

HOME & GARDEN

# New Gleanings from a Jewish Farm

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In the Garden

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO

FALLS VILLAGE, Conn. “Come seek enlightenment in the chicken yard, young Jewish farmer! Come at daybreak 6 o’clock sharp to tramp through the dew and pray and sing in the misty fields. Let the fellowship program called Adamah feed your soul while you feed the soil. (In Hebrew, “Adamah” means soil, or earth.) Come be the vanguard of Jewish regeneration and ecological righteousness!

Also, wear muck boots. There’s a lot of dew and chicken guano beneath the firmament.

What is that you say? You’re praying for a few more hours of sleep in your cramped group house, down the road from the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center? After a month at Adamah, you’re exhausted from chasing stray goats and pounding 350 pounds of lacto-fermented curry kraut?

Let’s try this again, then: Come seek enlightenment in the chicken yard, young Jewish farmer, because attendance is mandatory.

“They definitely throw you all in,” said Tyler Dratch, a 22-year-old student at the Jewish Theological Seminary’s List College, in Manhattan. “It’s not like you do meditation, and if you like it, you can do it every day. You’re going to meditate every day, whether you like it or not.”

As it happens, Mr. Dratch and the dozen other Adamahniks tramping through the dew on a recent weekday morning were also bushwhacking a trail in modern Jewish life. In its 11 years of existence, Adamah has produced no more than 300

graduates. But its alumni “former goat wranglers and kraut stirrers” are inventing some of the most influential institutions in Jewish food, farming and sustainability.

The program’s co-founder and director, Shamu Fenyvesi Sadeh, 45, ran through a list of the major projects headed by his former students and colleagues. There’s Pearlstone Retreat Center, outside Baltimore, and Shoresh and its farmlands around Toronto. These institutions stage environmental camps and raise produce on large grounds and holdings: Shoresh’s main farm spans 100 acres.

Lower down the food chain, Adamah alumni lead Jewish experiences like Wilderness Torah, which celebrates holidays like Passover in the California desert. And after the “evision quest” ends, Yiddish Farm provides intensive language training on a sustainable farmstead in the Hudson River Valley.

Finally, “we have people in the food business,” Mr. Sadeh said. Grow and Behold, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, ships pastured and ethically butchered kosher meat across the country. The Gefilteria (recently seen performing a “pickle residency” in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn) produces European peasant foods for the boutique Jewish marketplace.

These “immersive experiences” engage Jewish 20-somethings in their natural realm, said Sarah Chandler, Adamah’s director of earth-based spiritual practice. (Of her title, she said, “if it sounds like I made it up, it’s because I did make it up.”)

She added: “Jewish life is totally different now. It doesn’t need to be in the walls of the synagogue.”

Young Jews can spend their “odyssey years” working as art teachers at a Jewish eco-camp like Eden Village, in Putnam Valley, N.Y., and then enrolling in the Israel School of Herbal Medicine, before landing at Isabella Freedman.

Naomi Izen, 23, made all these stops on the path to becoming a food-education apprentice at Adamah. “You travel in these same circuits,” she said. “It’s these young Jews who are searching for community, who really want to heal the world and themselves.”

After graduating from Drexel University with a degree in fashion merchandising, Ms. Izen moved into a studio a few blocks from Penn Station. “I thought my dream was to become the creative director for a magazine,” she

said.

She got close. “I was going to press previews and cocktail parties every night,” she said. “It was good times. But I was missing something.”

One night, she remembered the name Adamah from a conversation with the director at her campus Hillel. “There was a 12-minute video on the website,” Ms. Izen said. “It was about the program and the people who did it. And I started crying because I said: ‘This is it. This is the place I need to be.’”

Adamah is not a kibbutz. And yet Ms. Chandler, 35, conceded, “This program is filling a role in the eyes of young Jews, in their imagination, that used to be filled by going to Israel for a few months and spending time at a kibbutz.”

A number of the Adamahniks have done that, too. Alex Lyon, 21, lived on a commercial “eco-farm” called Kibbutz Ketura. The daily experience “say, tree-trimming from a tractor, 30 feet above the ground” taught him a useful lesson: “Prune the dates as fast as possible.”

By comparison, Mr. Sadeh said, “It’s really clear that we’re not trying to produce farmers.” Yet the fellows are unmistakably seeking something: “Most of them acknowledge that they’ve been in their heads too long.”

