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Huffing and Puffing Won't Blow It Down: The Straw House Makes a Comeback

by Sue Kurtz and Zak Kurtz

It seems the first little piggy had it right all along. Sure, his house made of straw didn't withstand the Big Bad Wolf, but there have been significant improvements in home construction since then. Nowadays, straw bale homes are holding up against weather, noise and high energy costs. Jeff Kurtz and his family can attest to that.

In 1999, the eco-friendly builder designed and constructed the first legal straw bale house in the state of Virginia. When it was finished, he moved his wife and two young children in.



"People looked at it as 'weird,'" says Sue Kurtz. "This was years before [Al Gore's documentary] *An Inconvenient Truth* was popular. The magnitude of global warming wasn't yet being recognized."

As both Jews and environmentalists, Jeff and Sue Kurtz, have long understood the significant impact of wasted resources. In raising their children, they committed to – literally – *living* by example.

Straw bales, surrounded by stucco, form 16-inch thick walls that elevate the home's R-value¹ to three times that of most new homes. The superior insulation also serves as a sound barrier so effective, the doorbell is sometimes not heard.



Few interior walls on the ground level help boost air circulation. The concrete foundation, tile flooring and stone fireplace all serve as temperature "collectors," reducing the need to pump excess heat or air throughout the home. Kurtz designed the house to depend mostly on solar power, installing a majority of the windows

on the south and east-facing exterior. Even the surrounding landscape, which shelters the home from winds, contributes to the home's green design. Kurtz also insisted on using mostly recycled materials harvested on site including shale and limestone, cherry wood and oak.

"This is a straw bale house for mainstream America," said Kurtz. "It acts like a smart, energy-efficient solar home and it looks like an upscale, contemporary house."

And unlike buying organic food, the cost involved in owning an organic home is significantly lower than a standard home. Kurtz explains that the family's electricity bill for the 5,000 square foot structure averages \$3 dollars a day.

His wife Sue, executive director of Hillel at Virginia Tech, is applying the same concepts to plans for a new Hillel building. Set to start construction in July 2009, the Hillel Center for Jewish Life at VT will include an eco-friendly kitchen, meeting and worship space, CFL light bulbs and straw bale exterior (if its approved). Sue believes the green building will further enhance Jewish life on campus by incorporating Jewish values into the students' everyday life.

"In Deuteronomy,² we learn about *Lo Tash'chit*, the law against destroying nature," says Sue. "We are instructed not to cut down trees that bear fruit. There are numerous other verses in the Bible that prohibit humankind from meddling with nature."

As Rabbi Saul Berman, associate professor of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University, explains: "The laws of the sabbatical year teach that not only are the powers of the individual subsumed under the general rights of the community, but also that individuals do not have the right of exclusive dominance over their own property. These teachings emerge from the biblical indications that persons have a duty to allow their land to lie fallow during this entire year."³

Indeed, the concept of ownership is at the core of environmentalism. Proverbs teach that the earth is not inherited from our ancestors, but borrowed from our children. As Jews, we support the belief that nature belongs to G-d, not us. As such, we are tasked with repairing the world, *tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם), as it's called in Hebrew. The phrase has origins in classical rabbinic literature, appearing early and often throughout the *mishnah*. Environmentalism is, in fact, a Biblical requirement designed to preserve the earth and prevent social chaos. Going green may seem like a new fad, but it is an ancient Jewish tradition.

"What better way to teach college Jews about eco-Judaism," asks Sue, "than by allowing them to *live* it?"

Sue sees it as the responsibility of the entire Jewish community to include environmentalism in Jewish education. She believes her daughter's early exposure to eco-friendly living and Jewish values inspired her new career path. Samantha Kurtz is currently a senior Civil and Green Building Construction Engineering student at Virginia

Tech. She was 9 years old when she helped her father construct the family's straw bale home. She has since developed, like her father, a talent for building and a passion for sustainable living. Samantha has spent a summer interning with Tishman Construction Corporation in New York City and is pursuing a career as a green engineering consultant.

Before constructing his own home, Jeff Kurtz constructed three other straw bale structures, including a chapel in Spencer, West Virginia; and private homes in Lewisburg, Tennessee, and at the border of Roanoke and Franklin County in Virginia. He is currently in the midst of constructing an eco-friendly green subdivision at Claytor Lake in Radford, VA. Kurtz says he is happy to continue designing and building green homes, but has no plans to sell his own – not by the hair of his chinny chin chin.

Endnotes:

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1. R-value is a term predominantly used in the building industry to describe the insulation properties of certain building insulation materials. The higher the R-value, the greater the insulation.
 2. *Deut 20:19-20*: When you besiege a city for a long time, fighting against it to conquer it, you shall not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for you may eat of them, and you may not cut them down, for is the tree of the field a person that it should be besieged by you? Only trees which you know not to be fruit bearing trees, may you destroy and cut down; and you may build bulwarks against the city that wages war against you, until it is subdued.
 3. Jewish Environmental Values: The Dynamic Tension Between Nature and Human Needs by Rabbi Saul Berman.

Zak Kurtz is a 2007 graduate in Political Science, with minors in Legal Studies and History from Roanoke College in Virginia. Following graduation, he earned his paralegal certificate from Boston University. He is now in his first year at Thomas M. Cooley Law School in East Lansing, MI and will be studying to become a Sports and Entertainment Agent. He recently created a blog called, [Live From Law School](#).

Sue is the Executive Director of Hillel at Virginia Tech. Her goal is to build a sustaining, vibrant, meaningful and inclusive environment for Jewish college students, where they are encouraged to grow intellectually, spiritually and socially. Sue encourages students to pursue tzedek (social justice), tikkun olam (repairing the world) and Jewish learning.

Both Sue and Zak were influenced by the vision of Jeff Kurtz, environmental consultant; Sam Kurtz, green engineering student; and their building of the first legal straw bale house in the state of Virginia.
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