

Sowing the Seeds for the World to Come

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- Maybe your Jewish institution recycles.
- Maybe there is a greening committee at your synagogue.
- Maybe there is even a CSA system available in your local Jewish community.¹

During recent years, Jewish institutions and organizations have taken great first steps to become “green.” Members of the clergy, Jewish educators and temple administrators have often been at the head of these efforts. As community leaders lay important cornerstones to becoming more environmentally friendly, a flourishing of new contributions to Jewish environmental education has emerged into this greening landscape. In this article, I intend to show what most Jewish leaders do not do (yet) because it is not even clear that they know about it.

Imagine the following. Fourth grade religious school students meet their teacher to begin class. The location of learning is the community garden. The last Sunday of each month, students are instructed to come dressed in clothes that can get dirty. Fourth graders tap one another on the shoulder, pointing proudly at “their squash” and at the 3 newly ripened tomatoes growing on the vine they planted just a month earlier. For the first half of class, the students help to plant new seeds and tend to ripened produce ready for harvest.

¹ A Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) system provides opportunities for people to purchase produce directly from local farms. Individual households invest an amount of money comparable to what they would spend on produce at a grocery store and become shareholders. In turn, shareholders receive produce that grows on the farm throughout the year. Relationships are cultivated between local farmers and communities. Households receive a variety of produce, corresponding to what grows best in their region at various times during the year. Farmers have investors who rely on them and provide much needed support during the year.

The second half of class is spent in the grass where students reflect on their work. They ask questions, offer insights and draw comparisons between work they do in the garden and texts they encounter from Jewish tradition. For example, students reflect on the passage in Genesis 2:15 that describes humankind's first job: to till and to tend to the Garden of Eden. The students consider what it means that they are engaging in similar work thousands of (biblical) years later.

At the end of class, one student and her family are responsible for taking the harvested produce to the local food pantry with which the synagogue has chosen to partner. The family will spend the afternoon engaging in the daily tasks of the pantry such as sorting food and receiving those who come to receive food. Each month, a different family has this task. At the beginning of the next class, the teacher will ask the student to share her reflections on the experience. In class, the lesson will ask students to consider their responsibility, as Jews, to provide for members of the community who are in need.

This is just one example of what is possible in today's milieu of Jewish environmental education. In order to appreciate the significance of our current juncture, however, we must recall what got us here. In 1994, Surprise Lake Camp, in upstate New York, established the Teva Learning Center. The Teva Learning Center was designed to "renew the ecological wisdom inherent in Judaism."² The founders sought to do this "by immersing participants in the natural world and providing structured activities which sensitize them to nature's rhythms, [helping] them to develop a more meaningful relationship with nature and their own Jewish

² <http://www.tevalearningcenter.org/philosophy.php>

practices.”³ Trained educators live on site and work with visiting groups (mostly middle-school-aged students) who attend 4-day programs at the center exploring the relationship between the environment and Judaism.

In 2003, the ADAMAH fellowship program was established. ADAMAH is located at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, which is also the home to the Teva Learning Center’s fall program. ADAMAH, still active, is a three-month program for “Jewish young adults - aged 20 – 29 – that integrates organic farming, sustainable living, Jewish learning and teaching and contemplative spiritual practice.”⁴ These two programs, though slightly different in their approach and focus, nourish the fertile ground upon which many seeds were planted and began to grow. Now, as graduates from these programs have taken their learning from Isabella Freedman back to their home communities, the first educational fruits are ripe for the picking. Rooted in Jewish texts and values, combined with highly experiential modes of learning, the field of Jewish environmental education is brimming with creative opportunities and even bears the potential to revolutionize how we conceive of Jewish education as a whole.

Here is just a sampling of the *bikkurim* (first fruits) emerging from Teva and ADAMAH alumni. The Kayam Farm is located at the Pearlstone Retreat Center, twenty minutes outside of Baltimore, Maryland. In Hebrew, *kayam* means to exist, sustain or to firmly establish. Stories from the Torah and agricultural legal discussions from the Mishnah inform the layout and best practices of this 5-acre organic farm. Visitors to the farm have the opportunity to learn about how

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://adamahfellowship.wordpress.com/about/>

vegetables and grains grow, how the goats live and how the chickens lay their eggs. What makes this farm experience unique however, are the lessons of Torah that accompany their tour. They visit the Rosh Chodesh garden, the patriarch's vineyard and the matriarch's orchard. Signs with biblical quotes are located throughout the farm, identifying passages from the Torah that provide instruction as to how Jews are to relate to the land.

