

# Eitz Chayim Chronicles

January 2025

By Talia Berkwits

## Welcome!

*Eitz Chayim* is a monthly publication created to connect Jewish Chicagoland communities with environmental work. I created *Eitz Chayim* as an individual impact project as a part of the Einayich Yonim Fellowship, an 18 month long Jewish ecological fellowship for 10-12th graders, with the goal of emphasizing that Jewish values are inseparable from environmental work. I hope this publication is a mode of education, a creator of community, and a call to action to do our individual part in making the earth a more sustainable place l'dor v'dor, from generation to generation.

For more information on the Einayich Yonim Fellowship, click here: [eyfellowship.org](http://eyfellowship.org)



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## Local Spotlight — Mary Beth Schaye



The story begins with the PTA, a pancake breakfast, and a need for compostable products.

As an environmental chair at her daughters' elementary school, Mary Beth Schaye was organizing a pancake breakfast and searching for ways to compost the waste produced. "I wasn't an uber-environmentalist when I was little," Schaye explains, but "it was when my kids were little that I really started to be more aware of waste." At that time, it was difficult to find information about composting services, so she reached out to the Evanston Ecology Center and found out that, by chance, a food scrap hauling company named Collective Resource Inc. was founded just a few months beforehand. "There is so much *bashert* in this," she says, "that was my first encounter...and I was hooked."

The breakfast took place a little over thirteen years ago, and since then, Schaye has assumed many significant roles at the organization, recently restructured and renamed Collective Resource Compost Cooperative (CRCC), which is a "customized, container-swap, composting service" co-op that seeks to mitigate climate change by making composting easy for "anyone who eats." Through her work and energy as a Vice President of the board and an employee-owner, she has helped CRCC grow to serve the wide boundaries of the Chicagoland area.

Whether it be the drivers, container washers, customers, or co-op owners, Schaye values the "community around sustainability" and feels that the co-op model helps to cultivate that community through its structural commitment to supporting workers, the local economy, and the customers themselves. It is very easy to become an owner, Schaye remarks. Interested individuals can become co-op owners and support their work by investing in shares ranging from a quarter share (\$250) to as many as ten full shares.

There are an abundance of food waste reduction options available for both individuals or families, Schaye describes, including becoming an owner of a co-op like CRCC, a customer of a composting service, a backyard composter, or utilizing free communal composting opportunities. This flexibility is a needed part of making environmental work successful. The hardest part of composting is changing people's mindsets around it, she adds. "There is so much education that's still ongoing, education that needs to be done to have people make the connection." But, through the myriad of different ways to make an ecological difference, she is able to find joy and meaning in the oftentimes uphill battle of environmental work.

Schaye has created a community through her work in waste management and involvement with individuals to find the right environmental fit for them. She is on a mission to help Chicagoland communities become zero-waste and create a supportive and involved environmental ecosystem for all, all stemming from one long-ago pancake breakfast.

Interested in composting at home? Collective Resource Composting Cooperative offers flexible residential composting services ([click here](#) for more info). If you are interested in learning more about backyard composting [click here](#). Finally, for questions or inquiries for Mary Beth Schaye please contact [mbschaye@collectiveresourcecompost.coop](mailto:mbschaye@collectiveresourcecompost.coop)

## As Water Ebbs: The Role of Water in Parashat Shemot

Parashat Shemot is full of the extraordinary. Beginning with the resolve of the midwives, Shifra and Puah, to save the Jewish baby boys, the renowned burning bush, the powerful rod that shapeshifts into a snake, and Pharaoh's deep stubbornness and ruthlessness, it is a parasha of profound emotion and an action-packed plot. However, what brings the story to fruition is the presence of water. The Exodus story is one of water; a setting within itself, creating relationships, holding acts of generosity, and solidifying the exodus of the Jewish people.

The parasha begins with the sway of the Nile, when Moshe's mother, Yocheved, places Moshe "among the reeds by the bank of the Nile" (וַתִּשֶׂם בְּסוּף עַל-שֵׁפֶת הַיַּאֲר). Later, when Bat-Pharaoh "came down to bathe in the Nile...she spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it" (וַתֵּרֶד בַּת-פַּרְעֹה לָרְחֹץ עַל-הַיַּאֲר...וַתֵּרֶא אֶת-הַתִּבְיָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחֶהּ), and "named him Moshe, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water'" (כִּי מִן-הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתָהוּ). In an act of motherly love, Yocheved entrusts her beloved son to the precarious security of the Nile, confiding in the rocking of the waves and the sound as it rushes by. Moshe's existence is intertwined with water.

As the parasha progresses, Moshe flees Egypt. He approaches the Land of Midian as the daughters of the priest of Midian "came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock" (וַתִּבְאֲנָה וַתְּדַלְגֶּנָה וַתִּמְלֵאנָה אֶת-הַהֲרֹטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן). As shepherds tried to drive them away, "Moshe rose to their defense, and he watered their flock." (וַיִּשָׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת-צֹאנָם). This act of generosity as "a stranger in a foreign land" led Moshe to a community, in which he married his wife Tziporah, had his first child Gershom, and gained a sense of place and belonging as a shepherd.

