

# ECO-USHPIZIN: WOMEN TAKE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

## *A Sukkot Invitation*

Sukkot is an equinox holiday—day and night are equal, all is in balance; its purpose is to encourage us to pause in life before the onset of winter.

The Torah enjoins Jews to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and to build fragile “sukkot” in which to dwell seven days.

The ceremonial use of these booths came from the custom of farm workers’ building little huts in the fields so they could rest, protected from the midday sun.

At the height of the harvest, workers also spent their nights there.

At Sukkot, our autumn holidays come to an end, and then, a day later, we scroll all the way back to the start of the Bible:  
“In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.”

The sukkah is a frail shelter that can easily be buffeted by rain and wind, but the liturgy specifically instructs us to “sit there.”

Why should we be enjoined to sit in an inadequate shelter?  
Because true shelter resides not in stronger walls, not in more square feet, but in being in harmony with what *is*, in feeling connected to life, and its inexorable processes.

We “sit there” as well to understand nature—where the harvest came from, that huge natural processes sustain us.

There is a tradition of inviting mystical guests—known as *ushpizin*—into one’s sukkah, one per night:

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David.

We rejoice in the fruits of our harvest,  
and that makes us feel particularly welcoming and hospitable.  
*But hold it. Where are the women?*

In the following pages, Lilith invites them in.  
These are women who have really “sat there” in sukkot,  
and they bring back timely messages:  
*Connecting with the earth, protecting it, is a religious value.*

If it’s not your tradition to build a sukkah, take these pages, and clothespins, to a public park. Pin them on trees—they can be your sukkah.  
Add a song, a reading and our guests, as well as yours—*eco-ushpizin*.



**TRUCK FARMER:** Esther Mandelheim Elliott, 28

*With husband Pablo, she runs Stoney Lonesome Farm and its “eat local” CSA (Community Supported Agriculture Program) on 91 acres in Gainesville, Virginia.*

**I** lived in St. Petersburg until I was nine, and my earliest memories are of playing in the woods—with acorns, sticks, weeds. I could spend a whole day with myself examining “pieces of dirt.” I am very nostalgic for that. In the early fall, my grandmother—we called her Babulya—would take us to pick mushrooms near the Finnish border. There were swamps and cranberry bogs; the smells were so earthy. After my family moved to America, I went twice back to Russia to go up the river in my uncle’s little boat. We smoked our own fish and ate wild blueberries. It was very satisfying.

In New York, my parents sent me to *yeshiva*. In Russia there was such a climate of fear that we were deprived of Jewish knowledge. But in America, in school, Judaism took root at the core of my being—it became my guide for everyday things, large and small. In college, for the first time, I was able to begin putting together Jewish observance and a passion for nature. Pablo, a friend from Vassar, invited me to stay on his family’s farm—it was very neglected—and help him start a CSA. We became boyfriend and girlfriend, Pablo converted, and we were married under a full moon.

Our CSA is in its fourth year. We have 85 members. Membership is \$490 a year; \$440 if you help with the farm work. In the spring, members get lettuces and greens, herbs, cool weather vegetables. In the summer we harvest zucchini, potatoes, garlic, onions, dill, rosemary, cukes, peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, zinnias and sunflowers. In the fall we pick cabbage and winter squashes, carrots, kale and other leafy greens. Everything is delivered the day it is picked. You could not eat any fresher. It is a tremendous amount of work for us, and this year, our fourth, we are, finally, almost breaking even.

Pablo and I are still very much learning. Should we scale back the CSA? Host people to work the farm? Move towards bio-intensive farming? We both have, more generally, a deep interest in education. Can we combine farming in some way with teaching? Our goal, of course, is to make a living without killing ourselves in the process.

Shabbat and the Jewish holidays sustain us. It is so healthy to stop working. If we didn’t rest and feel spiritually renewed, the exhaustion—physical and mental—would be too much. Shabbat enhances our ability to farm, and farming highlights for us the importance of Shabbat, and of Judaism more generally. It’s challenging being observant—this year, both Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot fall on our CSA distribution days—but it is also our observance that propels us forward. Rosh Hodesh, Sukkot, the lunar calendar, the first full moon after our season ends—these are “organic” markers for us. We are discovering not only back-to-the-land farming, but back-to-the-land Judaism.

