

WOMAN TO WATCH

risa alyson cooper >> ilan glazer

It's not every day that a church picnic sparks a Jewish community garden several thousand miles away. While pursuing a B.A. in religious studies at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, Risa Alyson Cooper and a friend drove across Canada and found themselves short on funds in Nelson, British Columbia. They made their way to a free, entirely vegan church picnic. The pastor discussed religious veganism, and Cooper was hooked, switching her studies from Daoism to religion and food ethics and becoming vegan herself.

After graduation, Cooper studied for an M.A. in contemporary Jewish environmental discourse at the University of Toronto's Center for the Study of Religion. Seeking out opportunities to practice Jewish environmentalism outside of studying Jewish texts in an academic setting, Cooper worked with the Teva Learning Center as a Jewish environmental educator and wilderness programs coordinator for several seasons. She then became the program specialist for the Children's Garden and Exploring Toronto Programs, developing children's gardens at community centers and parks. Cooper also volunteered with the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada: Torat HaTeva, now Shoresh.

When the Jewish community in Toronto decided to erect a new campus to meet its changing demographics, Cooper and other Torat HaTeva/Shoresh volunteers sensed an opportunity. The Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ontario will house at least two synagogues, three schools, a community center, and a residence for Jewish senior citizens. The group approached the UJA-Federation of Greater Toronto about developing a Jewish community garden at the campus—and grants from Environment Canada, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Shell Environmental Fund and others made the vision a reality.

In preparation, Cooper completed the Adamah Jewish Farming Fellowship.

"During the time I spent at both Teva and Adamah, I discovered a Judaism that brought together all of the pieces of my self," Cooper said. "Whether I was milking a goat, exploring a decomposing log with a group of students, or just watching the morning mist hover over the lake, I found that Jewish teachings,

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rituals and holiday celebrations reflected and gave expression to the radical amazement and gratitude I experienced in these moments."

Returning to Toronto, she inspired over 400 volunteers to help build the Kavanah Garden. Now in its second year, the Kavanah Garden has won a place as a permanent fixture of the new campus. Over 3,000 community members have planted or harvested a wide array of fruit and vegetables, from tomatoes, peppers, beets, radishes, carrots, and leeks to strawberries, grapes, currants, herbs, and spices, all on less than a half acre of land. Lessons on composting, seed-saving, beekeeping, Jewish holidays, and healthy eating are offered regularly. Food is grown organically, and Jewish environmental wisdom is taught at every gathering. A Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) project, in partnership with a young Jewish farmer, provides over 60 families with fresh, local, organic produce from the farm, and, in partnership with local food banks, over 2,000 pounds of fresh vegetables have been donated to community members in need.

"For the young families that are developing a community around the Lebovic Campus, the Kavanah Garden will be a part of their children's experience growing up in the Jewish community—they will know where their food comes from, they will understand the connection between the Jewish holidays and the growing cycle, and they will appreciate the Jewish ethic of *tzedakah* on a new level," Cooper said.

The Kavanah Garden has become a model for other Jewish community gardens throughout Canada. Cooper hopes to continue to help the Jewish community of Canada integrate environmental and Jewish wisdom as well as to bring a Jewish farming fellowship to the Kavanah Garden.

Cooper was selected to participate in UJA's Social Innovation Pilot Project and has been receiving capacity building and financial support to continue developing the Kavanah



Photo provided by Risa Alyson Cooper

NAME

Risa Alyson Cooper

AGE

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PROFESSION

Director of Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs and the Kavanah Garden

WATCH HER BECAUSE

She's integrating environmental and Jewish wisdom to inspire the Toronto Jewish community. Watch her garden grow!

Garden and Shoresh's other programs.

"I always knew that I ultimately wanted to live and feel rooted in Toronto. The Kavanah Garden allows me to share this sense of awe and connection with my community at home," Cooper said. **PT**



Ilan Glazer is a Senior Rabbinical Student with ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal and Spiritual Leader of Temple Beth El of North Bergen, NJ.