

In the Fields of Tekoa

Eli Rogosa



In the hills of Tekoa, the farmers stood amid the wheat fields. Some swung their scythes among the stalks and sang: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy;" Others bound sheaves, singing: "He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed, shall come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." Still others gathered the grain into the threshing-floor, and sang, 'My standing wheat knelt and bowed to my sheaf. Lord! Bless my strength to gather my grain.'" The field was filled with work and song.

Eliav, his wife and two sons came to their field to begin the harvest. They came to the standing wheat from the four corners of his field. They all were enveloped, the full tall stalks covered them over. Swiftly glittered the scythes in the hands of the nimble workers. The stalks fell hither and fro as the heads of the reapers were seen above the golden sea. A neighbour called out to Eliav:

'From your standing wheat to your threshing-floor, my neighbor.' "From your vineyard to your wine-cellar," replied Eliav. One blessing in return for another. "The blessing of the Lord on you," called out Eliav's wife to her neighbour. 'Have you washed the wool of your flocks?' 'The Lord be with you, my neighbour," she replied. "I have washed it and carded it." "I have already woven thread." 'The Lord sends us blessings according to our abilities!"

"Zizz! Zizz" whispered the scythes to each other. It was as if they had scolded and said: "Hush, women. Don't gossip so much Time to work." The women cut short their conversation, and swung their scythes in the grain. "Zizz! Zizz!" whispered the scythes to each other. At that moment there passed a wanderer from the land of Moab. He was tired and hungry. Eliav saw him and called out: "The Lord be with you, wanderer! Turn hither, and pluck for yourself ears from the wheat, and bless the Lord that he has sent us his blessing." And the wanderer came, and plucked wheat, ate, and was sated. "Wait, wanderer," Eliav said to him. "Behold I am cutting my wheat; take from the corner." But the wanderer did not understand the significance of the word 'corner'. Eliav said to him: "This is the custom of the Hebrew farmers: when we reap our wheat, we leave stalks in the corner of the field for the poor and the wandering. It is called the corner." The wanderer plucked wheat from the edge of Eliav's field, beat it out, and rubbed it, placed the seed in his pouch, and went on.

The wanderer passed the field of Eliav's neighbour, and a voice called out behind him: "O, blessed of the Lord! Why do you shame me? For I have done you no wrong." And the wanderer was taken aback and said: "O, my lord, when did I shame you? I am a stranger. Only now have I come from the land of Moab, and I have never seen your face until today." "And do you not shame me," replied the farmer, "when you pass my field while I am binding the sheaves and do not gather the gleanings?" "What are the 'gleanings'?" asked the wanderer. "It is the way of the Hebrews " answered the farmer "The reaper grasps a handful of stalks and the scythe cuts them below. The stalks which have slipped from the hand and escaped the scythe-they are not for the reaper. The Lord has saved them for the poor and the wandering."

The wanderer took the gleanings, rubbed them, placed the seed in his pouch, and went on. The wanderer went up to the mountain, and a voice called to him: "Stranger! Will you do thus to me? Behold I am making a threshing-heap, and will you not turn to me and collect the forgotten?" "O, my lord, I know what are the 'gleanings' and the 'corner,' but I do not know what the 'forgotten' is."

And the farmer said: "This is the way of the Hebrew farmer. When a man gathers his sheaves to the threshing-heap, and has forgotten sheaves behind him, it is a sign that the Lord has given them to the wandering and the poor. Now you go and pass through my field, and you will seek and find sheaves, and take unto you what the Lord has saved for your sake."

The wanderer gathered the forgotten sheaves, beat them out, rubbed them, placed the seed in his pouch and went on his way. Adapted from the poem by Yehuda Steinberg

From the golden wheat field to the fragrance of fresh-baked bread on the Shabbat table, the seasonal cycles of farming and family traditions of bread are at the heart of the Jewish experience from ancient days to the present. Wheat, our ubiquitous food crop, uniquely reflects the values of its farmers and the values of the market system where ever it is grown. The evolution of bread tells the story of culture and ancient peoples. However modern wheat, bred for industrial food systems, dependent on agrochemicals and pesticides, is soaring in price and sinking in quality. Nutrition and flavor are forgotten. Israel buys 90% of its wheat from Midwest mega-farms, as do most of her neighbors. The rich biodiversity of world-wide wheats that sustained ancient Israeli and other traditional peoples for millennia is *on the verge of extinction*.

