

Communal Provisioning and Community Abundance: Operationalizing Jewish Concepts of Gleaning through Design

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INTRODUCTION

Each year, more than 10% of the U.S. population experiences food insecurity.¹ Historically, many faith-based organizations have focused on alleviating hunger as an expression of their values. As these organizations are some of the largest non-governmental landowners in the world,² some of their less productive land holdings could be repurposed to directly address food justice. In Jewish practice, Biblical literature outlines laws providing agricultural support in the form of fallen grain and fruit available for post-harvest gleaning.³ Two associated projects, *Abundance Farm* and the *Food Security and Sustainability Hub*, provide design examples that address food justice by operationalizing Jewish traditions of the commons.

GLEANING

Biblical agricultural laws outline three types of gleanings that pass into the public domain: the first are gleanings that are dropped while harvesting, the second are gleanings that are

inadvertently left behind when the crops are being transferred, and the third are the corners of the fields, or *pe'ah*, which were not meant to be harvested at all.⁴ The rabbinic literature details the spatiality of *pe'ah*, rendering a concrete dimension to farmers' social responsibility. The injunction stipulates that the corners comprise at least one-sixtieth of the field no matter how large or how small, and that these peripheral edibles be left for the hungry to harvest with dignity. Gleaning is one of several practices outlined in the *Torah* that aim to address economic precarity; along with gleaning, agricultural rest and debt forgiveness were traditional practices that aimed for social, economic, and environmental resets in pursuit of a just society.⁵ (Figure 1)

Jewish constructions of time remained synced to the cycles of an agricultural calendar.⁶ Community members are encouraged to address food insecurity throughout the year with a particular emphasis on contributing food as part of holiday ritual observance. Further, the Jewish Community Farming Network seeks to reconnect to agriculturally and ecologically based seasonal rhythms. The thirteen member organizations



Figure 1. Shmita Plot at Abundance Farm. Caryn Brause.

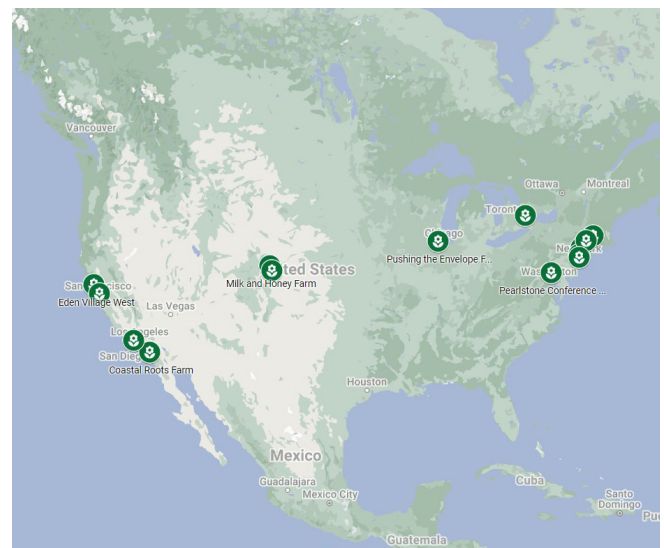


Figure 2. Jewish Community Farming Field. Jewish Community Farming Network.



Figure 3. Abundance Farm Help Yourself Farmstand doubles as welcoming signage. Caryn Brause.



Figure 4. Planting the orchard along the street frontage. Caryn Brause.

advance an ethical imperative in the form of a “commitment to food justice, equitable food systems, and access to sustainably grown food for all.”⁷ While the farms are varied in size, location, terrain, and programming, the projects and activities they undertake are animated by the traditional agricultural laws that concern themselves with social justice. (Figure 2)

ABUNDANCE FARM

Abundance Farm is a one-acre food justice farm and outdoor education classroom. The project developed through collaborations between three neighboring institutions - a synagogue, that owns the land and provides staff, utilities, and programming; a food pantry serving over 3,000 people per year; and a Jewish elementary school that incorporates the farm into their curriculum. Over the past decade, *Abundance Farm* has integrated land-based programming into the Jewish community’s ritual life while offering a variety of programming for the broader community.

