

A New Spin On The Dreidel, by Lee Ratzan

(you might choose different sections to read)

The dreidel is a traditional Hanukkah toy. If the dreidel were merely a symbol of the Hanukkah story, then (borrowing from a Passover song)--*Dah-yenu!*-- it would have been enough to assure its significance and memory throughout the generations. In fact, the dreidel has other symbolic meanings.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language-Fourth Edition*, the word dreidel derives from the Yiddish word *dreydl* based on *dreyen*, to turn. These words are themselves derived from Middle High German (*dray-en*) and Old High German (*dra-en*). One occasionally sees alternative spellings dreidl, dreydl, and dreidyl in various contexts. More than one dreidel are *dreideloch in German or Yiddish*, but the common English plural is dreidels.

A dreidel differs from an ordinary spinning top because it is emblazoned with the four letters **Nun-Gimmel-Heh-Shin** representing the words **Nes-Godol-Hayah-Sham** (A Great Miracle Happened There). Since 1948, Israeli dreidels bear the letters **Nun-Gimmel-Heh-Pei** for the phrase A Great Miracle Happened Here.

The Hebrew word for dreidel is *sivi-VONE*, meaning “an object that spins.”

There is something serene and harmonious about a spinning object. Physicists tell us that a spinning object generates an inertial torque that resists opposing motion. Spinning gyroscopes keep ships and planes on course. Whirling Dervishes spin themselves into a frenzy that they might enter a higher state of consciousness.

The dreidel is theology. The dreidel spins around a central point. It topples when it loses its connection to that point. So do we when we lose our Center. Spinning the dreidel is a symbol that life revolves about a Central Presence.

The dreidel is history. A dreidel has four sides. The four sides represent four empires that once enslaved us. The Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires each conquered most of the known world. In time, they themselves toppled and fell.

The dreidel is psychology. A case can be made that the human spirit has four primary attributes: self (soul, *nefesh*), body (*guf*), reason (*sechel*), and everything (by extension, evil, *hako!*). When the dreidel is spun, the four sides can no longer be distinguished and blend into a harmonious oneness about a single infinite point. Spinning the dreidel is a symbolic act of striving for that harmony.

The dreidel is philosophy. The four sides represent four aspects of the human dimension: **that which stands apart** (*nivdal-nun*), **the wheel of life** (*galgal-gimmel*), **humility** (*shafal-shin*), and **human potential** (*hiuli-heh*).

The dreidel is mystical numerology. Every Hebrew letter has an associated numerical value. Gematria assigns meanings to the arithmetic value of a word. Many Jewish organizations offer contributions in increments of \$18 because the word *chayim* (life) has the numerical value 18.

The letters of the dreidel add up to 358, which is the same as the Hebrew word *mashiach* (Messiah). Spinning the dreidel is a symbolic act of messianic hope.

The letters in the Hebrew word for snake (*nachash*) and by extension evil, also add up to 358. Spinning the dreidel is a symbolic act of faith that eventually evil stumbles and results in its downfall.

The dreidel is Kabbalah (mystical) geometry. The typical six-sided dreidel is related to a three-dimensional projection of a torus in four-dimensional space. Followers of the Kabbalah assign mystical meanings to this geometric shape and its associated symmetries. It is said that if each letter of the Hebrew alphabet was placed on a different vertex, then various folds reveal combinations of letters spelling significant words. **(continued)**

The dreidel is mathematics. As recently as November 2003, there have been college mathematics seminars on the probability of winning a game of dreidel, the expected number of spins in a game of dreidel, and whether the first player has a statistical advantage over the other players. Spinning the dreidel is not the same as doing your math homework.

The dreidel is fun. The traditional game of dreidel is played with raisins, nuts, candy or gelt with four basic rules (shin--put one in; heh--take half, gimmel--take all; nun--take nothing). **Variations abound.** Blackjack dreidel assigns a numerical value to each letter with the winner whoever gets *chayim* (18) or some pre-assigned value. Dreidel Bingo is played on an all-letter board. Dreidel musical chairs moves players as the dreidel spins. Dreidel horse racing moves players one notch ahead every time their letter appears. Dreidel baseball has rules for each base hit.

The dreidel connects holidays. The Hanukkah dreidel spins from above. The Purim grogger spins from below. In the story of Hanukkah, assistance and salvation came from above (Divine intervention). In the story of Purim, assistance and salvation came from below (ourselves).

Extreme dreidel: Astronaut Jeffrey Hoffman spun a weightless dreidel in zero gravity aboard the space shuttle Endeavor in December 1993. The largest number of simultaneous spinning dreidels (200) was set at the Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center in Skokie, Illinois, in 1998. The largest dreidel may be the one located at Chabad House in New Brunswick, New Jersey (it is 16 feet tall).

There are needlepoint dreidels, dreidel comforters, digital dreidel simulators, dreidel clip art, chocolate dreidels, inflatable dreidels, an unofficial Dreidels For Dummies, dreidels for the blind, human dreidels, eco-friendly dreidels, Golden Dreidel awards, piñata dreidels, marzipan dreidel cookies, and a recipe for dreidel toast.

Spell dreidel any way you choose. Choose whatever interpretation you like.

This year consider putting a new spin on your Hanukkah dreidel.

Bio: Dr. Lee Ratzan works at a health-care agency in New Jersey and teaches at Rutgers University. This article is based upon a presentation of the Ratzan family dreidel collection on display at the East Brunswick Public Library.

The Story of Hanukkah for Adults

Stories of heroism and bravery never die. They are told and retold from generation to generation, until they can be written down as part of a people's heritage. The story of Hanukkah is one of the most important tales of bravery in the history of the Jewish people.

