

Jewish Farming School, Then and Now

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I recently had the most wonderful visit to the **Adamah program** at the **Isabella Freedman Retreat Center**, connected to their Sukkahfest celebration. The whole thing was lovely and very impressive. Like many Jews, my background could hardly be less rural, and learning how to milk goats and pick vegetables was probably inordinately exciting.

Participants in the **Adamah program** spend three months learning and doing farming, environmentalism, sustainability, and Judaism. The program has been increasing in success and popularity and now the JTA reports on a new movement towards Urban Jewish farming - **Jewish Farm School Movement Moves West**:

Like the original Adamah, the Berkeley program will be a full immersion experience. But because it is situated in a city with a significant Jewish population, it also will serve as a Jewish educational center, playing host to visiting school groups and holiday festivities. Berman anticipates 10,000 annual farm visitors by the project's third year...

A major criticism of the rural Jewish farm programs like the original Adamah, Passow says, is the lack of direct connection to social justice work. The new Berkeley project will give its young participants the agricultural training they desire while serving the local community -- "a great merger of those two pieces," he said.

For me, one of the most interesting things about the 'Jewish Farm School Movement' is its history. Nowadays, Adamah fellows participate in a selective application process and pay a stipend for the privilege of participating in the program, but once upon a time, major Jewish organizations were struggling with how to incentivize Jews to, for heaven's sake, move out of the cities and learn some farming skills.

On the occasion of the 4th National Conference of Jewish Charities, in 1907, A.R. Levy **admitted**, "I am tempted to say that agriculture is the panacea for all the ills of the American ghetto." The idea was that the problems of American Jewish poverty and the over-crowding of immigrants in cities like New York could be solved by a movement of Jews (poor, immigrant, and orphan Jews, generally) to the land.

It wasn't only an economic question, either. In **Agricultural Education for Jews in the United States**, H.L. Sabsovich argued that that move was essential for Jews' full participation and acceptance in American civil society

For the general Jewish welfare we must certainly have a farming population, as we will stand better with our neighbors when we are able to point out that the agricultural industries are taken up by us as a life vocation. From an economic standpoint, farming, as a new Jewish trade, is not only advisable, but is an absolute necessity. None of the present schools meet fully the Jewish needs. In order to enable the Americanized and the immigrant Jewish lads to take advantage of the educational facilities

offered by the State colleges and secondary agricultural schools, preparatory Jewish agricultural schools should be established where they can learn that which the farmers' boys learn at home, namely, the farm operations and farm life.

(I doubt he could have begun to imagine Adamah - which is definitely not limited to 'lads' - as it exists now, and I wonder what he would think!)

You can also read about one **early precursor to Adamah** - a joint project of the Industrial Removal Office and the **Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society** - which brought "five settlers, with their wives and twenty-three children" to Arpin, Wisconsin, and set them up with homes and cows. At least according to A.W. Rich, author of the report, founder of the town of Arpin, and major player behind the project, it was ambling along very smoothly - despite the fact that three of the original settlers had to be removed because they started "becoming a disturbing element of the community after having been denied certain extravagant requests." (Requests for what??) You can read more about that project on the **Arpin** (current population 337) Wikipedia page.

The current Jewish farming movement has interesting continuities (Jewish continuity and prosperity concerns, the role of Jews in the broader social environment) and discontinuities (the new focus on environmentalism, an orientation towards the more elite and educated segments of the Jewish community) and I for one look forward to where we'll be in another hundred years.

In the mean time, one more discontinuity - blogging has come to Jewish farming. Check out the **Adamah group blog** for updates directly from the field.

If you want to try out Jewish farming for yourself, maybe you can make it to one of the no-fee Adamah-run farm visit days - the **Colors of Autumn Farm Visit** will be Sunday October 17th.