Living Judaism

Pearlstone Eyes Future with Intentional-Living and Hands-On Learning

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By Connor Graham

On a chilly Wednesday morning in April, a school bus filled with fourth graders from Liberty Elementary School in West Baltimore pulled up in front of the Pearlstone Conference and Retreat Center in Reisterstown. The children, who were there for an immersive outdoor experience — planting radish seeds, clearing planter beds and feeding chickens, goats and sheep — were not the only visitors that day.

A group of sheep that are standing in the grass

Description automatically generated

At noon, Pearlstone hosted a conference for a focus group committed to promoting food conservation in the hospitality industry and event planners met with organizers from a yoga and arts festival to confirm they will be coming to the Pearlstone Center in September.

Elsewhere, the organic kosher kitchen was churning out farm-to- table food for conference-goers and Pearlstone staff, while members from Pearlstone’s farm team performed routine maintenance on the new community farm and the center’s established educational farm.

In the midst of all the bustle, Jakir Manela, the Pearlstone Center’s executive director, was unfazed. “This is a light day,” he said. Over the next several years, if all goes as planned, the Pearlstone Center won’t see many more light days.

For more than a decade, Pearlstone has made a name for itself as the environmentally friendly retreat and conference center with a hands-on, Earth-based Torah education program. The center, nestled in the sprawling green hills of Northern Baltimore County, is estimated to serve around 20,000 visitors each year.

When Pearlstone’s immediate neighbors, Camp Milldale, closed in the fall of 2015, The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, which owns the Pearlstone property and Milldale’s 150 acres, repurposed the land to expand the Pearlstone campus and its mission. The Associated provides Pearlstone with with an annual unrestricted grant and is assisting in raising funds for a multiyear, approximately $20 million master plan, now in the first stages of implementation. The plan is expected to allow Pearlstone to nearly double its current operating budget.

“We are their partner; we think that what they do is unique and aligned with our priorities,” said Ruth Miller, vice president of community planning and allocations at The Associated. “Their programs have been evaluated. We know they work.”

But more important than the dollars, Manela said, is the projection that Pearlstone will also be able to extend its hospitality services, educational programming and agricultural stewardship to reach as many as 40,000 visitors each year.

**A sacred mission**

Manela describes the scope of the Pearlstone Center’s master plan as additive, meaning little will change about the programs and services Pearlstone currently offers, but many more opportunities and experiences will become available to the community.

The addition of programs and services, without the sacrifice of foundational values, has been the Pearlstone Center M.O. for a long time. Richard Pearlstone, in conjunction with The Associated, founded the The Jack Pearlstone Institute for Living Judaism in 1982.

In a 1994 Q&A published in *The Baltimore Sun*, Pearlstone said, “The institute’s purpose is really to provide a Jewish education on a more informal basis than going to religious school. What we’re trying to do is encourage families to celebrate Shabbat together, learn together, share Jewish values. We try to work with all the congregations and all the different strains of Judaism so that they can do programs together to promote Jewish learning.”

It wasn’t until seven years after that interview that Pearlstone opened the retreat center in Reisterstown, and several more years after that when the institution became a leader in the Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming and Environmental Education movement (JOFEE).

Even with the addition of Earth-based educational programming, the way in which new and seasoned Pearlstone team members describe the center’s current work is strikingly similar to the way Richard Pearlstone described the institute named after his father almost 25 years ago.

Sara Shalva, the Pearlstone Center’s assistant director, echoed Richard Pearlstone’s sentiment of informal education and emphasis on the celebration of Shabbat. “We’re getting rid of walls and classrooms,” she said. “Our educational programs live at the center of Jewish Wisdom and farm-based education, in the values of *shmita* (a Sabbath year for land to rest) and Shabbat, *tzar baalei chaim*(kindness to animals) and *shomrei adamah* (guardians of the Earth). What we have to share is universal.”

Josh Fidler, the namesake for the log-cabin village on the retreat center’s campus, is a founding board member, former board chair and current co-chair of the master plan. He describes Jewish unification as an ongoing value.

“We knew only one thing — that we couldn’t possibly predict how the retreat center was going to be used by the wide spectrum of users we hoped to attract,” he said. “Literally the day we opened, we hosted groups from all three major Jewish denominations at once. That gave us confidence that we were on the right track.”

