

Living on the Edge:

An Experiment in Judaism and Permaculture

TALYA OBERFIELD

We are an unlikely group to have come together to study permaculture at the Hava v'Adam ecological farm and education center near Modi'in in Israel. Ten participants, mostly Americans, ranging in age from 20 to 31, cover quite a lot of ground within the spectrum of what it can mean to be Jewish: We are unaffiliated, religious and in-between; we are Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and nondenominational; Sephardic and Ashkenazic. Two arrived planning to make aliyah, while for others, this five-month Eco-Israel apprenticeship program is their first experience in this country. Two have one Jewish parent and were raised Catholic. My dome-mate — we live in geo-domes on the farm made of wood and canvas — was born to a Moroccan Muslim father and a Jewish mother who converted to Catholicism. She is exploring her Jewish roots through this experience. From the start, our common interest in the environment and sustainability was more apparent than a sense of shared Jewishness.

Originally derived from “permanent (agri)culture,” permaculture is a design system and philosophy modeled after nature’s systems, applied not just to physical landscapes but to social structures and community life as well. An integral concept in permaculture design is the “edge effect” — the interaction at the borders between separate niches. The edges are where things happen. Transition zones in nature, where edges meet, are the most active, productive, and stable due to their biodiversity. For instance, plants that grow at the edges of a pond attract fish to feed and breed there, so designing a wavy shape to the pond rather than a circular one maximizes the edge, leading to a more active habitat. Strong ecosystems result when the borders that make up an edge are distinct yet permeable.

The “edge effect” has parallel results when applied to the design of the Eco-Israel community. Our interdependence as a functioning community on the farm requires that our “edges” are constantly in contact. Continuous interaction among the structures we’ve incorporated to support this exchange have strengthened our productivity on farm projects as well as our personal and spiritual growth. Weekly “talking circles” focus on honest and constructive communication. A rotation of communal chores holds the group accountable to maintain the needs of both farm and community. During “skill-shares,” individuals teach yoga, text study, or fermentation. Each of us is developing our own niche as part of this small ecosystem through the process of defining and negotiating our constantly fluctuating borders.

Planning our first Shabbat together was full of edge. Some had specific requests of the group, while others were unfamiliar with Shabbat and felt overwhelmed and alienated by restrictions. Most controversial was the request to leave the bathroom light on overnight, which many felt was counter to the ecological values the farm upholds. The quest for middle ground between seemingly conflicting values led to meaningful conversations and creative solutions. Such interactions pulled and pushed at my edges. Through interaction with others who hold a diverse set of Jewish traditions, I have developed a deeper appreciation for what makes my sense of Jewishness and my upbringing — in a Conservative egalitarian context among (relatively) like-minded friends and family — distinct. In this way, negotiation of the edge helps to further define the niches on all sides. By engaging others, I am learning who I am.

Three months in, challenges continue to arise, but there is a sense of openness to the influence of others. Our individual edges are active, but they reflect our progress toward a stable system with less friction and smoother communication. For example, during a recent “talking circle,” one person — who upon arrival expressed frustration with traditional religious observance — shared a powerful experience that inspired him to explore regular prayer. Midsentence, one of the most observant members of the group casually leaned his head on another’s shoulder. I was struck by

the marked openness in the dialogue and warm physical interaction. How had their once-closed edge become so permeable?

Taking responsibility for the daily function of our farm engenders a sense of shared purpose and requires cooperation. Baking and breaking bread together, watching seedlings grow into full heads of lettuce, maintaining compost toilets, celebrating rain — living side by side as we do — a natural osmosis occurs. The other dimension of effective edge, however, is the intentional quality of our community. Through course work, informal conversations, and rituals, we wrestle with the meaning of Jewish identity and our common history and heritage. We have found a context for permaculture concepts within Judaism's roots as an agricultural religion. The way *brakhot* reference the source of food growth aligns with permaculture's emphasis on whole system awareness. Celebrating the harvest festival of Sukkot takes on greater significance when we have a literal harvest to celebrate. Through a framework that integrates the two, the Jewish tradition enriches our shared permaculture; and through permaculture, we discover a richness in Judaism. As a result, we carve out a place within Judaism that we can inhabit together, at least for five months.

Edge can be found in endless areas of contemporary Jewish life: religious and secular, Jews and non-Jews, Israel and Diaspora. These dichotomies don't exist only between groups in society; there are edges within each of us. As complex and contradictory beings, we struggle to find wholeness and integration among disparate parts of ourselves. Whether we are trying to hold onto contradictions as individuals, or at the level of family, community, or beyond, meaningful interaction at the edge helps to develop and define that which is unique and distinct. Maximizing edge helps us to recognize and value our niches in order to form a sustainable whole that is greater than any sum of its parts.

Talya Oberfield joined Eco-Israel after earning a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass. She now serves as manager of programs at Building Impact, a community-building organization in Boston.