

SUSTAINING THE SOUL

Educator Elan Margulies says the environmental movement can create healthier and more sustainable Jewish organizations and communities **By David Stromberg**

ELAN MARGULIES'S path to becoming director of Teva – an educational program near Falls Village, Connecticut, that combines learning about the natural world with a deepening connection to Jewish practices and tradition – began with an “a-ha” moment.

Margulies was then an educator at Teva [Hebrew for nature], participating in the program after studying ecology as an undergraduate at Cornell University – and during the holiday of Hoshana Rabba, the last day of Succot, he noticed how ritual and land worked together.

“You thrash willow branches on the ground asking for water while walking in a circle,” he said of the seven *hakafot* that are performed on that holiday. “It’s a Jewish rain ritual. And willows are trees that grow near water.”

All this took place at the beautiful Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center – a former summer camp called the Jewish Working Girls Vacation Society, established in 1893 to offer Jewish women affordable vacations and named after one of its board members in 1936. The setting was important to Margulies’s insight. He had some memory of doing something similar in grade school – walking around plastic chairs and hitting the branches on concrete. When he did it outside, the meaning of the ritual became evident.

“It was a profound moment,” he recalls. “It was a real prayer: ‘May this land also have water.’”

Teva works to instigate these kinds of moments in children through experiential nature-based Jewish programs – including Shomrei Adamah (Guardians of the Earth), a multi-day program for 5th and 6th grade students coming from a range of Jewish day schools, including pluralistic and non-denominational community day schools. In this program and others, Margulies works with a team of educators, who come from equally varying degrees of Jewish observance and background, including Reform, Conservative, and modern Orthodox.

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“Many of the educators don’t cleanly fit in or identify with any single denominational movement,” explains Margulies. “For most, it’s the first time living within a Jewish community with such a wide spectrum of practice and upbringing – and for many, it can be a vibrant, and celebra-

tory experience bringing together different Jewish paths in a grounded, earth-based setting.”

Margulies works with up to 12 or more educators at a time, leading kids on different kinds of journeys – from day visits to longer stays on the Isabella Freedman grounds.

“It’s something quite beautiful,” says Margulies. “There’s a special *bracha* that you say when there’s something strange or bizarre, so you see kids making *brachot* on crazy insects. Or making grilled cheese sandwiches on a fire in the woods. They see the connections between Judaism and the environment – and this world.”

Margulies, 31, points out that Judaism is a deeply land-based and rooted religion – and Teva works to unpack those traditions. He spends a month training educators ahead of the season, investing in each person not just for the sake of their four-month stint at Teva, but as future leaders of the Jewish environmental movement.

And Teva educators have indeed gone on to found other environmental programs – including Eden Village, an innovative Jewish organic farm camp in New York; Shoresh, a grassroots Jewish environmental organization in southern Ontario; the Pearlstone Center, revamped by Teva-alum Jakir Manela; and Adamah, a farm established on the grounds of Isabella Freedman.

“People are energized by the work they

do here,” explains Margulies, “and then go and do other things.”

Coming and going is not just a physical matter, it’s also a spiritual question, especially for people whose religious tradition deals so much with questions of exile. The duality of land and spirit also gives Teva – as one of the programs in the Jewish environmental movement – a core that resonates with broader national history and identity.

“Personally,” reflects Margulies, “I deeply resonate with what Rabbi Nachman [of Breslev] said: ‘Wherever I go, I go to Jerusalem.’ We know that Jerusalem and Eretz Israel are holy lands – and there’s the larger question of whether all land is holy. And what does it mean for all land to be holy.”

This doesn’t mean that Margulies understates the relationship to Israel – which he says he loves dearly – but he thinks it’s important to have both ideas.

“As a people, we refer to the Land of Israel in so many ways,” he continues. “We pray for rain on the schedule needed in Israel. We have embedded in our cultural DNA this connection – it’s like a perceptive lens. Yet, many of us have lived and live currently in the Diaspora.”

This leads to the question of how to live vibrantly wherever one happens to be – finding and connecting with the special sparks of each place.

