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# Return and repair: the rise of Jewish agrarian movements in North America

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**Abstract**
Jewish Agrarian Movements (JAM hereafter) in North America express the many different shapes and iterations of Jewish farming on the continent, grounded in historical perspectives that influence current practices and activities. From within this diversity, common threads emerge with much to contribute to agrarian social movements and scholarship. Jewish values of returning (*t'shuvah*), releasing (*shmitah*), and repairing (*tikkun*), along with theories of *doikayt* (an anti-zionist movement around "hereness") and radical diasporism, animate JAM's critical engagement with agri-food systems. As researchers who have both studied and participated in Jewish agrarianism in a variety of U.S. and Canadian contexts, we solidify a series of themes and tensions that emerge from JAM: diaspora and indigeneity, modernity and tradition, Jewish agroecological knowledge production, and lived religion. We argue that, while JAM has not yet been examined thoroughly within critical food scholarship, it has the potential to contribute to broader debates and frameworks within sub-fields such as radical food geographies, critical agrarianism, and decoloniality. Without consideration of JAM as a part the study of food and agriculture, there are risks of marginalization of farmers, activists and researchers of Jewish identity.

**Keywords** Jewish farming · Critical agrarian studies · Radical food geographies · Agroecology · Lived religion · Diaspora

## Introduction

"Jewish farmers suffer from a double invisibility," says SJ Seldin, a co-founder of the Jewish Farmer Network, a primarily North American group connecting people who practice agriculture and Judaism since 2016. "Jews don't expect you to be farmers, and farmers don't expect you to be Jews," they add (Harris 2020). But contrary to the conventional American Gothic image of who is a farmer, Jews do farm, both in North America and around the world. Moreover, Judaism as a cultural and religious practice is increasingly embracing agrarian themes long embedded in its traditions.

Yet, little scholarship in critical agrarian studies has taken note of the existence of Jewish agrarianism in North America – a triple invisibility. In an effort to build understanding and recognition, we introduce the diverse Jewish Agrarian Movements (JAM hereafter) in North America to the critical food studies community. As researchers who have both studied and participated in Jewish agrarianism in a variety of U.S. and Canadian contexts, our collective goal is to establish a set of themes and tensions that emerge from the JAM. At the same time, we want to argue that these specific themes converge with and contribute to broader debates and frameworks running through critical food scholarship today.

This paper serves to review and analyze the JAM, and integrates knowledge gleaned from all of the authors' experiences participating in this movement; experiences that inform us as scholars. Along with our own experiences, we have examined a variety of primary and secondary source materials pertaining to the JAM for this paper, including, but not limited to, organizational materials—such as websites, program descriptions, conference schedules and mission statements—interviews with participants in the JAM, and existing literature, both scholarly and non-scholarly, such as news articles. Additionally, throughout this paper we reference interviews that were collected for a previous

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ethnographic study by a co-author of this paper, including recorded interviews, informal conversation, and participant observation of Jewish farming projects. Several academic and activist frameworks inspire us to make this contribution, and provide theoretical framing to the ensuing discussion, namely: radical food geographies, critical agrarianism, decoloniality, lived religion, and the Jewish critical-geographic concept of *doikayt*, as well as grassroots theorizing occurring within the JAM themselves.

Jewish farming hasn't been completely invisible to scholars. Recent works have examined the emergence of community-based Jewish farming and food initiatives, mainly in the context of institutionalized U.S. American Jewish environmentalism (Berndtson and Geores 2015; LeVasseur 2017; Rice and Goldberg 2021a; Silvern 2021), and have explored how these movements shape contemporary Jewish cultural and religious identities more broadly (Most 2016; Coons 2019). Yet by focusing on Jewish Agrarian Movements, the aim of our paper is to include a wider range of participants and perspectives: Jewish farmers who are connected to larger and more institutionalized Jewish environmentalist organizations; farmers who identify themselves or their farms as Jewish, but are not as connected to these institutions and networks; and Jews from a variety of vocational backgrounds who participate in these movements due to their interest in Jewish agrarian ethics as a framework for societal transformation and/or Jewish identity-formation.

While we are interested in the ways in which food and agrarianism function as unifying factors for Jewish people, we note that a key feature of the JAM is its heterogeneity, and therefore pluralize the term Jewish Agrarian *Movements*. These movements are made up of actors (individuals, collectives) that are working towards common objectives, discussed below. Drawing on a socio-metabolic perspective of movements, we show how the overarching aims and obstacles are shared, while their characteristics, contexts, and strategies may differ. Our treatment of these actors as unified movements, despite heterogeneity, lies in the fact that multiple types of linkages (conferences, trainings, overlapping funding sources, exchange of knowledge and staff, etc.) are at once based on *and* facilitate the proliferation of shared values and shared actions. There is a spectrum of participation and engagement, where some actors we discuss may be more central while others are less institutionally engaged.

Three types of heterogeneity are especially evident across the JAM: religious, racial/ethnic, and — especially with respect to Zionism — political. We interweave discussion of each of these heterogeneities throughout the paper, but the issue of political heterogeneity merits an initial explanation here in the introduction. Different Jewish agrarian movements relate differently to both the *state* of Israel and the *land* of Israel. While many Jewish agrarians connect to this particular geography as a cultural birthplace and draw ecological and agricultural inspiration from it (whether or not they support settler-colonialism in Israel) others highlight the "radical diasporism" of Jewish people and Jewish land-based relationships. Coined by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007), radical diasporism opens up the possibility for Jewish relationships to place that are based "not on dominance but on balance, perpetual back and forth, home and away, community and outside" (p. 199), a concept closely related to the older notion of *doikayt* that we discuss in more detail below.

While different members and communities within the JAM articulate different overarching motivations and positions, there is a prevailing sentiment across these movements that dominant methods of interacting with food and land must drastically change and that American Jewish communities' relationships to land must be 'repaired,' reflected in an agrarian vision of *tikkun olam,* a phrase common among Jewish progressives meaning "repair the world." With that call for repair in mind, in this paper we ask two main questions: What do Jewish people and Jewish experience in North America offer to the urgent task of radically transforming the industrialized-capitalist food system? Where and how are Jewish agrarian movements forming in North America, and how do they understand their relationship to place, in both contemporary and historical-geographic perspective?

## Orienting frameworks

The idea that the global capitalist food system is ecologically and socially destructive and has been built on histories and ideologies of oppression are key points of departure for radical food geographies scholarship. Reynolds et al. (2020) define radical food geographies as a framework that "aims to identify relations of power, exploitation, and oppression [within food systems] along with opportunities to reimagine futures in social life," and specify that it is a field of inquiry that has evolved in parallel and in response to social movements (p. 212). As the term suggests, the role of place and place-based networks is central to radical food geographies, both for understanding how food systems function and for confronting the injustices therein. At the broadest level, we situate our paper as a contribution to the work of radical food geographies, as much of the JAM themselves can be understood as engaged radical food geographies.

Questions surrounding Jewish farmers' relationships to North American geographies—and to the concept of land itself— direct us toward engagement with literature on decoloniality. Tuck and Yang (2012) clarify that decolonization centers on Indigenous people receiving their expropriated land back, and should not be used as a metaphor for other

or more vague social justice, educational, or human rights pursuits. They enumerate and caution against what they call "settler moves to innocence," defined as "strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege" (p. 10). This scholarship echoes the on-the-ground demands of the U.S. and Canadian Indigenous land back movement and other calls for substantive reform and reparation. Such decolonial critique compels us to closely and carefully examine what we refer to later in the article as the "Indigenous-diasporic tension" embedded in Jewish agrarian relationships with land. In doing so, we touch on the following questions: How do Jewish communities' interactions with land in North America intersect with the colonization and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous people and how do varying groups within the JAM conceptualize and approach these issues as they relate to food production and land stewardship? For many in the JAM, issues of settler-colonialism relate not only to Israel, but also to North America, and elsewhere, in tension with Jewish diaspora and religious persecution.

