

Washington Jewish Week

Students learn family stories, tell about them in Hebrew

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Hebrew was never Gabriel Brumberg's favorite subject, but his opinion improved when his sixth-grade class at the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital took on a project that combined the language with investigating family history.

Gabriel and each of his classmates produced a short video about their family's immigration stories, using school-provided iPads. They incorporated old photographs, artifacts, maps and a family tree to help tell the story. When it came to narration, the students did it in Hebrew.

Gabriel, 12, focused his video on a great-grandfather who lived in Poland and escaped just as the Nazis invaded in 1939. The family fled to Palestine, where Gabriel's grandfather was born, and then to Lithuania. There they received visas to go to Japan from Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara. Eventually they made it to the United States.

Gabriel said watching his video is both "interesting and spooky," knowing that his family faced persecution just a few generations back.

"We are descendants of people who were in the Holocaust, escaped from it, or were just terribly sad to hear that it was going on," he said. "We talked about the responsibility to keep sharing what happened. By doing this documentary project, we're doing exactly that."

Many of the students were fascinated to learn of their ancestors' pursuit of a better life in the United States. Johanna Lane's great-grandfather, like Gabriel's, also emigrated from Poland. But he came to America in 1905 and later met his future wife, who had emigrated from Kiev, then part of Russia.



Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital students, from left, Johanna Lane, Lincoln Aftergood and Gabriel Brumberg, along with the rest of their sixth-grade class, made videos about their family immigration stories and provided narration in Hebrew. Photo by Daniel Schere.

“I thought the whole project was really cool, because I didn’t know any of that information,” she said.

In addition to the chance to explore family history, Johanna said the project was a great way of learning Hebrew.

“We kind of learn how to think in Hebrew instead of just thinking in English and translating the words,” she said.

The video project was the culmination of a year spent exploring the question of “What’s in a name,” said Hebrew instructor Shoshana Sfarzada.

“Our goal is to teach language, but you can’t teach language without the connection to content. The videos were a way to connect kids not only to their own interests in themselves,” but to the larger context of their family and Jewish history, she said.

The school curriculum attempts to incorporate Hebrew into every aspect of learning, said Naomi Reem, head of school.

She said the videos are the final product of all the learning the students have done and are based on projects that teachers assigned them in the past. One of the school’s goals is to teach students to use Hebrew in every aspect of their lives.

“Teachers talk to the kids in Hebrew from the moment they walk in the door, even though most [students] have no background,” she said. “Somehow the teachers manage to convey the meaning of things.”

Sixth grade is a marquee year for the school’s students. It includes an end-of-year trip to New York City, where they visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and other Jewish sites to help them understand their heritage. Middle school director Lisa Schopf said experiences like the trip and the video project are important for helping students understand the human experience.

“They connect their lives and families today with generations past,” she said. “And so many stories look at great-grandparents or grandparents that were Holocaust survivors. And they look at how they came over to America and the child who is speaking is part of that narrative.”