In this context, Margulies refers to



TEVA LEARNING ALLIANCE

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spoke of “radical amazement” or a profound opening to reality before you. Margulies also connects this with Albert Einstein, who said, “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

The scientific and the spiritual, the soul and the land, are not seen as separate – they work together toward growth that is, itself, both spiritual and physical.

And while movement is a spiritual issue, it also involves moving around, so that Teva has taken its “movement” on the road with a Topsy Turvy Bus Tour. The bus, created by welding together two school buses, one on top of the other, was originally created by Ben Cohen, cofounder of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, together with artist Stefan Sagmeister, to go around the US and speak about American overspending on the military.

Later Daniel Bowman Simon, an envi-

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ronmental activist and a doctoral fellow in the Food Studies program at New York University, used the bus to petition for an organic garden at the White House. Then it came to Teva where it was converted by Jonathan Dubinsky, “Teva-nik Extraordinaire,” to run on waste-vegetable oil, which makes it carbon neutral.

The Topsy Turvy Bus now tours around the country, mostly in the northeast and midwest, during the summer to run educational programs.

There is usually a theme, such as water, and the educators talk about how God separated the waters, along with issues of conservation, or how forests help lands maintain

clean water, which means that healthy forests are needed for clean water.

The educators also try to provide kids with role models for how to be playfully Jewish. During their four-day stays, kids are given choices of *hugim*, or electives, to choose from – and one educator even created a “joy elective” called *simha hug*. The kids go to *shul* and have a *tisch* – banging on a table and drinking grape juice, and then go sing songs. Margulies recalls one kid asking, “Where’s the compost *hug*?” He was told that it was too far – all the way on the Adamah Farm. He answered, “No distance is too far for *simha*.”

And Margulies still has ideas about how to expand and connect Teva with other movements.

“One thing I’d like to bring to the field is the intersection between ritual objects and the DIY [do it yourself] movement,” he says. “To me, wouldn’t it be amazing if kids went to the woods, picked sticks, and whittled their own *yad* for Torah reading? Or spun wool for their own *tzitzit*? When they have ritual objects that they made, they have their own story, their own ritual. An object that you take off the shelf doesn’t necessarily have that. And you could theoretically do that with any object – but ritual objects are like an opening.”

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For Margulies, this connects with the Hasidic notion of *tikun olam* – raising the spark of the stick to reading the Torah and doing a mitzva.

“It uses our skill and intention to create beauty,” he adds. “We become creators – not just receivers.”

Before becoming Teva’s director, Margulies was himself a receiver of its trans-

formational power – one of the people who was energized by his work there and went on to found other projects. But his connection to nature goes far back into childhood.

“I grew up in Chicago, going to Jewish day school. I was always the nature kid of my class. I went to nature camps in the summer.”

He saw he also had a “crazy” amount of pets – including a 400-liter tank for turtles. He even bred dogs. But it wasn’t until college that he discovered the Jewish environmental movement – around the time there was an explosion of Jewish environmental organizations.

THE MOVEMENT had developed in the 1960s and ’70s from a combination of environmental activism and desire to reconnect with Judaism, and gained traction in the 1980s with publications such as Richard Schwartz’s “Judaism and Vegetarianism” (1982) or Rabbi Arthur Waskow’s “The Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays” (1982). The first national Jewish organization is considered to be Shomrei Adamah (“Guardians of the Earth”), founded in 1988 by Ellen Bernstein, who went on to produce a guide called “Let the Earth Teach You Torah” (1992) and other publications.

In 1993, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was established as a national voice and umbrella for Jewish environmental organizations, and in 1994, the Teva Learning Center was founded by Amy Meltzer at Isabella Freedman – which, among other programs, leads a Shomrei Adamah program. In 1999, Nigel Savage founded Hazon, a nonprofit that promotes sustainable communities in the Jewish world, which went on to bring the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center, the Teva Learning Alliance and the Adamah Farm together under its single organizational umbrella.

