

## The Message of the Daffodils

### *Shabbat Bo 5785*

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

In November, when LAFTY, our high school youth group, hosted a regional conclave for their Reform Jewish peers and friends from Jacobs Camp, they spent Shabbat afternoon at three different community service projects. I was happily assigned Oakland Jewish Cemetery, where I joined an eager group of teens, some parents, and advisors to plant hundreds of daffodil bulbs, all under the capable direction of Richard Estelita.

Collaborating with Eileen Hamilton, Richard had learned about the Daffodil Project, which aims to build a living memorial to the one and a half million Jewish children who perished in the שואה, the Nazi Holocaust. Daffodil blooms, they note, are shaped like the yellow stars that Nazis forced Jews to wear throughout the vast territory ruled by the Reich. The Daffodil Project has made extraordinary progress, more than three-quarters of the way to reaching its goal of planting one and a half million daffodils.<sup>i</sup>

The goal is worthy. This week, the world marked the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp, as World War II neared its end with Allied victory. Eighty years later, few Holocaust survivors remain among us, able to bear witness to the unspeakable horror. We are blessed with Holocaust educators—in particular, Professor Dorian Stuber and Dr. Marcy Paul, in our Jewish community. This week, the AHEAD Fund, founded by David Ronnel to enhance Holocaust education in Arkansas, bestowed its annual award upon an Arkadelphia public school teacher who has been a remarkable innovator in teaching her students about the horror in its fullness.

I take inspiration every year around this time, as daffodils begin to poke up from the ground and provide the first color of springtime. The daffodils are virtually always too early. The weather will turn cold again. But the daffodils will bloom, cold and darkness will be replaced by warmth and light, and we will celebrate the reawakening of the natural world. Like daffodils, young Arkansans like David and the teachers he has honored have popped up, prepared to step into a void left by the passing of survivors who have educated across the decades. Instead of the darkness of the appalling ignorance about the Holocaust that spurred David's interest, and in place of the cold winds of Holocaust denial, they give us hope that better time may yet be ahead of us.

The Children of Israel learn in this week's Torah portion that better times are ahead. They have sojourned in Egypt some four hundred thirty years, longer than any seasonal winter and long enough to lose all hope. Then, Torah records what our sages tell us is the first מצוה (*mitvah*) in the Torah: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months."<sup>ii</sup> You may wonder: Which month? Torah calls it אביב (*Aviv*), the word that means "springtime," though we have come to know it as ניסן (*Nisan*), the month when Passover falls, half a year before we begin a new year on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the seventh month.

As soon as God makes this announcement designating the first month as the beginning of springtime, God turns to מצוות (*mitzvot*), commandments, that must be fulfilled so the Israelites may be spared the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn, leading to their long-sought liberation from bondage. After centuries of slavery, degradation, and attempted genocide, the Israelites could be forgiven if they viewed the promise of freedom as skeptically as we might a daffodil shoot in early January.

Judaism has a unique calendar. It's complicated. A twelve-month year, with each month beginning on the new moon, would soon send the holidays careening out of their appointed seasons. Therefore, careful calculations add a leap month, seven out of every nineteen years. The primary reason for these calendrical gymnastics is to keep Passover in springtime. Rebirth of the Jewish people intentionally coincides with the rebirth of the natural world.

We are not slaves, and we are not threatened with genocide. Still, America has been through a long two weeks. While acknowledging that some among us celebrate the sharp turn away from America's path of the past half century or more, others are terrified. Immigrants, and not only those in this country illegally, transgender and nonbinary Americans, and federal public servants understandably feel threatened, and they are not alone. With at least forty-seven and a half months ahead of us, those who are or believe they are threatened face a long winter ahead.

Can the daffodils offer hope? These flowers' eagerness to foretell springtime symbolizes the human drive and the Jewish imperative to embrace freedom and redemption, life and hope.

Not for nothing, we planted daffodils in our cemetery. To be sure, part of the reason is beauty—or, to be more precise, extending the portion of the year when Oakland Jewish Cemetery is spectacular with living color. No place is prettier than our cemetery when the crepe myrtles are in full bloom, but that doesn't happen until the heat of summer. Now, before the wildflowers, and months ahead of crepe myrtle blooms, new life will blossom in our cemetery, as early as February.

Among the Hebrew terms for “cemetery” is *בית חיים* (*Beit Chayim*), House of Life. Part of the reason for that is that people’s lives are honored there. When we gather each year for “Standing on Their Shoulders,” and hear the stories of people buried there, we are inspired by those who have come before us. All year long, families and friends gather, very much alive, to honor those who have found their resting place there and to teach younger generations about their forbears.

But there’s another reason that a cemetery is called *בית חיים*, House of Life. Traditional Judaism teaches that, in the messianic future, all who have died will live once again. Bones will emerge from graves, adorned with flesh and blood, body and soul reunited, for a joyful eternal life here on Earth.

Most of the time, I don’t believe that teaching literally. I am more often inspired by language that treats that ancient faith as a metaphor, praising God, Whose “cleansing rains let parched men and women flower toward the sun.”<sup>iii</sup>

My son Daniel has taken to warning me that I may not merit bodily resurrection when the time comes, because I don’t literally believe in it. He is in good company. The sages of the Mishnah also teach that the promise is only fulfilled for those who believe.<sup>iv</sup> The notion that one must believe something for it to be true is contrary to most Jewish teaching. God exists, for example, when we believe and in moments when our faith ebbs.

The daffodils do more to convince me than my earnest son or even our rabbinic sages. Maybe believing does make a difference. The emergence of those stalks from the hard winter soil, their stubborn persistence when ice and snow fall again, and the beauty of their flowers remind us: If we believe in a better future, we will ourselves to survive, and we commit ourselves to build the tomorrow of our dreams, even if a miracle is required to make it so. Then, after the longest of winters, after the bleakest of times, and even after the apparent finality of death, life and hope may spring eternal, just like the daffodils before them.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.daffodilproject.net>.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 12:1.

<sup>iii</sup> *Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Siddur*, Services for Shabbat, New York: CCAR Press, 2007, p. 51 (p. 169).

<sup>iv</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1.