Some might question the possibility of finding contemporary relevance in these presumably antiquated approaches to the soil. However, Kayam Farm Director, Jakir Manela, asserts that the meaning of these texts remains applicable. For him, it is only the growing distance from the land and tradition that cause us to question such relevance. As he puts it,

Our covenant is based on an eternal relationship to the land. We don't have to find a connection between ecology and Judaism because it is already so deeply embedded in our tradition. [The Jewish festival] holidays (Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot) are based on the agricultural cycle. When Jews pray, we constantly thank God for sustenance, for the earth's bounty, for rain and for the gifts of nature that give us life and Jewish law explores agricultural and environmental themes at length. [Our role at the farm] is really more about showing people what is already in our tradition and allowing it to inform how we might deal with the spiritual and environmental predicaments we find ourselves in today.⁵

For Jakir Manela, growing food on Kayam Farm is not just about engaging a medium for Jewish learning. He believes that Jewish environmental education teaches core values of Judaism and has the potential to excite Jews of all ages about our heritage.

To be sure, not every community has a Jewish educational farm to visit and partner with. Thanks to the Jewish Farm School (JFS) though, any Jewish community can take root in the field of Jewish environmental education. The

⁵ Conversation with Jakir Manela, December 2009

Jewish Farm School was founded in 2005 by Nati Passow and Simcha Schwartz, who worked together previously as educators at the Teva Learning Center. According to the website of the Jewish Farm School, their mission “is to practice and promote sustainable agriculture and to support food systems rooted in justice and Jewish traditions.”⁶ As such, JFS seeks to provide training and education to Jewish organizations looking to deepen their commitment to the values and practices that inform the Jewish environmental movement. Last year, JFS completed a curriculum entitled *Alumot: The Jewish Gardening Project, A Resource Manual for Jewish Educators*. The curriculum provides a step-by-step guide for how to build a vegetable garden and is saturated with Jewish textual sources to consider, reflect upon and discuss as your garden grows. A Jewish educator needs only to obtain a curriculum like this one to begin growing a program like that of the 4th grade class mentioned earlier.

Projects and resources emerging from the Kayam Farm and the Jewish Farm School are but a few of the emerging fruits from which Jewish educators can reap benefit. This summer, 2010, Eden Village Camp will open in upstate New York. Eden Village will be the first camp of its kind, dedicated to creating an experience that includes “organic farming, wilderness trips...working towards a zero-waste goal [and] Jewish expression.”⁷ The Kayam Farm will launch its first summer long *beit midrash*, for adults who want to spend mornings working on the farm and the afternoons studying Jewish agricultural laws. The Jewish Farm School will run six trips for our college-aged Jews, providing an opportunity for students to spend their

⁶ <http://www.jewishfarmschool.org/>

⁷ <http://www.edenvillagecamp.org/>

break from classes getting back to the land and doing so in a Jewish way. These are invaluable educational opportunities available to every Jewish educator and, by extension, our constituents.

The serious climactic challenges facing our planet today, along with the long inspired history of Judaism's relationship to the land should be compelling enough reasons why every Jew should care about the environment. Surprisingly they are not; at least not yet. Jewish educators have new opportunities to provide exciting educational programming rich with Jewish content for all ages and appropriate for inter-generational learning as well. Thus, Jewish environmental education is no longer just for "tree huggers" or "crunchy granola types." In November, Teva Learning Center Director, Nili Simhai, was the first Jewish environmental educator to receive the impressive Covenant Award, which celebrates exceptional innovation, commitment and vision in Jewish education.

In her acceptance speech, Simhai honored the work of all innovators in Jewish environmental education with these words of poetic inspiration:

[Jewish environmental educators] are our foot soldiers in Jewish education...they are warriors of love and light in the name of Jewish identity. They work on the edge, where new Torah is found, and where Torah that we thought we knew like the back of our hand surprises us. They are not afraid to take a learner's hand and say, 'I don't know what we will find but let's go on this journey together because the world needs us.'⁸

Indeed, the innovators are all of the Nili Simhai's who are establishing Jewish educational farms and providing resources for the Jewish community. They glean wisdom and inspiration from ancient rabbis and contemporary sages alike. They

⁸ Nili Simhai Covenant Award acceptance speech, November 8, 2009, Washington D.C.

sow the ground upon which strong Jewish identities and commitment are likely to grow.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the Jewish community has taken important steps to becoming more sustainable and environmentally aware. Now, thanks to graduates of programs like the Teva Learning Center and ADAMAH, one need not be an environmental expert to have the opportunity to integrate Jewish environmental education into religious education in a deep and meaningful way. Today, there are over 3,000 synagogues in North America and over 350 Jewish Community Centers. If each of these organizations planted a vegetable garden of modest size and donated the yield to a local food pantry, the North American Jewish community could donate a quarter million pounds of produce each year. Now that is a vision of a world to come.