

Turmeric and moringa, and the Israeli who's growing them

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By HOWARD BLAS

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When Menachem Stolpner was growing up in the Coney Island/Brighton Beach neighborhoods of Brooklyn, he could have never imagined he'd be one of Israel's only turmeric and moringa growers.

The American-trained social worker, who has been living with his family on Kibbutz Shluhot, a religious kibbutz near Beit She'an, since 1996, has been training a group of young adults with disabilities to grow these special crops, believed to have a range of health and medicinal benefits.

Stolpner grew up in a religious-Zionist family. His parents and two older sisters made aliyah before he eventually came to Israel with his wife and (at the time, two) young children. Becoming a farmer was not an obvious career choice, though two experiences may have sowed this seed.

Stolpner spent a year on Kibbutz Yavne in 1977 and reports, "I felt like I was a country boy trapped in a city boy's body." Once back in America, his father saw an ad

in The Jewish Press looking for a religious boy to serve as a ranch hand in Colorado. “I worked with sheep on 20 acres of land with a religious guy from California whose tzitzit were blowing in the wind.”

While the experience ended quickly and with great disappointment, Stolpner says, “I knew it was what I wanted to do. I felt attuned to agriculture and the country way of life.”

Stolpner also began to notice that people with disabilities were often doing “unmeaningful things” and wondered if there might be more meaningful work for them. This idea would always remain close to Stolpner as he settled in to his new life in Israel.

In Israel, Stolpner worked for 13 years as a raftan (dairy herdsman). When he hurt his back in a “refet accident,” Stolpner returned to social work, where he worked in the welfare department, and worked in a group home for people with Down syndrome.

Stolpner always wondered if he might one day work more independently. He took a course in animal-assisted therapy, and began training people with disabilities from neighboring settlements to work in the small kibbutz zoo, and later in the greenhouse. He started a nonprofit, Shai Asher, got permission to renovate an unused kibbutz greenhouse, and expanded his work training and hiring people with disabilities. A successful Israeli grower of organic crops learned of Stolpner’s work and came to learn how he might also employ people with disabilities. At the end of the visit, Stolpner asked the man for advice. “What can I grow here?” “Kurkum [turmeric] and moringa,” the man replied without missing a beat. “They come from hot climates and would do very well here.” He even offered Stolpner his first moringa seeds, which he began germinating throughout his kibbutz house.

Stolpner was off and running. He went to a nearby store and was astounded at the price of these spices and crops. He visited an organic farm and market in the North and learned that they import turmeric from China. “I told them I want to grow it and they said, ‘If you grow it, I will buy it from you. They told me there is a market for it.’” After watching YouTube videos and reading many articles on the Internet, Stolpner and his crew of workers with disabilities began growing turmeric and moringa this year. “They are easy to grow and they require a small area. You can get 70 kg. of kurkum out of those 10 bags—and they sell for NIS 30-40 per kg.!”

Stolpner points to the educational benefits to his work crew of growing turmeric. “It takes nine months to grow and is perfect for us since you get to see all of the stages.” Stolpner notes, “Moringa is so healthy – you can sprinkle it on food or eat it off the tree!”

And if all goes according to plan, the turmeric and moringa plants, which he hopes to harvest in December, will be profitable. Given the reported health and medical benefits, Stolpner may be right.



MENACHEM STOLPNER (third from right) and some of his crew. (Courtesy Menachem Stolpner/Kibbutz Shluchot)

PROF. MARIA Luz Fernandez of the University of Connecticut, an expert on moringa, got interested in the plant through one of her graduate students. She got her first samples for her lab from Mexico, where she says the plant is abundant.

“Moringa oleifera leaves contain a great number of bioactive compounds. They are rich in vitamins, carotenoids, polyphenols, phenolic acids, flavonoids, alkaloids, glucosinolates, isothiocyanates, tannins and saponins,” she says. “These compounds have been associated with the protective effects of moringa leaves against oxidative stress), inflammation, hepatic fibrosis, high plasma cholesterol, bacterial activity, cancer and liver injury.”

At Edge of the Woods Market, a health food store in New Haven, Connecticut, located an hour south of Fernandez’s campus in Storrs, the entire upper floor is stocked with vitamins and health supplements. Jahi Locke, a store worker and yoga teacher, says the store sells moringa as leaves (\$29/pound), which customers use in teas, and as powders (\$38/pound), which are used for capsules for smoothies and shakes. He cites the additional benefits for regulation of the menstrual cycle and as a sex hormone.

Locke also says he sells many products with turmeric. “Turmeric is very popular, accessible and not too expensive, and it reportedly treats a wide range of things including inflamed joints, high heart rate and cancer.” He notes that many use it as a powder, and also in capsule form. “I juice the [turmeric] root each morning.”

Turmeric, the major source of polyphenol curcumin, is well-known to cooking enthusiasts. It is popular in Indian, Persian, Moroccan and Yemenite cuisines. Susan J Hewlings, director of scientific affairs at Nutrasource and a professor at Central Michigan University, and her colleague, Doug Kalman, collaborated on the paper “Curcumin: A Review of Its Effects on Human Health.”

They wrote that turmeric “has received interest from both the medical/scientific world and from culinary enthusiasts, as it aids in the management of oxidative and inflammatory conditions, metabolic syndrome, arthritis, anxiety, and hyperlipidemia. It may also help in the management of exercise-induced inflammation and muscle soreness, thus enhancing recovery and performance in active people. In addition, a relatively low dose of the complex can provide health benefits for people that do not have diagnosed health conditions. Most of these benefits can be attributed to its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.”

Hewlings notes that turmeric has “been around for centuries,” though it is “not very available,” meaning that it needs something to help in its absorption. “Black pepper is the easiest and cheapest to help in absorption.”

Kalman has spent time in India in the fields with turmeric growers and says there is now some research suggesting that there may be some benefits from the “waste,” the part of the turmeric root that was traditionally discarded; it may have potential as a protein source.

While Kalman cites numerous studies about the benefits of turmeric, he offers a very practical approach to its use. “Don’t be intimidated to use it as a food. Take a food-first approach – it is a more wholesome way to get benefits. We cook chicken or turkey burgers or barbecue with it.... Find ways to include turmeric in your daily diet because of the polyphenols, which are shown to help with inflammatory conditions.”

Hopefully Stolpner and his crew of growers will be successful with their harvest – and will make a profit. For now, Stolpner says he is the happiest he has been in his entire life. He and his workers haven’t missed a single day of work due to COVID-19, and the success of the crops in this region of Israel shows “there has to be a God!”

In any case, Naomi Eisenberger, executive director of The Good People Fund, which has supported his work, is proud.

“After meeting Menachem Stolpner and seeing firsthand the work that he does with the participants of Shai Asher, it was an easy decision for the Good People Fund to offer funding. Menachem puts his heart and soul into the program and loves and respects everyone. His patience is infinite. The fact that his young workers are learning a skill and finding meaningful work amidst the serenity of nature is impressive. The fact that some of the new plants they are cultivating, like ginger and turmeric, also have healing properties is just icing on the cake.”