nathan b. Ammi: Whilst your hand is still on your son’s neck, between sixteen and twenty-two, marry him off. Others, however, state: Between eighteen and twenty-four.²⁶

²¹ LevR 2.1, with M. Hirshman, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought: The Theology of Learning,” *CHJ* 4 (2006), 899–924, esp. 913. See also C. Keith, “Writing and Gradations of Literacy,” in idem, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (Leiden 2009), 53–94.

²² The term is admittedly obscure and has received a variety of interpretations.

²³ Y. D. Gilat, “Thirteen Years Old—the Age—The Age of Commandments,” in *Talmudic Studies* 1 (1990), 39–53, repr. in idem, *Studies in the Development of the Halakha* (Ramat Gan 1992), 19–31. The bar mitzvah was an amoraic novelty, not dating before the third century, possibly later.

²⁴ A. Schremer, “Eighteen Years to the Huppah? The Marriage Age of Jews in Eretz Israel in the Second Temple, Mishna, and Talmud Periods,” in *Sexuality and the Family in History*, ed. I. Bartal and I. Gafni (Jerusalem 1998), 43–70 (Heb).

²⁵ The “school of Rabbi Ishmael” is a catch all phrase denoting mostly the production of tannaitic midrashim before the third century. Rabbi Ishmael was active in the early second century.

²⁶ BT Kid 29b–30a, Soncino. Rava (Raba; Rabbah) apparently lived only forty years and witnessed forty funerals, while Hisda lived to be ninety-two and to celebrate sixty weddings, BT MQ 28a. Cf. BT RH 18a, with A. Tropper, “Children and Childhood in Light of the Demographics of the Jewish Family in Late Antiquity,” *JSJ* 37 (2006), 305.

The projected premarital childhood of this Babylonian discourse is not the periodically punctuated lifecycle of the Palestinian M Avot. Rather, it draws a horizon of adolescence in terms of morality which defines children as bearers of sexuality and of sinful thinking.

Little can be gleaned about the actual span and nature of Jewish childhood from lists mandating a child's intellectual development by precise age divisions. Nor can there be a systematic exploration of these idealized stages of childhood.²⁷ The gender discourse of M Avot 5.21 points to distinct differences between the sexes with an implied yet simple antithesis: the childhood of Jewish girls fails to form a happy fellowship with texts, unlike the childhood of Jewish males. The "race" of girls is sharply and irretrievably divided from the "race" of boys already at age five, if not before. A citizen in the Jewish commonwealth of M Avot 5.21 is a male whose life course is prescribed from birth to death as a chain of intellectual, economic and social advancement, a progression calculated to maintain the division between the sexes. Torah and Commandments became symbols of gender barriers, in spite of the specific biblical injunction of Deut 11:19 to teach children, seemingly sons and daughters alike, about the common Israelite past.

Rabbinic Lifecycles II: Ecclesiastes Rabbah

Should we express a surprise that the most entertaining vision of childhood belongs to a rabbinic commentary (Midrash) on the book of Ecclesiastes? That it was a parody rather than a serious theorization of childhood? That it interprets the famous opening line of Ecclesiastes (*Vanity of Vanities*) by way of providing a parody on popular configurations of lifecycles, Jewish and non-Jewish?

Life, according to this exegetical nugget, is not a steady progression of learning. Rather it is a series of precarious victories over animalistic instincts:

Seven vanities are like seven stages [of life] that a human experiences:
 A one year old is like a king on a turtle's cart²⁸ with everyone hugging
 and kissing him.

²⁷ J. W. Schofer, "The Different Life Stages: From Childhood to Old Age," in *Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life*, 327–43, for a brief overview. Idem, *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (Chicago 2010), 141–67, regards M Avot 5.21 as "a demanding schedule of ideals for an aspiring sage" (p. 142), as well as "a creative and contentious formulation" (p. 148).

²⁸ On this unique term, R. Kiperwasser, "The Comparative Study in Midrashim on Kohelet," *Sidra* 22 (2006–2007) (Heb), 157 note 21; and idem, "Structure and Form in Kohelet Rabbah as Evidence of its Redaction," *JJS* 58 (2007), 283–302 on a rigorous editorial which juxtaposed ancient and

A two-three years old is like a pig, sticking his fingers in gutters.
 A ten year old skips like a kid.
 A twenty year old is like a horse, neighing and beautifying himself
 when searching a mate.
 A married man is like an ass.
 When he bears children he is as bold as a dog in his quest of bread and
 sustenance.
 Aging, he is like a monkey.²⁹

Conceiving children as pigs and kids, young men as horses, married men as donkeys and dogs, and old men as monkeys amounts to a parable on a humanity too close for comfort to the universe of its very own domesticated animals. According to this midrashic scheme, childhood is passed in spaces that are a far cry from those allocated to the perennially learning child of Mishnah Avot 5. In EccR, childhood is a period rooted in the outdoors where children behave like animals. Through an ingenious strategy of displacement, the Midrash creates different habitats for a different, non-rabbinic childhood which is composed not of texts but of gutters and grass.³⁰

We can read this midrashic nugget as a chart of physiological development that begins with an infant's relative immobility and continues with the stages of crawling and skipping. Especially instructive is the comparison between an infant and a pig, a notoriously forbidden species in Judaism. Perhaps it was a deliberate slur on the plebeian *Am Haaretz* (literally "people of the soil" or commoners).³¹ One definition of a commoner was precisely that of a man who neglects the Commandments that groom a child to become a Jew. Another labeled commoners as men who did not bring up their sons to study Torah.³² The childhood described in EccR, then, is a Torah-less one, the opposite of the Torah-centered environment of a "rabbinic" child. Yet there are also commonalities between the midrashic and Mishnaic

contemporary sayings. Z. Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London 1994), 164, on the rarity of wagon (cart) as means of transport of either stones or children.

