Returning to the Garden

The New Jewish Devotion to Farming

by CHANA WIDAWSKI

Strawberry popcorn, heirloom carrots, gorgeous beets and Yiddish conversation, peace-building and spiritual connections? The new Jewish farms feature a wonderful cross-fertilization of ecology and social justice, with deep Jewish roots. A new crop of Jewish farmers is planting seeds of all sorts, building on an often-forgotten piece of Jewish agrarian history in North America. Jewish women in particular are tending to this fertile ground, for reasons both practical and ideological.

When Risa Cooper, 31, of Toronto ran out of money on her cross-Canada trip in 2001, she found herself enjoying a free meal at a local church. It was a vegan meal accompanied by a mini-sermon on Christianity and vegetarianism. "It was the first time I'd ever heard someone discuss explicitly the connection between religion and spirituality, which made me think about the Judaism I was immersed in yet didn't feel fully connected to." Cooper then wrote her thesis on religious veganism and earned a master's degree in contemporary Jewish environmental ethics; she is now working with a team growing strawberry corn and other colorful heirloom crops at the Kavanah Garden, a program of Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs in Toronto, where she is executive director. Founded as Torat HaTeva ("The Torah of Nature") in 2002, Shoresh was revived four years ago by Cooper and fellow Canadians she'd met as a participant in Jewish farming programs in the U.S.

One of these is Adamah, a program of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. Shayna Ashley Judelman, 28, found Adamah when she was exploring agriculture as a mode of sustainable development. "All I wanted to do was get my hands in the soil. When I finished my studies at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, I realized I was only looking at these issues academically. I traveled to places like Cuba and India—and everywhere I went, I sought out the farms. At Adamah, I was blown away by the vibrant community of earth-appreciating souls who were connecting with Jewish roots, values and traditions while they farmed. I had always struggled to find a way to connect to my heritage. Adamah became the gateway to a Jewish community I felt at home in." Today, in Israel, Judelman stares out in awe at valleys tilled meticulously by generations of Palestinian farmers; she and her husband, Shaul, are working toward her vision of Jews and Palestinians brought together through mutual love of the land. Along with their neighbor Ziad, they are pioneering Heaven's Field Farm, near Bethlehem.

Technology has made aspects of farming today easier than it was for Shayna's and Ziad's ancestors, but it's still terrifically hard work. "No matter how grueling it might be to wake at dawn each day, crawl on the ground and pull rows and rows of weeds in the beating sun, I know my calling is in the fields," says Mira Schwartz, 26. Inspired as a student at Skidmore College by a 75-day program through National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Schwartz began to take a closer look at where our food comes from, and she's been growing her own ever since. She lived and worked for a time at Isabella Freedman Retreat Center, and now she and her boyfriend, Dakota, are honing their agricultural skills working at Chubby Bunny Farm nearby. "We wanted a whole season of full agriculture production before doing it on our own on my parents' property in upstate New York and wanted to be near the Jewish community and friends we made at Adamah. … The way Jewish holidays are celebrated and agriculturally related there feels fulfilling in ways I had never experienced."

The intentional community created at Isabella Freedman through Adamah, the Teva Learning Center and other programs that the center hosts, offers hands-on activities like planting and pickling, political discussions on food justice, text studies and holiday celebrations as a way to explore Jewish values and sustainable agriculture. "It was at Adamah where I understood that while my expression is agrarian, my roots are Jewish," Schwartz said. At Isabella Freedman, holiday celebrations like Sukkahfest and Tree b'Earthday (for Tu B'Shvat) honor all streams of Jewish practice and are filled with song, dance, learning and meals made from produce grown right on the Adamah farm. "Sukkahfest is always a sell-out. Last year we had close to 180 participants," said Laura Chekow, registrar for the center. People from surrounding cities and those who live, work and farm at the center all flock to these holiday retreats. "I loved being

An Ethical Lunch

by LINCOLN SCHNUR FISHMAN

My wife and I have a 45-acre farm with a few plowed acres for vegetables, about 15 acres of pasture, and the rest in woods, where we raise cows for milk and meat, pigs, goats, chickens, and all kinds of vegetables. Our job is to kill living things to feed humans. Unless you can photosynthesize, you (or someone, somewhere) have to kill everything you eat.

The most basic relationship between you and whatever you eat is always going to be the same: it dies so you can keep living. What you eat—animal or vegetable—obscures the real ethical question: what effect does your lunch have on the rest of the world? A vegetarian who eats a head of lettuce from a big, nameless farm somewhere has a lot of thinking to do. Chances are that lettuce was harvested and packaged by someone who was grossly underpaid. It was shipped—refrigerated—thousands of miles. It was probably grown in a field where erosion is destroying the productivity of that field for future generations, and where fertilizer runoff pollutes all the water downstream from it.