In addition to radical food geographies and decoloniality, we use the aforementioned concept of *doikayt* (also transliterated as *do'ikayt* or *doykeit* and approximately pronounced dough-ick-kate, with the accent on the first syllable) to examine some of the above questions. Yiddish for "hereness," *doikayt* is a movement concept coined by the secular-socialist Jewish Labor Bund in the early twentieth century. The Jewish Labor Bund began in 1897 as a movement of predominantly urban diaspora Jews in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia who believed in fighting for Jewish liberation and safety wherever they had landed over centuries of persecution, and in internationalist coalition with other oppressed working-class groups. Rather than seeing the Jewish people as a nation that was necessarily tied to a particular *land* (i.e. Israel), Bundists instead advocated for Jewish *culture* across many different lands as the bond connecting us – a vision of a nation that was not territorial. They endorsed the "hereness" of pursuing Jewish liberation and safety in diaspora in opposition to the "thereness" of Zionism – a movement centered around the construction of a Jewish state in Israel by right of place-based heritage. Long forgotten with the post-World War II decline of the Bund — many Bundists were murdered in the Holocaust, and the experience of the Holocaust led to an upswing of Zionism among survivors — *doikayt* is now seeing a revival among anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jews. While explicit engagement with *doikayt* has not been widespread within the JAM, the limited engagement that does exist reflects a novel application of *doikayt* to agrarian contexts. As a theoretical framework, *doikayt* is especially helpful for provoking nuanced, geographically-situated, and historically-accountable analysis of complex dynamics between land, diaspora, indigeneity, and coloniality that manifest within the North American JAM today.

The self-evident emphasis on Jewish identity within the JAM also brings us into conversation with scholarship on identity-based agrarianism. Over the past two decades or so, there has been an influx of interest in the many dimensions of identity — including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and more — as factors that shape and motivate food geographies and food and farming-related social movements (Penniman 2018; Reese 2019; Hoffelmeyer 2021). Identity-based agrarianism integrates these emerging interests with agricultural movements and networks. One such example is SAAFON (Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network). SAAFON not only seeks to "find solutions to Black land loss," but does so through understanding and promoting culturally relevant practices and "Black agrarianism," while drawing on Black agricultural histories (McDonald 2021). Other examples of identity-based agrarianism sit at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and immigration status (Sachs et al. 2016; Wypler 2019; Mares 2019; Minkoff-Zern 2019).

Like all aspects of the JAM, members are not monolithic in their attachment to Jewish identity. Some think of themselves as Jewish farmers while others as farmers who are Jewish. For example, both Meredith and Rachel are full-time farmers and were participants at the inaugural "Cultivating Cultures" conference of the Jewish Farmer Network in 2020. While Meredith says she "can't imagine farming in a non-Jewish way," Rachel explains that her "Jewish identity and farming have barely intersected" (Norman, personal communication, 2020). Again, we emphasize the pluralism in the JAM, especially evident in constructions of Jewish agrarian identity.

Liz Carlisle's critical agrarianism framework (Carlisle 2014) emphasizes several aspects of the politics of agrarianism that we also see reflected in the JAM. Critical agrarianism highlights instances of agrarianism materializing among communities that have faced structural barriers to land ownership and forced mobility, with particular interest in collective rather than individual and nuclear-familial land tending. Moreover, critical agrarianism moves beyond the common romanticization of the "good ole days" within much agrarian thought, incorporates urban–rural linkages, emphasizes place-based decolonization, and seeks to build the agrarian "web outward rather than inward" (2014, p. 135). Within the JAM, practices of *t'shuvah*, literally meaning "return," offer a Jewish lens on critical agrarianism. *T'shuvah* is the process of reflection and holistic accounting of personal and collective ways of being, often in the context of acknowledging harms and doing repentance — and thus not a mere indulgence in a nostalgic or romanticized remembrance. *T'shuva* mirrors practices in critical agrarianism by reflecting on the past and ongoing harm of agricultural production

and generating new relations with land and people. In these ways, *t'shuva* is identity work that resists forces of assimilation, practices of appropriation, and white supremacy, while preserving community, land, and spiritual practices.

Identity-based and critical agrarianism framings also prompt us to ask what constitutes the Jewish in contemporary Jewish agrarianism and to ask how particular Jewish forms of identity, belief systems, and practices interface with other identity-based and critical agrarian communities. In what specific ways has the JAM in North America acted or not acted in solidarity with other marginalized farmers and activists? What major obstacles to, and opportunities for, enacting deeper solidarity can we identify for future research and organizing initiatives? To help conceptualize these questions, we draw on Hall's (1997) lived religion framework to interpret the role of spirituality and religious practice within the JAM. Lived religion breaks down binaries between "religious" and "non-religious" and enables a reading of the interpretive work of Jewish farmers who connect farming and spiritual practice as an expression of agency, or even resistance. An examination of spiritual practice illuminates the ways in which the JAM fits with and enforces trends in contemporary American Judaism, particularly among younger Jews, in building alternatives to traditional religious-communal institutions. Incorporation of Jewish ritual, as well as new emerging themes and tensions—such as an embrace of queerness and Indigenous solidarity—characterizes the twenty-first century JAM as distinct from Jewish participation in the back-to-the-land movements of the 1970's and 1980's and early Jewish American agrarian projects in the 19th and early twentieth centuries. Like political standpoints across the JAM, emphasis on spiritual practice varies between projects.

With the help of these concepts – radical food geographies, Indigenous-diasporic tension, *doikayt*, identity-based agrarianism, the critical agrarianism of *t'shuvah*, and lived religion – we detail the diversity, the complexity, and the vision(s) of the JAM. We conclude our paper with an assessment of contemporary Jewish agrarianism in the context of the larger North American Food Movement, exploring what makes this movement distinct and where it aligns with broader movement trends.

## The ancient history of Jewish agrarian ethics

Many groups within the JAM draw on ancient historical themes of Jewish agricultural participation, articulated in the *Tanakh* (the Torah and other books comprising the Jewish Bible), the *Talmud* (compendium of Jewish law and theology), and oral tradition. Such groups commonly draw strength from a sense that Jewish agrarianism originates in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve's eating from the forbidden tree results in them having to perform "hard labor" and "till the humus […] by the sweat of [their] brow" to obtain food that once flourished naturally (The Contemporary Torah, 2006, *Bereshit* 3:17–23). Such a historical view offers some Jewish agrarians (although not all) a sense of continuity through time and space. Shani Mink, co-founder of the Jewish Farmer Network explains:

> [Our ancestors] were outside praying with the trees and praying with the grasses and they were enacting their relationship with the divine through their relationship with the land… reaching back to the practices and traditions of our ancestors is a way of grounding us in our work where we are. (Norman, personal communication, 2021).

Among the ancient Jewish agrarian ethics that some JAM participants look to are *shmita, yovel, pe'ah* and *leket, shechita, tza'ar ba'alei chayim, bal tashchit,* and *l'dor v'dor.*

*Shmita*: This ethic is sometimes referred to as a *shabbat* for the land, *shabbat* being the weekly day of rest in Jewish tradition, where all work is set aside. The *Torah* describes the practice and rationale of *shmita:* "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat" (The Contemporary Torah 2006, *Shemot* 23:10-11). *Shmita* in particular has undergone a significant resurgence in the contemporary JAM. We explore its current applications—particularly as they pertain to food justice and sustainable farming—in greater detail in subsequent sections.

*Yovel:* The idea of *yovel* is a manifestation of both the weekly *shabbat* and *shmita* – a "Jubilee" which occurs every fifty years, signaling rest and redistribution of land and wealth, returning "each one to their holding" (The Contemporary Torah 2006, *Vayikra* 25:10).

*Pe'ah* and *Leket*: These related ideas translate as "corner" and "gleanings," and are commonly spoken of together, along with *shich'chah*, meaning "forgotten sheaves." These ethics of food redistribution instruct farmers to leave the corners of their fields empty, as well as releasing food that falls while harvesting, in order to "leave them for the poor and the stranger" (The Contemporary Torah 2006, *Vayikra* 19:10).

*Shechita:* This ethic describes practices of ritual animal slaughter according to the rules of *kashrut* (kosher laws), and guides the synergistic inclusion of livestock into the agroecosystem, and is described in the *Torah* and *Talmud*.

