

CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE, LAND-BASED JUDAISM OPENS IN ONTARIO

By **Jordana Skurka** - June 30, 2016



Risa Alyson Cooper, centre, shows off the newly opened Bela Farm

More than 200 people came out June 26 to celebrate the opening of Bela Farm, a 114-acre centre for sustainable, land-based Judaism.

Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of the grassroots Jewish environmental organization [Shoresh](#), which runs the farm, located in Hillsburgh, Ont., one hour northwest of Toronto, said she was “thrilled to see a very diverse group of community members” in attendance, from ultra-Orthodox to secular.

For many in attendance, Shoresh is “their only point of Jewish connection,” Cooper said.

Bela Farm, its design, goals and activities are rooted in Jewish values and practices, but open to all, she said.



Hundreds converge for opening of Bela Farm June 26 PHOTO COURTESY

“Land-based Jewish tradition is unique in the community,” she said. “It speaks to people in deep and profoundly meaningful ways, and bridges Jewish tradition with ecological stewardship. It is an expression of Judaism that is meaningful and relevant.”

One of the largest Jewish community farms in North America, it’s the latest initiative from Shoresh, which also runs a pollinator garden at Wolfond Centre at the University of Toronto and a community garden in a private backyard at Kensington Market.

The opening also featured performances from a cadre of Jewish Toronto-based musicians, a mini farmers market and a locally sourced desert reception.

Sabrina Malach, Shoresh’s director of engagement, says the opening reflects “a vision we’ve crafted collectively over the years.”

While there’s currently a growing movement of Jewish environmental organizations, largely centred in the United States, Shoresh, Cooper said, is unique “in that it is an environmental organization exclusively run by women.” Recently, it held a retreat for women that explored the intersection between Jewish tradition, land and gender, providing an opportunity to explore the connection between Jewish tradition and the natural world.

The farm is also inviting community members for a four-day retreat starting July 10 to experiment on a deeper level with land-based Judaism. The retreat will include prayer and meditation sessions, chances to work the fields and hands-on workshops. Malach describes it as a “procession of the land infused with music, poetry, art and Jewish texts.”



Hundreds unite for opening of Bela Farm June 26 PHOTO COURTESY

Shoresh also has a seven-year strategic plan it intends to execute by the next shmittah (sabbatical) year, including undertaking a native reforestation project, planting thousands of native trees in honour of meaningful life-cycle events, and even building a “bee sanctuary” across acres of native wildflowers to support the honeybee population.

Shoresh aims to provide local sustainable honey for Jews to enjoy on Rosh Hashanah. By 2021, it intends to produce a full line of products available for purchase through Bela Farm, including honey, beeswax candles, horseradish, matzah, pickles and herbal teas.

“We want the community to feel that Bela Farm is their own place,” Malach said. “We want to celebrate b’nai mitzvahs and, God willing, for weddings to take place on the farm. Our goal, over time, is to create and develop a new model for a community centre on a farm.”

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