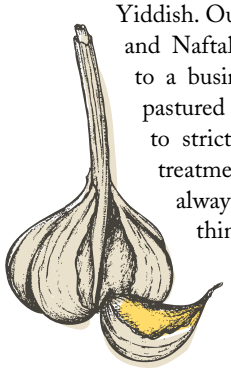
The ethical goal in eating is to avoid screwing over third parties—whether farm workers, future humans, or marine life. At the moment, this goal is unattainable for most Americans. When you stop and think about it, it's nearly impossible to get an ethical lunch. But people are increasingly asking to at least be given an ethical choice, and we feel part of a group of farmers trying to provide those options. ■

"I love that the work not only involves feeding people, but there's an educational piece too. We share the stories of where the food comes from, recipes and more. My grandfather thinks it's hilarious that his granddaughter is selling meat."

able to learn farming from incredibly knowledgeable and talented women. Working as an apprentice with Janna Berger, the Adamah farm manager, was invaluable. It was awesome to work with her to set up systems for irrigation and layout which then got used." Schwartz and Dakota plan to start their own farm on her family's land in upstate New York, based on the community supported agriculture (CSA) model, whereby people who don't themselves grow the food purchase shares in a farm, and are repaid by receiving fresh produce each week or so. Chubby Bunny Farm, for example, supplies the Hazon CSA of White Plains, New York, a cross-denominational partnership of six local synagogues. One week this past August, members of this CSA put on their tables tomatoes, swiss chard, beets, leeks, sweet corn, summer squash, garlic, fennel and zucchini, all grown by Schwartz and her companions.

Like the crops they plant, the crop of Jewish farmers is diverse. In Goshen, New York, alongside the beets, garlic and potatoes, a new community of Yiddish speakers is taking root. Naftali Schaechter Ejdelman, 27, co-founded Yiddish Farm in 2010 to meld his love of farming with his passion to preserve Yiddish language and culture. The seven participants in this past summer's educational program ranged in age from 19 to 81, including Yiddish speakers from Hasidic backgrounds, heritage speakers—those who come from homes where parents or grandparents spoke Yiddishs—and students eager to learn for ideological or linguistic reasons. From an illustrious family of Yiddishists, Ejdelman and his siblings and cousins grew up speaking Yiddish at home and with relatives. At the farm, strict guidelines ensure only Yiddish is spoken. "Unlike other Jewish farm programs, very few women participate in Yiddish Farm," Ejdelman noted. "I suspect that the Yiddish-speaking world is imbalanced. Many of our participants come from Hasidic backgrounds, and whether a woman is still part of the Hasidic community or if she's left it, she very often is busy raising children. Participants in Adamah or other programs are often at a different stage of life—not yet married with more time flexibility for exploring their interests, but women from this community are often married by age 20."

The typical Jewish farmer today is much more likely to have roots in 1960s back-to-the-land ideology than in Hasidism or Yiddish. Out of the fields and back in New York City, Anna and Naftali Hanau have brought their farming ideology to a business venture, Grow and Behold Foods, selling pastured meats raised on small family-run farms adhering to strict standards of kashrut, animal welfare, worker treatment and sustainable agriculture. "Naftali and I always thought we'd start a farm but when we began thinking about the costs of Jewish day school for kids and the challenge of finding a place to run an organic farm in walking distance to synagogues, our thoughts kept evolving. Naftali had already trained to be a *shokhet* (Jewish ritual slaughterer/butcher) so we could have kosher meat we felt good about while living in a remote area—and then we started realizing there were very few options in general for kosher, sustainably produced meats." Grow and Behold will ship its meats just about anywhere but most customers are in the Northeast. "Many had previously been vegetarians, not because they wanted to completely refrain from meat, rather because they had issues with the kind of kosher meat that was available," Anna said. "I love that the work not only involves feeding people, but there's an educational piece too. We share the stories of where the food comes from, recipes and more." Anna, 30, said her grandfather "thinks it's hilarious that his granddaughter is selling meat. He used to work for a company that produced sliced deli meat."



