

“The Secret of Success”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Psychologists have isolated the single most important factor in a child's future success — the ability to delay gratification. The child who can give up one cookie now for two later may well grow up to be an adult who will stay in school for a better job, or resist temptations that promise immediate reward but later suffering.

The philosopher Derek Parfit writes that we all have a “bias toward the near.” Young people will argue against benefits for elderly, even though they will one day profit from it, because of this bias toward the near. Or more simply, people drink to excess knowing that, the next morning, regret will follow. Human beings grab what is close, heedless of longer range considerations.

Living in the “now” has its point, but it is also an invitation to blindness. How much of our current economic crisis is due to fecklessness about the future? In an age when the internet can preserve each mistake and foolish act, disregarding consequences is increasingly perilous. Mistakes of adolescence are preserved, like ancient insects in amber, forever and ever.

The space to mature and slowly build, to ripen, is something owed to children by the adults around them. Remind them of reality of tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that — all the days when we will have to live with what we do today.