

Our Jewish Farmers

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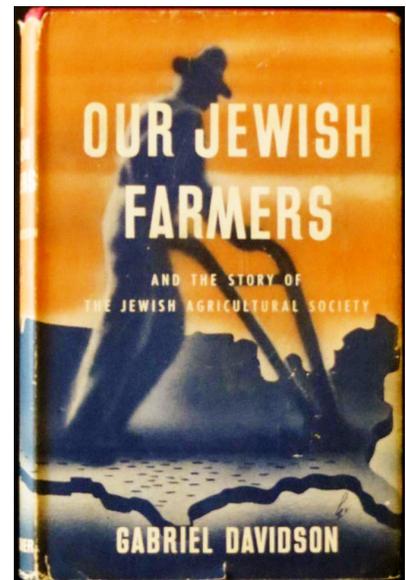
Treatment

Our Jewish Farmers is the working title for my next feature-length documentary film. This documentary project will follow the narrative of the agrarian Jewish tradition in the United States beginning with the incoming wave of European immigrants in the late 19th century and also highlighting the present-day resurgence of Jewish farming within the US. The film's working title pays homage to Gabriel Davidson's book of the same name outlining the chronology of the Jewish Agricultural Society from the late 19th century through to the time of publication in 1943. This treatment serves as an outline of the exploratory nature of where the project stands at present, outlining some of the thoughts I have had since the end of the NEH Summer Institute and how important that experience has been in formulating the film thus far (and well into the future).

Intention / Objectives

The intentions of this film are twofold: the first is to shed a broader light as to how farming and agricultural practices contributed to the systematic dispersion and assimilation process that would lead to the Americanization of the Eastern European Jewish community. The film will track historical narratives connected to the Jewish Agricultural Society and the early agrarian pursuits of the Industrial Removal Office (IRO) and Galveston Project through the use of archival material, oral histories and expert testimony in the form of interviews.

I am particularly interested in tracing the narratives of Jewish migrants coming from Eastern European shtetl enclaves, who, with the help of the Jewish Colonization Fund, the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the IRO, relocated by train to the rural landscape of America and were taught the agrarian skillset through Yiddish language farming publications. One of the first of these experiment communities, in Woodbine New Jersey, as well as the farming communities in North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee are all ostensibly well documented farming communities which I intend to include in this documentary film study.



For this portion of the film project, I will be travelling to various archives including the Center for Jewish History in NYC and the College of Charleston to search for photographic evidence and other documents/artifacts that will be essential for the visual storytelling of the Jewish farming experience in the US.

The second element of the film that will couple this historical survey of Eastern European migrants is



following the new wave of contemporary Jewish farmers, whose intentions are to find a more enriched understanding of their religious heritage through the tilling of the land. While Jewish farmers have been present throughout the history of the United States, 2020 stands as a particularly important year in this subject as it will mark the inaugural meeting of the Jewish Farmers Network, titled “Cultivating Culture”. This collective of Jewish farmers aims to foster a community with a mission of supporting “the economic, social, and cultural vibrancy of Jewish agriculture by connecting Jewish farmers to resources and community around the world”¹. I am fortunate to have been invited by the leadership of the Jewish Farmers Network to their foundational event which will serve as an exploratory venture, meeting farmers and other members of the JFN, hearing their stories with an aim to begin filming at Jewish farms throughout US in the Spring of 2020.

Prior to the conference in February, I will be travelling to Yesod Farm in Asheville, North Carolina for an exploratory research trip. I have been graciously invited by Jewish farmer, and chief operating officer of the Jewish Farmers Network Sarah Seldin to Yesod, where she resides as the steward in residence. Yesod Farms is self-described as dedicated to regenerative agriculture, earth-based Jewish living, and growing relationships across difference.

The film’s intention is to marry these two strands of Jewish agrarian life: the historical and the contemporary as a way of showing the cultural lineage of these practices.

As is often the case with documentary projects, there is an exploratory element to the unpacking of narrative through-lines. Discovering the oral histories to include will be part of the process of creating the film. As I am introduced to new people connected with the subject; interview and document experience of the present-day communities of Jewish Farmers, the film will evolve.

¹ <https://www.jewishfarmernetwork.org/mission>

Selected bibliography

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