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Going For the Green

by Alina Gerlovin Spaulding

For most athletes, “going for the gold” is a personal motivation, but at the American Hebrew Academy, students and staff are learning that “going for the green” is equally important. “I know that I can put the catsup and the mustard in the squeezable containers,” our *mashgiach*, Paul, says in his pristine, South African accent. He explains that single-use packets of condiments are wasteful... and he is concerned about how the kitchen at the American Hebrew Academy can do its share to stay “green.”

In 2007-08, the kitchen, at the country’s only pluralistic Jewish college prep boarding school, switched from buying produce from around the globe to using locally grown and often organic produce. For the Academy, an institution that serves 20 meals per child per week, cost savings, better quality, and reduction in transportation costs are all benefits of “going green.” Furthermore, students, staff, and parents all agree that the food tastes fresher, and the vegetarian options are both creative and delicious.

Some may feel that the American Hebrew Academy’s campus is environmentally friendly “by accident.” Truth be told, many on campus feel that there is something that drives the environmental commitment that cannot be quantified. It is the *kavanah* or intention of the founder, Chico Sabbah.

Born in Brooklyn, Sabbah moved to Israel in 1950, following Ben Gurion’s dream to make the desert bloom, later becoming an agronomist. When the historic gift was made to start the American Hebrew Academy, Sabbah hired an environmental arborist to identify rare trees and plants throughout the breathtaking campus. He then hired architect Aaron *Green* (Coincidence? We think not!) to create the campus using organic architecture, a design philosophy conceived by Frank Lloyd Wright in which buildings are integrated into, and become part of, the natural landscape. Green’s design also incorporated many local building materials into the campus. “Local” for the Academy means North Carolinian products, as well as those that come from Israel. The campus’s buildings are clad in Jerusalem stone, providing a physical connection to Israel, as well as the spiritual one that is only enhanced when students experience a semester in Israel their junior year.



The campus includes 26 buildings, all built within nature. Each building is crowned with a skylight, also manufactured in Israel, that allows the influence of natural light, proven to save energy and stimulate emotional well-being. Beneath the school's soccer stadium and running track, which is made of recycled rubber, rests the jewel in the crown of the ecological system at the Academy. Five hundred feet below the campus, is the world's largest closed-loop geothermal heating and cooling system. This \$3 million dollar investment, which includes over 750 wells, continuously recycles natural water to heat and cool everything from the kosher dining hall and its refrigeration units to the natatorium. Student houses are heated and cooled each day, but the academic buildings and athletic center "sleep" at night, so energy is conserved while buildings are not in use. The system, which initially cost \$2 million more than a traditional heating and cooling system, is expected to pay for itself in the next four years, only 12 years after its installation. At that point, the Academy will be heating and cooling at a 40% savings annually over conventional methods. As the campus grows, with more students, the efficiency of the system will grow, increasing costs savings to as high as 60%, all thanks to Mother Nature. Because the geothermal system takes advantage of the earth's natural temperature, as well as recycling all of the water it uses, nothing goes to waste.



The AHA Geothermal System

Living Classrooms

The geothermal pump house is one of several “living classrooms” on campus. Here, students can learn about geothermal energy and earth science, not to mention being reminded about the Jewish value of *tikkun olam*, the responsibility of each person to repair the world.

Walking past the kosher concession stand, you will find six greenhouses, housing the Academy’s 147 *Etrog* trees. Between the Academic buildings, sit the “Gardens of Israel” which were designed by the students, and are now in full bloom with grapes, vegetables, and trees that are cared for by students and staff.

It is likely that one of the greatest contributors to the decrease of the “carbon footprint” that the Academy is leaving is that nearly all of the 100-acre campus is restricted to pedestrian traffic. Staff members who need to get from place to place at long distances are issued electric vehicles.



The wireless campus, together with laptop and tablet computers provided to every student and member of the Academy’s faculty, act to help save paper, but they also pose one of the greatest challenges when it comes to conservation. The campus network allows students to turn papers in online, but many teachers continue to require the “standard” 10-page paper, printed, single-sided, double-spaced, with 1

½ inch margins. “As an institution, we want to serve as an example to our students, and the Academy is leading the way for all other high schools to follow.” says Glenn Drew, Executive Director of the American Hebrew Academy, “But we still have a very long way to go, particularly in the use of recyclable and biodegradable materials.”

In the meantime, Paul, the *mashgiach*, continues his quest, evaluating the increased cost of switching to compostable utensils and cups versus the energy consumed by dishwashing or the production of standard paper products that tend to be of lower quality.

The American Hebrew Academy is the Western Hemisphere’s only Jewish, pluralistic, college prep, boarding school. The state-of-the-art environment fosters academic achievement and strengthens Jewish identity in a residential setting for students in

grades nine through twelve. The dual curriculum, along with the aquatics center and sports complex, provides a holistic educational experience — nurturing mind, body, and soul. An internationally acclaimed faculty challenges students to excel in a rigorous program that includes Advanced Placement and Jewish studies courses. At the Academy, values and leadership skills are enriched by the culture, customs, and history of the Jewish people. Students graduate thoroughly prepared for college and ready to make a meaningful impact on the world. For more information about the Academy, please visit www.americanhebrewacademy.org.

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