*Tza'ar ba'alei chayim:* This ethic translates as the "suffering of living creatures," and is described in the *Talmud* as an implication of the *Torah*. It is commonly interpreted within the JAM as a ban on causing animals in one's care unnecessary suffering.
*Bal tashchit:* Translated as "do not destroy," this ethic prohibits wasteful destruction. It originates in the *Torah* as a specific ban on felling fruit trees during war and is often understood in the JAM as an environmental ethic of care that promotes recycling, composting, and closed loop nutrient cycling.
*L'dor v'dor:* This phrase from Jewish oral tradition means "from generation to generation," and is widely discussed in Jewish thought well beyond agrarian concerns as an encapsulation of the importance of continuity and the linking of past, present, and future. Within the JAM, it is often evoked to develop and preserve seeds, seed stories, and food traditions, while also incorporating change.

As well, the ancient Jewish ritual calendar centered around agrarian devotions at the Temple in Jerusalem. The holidays of *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot* all began as harvest festivals that involved bringing a portion of the produce from different points of the agricultural season to the Temple for blessing and for provisioning the people of Jerusalem – *Pesach* for the barley harvest, *Shavuot* for the wheat harvest, and *Sukkot* for fall fruits such as olives and grapes. However, after the Judean revolt against Roman imperialism in 66 CE and subsequent destruction of the Second Temple and siege of Jerusalem by the Roman Army four years later, diasporic Jewish people transitioned away from Temple-based practices and rituals and toward what is known today as Rabbinic Judaism, which focuses on the Torah, the Talmud (which was compiled after the destruction of the Second Temple), and community-based practices more amenable to living in diaspora.

During the post-Temple diasporic period, structural forces steered Jewish communities away from their collective experience as a predominantly agrarian people and toward a wide range of livelihoods associated with urban geographies, such as craftsmaking, trade, medicine, finance, and government. The shift from Temple-based practices to prioritization of Torah and Talmud study through educational reform made the Jewish people an unusually literate group during the late Roman Imperial period and supported the pursuit of non-agrarian livelihood opportunities elsewhere during the early Middle Ages (Botticini and Eckstein 2007). At the same time, expulsion from the land of Israel, laws against Jewish land ownership, and frequent pogroms and other incidents of exile shaped Jewish culture, commonly instilling a craving for "assurance and permanence" represented by land lost (Hillel 2005).

Nonetheless, while a decrease in Jewish communal agrarianism and increase in economic-cultural assimilation comprise the dominant trends and narratives of this diasporic period, historian Biale (2001) finds that Jews living in the Middle East and much of the Mediterranean region remained a predominantly agricultural people up until the eighth century. Even in Northern Europe, despite laws prohibiting Jews from owning land, viticulture was a common livelihood for many, including the French rabbinical scholar Rashi and his grandson Rabbeinu Tam. These ethics were not forgotten.

## The rise of Jewish agrarianism in North America

As significant work has already been generated on the history of Jewish agrarianism, this paper does not aim to rewrite that history, but rather to put the JAM in historical context for the purposes of contemporary analysis. Historical context is needed for exploring the ways in which participants in the contemporary JAM understand themselves within the history of Jewish agrarianism in North America. Take for example Alliance Community Reboot, or ACRE, in New Jersey. Their mission states that they aim to "rebuild Jewish farm-based community in South Jersey," referencing a Jewish farming colony established there in 1882. Historical context also aids us, the authors of this paper, in understanding historical influence on contemporary organizations, such as Living Tree Alliance in Vermont, a communal agrarian project that describes itself as "the kibbutz reimagined," referencing the influence of *kibbutzim* movement on Jewish agrarianism in North America throughout the 20th and into the twenty-first century.

Jewish agrarianism reached North America in a significant way beginning in the late nineteenth century, as part of a larger pattern of Jewish migration out of Eastern Europe due to rising antisemitism (Herscher 1981). Several philanthropic organizations were created during this time to aid refugees. One in particular—the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society—devoted itself to settling Jewish immigrants onto rural land in the Americas, rather than urban/industrial centers where they believed Jews were more likely to gravitate. Jewish elites and philanthropists undertook related efforts through the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, the Alliance Israelite Universelle (and its agrarian-specific Am Olam Group), the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society, and the Baron de Hirsch Fund (and the Jewish Colonization Association he founded). Finding agricultural opportunities for these predominantly working-class, urban-dwelling Eastern European Jews was part of a larger effort to assimilate and "normalize" them.

This nineteenth century mobilization of Jewish agrarianism in the Americas was not entirely reactionary, though,

containing within it the influences of utopian socialism that were prevalent at the time in the United States, Russia, and elsewhere. The result of these philanthropic efforts, assimilationist forces, and utopianist influences was dozens of Jewish agricultural colonies located across North America between roughly 1880–1930, as well as a few in Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, and parts of the Caribbean. Though some of these colonies may have overlapped in funding sources, they were not connected in a network, as many farms and projects within the JAM are today.

It is important to note that Jewish people in North America have not faced the same legal and institutional barriers to farming as some other marginalized groups, such as Indigenous and Black communities. Eastern European-descended Jews who were interested in agrarian lifestyles benefitted from the Homestead Act of 1862 and Dominion Act of 1872, laws which dispossessed Indigenous people of their ancestral lands and discriminated against Black Americans and Canadians. There was also Jewish involvement in plantations and slavery in the Americas (e.g. Liphshiz and Tzur 2013). As well, early American Jewish farmers were supported and encouraged by philanthropic groups such as the American Hebrew Agricultural and Horticultural Association to acquire and steward farmland (Herscher 1981).

However, just a generation before acquiring these advantages in North America, Eastern European Jewry lived through almost a century of targeted, antisemitic regulation of land owning and agricultural activities, notably including the Russian Empire's Jewish Statutes of 1804 and 1835, and extending into the Pale of Settlement that confined most Russian Jews to southwestern Russia while also prohibiting them from living in village areas. The legacy of structural barriers abroad, resulting in a lack of immediate agricultural experience, limited the success of early American Jewish agricultural projects (Herscher 1981). Moreover, in the 1920s, antisemitic literature like Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, was in wide circulation — including articles such as "How the Jewish question touches the farm" that altogether dismissed the idea of a Jewish farmer and spread antisemitic conspiracy theories across predominantly Anglo-descended American farming communities.

In the 1970's and 1980's Jews participated with other young first-generation farmers in the back-to-the-land movement, searching for more fulfilling and ecologically sound lifestyles. Young people in this era — not only young Jews— left that decade of intense social change with a new exposure to and desire for alternative lifestyles. Influenced by the emerging counterculture and continuing social struggles such as Civil Rights and opposition to the Vietnam War, a portion of young people looked to rural and communal living. Michael Tabor, a well-regarded elder in the JAM, got his start in what he describes as the "Diaspora Kibbutz" movement in this period. A veteran of the Civil Rights movement, Tabor decamped to a communal farm with other young Jews in the early 1970's, and now lends his land to a new generation of farmers (Rosenfeld 2020).

*Kibbutzim,* while a distinctly Israeli agriculture project, have enacted an influence on the JAM in North America historically. Historian Henry Near (2007) describes *kibbutzim* being founded as "voluntary" societies "in a spirit of close community and cooperation," which emphasized collective decision making and egalitarianism. Other scholars argue that the goal of developing *kibbutzim* was the "desire of colonization" (Piterberg 2013) and that the *kibbutz,* with its establishment of European migrants in working the land of Israel, fits into a settler-colonial framework. Whether best understood as motivated by socialism or by settler-colonialism, the first of these projects was founded in 1910. Over the decades, *kibbutzim* have developed into "complex and institutionalized communities" in Israel, which often combine agriculture and industry (Near 2007). American Jews have been affected by both experiences with and imaginaries of *kibbutzim*—and particularly the ideals, values, and politics that *kibbutzim* represent—through visits abroad and consumption of media ranging from early Israeli cookbooks to film and literature.

