

Juniors Class Summary--October 13, 2013

For our second lesson of the school year, we focused on Jewish immigration to the US through Ellis Island and Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Juniors class had several visitors this session, so we took time at the beginning of class to introduce ourselves and “introduce” Humanistic Judaism to our guests. Next, we talked about America’s history of immigration, and students shared where their ancestors came from before arriving in this country. After a short lecture describing how pogroms, discrimination, and lack of economic opportunity caused millions of Jews to immigrate to the US from Russia in the late 19th/early 20th century, the whole class took part in an Ellis Island simulation. Students played the roles of medical examiners, primary line inspectors, and Jewish immigrants entering the US, and reflected afterward on what the experience felt like and whether the immigration process was truly fair. After break, the class learned some Yiddish vocabulary and sang part of the humorous and nostalgic New York Yiddish theater song “Rumania, Rumania!” with Sarah. Then students split into groups and looked at old photos depicting Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side, sharing their impressions. We talked about the average dimensions of the tenement apartments that NYC Jewish immigrants lived in, and then used a tape measure and string to mark out these dimensions in our classroom. Students piled into the makeshift “apartment” that we created, and discussed what it must have felt like for Jewish immigrants to live together in such tiny spaces. After learning some other tenement facts, the class watched a short clip from the documentary *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*, learning about Yiddish newspapers, Yiddish theater, and other aspects of immigrant Jewish cultural life on the Lower East Side. The whole lesson gave students insight into the hardships Jewish immigrants to the US (including many of their ancestors) faced, as well as the strength and community ties of support that made Jewish immigrant survival possible.