

What Vanishes?

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

In his autobiography the great director Akira Kurosawa muses: "Mono-no-aware,' sadness at the fleeting nature of things, like the sweet, nostalgic sorrow of watching the cherry blossoms fall — when I heard this ancient poetic term, I was suddenly struck by enlightenment as if waking from a dream." To recognize impermanence can be saddening but also an awakening.

Temporality is a religious as well as a human observation. The book of Ecclesiastes is built around this awareness: "All is vanity" means everything passes away. The book is a meditation on mortality and an instruction on how to live knowing that everything is ephemeral.

Yeats puts it simply: "Man is in love and loves what vanishes/ What more is there to say?" There is more to say. As ever, it is about trust. One cannot know what lies beyond this life, but a religious spirit trusts that ultimately nothing vanishes. The alchemy of eternity begins in fear and may bring transformation; but to be a spark of God means that our essence endures. Some people believe the world is only stuff; others believe the stuff is suffused with spirit. For those who affirm spirit, the crucial datum is not the fall of the cherry blossom, but the eye of the Director.