The emerging American counterculture movement coincided with increased American Jewish connection to the state of Israel following the 1967 Six Day War, which itself followed two decades of increased cultural exchange between the American Jewish community and the state of Israel (Katz 2015). At the same time, the JAM is a distinct North American agricultural project, without definitive roots in modern Israeli agriculture, and American Jews participating in agricultural projects in the latter half of the twentieth century were not always influenced by the state of Israel. Rather, they also went "back to the land" like other members of that generation influenced by American counterculture and environmental movements. The interaction of these elements—the personal and political, the connection to social issues, and interplay between "here" and "there"— foreshadow the twenty-first century JAM.

## Jewish agrarian movements in North America today

Within *Pirkei Avot,* a central text in rabbinic Judaism and Jewish ethics, the following Hebrew phrase appears: "*machloket l'shem shamayim*," or, in English, "argument for the sake of heaven." The rabbis ask, "what is an argument for the sake of heaven?" the answer being that "the desired end is to attain the truth" (Sefaria n.d., *Pirkei Avot,* 5:17). In this section, we explore major tensions and themes in the contemporary North American JAM, such as indigenous versus diasporic identity, modernity versus tradition, Jewish agroecological knowledge production, and lived religion.

While these major themes are highly related and converge in practice (see the following section), we present them here individually to highlight certain historical and theoretical details. Our analysis embraces the positive framing of conflict and contradiction within Jewish scholarly tradition, understanding diversity and disagreement as part of the JAM's developmental and community-building process.

## Diaspora and indigeneity

A first theme — and tension — that is important to the JAM is the juxtaposition of indigenous and diasporic identities. While the indigenous-diasporic tension may appear oxymoronic, noting this paradoxical conjugation can inspire us to address important questions about cultural-historical and place-based identity. For many members of the JAM, indigenous and diasporic identities often entangle with each other as Jewish farmers make sense of tradition and displacement. While Jewish history and knowledge traditions are intimately tied to the land of Israel, the centuries-long development and redefinition of agrarian and spiritual practices across diasporic lands are also salient today. In its broadest definition, indigeneity — which comes from the Latin for "born within" — is an identity that groups of people globally have claimed in opposition to colonization. While the term diaspora was coined even earlier from the ancient Greek for "scatter" and "disperse" to refer specifically to the forced migration of the Jewish people from Israel, and first used in translations of the Torah into Greek (Edwards 2007), it takes on global significance today in response to the more recent era of colonization and displacement (Milstein 2021).

The terms indigeneity and diaspora differ from other place-related terms that are often used in both Jewish and North American contexts, including "exile", or *galut* in Hebrew, and "settler-colonial", which both denote force and domination. Exile is used in the Jewish context to express forced migration and most notably the denial of living in the land of Israel, while settler-colonial describes "a structure" (Wolfe 2006) of invasion and on-going expropriation of European and other peoples to lands around the world, including in the modern state of Israel itself. In contrast, indigeneity and diaspora in conversation are potentially generative terms, both socially and ecologically. Diaspora involves the dispersing and mixing of peoples, albeit often produced by and leading to more conflict. Indigeneity describes deep cultural or material connections to a place, including for those displaced or re-rooting in new places. Relatedly, Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that, for a non-Indigenous person, becoming "naturalized" to place requires living "as if this is the land that feeds you," caring for the land "as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it," and meeting your responsibilities (Kimmerer 2013, p. 214–215). Some groups within the JAM are actively grappling with the ethics of caring for land in this way, including participation in land-back movements and building relationships with Indigenous communities. We see these efforts as in line with Kimmerer's call to enter into deep reciprocity that renews the world.

A key example of the generative impact of putting indigeneity and diasporism into conversation with one another is the phenomenon of JAM members drawing from their diasporic experience to motivate reciprocal relationships with Indigenous people and land that we now reside upon; this concept is furthered when considering Jewish place-based practices. For example, Leora Cockrell, a leader of the Berkeley-based Jews On Ohlone Land, understands *shmita* as instructions from the creator about how to tend to ancestral lands specifically, and therefore not diasporic lands. From Cockrell's perspective, to be committed to diasporism, *shmita* should be reinterpreted as a call to return land and sovereignty to Indigenous people, who possess their own sacred instructions for how to honorably tend to their own ancestral land, which differs from mainstream *shmita* applications such as not cultivating land every seven years (Hazon 2021). Further exploration of diasporism will be explored in the next section through the work of Linke Fligl, a queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural project, which has produced myriad material on this subject.

In addition to indigeneity and diaspora, the term "ashkenormativity" has gained traction in the American Jewish lexicon in recent years to describe Eurocentrism in Jewish culture, including a prioritization of Ashkenazi (meaning descending from Eastern and Western Europe) voices and histories over Jews from North Africa and elsewhere (Ofori-Solomon 2020). With emerging understandings of ashkenormativity, it is vital that descriptions of the JAM acknowledge the diverse diasporic contexts its members descend from and reference. For example, Micah Chetrit started The Midbar Project in Tucson, Arizona in 2018, drawing on their family's agricultural history in Morocco. Chetrit is quoted in the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* describing this connection: "Being in the desert I felt very connected, but I could never name why….as I've learned more about my family's history working soil in the desert, I can name those feelings" (Harris 2020).

Soul Fire Farm was started by Leah Penniman — who describes herself as both Black and Jewish — and her husband, Jonah Vitalle-Wolff, who also identifies as Jewish (Penniman 2018). Through Soul Fire's explicit adoption of Afro-Indigenous methods and goals of mobilizing BIPOC in farming, this project can be seen as an example of identity-based agrarianism, as defined in the introduction of this paper. Soul Fire Farm is intentionally both part of and apart from the JAM, intersecting with Jewish agrarianism through relevant programming such as "Black-Jewish Community Liberation" Passover *seders*, while emphasizing Afro-Indigenous traditions. When asked why she called her landmark book *Farming While Black*, rather than "farming while Jewish," Penniman describes identifying a larger need

for visibility around farming in the Black community, stating "there was definitely stuff about being Jewish, about being Earth-based, people appropriating indigenous tradition and calling it something else. There was all of that, but there was nothing for us. I think that there was a need in our community," meaning the Black community (Farming's badly needed 'Blackstension agent' 2020).

Members of the JAM continue to grapple with conflicting views on American Jewish identity, particularly indigenous and diasporic identities. Consider Jesse Schaffer, a Jewish urban farmer in Chicago. He explains that he feels Jewish identification with the term indigeneity "divorces Jews from the settler-colonial state that we are very much a part of (Norman, personal communication, 2021). Other participants in the JAM contend that Jewish persecution represents a need for the acceptance of refugees in Israel. The indigenous-diasporic tension also influences other themes and tensions that we have found within the JAM, from political standpoints to agroecological knowledge. For example, it is a common Jewish agrarian practice to apply agricultural customs developed in the land of Israel to North America, such as growing a fig tree, which is one of Judaism's *shiv'at ha-minim* (seven species the Jewish Bible lists as special to Israel). Similarly, it is increasingly popular to eat *shiv'at ha-minim* species like figs, olives, dates, and pomegranate to celebrate *Tu BiShvat*, a Jewish holiday celebrating trees and the Kabbalistic notion of a "tree of life." On the other hand, there are other Jewish agrarians working to connect to herbalism and culinary traditions associated with the diasporic lands they find themselves living in.

## Modernity and tradition

Another primary theme within the JAM is the integration of traditional practices into modern contexts and into future visions of more just and sustainable food systems. This theme is also common in other examples of identity-based food and agricultural movements in the U.S., such as Black farmers' development of Afroecology (Paynter 2018; Reese and Cooper 2021) and queer agrarians' reimagining of sexuality and gender norms within traditional rural agri-food spaces (Sbicca 2012). As with the indigenous-diaspora discussion above, we refer to the tradition-modernity interplay as a tension as well as a theme, because of the complex and contested ways it manifests across the JAM. While there are myriad examples of this interplay, we focus in this section on the JAM's incorporation of the *shtetl,* the *Yiddish* language, and *shmita,* into contemporary sustainability and social justice pursuits.

