

Juniors Class Summary--January 27, 2013

The January session of the Juniors class focused on exploring the three main philosophies/ways of thinking about life and religion that Jewish people in the Sephardi and Mizrahi world developed during the Middle Ages. After opening with a brief opportunity for students to reflect on Tu B'Shevat and their own concerns about the environment, the class listened to a short talk that outlined these three primary philosophies--traditionalist, rationalist, and Kabbalist--and reinforced their connection to the holiday of Tu B'Shevat (which, with its focus on Israeli fruits and a "New Year for the Trees" that happens at a time when places like Minnesota are covered in snow, is very much connected to the Middle Eastern Jewish experience). Then Sarah came in to lead the regular Hebrew and music lesson, and students learned some Tu B'Shevat-appropriate Hebrew vocabulary for fruits, grains, etc (like "rimon," meaning pomegranate) and sang the Israeli pioneer-farmer song "Zum Gali Gali" in rounds. Students returned then to their earlier discussion, and to learn more about traditional Jewish philosophy, they took part in a Talmudic-style debate about a real question from the Talmud--is it right for someone to remove rocks from their field and pile them on public land? Students debated the question in teams, and then reflected on how traditional Jewish philosophy agreed with their own judgement that public land must be protected and respected for the good of all. Next, after considering some ways that they didn't agree with traditional Jewish philosophy, the class moved to consider the rationalist philosophy--exemplified by Maimonides--that grew out of medieval Jewish interest in science. However, instead of using rationalism to support religious ideas, students took turns coming up with rational explanations for 'miraculous' events described in the Torah. Finally, to learn more about Kabbalah, or Jewish mystical philosophy, students collaborated on a creative fill-in-the-blanks activity that required them to draw or act out missing words in a short reading about the kabbalist origins of the Tu B'Shevat seder and kabbalist ideas about spheres of energy, divinity, and tikkun olam. Students closed the day by joining in the Or Emet Tu B'Shevat seder.