

Juniors Class Summary--March 24, 2013

In March, the Juniors class concentrated on preparing for Passover as well as learning about the life and philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, one of Humanistic Judaism's most significant intellectual forebears. After sharing their favorite Passover foods/traditions and participating in an ice-breaker game, students listened to a brief talk focused on Baruch Spinoza, his Marrano ancestry and position within Amsterdam's Sephardic Jewish community of the 1500s, and this community's response to Spinoza's heretical ideas. Sarah Berman-Young arrived next to present the day's music and Hebrew lesson, and students worked along with her to review the Hebrew vocabulary of the Seder plate and practice singing "Ma Nishtana" (aka the Four Questions). After singing, the class returned to Spinoza, divvying up roles and acting out two scenes from John A. Gunn's 1932 play, Spinoza, The Maker of Lenses, to better acquaint themselves with the philosopher's life and ideas as well as the controversies that surrounded him. Performance concluded, students reflected briefly on the play and then turned their attention to reading short selections from Baruch Spinoza's The Ethics and A Theologico-Political Treatise. Selections touched on Spinoza's ideas about determinism and relativism, God as a dispassionate force synonymous with nature, the foundations of a free and democratic state, and the Torah as a document compiled by ancient Jewish historians instead of the actual word of God as received by Moses. Students explained the meaning of their assigned selections to each other in their own words. Finally, the morning wrapped up with a fun opportunity for everyone to write their first letter to their assigned SHJ pen pal!