

Sweet 16 Brings Heavy Responsibilities for Israeli Youths

As a kid, I recall going to friends' Sweet Sixteen parties, but it's a distant and vague memory. As common it is to celebrate this milestone in the U.S., in Israel it's a milestone that's noted very differently. With my oldest son turning 16 recently, it gave me pause to reflect on this difference.

In the coming year, my son will begin to take driving lessons and likely will be driving with a license before he's 17. The Israeli system is somewhat different, and he will have to take in the range of 30-40 lessons before even being eligible to take his first road test. I am sure that in Israel, like in the U.S., this is a milestone teens aspire to both because it symbolizes a degree of maturity and independence. Also because once other friends get their licenses, nobody wants to be the one who doesn't have theirs.

Also this year, my son will receive his *teudat zehut*—his Israeli identity card; "TZ" for short. While all Israelis receive a TZ number at birth (or immigrating as most of my kids did), the actual identity card is not received until 16. In a way, it's similar to a social security card/number, but it has less to do with receiving a stipend when one retires and is something that is kept secret so as not to enhance the concern that someone will become victim of identity theft.

In Israel, the TZ number is ubiquitous. Everyone is supposed to carry their physical card with them pretty much at all times. Israelis are asked to produce their TZ card often, sometimes when doing things as simple as entering a controlled environment, to using a credit card to buy groceries.

Israelis are asked his/her TZ number in the most mundane of places that would make Americans bristle with the worry about what the person asking might do with it. It's almost as common to be asked for your TZ number here as it is to ask someone how they are doing.

It's a funny juxtaposition from the more laid back Israeli attitude, as compared to the sometimes more formal American attitude, that Israelis throw around their TZ numbers without concern for things that Americans would be concerned about with their social security numbers. It's also interesting to note that, as various legislative efforts to have Americans carry an ID card (often for voting purposes) is a political hot potato, Israelis are used to carry their TZ cards with them. Indeed, my son looks forward to that.

Perhaps the biggest difference in my son turning 16 as compared to that of his American peers is that later this year he'll receive his first military call up notice. His three older sisters also received theirs at 16, but because Orthodox Jewish women are exempt from military service (as are many ultra-Orthodox Jewish men, and all Israeli Arabs except the Druze), they did a voluntary, non-military national service instead. So, my son will be the first in our immediate family to do military service, and that milestone, while 2-3 years before he'll be inducted into the army, is new for us all.

For the record, I did try to get myself conscribed, but as I noted then in an article entitled "At your age?," the young man half my age couldn't have been more eager to stamp my documents as exempt, because of my age at the time.

In the coming years, my son will participate in various programs to increase the likelihood that he'll be drafted to the most elite combat unit possible. He will go through a series of physical and psychological evaluations where the army will expertly rank him, assess his aptitudes, and begin to assign him to the unit that they think will be best. Indeed

in our modern Orthodox community, young men like my son strive to get to the most elite units, even trying to hide physical limitations that would limit their chances.

In America, the word "profiling" is a four-letter word. Here, it's a matter of survival. The army will profile my son as well and, ironically, in the Jewish state it's virtually impossible for a Jewish man to get a perfect profile because the army takes off points for being circumcised. A score of 97 is the highest possible profile for most Jewish men.

As the army begins to check him out and he begins to evaluate his options, as we as his parents begin to learn a whole new part of Israeli culture, language, norms, etc., I hope to be able to learn about this and be a resource for my son in parallel. I've always thought he should go into intelligence because he is very bright and analytical. Also, the idea of my kid being armed and defending us freaks me out a bit. And of course, there's the worry that in a combat unit he's much more apt to have to put his life on the line.

I know he'll be thinking about the same things because this past summer it was clear in the middle of the war that was thrust upon us, he was looking at and thinking about it not just as a concerned citizen, but as a future soldier. I know he looked at the war, as many of us did, with the hope that we would defeat and destroy Hamas and the other terrorist groups operating from Gaza, and end the threats we face (from that direction anyway), once and for all. But I also knew that he looked at the outcome of the war as one that was going to impact him. By not destroying Hamas and having a victory that was complete, I knew that he knew we were just kicking a can down the road, and one day his turn will come to be on the front line.

This is all part of being a 16-year-old Jewish Israeli. He's not worried about college or SATs yet, and he doesn't even think of it. First things come first. He'll get his Israeli ID

card, learn to drive and get a license, and then begin the process of taking this maturity and independence with which we and the country entrust him, to spend at least three years defending the state in uniform.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma magazine's *Standing With Israel*. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.