

Savers Of The Earth

Young Beth Ahm members learn about Tu b'Shevat, superhero style.

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Contributing Writer

A new youth program may have serious goals like caring for the Earth and celebrating nature, but its name — Zum Gali Gali Earth Rangers — means fun.

The group of elementary and middle school kids meet weekly after school at Congregation Beth Ahm in West Bloomfield to learn about the holiday of Tu b'Shevat, which marks the start of the New Year for trees in Israel.

Taking place this year on Shabbat, beginning Friday evening, Jan. 25, Tu b'Shevat is also termed Jewish Arbor Day or Jewish Earth Day, and is the time of the earliest bloom on the trees in Israel and the beginning of a new fruit-bearing cycle. It falls on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat.

Earth Rangers members, who belong to Beth Ahm, take part in a hands-on, interactive program of recycling projects and healthy food promotion — and tasting. They also have been rehearsing traditional and popular music with a message of Tu b'Shevat to perform at the synagogue's upcoming Tu b'Shevat seder.

Many synagogues and groups, including Michigan Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, hold a Tu b'Shevat seder, a concept created by 16th-century Kabbalists.

Some use Haggadot with a focus on ecology or Israel or family activities. Four cups of wine are served to represent aspects of the fruit tree and of ourselves. The seder is marked by eating fruits, specifically those named in the Torah as being found in Israel, including grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates.

Saving Trees

At Beth Ahm, the seder is sponsored by the synagogue's Tikkun Olam-Social Action Team (TOSAT), whose tagline says they are "dedicated to improving the world."

"Our co-sponsorship means that our caterer can use glass plates and dinnerware and TOSAT can do its part to save the trees by not using paper goods at the seder," said Nancy Kalef, TOSAT chairperson.

Earth Ranger Ayla Schwartz, 12, of Beverly Hills offers a few holiday suggestions: "Plant a tree, take a hike in the woods to sketch and think, hold a conver-



Elissa Berg helps the Earth Rangers create Tu b'Shevat artwork.

sation with your children about what the Earth would be like without trees, incorporate a new Jewish tradition like trying a new fruit."

Ayla encourages creating traditions like those her family has incorporated into their lives. "Sometimes we would read a book called *The Giving Tree* about a tree that gives everything it has to a little boy," she said.

Some celebrate the holiday by making a donation to an environmental cause, planting trees or contributing to the Jewish National Fund to have trees planted in Israel.

What's In A Name?

In naming the group, creator Elissa Berg said, "I was trying to think of something catchy and the song 'Zum Gali Gali' came to mind as an example of the music of the *chalutzim* [early pioneers who worked the land of Israel] that is often present at a Tu b'Shevat seder.

"Earth Rangers, in my mind, is kid speak; it sounds like superheroes and should conjure up the sense of caring for the Earth," said Berg, Jewish family educator and lead teacher at Beth Ahm. "Children learn about the environment



Sarah Aguiar creates a table centerpiece for the Tu b'Shevat seder.

and ecology and are usually invested in it, so the name blends the Jewish component with what they hear about in other venues. Personal connections help children to make personal meaning out of what they are doing."

She said there is potential for continuing the program beyond Tu b'Shevat, expanding it into a nature club or a musi-

cal group that sings at synagogue functions.

A goal of the program, said Berg, is for participants "to see the celebration of Tu b'Shevat and the references to nature in our texts as a way that our tradition is both ancient and contemporary, that we were once an agricultural people, and the way the Earth is treated still matters to us."

Itamar Moltz, 10, of Beverly Hills said, "The best part of being an Earth Ranger is the fun crafts." But he also understands the importance of recycling and planting trees as a way to take care of the Earth.

The group's projects reflect this, Berg said. Seder decorations are made from materials already in the synagogue or their homes so the children are recycling and repurposing. Other decorations are edible and, after the seder, will become food for squirrels and other animals.

Sarah Aguiar, 7, of West Bloomfield said making their own snacks is a highlight of Earth Rangers meetings, with recent healthy treats including homemade granola and fresh fruit lollipops.

The group also gets to discuss things like the importance of protecting the Earth.

"Look around you," Ayla Schwartz said. "It's the middle of January and there isn't a snowflake in sight. This isn't how it used to be. This is what it's becoming. I remember a few years ago when the snow piled up so high we had a mountain on our cul-de-sac until early April. Where did that go?"

"We can stop this. We must stop this. Don't make it end like this. When you give your children and your grandchildren this world, don't give it to them spoiled. It's important to protect the Earth for one simple reason. If we don't, there won't be any Earth left to protect."

She maintains that some ways to help take care of the Earth are pretty uncomplicated. "You could try to recycle something you usually throw away, go to the park and pick up litter, even just try to compost your extra vegetables for a week," Ayla said.

"If everyone on the planet just took an hour a week to help the Earth, our planet would be in much better shape."

And she sees the holiday as a time to start this focus.

"I think people should take action on Tu b'Shevat," Ayla said. "Teach your children important Jewish values as well as traditions." □