

Kollel's 2021-2022 Highlights



Pictured: Four students collaborating on a Haggadah page, made during [Unit 6](#).

Our yearly curriculum covers holidays, Shabbat practice, and basic liturgy and Hebrew. Each year, we focus in-depth on a particular Torah story and its related themes and contemporary justice topics. **In honor of Shmita, the biblical sabbatical cycle, the 2021-22 curriculum focused on renewal, the creation story, and Shabbat practice.**

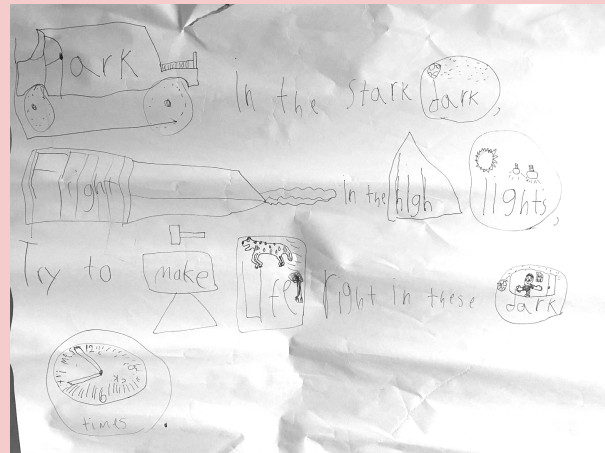
Unit 1: Creation and Being Human

In our first unit, students explored the beginning of *Bereisheet* through poetry, art, and personal interpretation. We read the creation story as told in [Being Torah](#), a children's text (inspired by a translation by Everett Fox, which "reproduces the literary forms, linguistic features, and rhythm of the original Hebrew"), and a selection of stories from [Arthur Waskow's "Before There Was a Before."](#)

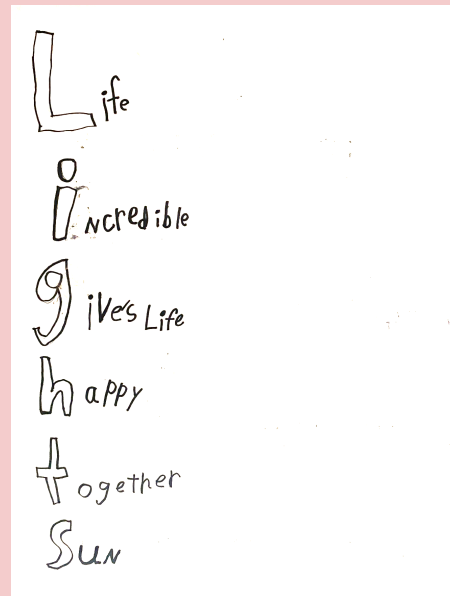
Examining the story as a whole, students identified poetic tropes and refrains, and created their own acrostic, concrete or alliterative poems to accompany the story.

Focusing on the first few days or moments of creation, students created their own paper collages that responded to the story and to examples from [art history and contemporary art](#). Some students focused on one particular moment or idea in the creation story; others considered the shapes and colors from our artwork examples. I was particularly taken with one "Creation and Destruction" piece, which sprang from the idea of opposites within the story.

After reading a story about the creation of Humans, students conducted partnered interviews based on the story. They asked each other,



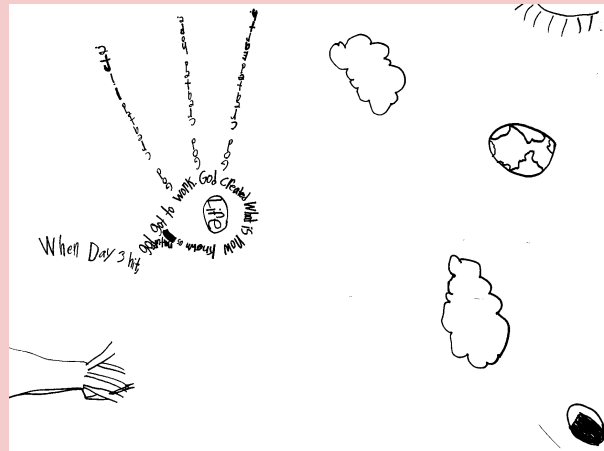
A concrete poem which responds to Day 1.



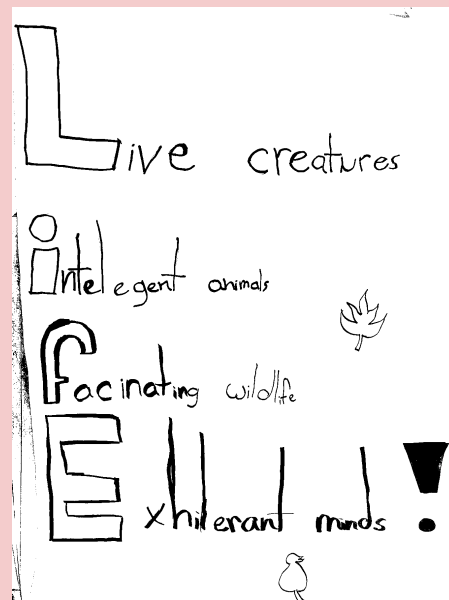
An acrostic poem which responds to Day 4.

- “What makes you yourself?” (What do you like to do? What words describe you? What makes you different?)
- “What is your ‘humus’?” (What do you need to be happy? What are you good at?) (One child replied that they need many hugs in order to be happy.)
- “Do you have opposites in you?” (Are there words that describe you that are opposites? I.e. “shy” and “friendly.”) (One child described herself as “both nervous, and a daredevil.”)

When vaccines were approved for children ages 5+, Kollel kids chose or wrote their own *brachot* for this momentous occasion. You can find [all of the brachot for vaccination that we used here](#). Some kids chose to write a *brachah* for something special that they’ve been waiting to do once they get vaccinated, like go on an airplane, or take a gymnastics class.



A concrete poem which responds to Day 3.



An acrostic poem which responds to Day 6.

Unit 2: Menorahs from Around the World



Pictured: Students presenting their Menorahs from Around the World project.

