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Food Waste: Making Less of It, Doing More with It

Reducing the amount of waste we produce is a core Jewish environmental value. Even though over-consumption and waste production are relatively recent environmental issues, Judaism has been tackling these problems since Talmudic times. The Jewish concept of *Bal Tashchit*, which prohibits us from being wasteful or unnecessarily destructive, is based on a text from the Torah that urges us to consider our relationship to the natural world.

This section shares some innovative tips on reducing your food waste from the Teva Learning Center. And, when you've cut down all you can and still have leftover food, we cover the basics of composting: how it works, how to start your own pile or work with a facility in your area. Considering the entire food chain—not only what happens before the food gets to our plates, but what happens after it leaves— is a key component of shifting your institution toward sustainable food choices.

Reduce your food waste

When it comes to food waste, most of us have all fallen into the trap of cooking too much food or taking too much on our plate. Before we even discuss how to manage our food waste, it's important to plan on reducing the waste to begin with.

HOW YOUR INSTITUTION CAN REDUCE FOOD WASTE:

- Try not to cook too much food. If you're not sure how much to make for a gathering of 20 or 30 or 50, think about how much food you would serve a family of 4...and then just multiply it.
- Resist the urge to cook way more food than you actually need.
- Encourage people to only take what they will eat by making an announcement before the meal or putting signs on the tables.
- If there are leftovers, find a place to donate them or come up with creative ways to reuse the leftovers for the next day instead of tossing all of it into the garbage.
- Easiest of all, encourage people to take home leftovers if they'll eat them!
- Freeze leftovers and organize a committee to deliver leftovers to families in mourning, people dealing with illness, or homes with a new baby.
- Serve whole fruit rather than cut-up fruit—it's easier to reuse later if it doesn't get eaten.
- Offer people smaller plates. When you don't have too much room on your plate, you're less likely to take more than you can eat.

Lessons from *Psolet* (food waste)

Before the kids' first meal at Teva [a week long Jewish environmental education program for 6th graders], the students are told they can eat as much as they want. They can come back for seconds or thirds even, but they should try not to create too much *psolet*. After each meal, the leftover food is collected in a bucket and ceremoniously weighed. ... The goal is to have the kids produce less *psolet* [each day.] By the last lunch at a session this fall, 45 kids produced less than a pound of waste collectively, a new record.

—http://www.plentymag.com/magazine/monkeying_with_the_message_1.php

***Psolet* on my plate**

OO WA OO WA OO WA OO OO (X2)

Each day I go to breakfast

Put oatmeal in my bowl

Fill up my glass with O.J.

Eat half my jelly roll.

I can't believe I took more than I ate

That's why I have so much *psolet* on my plate.

OO WA OO WA OO WA OO OO

Take two bites of an apple

Drop raisins on the trail

Pull breadcrusts off my sandwich

I say it's cause they're stale.

Each night I ask the stars in the sky (Hey stars)

Why does the food on my plate pile up so high?

OO WA OO WA OO WA OO OO

But now I'm feelin' happy

I'm peaceful and serene

I'm a *ba'al bal tash'chit*

Because my plate is clean!

It's true, I took no more than I ate

That's why you'll never find *psolet* on my plate.

OO WA OO WA OO WA OO OO (X2)

Composting

Composting is a process that helps organic matter to break down into a nutrient-rich, soil-like substance that is used in organic gardening.

Nearly all organic matter (that is, plants, meat, fish, milk, cheese, eggs, flower stems, etc.) can be composted, but the actual items that are accepted at each composting facility may vary. The reason for this? Some materials need a lot of heat to break down, and a given composting site may not have enough volume to generate the necessary heat. Other compost sites are concerned about pests; although meat and fish are perfectly compostable, they also can attract unwanted animals, and so many sites stick to vegetables only.

What are your options? If you have room on your property, starting a composting project can be a great educational opportunity for your community, and an extremely convenient way to compost your leftover food waste. However, you'll need someone (or a committee) to devote some energy to it.

Alternately, you can bring your food waste to a public composting facility. This may be run by your city government or a non-governmental agency. Many community-gardens offer public composting as well.

