

No Kings at the Final Gate

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

When a Habsburg monarch died, the cortege arrived at the Kapuzinergruft in Vienna and the major domo knocked three times on the door with his staff. A monk asked who was there, and the major domo replied, "His Imperial, Royal and Apostolic Majesty, emperor of Austria, king of Hungary," and added another five hundred and eighty-six such titles. There was no response from inside. The knocking and the litany of titles were repeated. Finally, on the third time, upon being asked "who is there?" the major domo answered, "a poor sinner," and the doors slowly opened.

The Bible teaches the same message: In the first verse of the book of Kings, we read: "Now King David was old." One chapter later, his condition has declined: "David was dying." When old, he is still King. When dying, he is just David.

The ancient Greek Epicurus said death was "an unwallled city." There is no protection in pretence or power. In that very vulnerability is an opportunity: the prospect of mortality returns us to our essence, the state of our souls.