Abundance Farm has operationalized Jewish concepts of social justice through spatial and design practices as well as through dynamic programming. For example, to activate the spatial concept of *pe-ah*, the design team located a pick-your-own orchard along the synagogue’s street frontage; the orchard repurposes the institution’s otherwise ceremonial front lawn, providing perennial fruits and berries to passersby and those in need. (Figures 3 and 4) Moreover, the *Help Yourself Farmstand*, a cnc-fabricated kiosk, was designed as a highly visible and



Figure 5. Shared Abundance Garden. Abundance Farm.

publicly deployed outreach element inviting the public to freely share in the harvest.

To address the concept of communal abundance through programming, *Abundance Farm’s* community harvest program runs two afternoons a week from late spring through the fall. By hosting these afternoon “Pick Your Own” events, all members of the community, whether they are food insecure or not, are invited to harvest produce together in a dignified manner, sharing agricultural wisdom, skills, and recipes.

The Farm’s spatial dimensions expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic when a long-envisioned program of dispersed gardens was launched. The *Shared Abundance Gardens* initiative promotes and supports home gardening from even the smallest scale container gardens. A collective of experienced and novice gardeners sign on to purchase shared materials, offer technical support and advice, and commit to sharing the fruits of their harvest. (Figure 5) By displaying “Help Yourself” signs throughout the region, the Farm promotes a vision, grounded in the spatial notion of *pe’ah*, that natural resources are fundamentally not owned by individuals but are meant to be equitably shared.⁸

FOOD SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY HUB

Building on the success of *Abundance Farm*, the synagogue purchased an adjacent extant municipal property through a public Request for Proposals foregrounding community

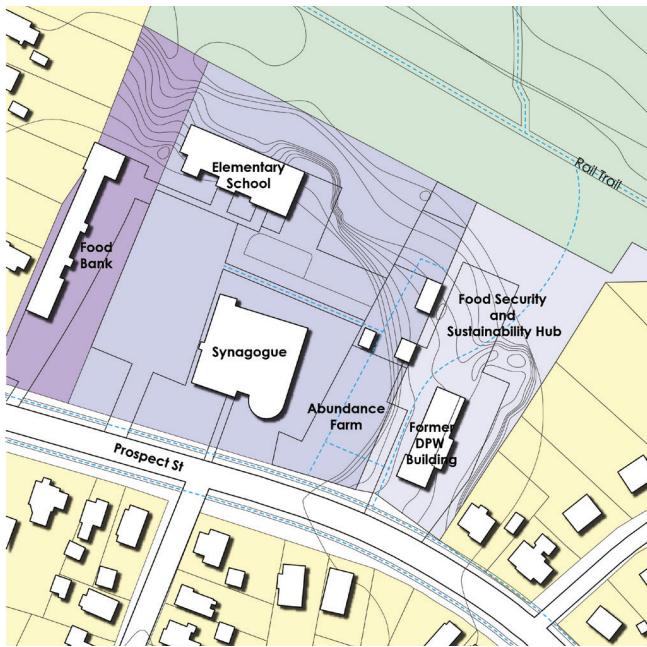


Figure 6. Campus Site Plan. Madison DeHaven.

benefit. (Figures 6 and 7) The design process for the *Food Security and Sustainability Hub* engaged Farm leadership in envisioning both short- and long-term programs proposed in the Community Benefits Statement and concurrent grant applications addressing food security infrastructures. Site planning and building design exercises explored the Farm's expanding mission and associated services that emerged in response to food insecurity during the early months of the pandemic, a time period in which the food pantry saw the number of households they serve increase by sixty percent.⁹

Design visualizations shared with farm leadership provided probes for dialogue about the ways adaptive reuse of the building and brownfield site could provide for inclusive future uses. Iterations tested spatial capacities and tectonic language to support food production and processing, educational and workforce training, value-added business incubation, skill sharing, and community gathering. (Figures 8, 9, and 10) As the project evolves, with some funds already raised and grants awarded, these visualizations support conversations about how best to carry out the ethical impulses captured in the ancient agricultural laws.