— as told to Susan Schnur.



Esther, whom would you like to invite into Lilith’s sukkah?

Friends whom I’ve fed through their pregnancies—that’s been amazing. Also, Blu Greenberg, the well-known Orthodox feminist. She’s honest about the effort involved in making Shabbat and the holidays happen.

Who’s a significant role model?

My mother. She wasn’t born Jewish, but she has clung to the Jewish people. She’s a wonderful cook, a seamstress, a weaver, a baker. She has a green thumb. She’s my model of simple living.

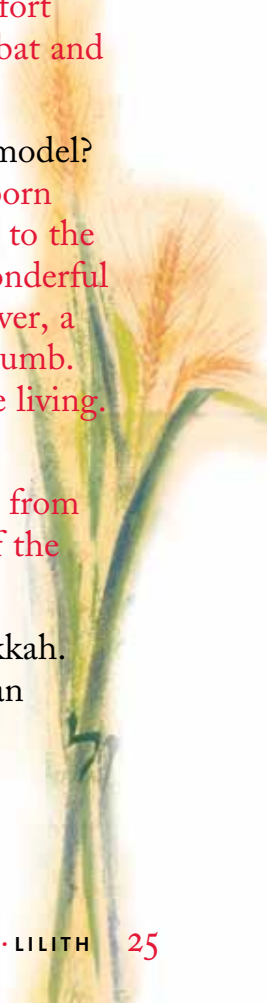
What shakes your lulav?

The deep ethical concept from Torah to be a *caretaker* of the Earth, not an owner.

The Earth is a fragile sukkah.

What one act of repair can we undertake?

Grow a vegetable.



Tzipi, whom would you like to invite into Lilith's sukkah?

Children, of course. Let me start at home by inviting Nir and Noa, who are six, and Ron, who is eight.

Who's a significant role model?

Yehudit Naot. She was Minister of the Environment under Ariel Sharon, and she actively lobbied for the position—other Ministers of the Environment just got stuck with it. Her advocacy made me realize that I, too, could do something significant, like help found an organization.

What shakes your lulav?

Fighting for Israel's Clean Air Act, which is now in its third round of negotiations.

The Earth is a fragile sukkah. What one act of repair can we undertake?

Help one child understand how everything that she or he does—ride a bicycle, make trash, hang laundry on a clothesline—affects our environment.

## LEGAL EAGLE: Tzipi Iser Itzik, 38

*Across the pond in Israel, she defends air and water.*

**I** was working as a lawyer for 10 years when I got pregnant with my first child, Ron, and suddenly became very ill with intestinal and urinary problems and overall weakness and malaise. I saw in the newspaper that a local plant had contaminated the wells in Herzliya, and so I stopped drinking the water. My symptoms disappeared. If I hadn't been pregnant—thinking about the health of my child as well as my own—I don't think I would have experienced this environmental connection as such an awakening.

I left my law firm, and helped found *Adam Teva v'Din* ("People, Nature and the Law"), also called the Israel Union for Environmental Defense. I'm the Executive Director. We lead the field in fighting for environmental issues—clean air and water, sustainable development—and in bringing issues and lawsuits before the Knesset and the Supreme Court. We have 30 employees—lawyers, clerks, scientists, environmental specialists—and more than 4000 members. Right now the Knesset is

debating the Israeli version of the Clean Air Act—*Adam Teva v'Din* drafted the original version—and it is, of course, very controversial. People want Israel to be an environmentally safe place to live, but there is also the economy. We are an industrial nation; Israel's financial health matters very much.

Ironically, perhaps, the issues that *Adam Teva v'Din* helps bring before the Knesset are often the only ones that both secular and religious members of parliament can agree on! *Adam Teva v'Din* has many publications, and we quote liberally from the Bible, using it as a text that impels us—culturally, historically and religiously—to act with environmental responsibility. I'm not personally religious—most of us working for the environment are secular—but many members of the Knesset are religious, and we need to be inclusive, to get them to step on board with these issues, too.

