

Getting Your Facts Straight

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre tells of King Charles II inviting members of the royal society to explain why a dead fish weighs more than the same fish alive. After a number of subtle explanations were given, the King pointed out that it does not.

The story recalls a tale told of the Maggid of Dubno. Once, a Rabbi claimed to a level of scholarship equal to the great Vilna Gaon. The Maggid suggested a test.

The Rabbi agreed. The question the Maggid posed was as follows: "In many cases in the law, an action is followed by the phrase 'not before and not after.' The book of Esther must be publicly chanted on certain dates, not before and not after. Yet when the Mishna prescribes the date for circumcision of a male child it omits the phrase *lo pachot v'lo yothair*, not before and not after. Why?"

The Rabbi thought for a while and launched into a long, elaborate explanation, finishing with a grand rhetorical flourish. Eminently self-satisfied, he crossed his arms across his chest and said, "There — now *that* is an answer. And what do you think the Gaon would have said?"

"I am quite sure the Gaon would have answered differently," said the Maggid softly. "His answer would have been — it *does* say 'not before and not after.'"