In the weeks leading up to Chanukah, the students studied menorahs from around the world, examining and describing the imagery, motifs, materials, and structures across regions.

They learned early on in their Jewish journeys that Jews have lived around the world and practiced Jewish ritual in similar and different ways.



A fifth and third grader's *repousse* menorahs.

The unit concluded by imagining and designing what a “Menorah from Washington, DC” might

look like and sharing their designs at NSP's community-wide Chanukah party.

Children took inspiration from local plants, murals, buildings, and their schools. They used an embossing technique based on the common *repousse* technique found in metal menorahs from around the world.

At the end of the unit, students made Shabbat candles to bring home for the following Shabbat.



A third grader's *repousse* menorah, depicting a mural near their school.



A first-grader's *repousse* menorah, depicting a tree.



A third grader's *repousse* menorah.



A kindergartener's *repousse* menorah.

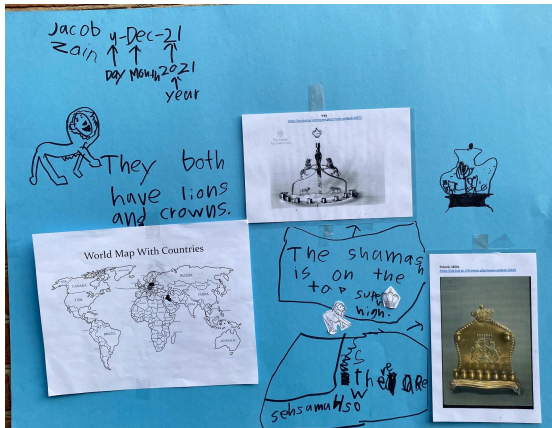


A student with their menorah.

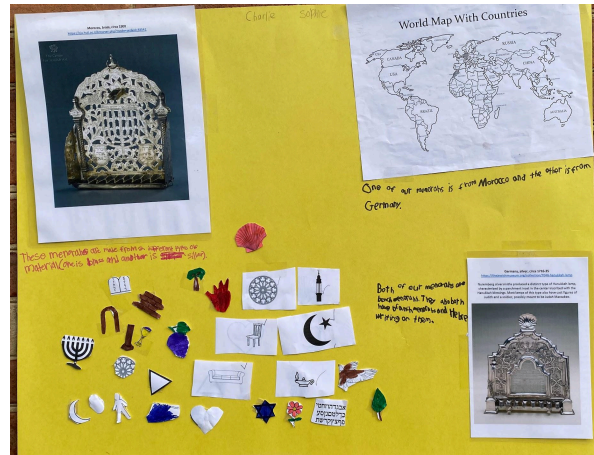


A student lighting their menorah.

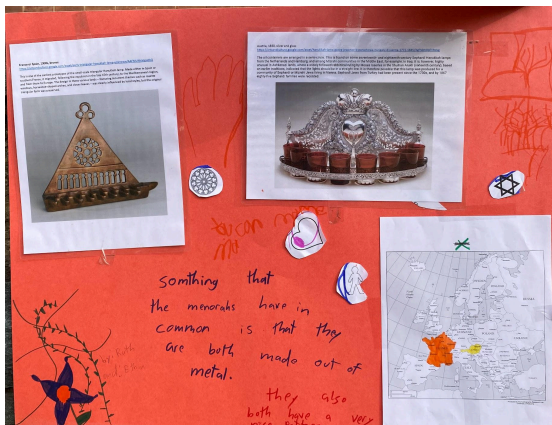
In pairs, students chose two to three menorahs to compare, examining and describing the imagery, motifs, materials, and structures across regions.



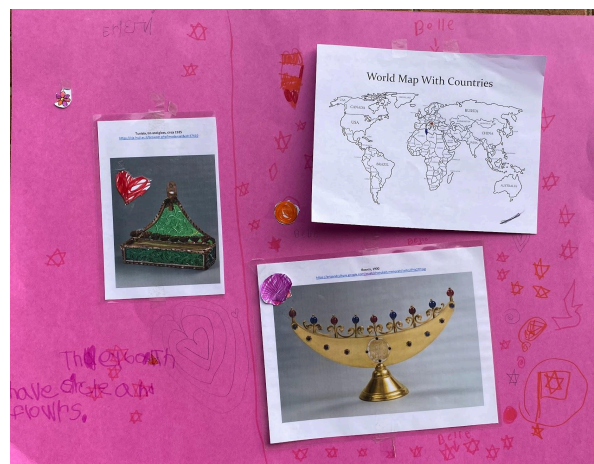
"They both have lions and crowns. The shamash is on top super high." (Menorahs from Iraq and Poland.)



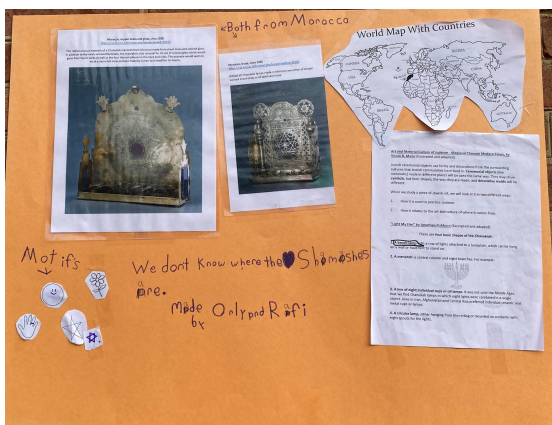
"These menorahs are made from different types of material. Both of our menorahs are bench menorahs. They also both have branch menorahs and Hebrew writing on them." (Menorahs from Morocco and Germany.)



