

# Strengthening Jewish identity through environmental education

VICKY TOBIANAH  
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Jewish outdoor, food and environmental education (JOFEED) programs help develop Jewish leaders and foster a deeper connection to Jewish identity, a new report has found.

The *Seeds of Opportunity* report, released in early March, is the first national research study on the impact of JOFEED programs on Jewish identity, education and Jewish life for Jewish adults (specifically, programs that last four days or longer, such as weekend retreats or hands-on workshops).

The results? Jewish environmental programs foster a greater connection to Judaism, and allow alienated and disconnected Jews to reconnect to their Jewish roots while engaging in issues they're passionate about, such as sustainability and the environment.

The report also found that many participants and educators of JOFEED programs – about 70 per cent – consider themselves leaders in their communities.

While many Jewish organizations fight to attract young professionals, people often feel disconnected from the Jewish community. In fact, the report found that 63 per cent of respondents felt disconnected from Jewish life (the main reason was a negative experience with Jewish religion or community), but 32 per cent reported that a JOFEED program was the main reason they reconnected.

Based in Toronto, Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs is an example of a Jewish organization that's centered on sustainability and en-



Shoresh program at the Kavanah Garden SABRINA MALACH PHOTOS

vironmental education grounded in Jewish wisdom and practice. At its annual food conference, for example, speakers explored the Jewish year of shmittah (the year the land lies fallow) and what it means for environmental preservation. They also spoke about practising sustainable farming and whether kosher should also mean ethical.

"The beauty of Jewish environmental education is that it's a unifying aspect of Jewish tradition. No matter where you stand on the religious or political spectrum, very few people can disagree on the beauty and sacredness of nature. Especially today with the environment being a hot topic in general, everyone knows that it's essential to our life. And the very first job of the first humans (Adam and Eve) in the world was to watch over and care for their

environment," said Tamar Maerim Yunger, interim executive director of Shoresh.

"Shoresh is the only Jewish organization in Toronto and Canada with a mission that focuses on food and environmental issues to build a more sustainable and connected Jewish community."

Shoresh's flagship program, its Kavanah Garden at the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ont., embodies the organization's goals. Participants can go on a nature hike, read education signs in Hebrew or English, smell the spices in the Havdalah garden, visit the outdoor kitchen and learn about more than 100 varieties of fresh food.

The site was voted by *Slingshot: A Resource Guide to Jewish Innovation* as one of the 50 most inspiring and innovative Jewish programs in North America.

Most recently, Shoresh opened Bela Farm, which will become fully operational in 2016, in rural Ontario, where it runs educational programs and workshops based on Jewish principles of ecology, nature and tikkun olam (repairing the world).

"The hope is that it will create a more sustainable and healthy Jewish community," Yunger said. "Without a doubt, Jewish environmental programs are connecting and reconnecting Jewish young adults to their Judaism in a new, meaningful way, when otherwise they would have disconnected in some cases entirely or remained marginally involved." ■



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