

ENVIRONMENTALISM / JEWS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE CARE OF THE PLANET

Jewish beekeepers in Toronto offer Rosh Hashanah sweetness by the jar

Honey makers at the Shoresh environmental project wax profound about Judaism and keeping the earth healthy as they distribute natural honey for the New Year's rituals

By **DANA WACHTER** | September 18, 2017, 10:05 pm



Shoresh has about 30 hives from which they pull honey to sell to the Jewish community. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

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HILLSBURGH, Ontario — The cloudless mid-September day is warmer than much of the summer has been in Ontario, Canada. It's quiet, except for birds chirping, bugs screeching and bees buzzing.

Next to a large baby blue farm house in rural Hillsburgh, Ontario, a baby blue pickup truck sits beside the honey house door. Inside, a pair of workers are busy cleaning up after four straight days of harvesting honey.

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These beekeepers are from Toronto's environmental education group, [Shoresh](#). Although they anticipate they could sell up to 3,000 jars of honey at their annual Rosh Hashanah markets, ahead of this new year they only managed to fill 1,200.

"It's rained all summer so [the bees] won't leave the hive if it's raining, and also the flowers produce less nectar when it's raining. So, our yields were actually lower than we thought," says one of the harvesters, Shoresh director of engagement Sabrina Malach.

As the primary beekeeper, Malach says even with a tough season, she and her team are thankful the bees are healthy and that there is honey to share with Toronto's Jewish community.

"We're about to go into Rosh Hashanah, and we can't have honey without bees. We can't have apples or honey without bees. So we realize, wow, this is a great example of how to show why as Jews we have a responsibility to take care of the planet. Not only for our own rituals, but in order to maintain our traditions, we need to have a healthy ecosystem," said Malach.



It's all about providing for the bees, Malach says; the honey is a pleasant byproduct of protecting their habitat.

With a master's degree in environmental studies from York University, Malach studied how people in New York, San Francisco and Toronto are protecting bees. Her interest in bees matched up with the direction Shoresh's founder Risa Alyson Cooper wanted, linking Jewish tradition and ritual to the environment.

“We believe that as Jews, we have a responsibility to keep the planet functioning so we can have a world for future generations,” says Malach.



This machine helps Shores volunteers collect honey straight from the bees. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Without bees, the food system wouldn't exist. Bees and plants are completely reliant on each other, Malach explains. Nectar from flowers feeds the bees, and when bees fly from plant to plant, they spread pollen, which allows flowers to make more flowers and seeds. This process of pollination, Malach says, is responsible for more than 90 of the crop varieties people eat.

Bee keeping isn't as simple as it used to be, Malach says. She described farmers of days gone by just putting hives out for bees to do their thing before a fall harvest. Now, she says, they have to deal with colony collapse disorder, new diseases or mites, plus drastic weather changes which she attributes to climate change. Last year, Malach says Ontario saw a drought. This year, more rain lessened their honey yield.



Shoresh director of engagement Sabrina Malach says that bees are responsible for more than 90 crop varieties that people eat today. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Her mission has become to create a refuge where the bees can thrive, and this has become possible, she says, with help from Toronto's Jewish community.

Selling and educating the community

Shoresh sells a large stock of pre-ordered honey before heading to the open markets, proving that the Toronto Jewish community loves the stuff. Malach says it "just makes sense" that Jewish beekeepers have a sanctuary to take care of healthy bees and sell honey.

As Jewish environmentalists, Shoresh's goal is to use experiential education to introduce the community to the idea that Jews "have a deep connection to earth, land [and] sustainability."

