

Adventures in Beekeeping

My Journey into the Hive

BY SABRINA MALACH



Photo by Larry Nusbaum

Bless the sting and bless the honey.
Bless the bitter and bless the sweet.
(Naomi Shemer, *For All These Things*)

If you walk past an apiary in Ontario at the end of August and take a deep breath, you might notice a familiar smell – that of stinky hockey socks. Surprising, funny, and yet still sweet, this is the scent of goldenrod nectar being evaporated down into honey by bees rapidly fanning their wings deep inside the hive. After four years of beekeeping, I am still joyfully awed by this smell.

August is a paradoxical month for me as a beginner beekeeper. It is both the harvest season, full of sweetness and abundance, and my personal sting season, full of swelling, itchiness, and pain. As a new-bee, the process of taking honey supers loaded with liquid gold out of the apiary sometimes feels like theft and makes me nervous and clumsy. And this ungraceful behaviour seems to stir up the bees and trigger their stinging impulse.

Last August, I spent a long day preparing for a community honey harvest at Bela Farm, a 100-acre rural centre for sustainable, land-based Judaism. Just before finishing up, I realized I had left one frame of honey in the apiary and needed to move it into the honey house. Unveiled, I picked up the frame dripping with honey and got stung on my philtrum, the vertical groove between the base of my nose and the top of my upper lip. My immediate reaction was compassion: I had just spent the day separating the bees from the foraged, evaporated nectar which they had worked so hard to produce, and perhaps this was their way of saying, “WTF!?!”

After a few minutes, the shock and pain started setting in, my compassion waned, and I cried and cursed. I’d been stung dozens of times before but this one was the worst. It hurt a lot, it had come out of nowhere, and it immediately transformed the shape of my face, making me look like I had overdone it on collagen lip injections. After three days of hiding from embarrassment, I made peace with the experience and shifted my perspective from one of victim to one of privilege. I had been kissed on the lips by a bee and I was honoured.

You might be thinking, “This lady has a crazy bee fetish,” but let me explain how and why I feel that getting kissed by a bee is a blessing. In 2005, I fell in love with honey bees while working on an organic farm in the Berkshire mountains in Connecticut. I was in awe of them: their social dynamics (each hive has one queen, thousands of female worker bees that run the hive, and a few hundred male drones); their design and architectural skills, as evidenced in bee-manufactured wax hexagons (did you know it takes four pounds of honey for bees to make one pound of wax?); and their critical role in the reproduction of flowering plants through pollination. The intuitive intelligence of the hive wowed me in a profound, transformative, and lasting way.



Photo by Sabrina Malach

Shortly after I'd caught the buzz, honey bees hit newspaper headlines. Widespread reports of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), the mysterious disappearance of bees characterized by unusual symptoms in the hive, put bees in the hearts and minds of the general public. Since we are programmed to protect what we love, my life mission quickly became to save the bees.

I dropped out of my urban planning program and transferred to a Master in Environmental Studies program to explore best practices for how urban citizens could protect pollinators. I organized pollinator festivals and planted habitats for bees at urban farms throughout the Greater Toronto Area. More recently, Shoresh, the organization I work for, initiated the planting of a 20-acre bee sanctuary at Bela Farm, which is located in Hillsburgh, less than an hour northwest of Toronto.

In 2013, Shoresh got its first hive and we have since grown our apiary to twelve hives. I feel incredibly fortunate to have learned how to keep bees by my mentor Mylee Nordin, a master beekeeper who embodies the zen of beekeeping. Without Mylee's help, I couldn't have done it. Beekeeping is a complex science and the learning curve is steep. My advice for new-bees who want to "save the bees" is this: flowers first, then hives. Bees need a habitat and diverse sources of nectar and pollen more than they need traditional beekeepers, and I strongly believe that the most important action we can take to save the bees is to plant flowers.

The rewards of keeping bees go way beyond producing honey. Honey bees have been some of my greatest teachers. They've taught me about communication, collaboration and, most importantly, interconnection. Honey bees are social beings that must work collaboratively and be in constant and intense communication to survive.

They intuitively know their tasks and work together as one super-organism for the greater good of the whole. The result is profound: a hexagonal honey-combed city filled with evaporated nectar that never expires. Wow.

The deepest wisdom from honey bees can be found in observing their relationship to flowers. Through the process of pollination (actually, interspecies sex), foraging honey bees visiting flowers in pursuit of nectar inadvertently pick up pollen on the backs of their legs and consequently enable flowering plants to reproduce. Through the transfer of pollen from one flower to another, bees help the entire ecosystem thrive and survive by enabling flowers to become fruits and seeds. Insect pollination demonstrates the interconnectedness of the world with the simplest beauty. The bees need flowers, the flowers need bees, and humanity, along with most other species in the animal kingdom, need them both. In this way, the bees keep us.

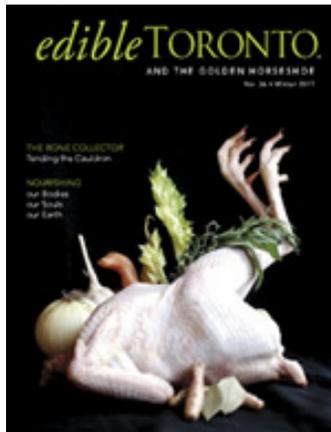
The truth is, we all need to become keepers of the bees. Even if you are not technically a beekeeper like myself, you have a responsibility to keep the twenty thousand species of bees that keep you and me fed and keep our world beautiful and functional. Bees are the little things that run the world and if we want this world to continue running in the beautiful ways that it does, we all need to identify as beekeepers. So, while I'm not advocating that everyone put on a veil and get a hive, I hope that you will start to think of yourself as a keeper of the bees and plant untreated, pollinator-attracting flowers wherever you can.

Through my time in the apiary – getting stung, tasting warm honey right off the comb, and observing bees pollinating flowers – I have gotten a taste of the paradoxical, beautiful, and profoundly intelligent nature of life on Earth, and my life is better for it. “Honeybees have achieved what many of us strive for: a life lived in the moment, replete with deep, substantive interactions enriched by relationship with others and a profound connection with the environment around us.” (Mark Winston, *Bee Time: Lessons from the Hive*.)

I don't know about you but I feel most content when I'm in the moment, living a purposeful life, surrounded by loved ones with whom I have good communication, and feeling connected to my environment. Bees are masters at this and through my time with them, I am learning how to be a better human and, in that way, they are keeping me.

Sabrina Malach is a Toronto-based community organizer and pollinator protector. Blessed with the best job, Sabrina is leading Shores's efforts to save the bees through the widespread planning of pollinator gardens throughout the GTA, as well as planting a 20-acre bee sanctuary in Hillsburgh. Her favourite ways to spend time include dancing to Raffi with her 3-year-old niece and watching bees pollinate flowers. To learn more about Shores's innovative efforts to save the bees, visit www.shores.ca.

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