

# THE JEWISH FARMER

reclaiming a deep-rooted profession >> anna stevenson

**L**awyer? Jewish. Doctor? Jewish. Artsy non-profit social justice changer-of-the world? Jewish. Farmer? Well, as it turns out...also Jewish. In fact, our ancestors were intimate with farming, and their lives (and the religious tradition that grew out of them) were bound with the seasonal rhythms of growing food in ways that contemporary folks can only dream about—until they become farmers, at which point Jewish experience takes on a whole new (old) dimension. What does it feel like to celebrate a harvest? How are Jewish rituals a response to awe at the natural world? Since becoming a Jewish farmer, I've found that Jewish tradition has deep roots.

For instance: Shavuot, the holiday of first fruits.

The spring had been cold and wet. I was getting sick of the stored root crops. The potatoes, beets, and carrots from last season were still good, but getting soft. After a while, their fleshy texture got to me, and the thought of another pyrex dish of roasted root vegetables or a batch of butternut squash soup made me long for summer even more. Something fresh, please. Something green, growing, and alive!

When you grow most of what you eat, you have to wait. Everything comes in its time. Throughout the spring, we'd been tilling, preparing beds, and transplanting plants from the greenhouse to the field. Tiny wisps of onion, no bigger than a blade of grass, were the first to stand bravely against the dark earth. Then came kale, cabbage, beets, and chard—bright, hopeful, and new. By the end of May, I was ready for some leafy greens...maybe with a little sautéed garlic...

But at Adamah, even when the vegetables are ready, we don't immediately dive in. Guided by the Torah's agricultural laws, we offer up our first fruits, placing the first full-sized leaf of kale, or first ripe tomato, on the altar (a sculptural piece of driftwood we hauled out of the Hollenbeck River for this purpose). We do this all season, but when our first harvest coincided with Shavuot, I experienced the holiday in a much more visceral way. Offering your first fruits on an altar—essentially saying, "This is not mine; I do not take credit for it, and I am grateful for it"—isn't quite as drastic as offering up your first-born child, but it really does make you pause. At the moment when we are most likely to pounce on the food on the table and take the harvest for granted, Jewish tradition asks us to pause, acknowledge the miracle, and give thanks.

This happens on a daily basis, too. The *brachot* (food blessings) are an everyday expression of thanks. Since I've begun growing vegetables, I've gained a clearer sense of their purpose. They are about being grateful, but on another level they are a way to translate, or even sanctify, something that is nothing short of a miracle. We work hard to grow vegetables, it's true, but the plants do the actual growing, in a mysterious and unfathomable dance with sunlight and soil to which we are merely handmaidens. When you sit down to a meal of steaming

fresh vegetables that you've watched and helped grow, you need a mechanism to express awe and gratitude in a meaningful way (yet also in a way that lets you eat the food before it gets cold!). Jewish tradition offers a short list of blessings for before and after the meal. Sometimes we use 'traditional' wording; sometimes we speak from our hearts. Either way, it's impossible to think of farming—and eating—without *brachot*.

And it's impossible to think of farming without Shabbat. For one thing, physical labor is exhausting. Even non-Jewish farmers recognize how important it is to take a day to rest. On another level, farming is like creating the world, and when your to-do list is endless, it's comforting to remember that God created the entire world in six days and rested on the seventh, because on the seventh day, creation was perfect. On our farm too, one day a week, creation is perfect. We walk the field with "Shabbat eyes," appreciating the beauty rather than seeing the things that need fixing. This is both a great challenge and a great blessing.

Being a farmer is humbling and inspiring. Being a Jewish farmer is even more. It's a comforting, all-encompassing whole, where the miracles of everyday life find a mode of expression, and the rituals of spiritual practice are grounded in everyday experiences. It's a Judaism far removed from the Hebrew schools

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many of us grew up in, because it is so much closer to the original. Jewish tradition was, at least in part, a response to our ancestors' feelings of awe at the natural world and to their realization of our tenuous hold on the earth, which is subject to the capriciousness of nature. When you're a farmer, you actually experience these things! Farming becomes even more meaningful when I realize that as a Jewish farmer, I've got a vocabulary around which to frame my experience and that this is what all those holidays and prayers are actually about. One mantra of sustainable design is, "you know you're on the right track when your solution to one problem accidentally solves several others" (Michael Corbett). The intersection of farming and Jewish tradition does exactly this by making farming more meaningful and Jewish tradition more accessible. I can't imagine a more "Jewish" job, or a more fulfilling way to live. **PT**



**Anna Stevenson** is the Farm Manager at the Adamah. Future plans include running an organic CSA farm with her family, owning a cow and a large pantry, and feeding people good food.

Photo by Rebecca Zimmerman