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Kavanah Garden entwines Judaism with environmentalism

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Special to The CJN

It is said that the world stands on three pillars: on Torah, on service and on acts of human kindness.

Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs is rooted in the social and environmental values found in these pillars.

Founded in 2002, Shoresh, which until last year was called the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada, aims to teach people to build a more ecologically sustainable community through the lens of Judaism.

For Risa Cooper, Shoresh's executive director who founded the Kavanah Garden in 2009, the organization offers Toronto's Jewish community a way to entwine their environmental, ecological and Jewish identities.

"My motivation behind establishing Shoresh's Kavanah Garden was to give Toronto's Jewish community members an opportunity to engage with their Jewish identity in real, meaningful and hands-on ways," said Cooper, who was named the 2010 Woman to Watch by *Presentense* magazine.

The Kavanah Garden is an organic educational garden at the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ont., that features more than 100 varieties of vegetables, herbs, fruit, and wildflowers, a havdalah spice garden, a greenhouse, a solar oven, a nature trail, and a rainwater catchment system.

The garden is open to elementary-school field trips as well as adult workshops that promote the connection between Torah and agriculture.

Cooper, who is a vegan, said she first became interested in gardening while she was a bachelor's student at Queen's University.

"I spent a summer in Costa Rica and during that time spent a few weeks volunteering in a village that had a raw goat dairy and grew all of their own



Kavanah Garden farmers built a Magen David-shaped raised wildflower bed. The raised bed will attract pollinators and other beneficial insects to the garden.



Shoresh's executive director Risa Cooper, bottom right, invited senior kindergarten Leo Baeck students to help harvest the Atomic Red Carrots they planted as junior kindergarten students the previous spring.

fresh fruit and vegetables," she said.

But it was the Teva Learning Center, a Jewish outdoor education centre in Connecticut, that led her down a path of Jewish environmentalism.

Cooper was pursuing her master's in contemporary Jewish environmental discourse at the University of Toronto when she first learned about Teva in 2005.

"I went for six weeks to do field research for my thesis and ended up falling so in love with the community and their model of experiential education that after completing my thesis, I returned to Teva where I worked as a Jewish environmental educator and then their wilderness programs coordinator for five seasons," she said.

Having just celebrated her third year with Shoresh, Cooper promotes the Kavanah Garden through programs that send Shoresh representatives to schools and synagogues to run workshops.

The interactive workshops show participants how to apply green living into their everyday lives.

Cooper said that the message resonates with some of the young students who visit the garden.

She recalled a special moment when a group of children visited the garden last year and found a praying mantis.

Cooper said they were amazed to see such an incredible creature. Sensing a teaching moment, she explained that there is a prayer that can be said when you see something rare or beautiful.

"One of the children said, 'There is a blessing for when we see a really cool bug - I love being Jewish,'" Cooper recalled.

In addition to fostering an appreciation of Juda-

ism's connection with the environment, the Kavanah Garden also implements the laws in the Torah that dictate how food should be grown and harvested. Although farmers outside of Israel aren't obligated to follow these laws, Cooper said the Kavanah gardeners do.

Shoresh also promotes the importance of tzedakah and tikkun olam.

About 80 per cent of all the produce grown is donated to people in need through Ve'ahavta, a Toronto-based humanitarian organization. The Kavanah Garden provides families in need with wholesome organic produce that they would not otherwise be able to afford.

For the past two years, Shoresh has provided hundreds of kilograms of food for tzedakah, while Shoresh staff have been working towards increasing programming and making the programs more accessible.

They've succeeded in attracting more than 3,000 people to participate in some aspects of Shoresh.

In May, Shoresh hosted its first forum at Beth Tzedec Synagogue that brought Jews of every denomination to celebrate the successes of the Jewish food movement in the Greater Toronto Area and map out steps to move forward.

"Seeing how the Kavanah Garden has grown in just two short seasons has been hugely humbling," Cooper said.

"I am so grateful for the incredible show of support we have received from community members from all across the many spectrums that make up our community."

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