

Still Crazy

Adamah brings a Jewish approach to organic farming

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Special to The CJN

Talia Allen recalls never even playing in the dirt as a kid. Fast forward to the summer of 2009, and that was about to change for her, big time. These past few months she's been shovelling goose manure, building chicken coops, wacking weeds, planting and hoeing a bounty of fresh produce.

For this 180-degree turn in the dirt, the 21-year-old Toronto native journeyed 600 kilometres to rural Connecticut to take part in Adamah, an agricultural program that brings a uniquely Jewish approach to organic farming.

The two are a natural fit.

"We are people of the land," Allen says in a phone interview, noting that many Jewish festivals — Succot being the most visible — are "connected to food and agriculture."

Says Megan Jensen, Adamah's assistant greenhouse manager: "We're bringing people back to the land and reconnecting [them] to Judaism."

The 13 other young adults who joined Allen on the three-month Jewish environmental fellowship learned not just how to farm organically, but how to do so with Jewish values that advance the practice of *tikkun olam*.

And it's not just the land that benefits. Take, for instance, the goats that graze on the sweet grass of Adamah's six-acre property in the Berkshire Hills. To milk or not to milk them on Shabbat? To alleviate stress to the animals, it was decided to milk them but to discard the liquid so as not to reap any benefit from the labour.

So too does Judaism's moral compass guide ecological practice at Adamah (Hebrew for earth). Surplus produce (think 1,500 strawberry plants and 500 blueberry bushes, to name but a few) harvested in its fields and orchards are donated to a food bank and farmer's market, the latter to raise funds for the local fire department; about 10 per cent of

Adamah's fields are left to lie fallow at any given time; practices such as crop rotation, returning nutrients to the soil and composting figure largely in this Jewish eco-culture, underscoring the values of transformation and not wasting what can be reused.

As its website notes in true Adamah spirit: "Where else can you say a blessing while using recycled vegetable oil to fuel a truck

Malach is an alumna of Adamah's fall session, when a new crop of "Adamahniks" rotates through three months of harvesting, preparing the gardens for winter and cooking in the "picklearium," its commercial kitchen that processes pickles, jam and tomato sauce for sale.

Like the summer group, the fall newcomers are exposed to Jewish spiritual and cultural programming, as well

Some alumni, like Risa Alyson Strauss, have transplanted their Adamah experience and broadened its reach in programs such as the Kavanah Organic Community Teaching Garden.

Opened earlier this year through the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada at the Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ont., the Kavanah Garden is organic farming the Jewish way.

Whether using discarded broom handles for infrastructure, applying Jewish agricultural law to planting or donating its bountiful harvest to those in need, the Kavanah Garden is about teaching.

To that end, it has hosted an eclectic mix including school children and seniors, says Strauss, Kavanah's program director who used her apartment's sunroom last winter to jump-start seeds in pots for transplanting. They would become the basis for Kavanah's 40- by 80-foot garden, which includes organic fruits, vegetables and *Havdalah* spices.

Aside from the garden, there are adult classes on Jewish-holiday harvest cooking and agricultural roots of the Jewish calendar. The two-hour workshop for elementary-aged children includes organic gardening practices.



The Summer 2009 group of Adamahniks.

that is filled with organic produce and naturally fermented pickles?"

Where indeed.

Since its start in 2003, the Adamah program — offered through the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center in Falls Village, Conn. — has hosted several Canadians, including most recently, Allen, and previously, her older sister.

Having worked on an organic farm in British Columbia and pursuing a degree in environmental studies from York University, Sabrina Malach easily slipped into Adamah's groove during her stint in 2005.

"It was a huge tikkun for me. I learned that Judaism is inherently agriculturally rooted and environmentally responsible," says the 28-year-old from Toronto, whose experience at Adamah led her to Israel and studies in ecology and Torah.



A sample of Adamah pickled products.

as training in Jewish leadership skills, and take their rest on Shabbat. They, too, start the day with *Avodat Lev* (service of the heart), the chanted morning prayers that include several minutes of silent meditation. And they get to celebrate Succot in the splendour of a New England autumn.

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