

“Judging People by Potential”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The hall leading to Michelangelo’s statue of David in Florence is lined with “emerging slaves.” Some are barely visible, others almost completely realized. Each is in a different state of freedom from the rock that gave birth to it and yet still holds it. At the end of the hall looms the David, perfectly formed, standing as if it had never been merely a rough block of unshaped stone. The awed visitor then turns back and looks at those first few undefined hunks of rock to wonder how Michelangelo could have envisioned his masterpiece hiding in the uncut stone — a piece of stone, moreover, that was rejected from another workshop. The answer lies in the possibility of seeing potential.

Judaism asks us to see people by potential. The great Talmudic sage Resh Lakish was a bandit until Rabbi Jochanan saw something special in him, training him to a life of Torah. David was the eighth child, nearly forgotten by his father. (see I Samuel 16:10,11) Moses was a lowly shepherd who had run in fear from the land of his birth.

To see a future King David in a forgotten child, Resh Lakish in a bandit, Moses in a shepherd — these are great acts of constancy and of faith. Too often, we see only the surface while “God sees into the heart.” (I Samuel 16:7) Judging people by potential is often the only way to see them as they truly are.