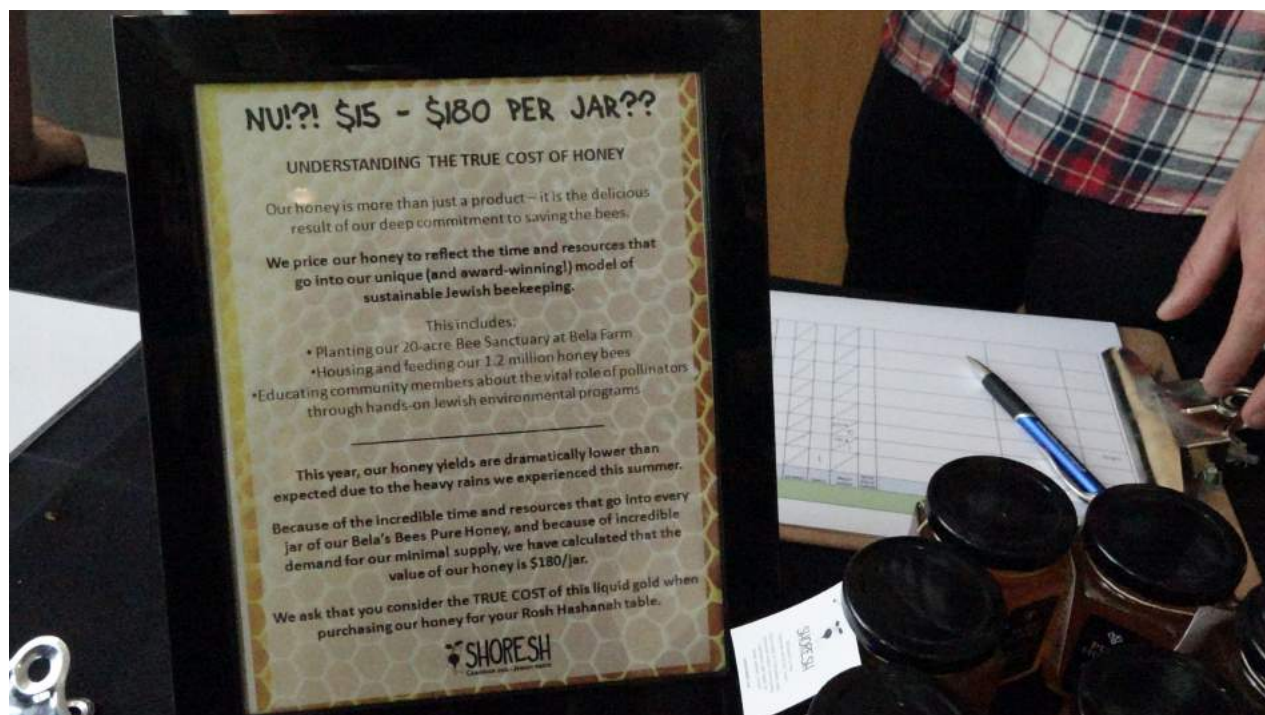


Shoresh has about 30 hives from which they pull honey to sell to the Jewish community. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Throughout the year, they run school programs, community gardens throughout Toronto, and host field trips. They partner with Jewish organizations like Toronto's Jewish Family and Child, and Bernard Batel, working with seniors and at-risk community members, too.

The week leading up to Rosh Hashanah, Shoresh set up markets at Jewish community centers in Vaughn, midtown Toronto and downtown Toronto to sell their honey jars, honeycomb and beeswax Shabbat candles.

Along with the products for sale, Cooper and Malach get into conversations with those who stop by, explaining the honey production and harvest process.



The true cost of Shoresh honey involves the work of volunteers and staff, plus the cost of the bees themselves. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

With all sales going directly to funding the bee keeping and other Shoresh programming, jars are listed at \$15 to \$180 Canadian dollars. This leads customers to ask why — and as Shoresh executive director Cooper explains to customer Liane Greenberg, Shoresh calculated the true cost of a bee making honey to be about \$180.

“It’s not just the work it takes to harvest the honey,” says Cooper, “but it’s all the work that we do to take care of the bees.”

This involves planting the wildflowers to provide bees with food and a safe habitat, running education programs throughout the year so that people understand how important bees are to the food and ecosystems, as well as the work the bees do.

Shoresh has 1.2 million honeybees, and each honeybee produces a 12th of a teaspoon of honey. Customers get to decide how much they donate above their \$15 purchase for the jar.



Shoresh director of engagement Sabrina Malach says that each bee makes about 1/12 of a teaspoon of honey in their lifetime. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Greenberg says she had heard that the number of bees has been on the decline, but she hadn't heard about Shoresh before an e-mail circulated her office about the honey sale in the front lobby of Toronto's Lipa Green Jewish Centre.

"I like the idea that it's not for-profit, and that they're educating kids," Greenberg says, "and how it's all linked to a sweet new year."



