

Chanukah

Hidden Mysteries of the Dreidel

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Uniting the Supernatural and Natural

We light Chanukah candles to publicize the miraculous power of God who intervened on behalf of the Maccabbees. The eight days of Chanukah commemorate the miraculous lighting of the seven-branched Menorah in the Holy Temple for eight days, thus connecting the numbers 7 and 8 together. In Jewish tradition, the number 7 represents a state of natural perfection (for example, Shabbat, is the seventh day of the week), but the number 8 represents a state of supernatural perfection (for example, circumcision is done on the child's eighth day). Thus, Chanukah unites the natural with the supernatural, the finite with the infinite.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, possessed a special love and affinity for Chanukah more than all the other holidays of the year. This is because the Chanukah candles represent the innate gift of the Jewish soul for spreading light and illuminating the whole world (even the non-Jewish world). The Ba'al Shem Tov's message spread by the Jewish soul stresses both that God creates nature anew at every moment and at the same time permeates it with supernatural power. Because of its ability to unite the natural with the supernatural, the light of the Chanukah candles will eventually bring about the true and complete redemption.

The Dreidel

A very popular Jewish custom is to play dreidel on Chanukah. Adults together with children gather around the lights of the *menorah*, spinning to discover which letter falls on top. What is the deeper significance of this act, and what meaningful thoughts can we have in mind while playing dreidel this Chanukah? As we will see, by spinning the dreidel in front of the Chanukah lights, we are bridging the gap between the finite realm and the infinite.



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The Dreidel's Four Letters

By tradition, the dreidel has four faces. The first thing one notices about the dreidel is that each of the dreidel's four faces has one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet inscribed on it. The four letters are *nun* (נ), *gimel* (ג), *hei* (ה), and *shin* (ש), the initials of the phrase, "A great miracle occurred there" (נִסְ גְּדוֹל הָיָה שָׁם).

The first thing to note is that the numerical value of these four letters together, נגהש, is 358, also the numerical value of Mashiach (מָשִׁיחַ)! The recurring motif found in the dreidel's hidden meanings is that of the Mashiach and redemption—changing the world and making it a worthy dwelling place for the Almighty.

In the past generation, some Jews living in the Land of Israel decided that it would be proper to change the last word from "there" (שָׁם) to "here" (פֹּה) thus making the phrase whose initials are on the dreidel, "A great miracle occurred here." Following this idea, the letters on the dreidel would be *nun*, *gimel*, *hei*, and *pei*, נגהפ, and their numerical sum would come to 138. But, as it is, you cannot escape the dreidel's inner meaning, and 138 is the value of Menachem (מְנַחֵם), one of the names of the Mashiach according to the sages; it is also the value of the word *Tzemach* (צֶמַח), the name of the Mashiach appearing in the Bible, "Tzemach is his name...."¹

When a Square Becomes a Circle

The dreidel is shaped like a top, with a pointed bottom edge on which it can be spun. Spinning the dreidel causes its square contours to fade-out, making it seem like a round top.

Conceptually, the dreidel's square faces and features represent the mathematical and syllogistic logic of the ancient Greeks, over whom the Maccabee's were victorious, both materially and spiritually. The Maccabee's, true to our faith in one God, believed and indeed practiced their belief that a view of nature and life that is based on human rationalism alone is lacking, for it is the infinite God, who has no bounds that brings all of reality into being. Thus, the round contours revealed by the dreidel when it spins represent the realm of the Divine, which manifests as miracles²—events that cannot be understood, and sometimes even perceived—by the rational human mind.

To call upon the terminology of Chassidut, the round contours of the spinning dreidel represent the revelation of God's surrounding light,³ referring to the energy with which the Almighty sustains reality. This aspect of God is described as round because He sustains all of reality equally, from the minutest particle to the greatest super cluster of galaxies. Just as the circle has no top and bottom and all its points are equivalent, so from the perspective of God's surrounding light, all of reality is equally important and

therefore continually sustained. Just as God sustains the laws of nature at every moment, so He is privy to altering them.