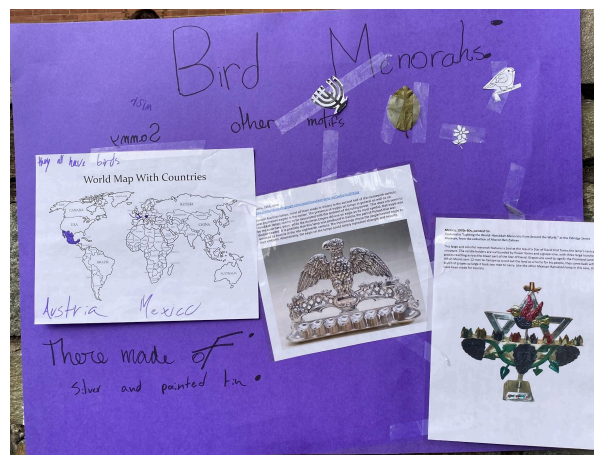
"They are both made of metal. They also both have a very nice pattern." (Menorahs from Austria and southern France.)



"They both have circles and flowers." (Menorahs from Bosnia and Tunisia.)



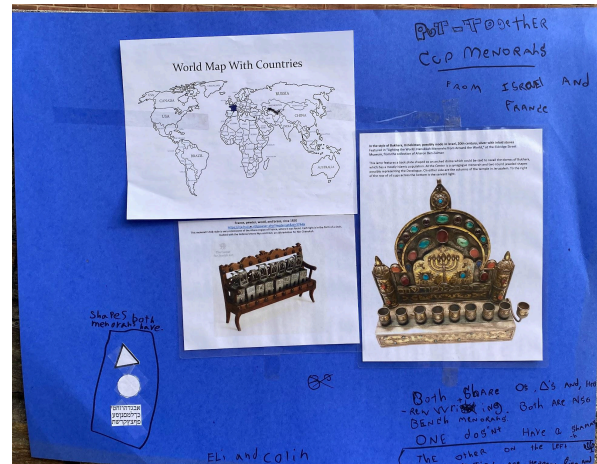
Two bench-lamp menorahs from Morocco. "We can't find the shamashes!"



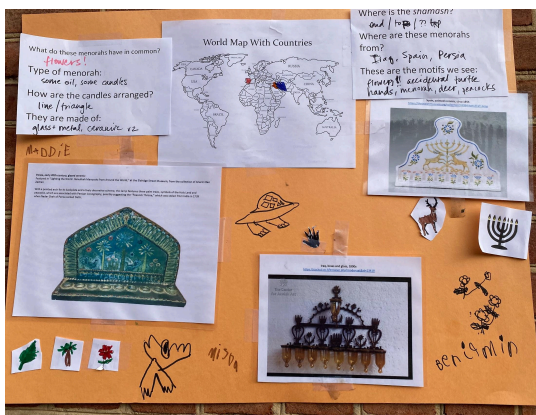


"They both have fruit on them. They both have oil lamps. They are both made of metal." (Menorahs from the Netherlands and Germany.)

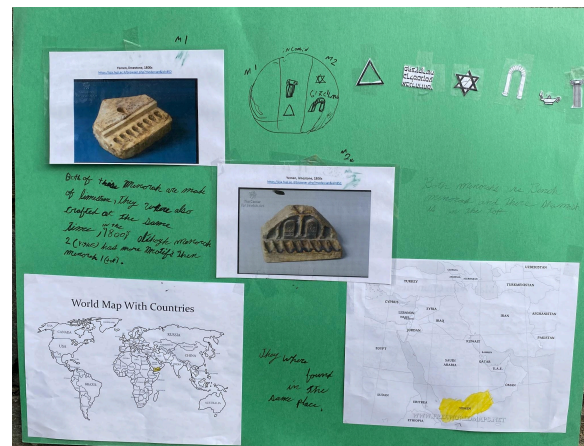
"Bird Menorahs: They all have birds!" (Menorahs from Austria and Mexico.)



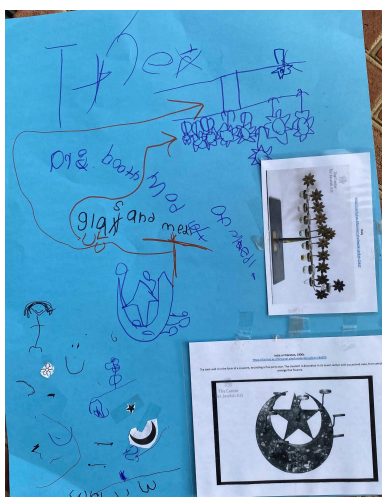
"Put together cup menorahs. Both share circles, triangles, and Hebrew writing. Both are also bench menorahs. One doesn't have a shamash." (Menorahs from France and Bukhara, Uzbekistan.)



We see "Flowers, accidental turtle hands, branch menorahs, deer, peacocks." (Menorahs from Spain, Iraq and Persia.)



"Both of these menorahs are made of limestone, and they were crafted at the same time, in the 1800s. Although menorah 2 has more motifs than menorah 1. They are from the same place." (Menorahs from Yemen.)



"Both are made of metal and have glass oil cups." (Menorahs from Italy, and India or Pakistan.)

Unit 3: “Big Questions” and Tu B’Shtvat

Students were invited to submit a question or topic for Zoom class during the Omicron spike.

The older cohort discussed the question, “**Why did God create Covid-19?**” We explored a variety of sources from Tanakh and Talmud. We had a lively conversation about the premises of the question and the nature of reality.

The younger cohort discussed the question, “**What is the hidden (or sinister) truth of a Jewish holiday?**” in relation to Tu B’shtvat. We discussed the concepts of balanced ecosystems, and invasive species, and greenwashing.

For Tu B’shtvat, Kollel gathered with other NSP members at the National Arboretum for a tree-themed scavenger hunt and to present their self-directed, environmentally-themed skits based on Tu B’shtvat midrash (interpretation) to honor the birthday of the trees.

In class, they used maps to explore environmental equity as an intersectional topic connected to Jewish values.

Unit 4: Shabbat and Gan Eden



Pictured: A student with a glue-resist challah cover. It has the blessing over bread written in Hebrew.

Students studied *havdalah besamim* (spices used to mark the end of Shabbat in the havdalah ritual) and wrote poetry about it.

