

Shoresh: Get Your Hands Dirty and Say “Wow!”

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If you happen to be wandering around the Kensington Market neighborhood of downtown Toronto, you might never know what you’re walking past. Amid all the shops, restaurants, and vendors, there’s a hidden oasis, literally right in a backyard.

Bees buzz, vegetables grow, and gardener volunteers gather to tend the backyard garden of Dave Pinkus, a Kensington Market resident since 1927. The space is called Maxie’s Garden, named after Dave’s brother, and the harvest from the garden goes to feed hungry people in the Greater Toronto Area.

Maxie’s Garden is just one of the projects run by an organization called Shoresh, whose tagline is “Canadian soil, Jewish roots.” Shoresh aims to weave together Jewish identity and culture with environmental and social responsibility, all while cultivating a deep, spiritual connection to the earth. As one volunteer for Maxie’s Garden said, “The process of seed to the table is truly divine.”

What is Shoresh?

Shoresh is the Hebrew word for “roots,” so it’s a fitting moniker for an organization that reveres and nurtures roots, both literal and figurative. The group comprises activists who aren’t content to sit on the sidelines. They roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty, tending vegetables, raising bees, and teaching others about the joy and reverence inherent in connecting to the earth while simultaneously helping those in need.

The mission of Shoresh is: “To inspire our community to act as responsible stewards of the earth by nurturing a sense of awe and connection through Jewish experiential education and action.”

What challenges does Shoresh address?

All of Shoresh’s activities are designed to address three specific challenges facing the GTA. Those challenges are:

- Environmental Crisis – Humanity hasn't been a very good steward of the planet to date, and we see the manifestation of our carelessness in the polluted environment, dramatic climate changes, and wildlife populations. We can and should do better.
- Poverty and Hunger – Hunger isn't just something experienced by far off people in remote places. According to Shoresh, GTA food banks see more than a million visits per year, and there are more than 24,000 Toronto Jews living below the poverty line. We can and should take care of our neighbors.
- Jewish disengagement – As younger generations lose touch with shared Jewish heritage and culture, they lose a source of great strength and purpose. We should nurture our roots and produce more good works.

While these challenges aren't unique to Toronto, Shoresh invests time, energy, and other resources to address problems at home, an approach that stands a better chance of producing lasting change.

What exactly does Shoresh do?

Because Shoresh's mission and challenges are daunting, the group articulates four strategic activities to make activism and progress more concrete:

- Nature-based Jewish education – Many young students may never have the opportunity to experience the fundamentally satisfying and productive act of tending the earth and raising vegetables. Shoresh partners with local schools and community organizations to spread the "wow" of nature.
- Tzedakah from the ground up – Justice can be achieved in many ways, and Shoresh folds tzedek into every aspect of their work. From sharing a harvest with hungry community members to teaching stewardship of the land as a way to reach out to vulnerable people, Shoresh grows community awareness as well as produce.
- Environmental action – Shoresh is investing resources in a better future, for the GTA and the planet. They plant trees, nurture bees and other pollinators, and teach others to do the same.
- Sustainable products – From the bees that Shoresh tends, they make and sell sustainable honey for Rosh Hoshanah and beeswax candles for Chanukah. Proceeds support the important work Shoresh does.

Shoresh is the perfect model of giving those in need a hand up, rather than a handout. They focus on sustainability and education as they provide assistance.

The "wow" factor.

Though Shoresh has a number of values they uphold and promote, perhaps the most delightful is "Mah Rabu!," which means "How Great!" The marvels of modern technology, transportation, and travel mean that some children may grow up without ever understanding that tomatoes come from a vine, rather than the grocery store.

“Mah Rabu!” is about cultivating the deep sense of wonder that we miss when we’re separated from the land. Nature is amazing. It cleans our air (if we let it). It gives us food (if we invest a little sweat equity). And it can provide us with an awe-inspiring, satisfying experience (if we take the time to enjoy it).

In an article for [The Covenant Foundation](#), Adina Kay-Gross interviewed Shoresh Executive Director, Risa Alyson Cooper, who gave an example of “Mah Rabu!” She said, “All our honey is harvested by hand. Every year people gather before Rosh Hashanah to work in the honey house, unpacking the honey, putting it into an extractor and spinning it. And then there’s the moment when someone opens up the extractor valve and the liquid honey pours out. There’s a collective breath taken in because it’s so amazing to participate start-to-finish in this natural process.”