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Mitzvah Day devoted to social justice, service

Marissa Brooks

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On May 16, more than 400 people will gather at Camp Mindy at Shalom Park before heading into Charlotte to perform acts of generosity and community service.

Mitzvah Day 2010 is the 13th annual Mitzvah Day for Temple Beth El - a day that Temple Beth El devotes to social justice and action.

"Mitzvah" is the Hebrew word for commandment, but it also means an act of kindness. Mitzvah Day 2010 Chairwoman Alyson Traw says that her personal goal for the day is "to do everything we can to maximize our day of service so that we leave the community a better place than how we found it."

Kelly Gaines, the co-chairwoman from 2001-2006, said the day "has always been a day when congregants of all ages express their Judaism by serving others in the community and participating in the holy task of repairing the world," known as "Tikkun Olam."

"I believe that the Commission on Social Action asked all (reform) congregations to begin holding an annual Mitzvah Day in 1998 because they felt so strongly about the powerful experience it created," Gaines said. "The vision was that Mitzvah Day would be a springboard that propelled participants to volunteer throughout the year."

Mitzvah Day 2010 projects focus on helping people in the local community as well globally. This year's slogan is "Pick your PASSION." There are 27 projects under 10 themes: Automatic "Mensch" Status, Caring for the Earth, Healing/Visiting the Sick, Honoring the Dead, Honoring our Elders, Loving Israel, Redeeming Captives, Repairing the World, Teaching Children, and Welcoming the Stranger.

The projects include helping Charlotte Green (an organization that works with inner-city residents to develop and sustain community gardens), making Dolls for Darfur to raise money to combat genocide, collecting gently used books for Habitat for Humanity, and making care packages for the children at the Levine Children's Hospital.

Some projects have age restrictions; for example, the Blood Drive is for ages 18 years and older, painting for the Charlotte Community Health Clinic and gardening for the Battered Women's Shelter Project is for ages 13-plus.

Mitzvah Day always occurs during the last day of religious school, so Susan Jacobs, Director of Education; and Kim Wilkoff, Religious School Chair, look for projects that are age-appropriate. Children and their families can prepare snack bags for the Salvation Army Center for Hope, spend time with seniors at Sunrise Assisted Living, recycle electronics, and write letters to troops.

The event is sponsored by Temple Beth El and contributions from congregants. Project supplies also are donated by congregants and local home improvement and grocery stores.

Jacobs said she hopes Mitzvah Day will "heal some of the damage in this world," and "bring healing and inspiration to our congregation and community members to make things better."

Marissa Brooks is a freelance writer who lives in the Arboretum area, and the registrar for Mitzvah Day 2010. Have a story idea for Marissa? E-mail her at mbrookspt@earthlink.net.

Read more: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/05/05/1408254/mitzvah-day-devoted-to-social.html#ixzz0p9APK1MF>