A simile poem by a fourth grader:

"A clove
Is like
A scepter

A rose
Is like
A pinecone

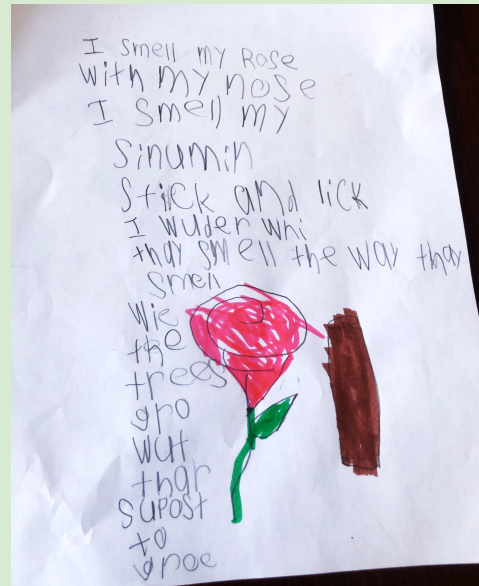
Cinnamon
Is like
A stick

Cardamom
Is like
A cashew
These are
All good smells."

Students considered Shabbat as a time of rest for both humans and animals.

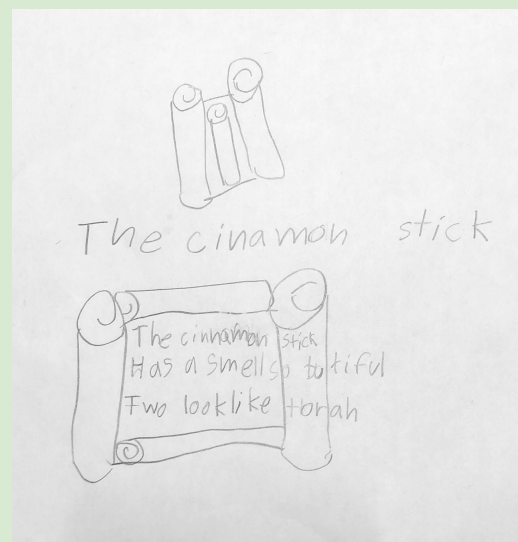
Using stories from Rabbi Marc Gellman's "Does God Have a Big Toe?" and "A Children's Book of Midrash," students considered Shabbat as a time of rest for both humans and animals.

We circled back to the word "Eden," and discussed what "paradise" or a "perfect place" might look like. One child



A ponderous, rhymey poem by a kindergartener:

"I smell my rose
With my nose
I smell my sinumin stick
And lick
I wonder whi thay smell
The way thay smell
Wie the trees gro
Wut thar supost to groe."



A haiku by a second grader:

"The cinnamon stick

suggested that in a perfect place, “There would be no money - you would get things by just saying please.” Many of the kids suggested that a perfect place would be “beautiful,” or full of flowers and gardens.

In pairs, the kids described their own perfect place, and then drew their partner’s description. Then we looked at some [depictions of Eden](#), including contemporary and historical artworks, paintings, weavings, and a Menorah, and Jewish, Islamic and Christian depictions. Several kids in the younger cohort described their perfect place as containing unicorns or dragons, and lo and behold, some of the artists who created these images also imagined unicorns or dragons!

Has a smell so beautiful
Two look like a Torah.”



Drawings inspired by class discussion on Eden.



Drawings inspired by class discussion on Eden.



Taking inspiration from both historic challah covers and a short story, “The Rest of Creation,” by Arthur Waskow, students created their own glue-resist challah covers.



Glue-resist challah cover by a third grader, with the blessing over bread written in Hebrew.



Glue-resist challah cover by a kindergartener. It says “Shabbat Shalom” in Hebrew.

Unit 5: Purim - Humor is a Jewish Value!



Exquisite Corpse collaged and painted puppets of pageant judges, Queen Esther, and Vashti.

We focused on humor and “being silly” as a Jewish value!

Kollel learned the Purim story through improv games and puppetry. The older cohort re-wrote the story using the surrealist “[Exquisite Corpse](#)” writing technique. Everybody collaborated on “Exquisite Corpse” puppets, which we displayed proudly at NSP’s Purim family-friendly party.



Exquisite Corpse collaged and painted puppets of palace guards, Mordechai, Esther, King Achashverosh, and a pageant judge.



Exquisite Corpse collaged and painted puppets of Haman and King Achashverosh's horse.

Unit 6: Passover, Safety, and Freedom

Kollel kids talked about safety and Jewish practices of protection, meditating on the times that make us feel the most safe. Some common themes were: being with family, playing with pets, reading before bed with a parent and spending time at school. Looking at [these historic amulets](#) for inspiration, the children made their own amulets shaped like hamsas, and chose specific things that made them feel safe, such as “love” and “friendship”.



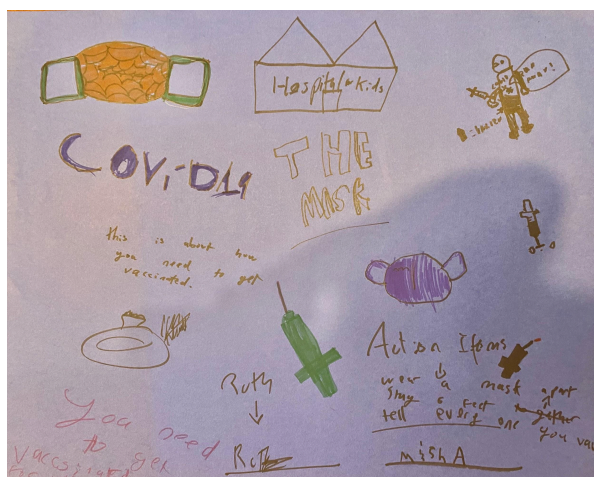
Kollel students' protection amulets.

Students proposed new seder supplements based on current events.

First, students learned about the symbolic significance of traditional items on the Seder plate, and some [modern seder supplements](#). They connected the seder plate items to three values as described in Jewish tradition: freedom, gratitude, and remembering.

