

# Chapter 8

## Working with Your Institution

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Your decision to read this guide shows that you've already taken the first step by deciding to make a difference at your Jewish institution. This section will guide you through the conversations you can have and the steps you can take to make changes successfully. Keep in mind that every Jewish institution is unique, with its own set of values and priorities. The more you are able to show that you understand your institution's values, and that the changes you are proposing will benefit your community, the more successful you will be.

*The material in this section is adapted from Oxfam's "Farm to School Toolkit" and The Sustainable Food Policy Project's "A Guide to Developing Sustainable Food Purchasing Policy."*

## Set the Stage for Success

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Be realistic. Start with something small. Once you have accomplished something small, you will be more confident to go onto bigger things. Make sure you go into this with a positive attitude. Expect to have bumps along the way and unless you believe that you can make a difference, you never will.

## Form a “Green Team”

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Don’t go at it alone. Find other people in your institution who are passionate about environmental issues and changing your Jewish institution’s food environment. You can assess volunteer interest by sending a survey through your institution’s listserv, newsletter, or other form of communication. Hold an information meeting, install a comments box, and/or set up a dedicated email address to actively solicit and allow people to share the changes they would like to make.

## Hazon Food Audit

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You have your idea, and you have a Green Team of people who support you, but where do you go from here? How do you go about figuring out exactly where your institution needs to change, and how to do that? Take the Hazon Food Audit (attached at the back of this Guide, and also available at [www.hazon.org/foodguide](http://www.hazon.org/foodguide)). The Food Audit sections match up with chapters in this Food Guide. Once you have your institution’s score, you can go back and look at which areas are in good shape, which areas are on the road to success, and which areas really just need a new beginning.

## How to Decide Where to Start

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The process of taking the Food Audit and/or reading the Food Guide can lead to change simply through raising awareness and seeding inspiration. If you are reading this chapter you are planning on taking concrete action, ready to make real changes in your institution. But where to start? With so many possibilities it may feel overwhelming. We recommend using the Food Audit Worksheet (the last page in the Food Audit section of this book), which is designed to help you determine your next steps for making positive food changes at your institution. (You do not need to have taken the Food Audit to use the Food Audit Worksheet tool.) It will help

you rank and compare different steps you could take by considering their levels of importance, cost, time, commitment, and ease/difficulty. If possible, fill it out and discuss with your “green team”, social action committee, other involved volunteers, and/or staff.

## Research

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As you begin to consider where to start, it’s important to have a full understanding of how your institution purchases food, where it is sourced, how it is prepared and served, what is done with food waste, etc. This will allow you to shape your goals and next steps, as well as make you more educated on these issues for when you present the new idea to the person(s) in charge. This research process is also a relationship building process. The very people who you might need to convince to go “green” are usually the same people who have the information you’re looking for.

Here are examples of some of the important questions you can ask:

(depending on the institution, you might need to pose these questions to the Rabbi, an office manager, or a kitchen staff person)

- Who manages the food and supplies purchasing?
- Where does the food at your Jewish institution come from now? Is it from a kosher caterer? A larger food vendor? A local, kosher restaurant?
- What are your kitchen’s resources/restrictions? What is the *kashrut* policy and how will this affect what you will be able to purchase?
- What is your budget? How much money is your institution currently spending on food? How much money is your institution spending on plates, cups, utensils?
- Conduct a formal or informal waste audit (see chapter 4) to discover what is in your waste stream. Do you recycle or compost already? Who hauls the waste and what does it cost? What are options for adding/increasing recycling and composting and how much would it cost (don’t forget to account for reduced trash collection when calculating costs)?

## Get Organized

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Organize a meeting of your Green Team. Set goals using the information you have gathered. Think big, but act small. Take into consideration your Jewish institution’s

limitations and also its potential.

## Develop a Plan and a Timeline

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Break down your plan into small steps to help make it more manageable. Compile a list of resources and allies. If you have a larger institution, form committees to take on different tasks.

## Educate and Communicate

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Education and raising awareness are not separate from action. Don't expect everyone to understand why you want to make changes in the food culture of your organization. Create enthusiasm for change by educating your community about why change is needed. Select initial projects that are visible to demonstrate progress. Whatever you do, tell the community about it! Have a regular presence in the newsletter, post signs around your facility, make announcements at events. Letting your community know what you are doing inspires new people to get involved, sends a message that change is possible, and helps to plant new practices in the culture of the organization.

## Crafting Institutional Food Guidelines or Policy

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You've taken the Food Audit. You've done the research. Creating a food policy or set of food guidelines for your institution is one possible next step. Your guidelines should facilitate decisions about food choices and help determine a course of action. By establishing a formal policy or guideline, everyone in the community will be able to look to it when they are making food choices for your community.

As we've stressed all along, making sustainable food choices are often nuanced, gradual, and sometimes contradictory. As such, considering "guidelines" rather than "policy" may be more realistic for your community (see Andrea's comment below about including the words "to the best of our ability" in their synagogue guidelines). Even so, having a written set of values and/or guidelines can be an important milestone in your institution's food journey and a public signifier of institution-wide support for these issues.