Tensions between tradition and modernity are embodied both in practices and in the naming and framing of JAM projects. The Philadelphia-based Jewish Farm School (JFS), for example, named their urban sustainability workshop series "*Shtetl* Skills," after the Yiddish word for the small towns in pre-World War II Eastern and Central Europe to which many Ashkenazi Jews living in the U.S. today trace their migration histories. However, JFS offers a more temporally, spatially, and culturally capacious definition of the *shtetl* in their workshops and broader food and sustainability work, describing their organization's goal as creating:

> a Jewish community whose relationships to farms, land, tradition, and creativity give it all the tools it needs to sustain life independent of the greater kingdoms or states that control the land (Jewish Farm School n.d., p. 6).

By broadening the definition, JFS uses the *shtetl* as a framework for current contexts and future visions, rather than to harken back to traditional ways of life. Rooted in the idea that "doing justice work is about taking responsibility for our use of history," the Jewish Farm School's curriculum uses an imagined *shtetl* as a departure point for teaching and cultivating community-based alternatives to corporatized food and social systems. As a result of this broader framing, the workshop series wound up attracting a significant amount of non-Jewish interest in Philadelphia, leading the facilitators to become more intentional about their use of Yiddish and Hebrew words and the assumptions they were making about their participants' backgrounds. This way of navigating tradition and modernity provides a specific instance of Liz Carlisle's notion of a "critical agrarianism" that turns "outward rather than inward," while also prioritizing cultural memory and reclamation for a specific marginalized community.

For elements of the JAM, drawing on ancient Jewish agricultural traditions is a method of avoiding appropriation and even "divesting from white supremacy" (Rice and Goldberg 2021b). Rice and Goldberg (2021b) describe how Jewish farmers "reject appropriative sustainable agriculture practices by imagining and enacting Jewish farming futures." In "turning to their *own* agricultural traditions instead of orienting toward others' cultural or ancestral practices" Jewish farmers, for example, reject appropriation of North American indigenous techniques. Doing so can be a "healing" choice, as Shani Mink Executive Director of the Jewish Farmer Network describes:

> And, this connection to ancestry, I think is really important for a lot of people, because it's very easy to fall into appropriative tropes and into appropriative agricultural systems and philosophies that are not ours. (Norman, personal communication, 2020)

Adoption of ancient agricultural tradition is also part of wrestling with historic and contemporary tensions in North American farming broadly — namely colonial legacies. Before "sunsetting" as an organization, the Jewish Farm School organized a Jews and Land Study Group to explore how Jewish land history over millennia reveals both obstacles

and opportunities for solidarity with other U.S.-based movements and communities. The study group was motivated by an interest in better understanding Jewish land and food practices over millennia as part of a more inward-facing cultural reclamation process, as well as in cultivating a deeper awareness of Jewish American communities' more recent settlement histories — all within the context of colonization and plantation histories, and more recent urban "renewal" and gentrification processes, for the more outward-facing task of "effectively partner[ing] in the work of liberation" alongside other marginalized communities (Rice and Goldberg 2021b).

Nostalgia is another phenomenon that characterizes some of the tensions between modernity and tradition. For example, the concept of *shtetl* is often an emblem of nostalgia, portrayed as "timeless" or "idealized" in postwar American Jewish cultural production (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Pinchuk 2001). The use of the Yiddish language serves as another example. Yiddish Farm is an operational farm in upstate New York that serves primarily *Chassidish* (a Jewish group that blends mysticism and Orthodoxy) and native Yiddish speakers. When the project first started, it marketed itself to a broader audience, fitting it into what Friedman (2015) and Shandler (2008) deem "Yiddishland"—a "transnational" Yiddish culture which in contemporary use is marked by revival and nostalgia. Both Yiddish Farm and the Jewish Farm School repurpose materials of the past, but they diverge in the fact that Yiddish Farm now serves the needs of Chassidish Jews, who are generally underserved in the majority of JAM projects.

Within the JAM, the blending of modernity and tradition is also represented in the elevation of ancient agrarian practice. *Shmita*, defined in our historical section above, is one of the most well-referenced instances of a text-based Jewish practice employed in the present. (For a more detailed exploration of *shmita* in the JAM today see our "Key Jewish Agrarian Institutions, Practices, and Grassroots Theorizing" section).

*Shmita* is not an obligated practice outside of the land of Israel and the way in which it is practiced does not, in most cases, comply completely with textual description. Rather than allow all land to lie fallow, or return all debts, most twenty-first century *shmita* projects in North America employ the *idea* of *shmita* — for example, the Jewish Farmer Network's *shmita* plots project, whereby farmers and gardeners elect to leave some portion of their project (however small) fallow in order to foster engagement with the concept on a scale of the participants' choice. Jewish nonprofits, such as Wilderness Torah, employ *shmita* concepts in organizational planning, using the 2021/5782 *shmita* year as an opportunity for an institutional fallow where they scale down programming to work on long-term projects. Adrienne Krone (2015, p. 314) describes *shmita* as both constrained and enabled by its American context; while it may not be feasible to practice *shmita* fully, those who do so may be inspired by modern environmentalist ethics, critique of the North American "industrial foodscape," or diasporic encouragement of "religious cooperation and innovation".

## Jewish agroecological knowledge production

There are synergies between the dually porous spheres of Jewish agrarian frameworks and agroecology which, when combined, can bring cultural specificity to sustainable or ecological farming. In this section, we highlight the collective production of a specifically Jewish body of agroecological knowledge. While not all participants in the JAM are explicitly agroecological, North American Jewish farmers' reclamation of ancestral teachings and practices are in line with agroecology's focus on using traditional knowledge to the benefit of agroecosystems and human health (Altieri 2009; Alzate et al. 2019). While introducing our radical food geographies framing, we asked "What do Jewish people and Jewish experience in North America offer to the urgent task of radically transforming the global capitalist food system?" This section illuminates how Jewish agroecological knowledge offers material and social practices that imagine and enact new food system futures, in concert with other bodies of knowledge that seek to radically transform unequal structures of power, production and distribution in the food system. It must be noted that many of the following principles overlap with other identity-based farming practices, and these synergies with agroecology are neither essential to Judaism nor unique to it, but nonetheless heartfelt by many JAM participants.

As previously mentioned, Jewish farmers turn to ancestral texts — such as the *Tanach, Talmud*, and *Pirkei Avot* — that outline practices for soil care and composting, seed keeping, closed-loop nutrient cycling, crop planning, animal husbandry and cycles of rest and release for both laborers and the land (Rice and Goldberg 2021a, b). Growing and processing culturally-important plants such as *qishu'im* (Janick et al. 2007; Goldberg and Rice 2022), garlic, wheat, barley, and grapes provides material and spiritual connection to the cycle of the Jewish agrarian calendar through foodways and the body.

Spirealated cycles of time in Jewish life, practiced through farming, map onto agroecosystem regulation, intraspecies synergies, and nutrient and energy cycling for the human and non-human. Observing *shabbat*, the weekly day of rest, is an embodied and community-based mechanism for honoring labor, learning, and community building. Farmers across the JAM appreciate and relish in what *shabbat* brings to overworked, often self-employed, farmers. In Jewish farming, the otherwise "unrecognized link" between agroecology and spirituality is evident through a body of cultural wisdom (Toledo 2022).

From an agroecological perspective, *shmita* structures land management, soil care and food systems in cycles of seven years. At the farm scale, reengagement with *shmita*

benefits the ecosystem. By mandating that agricultural lands not be cultivated each seventh year — and that only wild or perennial plants be allowed during that year — *shmita* promotes microbial, nutrient, and structural regeneration in the soil. Traditionally, the practice requires farmers to perennialize growing spaces and preserve food in order to maintain food access during the *shmita* year. For modern members of the JAM, engagement with this practice in part or in full encourages the design of perennial food forests, stewardship of wild edibles, integration of pest management on broader temporal scales, seed saving practices and networks, and thinking on multi-year production cycles. *Shmita* requires farmers to be preparing for the seventh year's release the entirety of the seven-year cycle.

