



Photos by Susan Ayer Photography

Members of the bus tour committee and panel members: Oran Hesterman, Randall Fogelman, Carole Caplan, Idelle Hammond-Sass, Lucinda Kurtz, Eitan Sussman, Rena Basch, Linda Jo Doctor and Davita Davison.

Being aware of food, land and justice issues this Rosh Hashanah.

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Contributing Writer

With the arrival of the Jewish New Year comes a different sort of resolution for an Ann Arbor group; one that expands a personal goal to include others, the environment and even the world.

Members at the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation (AARC) are using the time of shmitah — a once-in-seven-years sabbatical, when planting and cultivation of land in Israel is halted — to focus on ways to bring about positive change beyond Israel.

During the upcoming year, beginning with the start of Rosh Hashanah, the land is rested, with no plowing, planting, pruning or harvesting taking place and with anything that may grow on its own accessible to anyone. It is also a time when debts are forgiven.

“For me, the commandments of shmitah can be seen as a built-in seventh-year wake-up call,” said AARC member Carole Caplan. “Shmitah, which means ‘release,’ is the opportunity for those of us outside of Israel to become conscious of our relationships with each other, with the environment, and with our understanding of nourishment and ‘enough-ness.’

“Just as Shabbat is an opportunity to reset our ideas about personal production and consumption, shmitah practice gives us the exciting opportunity to re-imagine and reset our practices regarding food production and consumption on both a personal and a communal level,” she said.

“So many Jews are already passionate about a wide array of social justice issues,

and shmitah-practice offers a meaningful access point to understanding that Judaism has a long tradition of addressing what we tend to perceive as contemporary issues of food, land and justice.”

Taking A Ride

A tour bus, with 30 participants focusing on food, land and justice issues, wheeled into Detroit from Ann Arbor on Sept. 14. Co-chaired by Caplan and fellow AARC member Idelle Hammond-Sass, the day trip included visits to the Eastern Market and D-town Farm, an urban farm that works to improve food security, equity and social justice.

Malik Yakini of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network addressed the group.

“He told us much about the history of the resurgence of farming in Detroit and inspired us with how much they have been able to accomplish and the impact that they have had on the lives of those in the local community,” Caplan said.

The group shared a locally sourced lunch and heard from a panel that included Eitan Sussman from Keep Growing Detroit, Oran Hesterman of Fair Food Network, Randall Fogelman of the Eastern Market and Davita Davison from Food Lab/Kitchen Connect.

“Farmers are farming in Detroit and selling at the Eastern Market where SNAP food assistance is being doubled on local produce and small-scale food entrepreneurship is being developed by locals using local food,” Caplan said. “It all comes together to address food availability, food economics and food-related health issues in a way that is truly sustainable and strengthens community.



Malik Yakini addresses the group in an introduction to the tour at D-town Farm.

“Inspiring and hopeful in a world where challenges are usually focused on, rather than the solutions that are already underway right here in Detroit.”

Caplan said shmitah-year materials provided to her and Hammond-Sass by Hazon, the national Jewish organization for environmental awareness and action, “touched us both on a personal level to take the questions we were personally addressing and wrestling with — healthy food accessibility and affordability; availability of a sustainable non-GMO; local, organic food supply; environmental impact of our food production system: and fair-wages in the food system — and gave us a framework with which we could involve those around us in the

conversation as Jews, where justice and environmental stewardship are held as important spiritual values.

“I believe that if we can get people into the conversation and make it personal, more people will be inspired by those shared values to act,” Caplan said.

Learning Together

This past winter, the AARC formed a shmitah learning group.

“We have been studying the ideas associated with shmitah this past year, looking to reconstruct them so that the teachings might be relevant, raise personal and communal awareness about food, land and justice issues, and inspire action in our own lives

and throughout southeast Michigan,” Caplan said.

The group is facilitated by AARC member Dr. Marcy Epstein.

“We started the shmitah learning group because so many of us needed to learn more about the Torah’s teaching on shmitah and how to interpret it as the cultural practice of shmitah among modern Jewry is reawakening,” Epstein said.

“We came from many walks of life and interests, from folks interested in human rights and food systems to others trying to understand this larger scope of Jewish time: seven years and seven times that cycle for Jubilee,” she said, in reference to *yovel*, the year at the end of seven cycles of shmitah.

“We want to understand and bring to life the meaning of release. So Idelle and I gathered sources— cultural, religious, historical, practical, communal — drawing some from Hazon’s national Shmita Project curriculum, but sketching in a good many of our own interests,” Epstein said.

According to Hazon, the Shmita Project aims “to expand awareness about the biblical Sabbatical tradition and bring the values of this practice to life today to support healthier, more sustainable Jewish communities. It explores the possibilities of shmitah in a modern context, both in Israel and beyond, and not just for farmers, but for businesses, families, communities and individuals as well as way to prepare for it and how the wider shmitah cycle may hold the key to approaching the economic, environmental and societal challenges we are facing today.”

Epstein said, “The (AARC) group has been learning about biblical and rabbinic sources on shmitah as well as units on land and food release, debt forgiveness and economic justice, and modern slavery, today’s Jewish commons.

“Over the summer, we’ve shifted from textual study and reflective exercises that help us to grasp what shmitah has meant in the past and present to how we might practice in accordance with shmitah in the present and future. It’s been a thrilling adventure, and the shmitah year of 5775 is just beginning.

“The shmitah group is planning to reconnect within and beyond the Jewish community this year through prayer, conference, social action.”

