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A Food Conference: The Canadian Way

By Alyssa Berkowitz



COURTESY OF SABRINA MALACH

Sabrina Malach is an inspiring leader of the New Jewish Food Movement in her native Toronto. She is currently the Director of Outreach and Development at [Shoresh](#), a grassroots organization that aims to build a more ecologically sustainable Toronto Jewish community. Having received inspiration from her experiences as an [Adamah Fellow](#) and her work at [Hazon](#), Sabrina has channeled her passion and knowledge into new food projects in the Toronto Jewish community. Most recently, she is one of the coordinators of the [Shoresh Food Conference](#) coming up this February.

I recently had the opportunity to catch up with her and hear about her work on the Shoresh Food Conference, and how the New Jewish Food Movement takes a Canadian twist north of the border.

Alyssa Berkowitz: How have your experiences as an Adamah Fellow and a former Hazon employee inspired you and brought you to where you are today?

Sabrina Malach: At Adamah, I realized that farming, ecological sustainability, and the environment were incredibly important. At Hazon I worked and volunteered on four Food Conferences including the first food conference with Leah Koenig and Anna Hanau. Those experiences gave me the confidence that we could do something like that here, in Toronto.

In addition, it's interesting to think of the Adva Network. The purpose of the network is to bring alumni from Teva and Adamah together once a year and have them bring inspiration and ideas back home. We're doing a great job at that in Toronto because there are so many alumni here. Shoresh is the a great vehicle for us to to apply what they've learned from Teva and Adamah (all the staff at the organization are alumni) within a Canadian context. I'm grateful for my experiences with Adamah, Teva, and Hazon for inspiring Shoresh to do the great work we are doing here.

** What do you bring to Toronto and what kind of projects are you currently working on? **

The main project I am currently working on is the Shoresh Food Conference (<http://shoresh.ca/shoresh-food-conference>). Shoresh also has an incredibly successful [Jewish, community food garden](#) and we have begun to develop Bela Farm, a rural centre for land-based Judaism in southern Ontario. We are inspired by Adamah and Teva, and we take things we gained from Adamah and Teva and apply it to a different country, community, and city. We take the things we've learned, but put a Canadian twist on it.

Can you give me an example of that Canadian twist?

Everything that Shoresh does is rooted in a local, Toronto context. For example, The Kavanah Garden is located in suburban Toronto. The programming, community and what we grow are all rooted in that region. Another example is the emphasis on local culture, politics and ecology in most of the sessions at the Food Conference. One of our sessions is called Bagels, Blueberry Buns and Baby Beef: What Makes Toronto's Food Culture Unique?

What inspired you to hold the Food Conference?*

As a past staff, volunteer and participant of Hazon food conferences, I've seen how people are inspired by them. A lot of the work that Shoresh has been doing has been agriculturally based, in spring and summer, and winter is a quiet time. It seemed like a good reason and opportunity to increase winter programming, with an academic component supported by the University of Toronto.

What are you most excited for during the Food Conference?

I'm really excited to see how the Toronto community responds to the Food Conference, because I only know how people respond in relation to the United States. We've gotten great feedback so far and the Conference is more than half-full. We have partnered with two great organizations (The JCC and The University of Toronto) and together, we are reaching out to new members of the community that have no previous experience with Shoresh. I'm also excited for the various sessions, especially a session that discusses the local Jewish initiatives to decriminalize backyard chickens in Toronto. The session is called **Contrabirds: Illegal Chickens in Toronto**. I'm also excited to meet the participants and grow Shoresh's community.

What can other cities learn from Toronto if they want to organize similar events?

Generally, we take a permaculture approach: we look at local resources, see what our needs are, what we have, and go from there. Then, start small, local and focused and keep costs down, especially by starting with a one-day program. We're supporting local community by having local presenters and keeping the conference Toronto-focused. All of our presenters are local, many from the University of Toronto. We take a simpler, more local, grassroots approach that makes the conference easier to manage.

Lastly, what's your favorite Toronto food?

There's a bagel war between Toronto and Montreal, and even sometimes New York gets thrown in, and I love Toronto bagels. They have soft insides and crunchy outsides. This year I have a new local favorite vegetable which I have been growing at local school gardens: turnips. They remind me of what my ancestors must have eaten in Eastern Europe.

[The Shoresh Food Conference](#) is Sunday, February 5, 2012 at the [Miles Nadal JCC](#). For more information about registration and the Food Conference in general, [click here](#).

Alyssa Berkowitz is a senior in the Joint Program between Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary and is the Food Programs Intern at Hazon.