At the community level, *shmita* mandates that all land becomes communal (i.e. fences must be removed), and that all debts are forgiven, promoting anti-capitalist redistribution of resources and land that aligns with tenets of political agroecology. The framework thus inherently encourages community members to share resources, create mutual aid networks, and practice non-productivist ways of being. After seven cycles of seven years, the 50th year is *yovel*, or jubilee, during which fields are returned to their original owners, people in bondage are released, and cultivation is paused. These limits on power prevent intergenerational wealth accumulation and a certain degree of land tenure for farming families, in theory. While *shmita* is not practiced in full and *yovel* is not practiced contemporarily, engagement with the social and political aspects of these biblical laws are emergent threads within the JAM that guide agrarian practices as well as indigenous solidarity, economic justice, food justice, and other organizing.

## Lived religion

As the practice of agriculture and agroecological knowledge production intersects with politics, identity, and a sense of place for many in the JAM, so too is it linked to spirituality and religious practice. For many participants in the JAM, all of these practices constitute a form of "lived religion," a term that historian David D. Hall (1997, pp. 1–2) posits as a tool for "cultural and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion" that "expand our ways of thinking" by centering everyday and lay practice. Jewish farmers not only reference religious teachings and practices for agrarian mobilization, but also reference agriculture for new types of religious mobilization, allowing for reinterpretation and expression of spiritual agency outside of formal Jewish institutions. Similar to lived religion, "lived spirituality" is a framework that Alena Coons advances in her ethnographic work with Urban Adamah, a Jewish farming project in Berkeley, California. "Lived spirituality" builds on the concept of lived religion by identifying the ways in which farmers in her study use the term "spirituality," in contrast to religion, as a more "malleable path" with "diverse possibilities" (Coons 2019, p. 4).

Shani Mink, Executive Director of the Jewish Farmer Network, described in an interview conducted by one of this article's authors how prayer and farming intersect for her and across the movement:

> I think farming is a practice of praying with your hands and your feet. And every seed you put into the ground is a prayer, is a hope, is an exercise of faith….And it's interesting because we've had folks reach out to us and say, is there a specific blessing you should say when you're planting a seed… and I think that's an opportunity for something we can grow into and to find ways to bring more prayer to the farm (Norman, personal communication, 2020).

Shani describes not only a felt connection between agriculture, Jewish spirituality, and religious practice, but an opportunity for re-invention of Jewish ritual.

The Jewish Farmer Network (JFN) is a major coalition-building organization and leader within the JAM. In early 2020, JFN organized "Cultivating Cultures," an inaugural conference that brought together organizations and participants across the JAM. Spirituality and religious practices were inherently woven throughout the conference–from offerings of formal religious services, to a Saturday break to accommodate Shabbat (the Jewish day of rest), and sessions that included topics such as the ethics of *kashrut* (Jewish dietary and food safety standards).

Events like "Cultivating Cultures" provide communal space, through diverse and dispersed networks, to those who have not felt fully welcomed within formal Jewish institutions. Drew and Lacy Grimm, who were in the process of formally converting to Judaism during the below-excerpted interview, describe an inability to feel like they "fit in" with the Jewish communal landscape near their home in western North Carolina. Homesteaders themselves, the Grimms felt a different sense of belonging at the inaugural JFN Conference, describing:

> It felt like it was just our people…on all fronts we had so much in common, whether it was talking about how Torah fits into the relationship with the land, or you know, what can we be doing better ethically when we're talking about kosher…(Norman, personal communication, 2020).

Similarly, Rachel (who chose not to use her last name), a Jewish farmer working on a non-Jewish farm, described her sense of isolation from the Jewish community after growing up in a mixed faith family. Of the same conference she describes:

> It was amazing to find myself for the first time in a Jewish context where I didn't feel like an imposter or

> outsider, united by our shared passion for agriculture and excitement to bring these two aspects of our lives together (Norman, personal communication, 2020).

The JAM and its various networks provide new opportunities for religious-identity expression.

Another example of how lived religion manifests within the JAM is the (re)-agraianized practice of Jewish holidays. From Passover Seders to *Sukkot* retreats, organizations across the JAM are reconnecting Jewish holidays with their agrarian roots and introducing novel opportunities for observance. In May 2022, Yesod Farm + Kitchen, in North Carolina, invited participants to prepare the fields for summer harvest in observance of Lag B'Omer, a minor Jewish holiday not widely observed by many North American Jews. Before their sunsetting as an organization, Linke Fligl, a self-described queer Jewish chicken farm in upstate New York, offered opportunities such as a "Black Lives Matter Text Study" in observance of *Shavuot*, the holiday in which Jews celebrate the bringing down of the Torah from Mount Sinai. Linke Fligl also offered annual Sukkot retreats, and on their website one participant is quoted as follows:

> I'm having a hard time finding the right words to describe what celebrating Sukkot at Linke Fligl with 40 radical queer Jews of varying identities has brought up for me. Never in my very secular and assimilated life would I have thought I'd find a home for myself in Judaism (Linke Fligl n.d.).

The framework of lived religion additionally characterizes these expressions of spirituality through a lens of resistance, presenting "cultural freedom," and marking departures from formal Jewish institutional spaces (Hall 1997, p. 13).

Not all members of the JAM see spirituality or religious expression as a component of their agricultural practice, and instead hold more secular Jewish identities that pertain to community, heritage, or culture. It is also important to note that some within the JAM may identify as Jews who farm rather than as "Jewish farmers," as we note earlier. Additionally, Jewish farmers operate in diverse contexts, and connection to religion and spirituality can also be influenced, for example, by rural contexts that lack Jewish community and religious resources.

## Key Jewish agrarian institutions, practices, and grassroots theorizing

From an institutional perspective, unlike nineteenth and early twentieth century North American Jewish farms, contemporary Jewish agrarianism is often characterized by leading organizations that are networked within the larger Jewish environmental movement. The earliest Jewish environmental organizations include Arthur Waskow's Shalom Center (1983—present) and Ellen Bernstein's Shomrei Adamah (1988–1996). Today, Hazon (2000—present) stands out as a national leader of the Jewish environmental movement in North America (Silvern 2021). In the past two decades there has been a significant expansion in a network of institutions working to integrate Jewish life and agriculture, which has been the focus of scholars (i.e. Berndtson and Geores 2015; Krone 2015, 2021). This includes the Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming and Environmental Education "space" that is focused on the wider environmental agenda and the Jewish Community Farming Field Building Initiative. Many of these organizations have been supported by Jewish philanthropic foundations. While these organizations are not entirely representative of the dynamic and grassroots JAM that we aim to describe, they do provide leadership. We provide three examples of areas in which this institutional leadership has been especially active: *shmita,* diaspora, and seed keeping.

It must be noted that within the JAM, there are extremely heterogeneous initiatives that range from institutionalized organizations to grassroots movements or localized projects. The more formalized groups are established nonprofits that work regionally or nationally, may receive large foundation funding, and often educate and train farmers, students, and staff in collaboration with other national groups. Grassroots initiatives include networks and localized land-based projects that aim to provide resources and community connection among Jewish farmers. Initiatives of various sizes and structures are involved in summer camps, either running one in-house or working with a network of summer camps. While most groups promote education to some extent, they range in their level of production farming for market and in their explicit commitments to solidarity with non-Jewish groups, among other things. To highlight the varying degrees of institutionalization within the JAM, we discuss these examples along a spectrum of "more institutionalized" to "more grassroots" organizing approaches.

An official *shmita*-related initiative called the Shmita Project began in 2007 through a collaboration between three organizations and their leaders: Jewish Farm School (Nati Passow), 7seeds (Yigal Deutscher), and Hazon (Nigel Savage). Krantz (2016) traces the origins of this "*shmita* revolution" to the 5761 (2000–2001 CE) *Shmita* year that includes Nati Passow's gap year in Israel, Jakir Mendela's engagement with Arthur Waskow's (1987) *Godwrestling,* and Jeremy Benstein's dissertation research on environmentalism in Israel and Palestine (Krantz 2016). The Shmita Project evolved through conferences, including the Kayam Beit Midrash at Pearlstone Retreat Center in Maryland, and then through publications through

Hazon. This included Yigal Deutscher's (2013) *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto*, which lays out a vision for sabbatical-oriented food systems, economies, and communities. The following year, Hazon published both the Shmita Sourcebook, which summarized key ancestral and contemporary texts and offered engagement activities (Deutscher et al. 2014), and Rav Kook's (2014) *Introduction to Shabbat Ha'aretz*. Much of the elevated level of *shmita* consciousness and adherence evident today across much of the JAM can be traced back to this earlier collective work.