Below you will find two examples, one from Hazon and one from a synagogue in Toronto, of possible food

guidelines for your institution.

## Hazon's Organizational Food Values

In our society, all too often the readily available and familiar sources (national brand names) for our food prioritize uniform quality and economies of scale over taste, nutrition, environmental health, and local communities. At Hazon, we have developed a list of food values that we strive to reach when we are planning food at all Hazon events, programs, and meetings. However, we often are required to prioritize one (or more) of our food values over another as we are planning our events. As we work towards a healthy and sustainable food system where we will be able to meet all our food values all the time, we want to be transparent about the food choices we are making along the way, where we are falling short in meeting all our values, and how we are working to do better next time.

The following Hazon food values are listed in alphabetical order.

**Cost Effective** – As Michael Pollan (and others) have suggested, we should not shy away from paying more than we're used to for good-quality food that fits our values. That said we have to make our food choices fit into our overall budget.

**Delicious** – Food should be inspirationally delicious. Enough said!

**Ethical** – We care not only about the food but about the circumstances of the people who produced, prepared or served it, and when we eat fish and animals we want to know how they lived and how they died. In general we believe that informed choices ultimately change behavior.

**Fair-Trade** – When purchasing foods often grown in exploitative environments in other countries, we always try to source from companies that commit to paying their workers fair wages, and supporting community development and empowerment. Coffee, chocolate, tea, bananas should be fair trade certified.

**Healthy** – Hazon believes in serving healthy, nourishing food that is pesticide free. In general our society consumes too much refined white sugar and flour, high fructose corn syrup, and salt. However, celebrations and holidays are often marked by "out of the ordinary" foods – especially sweets and snacks. Additionally, our outdoor adventure programs may require participants to eat foods heavy in sugar and salt to maintain their energy and electrolyte levels. We aim to find a balance between serving foods worthy of the simcha, and sustainable for a bike rider, while maintaining a focus on whole, fresh and nourishing foods. We think there is value in working extra

hard to produce treats that are healthier than what is normal in our society.

**Kosher** – Because inclusive Jewish community is central to what we do and believe in, the meals we serve should be accessible to people across the Jewish spectrum. Food should be kosher. Hechshers should be provided so that people can decide for themselves if the food adheres to their own standards of kashrut. Non-hechshered products can be served if necessary, as long as it contains no explicitly traif ingredients and is clearly labeled as non-hechshered. When food is prepared under the supervision of a Mashgiach (a kosher supervisor) their credentials shall be clearly displayed in the dining hall and/or made available to interested participants ahead of time.

**Low Carbon** – We aim to serve food that has the lowest-possible carbon impact, including the amount and type of packaging that is used to contain it during transit, the dishes and utensils that we eat on, and how we clean/dispose of those after a meal. In addition, we consider the miles that our food travels to get to our table, thus emphasizing a menu that changes with the seasons. We're in favor of serving home-made foods when the event is small enough and where appropriate kashrut arrangements can be made.

**Lower on the food chain** – Whenever possible, we serve whole, unprocessed vegetarian foods including chumous, fresh fruit, etc. We usually serve meat at least once at our multi-day events, but not always and not as a matter of course; we believe that vegetarian meals can be fully satisfying and we aim to provide delicious examples of this!

**Organically and/or Sustainably-produced** -- Organic labels let you know that the food was produced without prohibited chemicals and is not GMO. In some cases, smaller farms aren't certified organic, but produce their food in a way that is sustainable and environmentally conscious. We're in favor of supporting the organic movement, and we're also in favor of supporting farmers who are growing with sustainable farming practices, especially if they are nearby (which helps us meet our low-carbon goals and support local food economies).

**Transparency/Education** – We believe in using food as a teaching tool and a conversation starter. And we believe in empowering individuals to make choices according to their own values. So being transparent about the choices we make is critical to our food work.

## The Sustainable Food Guidelines at First Narayever, Toronto, CA

First Narayever Congregation in Toronto, CA, recently passed a resolution regarding the food served at synagogue events. The resolution was the culmination of over a year of committee work, targeted outreach, and education. Andrea Most, project coordinator, reflects on the process of passing this resolution:

“So how did we get here? First, we approached and got support from the President of the Board who agreed to chair the Ad Hoc committee. We then spent over a year studying our own practices, and also outside practices (such as reading *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and watching *Food, Inc.*). We then put together a more formal committee, and started drafting recommendations. For a committee of 10 people, we identified 9 important areas to work on. Our final presentation to the Board was received very positively, and they voted unanimously to approve it. In the process, we decided that the words ‘to the extent possible’ were important to get the motion passed. But we feel confident that once we begin to implement these principles (and to educate people about them), they will quickly become ‘the new normal.’”

