



## Of Tu B'Shevat, Chickens, and the Renewal of Jewish Farming and Food-Consciousness

Cantor Marsha Dubrow, Ph. D.  
Spiritual Leader,  
Congregation B'nai Jacob,  
Jersey City, NJ

25 Tevet, 5771 (January 1, 2011)

### Of Tu B'Shevat, Chickens, and the Renewal of Jewish Farming and Food-Consciousness

During the dead of winter in Northeast America, it is refreshing for us Jews to have the occasion of *Tu B'Shevat* which always falls sometime in January or February. Just when we're completely chilled to the bone, feeling somewhat reclusive and hibernating in the warm comfort of our homes and synagogues, preferably looking outside at the snow piles, far away from the whistling winds, enjoying the warmth of a roaring fire, we have the joy of the *Tu B'Shevat* holiday, reminding us of the first fruits in *Eretz Yisrael* and the New Year for Trees. On the occasion of the upcoming *Tu B'Shevat* holiday, which falls in 2011 on January 20th, it seems appropriate in this month's column for me to address the phenomenon of a resurgence of the idea of Jewish farming right here on American soil. More significantly, in the past few years there has been a groundswell of interest (pun intended) in the Jewish community related to agriculture and our spiritual relationship to food.

First, a bit of background history. As New Jerseyans, many of you may be well aware that Jewish immigrants to America did not only settle in our cities, the Lower East Sides of our urban centers. They also made forays into the more agricultural areas and became renowned as chicken farmers. Today one can still take back roads in western Connecticut and Massachusetts and see vestiges of chicken farms that were owned by Jews. Even Baron deHirsch financed an agricultural community of Jewish immigrants in Southfield, Massachusetts and a synagogue now repurposed as a cultural arts center can be visited there. And in South Jersey, the Vineland area was 'the place' when it came to New Jersey Jewish chicken farmers.

Nina Schaefer, writing about a trip taken to South Jersey in recent years by congregants of her Conservative congregation, Temple Beth Am Israel of Penn Valley, PA, mentions the following history: "In 1882 twenty-five settlers responded to the offer by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to build Alliance Colony in Norma, New Jersey. By that summer, each of 70 former shopkeeper families received 15 acres of would-be farmland which they first had to clear of forests. Within one month, they had planted corn. The Aid Society erected large buildings for several families each with provisioned common kitchens until they could build their own homes. Within 20 years, this agricultural colony, starting with no knowledge of agriculture in sandy south-Jersey soil, was the thriving home to 512 Jews who also winter-worked manufacturing cigars and shirts. Alliance also became the training ground for transient immigrants who later settled and chicken-farmed surrounding settlements. By 1900, Alliance touted two synagogues, a brotherhood, a library, a Benevolent

Society, a Lodge, a cemetery, and a Zionist Association."

She goes on to write about other Jewish agricultural communities established over the 20th century - even post-Holocaust - in the Vineland region, and singles out a recounting by Vineland resident Sol Finkelstein, father of a congregant, of his own agricultural experiences: "Sol told (us) about coming home to his \$35 a-month walkup in New York to tell his wife Goldie, that he had bought a parcel of land in Vineland where they could feel free, where they didn't have to speak English, where nobody would tell them what to do or what not to do. He and his brothers bought 10 acres with little houses and borrowed money to buy chicken coops. 'It was like a kibbutz,' he said; 'soon 400 Holocaust refugees came to Vineland to be chicken farmers!' Joe inserted: 'My family was six survivors growing up in three bungalows raising seven cousins always eating in each others houses.' Everyone had an accent. Everyone had a tattoo.

In this Egg Capital of the United States, Sol helped establish the JPFA, the Jewish Poultry Farmers Association, which met weekly on the Alliance beach in Norma where the men played cards and mothers watched their kids play in the sand. He became a political power and got appointed city planner. He arranged for the first Yom HaShoah service, and started a theater with actors from Vilna playing in Yiddish. The kids learned English and grew up there, 80% of them becoming professionals, and almost all moving away.

Sol said life as a chicken farmer was not a great science. You bought baby chicks, you built a fence, you gave heat and water and food. You got up early to feed the chickens, then fed yourself, collected the eggs, washed and graded and packed and sold them. Goldie, he said, was Secretary of Transportation, taking the children 8 miles to school and back. Sol became the first on the eastern seaboard to package frozen eggs for Manischewitz. He recounted the story of his making his rounds to bakeries and restaurants to whom he sold these frozen eggs, including a bakery in Bethlehem, PA where he got to talking to the owner about his having been liberated from Mauthausen in 1945. The baker told Sol to wait a minute. He made a phone call. And then the baker's son came into the bakery. A U.S. Army officer in Patton's 11th Armored Division, the son had liberated Sol from Mauthausen."

Most of the second and third generation of these 'Jewish farmer immigrants' moved on to college, the professions, and comprise today's suburban Jewish baby boomers.

But now let's fast forward to the beginning of the 2010s, a new

decade, and we're surrounded by the new Jewish ecologists, a fancy word perhaps, but in fact, an expression of Jewish continuity, actually, right here on American soil. Today's young Jews, the grandchildren and great-children of that immigrant Jewish farmer generation, are striving to become mindful of the rich resources of Mother Earth. The Isabella Freedman Retreat Center in northwestern Connecticut has a special program called 'Adama,' which, of course, means 'Earth' or 'Soil.' Young people (and old, too) can go there and 'work the soil' as part of a special Jewish agricultural summer experience. It's more fun than a hotel in the Catskills! For more info on their Farm & Learn Programs see <http://isabellafreedman.org/adamah/intro>.

And the big headlines these days in the contemporary Jewish world in the United States and Israel is coming from an organization called Hazon. According to Hazon's mission statement, "Hazon means vision and is America's largest Jewish environmental group. Hazon creates healthy and sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond." They accomplish this in three ways:

1. Creating Transformative Experiences
2. Providing Thought Leadership
3. Supporting the Jewish Environmental Movement in America and in Israel

Founded in 2000 by Nigel Savage, Executive Director, Hazon is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. That means if you like what they are doing, you can send them a check to support their efforts! Check out their website is: [www.hazon.org](http://www.hazon.org). Their recent Food Conference at the Isabella Freedman Center in early December was completely sold out!

On Saturday, January 15th, Shabbat Shira – the Sabbath of Song, when we read in the Torah *Shirat Ha'Yam*, the Song of the Sea, celebrating the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, we will commemorate our own historical exodus from oppression in Europe and Russia with a nod to our American Jewish agricultural ancestors with a celebration of *Tu B'Shevat* and a special *Tu B'Shevat Seder* at Kiddush. *Chag sameach*, keep warm, and a happy 2011 to all!

**Cantor Marsha Dubrow, Ph.D.**

[cantor@bnaijacobjc.org](mailto:cantor@bnaijacobjc.org)

(201) 910-4334