

# Cherish Your "Nothing"

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Our morning prayers offer a series of questions followed by a startling declaration: "The advantage of man over beast is nothing because all is vanity." At first this seems to mean that since all die, human and beast, nothing really matters. But here are two other ways of understanding this statement, the second of which solves a difficult problem in the beginning of the Torah.

You might take Rabbi Simon Greenberg's suggestion of seeing the word "*ki*" not as "because" but in its less usual meaning "when." That is, we are no better than beasts *when* we see the world as emptiness and vanity. Only when we live with meaning are we better. No advantage for nihilists.

Another explanation is that unlike beasts, our nature is not a given — in our "nothing" is our advantage. Beasts are pre-set; they do not change their personalities through efforts at self-improvement. This is why God says at the outset of Genesis "Let *us* make man." To whom is he speaking? To human beings. We are co-partners with God in shaping human character. We make ourselves together, from the element of nothing — of not-giveness — in our composition.

Treasure your 'nothing' — the not yet shaped part of you. It is a blessing and an opportunity.