We turned to the subject of current events and big changes from the past year. Students split into groups according to the topic that interested them most. In their small groups, they read an abbreviated news article about their topic and [discussed it](#). They talked about how the story made them feel, how people are helping, and what people should know or remember about the story. Then, they proposed a new seder supplement and

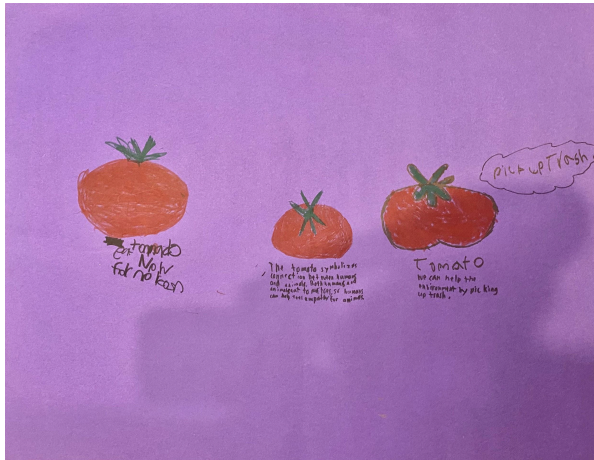
Two groups [read about vaccines for kids](#):



The older group proposed a mask on the seder plate. Their action items included maintaining our regular pandemic protocols like masking and distancing, and encouraging people to get vaccinated.

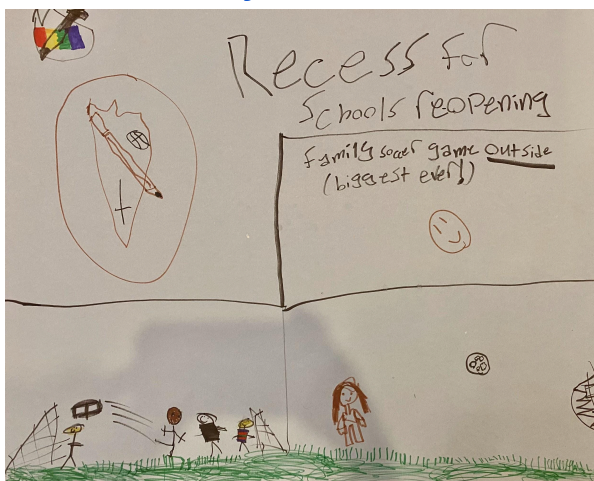
action items to commemorate the big changes or issues of their topic.

One group [read about the rise in PPE pollution](#) and its effect on the environment, and proposed a tomato on the seder plate:



They wrote, "The tomato symbolizes the connection between humans and animals." Their action item is to pick up trash!

Two groups chose the topic of schools and activities re-opening, and [read about schools re-opening in Uganda after two whole years!](#)



The first proposed "recess at the seder." I think that speaks for itself.

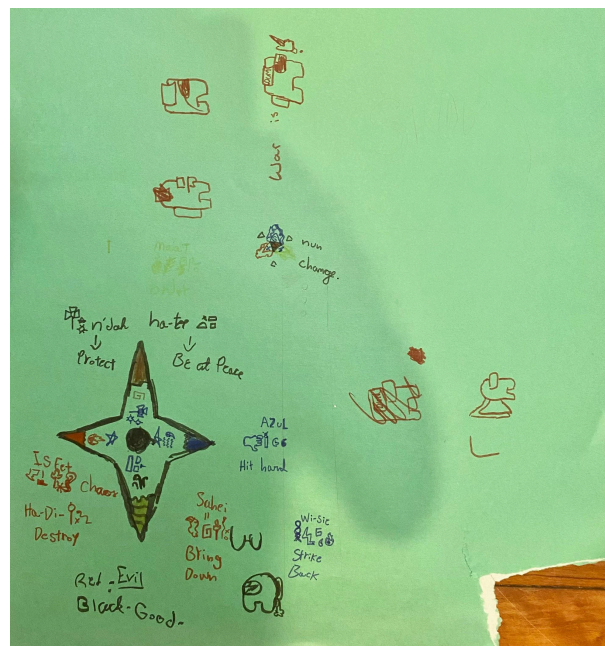


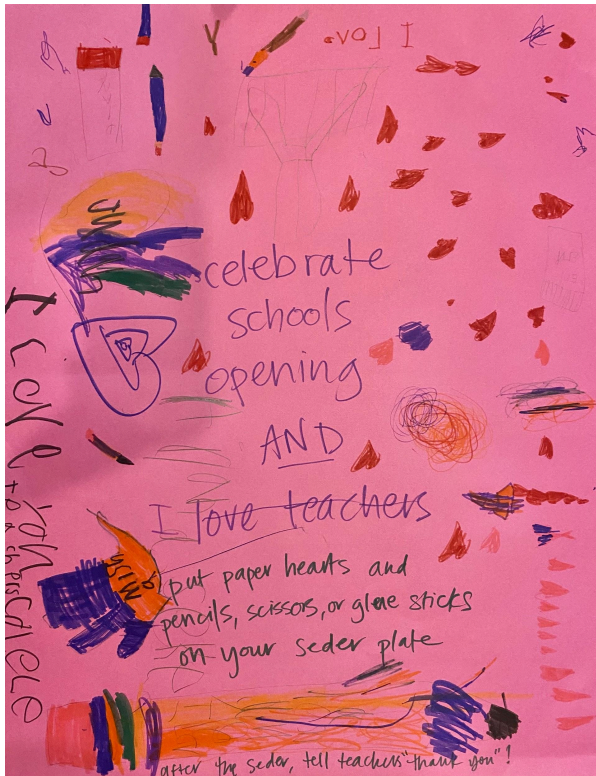
The younger group proposed both a sharpened carrot and a flower on the seder plate. They wrote, "The carrot represents the shot. The covid vaccine is sharp and pointy and the carrot is sharp and pointy."

To explain the flower, one kindergartener wrote:

"Everything is byoodifile in its own way even the virus it looks like a ball with a crown on top I want everyone to realise that that is good in the word."

