A retired teacher once berated me. “The Ten Commandments,” she complained, “directs us to honor our parents, but it says nothing about honoring our children!”

There are many ways in order to respond to this assertion. I chose to point out that the Decalogue is recited publically in the synagogue just three times a year: when Parashat Yitro (Exodus 20) and Parashat Va-et’chanan (Deuteronomy 5) are read, and on the festival of Shavuot. Jews, on the other hand, recite the Deuteronomic verses V’ahavta, containing the line v’shinantam l’vanecha (you shall impress [God’s mitzvot] upon your children), twice daily.

In Taking Hold of Torah (Indiana University Press, 1997), a meditation on Jewish continuity in America, Arnold Eisen (now chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary) identifies the entire book of Deuteronomy as an effort to ensure the Jewish identity and fidelity of the children; of future generations. In the context of popular culture, I remember in particular a segment of the 1980s hospital drama St. Elsewhere. Weaving through the ongoing plot involving the series regulars, two scenes are repeatedly shown. One is of an Easter Day worship taking place in the hospital’s chapel; solemn, dignified, and attended by adults. The other was of a Passover seder filled with noisy children as the rabbi engages them in an animated telling of the exodus from Egypt. “And when your children shall ask.” “Impress them upon your children.”

You and I can cite numerous other instances in Jewish sources, literature, and life that attest to the primacy of concern placed upon the future, the fate of our children. In reality, however, children are easy. They are eager and voracious in their curiosity and willingness to learn about themselves and their heritage, if they are presented with the opportunity. Children must be taught, and their teachers are adults who not only were once children (taught themselves by adults), but who retained their interest and care for Judaism and the people Israel into adulthood. The problem is clearly not children. It is what happens to them as they grow up!

Certainly among the most frequently told jokes among leadership of synagogues is that of the shul that was being overrun
by mice. None of the conventional methods of pest control was working, until someone determined to fashion tiny tallisim and yarmulkes, give each mouse a bar mitzvah, and they were never seen again. The heart of the story is that retaining children within synagogue life is relatively easy up to bar mitzvah. Then keeping adolescents and young adults in the fold becomes a challenge. With this self-enforced absence, we cannot be confident that they will ever return to the temple, even when they are grown, married, and have children of their own.

Of course, the concern about the Jewish fate of adolescents and young adults is hardly a new one. Simon Rawidowicz, mid-twentieth-century Jewish scholar, wrote in a seminal essay, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People,” that every generation, at least as far back as the mishnaic era, expressed concern for the viability of the next generation. Indeed, periodically, articles in this Journal have taken up the challenge of what should be done with our youth. One offering was actually entitled “Keeping the Mice in the Shul,” and was written by current URJ President, Richard Jacobs (Winter 2009). More directly on point, perhaps, a symposium twenty years earlier (Fall 1989) evaluated the status of the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary.

One might ask, what can be said now that has not been said before? Rawidowicz pointed toward an answer. As each generation appreciates the contributions of their parents in ensuring their continued place in the Jewish community, they nonetheless fear for the future. What worked for the parents does not necessarily work for the grandchildren. The times change, and with the passage of the years, the delicate balance of social and intellectual forces that could be brought to bear in order to meet the perceived threat for survival is altered. The variation might be subtle or distinct, but it is inevitably present. Each few years, the paradigm shifts and new solutions must be applied.

Let me propose as an exercise that you think back of your own experiences when you were between thirteen and eighteen. What were the programs and activities that appeared to be successful in sustaining Jewish identity into one’s adult years? Would they be as successful today? Certainly, some programs have endured and perhaps even flourished. Others have languished or withered. Developments in technology, shifting economic structures, the loss of immigrant grandparents, and a more complex relationship with
the State of Israel are among the factors that transform the attitude of youth in the second decade of the twenty-first century and therefore raise the issue of what is to be done with the kids, once again.

I extend my gratitude to colleagues Michael White and Karen Thomashow for serving as guest editors for this issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly. Using the URJ’s initiative in the area of Youth Engagement, they have assembled a variety of scholars, educators, and fieldworkers in order to examine the paradigms, experiments, and new ventures that take up the challenge of preserving the next generation of Jews.

Appended to this issue’s symposium are two articles that mine traditional sources. David Zucker and Moshe Reiss examine the odd and elliptical verse in Genesis (35:22) that describes Reuben sleeping with Bilhah, specifically in the context of two pseudepigraphic works, Jubilees and the Testament of the Patriarchs. Amy Scheinerman explores the Talmudic effort to explain unexplainable disaster—the destruction of the Second Temple—through an interweaving of four stories. Finally, David Goldstein provides an instructive historic footnote regarding how the Louisianan Senator Russell Long was drawn into the struggle on the part of Soviet Jewry in the mid-1980s.

Paul Golomb, Editor

Postscript. The focus of the articles presented here is relatively sharp. Each of the presentations concerns students (and their parents and teachers) between the year of bar/bat mitzvah and high school graduation. It is, however, a critical time in which the maturing Jew is still living within the context of home and synagogue. When the student goes off to college, it is a “whole new ballgame.” The challenge of Jews on campus—both for the product of a Reform Jewish upbringing, and for the role of Reform Judaism in a university setting—will need to be taken up in some future issue. Let me invite college faculty and staff, and Reform Jewish campus workers (including Jewish chaplains and Hillel directors whose responsibilities extend beyond a Reform Jewish student body) to submit their thoughts and experiences to this Journal.