



**Remarks by The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Delivered at the 19th Annual Bradley Prizes Ceremony
Washington, DC
May 16, 2023**

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:

Thank you so very much. I am deeply grateful and humbled to be here this evening. Sharing the stage with my fellow awardees, two remarkable and accomplished individuals, is an honor of the highest order.

I'm also grateful so much of my family is able to be here. You all share in this honor because you have been my greatest supporters and encouragers, even in – especially in – the face of relentless opposition.

Dick and I returned from Israel a couple days ago. Our travels took us into the land – quite literally – walking, hiking, climbing, and immersing body, mind and soul in that Holy place.

While there, I thought about my remarks tonight. I also thought about the many sermons I've heard over the years, and how pastors tend to make three points in them. These two trains of thought merged quite nicely as I learned about three particular trees that inhabit that special country.

Trees speak to me – not quite like God spoke through the burning bush to Moses – but they contribute mightily to the refreshment and peace I find in nature... they speak to my soul.

The first tree I encountered as we began the climb up Mount Masada is called the Ar'ar. It's a rather stunning tree – often growing lush and beautiful in the harshest desert terrain. It produces a very appealing fruit about the size of a grapefruit.

But when, with expectation, you break the fruit open – poof! – it's full of nothing but air. And the tiny amount of pulp inside is poisonous.

The Ar'ar is a mirage – it looks good, but it offers very little.

The second is the Acacia, a strong tree with particularly deep roots. It's remarkably resistant to decay. It can go years without sprouting a leaf and yet remain alive thanks to its root structure. It stands tall in the desert and identifies where there is water, however

deep. And its wood is desirable, valuable – it burns hotly, yields sap that’s a balm to wounds, and was specified by God for use in constructing the Ark of the Covenant.

The third is the Tamarisk tree. It grows full and beautiful, offering shade that’s 10 to 15 degrees cooler than the surrounding desert. But it is slow growing, taking three generations to mature to size. So whomever plants the tree will not likely enjoy the tree’s cooling shade. It is planted deliberately as a gift to those who follow.

Abraham planted a tamarisk to honor the covenant with the Lord God. (Genesis 21:33)

So, what can these ancient trees teach us today? And how do they connect to education freedom – my life’s work, and the reason for which I’ve been given this great honor?

We live in a culture that plants and celebrates Ar’ar trees. We cultivate what’s on the outside, with far too little work on what’s inside... an Instagram-deep, TikTok-ready understanding of our humanity.

Children taught to say and do the “right” things, but are often empty inside, just like the Ar’ar’s fruit. Hopelessness, mental illness, and suicides have reached historic highs, and academic achievement has plummeted to record lows.

Students are held hostage in school buildings that may look lovely from the outside, but once inside, you discover they can’t read.

And they’re fed poison, drip by drip:

⇒ Cancel people who don’ t agree with you

⇒ Tear down statues and re-write history

⇒ Judge people based on their race

⇒ Choose your own gender and disfigure your body

⇒ Chose victimhood, not heroism

And yet some with power and influence contend parents shouldn’t have a say in what their children are taught! That the parental rights movement is born out of some form of hatred.

No. We want empowered parents because parents love their children! We want what's best for them. Parents have primacy because parents – not the government – have the biggest stake.

As Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch prime minister and theologian, put it:

“If there is any axiom in the area of education, this is it. ... The parental rights must be seen as a sovereign right in this sense, that it is not delegated by any other authority, that it is inherent in fatherhood and motherhood, and that it is given directly from God to the father and mother.”

Parents yearn for their children to learn, to grow, to flourish.

Government, by its very nature, does not and can not know a child as a parent does. Not at the school district headquarters, not at city hall, not at the state capitol, and most definitely, beyond a shadow of a doubt, not inside the four walls of the U.S. Department of Education.

Parental control is rooted in meeting the needs of each individual child. We have an abiding respect for the innate value of every child, and an ambition for them to unlock and achieve their full potential. And not just for them, or for ourselves. We know better schools will help grow better citizens and a better America.

This brings me to the Acacia tree. It represents what every parent desires for their child: to grow strong, resilient, resistant to decay, deeply rooted to weather life's storms. Made of material that burns hot; a passion for life and for vocation. Formed and shaped consistent with the generations that preceded it.

This was what our Founding Fathers wanted for their fledgling experiment in self-governance, as well.

It's neither accident nor coincidence that Thomas Jefferson worked and wrote on education as much as he did. He understood, as we understand today, that we cannot and will not long endure as a nation if we don't raise up prepared citizens.

And yet we support a government-run, union-controlled education system where, despite spending more than three-quarters of a TRILLION dollars each year, 86percent of students don't have a responsible command of U.S. history.... and 80 percent don't know civics.

A tree that is well-planted grows leaves and bears fruit. But for decades, the “trees” of our education system – our schools – have not been very fruitful.

That brings me to the third ancient tree: the tamarisk. We must be in the business of planting these stately trees, of putting stakes in the ground for the benefit of future generations, as Abraham did in Beersheba. That can require accepting that we may not live to see the benefit of the work we do today, but remaining resolute in our commitment and desire to plant leaders, nurture hope, and protect freedom.

The Bradley brothers were tamarisk planters. We are here tonight, enjoying the shade Lynde and Harry Bradley's foresight and generosity continues to provide, generations after they left this earth, as their Foundation helps to secure the blessings of liberty to our posterity.

Today that's far from a foregone conclusion. The debates that rage just blocks away from here over whether we can afford to pay our bills as a Nation, or if men should be allowed to compete on women's sports teams, are a sad and perpetual reminder of that.

Will we succumb to the easy veneer of the Ar'ar? Or will we find the strength and do the work to grow acacias and tamarisks -- work that's not necessarily popular in today's culture.

I know we share an aim that's not only for today... though in the fight for education freedom, I'm thrilled that trees planted during the last few decades have taken root and are growing strong and swiftly today!

But ultimately, our aim is that Americans three generations thence can bear witness to the trees we plant today. And remember. And appreciate.

The teacher who led us in Israel encouraged a simple reflection to consider the meaning of our lives: how many tamarisks did you plant? How many acacias did you cultivate?

I pray that number for each of us is many.

I pray my life's work is known as planting tamarisk shade trees in the hot desert. I've given my all to education freedom in the firm belief that every child should have an equal opportunity to unlock their full, God-given potential.

Thank you again for this deeply meaningful honor, and may God bless you and may He continue to bless these United States of America.