Two groups [read about the war in Ukraine:](#)

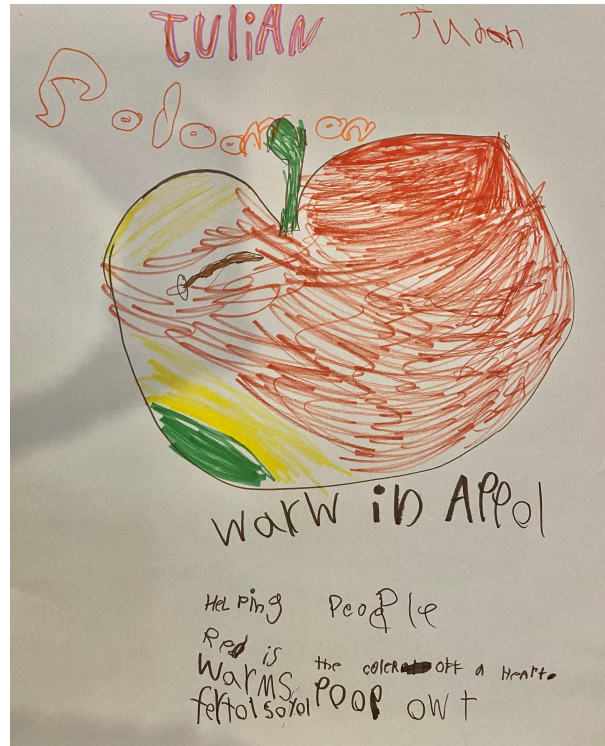




The second group proposed paper hearts, scissors, glue sticks, and pencils on the seder plate, both to celebrate schools and to show love for teachers. Their post-seder action item is to tell your teacher “thank you!”

One group [read about the first Amazon workers’ union](#) and other low-wage workers’ efforts to unionize.

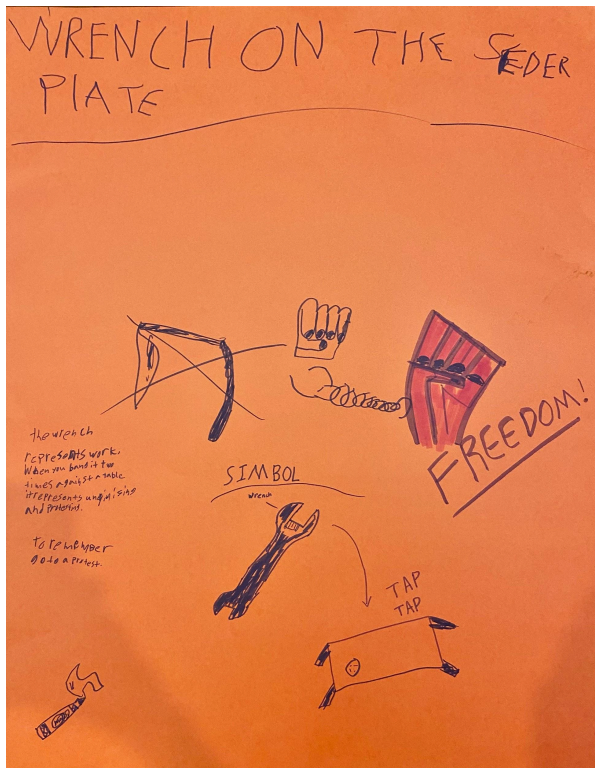
The older group proposed both an Egyptian symbol of peace and a stop sign on the seder plate, and tore off a corner of the poster that said “war” and crumpled it up.



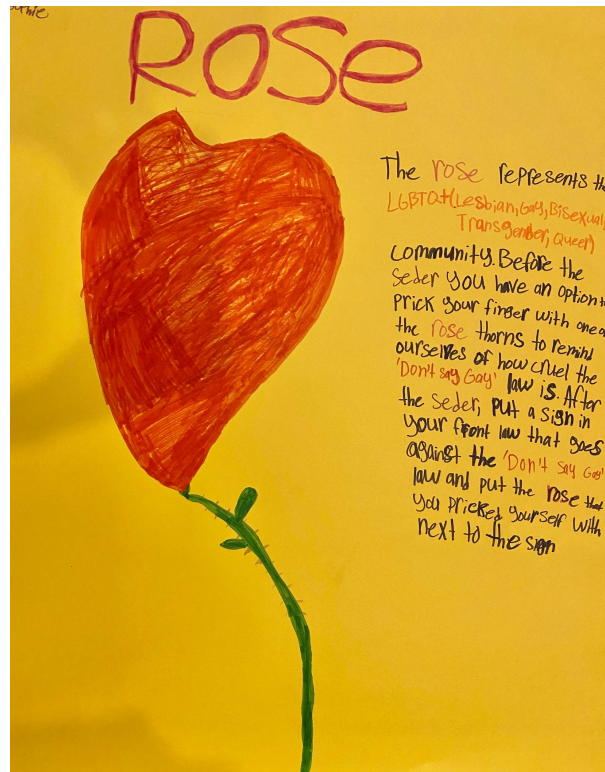
The younger group proposed an apple with a worm in it on the seder plate. They wrote that it represents “Helping people,” and that “red is the color of a heart,” and “worms poop out fertile soil [poop out fertile soil].”

(You might say, “wait, what does a worm in an apple have to do with war in Ukraine?” To which I would respond that this group of kids did a pretty good job making their proposal as abstract and baffling as the traditional items on the seder plate.)

One group [read about the “Parental Rights in Education” \(or “Don’t Say Gay”\) bill](#), and proposed a rose on the seder plate.



They proposed banging a wrench on the seder plate and wrote, "The wrench represents work. When you bang it on the table it represents uprising and protesting."



They wrote, "The rose represents the LGBTQ community," and proposed pricking oneself with a thorn to "remind ourselves of how cruel" the bill is.

We ended our Passover unit with a lively discussion on freedom in relation to both the Passover story and our own lives.

Some students were quick to differentiate between the freedom discussed in the Exodus story - freedom from slavery - and personal freedoms, or how generally "free" people can be. Many argued that because we live inside of bodies, we cannot be free from human needs or limits - and real "freedom" would mean being limitless.

The older students listened to two poems: "Maror" by Marge Piercy which discusses a personal exodus, and ["Red Sea" by Aurora Levins Morales](#) which discusses freedom as a mutual obligation.