Jack Pearlstone’s grandson P.J. is the center’s immediate past board chair and current co-chair of the center’s capital campaign. He believes the implementation of Pearlstone’s master plan will have a huge impact on the Baltimore Jewish community, which is what his grandfather would have wanted.

“I think my grandfather would be very proud and honored to see what his original idea has become,” said P.J. “He had a deep commitment to the Jewish future, and this plan continues upon his original vision.”

**Creating a vibrant ecosystem**

The top of a hill just west of Pearlstone’s former boundaries offers the perfect vantage point to envision the plans for its new campus. There are the acres to the west, now mostly vacant grassland, that will become a vineyard and blueberry orchard; the house just beyond that field that will serve as employee housing; and the land just north of a 5-acre pond that is the future site of an outdoor amphitheater.

A group of people in a field

Description automatically generated

Greg Strella, Pearlstone’s director of stewardship, said those at Pearlstone consider the already established retreat center, the area designated for events and the plans for *moshav*, an intentional Jewish community, to be centers of gravity for the campus. By infusing agricultural stewardship into these centers, Pearlstone is creating a “vibrant ecosystem.”

“They all lead you to the same thing,” he added. “Resilience and abundance.”

According to Strella, the acquired land making up the 180-acre campus will contain 70 acres of forest, 50 acres of grassland and meadows, a 5-acre pond, and a half-mile of streams bordering the north and west ends of the campus. With these natural amenities at its fingertips, Pearlstone is encouraging the community to participate in more spur-the-moment visitations.

“We’re opening up this campus to the community in a way that we haven’t been able to in the past,” said Strella. “We’re layering things in like the events area, Upicks [a berry-picking event], the pool, the trails — things that are inviting the community to swing through without planning a full-fledged retreat.”

Manela explained that Pearlstone’s reputation as a “hidden gem” is both a blessing and an obstacle. “That identity is part of who we are, but we’re also pushing through that,” he said. “We have 20,000 people we impact every year. Many of those folks are coming from around the country and around the world. But it’s ironic that the notoriety and prominence of Pearlstone is greater in the national Jewish leadership world.”

As Strella describes it, practically every element of the campus plays a prominent role in the creation of an ecosystem, from the goats and sheep that graze the property to the aforementioned pond that can see the interaction of more than 120 species of bugs, plants and animals.

Like the hundreds of plant and animal species mingling across the campus, the people — guests, employees, volunteers — play not only a pivotal role in the upkeep of the ecosystem, but provide another element of diversity.

Shani Mink, the animal manager, field manager and volunteer coordinator at Pearlstone, said, “It’s nice to be part of a Jewish organization that has diversity within the Jews who work here,” citing a range from culturally Jewish to extremely observant.

Mink also said that the Pearlstone staff accommodates and welcomes people from all religious backgrounds and primary languages. Several employees from the kitchen are Spanish speakers, she said, while the housekeeping team members primarily speak Russian.

Wynne Paris and Kimberley Maddox are, respectively, the co-founder and event planner for the Love Light Festival, a yoga and arts festival based in the mid-Atlantic that Pearlstone will host in late September. While Love Light does not cater specifically to any one religion, Paris said spirituality is at the festival’s core.

“What’s so nice about Pearlstone is the tenants of the Jewish religion are totally in sync with the yoga tradition,” he said, citing the festival’s vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol as parallels to the traditions of kashrut. Furthermore, Pearlstone’s commitment to *moshav* and community- building impressed Paris.

“In the current climate, it’s sad to say, just creating a space for people to enjoy love and happiness is a form of activism,” he said. “It shouldn’t be that way, but it is.”

**‘Taste the new Pearlstone’**

In Pearlstone’s dining area are two chalkboards: one outlining the center’s food ethic and the other showing what items from the current week’s offerings were sourced from the Pearlstone farm.

The former board reads, in part, “We strive to provide consciously sourced, wholesome, delicious food, inspired by crops grown on our farm and prepared with love.” The harvest from the farm that week included eggs, bitter herb and parsley.

Part of the center’s educational farm is the calendar garden: 12 wooden raised planter beds that represent each month of the Hebrew calendar. Each bed is used to grow produce that can be harvested in that particular month. Frequently, the crops yielded from this area of the farm can show up on the menu.

