

# Field of Dreams

## *Organic Devotee Daron Joffe Fuses Earth-Friendly Food, Jewish Values*

By LISA KEYS

His birth certificate may say Daron Joffe, but to his friends, family and students, he's known as "Farmer D."

At 26, Joffe has an impressive seven years of organic soil ground into the treads of his well-worn boots (metaphorically speaking). But it was only recently, he said, that he discovered the symbiotic relationship between his two life passions: farming and Judaism.

Joffe's goal is to "really enrich people's life through a connection to the land," he said. "Judaism is so rooted in agriculture, the cycles of the seasons, the harvest. We want to enhance that for people and build a business at the same time."

Joffe is one of eight "social entrepreneurs" between the ages of 22 and 36 selected last month to receive a high-profile Joshua Venture grant. The \$60,000 in seed money (again, metaphorically speaking) will enable Joffe to establish Gan Chaim — "Garden of Life" — which aims to create Jewish gardening and environmental awareness programs at a farm in Athens, Ga., and, eventually, at other venues across the country.

As he did last year, Joffe will spend this Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for the Trees, at the garden of the Marcus Jewish Community Center in Atlanta, which he created. "It's amazing," he said, recalling last year's planting of 18 fruit trees. "Kids are out in the sun, feeling the earth, learning how to plant a tree. It's an experience they'll never forget. It has a huge impact — and their kids will be able to eat from the tree."

But let us begin at the beginning: Back in 1998, Joffe was operating an organic farm in Wisconsin. An invitation for a Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life conference arrived in the mail, addressed to a former resident of the farm. Intrigued, Joffe attended the conference himself.

"The whole thing was phenomenal," Joffe said. "I had been passionate about my Judaism since I went to Alexander Muss High School in Israel. I became passionate about agriculture in college. But I didn't make the connection until I found COEJL. Somehow they can work together for a

single goal. I started to coalesce this Judaism and environmental thing in my being. That became my focus."

Joffe began with baby steps, teaching gardening to children in the Jewish community of Madison, Wisc. After a stint in 2000 at the San Francisco League for Urban Gardeners teaching landscaping and horticulture to incarcerated youth, Joffe relocated to his hometown of Atlanta.

Wanting something "fulfilling" to do, Joffe wrote a proposal to establish a garden at the JCC day camp. The program, Joffe said, was a hit. The children grew cherries, carrots, lettuce and okra. "It was a miracle for them to see it," he said. "There was an appreciation that had never been there before. Parents would come to me, say, 'What did you do to get my kid to eat carrots? He ate okra, for God's sake!' Children had profound experiences in that garden every day."

Joffe is currently studying and living on an organic farm in Athens, where he was hired by Carl Jordan, a professor at the University of Georgia's Institute of Ecology, to "develop a model organic enterprise on his land," Joffe said. "He put me in charge of the vision."

That vision is transforming the farm into Gan Chaim, which he describes as "somewhat of a kibbutz," he said. "We have an educational center, and we're going to market ourselves as a community-supported agricultural farm, mainly focusing on the Jewish community of Atlanta."

The plan is to engage the local Jewish community in the farm. "We want them to invest in the farm and receive whatever we grow here," Joffe said. "What this is about is environmental awareness, stewardship, supporting local farms and really getting the Jewish community to actively participate in supporting the local farm and a healthier lifestyle."

Born to South African parents and raised in Atlanta, Joffe didn't always have the desire to till the soil. As a student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Joffe began with the usual "undeclared" melange of anthropology, math and English classes. The summer after his freshman year, he took an accredited apprenticeship on an organic farm. Drawn to the hands-on education farming provides — and unable to receive adequate credit from the university — Joffe dropped out of school in 1995 and was, he said, "self-taught from then on."

After working an apprenticeship on a biodynamic farm — combining organic farming with a "holistic, spiritual science" — in Georgia, in 1996, Joffe bought a farm in Wisconsin. "It was a combination of a dream come true and a harsh bite of reality," he said. "As an apprentice, the man I worked for gave me a list of things to do and I didn't deal with a lot of

logistics. Owning a farm taught me a lot of real life lessons as far as owning property, running a business, creating partnerships and managing a staff."

The community-supported farm was a success — the American Biodynamic Association voted Joffe "rookie biodynamic farmer of the year" in 1998 — or, as much as a success a small farm could be in light of the increasingly industrialized face of agribusiness. Over time, Joffe's side project — selling organic pizza and falafel at the Madison farmers' market — became more profitable than his farm.

"Part of the reason I farm, why my passion is so intense, is that I see people who eat my food transform," he said. "If you eat food that's grown with love and intention, grown to actually make people feel good, it changes the way they function. They have less stress, are healthier. It's very subtle, but I really believe it."

It's when that method is combined with Judaism that the effect is most profound. "I'm trying to bring together these two different worlds; to support small farmers and improve the way Jews steward the earth. It's a part of *tikkun olam*; it's our duty as Jews to choose a more compassionate way of bringing food into being."

"I'm kind of an eco-Yid, you could say," he said. "My temple is really nature. I find myself most in touch with Judaism when I express it through the earth, through farming."