There is no question that my commitment to environmental causes comes not only from being a lawyer, but from motherhood. I think that many of us who are female professionals do what we do because of our children—we want a better world for them, whether that be societally, legally, or environmentally. Israel is a very child-positive culture; being a parent is a very important cultural value. My professional skills and experience are my greatest assets, but what drives me are my children.

— as told to Melanie Weiss.





## FRYING-PAN BODHISATTVA: Betsy Teutsch, 54

*She models mindful consumption in a world that says “buy, buy, buy.”*

**N**ot long ago, my father died—he was a frugal, modest guy—and I came into some money. Woo. I needed to think about what to do with this money, and it struck me, even though our culture encourages constant material acquisition, that I really had everything I needed. I started [www.moneychangesthings.blogspot.com](http://www.moneychangesthings.blogspot.com) to mull it all over, to write about my personal decision-making processes when it comes to buying, and to write about wanting to be part of the “solution”—I can afford it.

For some years, for example, I had wanted a Prius, kind of as a “vanity item,” and because I felt embarrassed to be seen driving around in my mini-SUV, a 1999 Subaru Forrester. It really made no sense for me to get rid of the Forrester, though—it had only logged 50,000 miles. I decided, instead of the Prius, to drive as little as possible, and to keep track of my mileage. Over time, I “localized” my life, relocating my hairdresser, doctor, masseuse and bank. I biked, walked, used mass transit and ride-pooled—the latter is pleasantly social—and got my mileage down to 2500 miles a year. People in my circumstances can edit their lives enormously, without sacrificing quality-of-life. And the act of editing is a very spiritual one, because you’re saying, “I have what I need.”

I blogged about my decision to buy a second frying pan—it took me 25 years to give myself permission to do that!—and about how the purchase made a huge difference to me. I didn’t have to wait until one whole batch of schnitzel was finished before I could start the next one. You can spend \$15 and really experience a quality-of-life improvement; buying a second house may not contribute as much to your sense of well-being.

Recycling bins in Israel also interested me. They are standard in most neighborhoods, and are huge, room-sized cages made of wire, with holes the width of a bottle. You just plop your recyclables in there. In Tel Aviv, people have turned them into works of art, with mosaic tiles, hamsas and wild things.

In 2003, I co-launched Freecycle.org in Philadelphia, an online community of people who need things and people who want to divest themselves of things. Everything is free. There is an immense amount of surplus in our culture. People get rid of boats, laptops, pianos, unused Nordic tracks. When you upgrade your camera, what do you do with your old digital one? Sometimes I think: How did all this *stuff* wind up in my house, most of it uninvited?

I also blogged about my husband’s mother, Hilda, a German refugee (she came to this country in 1939) who was frugal and never wasteful—habits that put me off at first; Americans really look down at thrift. I realized at some point, though, that I had *become* her. I save all the rubber bands that the mail comes in, and when I had a huge pile recently, I returned them to the post office. “Do people do this?” I asked the clerk at the counter. “You’re the first in 10 years,” she said.

—as told to Susan Schnur.

Betsy, whom would you like to invite into Lilith’s sukkah?

Juliet Schorr, who wrote *The Overworked American* and *The Overspent American*. She describes voluntary simplicity. Fifty percent of gifts go right into the closet and are never used. Did you know that?

Who’s a significant role model?

My friend, Meenal Raval, who is further along the path than I am. She gets an idea—“this is the next thing I need to do.” Currently she’s retrofitting her house with solar panels.

What shakes your lulav?

Dual-flush toilets. They’re common in Israel, but they’re hard to procure here.

The Earth is a fragile sukkah. What one act of repair can we undertake?

Get out of your car.

## VEGGIE PIONEER: Dr. Roberta Kalechofsky, 76

Writer, public speaker, the brains behind Micah Publications ([www.micahbooks.com](http://www.micahbooks.com)), the source for Jewish vegetarian and animal rights books.



**I** was raised in Brooklyn by carnivores. As a teenager, I would tell my boyfriends, “Please, no steak. Mom cooks it three times a week.” There was one vegetable in my childhood: overcooked string beans. And one ingredient in salad: iceberg lettuce.