Rabbi Psachyach Lichtenstein, Pearlstone’s creative director and rabbinic educator, uses the calendar garden during his Earth-based Torah education.

“The Hebrew calendar is not just a time-keeping device, it’s actually the heavens and the Earth itself,” he said. “We focus on how each one of the holidays relates to where you are physically in connection to all the other beings around you.”

Over the course of time the JT spent at the Pearlstone Center, Manela frequently said, “Taste the new Pearlstone.” The mantra serves as a goal, a tangible way the community can see, or taste, how the changes at the Pearlstone campus are coming to fruition.

Despite working on one of the most beautiful pieces of real estate in Reisterstown, Shraga Zirkind, the head mashgiach and chef at Pearlstone, said he never takes in the view during his workday.

“I don’t leave the building because kosher is my main responsibility,” said Zirkind, who was a chef in New York for eight years, but didn’t become a kosher supervisor until he came to Baltimore.

For Zirkind, who described himself as “just a person who recycles,” the combination of organic and kosher is new concept, but a welcome challenge.

“I’ve learned a lot about how kosher effects sustainability,” he said. “I did not know there was a whole world of kosher people that are looking for free-range, cage-free and farm-to-table.”

Pearlstone’s food ethic not only benefits those who consume it, but the land as well. Annually, the center produces 60,000 pounds of compost, decomposed organic matter that can be used as plant fertilizer, 31,000 pounds of which comes directly from food scraps.

“Food is one of the areas we’re really investing in,” said Manela. “I’ve been here for 12 years, and right now the food is the best it’s ever been.”

Part of Pearlstone’s new master plan is the launch of the Community Sustainability Initiative. The initiative, directed by Joan Plisko, aims not only to green the current site and any new facilities created, but also to document the ways in which that protocol is benefitting the center and the community.

“Over the past two years we’ve reduced our energy consumption and costs by 30 percent,” Plisko said, “and we’re trying out a new piece of equipment in partnership with The Associated to reduce it another 15 to 20 percent.”

The aforementioned partnership with The Associated is a large-scale solar energy project. The Associated has specified that over the course 20 years the Federation intends to offset each of its agencies’ electricity use with solar energy by 50 percent. According to Manela, no other Jewish community in North America has made the commitment to solar energy the way that The Associated has agreed to.

Pearlstone wants others to benefit from the experiment.

“We want to share the things we learn with the Jewish community, so that other Associated agencies and synagogues can take these same tools and apply them in their organization,” said Manela. “They can save money and build happier and healthier work forces. We want to be a model.”

**A multi-faceted experience for all**

Part of the Pearlstone Center’s most important outreach is to youth, Jewish and secular. Liberty Elementary School, who Pearlstone named program partner of the year, has been in partnership with Pearlstone for three years.

Each year the school has sent about 70 students to Pearlstone in three separate trips. The first is in the fall to familiarize the students with the pasture, animals and how the growing cycle functions. The second occurs in April when the children begin preparing for the next year of planting, and the third occurs in June when students prepare a full farm-to-table meal that utilizes the vegetables they planted that fall.

“In the past, this last visit of the year has also been an overnight experience where our fourth graders get to participate in a campfire, night hike and other evening outdoor experiences,” said Joseph Manko, the principal at Liberty Elementary.

“Most of our children don’t leave the four-block radius of their homes, they don’t see how vegetables are grown and they have never been away from their parents for an overnight experience with their classmates. This experience shows them that there is a larger world beyond West Baltimore.”

Pearlstone encourages secular groups to visit, and changes very little when it comes to explaining its Jewish values.

“Judaism and culture in general can be seen as particular or universal. Our values of sustainability and justice don’t only exist in Judaism,” said Manela. “We’re teaching our values in a broad, universal sense. I think that’s one of the magical things about this place.”

“Torah is our traditions and our teachings in books, and texts and teachers,” said Lichtenstein, “but also, Torah is the wisdom you find within creation.”

For the many different layers the Pearlstone Center encompasses — religion, environmentalism, farming, education — it is far from a complicated place. Manela hopes that both visitors and staff members alike can use their time at the center to unplug as often as possible to bask in what is in front of them.

“We want to simplify and help people focus on the fundamental aspects of life,” said Manela. “There’s nothing on your phone that is better than those baby goats.”