

Replace Yourself?

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

When asked if he wanted the King of Rome one day to replace him, Napoleon declared, "Replace me? I could not replace myself! I am the child of circumstances." That idea was dramatized by Stephen Vincent Benet in his story *A Curfew Tolls*, in which an Englishman residing on the Mediterranean coast of France meets a retired, frustrated French artillery major. It turns out to be Napoleon, born a few decades too early to conquer.

The Talmud tells us that everyone who crossed the sea saw miracles greater than the prophets. Why were they privileged to do so? Because the experiences of each age, its good fortune as well as its burdens, are unique. We cannot reproduce the piety and practices of our ancestors, we can only translate them, approximate them, adapt them to a new time. No one can be exactly replaced by someone else. Born in a different time, we could not even replace ourselves.

There is a story of two students of the same great Rabbi. One tried slavishly to follow the way of his master; the second developed his own methods and conclusions. Meeting in later life, one asked the other "Why didn't you follow the path of our Rabbi?" The second answered, "I did, more faithfully than you. You see, he grew up and left his master, and I grew up and left mine." No duplicates.