I started Micah Publications in 1978, and at first we published only fiction; I was very involved in the world of independent publishers. One day in 1983, I received an unsolicited manuscript called *Judaism and Vegetarianism* by a Richard Schwartz. I had no interest in the topic, but I believe in reading the first 25 pages of any submission—I feel it’s a responsibility—and this author is describing the veal industry, how calves are raised in crates on “factory farms.”

I call my kosher butcher immediately. “I want you to listen to this,” and I read him a few paragraphs. “This guy’s got to be crazy,” I tell him. “Isn’t the whole point of *kashrut* that animals are raised humanely and slaughtered humanely?” “No,” he says. “All meat raised for commercial markets is raised the same way. We just kill the animals differently.” “Then this meat was never kosher and never will be,” I said. That was it. I became an instant vegetarian.

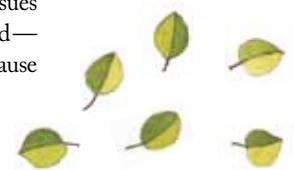
One thing led to another. I published Richard’s book, and I became very active in the North American Jewish Vegetarian Society. We used to meet in the Catskills at The Vegetarian Hotel, which is no longer there. I educated myself on how to become a good cook—I really had to, it was a new regime, and otherwise I would have had rebels on my hands, my husband and children. I’ve written and edited many books, including *Hagaddah for the Liberated Lamb*—there’s

a beautiful gift edition on purple linen, as well as the paperback; *The Jewish Vegetarian Year Cookbook*, which is vegan; *Rabbis and Vegetarianism: An Evolving Tradition*; and an anthology, *Judaism and Animal Rights: Classical and Contemporary Responses*, which has 41 articles by rabbis, doctors, veterinarians and activists. My interests grew to involve everything that has to do with food: food labeling, politics, gene-tampering, nutrition.

Micah Publications sells two bumper stickers: “Vegetarianism is an Affordable Health Plan” and “Real Environmentalists Don’t Eat Meat.” They get to the heart of the issue, which is that healthcare costs will always be high if people continue to eat the wrong things, and environmental costs will always be high because the meat industry puts a tremendous strain on the earth’s resources. Cattle contribute more to global warming than automobiles do. For me, organic means “God’s plan.”

If I were Neanderthal, I’d write for Neanderthals. But I’m a Jew—Jews possess the longest history of meditations on the ethics of diet. Who should be more involved in these issues than us? Our values oblige us to be involved—because of our history, because of justice, because this is the best diet for poor people.

— as told to Susan Schnur.



Roberta, whom would you like to invite into Lilith’s sukkah?  
**My bubbe. I used to sit on her porch in Brooklyn eating bags of *gribenes* [chicken skin] and *schmaltz*. She’d save them for me. What did we know from diet or exercise?**

Who’s been a significant role model?  
**David Rosen, the diplomat (and Orthodox rabbi) who engineered the Vatican’s recognition of Israel. When people ask him why he’s vegetarian, he says, “Because I’m a Jew.”**

What shakes your lulav?  
**Vegetarian eating and cooking are tremendous adventures.**

The Earth is a fragile sukkah. What one act of repair can we offer?  
**As the saying goes, “Don’t eat anything with a face.”**



## **OUTDOOR EDUCATOR:** Nili Simhai, 35

*Director of the Teva Learning Center, she teaches Judaism through the lens of nature.*

**I** grew up in a Farsi-speaking family, first in Israel, then Teheran, and finally in Cleveland, where I attended a Hebrew Day School. I was one of those kids who just always taught Hebrew on the side. I loved being Jewish. Another part of me was passionate about nature; nothing made me happier than being with my cats in our little suburban backyard. I majored in Wildlife Management at Ohio State, and my folks thought I was crazy. “This is not a career,” was my father’s line. “It’s a hobby.” I assumed I’d get a doctorate and do research, but then one summer I taught at a nature center. “This is it,” I thought. “I was meant to teach.”

So there I was, *shomer Shabbat* [an observant Jew], flipping through an environmental job catalogue and thinking, “If *only* I could combine this with being Jewish!” I literally turned the page at that moment, and there it was: “Jewish Environmental Educators Wanted.” And that’s how I got to Teva. I’ve been here 10 years.

