

“Before and After”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Vladimir Nabokov opens his autobiography *Speak Memory* by recalling a scene in a home movie in which he saw his own family before his birth; his mother was pregnant and happy but, looking at his crib waiting for him, it had the “smug, encroaching air of a coffin.”

The world prepares for our entrance and, over the course of life, prepares us for our exit. Things existed before we appeared and will continue after. Although we cannot know what awaits us, we do know our power to leave the world changed.

Repentance on Yom Kippur, the prayer book teaches us, tempers the severity of the decree. The decree is death. That cannot be changed. But how we live, and even how we die, leaves an indelible impression and powerful message.

In *A Musician's Death*, the great Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz tells of a musician who on his deathbed seeks to reconcile himself with his family. He is by turns harsh, dismissive and kind. For his final confession he summons the family around and asks them all to take out their instruments and play. “Let’s hear,” he says, “how the band will sound without me.” Reluctantly the family is persuaded to play. The final line of the story reads: “The tiny house filled with music.”