Unit 7: The Omer, and the Cycles of Jewish Time

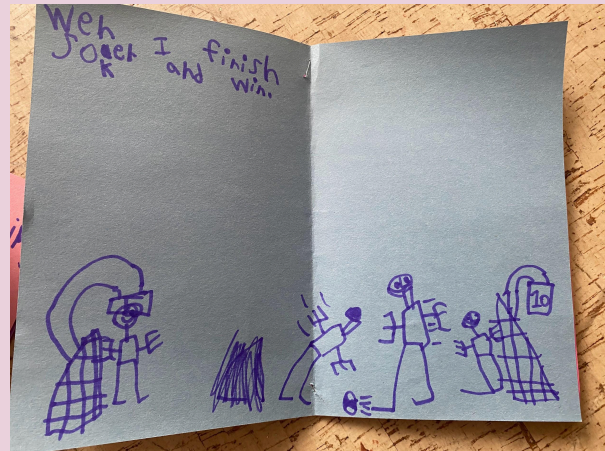
We learned about the cycles of 7 in Jewish time, and considered why 7 is a special number in Judaism. We connected the cycles of 7 in Jewish time to the mystical *Sefirot*, and to the story of creation. We celebrated Lag Ba'Omer with the greater NSP community with a picnic, fire, and s'mores!

We read "[Before There Was a Before: Resting](#)" by Arthur Waskow, in which the Humans suggest that the reason is, "No two numbers can be multiplied to make seven, and seven can't be multiplied by anything to make any number that is ten or less. So seven isn't a product, and it doesn't produce. It's the only number up to ten that's like that. So it's the resting number."

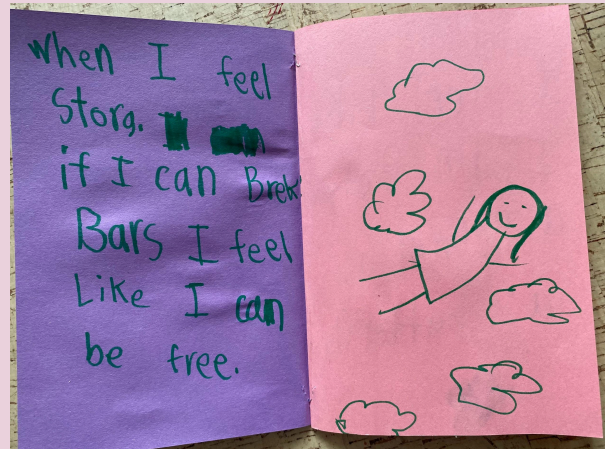
Then we read a very participatory story in which the people of Chelm learn about the 7-year *Shmita* cycle, and the importance of rest and shabbat for the land. The kids broke off into pairs and chose an action that people should either STOP, or do more of in order to listen and let the land rest. One pair taught us about the importance of compost through a very silly skit. Another pair gave a nuanced presentation about how camping is fine, but we have to do it right - clean up!

We used the Sefirot to consider the question: How am I *b'tzelem Elohim*, "in the image of God?"

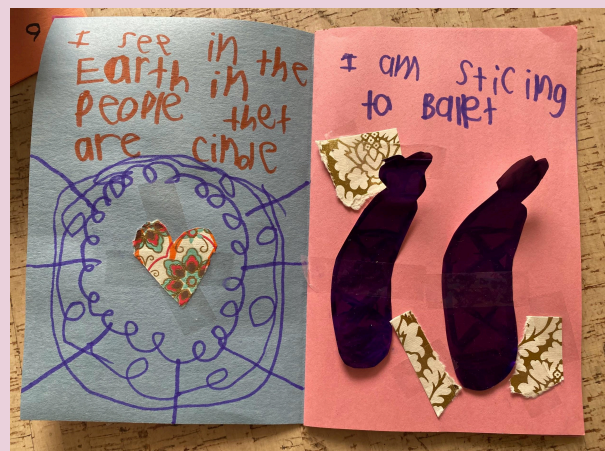
We re-examined [Bereisheet 1:26-27](#) and discussed what it means to be *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God. Most of the



A first grader's reflection on the Sefirah of Hod, glory: "When I finish soccer and win."



A first grader's reflection on the Sefirah of Gevurah, strength: "When I feel storg. If I can break bars I feel like I can be free."



A kindergartener's reflection on the Sefirot of Chesed, loving-kindness.

kids agreed that that does not mean we look like God, but that we might think or behave in similar ways. Someone in the younger cohort suggested that it might just mean “God sees us.”

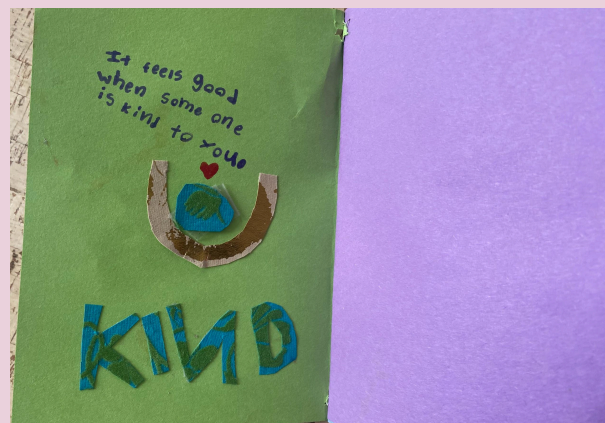
We talked about how Jewish mystics explained that there are 10 *Sefirot* (or qualities/attributes) of God that we can find in ourselves. During the Omer, we focus on the seven that have to do with our emotions and our actions. **The kids considered a series of prompts based on each *Sefirah* and began making collage books to reflect on these questions.**

One child told us that *Chesed*, lovingkindness, can be hard because sometimes we have the urge to be mean. Another said that they see *Tiferet*, beauty, in people’s souls, but that nothing is “perfect”. Another, reflecting on *Netzach*, told us that something they want to stick with is *Kollel*!

Tiferet, beauty or compassion, and *Netzach*, endurance: “I see in the Earth in people that are cinde. I am sticing to ballet.”



A third grader’s reflection on the *Sefirah* of *Gevurah*, strength: “I have bin strong when I overcome problems. I have bin strong when I am overcoming a challenge.”