Mr. Sadeh continued: “One of our former field managers called it the Jewish blue-collar training program. We take upper-middle-class, college-educated kids and show them some blue-collar skills.”

At 7 a.m., a blue-collar, immersive Jewish experience was about to occur in the garbage enclosure behind the dining hall. As part of morning chores, Maddy Herzog, 22, and Andrew Rosen, 20, would be loading trash cans onto a caddy and wheeling it down the road to what a sign calls Bubbe’s Breakdown Bistro, a series of raw compost mounds in the chicken yard.

Even an eco-conscious retreat center generates a lot of trash. Isabella Freedman started in 1897 as the Jewish Working Girls Vacation Society: a cheap rural getaway for laborers in the urban garment trades. It’s an irony of the postindustrial economy that Jewish girls (and boys) from the city “the Adamahniks” now pay \$1,000 to \$1,500 to labor here in the country for three or four months.

The work isn’t frivolous. Typically, about a third of Adamah’s \$300,000 annual budget comes from the proceeds of the farm. With 10 acres

under cultivation and a full-time manager, the farm grows more than 50 crops and serves 120 families in West Hartford, through C.S.A. shares. (Much of the harvest goes to the retreat's dining hall.) Adamah's goat-cheese operation is on hiatus. But the farm produces 6,000 jars of jam, kimchi, kraut and pickles, and sells them through buying clubs and its website.

The labels, designed by Mr. Sadeh's wife, Jaimie, advertise the ecological mission of Adamah and the health benefits of live lacto-fermentation. There's a reason Mr. Sadeh calls the commercial kitchen the Center for Cultural Proliferation.

Now that the sun was up, something smelled as if it was lacto-fermenting in the compost bins. Maybe last night's meatloaf. Typically this hauling job would take two round trips. But Mr. Rosen had resolved that all five cans, each weighing 50 or 60 pounds, could be squeezed on the rickety "peasant cart."

"Andrew, you're going to spill all this," Ms. Herzog said.

Mr. Rosen said, "And I take responsibility for this."

Ms. Herzog said, "We're going to be"

"We're going to be having breakfast early," Mr. Rosen interrupted. A junior at Queens College, he will be returning from Adamah to a yeshiva in Far Rockaway, N.Y.

"I didn't come here for the Jewish education," he said. "I came to learn about perennials, which are all here, and permaculture and pickling and cheese-making and invasive plants."

Ms. Herzog, who last year received a journalism degree from Northwestern University, said, "So far, this is new." By that, she meant everything. The meditation and the gratitude she liked. During the hike, she had tucked a black-eyed Susan behind her right ear.

"This morning I was able to wake up and not hate my life so much," she said. "The first week or so, I thought, 'What have I gotten myself into?'"

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Beit Adamah, the Adamah House, lies a half-mile down the road, a distance traversed by a fleet of bicycles that appear to date back to the age of the Second Temple. B.A., as it's known, is a three-bedroom split-level whose living space is either comfy or grotty, depending on your disposition and how recently

youâ€™ve lived in college housing.

You could call the decorating style â€œlandfill revival,â€ with the last-stop couches, and the ants, and the home-brew experiments on the kitchen floor. Alternately, you could choose to live in a tent.

The tidiest room in B.A. is the worship annex in the back, where the fellows do their avodat lev (â€œheart workâ€) in the morning and celebrate the Sabbath. The liturgy here changes, depending on whoâ€™s leading it. By design, Adamah is â€œpluralisticâ€ or â€œpost-denominationalâ€ or â€œall-stream.â€ The fellows may have grown up attending services that are Jewish Renewal, Reform, Conservative, modern Orthodox or Hasidic â€” or attending no services at all. Yet they seem to agree on a few points of the Sabbath ritual. There will be bare feet (and only bare feet), a lot of ecstatic chanting in Hebrew and a bountiful distribution of beer.

The diversity of religious practices is perhaps exceeded only by the variety of kosher diets: omnivore, vegetarian, vegan, honey-tolerant vegan, etc. Todayâ€™s breakfast was a fresh egg scramble and homemade granola with raw goat milk.

Itâ€™s not what Shira Frager, 26, buys for herself back home in Queens. This morning, she poured herself a mug of coffee and examined the raw goat milk. She lifted it to her nose and took a whiff. And then she made a leap of faith.

