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3rd of Kislev, 5775

Shabbat times for Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Rosh Chodesh Kislev occurs on Sunday, 23 Nov 2014
Candle lighting: 4:24pm on Friday, 28 Nov 2014
This week's Torah portion is Parashat Vayetzei
Havdalah (45 min): 5:27pm on Saturday, 29 Nov 2014

[Shabbat times for Montreal](#)

Toronto educator honoured

Cara Stern, Staff Reporter, Monday, November 25, 2013

Tags: Jewish learning

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Risa Alyson Cooper with a pattypan squash

TORONTO — A Toronto woman has been named one of five recipients of the Pomegranate Prize, an award designed to recognize and encourage educators who have been working for less than 10 years.

Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs, was the only Canadian among this year's group of winners. Although she's not a teacher in the traditional sense, she has spent years working as an environmental educator both in Connecticut and in her native Toronto.

The prize is bestowed annually by the Covenant Foundation, which aims to recognize the diversity of strengths in North American Jewish education. Created in 2011, the award comes with \$15,000 distributed over three years to help fuel the winners' projects.

"Our goal with this prize is to provide the means for these already remarkable educators to further develop their skills and interests, and have the chance to get to know others who, like themselves, are bringing fresh new ideas and abundant energy to the field of Jewish education," Keating Crown, a member of the foundation's founding family, said at the awards ceremony in Chicago on Oct. 28.

Cooper wasn't able to attend the ceremony, since she had given birth a month earlier.

Through Shoresh, Cooper, 32, has created the Shoresh Kavanah Garden at UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan.

The garden is home to more than 100 kinds of organic vegetables, fruits, herbs and wildflowers. There's also a compost demonstration site, a rainwater catchment system, a Havdalah spice garden, raised wheelchair-accessible garden beds, a greenhouse, and an outdoor kitchen and bicycle-powered blender.

Signs in Hebrew, English and Russian allow people from a variety of backgrounds to learn about the garden

Harlene Appelman, executive director of the foundation, said the panel of judges selected Cooper for the prize because she shows such promise so early in her career.

"She's a pioneer. She's a visionary," Appelman said. "She's accomplished a lot in a short time."

Appelman said she hopes that the five winners will be able to rely on each other for support and new ideas that will improve Jewish education in North America. There will be webinars throughout the year, and the winners will come together for a meeting in New Jersey in February.

Cooper said she found out she had won the prize on the first day of her maternity leave.

"I was completely floored, and just so humbled and grateful," she said. "It was a sweet way to transition out

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of Shoresh.”

Shoresh means, “root” in Hebrew, which Cooper said is perfect in describing the group’s projects.

“Shoresh is helping community members get back to their Jewish roots,” she said. “The idea is that through interacting with our land with the earth, we’re able to access and understand a part of our Jewish heritage.”

She said it’s a blessing when she’s able to teach someone and watch them have an “a-ha” moment.

“What I love about being an educator is helping to create points of connections... whether it’s offering them an opportunity to connect with a kind of tree or a particular Jewish text or even other community members,” she said. “I feel these other kinds of Jewish connections deepen our understanding of not just ourselves, but our community around us.”

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