

A True Story

By Jen Glaser

“Sam, where is your homework?”

I was waiting for this. It wasn't done, but I had a good excuse that meant I didn't have to lie.

“I rushed out of the house this morning because my little brother couldn't find his sports bag and we all had to spend time looking for it because he was crying and so I left my homework on the kitchen table so I don't have it.”

I said this in rapid fire, trying to look very upset. My teacher gave me a long hard look, but he chose not to push me further.

It is true that the homework is sitting on the table at home, and that my baby brother was crying, and that everyone (everyone but me that is) was looking for his bag.

And it is even true that it is because of my brother that my homework wasn't done. I was going to do it before breakfast, but with all the commotion I couldn't concentrate.

(I know what you are thinking - my mother would probably tell the story differently – she would say I couldn't concentrate this morning because I was too tired because I went to bed so late last night.)

But in essence, the story I told my teacher was right. You could say that my story tells the compact version – it gets to the essence of what life in my family is like, and why I didn't have anything to hand in, even if the details are different.

* * * *

At break I went outside to find Ari. He is my best friend, though if you asked him he probably wouldn't agree because sometimes I give him a hard time. But we can be best friends even if we irritate each other, and

even if sometimes he chooses not to hang out with me. Last year he really *was* my best friend and I still like to think of him that way. The fact is, if Ari wasn't my best friend I'd be a different person, he brings out the best in me.

Sometimes I *choose* to see things a certain way because there is something important in that knowledge. Like the Maccabees and Hanuka - I don't know what to believe about the miracle with the oil, but I sure prefer to think that life can be full of miracles than think it can't be. And it's the same with Adam and Eve in the creation story, I like the idea that we all come from the same source. It makes me think that as human beings we are all equal.

"Sam, come and see this!" That's Ari, he is grinning. I am glad I've found him. He is looking at something on his iPhone. Leaning up close I can see his Facebook page. Sarah has posted a new picture of herself holding up a gold medal. Sarah is Ari's sister. She isn't at school today because she is running in a State marathon. "Isn't that great!" he says proudly. "Is it her medal?" I ask. Ari gives me one of his strange looks. I can see he is irritated and disappointed. "*Of course* it's hers" he says. "Why else would she be posting it?"

I am happy for him, but I am also practical. Not everything you see is true (last week someone posted a picture of me with two heads, and that wasn't true). But I give him a slap on the shoulder anyway, "just kidding" I say. We both break out in a grin. That's what I mean when I said he brings out the best in me. Sometimes just the idea that he is my best friend makes me act differently, and then I *am* a better friend.

Teacher notes to the discussion guides:

It is important that in facilitating these discussions you don't push a particular position, or feel you have to defend or convince students of Hanuka's 'truth'. Some students may accept the historic or mythic veracity of the story, others might be troubled by it. What these discussion offer the student is an opportunity to share their existing thoughts and judgements with each other.

True stories and truth *in* stories

This discussion plan explores the connection between stories and their components – the factor of time and memory, what makes a story convincing, and the relationship between truth of the component parts of a story and truth conveyed by the whole (historical truth and narrative truth). This opens the possibility for students to share their own honest assessment of the Hanuka story while also offering them other ways of finding meaning in it other than it being 'a true factual account' of events

Choosing the way we see things

In 'A True Story' there are several times where Sam chooses one version of a story over another. With his friend Ari it is because he believes that choosing the narrative of friendship makes him a better person and a better friend, in the case of Hanuka and the creation story, it is because the narrative he chooses (in one case, a narrative where the world contains miracles, and in the other, a narrative of human equality) offers him a richer and more meaningful perspective on the world. Choosing to believe in these cases is to take an intentional stance toward the world that is more about values than about 'provable facts'. This discussion plan explores the relationship between our intentional stance toward the world and its affect on our lives. It opens for consideration the possibility that taking such a stance toward Hanuka could be a meaningful intentional choice.

Making our own world

Sam states that the idea of Ari being his best friend *brings out the best* in him – is it possible that ideas can shape our ability to *determine the future* of our world? That the mere idea of 'being someone's friend' (or enemy) might lead me to act toward them differently? Or that the *idea* of global warming (putting aside scientific evidence for or against) might lead us to take better care of the planet than if we rejected it? Can ideas we hold not only shape who we are, but who we will become? If that is the case can we intentionally choose to accept an idea because of how it will shape us or shape the way we see the world? Are there ideas in the Hanuka story that we want to shape us in this way?

Miracles

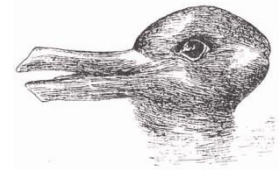
In talking about truth in a story in relation to Hanuka, the Miracle of oil is bound to come up. The students may want to talk about whether they believe miracles can really happen. These two discussion plans can help students reflect on what kind of event they think counts as a miracle. While this may go beyond a discussion about truth, spending time on this may give students more insight into why they accept or reject the 'miracle of oil' as a miracle. The first discussion guide explores our everyday use of the term Miracle and its meaning. The second discussion guide encourages students to reflect on their own judgements regarding the kind of event that might count as a miracle.