This past spring they initiated a symposium called Food, Land and Justice: Through a Jewish Lens.

“It took the teachings of shmitah as a way to shed light on environmental sustainability and justice issues facing us on a local level,” Hammond-Sass said.

Funding Future Plans

“In partnership with Pardes Hannah (the Jewish Renewal Community of Ann Arbor in Affiliation with ALEPH: The

Alliance for Jewish Renewal), a small group of interested individuals applied for a grant from the Jewish Federation of Greater Ann Arbor late last winter, and gratefully received \$5,000 for programming which will take place throughout this shmitah year,” Caplan said. “We are looking to move forward, through this year and beyond, as a Jewish alliance for food, land and justice.”

The bus tour was the group’s first grant-sponsored event, with a year of shmitah-related programming planned, with AARC members, Caplan, Hammond-Sass and Rena Basch of Locavorious, along with Oran Hesterman, Lucinda Kurtz and Linda Jo Doctor of the Kellogg Foundation, all from Pardes Hannah, comprising the event’s committee.

There is a hope for partnerships with other Ann Arbor synagogues.

“We are in the process of creating an event on Dec. 7, focusing on ‘farm to institution,’ bringing local healthy food into our hospitals, schools and the public sphere,” Hammond-Sass said. “We’ll visit the farm at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ypsilanti where we will meet their farmer, Dan Bair, and learn about the impact the farm has made on the patients and staff, see the facilities and hear from others in the farm to school movement about how access to healthy fruits and vegetables can also teach geography, and offer other place-based learning opportunities for the classroom and cafeteria.”

Future events include “Sustainability at Home,” with a focus on organic home gardening and permaculture principles in honor of Tu b’Shevat; “Land Conservancy,” a program on maintaining both open space and farmland; and a “Stewardship Day” in the spring. The year’s events will culminate in a community-wide Youth Outdoor Education Farm Day and Community Jewish Food Festival at a local organic farm.

Reaching Out

“My personal goal is, and has been for quite some time, to help people bridge what I feel is a very narrow space between environmentalism and spirituality,” Caplan said. “Luckily, as food is a natural topic around which Jews gather, it is also a perfect place to explore environmentalism and spirituality.

“Further, shmitah, with its directives on letting the land rest, which addresses good farming practices; seeing all seventh-year produce as *hefker* (ownerless), which addresses food security and accessibility; release of debt, which addresses economic justice; and sanctification of all seventh-year produce, which addresses conscious food consumption, provides a rich framework from within our tradition to do this exploration,” she said.

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L'Shanah Tovah!

*May the coming year be filled
with health, happiness and prosperity
for all our family and friends.*

The Eisenbergs

Harry, Marsha, Emily & Jennifer

L'Shanah Tovah!

*May the coming year be filled
with health, happiness and prosperity
for all our family and friends.*

**Dr. Jeffrey and Laurie Fischgrund
Michelle, Marcy, Mark
Andrew and Melanie**

Resh Hashanah

**May the coming year be filled with
health and happiness for all our family and friends.
L'Shanah Tovah!**

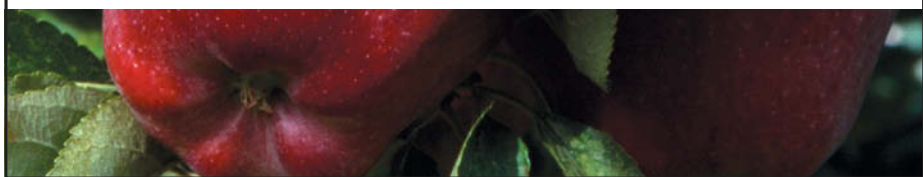
**Judy, Greg,
Alana and Megan Epstein**

L'Shanah Tovah!

*May the coming year be filled
with health, happiness and prosperity
for all our family and friends.*

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*May the New Year
bring to all our friends
and family
health, joy, prosperity and
everything good in life.*

**DOREEN & IRVING
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*May the New Year
bring to all our friends
and family
health, joy, prosperity and
everything good in life.*

Judi Schneider

*Brett, Patty,
Caidey, Zack & Caroline,
Bryan, Arryn, Ethan & Avery
Brad, Molly, D.J. & Anna
Brandon, Alexandra*

Rosh Hashanah
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5775



Rosh Hashanah

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The bus tour group hears from Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's beekeeper at D-town Farm.



Hesterman, Sussman, Fogelman, Davison and Doctor participate in a panel presentation.

Shmitah events for the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation welcome the greater community.

"Look for the presence of our group at a roundtable about 'the commons' at the International Day of Peace, for programs on debt forgiveness as a micro- and macro-practice, for projects on food systems and land stewardship, studies and trainings, and opportunities to explore rest, release, remission and reconstruction," Epstein said.

Part of the group's mission is to reach out to the unaffiliated as well, on both a very personal level as well as through the community events.

"And with environmental and food issues making headlines every day, I believe this shmitah cycle is coming

at exactly the right time," Caplan said. "Together, through study, celebration and action, we *can* make this year a meaningful shmitah, truly a rest, a release, a Shabbat Shabbaton, the Shabbat of Shabbats."

Why not a shmitah "Farm-to-Shabbos- table" program?

"I personally believe its time has come," Caplan said. "We are very excited about the possibilities for the shmitah year and are still planning and dreaming how we can use shmitah to have a powerful Jewish-based influence on people's lives." □

For information on participating in, volunteering for or for help in planning shmitah programming, contact Carole Caplan at carolecaplan@livebychoice.com.