Water, an essential source of life, is a cornerstone of ecology, and sustains all living things. Yet its existence is precarious. Too much, too strong, too little, too slow: our lives hang in its balance. So too for Moshe, the balance of water sustains his existence, his community, and his legacy.

As I begin 2025 I pray for the water that follows Moshe and the Jewish people through the Exodus. I ask for the peace it provides, the community it cultivates, and the mitzvot it upholds. In a more literal sense, I beg for the security of water as wildfires ravage Southern California, and pray for water to restore the vitality and balance of these ecosystems. Whether it be drought, extreme storms and hurricanes, harmful algae blooms due to an excess of nitrogen and phosphorus in synthetic fertilizers, ocean acidification, or the depletion of freshwater, climate change is inherently linked to water, and the equilibrium in these natural processes are slipping like water through one's fingers.

May water trickle through this new year, 2025, providing us all with security and comfort like it did as Yocheved placed Moshe in the Nile, the empathy to care for those around us like Moshe's choice to water the Midian flocks, and joyous community like the one the Jewish people cultivated as they eventually left Eretz Mitzrayim through the parted sea.

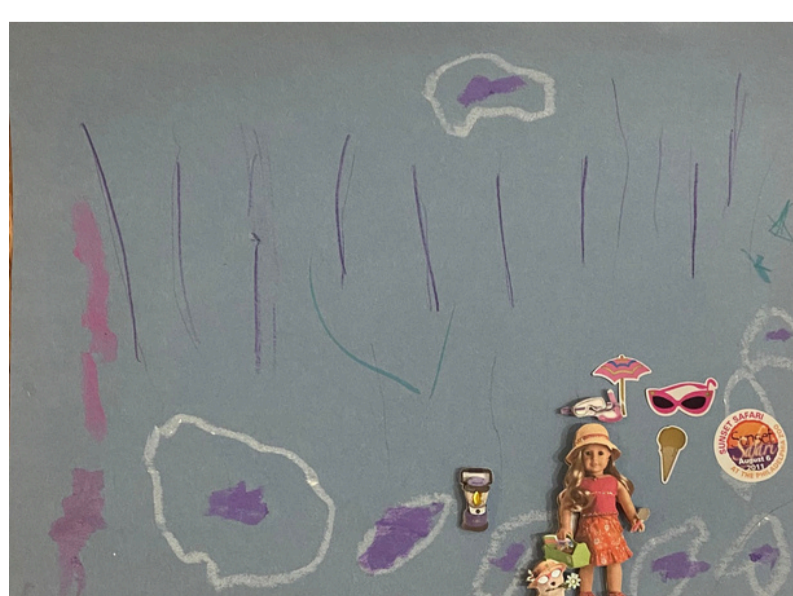
For those interested in supporting those affected by the California wildfires, consider supporting the [California Community Wildfire Recovery Fund](#), [American Red Cross](#), or [World Central Kitchen](#).

For those interested in aquatic volunteering in Chicago consider the [River Ranger Volunteer Program](#) through Urban Rivers (where you can kayak through the Chicago River!) and [Friends of the Chicago River](#). For more information about water in Chicago, the [Metropolitan Water Reclamation District](#) has a ton of great resources!

## CHICAGO ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS

After years of planning and cooperation, on January 1st 2025 all city-owned buildings in Chicago started using 100% renewable energy! Chicago's roughly 400 city-owned buildings, including O'Hare International Airport, water treatment plants, and libraries, use "approximately 700,000 megawatt hours per year" ([Sun Times](#)). Through this plan, Chicago's carbon footprint will be cut "by 290,000 metric tons per year, the equivalent of removing 62,000 cars from the road" ([City of Chicago](#)). This plan, based on city money and renewable energy credits, relies upon a solar field outside of Waverly Illinois (a roughly 3.5 hour drive from the city) that provides the energy to support all of the municipal buildings. This is the first step in Chicago's goal "to source the energy for all buildings in the city from renewables by 2035" ([Grist](#)).

## Artist Spotlight



### Rain Story

Gaby, age 4 1/2

crayons, oil pastels, colored pencils, stickers

### Artist statement:

"It's a story book about the rain. The clouds got words inside. This is the last rain party of the solar system."

Do you like the rain?

"No because I don't like getting wet."

## Hello! My name is Talia Berkwits.

I am currently a senior at Jones College Prep. I am Vice President of my school's Jewish Student Connection club and American Sign Language club, an untalented and unknowledgeable member of my school's golf team (yet enthusiastic nonetheless), a long-time sporadic pianist, and a returning Hartman Teen Fellow. Some of the many things that bring me joy are strawberry lemonade, walking to the beach, homemade challah, traveling, good food, and chocolate peanut butter anything. Feel free to reach out at [tberkwits@gmail.com](mailto:tberkwits@gmail.com)



Logo created by Ava Berkwits

See you next month!