Young Jews farming may seem unusual to some, but these farmers are part of a Jewish agricultural renaissance. At programs like Adamah, Kayam Farm near Baltimore, Maryland, or Kavanah Garden, in Toronto, participants study liturgy and Bible stories as the earliest indicators of Jews working and living harmoniously with the land and natural world. *Mishnaic* laws (oral Torah) detail practices like *pe'ah*, leaving the corners of one's fields for those in need; *bikkurim*, offering G-d one's first fruits during the holiday of Shavuot; *shemitah*, giving the land a sabbatical; and *orlah*, not eating the fruit from trees that are less than three years old.

In modern times there was a major Jewish agricultural movement in the United States, beginning in the 1880s, as young and idealistic Jews fleeing persecution in Russia and Europe established the secular and communal Am Olam movement as a way to rebuild their lives and community through farming colonies. Many lasted only a few seasons, because of inexperience or other obstacles. Around the same time German Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice De Hirsch funded the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Assistance Society. It provided loans and technical assistance to thousands of individual Jewish immigrants to settle their families on abandoned farms or on unoccupied land, among them Lilith editor Susan Weidman Schneider's great-grandparents, who farmed from 1882 to 1885 on the icy Canadian prairie. The Jewish Farmer magazine,

founded in 1908, lasted 50 years. A current blog, using the same name, has been started by Scott Hertzberg, who farms vegetables with his wife, Tanya, in southern Maryland. He indicated that, at its peak right after the Second World War the Jewish farm population of America numbered about 100,000 people in 25,000 families. Additional farms started in the 1940s and 50s, particularly in the Catskills and southern New Jersey, were founded by newly immigrated Holocaust survivors.

Naftali Ejdelman candidly points out that Yiddish Farm is not a new concept. "My grandfather helped to found an agricultural community in New Jersey, but he wasn't a good farmer, he was a dreamer. What I'm doing now is dedicated to my grandfather's dream. If he was alive, I know he would move to Goshen to be at Yiddish Farm."

While Shayna Judelman picks herbs she is reminded, she said, of her own grandfather selling vegetables in Toronto's Kensington

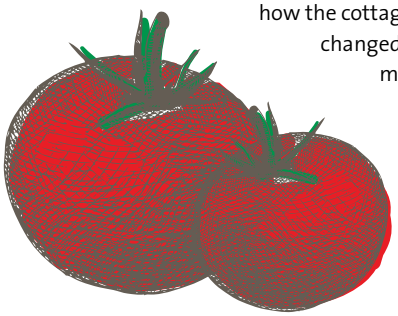
Earth Mamas *by* ALISHA KAPLAN

People are often surprised when I mention that my mom has a farm outside of Toronto. "Has it been in your family for a long time?" they ask. "What do you grow?"

"Well," I say, sheepishly. "We don't actually farm anything yet. It's more like a cottage." But it isn't, really. Before the farm, we did have a cottage, up on Sparrow Lake in Muskoka, Ontario. It used to be a summer camp and we shared one of the old bunks with my aunt and uncle and first cousins. Even just my family was a tight squeeze—my brothers and I would nestle next to Grandma in one of the two bedrooms.

Our other relatives stayed in similar cabins around the lake. At some point, they started building large cottages, with air conditioning and big-screen TVs. Motorboats replaced canoes, their engines ripping through the quiet. Some cousins built swimming pools. Some brought up hired help to do the cooking.

When my grandmother was diagnosed with colon cancer, she reminisced about the simpler time at the cottage, sitting on the porch with a grandchild on her knee, looking out onto Sparrow Lake, listening to the loons and the whistle of the train at dusk. Then she would remark, sadly, on how the cottage had changed. My mom promised herself that if Grandma got through surgery, she was going to find a place where she could relive her memories of the cottage and be healed by them.



My grandmother lives in memories. She's the great storyteller in our family, always talking about the old country, Auschwitz, the D.P. camp in Italy, her arrival in Canada after the war. Her reminiscences about the carefree days at the cottage differ from the others because they aren't stories of suffering. Even with cramped space and mosquito bites, the cottage was pure pleasure. Some say that when you're suffering it helps to visualize a happy, peaceful place. I guess that's what Grandma was doing, without realizing it.

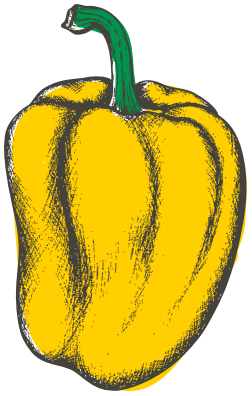
She did get through the surgery. And Mom remembered her promise. After taking Grandma to her first chemotherapy treatment, she drove out to the country to meet with a real estate agent. The first property she saw was a 15-acre plot of land in County Wellington, an hour outside of Toronto. Mom fell in love with the big hill, the pond, the stone wall, the horse barn. The next day the place was ours.

