

Class update - Juniors, December 2009

The December juniors class, organized around a Hanukkah theme, focused on the ways that historical explanation can differently inform how contemporary Jews celebrate and think about the holiday. Class started off with a game of dreidel; students played for gelt and had a chance to re-familiarize themselves with some Hebrew letters. Then the class worked to solve a riddle that engaged them in thinking about how the Hebrew letters on the dreidel connect to the rest of the Hebrew alphabet; taking the phrase “Nes Gadol Haya Sham,” the celebrated acronym that takes the dreidel-letters as its basis, they used phonetic principles to spell the words out in Hebrew, and employed a glossary of terms to discover that this phrase translates as “A great miracle happened here.” They discussed the significance of this phrase to the standard retelling of the Hanukkah story and its ‘miracle of lights,’ and then moved on to some theater activities. Two groups of students read two different accounts of the Hanukkah story—one a traditional retelling of the Maccabees’ triumph over Greek oppressors, while the other (supported by most contemporary scholars) an account suggesting that the Maccabees were actually involved in a civil war with more assimilated, Hellenized Jews in Jerusalem (and King Antiochus just intervened). Each group created a mini-play about their version of the Hanukkah story and presented it to the class, and their performances became a springboard for discussion about the reasons one historical explanation might be promoted by Jewish people as opposed to another, more historically true, explanation. The lesson finished with rehearsal and final planning time for the Hanukkah play “Herschel and the Hanukkah Goblins.”