In the year 336 BCE, Alexander the Great, the King of Macedonia, assembled a huge army and defeated Darius, King of Persia. He became ruler of the entire Persian Empire, including Syria, the land of Israel, and Egypt. Alexander was respectful of Jewish religious practice and decreed that the Jewish people could continue to observe their religion as before. A legend states that the High Priest, in appreciation, called for all Jewish males born that year to be named in honor of the king: Alexander. To this day, Alexander is one of the few non-Biblical names given to Jewish boys as their “Hebrew” name.

Unfortunately, Alexander the Great lived a short life. After his death, his great empire was divided among his generals. Two of the kingdoms, Syria (ruled by the Seleucids) and Egypt (ruled by the Ptolemy's), were at war for almost a hundred years. Israel was a land bridge between the two countries and was wracked by war the entire time. Its ownership changed frequently, once even being given as a dowry when a Seleucid offspring married a Ptolemy offspring. When the war ended, Syria owned Palestine. The Seleucid Empire, or Syrian-Greeks, brought peace to the land and, with it, Greek customs and practices. Like others throughout the “known” Western world, Jews took Greek names (such as Jason, Hyrcanus, Aristobulus), spoke Greek, took part in Greek games in the gymnasium, and studied Greek culture. Some Jews began to spend more time on Greek learning than on Jewish learning.



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Hanukkah Readings 2018

Eight Little Candles

From *"The Eight Nights of Hanukkah"* by Suzanne Beilenson and Rabbi Daniel D. Wolk
Published in 1993 by Peter Pauper Press, White Plains, New York

I thought of all the wondrous things the Maccabees had done;
I lit a little candle -
And then there was one.

I thought of all the wondrous things that I myself might do;
And lit another candle -
And then there were two.

I thought of Eretz Yisrael, the Maccabees, and me;
I lit another candle -
And then there were three.

I thought of Jewish heroes that fell in peace and war;
And lit another candle -
And then there were four.

I thought of young Judeans all pledged to serve and strive;
I lit another candle -
And then there were five.

I thought of Jewish pioneers with shovels, rakes, and picks;
And lit another candle -
And then there were six.

I thought of white as white stars, of blue as blue as heaven;
I lit another candle -
And then there were seven.

I thought of the great Lord our God who guides us early and late;
And lit another candle -
And then there were eight.

III. These Lights: HaNairote Hallalu (Hah-LAH-loo)

This is the traditional paragraph read after the candles are lit each night.

We kindle these lights to recall the wondrous triumphs and the miraculous victories wrought through Your holy priests, the kohanim, for our ancestors in ancient days at this season. These lights are sacred through all the eight days of Hanukkah. We may not put them to ordinary use, but are to look upon them and thus be reminded to thank and praise You for the wondrous miracle of our deliverance.

In 175, BCE Antiochus Epiphanes ("the glorious") became King of Syria. Behind his back, he was also called "Epimanes" ("the madman"). It is not clear why he decided to outlaw the Jewish religion, but outlaw it he did, prohibiting the observance of the Sabbath and dietary laws and the circumcision of baby boys. He decreed that a statue of himself as Zeus be placed in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and a pig be offered up as a sacrifice.

The Jews in Palestine were sharply divided. Some were afraid. Many in the wealthy leadership had strong ties with the Syrian-Greek rulers. They were so involved in Greek culture that they could not see the danger of Judaism's destruction. Those who were afraid, or who had assimilated, followed the new rules, abandoning their Judaism. But in the village of Modi'in, near Jerusalem, Mattathias, a priest, arose as a leader of the opposition. When the Syrian-Greek officials came and ordered the people to sacrifice a pig, Mattathias stepped forward and killed the chief officer. He shouted, "Whoever is for God, follow me!" (The initials of these Hebrew words form the acronym "Maccabee.")

Mattathias and his followers fled to the Judean hills and became an army of guerilla fighters. Mattathias was an old man, and so he named his son Judah to be general. His other four sons, Jonathan, John, Elazar, and Simon, also became leaders. Judah's army knew the hills and mountains and used that advantage to fight the large, well-equipped army of Antiochus.

The war went on for three years, from 168-165 BCE. Sometimes the Maccabees, Judah's army, fought the Syrian Greeks and sometimes they had to fight other Jews. But, in the end, they won.

In the year 165 BCE, the Maccabees, also known as the Hasmoneans, marched into Jerusalem. They cleaned up the Temple, destroying the idols of Zeus and other gods that Antiochus and his followers had placed there. Once again, it became a place that was appropriate for worship of the One True God. On the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev, they rededicated the Temple. Following the lead of King Solomon, builder of the First Temple, they held an eight-day festival of dedication. The festival celebrated the military victory of the weak Jews over the strong Syrian-Greeks. However, it also celebrated the spiritual and cultural victory that permitted the Judeans, or Jews, to maintain the practices, laws, and customs that had been given to their ancestors in the Torah. In a world where Greek practices, religion, and customs were the only respected ones, the Jews said, "We will keep the traditions of OUR ancestors."

Six hundred years later, in the Talmud, the Rabbis ask, "Why do we celebrate Hanukkah?" They answer the question with a story: When Judah and his followers rededicated the Temple, they needed consecrated oil to light the seven-branched menorah. They could only find one unprofaned flask, enough to burn for one day. But the small flask burned for eight days, throughout the rededication celebration. It was enough time to produce a new supply of oil; oil that had not been profaned by use in idol worship. It is a beautiful story, reflecting a miracle that a small people can maintain its identity against all odds. Today, we light candles throughout the holiday, beginning with one candle and ending with eight.