Resources for Institutional Composting

- The EPA has an extremely comprehensive website of resources on composting, including: what can and can't be composted, regional composting programs, laws and statutes, environmental benefits of composting, the science and technology behind the process, and a list of publications with more information.
- Connecticut State developed a manual for composting in schools.
- The Jewish Farm School has a Jewish composting guide, including instructions on building a compost bin and thoughts on the nature of cycles in Jewish tradition.
- Vermiculture (composting using worms) is a fun and effective way to handle small amounts of compost, a great educational opportunity for a classroom setting.
- If your institution has a CSA, find out if your farmer could pick up your compost.

Composting at synagogue

Altshul, an independent minyan in Park Slope, Brooklyn, has been composting since 2009. About seven or eight Altshul members take turns collecting the compost after kiddush and bringing it to farmers markets and community gardens in Brooklyn and Manhattan that have public compost drop-offs sites.

Education is important – there was a lot of support and interest in the idea, but also some trepidation about what items could actually be composted (the answer: all food items!). To increase awareness and facilitate the process, the group has made a set of reusable signs that they put above three different bins in the kiddush hall: trash, compost, and reusable/rewashable (for the Kiddush cups and plastic utensils that can be used again). The biggest challenge is getting people to commit to actually take the compost—but the group has a strong core of volunteers and is hopeful that as awareness grows, so will the number of people who get involved.

One member of the team, Shuli Passow, told us about her experience:

"Being part of a religious community that includes composting as part of its regular habits is deeply meaningful. It integrates one set of values into another, as my environmentalism finds new expression as a Jewish act, and my Jewish community encompasses a behavior that aligns with my personal commitment to environmental stewardship. This seemingly small practice of composting enables me to feel more full whole in my Judaism and more spiritually rooted in my work to connect with and care for the earth."

Advice from the group's founder, Leah Koenig, on starting your own composting program:

- Research your compost drop-off options. Gardens within walking distance are ideal.
- Talk about the idea with your community to gauge interest, then recruit people to help you. Don't go at it alone!
- If you can't compost right away, at least switch to compostable plates! It's a step in the right direction. This is how Altshul got started.

HOW TO START COMPOSTING AT YOUR INSTITUTION

- Evaluate: how much food waste is produced, and when?
- Find out if your institution would be willing to start composting on-site. Use information from Connecticut State and the Jewish Farm School to explain what will be involved.
- Recruit a committee to help you put your plan into action. You'll need to work on the infrastructure (or on a rotation schedule if you're bringing compost to a facility off-site), and on people's habits, getting them to remember to put food waste in a separate bin from trash.

Recycling

If your town or municipality offers recycling, your community may still need some reminding when it comes to putting bottles, cans, and paper in the right bins. Make sure there are always recycle bins next to trash bins, and make sure they are clearly labeled (this could be a good project for your Hebrew school). At the Hazon office, we label the trash bins with a sign that say "landfill" – a somewhat in-your-face reminder of where our non-recyclable trash ends up.

If your town doesn't recycle, find out if there are organizations that can take your recyclables, and organize a drive in your community.

In addition to making sure your materials get recycled, encourage your institution to purchase products made from recycled materials. Newspapers, paper towels, aluminum, plastic, glass soft drink containers, steel cans, and plastic laundry detergent bottles commonly contain recycled materials. As consumers demand more environmentally sound products, manufacturers will continue to meet that demand by producing high-quality recycled products.

Recycling gets a lot more air time than the other two of the "3 Rs"—yet reducing the waste we generate, and lengthening the shelf life of the products we do use, must become as routine as recycling. Here are some tips for Reducing and Reusing:

- Buy in bulk
- Use pitchers and glasses for water, or a water cooler, rather than individual-sized water bottles

HOW TO INCREASE RECYCLING AT YOUR INSTITUTION

- Find out what the local recycling laws are and evaluate your institution to see if they are in compliance.
- Encourage recycling by making bins available everywhere food is eaten (classrooms, offices, social hall, outside, etc.)
- Engage your community in a poster campaign: the winning entry will be displayed throughout your institution to encourage recycling.
- Organize "drives" for specialty recycling items, such as electronics and batteries, and bring them to a facility in bulk. Make sure to feature your efforts in your institution's newsletter!
- Buy recycled paper, dishes, and napkins.