

On Not Being A Blockhead

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Historian David McCullough tells a story that Abigail Adams received a letter from her sister about her son John Quincy Adams. It said he was a very impressive young man but that, alas, 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 John Quincy: "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 published in English about Judaism than in any language at any time in history. The internet, too, is a rich archive. Lessons in Hebrew are readily available. If she were a Jewish educator, what would Abigail say?