Greater Toronto Area

Shul helps bring fresh produce to congregants

By SHAYLA GUNTER-GOLDSTEIN Special to The CJN

Ivan Simon does not seem like your average "crunchy granola" type. A 40-something computer software architect living in Toronto with his wife and two children, he seems more like a supermarket kind of guy than a local organic consumer.

But Simon is one example of the growing trend to people changing the way they think about their food choices and where their food comes from. A passion for a healthier and more ecologically responsible lifestyle has motivated him to spearhead a Community Supported Agriculture organic farming program at Toronto's Beth Radom Congregation.

The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program

links local Ontario organic farms directly with consumers through the availability of fresh vegetable and fruit boxes. Beth Radom's program will see households purchase, in early spring, subscription "shares" of the year's harvest from a local organic farm. Participants pay for their produce at the beginning of the season to help provide the necessary start-up capital for farmers to purchase seeds and supplies.

Working in conjunction with Torat HaTeva, the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada, Simon says his goal in introducing the CSA program to Beth Radom is to make local, organic produce accessible, affordable and convenient for the Jewish community.

Michael Schecter of Torat HaTeva says his organization "recognizes there is a disconnect in the community between the environment and Judaism, and is working to repair it. So much of kashrut and Judaism is about healthy living and eating.



Ivan Simon, left, and Michael Schecter

Zionism started with our attachment to the land. It was [David] Ben-Gurion's vision. Eating organic and making ecologically responsible choices helps us, as Jews, rekindle that."

Simon says his interest in rekindling this relationship was piqued when the shul's Cantor David Rosen delivered a Shabbat sermon about the environment. Simon was familiar with the CSA program through friends at the First Narayever Congregation in downtown Toronto, which hosts the only other Jewish CSA depot in Toronto. He approached Rosen with the idea of starting a program at Beth Radom.

Both men feel that the membership of Beth Radom, which is increasingly becoming a younger, family-oriented group, would react favourably to an environmental initiative such as CSA

Simon also believes that one of a synagogue's roles is to be proactive. "I want this for Beth Radom and for our members. I hope that this program will motivate current members to become more active in the shul and within the Jewish community, and perhaps even attract new members."

Beth Radom and Torat HaTeva will work with the Plan B Organic Farm, a certified organic CSA farm in Southern Ontario, to provide the program. From June through the end of October, fruits and vegetables will be available to those who sign up as shareholders. In addition to the produce, kosher organic fish and chicken will be available this year.

Plan B is aware of kashrut concerns. For example, none of the vegetables or fruits supplied will be from farms that raise pork to avoid contamination through soil. While vegetables won't be checked for insects, observant clients may ask that their boxes exclude certain types of vegetables.

"People are realizing that the food we eat today is not the same – in taste, appearance, or in nutrients – as the food we grew up with," Simon says. "Organic produce tastes like farm food should taste."

Schecter adds that "when you think of the chemicals and pesticides used on crops, and the often inhumane treatment of animals used in mass-production farming, you have to ask yourself if that is following the spirit of kashrut."

Food boxes come in a variety of sizes. A half-share box, suitable for a household of two or three adults for example, contains eight to 10 assorted in-season items. Fresh herbs and a newsletter containing recipes and tips are also included. Boxes will be available for pickup once a week at the Beth Radom depot in the Bathurst Street and Sheppard Avenue area. The congregation is currently investigating a depot location in Thorn-hill

Beth Radom will also practise tikkun olam by donating any unclaimed boxes each week to shelters and food recovery programs such as Second Harvest. Shareholders may also choose to donate a portion of their box to these causes directly.

Schecter will explain the principles and philosophy behind Community Supported Agriculture at a pre-Tu b'Shvat shiur at Beth Radom on Jan. 19 during morning services. Members of the community are welcome to attend and to participate in the CSA program. For more information, call the synagogue office at 416-636-3451, extension 24.

Torat HaTeva will hold a CSA Tu b'Shvat seder, also on Jan. 19, at the Anshei Minsk Synagogue. For information, visit http://www.torathateva.org.

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