

Jewish co-op plans Sunderland farm
By SIOBHAN SKYE ROHDE
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November 30, 2002 -- SUNDERLAND - When Rabbi Chaim Adelman looks at the land tucked behind the Pioneer Auction House, just past the Sunderland town line on Route 116, he sees more than two empty fish troughs and a fairly new barn. Walking across the 70 acres in his black hat and suitcoat to inspect ponds and the woods at the edge of overgrown fields, Adelman envisions an Orthodox Jewish community where commitment to G-d and to the land go hand in hand.

Adelman, 46, the University of Massachusetts chaplain who runs Chabad House on campus, is the driving force behind Eretz Ha'Chaim, or the Living Land, a Hasidic housing cooperative that has planted garlic in the fields and back-to-the-land visions in the heads of Orthodox Jews nationwide.

"Everyone will agree if you grow your own food, process it yourself, provide it yourself, that will be as pure as you can get," said Adelman. "My dream would be to be totally self-sufficient: have our own vegetables, have our own dairy production. We could grow olives in a greenhouse and grow our own wheat."

Eretz Ha'Chaim will also include a synagogue, school and Torah education center, which will host events for area residents, from schoolchildren learning how to bake bread to Jewish adults who want to find out more about their faith.

Sunderland must approve any property plans before building can proceed. Adelman said he plans to present his plan to the town this winter.

Adelman has hit a nerve with his quest "to live the most spiritual and beautiful, caring life we could as Jews." Seven families have signed on to move onto the land, and two families want to participate but remain in their current homes.

In a screening process, members of Eretz Ha'Chaim vote on all applicants seeking to join the housing co-op, and hold a meeting with them.

Eretz Ha'Chaim has received about 40 queries from as far away as New York City, Chicago, California and Montreal.

"It's exciting," said Adelman. "The call of the rebbe (the spiritual leader of Lubavitch Jews) to make Israel where you are, that's in Amherst and Sunderland, too. I feel very challenged to go out and do this, to invite neighbors to celebrate with us and make communication. I'm confident we'll be able to thrive here as well."

The land, which Eretz Ha'Chaim bought in 2001 for \$620,000, is currently zoned for 13 homes, though Adelman envisions as many as 50. Scott Nielsen, the developer who is working with Eretz Ha'Chaim and provided much of the \$220,000 down payment, does not want to build another standard subdivision.

Self-sufficiency, education

"We want to make sure we have a design that promotes togetherness, but we also have to take economics into consideration," Adelman said. He began to think about a self-sufficient community four or five years ago. Involved with the kosher food industry as a rabbinical field representative inspecting five food plants, he saw the problems faced in maintaining food purity with so many suppliers, and realized that it was possible to grow one's own organic, kosher food.

Though kosher food has different categories, the basic tenets of kashrut, or Jewish dietary law, are threefold. First, a kosher animal must eat grass and have split hooves. Most birds are considered kosher, but birds of prey are not. Sea animals are kosher only if they have fins and scales. Any food product of a non-kosher animal is also non-kosher, except honey.

Second, animal slaughter must follow Jewish law, leading to a quicker, more humane death. Third, meat and dairy products cannot mix.

In Israel, part of each crop is tithed to the poor, and farmland is left fallow every seven years. Adelman plans to follow these tenets with Eretz Ha'Chaim.

While self-sufficiency is a vital goal for the community, so is education. Adelman imagines children coming to the farm to watch every step of bread making, from wheat harvest to baking. Eretz Ha'Chaim has held farm festivals on the land in the past two Octobers, with visitors taking horse-drawn carriage rides and helping to plant garlic.

Devorah Lifchitz, 27, of Amherst, said she welcomes the opportunity for Jewish and non-Jewish people to come together and understand each other's beliefs.

"It's so strange to me when they refer to us as ultra-Orthodox," she said. "I'm just a mother with a kid. I go everywhere they go."

"I guess the main attraction for us is the possibility of creating an actual learning center and allowing people to get in touch with their spiritual selves," said Chana Luba Ertel, 26, who moved to Amherst with her husband last year.

Lifchitz, who has been involved in Eretz Ha'Chaim for two years, stressed the value of communal living on the property. "The Orthodox community itself, it definitely will teach us how to live cooperatively," she said. "It will be great. We live so far apart. Jewish people who live this kind of lifestyle, they need to live close together."

Lawrence Schiffman, chairman of the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, worries about a possible conflict between the idealism of Eretz Ha'Chaim and the economics of farming. "I think the question of whether they will succeed is an economic question," he said.

This concern extends from the overall financial health of the commune to seemingly trivial details with an economic impact. Adelman said community members may have outside jobs to supplement the farm income.

Fundraising will be ongoing, and donations are welcome. No one from Eretz Ha'Chaim will milk cows on the Sabbath, but the community will hire non-Jews to tend the herd.

"The question is trying to merge and be faithful to the old, but infuse the old with new ideas," said Joel Kaminsky, assistant professor of religion and Biblical literature at Smith College. "Religion should be in the business of, to some extent, adaptation. It's not a religious compromise; it's a cultural compromise."

In other words, the goal these days is to get your message out there.

Shaul Magid, associate professor of Jewish philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary, called Eretz Ha'Chaim a great tool for attracting people to Judaism. "These people, though they didn't grow up Lubavitch, are bringing the values they grew up with into the community," he said.

Lubavitch Hasidism, a branch of Judaism, focuses on observing and showing others the richness of a life shaped by adherence to the Torah.

Outreach is an important Lubavitch aspect, and rabbis at more than 2,400 Chabad-Lubavitch centers around the world encourage Jews to return to traditional practices.

"It's an interesting experiment," Magid said of Eretz Ha'Chaim. "It's also not insignificant that it's happening in western Massachusetts because, as we all know, that area is a repository for alternative communities. In a certain way, it's trying to compete with that market."

He said the image of bucolic farm life is especially attractive as drug use rises among urban Orthodox teens. "I just wonder if this is a way to create another environment," said

Magid. "I think it's interesting that this is happening in the wake of ... problems that occur in any urban life."

But the question remains: Can the farm succeed when most Eretz Ha'Chaim community members are fairly new to rural life?

"These people are not farmers by training, nor are they farmers by ambition. They're city dwellers," said Magid. "Can they maintain their middle-class lifestyle and figure out employment opportunities to do that?"

If its commitment to a Torah-true life and to Eretz Ha'Chaim is any indication, the community will do just fine, according to Scott Nielsen.

"These folks have chosen to structure their lives around certain principles of guidance," he said. "I like their sense of commitment, and I think that is what's going to make this community succeed."

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