Jewish views on food and ethics

Toronto's Shoresh runs interfaith and other programs to solve agricultural challenges.

VICKY TOBIANAH

For some people, kosher might mean a label on a box or can, a prerequisite before they bring it into their home. For others, it might also mean the food was produced free of pesticides and chemicals, or that animals were treated humanely before being killed. Redefining kosher – and opening a discussion on what constitutes kosher and how Judaism plays into the local, sustainable food movement – was the theme of a recent conference hosted by Shoresh, Toronto's Jewish environmental group.

"Can we call something kosher if animals were raised in conditions of incredible suffering or if the workers who prepared it were not paid fairly?" asked Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of Shoresh, which was established in 2002. "Our community has been exploring the nature of our relationship with food for 3,000 years and today we're bringing this conversation forward," she said to about 125 academics, students, rabbis, chefs, farmers, food lovers and community activists who attended the annual conference, which was held this year on Jan. 27 at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre in Toronto.

But eating local and organic can be difficult for Jews, she admitted. After all, to be certified under COR – the Kashruth Council of Canada – you must adhere to strict requirements, and pay a substantial fee. That usually isn't feasible for small-scale, artisanal farmers who are scattered all over Ontario, she argued. "A hundred years ago, the women in our kitchens were in charge [of making sure food was kosher]," said Cooper, pointing out that women knew their local butcher, milkman and farmer, and knew who to trust with kashrut. "But now, COR oversees practices of food providers, most of whom are not accessible to our community. How can we bring small-scale artisanal food producers into a global certification system?"

CARA GOLD

From left: Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of Shoresh; Sharoni Siboney, manager, Jewish life department, Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre; and Sabrina Malach, director of community outreach, Shoresh.

That's also the challenge that Fahim Alwan faced when he became the first organic, halal food provider in Ontario. His goal: following the strict Muslim dietary laws while also ensuring that the animals he uses are allowed to roam freely, breathe fresh air, and are not being fed any growth hormones – this requires him to work long days, seven days a week. As with kashrut, the cost of "eating ethically" is more expensive when you add in halal restrictions.

For Alwan, providing "ethical food," as he puts it, is worth it. "You need commitment from people willing to go that path and pay the prices," he said at the conference.

Balancing what's ethical – including the treatment of the animal – with religious requirements is a challenge for both communities.

"The question is, 'Can communities who are cousins in faith sit down and work together and learn from one another and support one another?'" said Selma Djukic, a halal specialist, at the conference.

The Toronto community is not the first one to raise the idea of interfaith cooperation in this area. Inter-cultural cooperation on issues concerning food, natural resources and land has existed in Israel since its establishment, York University Prof. Stuart Schoenfeld told conference participants. Israel and its neighbors share a common ecological region, so they all face similar issues, such as climate change, growing populations and limited resources. To deal with these challenges, they need to work with each other across borders, said Schoenfeld. He pointed out that Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians all learn together at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in Israel, preparing the future leaders of these populations with the tools to cooperatively solve the region's current and future challenges.

"There are people taking initiative to create relationships across social, political and ideological boundaries," said Schoenfeld. "The core mission is to create a generation of environmental professionals who understand their professional challenges in regional terms, not just in global terms."

Responsible and ethical agriculture is not a new challenge, and Shoresh takes it names from the Hebrew word *shoresh*, which means roots, highlighting the fact that sustainability is rooted in Jewish tradition. Since biblical times, Judaism, for instance, has been concerned about preserving the environment and building sustainable communities, said Cooper. When the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel, each tribe received a portion of the land, she explained. The Torah stipulated that surrounding the Levite cities should lie a *migrash*, which Cooper compared to a "green belt," a strip of land devoted to farming, agricultural and natural beautification rather than for urban development. That's still something you can see today, Darcy Higgins, founder of Food Forward, a Toronto-based organization that wants to improve local food policies, said at the conference.

"We have to start containing the sprawl, the urban development of the GTA [Greater Toronto Area]," he said, noting that this is why the Ontario government established the Green Belt Act in 2005. "The best farm land in Canada used to be right here where we're sitting," he continued. "If we want to keep it for future food production, we have to preserve this area." Ontario's act is similar to the Agricultural and Land Reserve established in British Columbia in 1974, which reserves five percent of the province for agricultural purposes.

According to Cooper, sustainable living is already a component of a healthy Jewish life, and the question now is how to balance Jewish traditions and dietary laws with new ways of preserving the land on which we live. At the conference, snacks were provided from a food company that uses only kosher-certified ingredients – but in a kitchen that doesn't have a kosher certification. It was up to the conference's diverse participants – who ranged in age, profession, socioeconomic status and religious observance – to decide if this was kosher enough for them.

When Shoresh opens Bella Farm in 2016, "a centre for sustainable land-based Judaism," as Cooper described it, they hope to offer local, organic, kosher products. "Our mission is to build a more connected, sustainable Jewish community," she said.

Already, Shoresh runs food-focused interfaith programming to discuss common challenges and plan learning events on *shechitah* (the act of ritual slaughter) – without doing it firsthand, of course. This year, they're focusing on learning about *Shemitah*, the centuries-old Jewish practice of refraining from all work on the land of Israel every seven years. In 2009, they opened Kavanah Garden, an organic, educational garden where they have 100 varieties of organic fruits and vegetables, a Havdalah spice garden, an outdoor kitchen and a nature trail. About 80 percent of the food Shoresh grows there is donated to Ve'Ahavta, which services the less fortunate in Toronto.

For Cooper, respecting and preserving the environment is as much a part of Judaism as any dietary or religious practice. "We're bringing together diverse community members, modeling new ways of approaching longstanding Jewish and global concerns," she said.

Vicky Tobianah *is a freelance writer and editor based in Toronto and a recent McGill University graduate. Connect with her on Twitter, @vicktob, or by e-mail to vtobianah@gmail.com.*