Among the first movements Margulies encountered was COEJL, which he joined as a student board member, along with the Green Zionist Alliance, a New York-based pluralistic organization now called Aytzim [Trees in Hebrew]. He went to a Jewish environmental conference at the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center – which he calls a terrific place to feel the pulse of the Jewish environmental movement.

That was where he discovered the Teva

program – in which he participated in 2007 – and after which he moved to Washington to work for the National Park Service around the mid-Atlantic, doing botanical surveys in 11 forests.

He then worked for a professor at Cornell doing forest ecology research before moving to Israel for a year and a half, living in Jerusalem and doing graduate work in ecology at the Hebrew University.

While all this was happening, a parallel story was unfolding that would have great impact on his professional life.

Back in 2007, he had invited his family to Isabella Freedman to visit, where his parents met Hazon founder Savage. They were then invited to a Jewish food conference at Isabella Freedman a few months later, which promoted the intersection of sustainability and Jewish food values, and where they met other people involved in Teva and Adamah.

Around 2008, after experiencing these Jewish environmental organizations and being prompted by ex-Adamah people in Chicago, Margulies’s parents decided to turn the land they had next to their family envelope business – which grew industrial corn – into a Jewish community educational farm called Pushing the Envelope Farm. When Margulies came back from Israel in 2011, he came to work on the farm, directing its activities for the next two and a half years.

“We had goats that were a wedding present to my sister and her husband,” says Margulies. “We had chickens that laid eggs in the classroom.”

The farm worked with Jewish schools, synagogues and institutions in the region, while continuing to run the nonprofit farm – renting land to incubator farmers who were just starting out and also allowing refugees to farm the land.

“They were inspired by what they saw at Teva,” reflects Margulies, “but they did this on their own. There’s something inspiring about the Jewish environmental movement – it includes all different denominations, from humanist to Chabad to interfaith – because the soil, the earth, is something that unites us. And if we can use that to experience joy and nourishment – then it’s all the better.”

The way to achieve this is education – and Teva is one way Hazon helps to create healthier and more sustainable Jewish



Young Jewish residents celebrating life at Isabella Freedman

organizations and communities. To do this, Margulies is working to create educational materials, making them more accessible by developing curricula.

“THERE ARE 100 reasons to plant a tree,” explains Margulies. “Because it’ll sequester carbon and reduce particulate matter in the air, because it serves the food supply, because it filters water.”

All this has to be taught to educators who will then teach children.

“We give educators a 300-page manual that we’ve accumulated over the years with everything from *brachot* to games to ecology to prayer,” he explains. “A large part of my job is to hire and train these educators.”

Teva brings in guest educators, teaching sessions about spirituality and religious law, and holding weekly professional development sessions. They are now actively engaged in

preparing a curriculum – training educators to be ready when kids arrive, and ready to be leaders when they go on to other places.

Educators can return for more than one four-month season. But Margulies hopes that Teva can continue to grow and offer educators year-round job opportunities.

He also finds Teva to be one of the best places to learn to teach because educators get to practice their curriculum with different groups of children from week to week.

“People really learn their own style of teaching,” he says. “They live communally, cook, live on the Isabella Freedman campus – this is also part of the experience.”

But in keeping with his double focus, Margulies is also aiming to infuse the project with a certain spiritual sensibility.

“Part of it is the idea of how to live a vibrant, joyous, rooted Jewish life,” he says. “If we can do that together, then that serves

as an example for the kids and also for the people we work with.”

He says they take a lot of inspiration from the Hasidic masters – including the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman and Heschel.

“It’s important to know who your neighbor is,” he adds, “and it might just be a tree that’s lived there for 50 or 80 years. By understanding the place where you are, you develop an understanding and consciousness about other places you go.”

He invokes a lesson that the land near Isabella Freedman has taught him. The whole area had been logged after the Civil War for charcoal and grazing animals. It was subsequently abandoned and has grown up beautifully since – something he calls a grand *shmita* experiment.

“Sometimes, if we step back and let nature take its course, something beautiful, healthy and dynamic can recover.” ■