

The Hanukkah Gift

A special story for Beavers with web clues for surprise activities!

by Susan Mackie

It was very early December when the first snow began to fall. A small flake appeared from nowhere, zigzagging back and forth on a happy breeze, looking for a place to land. It decided to settle on a log, in a schoolyard, next to a small Beaver eagerly waiting for the start of a meeting.

Sara Lupinacci caught the snowflake's fall out of the corner of her eye. She watched as it drifted, floated, and settled contentedly on the log beside her. Her grin was slow and careful, like the snowflake, as she looked up to the grey sky, bursting with the snowflake's brothers and sisters, jostling each other, getting ready to tumble to the sleeping earth below. Soon the holidays would begin, and Sara couldn't wait.

The Beavers sat in a circle on their logs, as Tic Tac began explaining the next game to them. They were going to play "Boo Tickle," one of Sara's favorite games! (Look for this game at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=151>.) And she was going to play with one of her favorite people...her best friend Aliza.

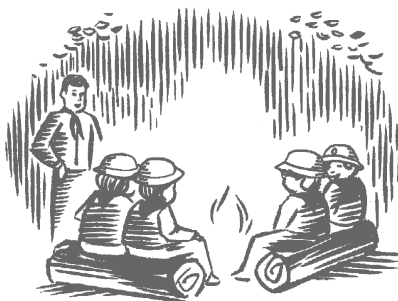
Aliza Cohen always sat next to Sara. Her family lived next door to Sara, so the girls were always playing together (even when they weren't being Beavers). Aliza's family had moved in just last year, and was Sara ever happy to find someone new to play with.

That day, Raksha told them their craft would be Sparkle Art (look for this at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=153>). They were squeezing sparkle glue onto paper plates, making their own special designs - whatever they liked! Sara was making a Christmas tree, or trying to. She kept getting the glue in little clumps, so she decided to turn her boo-boos into the ornaments on

the tree. By the end of craft time, she had a lot of ornaments! Pink ones, purple ones, even a striped one (that happened when she accidentally dropped some yellow sparkle glue onto a blue ornament.

Oops.

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She knew Mamma would love it anyway. She always did. Mamma, with her big smile, her glossy black hair, her tomato garden and her warm kitchen. She smelled like home...and she attached every piece of art Sara made right to the fridge. "Bella, bella," she would clap, always with a smile. Right now, Sara thought, Mamma would be busy baking pannetone, an Italian Christmas cake (make your own pannetone at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=153>). There would be some for the family, and some for Sara to take to Beavers next week - after all, Beavers was all about "sharing, sharing, sharing," and what better to share than Mamma's pannetone!

When she got home after Beavers, the kitchen would smell of raisins, and fresh butter and lemon. Sara was only six, but old enough to remember the smells and tastes of Christmas.

And Momma would make her pannetone, and her pasta, and the family

would put up their Christmas tree (a real one, Poppa always insisted!), and they would sing their traditional Italian Christmas carols like, "Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle," "Mille Cherubini in Coro," and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

Of course, Santa Claus would come, and there would be presents and candy and toys. Last year Sara got everything she needed: a new hat and scarf set, two new dresses, a toboggan, and a My Little Pony Twinkle Twirls Dance Studio Playset.

It wouldn't be long now. It was only the first week in December, but the air smelled like Christmas. Ackerman's Drugs and the Home Hardware next door both had Christmas lights up, and Ripelle's Hair and Beauty Salon even had a light-up angel in the window, with a pink halo that flashed whenever a customer came in the door.

Sara finished her craft, drifting back from thinking Christmas thoughts. As she was putting her name, "S-A-R-A" in big, red glitter letters, she glanced at Aliza's picture.

She looked at it one way, then the other. It didn't look like a Christmas tree. It didn't look like a reindeer. In fact, it didn't look like anything Christmas-y at all. What it looked like was a top, a toy top, with funny letters on the side.

"What's that?" Sara asked her friend, looking down at the paper with her nose all crinkled up.

"Don't look so funny," Aliza giggled, "haven't you ever seen a dreidel before?"

"A what?" replied Sara. "It looks like a top. Is that what you're asking for from Santa?"

"No, silly," said Aliza, "it's a special toy for the holidays. We always play a game with it. Besides, we don't have Santa. We don't have Christmas."

Sara almost dropped her sparkle glue bottle right on the floor. Her eyes were as big as the paper plates they were using for the crafts. No Christ-

mas! No Santa! No trees, no decorating, no baking, no carolling. It just couldn't be true. It couldn't.

When Sara got home from Beavers that night, Momma knew right away something was wrong. Sara didn't want any panettone. She didn't want her milk, even in her favorite purple Barney cup. She just went straight to bed, but she couldn't sleep.

Momma could hear her flipping and flopping in the bed, just like a baby seal. Momma came down the hall, her furry slippers scuff-scuffing the floor. She came in and sat on the edge of the bed. "Cara," she said, stroking the top of Sara's brown curly head, "tell me what's wrong."