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The farm used to be bigger. For seven years, the fellows sowed four fertile acres along a bend in the Hollenbeck River.

Then Hurricane Irene paid a call and the river washed it all away. You could say that the destructive waters are biblical. Or you could say the environment appears to be changing, and not for the better. Mr. Sadeh favors the latter interpretation.

The Talmud, Judaismâ€™s collection of rules and interpretation, overflows with regulations that define the practices of an ancient agrarian society. But these laws are binding only in the land of Israel.

â€œThatâ€™s not the way I think about life, or Judaism, or tradition,â€ Mr. Sadeh said. â€œFor me, it cheapens the whole thing. Weâ€™re not a biblical theme park.â€

The practice of â€œshmita,â€ a resting of the fields and forgiveness of debts, is a good case study. The letter of the Talmud declares that every seven years, the

land should lie fallow. No planting, no pruning. The gates of the farm must be thrown open to all comers.

Mr. Sadeh appreciates the revolutionary implications: “It’s a limitation of the excesses of capitalism, of private ownership.”

Yet when the shmita year starts this September, “If we don’t farm, it just means the dining hall and our C.S.A. members get vegetables from a less ecologically satisfactory location.” Does the Talmud intend for Jewish consumers to shop at Whole Foods?

Mr. Sadeh has settled on the idea of performing ecological restoration. The hills above Isabella Freedman are blighted with invasive plants: garlic mustard, multiflora rose, Asian bittersweet.

Adamah exists to teach “the way agriculture has imbued Jewish ritual life, the communal life, with meaning,” Mr. Sadeh said. “We don’t work on Shabbat. Otherwise, if you walk on the farm, you wouldn’t know it’s a Jewish farm.”

Or put it this way: When Ms. Frager asked how the sheep and the goats get along in the pasture, Mr. Sadeh could offer an answer from scripture. The biblical term “etzon” meant a mixed flock. The sheep ate the grass; the goats ate the brush. But it was more important that Ms. Frager recognize the live wire on the electric fence.

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At a certain hour in the day, a young Jewish farmer has learned all she’s going to learn from pounding 350 pounds of freshly picked cabbage in a food-grade drum. This is when the lessons move to the classroom “or, rather, the instructional yurt.

On a recent evening after dinner, the topic was dust. The starting point was a passage from Genesis: “Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”

The 12th-century rabbi and scholar Rashi posited that the dust of creation came from the four corners of the Earth. Did this mean that we are by nature worldly and interconnected? “There’s no one answer,” Mr. Sadeh said. And he dispatched the Adamahniks to study essays by Barry Lopez and Rebecca Solnit on the topics of economic migration and rootedness. In sum, where do we call home?

For several of the fellows, the answer was right here, in this yurt, in the holy city of Falls Village. Meredith Cohen, 31, came to Adamah after working eight years in education (starting with Teach for America, in New Orleans). “When I discovered Adamah, I thought, “Everything I want in life, that I thought I had to work and build, already is in this place,” she said.

So when her fellowship period ended last fall, Ms. Cohen said, “I never left.” Now, she manages the dairy-goat barn as one of four apprentices.

The problem with marching in the advance guard of Jewish thought is that the rest of the army can seem pretty far behind. Rory Katz, who starts rabbinical school this fall at the Jewish Theological Seminary, in Morningside Heights, recalled what happened when her parents’ synagogue booked a speaker from the Jewish environmental group Hazon, Adamah’s national parent organization.

“They spent a whole weekend around the topic of food activism,” Ms. Katz, 26, said. “They did a lot of advertising trying to get people to come. And then my mom said it was boring. My dad said it was boring, even though he had helped organize it.”

As an intentional eco-community, Adamah would seem to represent a mock-up of the Promised Land. Yet at some point the shared meals and the back-rub circles can begin to feel more real than the real world.

On the Fourth of July, Emily Sellman, 23, went home to her family in Baltimore for a weekend on the beach. “I didn’t like leaving,” she said. “It was a little bit of a culture shock. No, it was a culture shock.”

What was wrong?

“The food was funny,” Ms. Sellman said. “You have to dress up. You have to look good.”

The discomfort, she ultimately concluded, wasn’t so much cosmetic as existential. “I almost felt useless,” she said. “I’m used to doing work, and all the stimulation and learning here. With my family, I was just at the beach. It was too much downtime.”

Back at Adamah, heart work starts tomorrow at 6 o’clock, sharp.

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