Shoresh executive director Risa Cooper, right, and director of engagement Sabrina Malach chat while cleaning up after the honey harvest. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Next to the Shoresh booth, Toronto's Jewish Family and Child Services sells tea leaves on behalf of the [Pearl Project](#), which helps former youth in care transition to independence. Shoresh partners with the program to teach the 18-25-year-olds how to prepare the earth and soil, plant, grow and dry the tea, as they learn to run their own business.

One of the coordinators, Miriam, explains that Malach helped them through their entire process, from finding plots of land in Toronto, to planting them, taking care of them and being introduced to different types of plants.

‘Community supported’ bee keeping

Shoresh has based its bee keeping at Bela Farm in Hillsburgh, Ontario, for the last four years. They’ve been on the land for five years, creating a habitat perfect for the bees with its owner, Rachelle Rubenstein, a Jewish artist from Toronto. Malach says she has opened her space to Jewish artists and gardeners who want to use the land sustainably.



Shoresh is designing 20 acres at Bela Farm to become a bee sanctuary. Four acres are already designed and in use. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

The first 12 hives sit together in one area near the farmhouse, and bees from another 18 hives further down the property share the volunteer-planted wildflower field between them. No chemicals are used on the property as Shoresh creates a 20-acre sanctuary, four of which have already been designed and bees fly freely there.

They do it all “in community,” says Malach. Volunteers helped her plant the seeds and tend to the wildflowers; they make the boxes and frames for hives in the spring, tend to the bees during the summer and harvest the honey together to sell just before Rosh Hashanah.

“There are a lot of hands and wings that have brought that honey to those jars,” said Malach, which is necessary since Shoresh’s team is made up of just a handful of people.



Volunteers at Shorash package honey into these jars to sell to Toronto's Jewish community. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Their “community supported bee keeping initiative” was even featured in the [Slingshot](#) guide for innovating projects throughout North American Jewish communities.

They see strong support from their partners and community members in and near Toronto, but while there are many Jewish environmental organizations throughout North America, Malach says Shorash is the only in Canada.

“I don’t know if that’s because there’s more Jews in the States, or because they’re more open to innovation, or they’re more concerned about the environment,” says Malach. “I’m not really sure.”



Shoresh executive director Risa Cooper explains the work the bees do to make the honey. Educating the community is a focus of honey sales. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

Shoresh is part of an umbrella network, [JOFE](#), the Jewish Outdoor Food Farming and Environmental Education, which, just like Shoresh, works to link the natural world to Judaism through hands on experiences. It's also part of New York-based, Hazon, for which Malach used to work.

Jewish farming

The calendar, in terms of seasons changing, has always impacted farmers across the globe, but for Jewish farmers, the calendar has even more meaning. Shoresh staff won't work (or farm) on Shabbat, and the holidays set certain limitations on when certain aspects, like harvesting, need to be finished.

Malach says if Rosh Hashanah had come in October this year, they would have had at least 2,000 jars of honey, because the bees would have had an extra few weeks to pollinate. Goldenrod flowers, which are the bees' go-to source of nectar this time of year, were not even in full bloom when volunteers harvested honey.

Malach says even though the bees are making more honey, they won't harvest again, since it takes so much time and energy from staff and volunteers.



Shoresh turns beeswax into shabbat candles to sell to Toronto's Jewish community. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

"It gives us a sense of order, somehow, even though there's constraints to it. We have boundaries that we follow, which I appreciate," says Malach.

She notes that there's a Jewish food movement that is looking into how Jewish traditions are based on agricultural realities. In North America and Western Europe, apple season kicks off just in time for Rosh Hashanah, too. For Passover, farmers have to hope lambs are born in time to bring a shank bone to the seder plate.

Malach says wax is harder to come by since four pounds of honey are required to make one pound of wax. But it also contributes to what they offer for Jewish rituals. Along with the honey, Shoresh sells beeswax candles for Shabbat.



Shoresh estimates that 1.2 million bees live and work on the 20 acre sanctuary they're building. (Dana Wachter/Times of Israel)

“We try to not waste anything,” says Malach. “This is all the wax we melt down with the help of the sun, and eventually we’ll turn that into candles.”

Using every part respects the bees and the role they play.

Malach points to Torah teachings that every creature has a purpose. “I’m not particularly religious,” says Malach, “but there is all this stuff written in text that basically commands us not to destroy the world, and it’s explicit.

“We’re just taking that text and trying to walk the walk, and trying to mobilize the community at the same time,” she said.

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