

On not Being a Blockhead

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

In his biography of John Adams, David McCullough tells his readers of a letter that Abigail Adams received from her sister about John Quincy Adams. It said that John Quincy was a very impressive young man but that he seemed a little overly enamored with himself and his opinions, and that this was not going over very well in town.

Abigail wrote to her son as follows: “If you are conscious to yourself that you possess more knowledge upon some subjects than others of your standing, reflect that you have had greater opportunities of seeing the world and obtaining knowledge of mankind than your contemporaries. That you have never wanted a book, but it has been supplied to you. That your whole time has been spent in the company of men of literature and science. How unpardonable would it have been in you to have turned out a blockhead.”

McCullough concludes how “unpardonable it would be for us — with all that we have been given, all the advantages we have, all the continuing opportunities we have to enhance and increase our love of learning — to turn out blockheads or to raise blockheads.”

There are more books of Jewish learning in every language today than at any time in the past. There are internet sites, podcasts, DVDs, every variety of access to learning. Our ancestors learned amidst scarcity. In the midst of abundance how unpardonable, Jewishly, to be, or raise blockheads?