Linke Fligl, Yiddish for "left wing," a queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural organizing project started in 2016 by Margot Seigle and Adin Zuckerman, draws on Kaye/Kantrowitz's *doikayt*-related notion of "radical diasporism" to insist that reparations-based programming that addresses land dispossession of Indigenous people and the forced migration of Black people are critical for any diasporic future in an occupied North American context. The project started when Seigle gave 181 acres of land as reparations to WILDSEED, a Black and Brown-led community. Members of WILDSEED then asked Seigle about what other vision they had for the land, which was to build land-based queer Jewish community. WILDSEED agreed with that dream and allocated 10 acres of the 181 to Seigle and collaborators to launch Linke Fligl. Along with the farm business, their work consisted of workdays and immersive queer land-based celebrations of Jewish holidays, along with producing zines, music, rituals, and other forms of political education to share with the community. Using the concept of radical diasporism, the project explored Jewish relationships to land until Linke Fligl sunsetted the farm in 2022 (in part as a *shmita* release). This exploration of relations encompassed both stories of agricultural and nomadic roots and contemporary stories of migrations and displacement, especially in the context of "ongoing settling and colonization of indigenous land." They write that:

> Diasporism offers a path to that future, one of *teshuvah* (return) and remembering. This path requires reckoning with the imagined and sacred space of Eretz Yisrael, the modern nation-state of Israel and the occupation of Palestine. It requires reparations for histories of enslavement, genocide and systemic oppression of Black and Native communities. (Linke Fligl 5781, p. 3)

Such a framing is an example of what we referred to in this paper as cultural reclamation, or *t'shuvah*, not a mere nostalgia but a Jewish framework of critical agrarianism. Naming aspects of assimilation is another dimension of this work. For example, Linke Fligl (which still maintains an active website, at this writing, although the farm itself is now closed) recently shared the hashtag #NotOurNewYear! on social media during Gregorian calendar-based New Year.

Growing excitement around seed keeping across the JAM culminated recently in the creation of the Jewish Seed Project, led by a group of volunteer organizers within the Jewish Farmer Network since 2021. The project centers around the *qishu'im*, a culturally important cucumber-like fruit with thick hairs described in the Torah and other texts of antiquity (*Bamidbar* 11:5; Janick et al. 2007; Paris and Janick 2008). In its first season, the Jewish Seed Project brought together six Jewish farmers to grow six varieties of *Cucumis melo*, known as chate melons or hairy melons, that resemble the *qishu'im.* New England-based seedkeeper and community organizer K Greene, who acquired a collection of possible *qishu'im* descendents through seedkeeper networks, provided seeds and mentorship. The Jewish Seed Project has documented growing outcomes, challenges and stories associated with seed keeping in the Jewish North American diaspora (Goldberg and Rice 2022). One venue for this is the project's blog, where growers contribute stories and reflections about growing *Cucumis melo* and other culturally important seeds. In the inaugural blog post, organizer Masha Vernik (2021) writes: "Seeds are memories. They are the keys to the past and messengers to the future." Here, Vernik captures the potential for seeds and seed keeping to preserve cultures that have diversified in the context of diaspora (in this case, Jewish cultures in North America), while also doing the much-needed work of diversifying agricultural systems themselves to be more resilient.

Deepening this exploration of diaspora and agro-ecological resilience, the Jewish Seed Project added "diasporic gardens" to their initiative in 2022, wherein different varieties of possible *qishu'im* descendents that have been carried into diaspora and effectively separated by migration, forced displacement, and centuries of travel are re-introduced and planted together. The project also expanded from six to 16 growers. These "diasporic" varieties of *qishu'im* are encouraged to cross-pollinate to create new varieties that are both defined by diaspora and situated in specific regions, a material metaphor for creating and celebrating place-based Jewish life across the diaspora. It is important to note that this collection of initiatives highlights the tensions between reclaiming ancestral practices, such as *shmita* and seedkeeping, and modern ideas of diasporism and *doikayt*. This tension generates new questions for the JAM, including: what does *shmita* mean for those in North America? Is it a process of (supporting) rematriation (i.e. re-commoning land to Indigenous communities), or is it the tricky and fraught process of "becoming indigenous/naturalized to place" (Kimmerer 2013)? Seedkeeping can be a productive compromise or balance between remembering older human-plant relationships and finding hereness. Taken together, these initiatives exemplify grassroots theorizing within the JAM that inspire future possibilities for agrarian relations.

## Conclusion

In addition to highlighting the unique contributions of the JAM, the activities described in the previous section—the Shmita Project, diasporism, and the Jewish Seed Project—also demonstrate the significant influence of the broader sustainable food movement on the JAM and potential new coalitional opportunities. *Shmita* bears resemblance to indigenous food systems around the world in that it structures human-land relations before and beyond the Western paradigm of property. Diasporism is now commonly used by communities around the world working to understand their lives in new geographic contexts (Edwards 2007). And importantly, Jewish seed-keeping in North America today is deeply inspired by indigenous food sovereignty (Grey and Patel 2015; Kim 2022; Martens et al. 2016), and by African diasporic seed work (Carney 2013; Keeve 2020).

With regard to how these Jewish mobilizations might influence current conceptualizations of broader food movements, the JAM offers yet another chance to further diversify twenty-first century agrarianism in North America. Earlier in this paper we described the increasing emergence of groups who engage in identity-based agrarian work, examples of which sit at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and immigration status. Groups such as SAAFON, as just one example, draw on diverse traditions—in this case that of a distinctly Black agrarianism and Black agricultural history—while farming in a culturally relevant manner. Jewish agrarianism should be understood as part of larger identity-based movements, as well as critical agrarianism and the broader sustainable food movement, as well as the movement in many faiths to "green" religion.

To not recognize the JAM as part of above-mentioned movements risks minimizing, and simplifying, or even erasing histories of Jewish displacement, immigration, and farming stories. This is particularly important given noticeable antisemitism in progressive spaces, including those in broader food movements (Randall 2021). Without understanding the nuance of Jewish agrarianism's pasts and present, it is all too easy to over-associate Jews with the white, urban, capitalist class, an ancient antisemitic trope. Although Judaism — like Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and, to a lesser extent, Islam and Hinduism — underwent a major shift away from its pagan and rural roots towards focusing more on the concerns of the bourgeois and urban, those ancient agrarian themes still echo through its culture and liturgy (Bell 2018). Those echoes are now growing louder and louder.

But the echoes are not always consonant with each other. Throughout this paper we've sought to illuminate, rather than minimize, the tensions inherent in the JAM—between modernity and tradition, or indigenous and diasporic identities, for example. The JAM captures stories of Jews as both settlers and displaced refugees. To bring the JAM to light holds the potential to debunk underlying antisemitism that might be latent in the wider food movement, and which can be accentuated by Christian hegemony and normativity in regenerative farming spaces where Jewish stories may not be valued.

Bringing Jewish stories into conversation with food sovereignty, sustainability, and identity-based agrarianism also presents possibilities for further solidarity between food movements. In the aforementioned Jews and Land Study Group, a prime concept was the importance of knowing one's own history—and one's own agricultural heritage and traditions. This knowledge can prevent appropriation of other group's traditions, but also allows Jews to proceed into agricultural spaces with full awareness of the burdens, baggage, and opportunities that Jewish agrarianism brings to the project of radical food systems transformation — in other words, to be better participants in multicultural and multiracial solidarity spaces. This paper offers insights on how concepts that challenge land entitlement, restricted resource use, territorialism, and privatization (such as *shmita, doikayt,* and radical diasporism) are theorized on the ground within and for the JAM, but also can be enacted in solidarity efforts.

