

Using Philosophical Inquiry to Explore

Question of Truth and meaning in the Hanuka Narrative

Hanuka is a complex holiday, carrying many messages. Its historic roots are documented in various sources, yet these sources convey different information and explain the rituals of the holiday in different ways. For many children, the story of Hanuka is interwoven with the 'miracle of oil' through a narrative of the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus's army. By middle school many students are questioning what to make of this miracle and the 'truth' of this historic narrative. Often, we as educators, leave them to address this question of truth on their own. This lesson seeks to explore the question of truth head on. The focus here is not on the story of Hanuka itself (indeed it presumes Middle School students know the basics of this story), rather, it offers a *philosophical exploration of the concept of truth* in a way that is accessible to Middle School youth. The aim of the lesson (or series of lessons) is to offer students a more sophisticated understanding of the notion of truth so that they may have more complex cognitive resources available to them through which to make meaning of this holiday.

The starting point of the lesson is an original story: "A True Story", that was specifically written for this purpose. Interwoven in this story are several accounts of 'what makes something true' and different *kinds* of truths (facts, essential nature, reasonable explanation, aspirational hopes, etc.). After reading this story and uncovering the different meanings of 'truth' in it, students are asked to raise questions about truth the story gets them thinking about. Several discussion guides then engage students in thinking about some of these questions around truth more deeply and what it would mean to understand Hanuka through these lenses. After this, two sets of resources offer students a link back to reflection on Hanuka. The first is a source sheet with several short accounts of the 'story of Hanuka' as recorded in early and Rabbinic sources (and also an overview of the story for students if you require it). The second is a resource sheet of modern interpretations of Hanuka as it's truths inspire people today.

About the Author

Dr. Jen Glaser is Director of "Engaging Texts" www.engagingtexts.com which offers professional development opportunities and a teacher network for Jewish educators building communities of philosophical inquiry in their classrooms and institutions. She also consults with schools around issues of pluralism, Design Thinking, and was a JEIC designer generating an innovative model of Jewish education focused on working with teens around identity issues. She brings her 25 years of experience with Philosophy for Children to this work.

Hanuka – A True Story

Exploring Question of Truth and meaning in the Hanuka Narrative

These lessons explore the concept of truth in general, and truth in relation to the holiday of Hanuka in particular. The session is designed for Middle and High School students. The lessons are inquiry based. Students will mostly be working in groups then coming back to share and discuss further in a larger group together.

Earlier we said that 'philosophy begins in wonder' – that it involves puzzlement or being 'pulled up short' by something unexpected. The 'Miracle of Oil' and the multiple versions of the Hanuka story, often mean our students are 'pulled up short' – either by something that conflicts with what their everyday belief of what is possible (the miracle of oil) or by the conflicting accounts of the seemingly historic narrative itself (as recorded in the Book of Maccabees, in the Talmud, etc).

The texts, discussion guides and activity are appropriate for students from all backgrounds as it approaches the question of truth philosophically, and is therefore not dependent on their level of Jewish knowledge or religious orientation (they will engage with the topic from their existing points of view). The resource sheets on the story of Hanuka and contemporary commentaries are varied, so you can choose which one you feel is most appropriate for your students.

All the resources are accessible through a page on the Engaging Texts website, and can accessed through this link. <http://engagingtexts.com/2018/09/newcaje-session-on-hanuka/>

Resources posted on the site that you will need to access for your lesson(s) are:

- A short story called: “A True Story” and discussion guides on Truth and Meaning in Hanuka
- A source sheet on the narratives of Hanuka in early sources and some commentaries/reflections on the meaning of Hanuka
- A final worksheet on ‘Where do I stand: truth and meaning in Hanuka’

Lesson plan(s)

[N.B: This is enough material to cover several lessons, you can do part or whole of the activities below.]

1. **Introduce the theme of Truth** – in this lesson we are going to be exploring the concept of truth and different kinds of truths: We will be doing this so later we can think about the holiday of Hanuka together.
2. **Read the Short Story:** “A True Story” together. (download it from the link to classroom materials on the above webpage.)
3. **Divide the students into small groups** – in the groups they should
 - a. read the story again, underlining or making a note of all the different ways the notion of truth comes up.
 - b. Then go over it again, stopping to discuss each point in the story they have identified, asking themselves what questions about truth come up for them here – they should write down these questions.
4. **Bring the groups together**, share what the different small groups found in the story and list the questions they came up with on the board.
5. **Go over their questions and see if any of the questions focus on a common interest** (eg, two or more questions may have as their interest “what makes something true”, though the questions themselves might be articulated differently) – through discussing the connections, several general themes or interests around the nature of truth should emerge.
6. **In light of the students’ interests and questions, choose one or more of the discussion guides and do it.**
 - a. Download the discussion guides
 - b. The way the discussion guides are constructed, the questions in each one build on the questions before them – so the goal is not to get to the end as quickly as you can, but to think about each one and reflect on what this question adds to the ideas being discussed as it develops. The first page of the discussion guide is for the teacher to orient you to the larger themes around which each of the discussion guides is organized to explore.

- c. When students answer each question make sure to take time to encourage the students to explain what they mean as fully as they can. (for example, by asking them, once they have finished talking, "Can you say a little more about what you mean here?" or "Does anyone have a different point of view/opinion?")
- d. Encourage students to ask each other follow-up questions.

If they simply answer 'yes' or 'no', this kind of encouragement should help lead them to share more of their thinking that lay behind their opinions and judgements.

7. **Turn to some of the secondary sources** – read and discuss them (you might also divide the students into pairs and give each pair a different source and then have them come back together to share their source and what they think it means/says about Hanuka and how this might relate to their class discussion.)
8. **Ask them what questions they now have about the Hanuka** (focusing on the question of truth) List them on the board or flipchart – write the student's name next to their question.
9. **Summation: Where do I now stand? truths and meanings in Hanuka:**
Using the 'Truth and meaning in Hanuka' quadrant handout (download the handout from the website cited earlier). This is a summative activity that asks the students to go beyond talk and assess where they stand on some of the key ideas that will have been explored.
 - a. each student should now fill in aspects of Hanuka that, for him/her sit within each quadrant (instructions are on the handout).
 - b. Break into groups of 3-4 to share their quadrants with each other.
 - c. Take one question and explore what it would mean to put it at various points on the page with the class before they start - as an example so you are confident they know what to do with the exercise.
10. **If there is the opportunity**, do the activity that has students explore the opinion of other people in their community for homework. Print and display their results in the classroom. (this activity is written up with the discussion guides)



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