Learning to Be a Fool

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The first service a child doth his father is to make him foolish. — George Herbert (1593-1633)

There is a lovely rabbinic tale of a man whose father had died and left a very strange provision in his will. (Mid. Ps. 92:13) The will left everything to the only child, his son. But the gift was conditional. It said the son could not inherit "until he became a fool."

Consulting all the wise men of the town, the son could not find anyone capable of interpreting the statement. Finally, he went to the local rabbi. His rabbi too was stumped and decided to consult another authority, Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha.

As he approached Rabbi Joshua's house, he was greeted by an outlandish sight. He saw Rabbi Joshua on all fours, a reed sticking out of his mouth, pulled along by a child. He soon spotted the rabbi's small daughter and realized that what he had seen was Rabbi Joshua playing with her, pretending to be a horse.

He asked about the will, and instantly the sage had the answer: "What you just saw is your answer." The will meant the son could not inherit until he had children. No one should live a life surrounded solely by adults. It induces a seriousness that is really foolish.