

A Lesson in Jewish Ecology

Kavanah Garden Aims to Bring Jews Back to Nature

By Dan Verbin

After less than a year, Lebovic Campus's Kavanah Organic Community Teaching Garden is already proving to be a stunning success beyond anything its creators could have hoped for.

With five apprentices and 1400 participants and volunteers producing more than 350 pounds of food since its inception last April, the garden has more than fulfilled its mission of donating 90 percent of its organic fruits and vegetables to tzedakah (charity).

"By engaging people with the land – growing food for tzedakah – that's a really great hands on way to get people thinking about the choices that they make in their life and trying to get them to act from a place of greater kavanah – of greater intention," said Program Director Risa Alyson Strauss.

The donation of Kavanah Garden's produce to tzedakah is based on the Jewish agricultural law of ma'aser (tithing) that stipulates you must give 10 percent of your harvest to the

poor.

The garden, wholly organic and built out of recycled materials such as bicycle wheels, hockey sticks, ski poles, car tires – even the composter is made out of old skids – is in the enviable position of being able to donate more thanks to a bumper harvest this year.

Yet the teaching garden, whose mission is to engage members of the community in tikkun olam (repairing the world) through "hands-on, transformative programs, rooted in Judaism's deep ecological and agricultural wisdom," would not even exist if Strauss had not found herself in rural Connecticut several years ago.

Strauss, who worked for a Connecticut Jewish environmental education centre for four years, was sitting around one day at the centre with five or six other Torontonians. It was then that they realized the irony that they were all from the same city but they had to travel such a long distance to find a garden, a farm or an outdoor centre based on Jewish ecological practices.

"We decided that there should be something that spoke

to that part of our Jewish identity in Toronto," Strauss said, who has a master's degree in contemporary Jewish environmental discourse.

They approached UJA Federation when Lebovic campus was still in the development stages and were thrilled when UJA promised to find them a home on the new campus.

"We thought what better place to start a garden than a brand new community. And (UJA) were really supportive of the idea," said Strauss who added that they were also "blessed" to get funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and Environment Canada to start the project.

Besides teaching organic gardening skills and providing fresh, organic produce to those who might otherwise not have access to it, Kavanah Garden operates according to Jewish agricultural law in order to introduce those unfamiliar with the environmental aspect of Judaism to their ecological tradition.



Program Director Risa Alyson Strauss with solar oven

The mission of the garden is to "teach community members not just how to grow food but to teach people that this is definitely a part of our Jewish heritage and Jewish identity and this is a way to engage with Judaism," said Strauss.

Other examples of Biblical rules that are followed include the law of shmitta (instead of leaving a field unplanted every seven years as the law stipulates, they are dividing their berries into seven planters and will be leaving one planter empty each season) and the law of bal tashchit (nothing should be wasted).

Strauss also pointed out that in Genesis 2:15 after creation, God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden, saying his

job was to "work (the land) and protect it."

"In my mind growing your own food organically is a way of maintaining that balance of working the land and protecting it at the same time," she said.

Kavanah Garden is full of surprises. It even boasts a solar oven made from recycled materials. The oven is self-sustaining, using only sunlight to heat up to 250 degrees on a hot day. Strauss explained that the inside of the oven acts like a mini greenhouse effect.

"For me, being a farmer, being a gardener, that is me being Jewish," said Strauss.

For more information or to find out how to get involved, go to www.torathateva.org/kavanah.htm