



Wednesday, May 23, 2012

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2nd of Sivan, 5772

Shabbat times for Toronto

Candle lighting: 8:28pm on Friday, 25 May 2012

This week's Torah portion is Parashat Bamidbar

Erev Shavuot occurs on Saturday, 26 May 2012

Shabbat times for Montreal

Rabbi and organic farmer trade jobs

Thursday, May 17, 2012

Tags: Opinions

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Rabbi Daniel Mikelberg, left, and Daniel Hoffmann

Rabbi Daniel Mikelberg & Daniel Hoffmann
Special to The CJN

A rabbi and a farmer meet in a coffee shop. Both are named Daniel. The rabbi says to the farmer, "What if mwe traded jobs for a day?"

One year later, they did just that – they did each other's jobs, shadowing one another, each taking on the other's responsibilities. The work was often done collaboratively. This is what they learned.

Rabbi Daniel:

Every day is an adventure for a rabbi! Last week, I ventured out to the "hinterland" north of the city, to an organic farm known as The Cutting Veg. Trading jobs with Farmer Daniel Hoffmann, I was struck by the many parallels between synagogue life and the farming experience. Both professions plant seeds for the next generation. Both "rabbi-ing" and farming demand careful, dedicated labour and faith in the future. Both processes strengthen community and foster holiness.

I spent the morning crouching down, planting onion bulbs. Side by side, these bulbs would first produce green onions. These would then be harvested for the bulbs. I found myself obsessing about planting the onions just right. How could I make sure that the seeds would grow to their full potential? What would they look and taste like? Could I protect them from danger? I was given reassurances and told not to worry – my novice planting skills appeared to be just fine. I would have to let go of my fears and let Mother Nature take over. Would it be a good harvest? We did the best we could. Now we had to wait and see. Just like so many aspects of our lives, we were called upon to have faith.

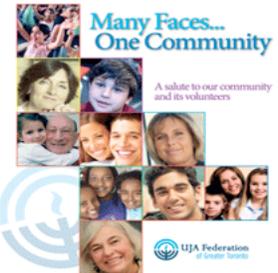
This was messy work, but oh so meaningful! Days later, I still found remnants of the soil imbedded in my fingernails. I'm usually quite concerned about keeping things clean and tidy, but this did not appear to be an option on the farm. The experience was thus very real! I was reminded that even though I aspire to understand things with right and wrong, good and bad dichotomies, more often than not, this is not a reality. It's in those messy gray areas that we generally discover true value.

Farmer Daniel:

The mystique of the rabbinate has always intrigued me. So, when Rabbi Mikelberg suggested a job trade, I found myself at Temple Sinai Congregation in Toronto, all cleaned up, yarmulke-affixed, and ready to "rabbi it up!" Our day began with a morning Sabbath service where 200 kids connected through music, rituals and Jewish values. Whether you're four years old or 400, eating challah and singing Hinai Ma Tov never gets old, as far as I'm concerned.

We then met with a representative from Jewish Family & Child to explore how Temple Sinai could take a leadership role in addressing the abuse of women within the Jewish community. Since I also have a background in social work, this had particular interest for me, as I recognize violence against women not as a "women's issue," but as an issue that needs all of our attention.

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Next, we met with a young man in the process of converting to Judaism and visited two congregants in the hospital to offer support and lovingkindness.

This was followed by an evening Sabbath service, which embodied the themes of relaxation, celebration and meaning.

But it was the moments in between these activities that were most special to me. In preparation for the evening sermon, we checked out the Torah portion of the week, which addressed the themes of holiness and of atoning for one's impurities. Lively discussion ensued. Is it holiness we should aim for, or wholeness? Are we to try to eliminate our impurities, our flaws, our mistakes, or rather to keep working at being more conscious of them? In our talks, we shared what motivates us to do the work we do. We discussed our relationship with prayer and with our spiritual practices. What a privilege to have access to a rabbi for an entire day!

Rabbi Daniel:

Over lunch, each farmer reflected on his or her most loved fruit and vegetable. We were asked to think about the growing process of our favourite foods. Such an important question, and yet one that I rarely consider. Hard to appreciate that food never just magically appears on one's plate! Too often I forget that fruits and vegetables travel a long way before they end up in the supermarket. We have a Jewish tool to open our eyes to this pathway – blessings! Voicing our blessings enables us to pause and express thanks for our many gifts.

That afternoon on the farm, I also chopped potatoes. I learned that potato bushes grow from segments of potatoes that have an embedded eye. It struck me that we were cutting up perfectly good potatoes in order to put them back in the ground! Was this productive? Yes! In fact, each single potato would go on to produce dozens more. Again, this is reflective of Jewish wisdom. As we build for future generations, we sometimes need to make painful sacrifices.

Farmer Daniel

Toward the end of the day, a congregant approached me: "How's it been to be a rabbi for a day? It must be quite different from farming."

I thought about it for a moment. "Not at all actually."

The more we farmed and "rabbi-ed" together, the more the similarities between our working lives became apparent. Rabbi Mikelberg's work is all about healthy relationships – with congregants, temple staff members, fellow clergy, colleagues in the community. On the farm, we too focus on healthy relationships – with the members of our Community Supported Agriculture program, with our staff, interns, volunteers, community partners and with other farmers. Rabbi Mikelberg spends his day sowing seeds – seeds that grow community and Jewish engagement. On the farm, we not only sow seeds literally (peas, beets, garlic – yum!), but we also aim to sow seeds that enhance people's quality of life and support long-term ecological health.

And to be a rabbi requires a great deal of relinquishing of control. When we went to the hospital, we didn't know whether we'd be greeted warmly or with hostility (and indeed we got both). And in farming, we can work our butts off, but we have no control over the weather or the outcome of the harvest.

As we discussed how we approach our work, the synchronicities continued to reveal themselves. We each view our work as part of the Jewish value of tikkun olam – repairing of the world. We aim to be of service to those with whom we interact – perhaps a member of the congregation in need of support, perhaps a farmer's market attendee needing cooking tips.

Rabbi Daniel:

Significantly, we worked the soil as part of a farming community. This was holy labour! Together we would make a real impact. We planted more than 10,000 onion bulbs that morning. On the drive home, I found myself reflecting on the importance of farmers! Away from the city, they are often way off our radar. We need to remember and appreciate that their love of the earth, their hard work and their wholesome intentions are key to making the world a healthy place. As I resume my more traditional rabbi tasks, I will now bring renewed emphasis to opening my eyes to the natural wonders of our world.

Farmer Daniel:

I found myself realizing during our two days together that tikkun olam is possible everywhere. We encountered many others who also aim to be of service: the farm intern who works as a flight attendant and looks out for her passengers with such care; the members of the temple's social action committee who

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give their time, energy and spirit to build community and promote social justice. If my day of "rabbi-ing" taught me anything, it's that it doesn't matter so much what you do, whether you're a rabbi, a farmer, a business executive or a volunteer. It's not so much what you do, but the intention, the kavanah, you bring to it.

Rabbi Daniel Mikelberg is a rabbi at Temple Sinai Congregation in Toronto (www.temple Sinai.net). Daniel Hoffmann is an organic farmer with The Cutting Veg organic farm (www.thecuttingveg.com).

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