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Preserving The Earth

Young Detroiter blends environmental spirit with Judaism.

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Blair Nosan: "Judaism and environmentalism had never before been linked, let alone adjacent, in my experiences."

Photos by Jerry Zolynsky

Preserving The Earth

Young Detroiter blends environmental spirit with Judaism.

Shelli Liebman Dorfman
Senior Writer

Growing up in West Bloomfield, Blair Nosan could not have imagined making her home in an urban prairie or choosing the unlikely profession of becoming a pickler.

"There's not much I can think of that's more intriguing, bizarre or comical than a 25-year-old purporting to form her career around being elbow deep in brine," said Nosan, who owns and runs the Detroit-based artisanal fermented pickle business, Suddenly Sauer. But it's part of what she does to fulfill her passions for preparing new foods and teaching others how to make homegrown products.

"And I can base what I do in my house, 20 minutes from the suburb where my parents live," she said. "It is an amazing cultural experience and culture shock. I can be close to my family — parents Jo-Anne and Terry and sister Stephanie, 22, in West Bloomfield — but in a place where I am less than two miles from downtown and I can look out the window into gardens, freeways and open space."

Nosan's introduction to the pickle business was accompanied by an unexpected bond with Judaism.

In 2008, she graduated from University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with a triple major in English, French and women's studies. She had lived for four months in France in 2005.

"At that time, I had little interest in Judaism," she said. "I had worked on an organic farm and a 'from-scratch' pizza kitchen. I studied the arts in college, not environmentalism — not pickling, for sure. [In France], I fell in love with the European food system that provides for a more universal access to fresh, quality food."

Nosan considered going to graduate school, maybe becoming a professor.

"Nothing really sparked my imagination, though," she said. "My sister, Loren, who is 28 and lives in Portland, had worked on a

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Celebrate Tu B'Shevat!

Thursday, Jan. 20:

- 6:45 p.m., Orchard Mall, 6445 Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield: Hands-on, young family event led by Martha Goldberg of Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield. Wear green or homemade tree costume. Information: kdavis@shaareyzedek.org or (248) 357-5544, ext. 60. No charge.

- 5-7 p.m., Aish in the Woods, 25725 Coolidge Highway, Oak Park. Shalom Family challah-baking program sponsored by Federation's Alliance for Jewish Education. 5-6 p.m. challah-baking open house; 5:30-6:15 p.m. pizza dinner and Tu b'Shevat fruits; 6-7 p.m. challah braiding, book reading, sing-a-long. $18.

Sunday, Jan. 23:

- 10 a.m.-noon, Matthaei Botanical Gardens, 1800 N. Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor. (734) 647-7600.

- 4:30 p.m., Jewish Community Center, 6600 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield. Sponsored by the JCC's Shalom Street. Children's Tu b'Shevat activities and counting of pennies to be donated to JNF. Call (248) 432-5451 or e-mail tabohasira@jccdet.org. No charge.

- 5 p.m., Temple Emanu-El in Oak Park. Potluck vegetarian family-friendly seder. Cantor Darcie Sharlein and singer-guitarist Steve Klaper will explain symbolic foods for the holiday and lead music, stories and activities. Last name beginning A-J, bring dessert; K-S, bring main veggie dish; T-Z, salad. RSVP by Jan. 21: (248) 967-4020. $5; $10/family.

- To make a donation or plant a tree in Israel, contact the Jewish National Fund at (248) 324-3080 or access the website at www.jnf.org. All tree donations will support the rebuilding of the Carmel Forest in northern Israel, which was devastated by fire.

farm and she was an inspiration to me in general, so I looked into the possibility."

While searching online about farming apprenticeships, Nosan found the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center website. That find would change the course of her professional and religious life.

After graduation, she spent eight months in Falls Village, Ct., on Adamah: the Jewish Environmental Fellowship, sponsored by the Freedman Center. The fellowship is a leadership training program for young adults connecting Judaism with environmentalism, integrating organic farming, sustainable living, Jewish learning, community building and contemplative spiritual practice.

Lessons Of The Land

"Judaism and environmentalism had never before been linked, let alone adjacent, in my experiences," Nosan said.

She spent a summer and a fall at Adamah, staying on past her fellowship to be an apprentice in a commercial pickle kitchen.

