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

By Alexandra Lapkin
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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 Molisch 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.

Continued on Page 4
At Temple Israel of Boston, New England Jewish Food Conference attendees learned about creating a "shamim summer." The event was held at the New England Jewish Food Conference with a special "shamim summer" theme. Attendees heard from experts in the field and engaged in discussions about how to incorporate Jewish cooking into their summer cooking.