When Grandma was well into chemotherapy, Mom took her out to the farm and settled her in an easy chair on the wraparound porch, with its view of the pond, covered her with a blanket and went inside to make her tea. By the time she returned, Grandma was fast asleep; an hour later she awoke, rejuvenated.

I was a teenager then, resistant to nearly all change, and not happy about selling the cottage and buying a farm. I thought it was a crazy idea—no lake, no forest, no cousins next door. Now I understand my mother's vision. She was looking for a sanctuary for Grandma, but she also saw more. In the farm my mom realized an opportunity to preserve a piece of beauty and sustenance and history in the changing Canadian landscape.

We've discovered that we're not the only Jews who long for country life. So we're working with Shoresh, a Jewish environmental organization, to create a rural center for sustainable, land-based Judaism in Southern Ontario. Just before developers could snatch it up, my mom bought the cattle farm next door: 99 acres of lush farmland owned by an old-timer fourth-generation farmer named Fred Cox. When Farmer Cox first met our group, led by Shoresh's Risa Alyson Cooper and Sabrina Malach, he laughed at the idea of women running a farm. He'd never believe how many other Jewish women are already deeply involved in the nurturing and regenerative experience of farming.

We're coming to understand what power the land holds. When Grandma comes out to the farm, she has her tradition: Mom covers her with a blanket on the porch, goes in to make tea, and comes out to find Grandma sleeping soundly, as she never can in the city. "We're earth mamas," my mother laughs. ■



Tributes to ancestors who farmed are commonplace for this crop of Jewish farmers. Some were founders of idealistic agricultural communities; others came to farming out of immigrant necessity.

Market from the back of a horse-drawn cart. In some cases the work is literally passed down from generation to generation. "It is amazing to see and feel firsthand an intense love and connection the Palestinian women have to their particular land. I never cease to be impressed by how clear it is that folks are sharing from generation to generation the traditional knowledge of how to till a specific property. It seems like the savtas (Jewish grandmothers) had a different experience and instead know how to farm different types of lands all over the Middle East as a result of being dispersed in and farming in varied areas."

Tributes to ancestors who farmed are commonplace. Guelph, Ontario is soon to be home to Bela Farm, a rural center for sustainable land-based Judaism [see sidebar]. Modeled on Adamah, Kayam Farm, and Eden Village, a Jewish organic farm camp in Putnam Valley, New York, Bela, named for Rochelle Rubinstein's father, will be the largest Jewish educational farm in North America, said Cooper.

Some of today's Jewish farm leaders are focused on ecology education, community building and Jewish values; others are looking to achieve the greatest crop yield in order to maximize their reach, like Mira Schwartz's CSA, or to create viable business ventures aligned with their values, like Grow and Behold. At Kayam Farm's Summer Kollel program, participants farm in the morning and do intensive Jewish study in the afternoon, exploring questions such as: How does farming inform my relationship with the world? With Judaism? With my community? With God? With myself? To build knowledge around practical applications, participants learn from experts on topics of food systems and food justice. Group time, community building and reflection are also critical components of Kayam programs.

One perhaps unanticipated by-product of the new Jewish farming movement is that when the right soil and souls come together, matches can be made. Mira met Dakota. Shayna met Shaul. Anna met Naftali—and ultimately each couple is now working towards their visions and dreams together. Inspired by such stories, an unconventional form of speed dating has been popping up in farms across the country. At one event in Idaho, Earthly Delights Farm hosted a heterosexual speed dating event where women were shown the difference between weeds and veggies and instructed to pass the info along to men who rotated from each garden bed every three minutes. While doing the farm's weeding, the singles worked together to find the best of the crop.

It is worth pondering, as we nibble our locally produced goat cheese, sautée our freshly harvested kale and make borscht from CSA beets, what the future of Jewish farming will look like. How will Jews face the challenges of isolation in rural farming areas without other Jews? Will towns like Goshen, New York, become home to a whole community of Yiddish speakers growing fruits and vegetables, operating a dairy and slaughtering meat? Will farming become further legitimized, with parents as proud and supportive as Mira Schwartz's lending their own land towards the development of a farm? Will the farms become self-sustaining businesses? Or will Jewish farming be about the power of using farming and the natural world as the ultimate classroom for shaping educational, community-building and identity-shaping goals? ■

Chana Widawski, a social worker, writer and consultant, is a bicycle commuter who chairs her block association and stewards her local park. She works with survivors of abuse and violence and leads educational travel programs around the globe.