

Young and Wise?

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Wisdom is sometimes an accompaniment of years. Of course remarkable feats have been accomplished by very young people. Usually, it is true, such feats are not of wisdom but of skill in fields like mathematics, chess or music. Nonetheless, youth is no certain bar to wisdom, even if we don't quite believe the report from Tristram Shandy's Yorick of "the great Lipsius...who composed a work the day he was born" or the story of the Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin that as an infant he recited the blessing on his mother's milk. They may be exaggerations.

The Torah teaches us to treasure age: Abraham, say the Rabbis, was the first who "merited" looking old. But wisdom is a quality unevenly distributed across a life span and each stage of life demands different sorts of decisions. In my early teens I had a camp counselor who insisted we had to do what he said because he was older than us. When I complained of this to my father, he told me the saddest man in the Torah was Methusaleh, because the text relates he lived 969 years and had children. Imagine, my father exclaimed with a smile, all those years and not a single accomplishment worth recording. Age is no guarantee. When my father told me that he was still pretty young. But wise.