"Mamma, it's too awful. I can't believe it. Aliza told me tonight at Beavers that...well, she doesn't have Christmas!"

Mamma bent down and kissed her, and smiled. "Ah, so that's what it is. I knew it was something. It's good that you tell me what's wrong when you are troubled. Mammias and Poppas and even Beaver leaders are always here to listen. And sometimes, you know, it isn't so bad as you think."

Sara propped herself up on her elbow, nudging Barney and her raggedy dolls and her My Little Ponys till they fell on the floor with a clatter. "Mamma, what could be worse than not having Christmas. Maybe they don't have enough money! Oh Mamma, can I give Aliza my presents? Can we bring her our tree? We have lots of decorations...can't we give them some?"

Mamma smiled down at her little Beaver, ready to share everything she had to make her friend's family happy.

"I think," she said, with a knowing smile, "I think what we need is to go over and visit Aliza and her momma and poppa. I'll call Mrs. Cohen tonight and perhaps we can visit them tomorrow. Don't worry. Things will all be clearer then."

At seven o'clock the next evening, Momma, Poppa and Sara knocked at the Cohen's door. Aliza answered, jumping up and down excitedly. She certainly didn't look sad in the least.

Mr. and Mrs. Cohen came forward and everyone hugged. "Happy Hanukkah, Happy Hanukkah," exclaimed Poppa, causing Sara to look up, puzzled.

"Poppa," whispered Sara as she tugged on Poppa's sleeve, "you're supposed to say 'Merry Christmas!'"

"Ah, little one," said Mrs. Cohen, taking Sara onto her lap, "here we don't have Christmas - here we have

a beautiful holiday called Hanukkah, which is celebrated by people of the Jewish faith. Your Momma told me how worried you were, and believe me, our Aliza is very lucky to have a friend like you who would share everything."

The warm, glowing light from the menorah lasted eight days - it was a miracle!



And Mrs. Cohen began to tell her the story of Hanukkah. Sara sat, wide-eyed, listening to the tale that began thousands of years ago. She listened how the Jewish people, led by a man named Judah Maccabee, fought for their freedom and in the end won. In their happiness, they wanted to make their temple their very own again...and fill it with lots of light. But they found they had only enough light to last one day. Nevertheless, they filled their lamp - it was called a "menorah". And, with only a little oil to burn, the warm, glowing light from the menorah lasted eight days - it was a miracle!

Sara listened as Mrs. Cohen told her how their family celebrated every year, around the same time, for eight days in honour of the miracle of the oil and the victory of the Jewish people. She learned all about the menorah (Aliza's mother had a beautiful silver one, given to her by her mother and her mother's mother), and how they added one new candle to the eight branches every night of the holiday.

"It is a very special, wonderful time for us, much like Christmas is for you, Sara. We have our prayers, and special ceremonies, and songs we sing every year at this time. Parents give gifts to their children, I bake wonderful sufganiyot (just like jelly donuts), and we make potato latkes from my grandmother's recipe. Children love the Hannukah gelt - these are chocolate coins - they are Aliza's favorite!"

Sara felt all lit up inside. How warm and sweet Aliza's house was; how brightly the menorah glowed, how delicious the smells were, drifting in from the kitchen. It wasn't exactly the same as Christmas, she thought, but it was pretty wonderful too.

They all sat down for a big feast, traditional for the first night of Hanukkah. They had potato latkes (make your own potato latkes at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=153>), and roast beef, and everyone loved the sufganiyot (make your own sufganiyot at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=153>) (especially Poppa, who kept having another and another till Momma gave him one of her looks). Mr. Cohen said special prayers, and welcomed the family down the street for their very first Hanukkah celebration.

And after supper, Aliza handed Sara a package, wrapped in silver paper and tied with a blue ribbon.

It was a dreidel. Sara's very own dreidel. The girls sat down in front of the fireplace to play. The little tops spun and spun and danced in the glow. (Find the dreidel song at <http://www.scouts.ca/beavers.asp?cmPageID=153>).

The two girls fell together, laughing and giggling. They didn't see Mrs. Lupinacci smiling and nodding her silent thanks to Mrs. Cohen, or Poppa and Mr. Cohen shaking hands.

When the Lupinaccis got home, Sara was pretty tired. "Momma," she said, "can I have my dreidel? I want to put it on my night table so I can see it first thing in the morning. It's my very first Hanukkah gift."

Momma already had the dreidel in her hand. She put it on the night table next to Sara's window, tucked Sara in just the way she liked, with the covers over her arms, kissed her, and put out the light.

As the sound of Momma's slippers scuffed down the hall, Sara's sleepy eyes looked out the window. Snowflakes were falling, finally released from the clouds, happy and dancing and settling on the windowpane. She closed her eyes and drifted off somewhere with the snowflakes. The light from the menorah in the Cohen's living room shone through Sara's window, settling its glow on the Hanukkah gift.

- Susan Mackie is editor of Leader Magazine, and author of "Don't Get Me Started - Reflections of a Country Columnist".