"Judaism was really brought to life there in a way I had never experienced before," she said. "We were using Judaism as a reason to take care of the Earth, to be a participant in the world around us. We were also being Jewish in the sense of engaging in Jewish tradition and singing songs, being exposed to the excitement of being Jewish. For the first time, I felt I identified with a Jewish community and that coincides with how I felt about the environment and Earth-centered Judaism."

Another important revelation came from her experience.

"I had left Michigan thinking I would not go back, but agriculture-based Judaism taught me the value of roots, and I ultimately found myself yearning for home, to bring the lessons I learned back to the Metro Detroit community," Nosan said.

Since returning to Michigan in 2009, Nosan has worked in Ann Arbor preparing seasonal meals with the Harvest Kitchen and freezing fresh produce with Locavorious. In Detroit, she worked with AmeriCorps as an urban agriculture apprentice at the Greening of Detroit, where she was able to use her expertise in pickling and preserving food.

Her decision of where to live came easily.

"I knew what I wanted was to work in food and food justice and to live in the city," she said. "I grew up near the city, but had no relationship to it other than seldom-attended cultural events downtown. And when I was a junior in high school, I participated in Summer in the City [a nonprofit designed to improve and expand community service in Metro Detroit]. I wanted to live in an urban area exposing

Straight from the ground — garlic used in pickling

me to something new, but I wanted to be near my family."

Since August 2009, Nosan has lived in three neighborhoods before settling into Detroit's North Corktown.

"It's one of many neighborhoods where gardening and farming has long been a solution for vacant urban lots," Nosan said. "The excess land is used for a myriad of interesting projects, including individual and community gardens. There's a farm-for-profit just up the street; and my upstairs neighbors have a beautiful garden in the lot next door. A lot of my friends in the neighborhood have chickens."

Jewish Knowledge

"I'm always eager to share my experiences and the value they've added to my life, particularly my Jewish life," Nosan said.

She joked that this week is "her busy time," with requests from synagogues and agencies to share her expertise in relation to the Jewish holiday of Tu b'Shevat, which falls on Thursday, Jan. 20.

The holiday, dubbed the "New Year for Trees," "Jewish Arbor Day" or even "Jewish Earth Day," marks the start of a new cycle for the tithe on fruit-bearing trees in Israel, a sharing of the bounty with those in need and a time for the land to rest during each Sabbatical year.

According to the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), Tu b'Shevat can be celebrated with ecological restoration activities, by eating fruits — like grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates — and through educational events relating to protecting the Earth. Tu b'Shevat is a time to plant trees or make donations to the Jewish National Fund to have trees planted in Israel.

Nicole Jahr, director of education at Congregation Beth Shalom in Oak Park, contacted Nosan about sharing her expertise. "Tu b'Shevat is an environmental holiday and I was looking for new ideas to bring to my high school program," Jahr said.

Nosan will teach in a joint program with seventh- and eighth-graders from Beth Shalom and Temple Emanu-El in Oak Park. "The program will focus on winter foods found locally and native/ancient foods of Israel," Jahr said. "Blair is a visionary. She is passionate and knowledgeable and the Detroit Jewish community is ready to utilize her passion for Jewish environmentalism by bringing her ideas to Jewish children and families."

Nosan teaches Jewish environmentalism through Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Township, where she graduated from religious school, and Temple Israel in West Bloomfield.

"I started by teaching four classes at Beth El and I loved it," she said. "This year, I will teach 10 lessons to eighth- and 10th-graders."

Her course includes an introduction to Judaism and agriculture as well as making sauerkraut with the students.

At Temple Israel, she teaches a fourth- through sixth-grade environmental mitzvah program that was already written and implemented. Beginning next month, she will begin to teach her own curriculum.

"Blair contacted me, looking to find a way to communicate her passion for environmentalism," said Beth El's rabbinic associate, Keren Alpert. "She also wanted to share how her pathway back to Judaism — after being a disaffected young adult — was through environmentalism and through her discovery of all the implicit Jewish values that are imbedded in environmentalism."

Both women had been involved with the Isabella Freeman Retreat Center, where Alpert began work for her rabbinic training and Blair participated in Adamah.