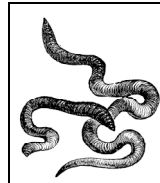
For the Jewish educator, wheat offers an untapped wellspring of meta-disciplinary learning spanning the tales and traditions of wheat and bread in folklore, healthy diet and nutrition, hands-on bread-baking with elders, text study of Seder Zariim (the first volume of the Mishnah) and advanced science projects to breed wheats for organic systems to address compelling issues of biodiversity, food systems and organic gardening. It all can start with a wheat seed.

Following is an overview of wheat-inspired Lemudei Kodesh, science and stewardship activities. Hands-on workshops, curriculum and ancient Israeli wheat seeds are available from the Heritage Seed Conservancy: growseed.org. Farmers, schools and bakers are invited to 'adopt a rare wheat variety' in cooperation with the HSC seedbank.

*Eli Rogosa, an organic farmer and artisan baker, is director of the Heritage Seed Conservancy and the USDA program 'Northeast Organic Wheat' to collect, trial and breed world-wide rare wheats in Northeast organic farms, foster local farmer-baker market partnerships and community bread traditions.
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Alumot - Wheatsheaf Projects



1. Composting is the first stage in organic farming and gardening. The easiest way is to collect foodscraps and bury them deep in the soil. Next season, plant in this enriched soil. A compost pile is a living laboratory for soil life. Tracking the nutrients that feed you from soil to table to soil is a complex lesson in food systems and waste management. Managing a school compost system is a practical solution to global warming!



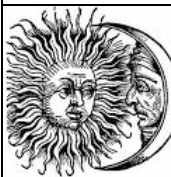
2. Plant wheat: Wild wheat, known in Israel as 'Em Ha'Hitah' or 'mother wheat' grows from the wind-swept Galilee to Jerusalem's hills. The history of wheat tells the journey of the Jewish people. Plant emmer, the wheat eaten in ancient Egypt and used in the original matzah. Plant the almost-extinct wheats found at Masada. Count the Omer as wheat grows. Dance a harvest song. Thresh Shavuot sheaves, bake and taste the flavor of ancient days. Free curriculum on: growseed.org/seedstewards.html



3. Make a clay oven: Are there natural clay deposits in your area? I found an abundant supply by the shore of a local river; perhaps you can too! Otherwise clay is available at art stores. Mix with gritty sand and straw. I cut tall meadow grass and let it dry for straw. Mix-knead with your bare feet. Line a fire pit with clay and slap flat bread on the heated clay. Build a beehive-shaped oven coil by coil. See: growseed.org for photos.



4. Bake bread: Start with matzah, the bread of simplicity; fresh-ground flour and spring water. See: growseed.org/matza.html. Make festive loaves from the basic recipe: one part flour, two parts spring water (*not tap water*), a spoon of yeast and sea salt. Gently mix-knead. Let rest in the fridge for a day or two. Take an egg-sized portion to bless* and compost. Shape loaves or braid into challahs. Invite grandmothers to help.



5. *Blessing - 'Taking Challah' - The ancient Hebraic tradition of the separation of dough is a consecrated participation in the transformation of grain into bread as a regenerative life process. A small portion of the dough was given to the Cohanim, or today returned to the earth (composted) or burned with a blessing 'Baruch...l'hafrish hallah'.



6. Celebrate. Feed the hungry. Grow your own food. Eat local. After you read our '[Seder Zariim](http://growseed.org/sederzariim.pdf)' guidebook (*free on growseed.org/sederzariim.pdf*), brainstorm compelling projects for: *Peah*: Corners for Gleaning - Gifts to the Hungry, *Kilayim*: Diverse Varieties-Biodiversity, *Shevii*: Sabbatical Year and Jubilee, *Maserot* - Tithing the fruits of your labors.