At Teva, we teach Jewish studies—the holidays, prayer, Jewish values—in contact with God’s creation. Teva does weeklong and Shabbat retreats—for Jewish Day Schools, for groups of bar/bat mitzvah kids, for families; synagogue life is no longer just “Hebrew School” or “Men’s Clubs.” We teach about 3000 people a year—in the summer in Cold Spring, New York, in the fall in Falls Village, Connecticut, and in the spring we move the whole show to Baltimore. We sponsor a four-day conference every year, and we send educators out to whomever wants us. At the height of our year, we have 18 to 20 people teaching, most of them 20-somethings. We’ve grown into being such a rich and supportive community.

The sort of thing we do is, say, blindfold students and then walk them to a scenic overlook. “Say the first word that comes to your mind,” we instruct them, and then we whip off the blindfold. “Wow.” “Oooohhh.” “Spectacular!” We let them soak it in for a little while. Then we say, “Did you know there’s a traditional *bracha* [prayer] for moments of awe like this?” At that moment one of two things happens: Either something comes alive for them in Judaism, or something comes alive for them in nature.

At Gesher Jewish Day School in Fairfax, Virginia, we’re constructing a curriculum that can be used outdoors for teaching everything—Mishna, science, *tefilla* [prayer]. We’re planting a “*Hagim* [holidays], Shabbat and Havdalah Garden”—the Havdalah one full of herbs; the Shabbat one full of different flowers. And we have a Rosh HaShana curriculum tied to composting—teaching *tshuva* [repentance] through parallels with the compost bin. Jewish biblical and Talmudic texts are just stuffed with agriculture and nature.

The ripple effect—I really believe in it. You teach people, they go out into the world and teach people, and then these people teach people, and on and on into new communities. We all work from such a place of joy. I think the synergy of faith and nature makes you joyful.

—as told to Susan Schnur.

Nili, whom would you like to invite into Lilith’s sukkah?

**Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb.**

He was walking across the country as part of an interfaith group whose mission it was to raise environmental awareness. I was in 11th grade. He stopped at a local shul to give a talk. Some part of my mind never forgot this.

Who’s been a significant role model?

Whoever wrote, “Vocation is where the heart’s deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.”

What shakes your lulav?

Once I was backpacking and I found this huge purple caterpillar that did backflips when you held it in your hand. I was exhausted and hungry, but I shouted a *bracha* [prayer]. It was the most real prayer I ever said in my life.

The Earth is a fragile sukkah. What one act of repair can we offer?

Take a hike on *Shabbos* and say a prayer—either a traditional one, or one you make up yourself.



## ACTIVIST/EXECUTIVE: Barbara Lerman-Golomb, 48

*Lifelong volunteer, she brings eco-consciousness to synagogues.*



**M**y maternal grandparents were always on the ramparts politically and socially, so for me, activism was the air I breathed. In high school, Thoreau was a big influence; in college, I made a film about the dangers of nuclear power which radically changed me.

As a young mother, the dioxin in diapers—the notion that babies' little bottoms were in contact with a known carcinogen—propelled my husband and me to switch to cloth diapers, which we washed at home. When my oldest daughter was in nursery school, I volunteered as the “Shabbat Mom”—it involved helping with lunch—and I watched these kids throw everything in the garbage. At the same time, I was a volunteer at a soup kitchen in Trenton, and I saw kids there who routinely went to bed hungry. It was all so disturbing.

In 1993, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was getting off the ground, and I became very active, speaking at synagogues about the connection between Judaism and the environment, about stewardship and the need to live “sustainably.” I worked with an interfaith group in New Jersey called GreenFaith whose mission it was to get churches and synagogues to switch to renewable energies: solar, wind, hydroelectric. I wrote a lot, on topics like toxic lawn spray—suburbanites have an insane fear of dandelions. I created environmental curricula; I was more or less on a rampage. In 2001, COEJL sent me and seven other Jewish environmental educators (plus rabbis) to the remote Tongass National Park in Alaska. It was a silent retreat—except for Shabbat, when we *davvened*, sang and had discussions. For 10 days, we sea-kayaked, ate organically, saw the effects of clear-cut forests. The experience was life-changing.