DISCUSSION GUIDE: True stories and truth *in* stories

1. If your brother / sister comes home from school and tells you what happened to them that day, would you expect all the details to be accurate?
2. If someone tells you a story about what happened to them when they were in kindergarten, would you expect all the details of their story to be accurate?
3. If a story sounds convincing are you more likely to consider it to be a true?
4. What makes a story sound convincing?
5. Could a story be true, even if it doesn't sound *at all* convincing? (can you think of an example?)
6. Can you tell a story where all the events in the story are true, but the story itself isn't true? (if you think you can, try to tell one)
7. Can there still be truth *in* a story even if the story itself isn't didn't happen the way it is told? (can you think of an example)
8. Do you find the Hanuka story convincing? What aspects do you find more convincing and which less?
9. Do you think there could be truth in the Hanuka story, even if all the details we tell are not accurate?

DISCUSSION GUIDE: Choosing the way we see things

1. Can you choose to see this picture as a duck or as a rabbit/ see the cup half full rather than half empty?
2. Can you choose to see a person as good even if they do bad things?
3. If you fail a test in school, could you choose to see this as a positive thing? (what reasons might we have for doing that?)
4. Do you think that the way you see past events in your life shapes the way you approach life today?
5. Do you think that the way you choose to see your past can affect the person you will become in the future?
6. Are there things in life you choose to believe, because that is the kind of world you want to live in?
7. Could the way we choose to see the Hanuka story lead us to see the world today in a certain way? (If so, in what ways?)
8. Could we choose to find meaning in Hanuka without having to decide if it is a true story?



DISCUSSION GUIDE: Making our own truth

1. Could the idea of winning a race lead you to win the race?
2. Could the idea of heroism lead you to act heroically?
3. Could the idea that miracles are possible lead you to see the world as miraculous?
4. Could the idea of friendship lead you to actually *become* a better friend?
5. Are there ideas you choose to believe in because you want them to shape how you act in the world?
6. Are there ideas you choose to believe in because you want them to shape how you view the world?
7. Are there ideas in the story of Hanuka that could lead you to act in a way that “brings out the best in you”?
8. Are there ideas in the Hanuka story that could lead us to build a better society?

Discussion Plan: Miracles

Discuss what the term ‘miracle’ means in each of these sentences

1. “It was a miracle he survived the accident”
2. “When my baby brother was born and I saw him for the first time I thought ‘this is a miracle’”
3. “The trapeze artist performed miraculous feats of daring”
4. “My biology teacher talks about the miracle of life on earth”
5. “It was a miracle that I got my homework done on time”
6. “The magician pulled a rabbit out of the hat – it was a miracle!”
7. I used to take butterflies for granted, but now we have studied them, I think each one is a tiny miracle!
8. “During Hanuka we talk about the miracle of the oil”

Discussion Plan: What counts as a miracle?

1. As I was walking home I was thinking “wouldn’t it be great to have money to buy an ice-cream” - and then I saw a dollar coin in the gutter.
2. In the storm, a bolt of lightning came down and split the tree in half.
3. I fell off my bike speeding down the hill, but came out of it without even a scratch.
4. When the apartment block caught fire, everyone got out safely
5. I wake up every morning refreshed and ready to start the day.
6. The fortune teller told my sister that she would meet someone and fall in love and she did.
7. When we were out in the family car the other day the gas meter showed we were out of gas – it was 20km to the next gas station and we should have run out of gas, but somehow it lasted until we arrived, then, just as we pulled up to the pump we ran out!
8. A standard 747 airplane weighs around **440,000kg** when it is loaded, and yet it can still get off the ground!
9. When the Maccabees were purifying the Temple, they only found enough oil for one day, but it lasted for 8 days.

Exercise: What counts as a miracle?

For the items listed above (1-12) decide which word best describes it.

Miraculous Awesome Coincidence Lucky Ordinary

ACTIVITY: Interviews about Hanuka

This activity offers students a chance to extend their own inquiry by interviewing people around them – this offers them a chance to find out what a broader section of their own community believes and develop an appreciation for the plurality of views within it. It might lead them to see that their own ideas are not radical breaks from their community and to consider the extent to which they share perspectives with others in their community.

Activity

Interview two people who light Hanuka candles.

1. Do you think the Hanuka story happened the way we tell it? Do they think that *parts* of it might be true? (if so, how did you decide what parts?)
2. Does it matter to you whether it really happened the way it is told? Why/Why not?
3. Do you think that it contains some ideas or truths we can learn from (if so, what are they?)

Take a picture of the people you interview and write up their answers next to their photo.

(Create a classroom display from all the interviews and photos).

