

# EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT DREIDLS... ...BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

## ***BT Shabbat 21b***

Our Rabbis taught: The commandment for observing Chanukah is that there should be one light for a person and their household. Pious people kindle a light for each member of the household. Regarding the very pious, the House of Shamai maintains: *on the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter one subtracts from them.* In contrast, the House of Hillel says: *on the first day one is lit and thereafter one adds to them...*

Our Rabbis taught: It is a commandment to place the Hanukkah lamp by the outside door of the house. If one dwells in an upper apartment, one places it by the window nearest the street. But in times of danger it is sufficient to leave it on the table.

What is Hanukkah? As our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev the eight days of Hanukkah begin, on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they profaned all the oil that was in it. When the Maccabees prevailed and defeated them, they searched and found only a single flask of oil, sealed by the High Priest, but there was only enough in it for one day's kindling. A miracle was made upon it and they lit from it for eight days! The next year these days were established and made a Festival with the recitation of *Hallel* and giving thanks.

## ***Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun 19:4***

(Rabbi Avraham Ever Hershovitz, 19<sup>th</sup> Cent.)

The Hellenists enacted decrees forbidding the learning and teaching of Torah. However, the Sages of the time came up with an ingenious tactic. They devised the game of dreidel, so that if the Hellenists encountered Jews leaning Torah, the Jews would quickly take out their dreidels and pretend that they were playing the game. Therefore, the dreidel allowed the Jews to continue learning and teaching Torah right under the noses of the Hellenists. The custom of playing dreidel on Chanukkah remained thereafter to commemorate the miracle that with the help of the dreidel, the Torah was saved from being completely forgotten from among Israel.

## ***Why Do We Play Dreidel With Children?***

(Sefer Ner Mitzvah, cited by Ohr Yisrael, Kovetz L'Inyanei Halachah U'Minhag, vol. 14, p. 54)

We play dreidel with our children to inspire them to learn about the miracle. Through playing the game, the children will come to ask about Chanukah, and, as a result, parents will be able to explain that Chanukah was established to commemorate the miracles that occurred for our ancestors, who risked their lives to save our holy Torah, and that we too must sacrifice ourselves for the Torah. These ideas will consequently become ingrained in their hearts and souls, helping them to grow to be *ehrlische Yidden* (wholesome Jews).

## ***The Surprising Origin of the Dreidl*** (Rabbi David Golinkin, Ph.D.)

([www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-origin-of-the-dreidel](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-origin-of-the-dreidel))

The *dreidel* or *sevivon* is perhaps the most famous custom associated with Hanukkah. Indeed, various rabbis have tried to find an integral connection between the dreidel and the Hanukkah story; the standard explanation is that the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin*, which appear on the dreidel in the Diaspora, stand for *nes gadol haya sham*—"a great miracle happened **there**," while in Israel the dreidel says *nun, gimmel, hey, pey*, which means "a great miracle happened **here**."

One 19th-century rabbi maintained that Jews played with the dreidel in order to fool the Greeks if they were caught studying Torah, which had been outlawed. Others figured out elaborate gematriot (numerological explanations based on the fact that every Hebrew letter has a numerical equivalent) and word plays for the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin*. For example, *nun, gimmel, hey, shin* in gematria equals 358, which is also the numerical equivalent of *mashiach* or Messiah!

Finally, the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin* are supposed to represent the four kingdoms that tried to destroy us [in ancient times]: N = Nebuchadnetzar = Babylon; H = Haman = Persia = Madai; G = Gog = Greece; and S = Seir = Rome.

As a matter of fact, all of these elaborate explanations were invented after the fact.

The dreidel game originally had nothing to do with Hanukkah; it has been played by various people in various languages for many centuries.

In England and Ireland there is a game called *totum* or *teetotum* that is especially popular at Christmastime. In English, this game is first mentioned as "*totum*" ca. 1500-1520. The name comes from the Latin "*totum*," which means "all." By 1720, the game was called *totum* or *teetotum*, and by 1801 the four letters already represented four words in English: T = Take all; H = Half; P = Put down; and N = Nothing.

Our Eastern European game of dreidel (including the letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, *shin*) is directly based on the German equivalent of the *totum* game:

N = *Nichts* = nothing; G = *Ganz* = all; H = *Halb* = half; and S = *Stell ein* = put in.

In German, the spinning top was called a "*torrel*" or "*trundl*," and in Yiddish it was called a "*dreidel*," a "*fargl*," a "*varfl*" [= something thrown], "*shtel ein*" [= put in], and "*gor, gorin*" [= all].

When Hebrew was revived as a spoken language, the dreidel was called, among other names, a *sevivon*, which is the one that caught on.

Thus the dreidel game represents an irony of Jewish history. In order to celebrate the holiday of Hanukkah, which celebrates our victory over cultural assimilation, we play the dreidel game, which is an excellent example of cultural assimilation! Of course, there is a world of difference between imitating non-Jewish games and worshiping idols, but the irony remains nonetheless.

### ***Rules of the Game*** (Wikipedia)

Each player begins with an equal number of game pieces (usually 10–15). The game pieces can be any object, such as chocolate gelt, pennies, raisins, etc.

To start the game, every participant puts one game piece into the center "pot". Every player also puts one piece into the pot when the pot is empty or there is only one game piece in the pot.

Each player spins the dreidel once during their turn. Depending on which side is facing up when it stops spinning, the player whose turn it is gives or takes game pieces from the pot:

- If נ (*nun*) is facing up, the player does nothing.
- If ג (*gimmel*) is facing up, the player gets everything in the pot.
- If ה (*hei*) is facing up, the player gets half of the pieces in the pot. If there are an odd number of pieces in the pot, the player takes half the pot rounded up to the nearest whole number.
- If ש (*shin*) is facing up, the player adds one of their game pieces to the pot (sometimes accompanied by the chant “*shin, shin, put one in!*” In some game versions a *shin* results in adding three game pieces to the pot, one for each stem of the letter shin (ש).



shin - put one in



hey - take half



gimmel - take everything



nun - take nothing