

Food Conference puts Shmita values on table 125 attend event at Temple Israel

By Alexandra Lapkin

Advocate Staff

Sunday's Boston Jewish Food Conference brought together a crowd of about 125 people including sustainable farmers, fermentation enthusiasts, kosher chicken growers, beekeepers, organic food chefs, and everyone in between.

Held at the Temple Israel of Boston, the conference, titled the "Shmita Summit," was organized by Ganei Beantown: Beantown Jewish Gardens and supported by Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), New Center Now, Hazon, and Moishe Kavod: Jewish Social Justice House, among others.

Leora Mallach, who previously helped design the Green Apprenticeship program at Kibbutz Lotan in Israel, co-founded Ganei Beantown with Becca Weaver more than two years ago. Ganei Beantown is an educational program focused on building a network of gardens at various synagogues and holding workshops in the Boston area on food production principles rooted in ancient Jewish agricultural practices.

Shmita, which means "to release" in Hebrew, is one of those biblical traditions. Every seven years, Jews in ancient Israel stopped plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting, to allow the land to rest. The mitzvah of Shmita was an opportunity for farmers and their workers to take a break from work, as well. The crops in the field, left by the farmers, were claimed by the poor and the city dwellers.

This year's third annual conference began with a Shmita Seder and then continued with workshops. Despite the fact that in today's world, stopping food production every seven years would be life-threatening to people's urban lifestyle, participants explored other ways to apply Shmita to their lives. Topics ranged from maintaining sustainable relationships, buying groceries on a minimum-wage salary and decreasing mankind's carbon footprint, to expanding Shmita principles from a personal level to Jewish communal institutions.

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Participants spent the rest of the conference at a shuk (marketplace), where they learned to make sauerkraut with the “Boston Ferments” group, were taught about sustainable arts and crafts, chartered with representatives of different Jewish organizations and bought snacks from The Chubby Chickpea and Inna’s Kitchen.

Alex and Inna Khitrick, a mother-son team, started Inna’s Kitchen, a deli and catering service located at 19 Pelham St. in Newton, three years ago. The breakfast and lunch menu lists a variety of Eastern European, Middle Eastern and American Jewish options, from cheese blintzes, to chicken shawarma, to sweet-and-sour brisket sandwich.

Inna’s motto is to “make everything from scratch,” she said. Alex added that the deli, which is kosher but not under rabbinical supervision, applies food-justice values, with a focus on using only ethical and environmentally friendly products and organic ingredients. The meat, which is all glatt kosher, is grass-fed and free of antibiotics and hormones. Meanwhile, most of the produce is grown locally.

Jacqueline Serebrani-Kessner, artistic director of Creative Arts Enrichment, lives on a small farm in Lexington. She collected the feathers dropped by birds on the



PHOTO/EKATERINA LARKIN

Alex and Inna Khitrick of Inna’s Kitchen, a deli and catering service in Newton, were among those with a station at Sunday’s New England Jewish Food Conference, also known as the “Shmita Summit.”

ground of her farm and brought them to the conference, where participants could dip the feathers in ink and use them as writing quills. She said the repurposing of the feathers allowed the participants to “appreciate the beauty of the animal.”

Mark Dworzcan, a member of Temple Beth Zion (TBZ) in Brookline, sat down at Serebrani-Kessner’s table to try his hand at writing with a quill. Dworzcan said he came to the food conference because he is taking a course at his syn-

agogue on preparing for the Shmita year. After learning about Shmita’s origins in Jewish texts, the end-goal of the course is to come up with an action that embodies the principles of Shmita. “I’m here to explore, get ideas,” he said, “and bring them back to TBZ.”

Rachel Tali Kaplan is a farmer at Powisset Farm in Dover, which operates on a model of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Powisset, where farmers grow all sorts of vegetables and raise livestock, is not based on Jewish re-



PHOTO/EKATERINA LARKIN

Mark Dworzcan tries his hand at writing with a quill at one of the New England Jewish Food Conference stations. The event was held at Temple Israel of Boston.

ligious practices, but Kaplan, who is Jewish, applies Judaism on a personal level in her farming. Observing Shabbat, she said, allows her to take a break from engaging with the land. “I’m grateful for Shabbat,” she said, “because it keeps me sane.”

Rabbi Getzel Davis, Associate Rabbi and Jewish Educator at Harvard University’s Hillel, spoke about Eden Village Camp, a Jewish Farm and Arts Camp in Putnam Valley, New York, where he worked as a counselor. Kids at the

camp learn about Judaism beyond “just the Holydays,” he said. “They learn what it means to be a Jewish farmer, about vibrant Judaism of the 21st century.”

Looking back on the conference, Mallach said she loved seeing the participants engaged and asking questions. As for applying Shmita values this year, she believes it is possible, as long as participants receive support. “It’s an opportunity and a challenge,” she said. “A year is a long time to re-member.”