²⁹ Schofer, *Vulnerability*, 159–60 on this list as "a family-centered account of childhood."

³⁰ Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 222–7 on a baby as a cast away relic of a raging storm, lying naked on the ground, speechless and needing every help, which, pace Laes, *Children in the Roman Empire*, 78, reflects pessimism about infancy in particular and life in general.

³¹ On non-Jews as animals, primarily pigs and donkeys, contrasted with the concept of Israel as angels, S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Oxford 1984), 33f. On *Am Haaretz* as a content-bound term relating to both Jews and non-Jews, *ibid.*, *passim*. On pigs and pork, D. Kraemer, "The Problem with Pork," in *idem*, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (New York 2007), 30–3; and D. Barak-Erez, *Outlawed Pigs: Law, Religion, and Culture in Israel* (Madison WI 2007), 15–20.

³² BT Ber 47b.

childhoods. Both refer to the need to marry and the necessity to earn a living, but the commoner also bears children after whom he looks with the fierceness of a hungry dog. In the rabbinically endorsed life course of learning, fatherhood is implied in matrimony but paternal responsibilities are ignored.

From pig to monkey, EccR and M Avot discourse of origins shows (male) children as double creatures, oscillating between playfulness and learning, the mundane and the sublime. One is an ironic portrayal of everything that children are expected to be; the other is an irenic projection of a rabbinic self-vision in which status was solidly anchored in learning. These are ego-documents, summaries of contradictory-complementary life courses.

Rabbinic Lifecycles III: Tractate “Mourning” (Semahot)

A third rabbinic approach to theorizing childhood was incorporated in a tractate dealing with funerary regulations, euphemistically entitled “Joys” (*Semahot*). Such rules are unambiguous. They dwell on the appropriate burial ceremonies for the deceased according to age, theorizing the human lifespan in phases and in terms of untimely or timely death.³³

A day old infant, even a neonate whose half body emerges alive, if he dies, receives a funeral as though its family were interring a fully-grown bridegroom.³⁴ The corpse should be carried to the cemetery wrapped in a kerchief. It may be interred in the presence of one woman and two men (or two women and one man).

The public ought not to line up nor to recite the mourners’ blessing (*birkat avelim*) for an infant who dies before he is 30 days old. (Cf. PT Kid 4.11)

³³ For text, translation and commentary, D. Zlotnick, *The Tractate “Mourning” (Regulations relating to Death, Burial and Mourning)* (New Haven 1966). The date of the tractate is contested: The latest authorities mentioned are the tannaim of the fifth generation, i.e. early third century, and the language employed is Mishnaic Hebrew. Schofer, *Vulnerability*, 88 for a post-Talmudic date with M. Higger, *Treatise Semahot* (Jerusalem 1969) (Heb). E. Meyers, “The use of Archaeology in Understanding Rabbinic Materials,” in *Talmuda de Eretz Israel. Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, ed. S. Fine and A. Koller (Boston-Berlin 2014), 318, for an earlier, tannaitic or “early rabbinic” date. On funerary customs, N. Rubin, *The End of Life. Burial and Mourning Ceremonies in The Talmud and Midrash* (Tel Aviv 1997) (Heb), 160–89.

³⁴ This was an euphemism according to Zlotnick, 106, reflecting the impact of death on the family since mourning rites should not be observed unless the infant lived at least thirty days, BT Nid 44b. Cf. M Nid 3.2–4.1 and PT Kid 4.6.

An infant [who dies between the ages of] 30 days and 12 months is carried out in a casket (*geluskema*) borne on outstretched arms and accompanied by a procession of men and women.

An infant who dies between the ages of 12 months and three years is carried out in a casket borne on the shoulders, and accompanied by a procession of men and women. Rabbi Judah says: If the father wishes to honor a child less than three years old, a coffin (*aron*) may be brought out to the cemetery for him.

If the dead child had been known to the community the public participates in the last rites. If the child had been unknown, the public does not participate in the rites.

Eulogies for dead children are to be delivered for a child of three if it dies poor and for a child of four if it comes from a rich family. Rabbi Akiva, however, stipulates that an oration should be delivered for children of the poor who lived to their sixth year, and for children of the rich who lived to their seventh year. Children belonging to rich families are like children of the sages; children of the sages are like children of kings and [the public] ought to engage [in rites over their death]. A child (*tinok*) who had been managing its own affairs deserves an eulogy in its own right.

From the age of 20 to 30, the deceased is carried out as a bridegroom (*khatan*); from 30–40 as a brother; and from 40–50 as a father. Rabbi Shimon said: from 30 to 40 if he has children he is carried out as a father. Death before 50 is an untimely death. Death at 60 is the kind of death that the Torah alludes to (Job 5:26), namely a ripe age. Death at 70 is the death of divine love (Ps 90:10). Death at 80 is death of “strength”. Beyond that life is only sorrow. (Sem 3.3–7)³⁵

Faced with this novel reading of the lifecycle, the quantification of childhood in terms of days, months and years shows that we are dealing with an incomplete combination of broader types of familial affiliations. Each stage, or rather each tragedy, encapsulates the complexity of the relationship between infants and society. Through funerary customs we are asked to conceive lifecycles in terms of the appointed roles and unfulfilled potential of children as bridegrooms, brothers and fathers on the one hand, and through age criteria for timely death on the other. Between the lines we find possible glimpses of demographic realities. Children faced the danger of death practically from birth.

Like Mishnah Avot 5.21, the tractate on mourning represents only half of the Jewish child-population. Its collective familial mourning projects the importance of male children in a genealogical chain that generates new

³⁵ Higger and Zlotnick for Hebrew text.