*The resolution reads:*

*Moved that the Food Committee (formerly the Kiddush Committee) oversee the delivery of all food served in the shul, encouraging the use of food that is, to the extent possible: healthy and nutritious, produced in a sustainable, environmentally sensitive manner, produced under fair labour and trade practices, produced according to a high standard of animal welfare, and produced locally, while maintaining a budget that is sustainable by the congregation and while encouraging as much community participation as possible in bringing out food practices more closely in line with our Jewish values.*

Passed by the Board of the First Narayever Congregation, May 3, 2011

## Small Steps for Success

Congregation Kol Ami in Elkins Park, PA, has made it their policy to serve Fair Trade coffee and tea at all congregational events.

## Eating our Values at Beacon Hebrew Alliance, Beacon, NY

Over the past year, a committee of BHA members met to discuss these issues. They learned from *Fresh: the Movie* (made by our member Ana Joanes), *Food for Thought*, their friends at Eden Village Camp and Common Ground Farm and most importantly, each other. The outcome of

those conversations is the new BHA Food Policy, which you can read it in its entirety on the Hazon website.

Some highlights are:

- Except for Pesach, our kitchen is going to be entirely dairy. This is in recognition of the complexities involved with managing a very small kitchen which thankfully, has many volunteers.
- We are going to prioritize, but not require, eating food grown or produced in the Hudson Valley.
- We're going to make a real effort to give blessings of gratitude before and after meals and to reinvigorate a culture of inviting new and old friends to our homes for Shabbat.

Most excitingly, as a way of recognizing that being deliberate about eating kosher, healthy food can be very time consuming, they are organizing four large-scale cooking extravaganzas, called *Eating Our Values*. These events will be chances for the community to come together and stock the BHA pantry with non-industrial, kosher and, to the greatest degree possible, local food which they can easily access for kiddush, classes, and more.

## Take Action

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Now you're ready to talk to the person in charge. Having the conversation is usually the most difficult part in this process.

**Set up a meeting.** Meet with your rabbi, executive director, kitchen manager, or person(s) in charge of the food purchasing.

**Consider the issues from your institution's point of view.** Place yourself in the shoes of the person you are meeting with and consider: What are their priorities? What are the limitations? What educational opportunities can your Jewish institution take advantage of from this, and how can you frame sustainable food choices in the context of your institutions' Jewish values?

**Share your vision.** Consider writing a statement that inspires your institution's leadership to work with you on this project. Focus on your institution's concerns. Make it clear that adopting sustainable food practices at your institution will add value to the community and will not compromise traditional values. Here's an example:

*"This could be a great way to get young adults, who tend*

*to be passionate about environmental issues, involved in the synagogue. Changing our food will not compromise our traditional values of kashrut, but is a way for our synagogue to be a voice in addressing contemporary issues. It is also a fresh, innovative way to re-engage current members."*

**Know your facts, and share examples.** Use the information and links in this guide to bring data to back up your points. You'll want to show that you have done your research and that you have looked up this topic from different angles. Use the examples of what other synagogues have done in this guide to show that the changes you're talking about are not only possible, they've been made in other communities with great success.

## Anticipate Challenges

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You might be faced with criticism and skepticism. Don't get defensive or discouraged. It's important to show that you understand the institution's values and position. Do your homework and practice responses in a calm, collected way. You don't want to add stress to their jobs, rather, you want to offer an opportunity that will benefit both your institution and the community. Here are some examples for how to address these concerns:

**Problem: Prices.** "It sounds like this is going to be way more expensive. We need to keep our food costs down." Response: Buying local does not always mean higher prices. Remind the person you are meeting with that the higher price will reflect the higher quality and nutritional value of the food. If it is really out of the institution's budget, figure out where you can make the most important adjustments—say by offering organic grape juice for kiddush.

**Problem: Distribution.** "This seems way too complicated. Right now we have one kosher caterer that can supply us with everything we need." Response: Describe how important this is to you and your green team. Explain that there are people willing to make this happen—including working with the existing food providers to help them add sustainable foods to their repertoires.

**Problem: Legal issues.** "How can small farmers monitor their production and processing in terms of food safety issues?" Response: Most farmers have liability insurance. Come prepared with a few farms you have looked into and their information.

**Problem: Labor/staff time.** "We don't have enough



staff to deal with the added labor of buying local. There's not enough time to chop, clean, etc." Response: Some farmers offer value-added products: locally-produced jams, jellies, or pickles will require little additional preparation than the products you're used to. You can also consider organizing the green team to help out with the food preparation.

## Evaluate

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Evaluation is key to see how far you have come in attaining your goals. You can decide to do this every few months or after a year. Assessing how far you have come will empower you to work towards higher goals.

## Share your Success!

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Spread the good news. Share all you have learned with members of your institution and the community by educating them about the changes you have made. Write an article for the local or institution's newspaper and hold an educational event such as a film night, panel, or potluck. In the process you can also gain more support and momentum for effecting change. Email [foodguide@hazon.org](mailto:foodguide@hazon.org) so we can spread the word for you!