



Jewish food conferences: Sustainable or just a fad?

by [questpost](#) [↗] · Tuesday, April 17th, 2012

This is a guest post by Leora Mallach, the Co-Founder and Director of [Ganei Beantown](#): Beantown Jewish Gardens. You can join her this Sunday April 22nd to celebrate Earth Day at the first [Boston Jewish Food Conference](#) at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, MA. When not shifting paradigms in the Boston Jewish community, she can be found doing batik.

There feels to be a lot of energy currently around the “new Jewish food movement.” It’s not new, nor a passing fad, but a logical element within the continuum of the broader Jewish food conversation.

If we acknowledge it is a movement, and the growth in both national and place-based organizations over the last few years would indicate it is, we must consider where this momentum comes from. What we eat as Jews has been discussed, dictated and consumed from the earliest of days. The story of the migration of our ancestors and their adaption to local culture and cuisine is well documented. It has produced such great rifts like the debate over whose bagels are better: Montreal or NYC. (Duh, NYC)

All religion is interested in sustainability. According to Wikipedia , “Sustainability is the capacity to endure.” Our current rabbinic tradition has origins in the preservation of culture and community after the destruction of the Temple. We are a religious continually struggling with adaption to the period of galut (exile) while still holding true to values, ritual and community. This too has manifested and morphed over the centuries.

We now live in the age of the world wide web, of technology that enables the global exchange of ideas in real time. North American Jewry knows how to do conferences; for sitting and learning, networking and sponsorship opportunities. The current prevalence of Jewish Food Conferences (nationally, Toronto, Boston, Denver) is a reflection of the current state of the North American Jewish community. What is amazing is that at a Jewish Food Conference, rabbis who have never witnessed a shechita sit next to

Jewish college students who spent their spring break working on a farm with the [Jewish Farm School](#) delving into texts and discussions of food systems and justice.

In 2006, Hazon hosted the first Jewish Food Conference at Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. Since then, their presence has grown and their multi-day conference now attracts hundreds. The energy and successes of what Hazon is accomplishing on a national scale in the U.S. is also manifesting and celebrating how the Jewish Food Movement is sprouting itself locally.

February 5th this year was the first [Shoreside Jewish Food Conference](#) in Toronto, whose popularity demanded standing room only seats. This Sunday, Earth Day, will see the birth of the first [Boston Jewish Food Conference](#) (Full disclosure, I’m running it, and you can still register!) and next weekend, April 29, in Denver one can attend the [Rocky Mountain Jewish Food Summit](#) and compete in the Colorado Kugel Contest.

It is a question beyond “what does it mean to eat Jewishly,” to more specifically, “what does it mean to eat Jewishly *here*?”

We now have the momentum and capacity to engage in issues of applying Jewish agricultural law to current practice, to acknowledging the principles of shmita on Jewish farms in New York and Baltimore and in our national advocacy, to framing Jewish community in a way that honors the widow, the poor and the needy, and to develop that learning in contemporary times. The power of these conferences is in the connections with others *in their community* who are thinking about, and enmeshed in, the nuances and conflicting ideas, and struggling to make “the best” decisions about how to nourish themselves and their community in a just and sustainable manner.

The Jewish sustainability community (far larger than the Jewish food community, although with much overlap) provides a tremendously rich opportunity to build diverse and [pluralistic](#) community. We study, contemplate, debate, act and eat together with respect and reverence. The most beautiful aspect of this movement is the trans-denominational, intergenerational community that comes together for a moment in time to grow and build an even more amazing and sustainable religion.

While the model of the Jewish Food Conference might be a contemporary framework, the conversation is ongoing.