"We began to work together to develop two mini-courses; and we studied texts together and talked about adolescent development and creation of lesson plans," Alpert said.

"She has now taught her mini-course for two years and is developing a Tu b'Shevat component as well. The students enjoy Blair and are beginning to understand the intersecting space that Jewish values and environmentalism share.

"I think Blair is a wonderful role model for the children, who can see that social action is Jewish action. I also applaud her work to make sure that we consume food in a more intentional manner."

Nosan added, "I really love adult education and would like to develop more connections with Jewish institutions."

Community Teaching

Nosan runs food preparation, preservation and fermentation classes from a mobile kitchen she brings to homes, classrooms and community centers. She hopes to have kitchen space in the Corktown area sometime next year.

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Workshops and classes include those on vegetable and dairy fermentation, freezing, drying and canning as well as ice cream making. Prices for classes, which are held for 6-20 participants, begin at $35 per person. Nosan also holds children's parties as well as children's and adult events.

"When I teach pickling classes to adult Jews, I love hearing how many of them remember being able to go the neighborhood deli and putting their hand into a crock to choose their pickle," she said.

Nosan has taught classes on food preservation for the Garden Resource Program and freelances for community gardeners and Jewish environmental events.

Working with young adults, she said, is like "reclaiming the knowledge of our grandparents' generation."

"My classes on making butter bring back a lost art and remind people of their capacity to create simple staple foods themselves," she said.

Keren Alpert

Her cultured dairy and vegetable fermentation classes are taught locally and are among those she has taught at the Hazon Food Conference in California, sponsored by Hazon, America's largest Jewish environmental group.

"Many young people who recognize the value of knowing who produces the food they eat, often preferring organic choices, have come to support local CSA (community-supported agriculture), thereby also helping the local economy," said Betsy Winkelman, chair of the Michigan Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (MI-COEJL), a Bloomfield Hills-based special project of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Metropolitan Detroit.

"The small local farmer's crop yields more variety and intense flavor as it can be harvested close to ripeness — a benefit unavailable to food shipped from afar."

Going Into Business

In August, Nosan launched her own business, Suddenly Sauer, featuring artisanal hand-pickled products.

Using only chemical-free produce, Nosan's products include dilly beans, hot head cauliflower, olive-style green tomatoes, Lebanese turnips and classic kraut, priced from $5-$7. Created in Nosan's home kitchen, Suddenly Sauer products are pre-sold with subscriptions through a "pickle club," and picked up at community events.

"Not only do I get to meet people at the events who may later buy my products, but also shoppers who are not from the downtown area get to see downtown when they come pick up their purchases," Nosan said.

Noam Kimelman, 24, of Detroit is a member of Suddenly Sauer's pickle club. Nosan's friend from the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue in Detroit, where they are both active, Kimelman says the pickles are fantastic.

"Blair has a really great skill and she might as well use it to help bring good food to the community," he said.

Suddenly Sauer was begun with Nosan's saved and invested funds. At the start, she received the first micro grant from Soup at Spaulding, a grassroots weekly fundraising dinner in Detroit. Monetarily, the grant was small — just $50 — but the support showed that Nosan's idea was a winner. For now, Nosan is the business' only employee. Her boyfriend, Ben Chodoroff of Detroit, created and maintains the Suddenly Sauer website through theworkdept.com.

"A lot of my Jewish friends work in other areas of food and food justice," she said.

Her hope is to create and encourage programs like Adamah and other Jewish projects to come here and for young people to know there could be a place for them in the Detroit area.

"I've been thrilled to see a growing interest in food and agriculture arrive alongside a desire for traditional food knowledge," Nosan said. "Canning, fermenting, drying and root-cellaring, all so recently discarded, are being sought after with gusto."

Added Winkelman, "Blair Nosan is living the 21st-century locavore's dream and sharing it with others through her teaching of various methods of food preservation, once common. Her focus on teaching young people is indicative of the growing recognition that these activities provide satisfaction and value beyond the food itself." □

Suddenly Sauer products or classes: www.suddenlysauer.com or e-mail blair@suddenlysauer.com. MI-COEJL: (248) 642-5393, ext. 7; mi-coejl@jfmd.org or www.mi-coejl.org.