From 2004 until recently I worked at COEJL, first as its Communications

Barbara, whom would you like to invite into Lilith's sukkah?

**My mother.** In the 1950's, she had three natural childbirths when it was unheard of. She was progressive in a lot of ways. Also, Rachel Carson.

Who's a significant role model?

**Nachman of Bratslav, the 18th-century Hasidic rebbe.** He gets it: He prayed out-of-doors.

What shakes your lulav?

**The Garden of Eden.** Also, Brooklyn, where I gave up my car, use the public park, and live in much less square-footage than I did in the suburbs. Our family's carbon footprint is heading towards neutral.

The Earth is a fragile sukkah. What one act of repair can we undertake?

**Go online and figure out your carbon footprint. It's easy and fun. Then multiply that number by everyone on the planet, and see how many Earths we would need to sustain your habits.**

Director and then as Executive Director. I originated a Chanukah campaign called “How Many Jews Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?” We delivered compact fluorescent bulbs (CFL's)—which are energy-efficient, affordable, and can be bought just about anywhere by now—to synagogues and Jewish institutions, for their own use and for congregants' home use. We distributed 50,000 bulbs—that prevents 18,000 tons of carbon dioxide from going into the atmosphere. Across the US, we had Jews changing their light bulbs for Chanukah. Some synagogues have put in solar *nerot tamid* [eternal lights].

We also brought the Al Gore film, “An Inconvenient Truth,” to synagogues. Why? Because people need to understand that the imperiled environment is a Jewish issue—it's a spiritual issue, it's a religious issue. Judaism's new social justice cause is the environment.

—as told to Susan Schnur.



And don't miss **BLOGMEISTER:** Leah Koenig, 25

Editor of "The Jew and the Carrot" ([www.jcarrot.org](http://www.jcarrot.org)), the "front page and voice of the emerging Jewish food movement," a project of Hazon ([www.hazon.org](http://www.hazon.org)).

**C**yberspace Jews really want to eat less passively, to know where their food comes from, how healthy it is, whether their consumption is ethical, what Judaism has to say about genetically modified food. We see Judaism as having a very rich history of eating communally—Jews eat! And we deeply understand how eating together creates community. Unlike our grandmothers, many of us work full-time and have a broader definition of "family"—we don't generally live near our biological ones, we truly celebrate "difference," and we have non-Jews around our dinner tables.

Recently we've been cyber-debating about whether to *shecht* [to kill in accordance with kashrut] a goat at Hazon's upcoming annual food conference. Vegetarians are against it, but meat-eaters are divided. Some want to be in touch with taking a life, some fear being *that* in touch, some wonder whether such an experience will turn them into vegetarians.

We love making Shabbat dinner—the smell of challah wafting through the house, the surprise of what's in a weekly haul of CSA vegetables. Bok choy? Turnips? We find the improvisatory aspect of cooking from whatever the Earth serves up that week very exciting. Personally, my cookbook "bibles" are Madhur Jaffrey's *World Vegetarian* and Deborah Madison's *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone*. What runs through my veins? Kale. Sauté it with garlic, soy sauce and ginger. Put it in a frittata. Grate it (raw and fine) into salads. The *Jew and the Carrot's* cyber community wants the larger Jewish world to eat together more—especially on Shabbat—and to eat increasingly "sustainably."

—as told to Susan Schnur.



Illustrations by Sharon Binder [www.sharonartwork.com](http://www.sharonartwork.com).

## DEAR READER

### *We Now Extend the Invitation to You!*

Whom would *you* like to bring into Lilith's sukkah?

Who has been a significant eco-role-model for *you*?

What shakes *your* lulav?

The Earth is a fragile sukkah—what one act of repair can *you* offer?



In thinking about Eco-Ushpizin,  
three Jewish ethical principles are useful to know:

*Bal Tashchit:* Do Not Waste Nature's Resources.

*Tzaar Baalei Chayyim:* Refrain from Hurting Animals.

*Shmirat HaGuf:* Treat Your Body—and the Earth's—as Sacred.



*May we dwell in balance in the coming year.*

*May we give thanks for all that we have reaped.*

*May we sustain the Earth as She sustains us:*

*With abundance.*

*Amen.*