A Jewish mission: Environment

By Michael D. Schaffer
Inquirer Staff Writer

Ellen Bernstein went into the Grand Canyon on a backpacking expedition one Passover and came out with a spiritual discovery.

What Bernstein found at the foot of the canyon's red wall about 10 years ago was a connection between her Jewish tradition and her love of nature.

On the spur of the moment, Bernstein suggested to her hiking companions — about 10 people, most of them not Jewish — that they join her in an open-air seder, the ritual meal that marks the opening of Passover. The others were interested and went off to forage for foods that could be used for the seder. “Everybody was totally into it,” Bernstein said.

The celebration lasted long into the night. “It was a meaningful ritual . . . because it utilized the things that were right there,” Bernstein said. “. . . We talked all night long about religious questions. It was just a fabulous forum.”

By the end of the meal, Bernstein said, she realized that her Judaism and her love of nature intersected like paths in the woods.

A decade later, at the point where those paths cross, Bernstein, of Mount Airy, has begun building the first Jewish organization dedicated to environmental issues.

The organization is called Shomrei Adamah, Hebrew for “Guardians of the Earth.”

The creation of Shomrei Adamah represents an important step for Judaism, according to Bernstein.

“Jews have really lagged behind as far as environmental issues,” said Bernstein, 35, who has a degree in conservation of natural resources from the University of California and once taught high school biology and led white-water river trips in California.

Environmentalism “hasn’t . . . been identified as a Jewish issue, and I believe it most definitely is. . . . The tradition is absolutely full of rever-

(See: JEWS on 2-B)
A Jewish group for environment

JEWISH HERALD TIMES, AUG. 19, 1980

Tu B’Shvat was “not very widely celebrated,” Bernstein said. But she saw the holiday as “really an opportunity to honor nature.”

Bernstein created a seder for Tu B’Shvat and put together a haggadah, a collection of readings and prayers, for the holiday.

“It’s all about getting in touch with nature and honoring nature,” Bernstein said.

About 200 people turned out for this year’s Tu B’Shvat seder, held Jan. 22 at the Shelly Ridge Girl Scout Center in Miquon, Montgomery County.

The Tu B’Shvat seder has been celebrated in 15 states, from Maine to California, according to a statement by the Federation of Reconstruction Congregations and Havurot.

More than 1,000 copies of the haggadah have been sold, according to Bernstein.

She said she was planning to develop more holiday rituals that celebrate nature and emphasize nature’s importance in the Jewish tradition.

Bernstein said she also planned to develop “how-to” materials to help individuals and communities enhance the qualities of their environments. She said she planned to develop special programs for teaching children about the environment.

She also is organizing a conference to be held in the Philadelphia area this spring, perhaps on Memorial Day weekend, for Jews who are committed to dealing with environmental issues.

Bernstein said she already had held workshops on the environment in several parts of the country. “I’ve gotten really good response from people all over the country,” Bernstein said.

Shomrei Adamah takes a new approach to environmentalism, an approach that integrates intellect, emotion, spirit and activism, according to Bernstein.

“Most environmental groups will function around social action and education,” she said. “Very few people see repair of the world” as a reason for religious celebration, she added.

Bernstein said that her organization was “a really good model for other [religious] traditions … It reaches all sorts of people that are not normally reached by other environmental groups.”

Bernstein in her backyard, Jewish tradition, she says, is “absolutely full of reverence for the land.”