

JUDAISM'S (NEW?) SUSTAINABILITY

BY BRONWYN FREY

If you've given up on organized religion playing a positive role in environmental awareness, the Jewish community in Vaughan, Ontario would be glad to show you otherwise. Since 2009, schul and school groups, synagogue members, and families have learned about organic food production and environmental responsibility in the greenest corner of the Lebovic Jewish Community Campus, Kavanah Garden. The Hebrew word kavanah means "intention" – specifically, the kind necessary for performing Jewish rituals. In this case, religious intention is not just directed towards ancient customs, but also toward solving ecological concerns.

Although few of the agricultural laws in the Torah and Mishneh Torah apply outside the land of Israel, Kavanah adopts those that are optimally translated to a contemporary, ecologically conscious setting. The law of orlah stipulates that in the first three years of growth, the fruit of a

tree must not be eaten. At Kavanah, this law used to practise restraint and gratitude toward nature. Lo tashchit commands that when waging war, the trees of an enemy's city may be eaten from, but not cut down. Today, this passage has become an injunction against waste. At Kavanah, lo tashchit is most notably evident through compost. Tikkun olam, or "world repair," originates in the Mishnah and is also associated with medieval kabbalah, but has come to designate social responsibility and improvement. It is perhaps the law that applies most generally to the garden's mission.

For the second year in a row, Kavanah has been featured in Slingshot, a Jewish activist magazine, as one of fifty most inspirational projects. The garden is obviously having a powerful effect on the Jewish community. But does it have anything to offer non-Jewish Canadians?

Yes and no.

Although I'm not Jewish, I volunteered at Kavanah in 2011 for reasons I'll explain below. I mostly helped kids garden, look at bugs, and play in the river. Most activities had tie-ins to ecological or Jewish concepts. The kids and families were Jewish, the signage was in Hebrew and English, and I heard food blessings so often I found myself chanting along, "Barukh ata Adonai ..."

Rachel Rosenbluth is Kavanah's director of education. Her description of Kavanah's activities, of course, shows how they are explicitly linked with Jewish traditions. "Meet a Tree" begins with Pokeiach Ivrim, a prayer thanking God for opening the eyes of the blind, followed by a discussion of blindness and the metaphor of "opening one's eyes." Children are then blindfolded and led to a tree to encounter it with their other available senses.

A new program this season is Urban Teva Adventures. Teva means "nature," and the adventures lead groups through Toronto's parks and ravines. "The garden is in the suburbs, so this is accessible for the downtown crowd," Rosenbluth explains. "We're doing hands-on activities through ravines in the city ... guided nature walks that let people connect to their space, and all these are weaving in Jewish teachings."

Though most of Kavanah's content integrates Jewish teachings, Rosenbluth also offers three across-the-board gardening tips.

First, companion planting can preclude the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides. "Instead of just having a whole backyard full of tomatoes, you'll have tomatoes and lettuce together with onions. And the reason why you do this is the plants can actually support each other in their growth. So the lettuce will, say, provide shade for an onion, and the smell of the onion can deter the bugs that like the lettuce."

Mulching, whether with wood chips, dried leaves, or straw, has numerous benefits. "On one hand [mulch] is slowly decomposing and



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feeding the soil new nutrients, and it's also preventing water from evaporating, and it's suppressing weeds."

Her third suggestion is to have a small-scale worm bin or, if space allows, a personal compost. The worms decompose food scraps, which in turn feeds the soil fresh nutrients and helps grow new plants. Rosenbluth recommends this process because it can help gardeners to "feel the cycle of the growth and destruction."

While Kavanah offers a wealth of ways to connect with nature and grow food sustainably, most of this content is packaged and marketed specifically for Jews. It's not that Kavanah excludes or proselytizes. The garden has signs with quotations from all traditions as well as Judaism, and Jewish tradition requires potential converts to be turned away three times. As a religious studies student who spent too much time indoors, I enjoyed working with the soil and observing the inspired ways in which Jewish kids and families could experience their heritage. But I clearly lacked the particular religious and community awareness to fully appreciate the experience.

Like Kavanah Garden, other traditions and secular society should seek out, promote and create their own inspirational sites for environmental responsibility. Southern Ontario already offers several such opportunities. Old Order Mennonite estates sell their chemical-free produce in markets and along the road. A few, like Leonard F. Martin's strawberry fields, allow customers to harvest produce themselves, offering a more in-depth experience of the region's heritage. Some certified organic farms also allow you to pick your own. Others, like The Cutting Veg in Sutton, have internships for sustainable farming.

Kavanah demonstrates how ancient traditions can dynamically interact with social and environmental responsibility, and there are plenty of resources for similar initiatives outside the Jewish community as well.
