

Kids uncover rich heritage at history day

Alex Weisler

Whether exploring the nature of Jewish role models today, discussing Biblical topics or examining the Holocaust, students of the Orangetown Jewish Center congregational Hebrew School recently found wide-expression for their Jewish heritage as part of the synagogue's inaugural History Day program.

Each grade level's projects focused on a different theme. Exploring traditional Jewish liturgy, third graders designed dioramas depicting Bible stories and fourth graders spoke about prophets. Tackling more modern Jewish topics, fifth graders researched Israel, sixth graders created poetry and artwork reflecting the Holocaust, and seventh graders elaborated on the individuals who have defined Jewish-American History. Sandy Peck-Borowsky, OJC's principal, felt that the wide range of topics contributed to a greater understanding of history's importance

"Jewish history is like a 5767 piece puzzle," she said at the program, which took place on April 18. "It helps us to remember the past and apply those lessons to our future."

Projects encompassed a wide variety of approaches to Judaism; posters on Jonah and the Whale and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah sat just a few feet away from a dissection of Israeli fashion trends and essays on well-known American Jews like comedian Adam Sandler and *Friends* actress Lisa Kudrow. "When I said I wanted to do Mel Brooks, I wasn't sure if he was Jewish or not," said seventh grader Danny Klein. "I always wanted to know his life story, and History Day let me learn it."

Peck-Borowsky felt that the personal nature of the projects allowed for more innovative approaches to gathering knowledge. "I wanted them to be able to tie different parts of history together and express themselves any way they wanted," she said. "That way, they could learn from each other."

The program commenced with a discussion about the nature and importance of history education by Peck-Borowsky. As the group attempted to define an abstract noun like history, she noted that "It can be anything," and added that history had been made just two days prior with the shootings at Virginia Tech and the heroic actions of Holocaust survivor Liviu Librescu.

"Our history teaches us what we can become. By studying American Jewish History or world Jewish History, you're really just learning about yourself," explained Rabbi Craig Scheff in his remarks during the program. "We are everything our history brings together." This portion of the History Day program was one of the more interactive segments of the event, as students answered questions posed by Peck-Borowsky and Rabbi Scheff.



This open-ended discussion was followed by a series of presentations by representatives of the different classes. Students elaborated on the reasons they had chosen their topics and explained the contents of their final product. After presenting her poster on the prophetess and judge Deborah, Melissa Matalon noted, "I thought she was different than a regular prophet, and that it would be cool to learn more about her."

Seventh graders studying American Jewry even turned a critical eye on the movement and its public faces. A project on Adam Sandler led the group to examine the merits of such a role model, discussing the positive and negative aspects of having a comedian



like Sandler as one of the nation's most recognizable Jews.

Students eventually determined that someone like Sandler showed Jewish children that the definition of success was broad and inclusive.

After the presentations, teachers and students migrated to the synagogue's social hall where they had displayed their projects. As they milled about and skimmed posters and essays, students agreed that they were glad they had participated. "It's cool and it's fun," said Jonathan Schatz-Mizrahi, 9. "I got to learn so many new and different things about Israel."

Adults, too, noted the benefits of such an individualized approach. "There's not many things that you can do that encompass both a third grade and a seventh grade," said teacher Dale Fox. "It gives the kids a little bit of flavor as they go through Hebrew School. The kids really participated in this, and it's fantastic to find something the whole school can do together."

Reacting to the event's high turnout and enthusiastic participation, Peck-Borowsky noted that she hoped History Day would continue to flourish for years to come. "I want them to write and learn things from the heart," she said. "This was completely self-generated for each student. I think that it shows. Rather than, here's the map of Israel, this is an activity that supplements and makes it personal."

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