



Kosher and eco-friendly can go together, panelists say

Jodie Shupac, Special to The CJN, Friday, April 27, 2012

Rabbis, farmers, foodies, academics and activists – plus 110 attendees across the denominational spectrum – participated in the second annual food conference hosted by Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs and University of Toronto’s centre for Jewish studies in an afternoon of panel discussions.

From a lesson in backyard chicken farming to a “benching from the heart” workshop, the 11 talks were dynamic and diverse.

Aaron Gross, CEO of Farm Forward, an animal welfare non-profit group, and Jonathan Abrahams, executive chef and director of operations at The Healthy Butcher, which specializes in certified organic meats, looked at the question of reconciling kashrut with contemporary ethics related to animal slaughter.

Gross spoke of what he called “big kosher’s complicity” with the injustices of factory farming, referring to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ (PETA) 2004 exposure of animal cruelty at AgriProcessors – the former Iowa-based, glatt kosher slaughterhouse giant.

Reports that about 20 per cent of cattle were conscious during tracheal and esophagus extraction did not stop the Orthodox Union from saying it was still kosher, Gross said.

He criticized the controversial hoist and shackle slaughtering method – prominent in kosher abattoirs in South America – which often sell to the United States and Israel.

Out of concern about fulfilling the halachic stipulation that an animal must be conscious at the time it is first cut, kosher slaughterers refrain from stunning it – leading to what Gross called a violation of the Torah’s tz’ar ba’alei chayim, which forbids the unnecessary infliction of pain on all living things.

Kosher slaughtering needn’t be problematic in and of itself, he assured, but, in adopting inhumane methods of mainstream commercial farming, kashrut has become part of the problem.

“If we [as Jews] let kosher continue to participate in the factory system, what does that say about us?”

Though raised in a strictly kosher environment, Abrahams spoke of having steered away from kashrut, both personally and professionally, as his career as a chef evolved. His

decision is a result of what he's seen as a troubling treatment of farm animals raised for both kosher and conventional purposes.

"Is it kosher – as God intended – to pump an animal full of hormones?" he asked.

Abrahams added that the cost of kosher killing of certified organic animals is not in proportion to the number of interested people in Toronto necessary to make it affordable.

Gross said creating the "eco-kosher" market could be achieved using alternative purchasing co-operatives and a commitment to potentially paying more for meat.

Several people in the crowd – a cross-section of secular and more traditional Jews – expressed frustration at the panellists' failure to provide a clearer roadmap.

But Gross ended on a hopeful note. "There's something possible here. We need to create a model that works in one place – it doesn't have to be perfect... we just need to create that first one."

In another talk, on "Tikkun Olam: Reconstructing a Broken Food System," panellists focused on applying the concept of tikkun olam (repairing the world) to a food system struggling to meet the challenge of global hunger.

Moderator Charles Levkoe, a PhD candidate at University of Toronto who researches the Canadian food movement, said that to change things, we must view hunger as a social construct, spurred by commercial farming, faulty distribution methods and producer-consumer alienation.

"We have enough food... Instead of thinking about how to feed the world, we need to create systems where people can feed themselves," he said.

Ida McLaughlin, national executive director at Mazon Canada, which allocates funds to Canadian food banks, soup kitchens, shelters and school breakfast programs, outlined Mazon's funding criteria.

More and more often, they look for agencies that support fresh produce, practise cultural sensitivity and treat food recipients with respect.

Michael Friedman, manager of agency relations at the North York Harvest Food Bank, said his organization is increasingly looking toward a model that prioritizes community-oriented, member-led programs.

By organizing community garden projects and educational trips to grocery stores, they are nurturing grassroots involvement "beyond just handing out a hamper," he said.

People in the audience asked about concrete ways they could contribute.

McLaughlin emphasized the importance of finding a place to volunteer that best suits one's interests and expertise.

Daniel Hoffman, social worker, organic farmer and head of eco-social enterprise The Cutting Veg, stressed the power of individual action, such as bringing healthy food to work and shopping at farmer's markets. The Cutting Veg runs four Jewish community-shared agriculture programs in the GTA.

"Don't look at us as the leaders. You be the leaders," he said.

Cara Gold, a new Toronto resident and previous volunteer on organic farms, said, "There's a lot more passion in Toronto than I expected for these issues.

"Innately within the practice of social justice there is a deep Jewish connection. This conference is bringing that back into the forefront of our minds – it's easy to forget. Today can help us re-make that connection."