CONCLUSION

Abundance Farm is unique, even within the Jewish Community Farming Network, in that the farm is sited directly on land owned by and adjacent to a house of worship. In the coming decades, it is expected that more than one quarter of all houses of worship in the United States will close, presenting an opportunity to transform these "tens of thousands of faith buildings on hundreds of thousands of acres"¹⁰ in ways that promote positive ecological health and human wellbeing. Indeed, a



Figure 7. DPW Building. Madison DeHaven.

growing national interfaith movement is already working to provide tools to faith communities so that they can experiment with greater ecological and socially just land stewardship for a wide array of their property holdings.¹¹ While modest in scope, the *Abundance Farm* initiatives offer design and organizational prototypes with which we might expansively redesign quasi-public landscapes held by faith-based organizations to advance communal provisioning and community abundance.

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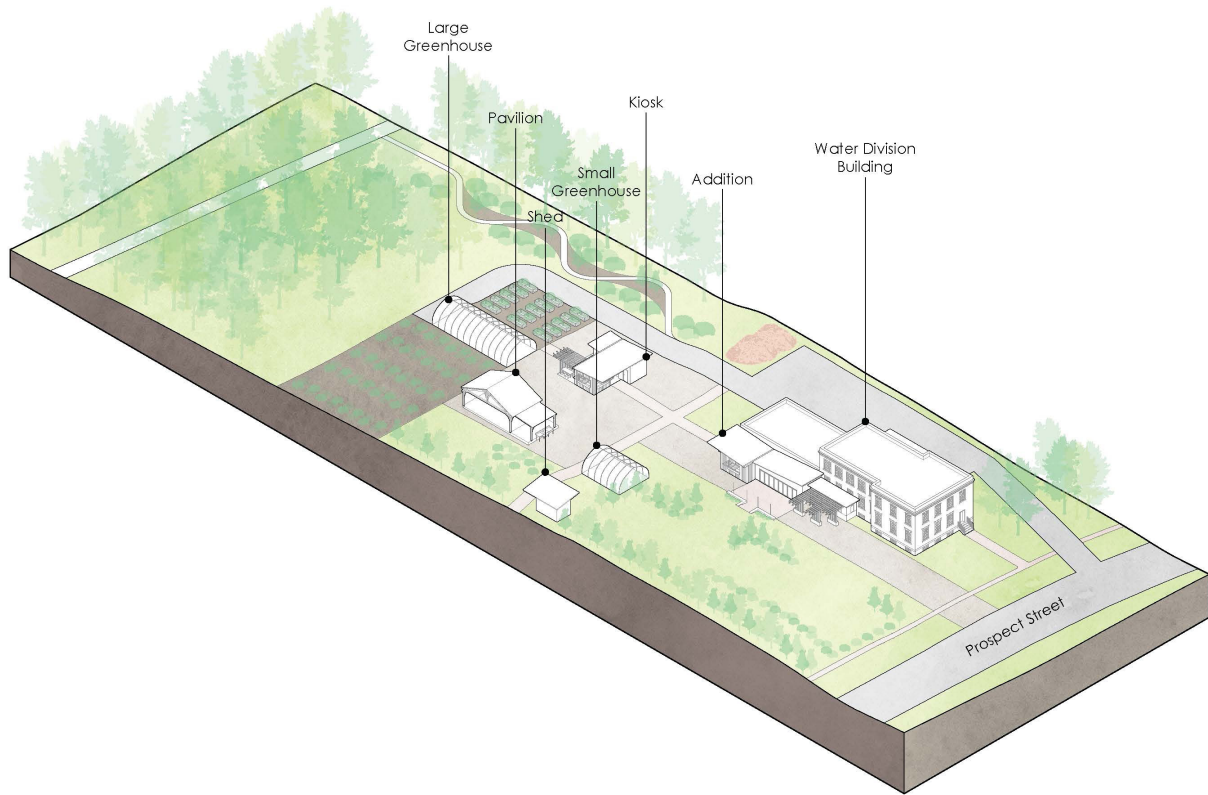


Figure 8. Food Security and Sustainability Hub Site Plan. Madison DeHaven.



Figure 9. Education Kiosk. Madison DeHaven.

Figure 10. Business Incubation. Madison DeHaven.

ENDNOTES

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