A second grader’s reflection on the *Sefirah* of *Chesed*, lovingkindness: “It feels good when someone is kind to you.”

We learned more about Jewish mysticism and its connection to Lag Ba'Omer. We read ["Light," a short story/poem by Jane Breskin Zalben](#), based on Isaac Luria's *midrash* on creation.

Our Greek mythology experts pointed out that the myth of the shattered vessels is sort of the reverse of Pandora's box, in that all the good things are released instead of the bad things.

The older cohort read an ever-so-slightly adapted contemporary poem [by Peter Cole called, "Song of the Shattering Vessels."](#)

Then we learned about Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his connection to Lag Ba'Omer and mysticism. We read "Rabbi Shimon, the Cave, and the Carob Tree," from [A Child's Book of Midrash by Barbara Diamond Goldin](#).

We connected this story to the tradition of having a bonfire on Lag Ba'Omer. We talked about what it might have felt like to live in the cave. Some people thought it would feel scary and lonely or confining, but others thought it might be kind of nice to just hang out. One child suggested that it would feel like being in the Hunger Games.

On Lag Ba'Omer, we hosted a community celebration with a picnic, campfire, (kosher) s'mores. Several Kollel students led a blessing for the 33rd day of the Omer.



Students making (kosher) s'mores on Lag Ba'Omer!



S'mores are delicious.



Students leading the blessing for counting the Omer.



Archery for Lag Ba'Omer!



A student collecting firewood.

Kollel kids traveled back in time and held a debate based on Midrash. We closed our eyes and became the ministering angels described in [Bereisheet Rabbah 8:5](#), debating the creation of human beings.

In their structured debate, the older cohort became the Angels of Lovingkindness, Justice, Truth and Peace. (Some kids really get into character by affecting different accents.) They gave opening statements, one round of rebuttals, and closing statements.

Some important points were raised: war in Ukraine and the culpability of Russian soldiers (one important perspective was that because some humans are good, we can't judge them all according to the bad ones); pollution and environmental destruction; human creativity and invention; that lies lead to conflict. The Angel of Justice suggested that if humans turn out bad, "we can fix them because we created them in the first place." Also, there is "more justice than bad things: helping the environment, BLM, democracy."

At the end, everyone got a chance to say what they REALLY

thought. One child told us that they were actually in favor, and that one reason was, "If humans weren't created, we wouldn't be at Kollel!"

In the younger cohort, the kids chose sides, but because the overwhelming majority was in favor of the creation of humans, a few kids opted to argue from the other side. Some kids practiced some really theatrical lawyering skills; one child started their closing statement with, "**Raise your hand if you love your friends!**"

We heard a range of points, and I rescued some of the preparatory notes:

- "If humans wasn't cratid [sic] there wodint [sic] be cars, technology[;] there woddit [sic] be cupcakes even ice cream." And their rebuttal to the opposing side included: "We can make a change to polloshun [sic] we can save animals if we work together."
- "Humans make cars and cars are bad[;] animals don't like being on farms."
- This 4-part thesis on why humans should not be created: "1. Cinstruksion [sic] is BAD for the planit [sic]. 2. Cutting trees = less air. 3. Camping is taribol [sic] for the air. 4. Animals do not like farms."

In their closing statement, one pair argued that we would not need friends, cupcakes, etc. because **if humans were not created, we would have been born as other animals.** This opens up some interesting questions on the nature of minds/souls - for another day!

Unit 8: History and the Future

In our final unit of the year, Kollel students discussed history and the future. We spent time discussing their own family histories in the Americas and the world, and learning about Jewish history and migrations. We learned about the modern state of Israel, and the history Palestine, to prepare for a field trip to the [Museum of the Palestinian People](#).

We started by recalling the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who hid from the Romans, as a segue into the long arc of Jewish history and migrations from and back to the land of Israel. One child told us a very thorough family history, which included leaving Spain and traveling to the Ottoman Empire.

We looked at the [Indigenous lands USA maps](#) and the kids noted how the map became more and more white as time went on.

Then, we looked at [maps of Palestine](#) and noticed a similar thing. One first-grader observed that on the present-day map, which included Israeli roads, checkpoints, settlements, wall, etc., the West Bank looked like it was in “bits and crumbs.”

We read [Sitti's Secrets](#), and shared how the story made us feel, and what it brought up for us. Some kids said it made them feel happy, and others felt sad. Some kids recalled visiting grandparents recently too.

The kids came up with questions that they could ask the expert tour guides at the museum. Questions included,

- “Why is it called Palestine?”
- “How many Palestinians lived there before it was Israel?”
- “How many cats are in Palestine?”

On our field trip, the older cohort got a very thorough historical overview of Palestine. Our tour guide quickly noticed that we have some Greek culture enthusiasts, and told the kids that Nablus, in the West Bank, was originally named Neapolis.

The younger cohort basically ran the tour - they directed our tour guide toward the pictures and artifacts that they were curious about and asked tons and tons and tons of questions! The curator of the art exhibit came during the younger cohort's tour and gave them a walk-through of the symbolism in the artwork. In both cohorts, it was exciting to have caregivers learning and asking questions alongside the kids.

Following the field trip, we reflected briefly on our learning. I was really impressed with how many details some of the kids remembered from our field trip. We reviewed a few key symbols from the museum - the key and the phoenix - and then

discussed our learning from the whole year.

We read “Educating the Soul” by Joel Lurie Grishaver (with a bit of [extra midrash](#) squished in) and talked about what Adam and Eve saw while gazing into the future. The older cohort got really into the weeds as far as what it would be like to see everything that ever happened all at once, imagining that it would be like watching someone edit every single cut of a film (and so also really boring).

Some kids suggested messages that Adam and Eve could send to the future after seeing the light - in both cohorts the kids brought up climate change and pollution as a primary concern.

Finally, we sent our own messages to the future through a collective time capsule. Some kids wrote stories and poems, and others contributed short letters and drawings. Without spoiling too much for our future selves, one of my favorite suggestions was to include a tree leaf, so to show that we had most Kollel classes outside this year.