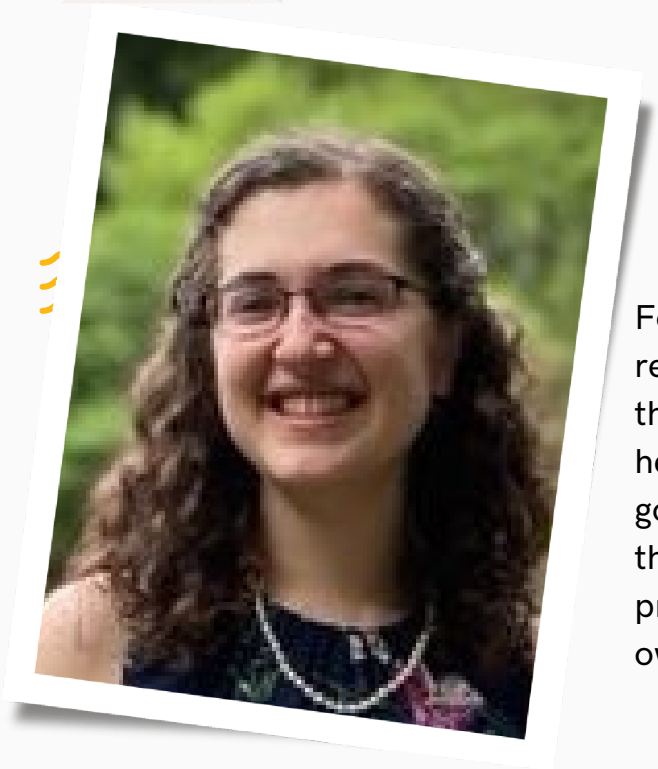
EZRA ACADEMY



MADELEINE CAHN

Middle School Teacher

For my Civic Spirit "project," I helped the students restart student government, which had lapsed during the pandemic. All interested 3rd through 8th graders held a constitutional convention to decide government roles and election procedure. All 3rd through 8th graders voted in class representative and presidential elections and, unprompted, formed their own political parties.

Our first student government held weekly meetings at which different students, with and without official roles, proposed initiatives. So far, we have enacted a number of them, all student run: the bake sale the 4th grade rep proposed (raising money for school improvements the student reps requested); the chess club, chess tournament, and basketball tournament the co-presidents proposed; and the art club the 6th grade rep proposed, among others. After the second round of elections in March, the second student government has started planning more initiatives for May and June. Through this process, I learned that with some support, children can take responsibility for significant projects that involve many parts and include many people. The bake sale especially gave the whole school, preschool through 8th grade, a chance to come together as a community.

In addition to my "project," I tried to incorporate civics, especially the skills from Civic Spirit, into every aspect of my teaching. In my ancient history class, the 6th graders practiced primary document analysis through frequent art analysis of ancient stele, jewelry, and statues and a two-week project on Hammurabi's Code in conversation with U.S. and Jewish law. They studied uses of public spaces and systems of societal organization through building replicas of a Sumerian ziggurat and the complex village of Catal Huyuk. They practiced research skills and collaboration through designing and drawing a class Egyptian tomb painting. They tried out different models of dialogue in a Mesopotamian empires debate and a pharaohs speaker panel.

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As a civics teacher, I had some responsibility for a number of civic holidays this year. Rabbi Amanda and I tried to help students feel connected to Veterans Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Day by having students learn about specific veterans and Civil Rights Movement activists. For Veterans Day, we read one World War I poem and one modern poem written by veterans with the 7th and 8th graders and had the 6th graders watch a news clip about a second grader who advocated for a World War II veteran to receive a medal. For MLK Day, each 6th grader researched a "Forgotten Civil Rights Hero" to present to the school at our MLK Day assembly, in addition to the Ezra Academy tradition that each grade sings a Civil Rights Movement song.

I tried to put small moments of civic belonging into daily routines, too. In morning homeroom, my 6th grade class does check-ins every day. Everyone has a turn to pronounce their name, say how they're feeling, and answer a check-in question (e.g. "If you had wings, what kind would they be?"). It took a long time to set up this routine and get everyone used to doing all the parts of the check-in and listening to everyone else, but it really starts the day off well. At the end of lunch, the 6th graders gather around a small table in the back of the room and do the Grace after Meals. Although they complained for a couple of months, by March they got into the singing and were excited to have the chance to lead the call-and-response at the beginning of the prayer.

The hardest aspect of civics to teach this year has been everyday kindness, respect, and empathy. Going on field trips, especially the five-day 6th grade trip to Alabama, helped somewhat. I think, or at least I hope, these skills will develop more as they mature.

Ezra Academy's first student government.

6th grade collaborative tomb painting class project.