As the preceding discussions indicate, North American Jewish agrarians have not always acted in solidarity with other marginalized communities. During the initial wave of Jewish settlement on North and South American farmland, many European Jews undermined Black liberation and indigenous sovereignty by participating in the Homestead and Dominion Acts, as well as other elements of colonization including the slave system. Such historical failures serve as both obstacles to and opportunities for future solidarity efforts among JAM members. As is common with identity-based movements, today's JAM does not present a clear consensus of what multi-racial and ethnic solidarity should or could look like. Concrete examples mentioned in this paper include: Linke Fligl's act of land reparations, Jews on Ohlone Land's interpretation of *shmita* as a call to participate in the Land Back movement, and Soul Fire Farm's Black-Jewish Community Liberation *seders*.

More and more place-based solidarity initiatives are popping up and energizing the movement as a whole. Inspired by a shared ancestral history of seeking refuge on South Jersey's sandy soils, a Black-led community food movement called Honeysuckle Provisions, a Jewish-led agrarian initiative called Alliance Colony Reboot (abbreviated as ACRe, see Appendix 1 for more information), and a Black elder who farms ACRe-owned land rent-free are, as we write, joining together to create a Black-Jewish CSA program (Riordan 2023). If there is any unifying quality of the JAM that could also serve as a formula for solidarity action, it is this method of using historical conjuncture and relationship to place as inspiration for collective repair that encompasses past, present, and future agrarian generations.

## Appendix 1 Select North American Jewish Farming Organizations

**Table 1** Select (non-exhaustive) list of North American Jewish Farming Organizations

| Organization, Location of Farm (Years Active) | Mission Statement Excerpts |
|---|---|
| *Abundance Farm, MA (2014—Present) | Abundance Farm works to build a more generous, just, and sustainable world. We do this by offering earth-based, community building experiences that integrate Jewish tradition, regenerative agriculture, and food justice |
| *Adamah and Hazon, CT (2004—Present) | Adamah cultivates the soil and the soul to produce food, to build and transform identities and to gather a community of people changing the world…we grow people through experiences with ecology, food production, social justice, spiritual practice, a vibrant evolving Judaism, and intentional community |
| Amir, Multiple States (2009—Present) | Amir cultivates youth to change tomorrow. Our goal is to inspire and empower youth through the medium of farming and gardening, helping to foster a more just and compassionate world |
| Alliance Community Reboot, NJ (2014—Present) | Alliance Community Reboot (ACRe) seeks to rebuild Jewish farm-based community in South New Jersey, on the site of the Alliance Colony, the first Jewish agricultural society in North America. ACRe is building an active farm rooted in the values of sustainability, food justice and Jewish education. The farmhouse, historic Alliance Synagogue and surrounding 70 acres of farmland serve as a Jewish cultural and educational hub for neighboring communities |
| *Beantown Jewish Gardens, MA (2011—Present) | Ganei Beantown (Beantown Jewish Gardens) is building community through experiential food and agriculture education rooted in Jewish text, tradition and culture |
| *Coastal Roots Farm, CA (2014—Present) | Coastal Roots Farm is a nonprofit Jewish community farm and education center. We cultivate healthy, connected communities by integrating sustainable agriculture, food justice, and ancient Jewish wisdom |
| *Eden Village Camp, NY and CA (2008—Present) | Rooted in the Jewish vision of creating a more environmental sustainable, socially just, and spiritually connected world, Eden Village Camp is dedicated to providing campers with an incredible summer experience while empowering them to promote a vibrant future for themselves, their communities, and our planet |
| *Ekar, CO (2010—Present) | Ekar Farm and Community Gardens is a communal urban farm, inspired by Jewish values. We work to build community, provide experiential and environmental education, and grow sustainably produced fruits and vegetables, expanding access to those in need |
| Green Kippah Collective, QC, Canada (2012) | The Green Kippah Collective is looking to sprout a diverse community of creative people (business and social entrepreneurs, movers and shakers, inventors, artists and recent graduates) who are interested in exploring the intersection of progressive Jewish identity, food and the environment |
| *Grow Torah, NJ (2014—Present) | GrowTorah develops educational Torah garden programs for Jewish schools and communal organizations… Through our curated educational garden experiences, participants explore relevant Torah values, and learn the fundamentals of gardening and small-scale land-stewardship |
| **Jewish Farmer Network, No Specific Farm Location (2016—Present) | Jewish Farmer Network supports the economic, social, and cultural vibrancy of Jewish agriculture by connecting Jewish farmers to resources and community around the world. We mobilize Jewish wisdom to build a more just and regenerative food system for all |
| Jewish Farm School, PA (2005—2020) | Jewish Farm School equips and mobilizes Jews to be part of building a just, equitable, and sustainable food system. We renew our connection to land, food, spirit, and communal celebration. We root this work in Jewish values, traditions, and the cycles of the Hebrew calendar |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Organization, Location of Farm (Years Active) | Mission Statement Excerpts |
|---|---|
| *Milk and Honey Farm at the J, CO (2015—Present) | Milk and Honey Farm at J (MHF) is an educational and sustainable farm that brings together the greater community via experiential programs and activities designed to ignite wonder and discovery, grounded in Jewish heritage, tradition, and values |
| Netiyah, CA (2011—2018) | Netiya is a food and faith network that cultivates gardens on unused land at faith-based institutions to grow and tithe nutritious food. Netiya fosters self-reliance and stewardship to lead Angelenos of all faiths toward greater access to food worthy of a blessing |
| Linke Fligl, NY (2016—2022) | Linke Fligl is a queer Jewish chicken farm and cultural organizing project building a radical diasporic Jewish future rooted in land, tradition, healing, and justice through growing nourishing food, cultivating land-based community and organizing for reparations |
| Living Tree Alliance, VT (2015—Present) | Our mission is to create, evolve, and manage a thriving earth-based intentional community with universal Jewish values for individuals and families of all backgrounds seeking greater connection, meaning and purpose in life |
| *Farming programing at Pearlstone Center, MD (2006—Present) | Pearlstone is fertile ground for living Judaism, a living laboratory for twenty-first century American Jewish life…Pearlstone cultivates vibrant and sustainable Jewish life by engaging more than 20,000 annual participants in immersive retreats, Jewish experiential education, hands-on organic farming, and community sustainability initiatives |
| *Pushing the Envelope Farm, IL (2007—Present) | We foster vibrant communal life by exploring Jewish agricultural traditions and contemporary ecological understanding. Through hands-on learning based in ecological design, personal interaction with nature, and an exploration of Jewish thought, we inspire, build, and create a more sustainable future |
| *Shalom Institute's Shemesh Farms, CA (2013—Present) | Shalom Institute is the home of … Shemesh Organic Farm and Shemesh Enterprises, a farm-based social enterprise for young adults with diverse abilities |
| *Shoresh, ON, Canada (2008—Present) | Shoresh inspires and empowers our community to take care of the earth by connecting people, land, and Jewish tradition. Through nature-based Jewish education, healthy food production, environmental action, and sustainable Jewish products, we offer community members meaningful opportunities to be responsible stewards of the world around us |
| Stable Harvest Farm, BC, Canada (2020—Present) | We're a Jewish farm that welcomes everyone, inspired by the ancient traditions that unite communities and bring people together to celebrate the land. Using food as a way to teach and inspire Jewish values, tradition, and practices, Stable Harvest Farms is looking to make the world a more sustainable place |
| *Urban Adamah, CA (2010—Present) | Urban Adamah seeks to build a more loving, just, and sustainable world. We ground and connect people — to themselves, to others, and to the natural world. We do this by providing farm-based, community building experiences that integrate Jewish tradition, mindfulness, sustainable agriculture, and social action |
| Yesod Farm + Kitchen, NC (2018—Present) | Yesod Farm + Kitchen seeks collective liberation with the land through Jewish agriculture, mutual aid, and growing relationships across difference |
| Yiddish Farm, NY (2012—Present) | The mission of Yiddish Farm is to expand the role of the Yiddish language, serve as a bridge between Yiddish speakers of various backgrounds, and to promote environmental stewardship through organic farming |
| Zumwalt Acres, IL (2020—Present) | Zumwalt Acres is a Jewish regenerative agriculture community working to develop a model of ecologically sustainable and socially just land stewardship in Illinois |

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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