The dreidel's square shape represents the ever-present experience of God's inner light,⁴ referring to the energy with which the Almighty is perceived by our consciousness. The capacity to reveal Divinity changes from one part of nature to another just as the ability to perceive God varies from one individual to the other. For this reason, God's inner light is likened to a straight line (the contours of the dreidel's faces are straight lines), which has both a beginning and an end, indicating gradation.⁵

The surrounding (round) light reveals God's infinite nature; the inner light (square) reveals His finite nature. It is from God's surrounding light—from His infinite nature—that miracles happen.

Thus, we are not the only ones playing dreidel. In a sense, whenever a miracle occurs, we can imagine that God too has been playing with His big cosmic dreidel. By spinning this abstract dreidel, God spins His inner light—His revealed finite nature as we experience it normally—blurring the harsh logical rules that govern reality and allowing His infinite nature to be revealed. One might say that God is continually spinning miracles into nature.

By meditating on the act of spinning our own physical dreidel, we connect and identify with the Divine and show our willingness to see beyond the square and logical face of nature and believe and tap into the infinite, circular realm of God's infinite space. In effect, meditating on the dreidel's spin has the power to open our eyes to miracles.

What's in a Name?

To gain a deeper appreciation of this charming little toy, let us continue by analyzing its name. As is well known, the name of an object (particularly in Hebrew) reveals its essence. The dreidel has three names that we are going to look at it. First, in Hebrew it is called a *sevivon* (סֶבִיבּוֹן); obviously, this is the most sacred name of the three. In Yiddish, it is called a dreidel, the name that it is most commonly known by around the Jewish world. Finally, in English, we would call it a "top."

Rules of the Game

The most common game played with the dreidel is with nuts or almonds. Each of the players is provided with an equal quantity of nuts and play commences by placing one nut each in the pot. Each child spins the dreidel on turn. The traditional rules are that if the dreidel lands with the letter *shin* revealed the player who spun the dreidel has to add

another nut to the pot (in Yiddish, the *shin* stands for “*shtel*,” meaning “put in”). If the result is a *hei* (*halb*, “half,” in Yiddish), the child receives half the pot (with the additional nut when there are an odd number of nuts in the pot). If the result is the *gimel* (*gantz*, meaning “all”), he wins the entire pot (and subsequently a new pot is made). And, if the result is the *nun* (*nisht*, meaning “nothing”), he does nothing and the dreidel is passed on to the next player. And so the game revolves and revolves until one of the players has won all of the nuts.

Equipped with our understanding of the dreidel’s four faces we can delve deeper into the symbolism hidden in these rules.

Shin: Possessions and Ego

The *shin* requires the player to lose a nut. To understand why this is so, we need to translate the loss into the psychological realm. The *shin* as we saw corresponds to kingdom about which the *Zohar* says, “She has nothing of her own.”⁶ We all possess a faculty of kingdom, which is usually characterized as our ability to relate with our surroundings. When in its rectified state, our faculty of kingdom knows that all that we have been given comes from Above (in the case of *sefirot*, per se, “above” refers to the *sefirot* above kingdom). An individual with a rectified faculty of kingdom experiences a sense of lowliness in the psyche.

When kingdom is in a fallen state it is because it lacks the ability to acknowledge that all is from above, causing feelings of self-aggrandizement and self-worth to take the place of the rectified experience of lowliness. In its fallen state, kingdom becomes a breeding ground for the ego. Instead of increasing his indebtedness to the Almighty for the gifts granted him, the individual’s sense of self-worth augments his possessiveness, making him feel that everything that he has is his by virtue and by right. The rectification of the psyche in such a situation is to take his possessions away, in order to impress upon him that everything he possesses is a Divine gift.

Nun: Beating Entropy

The *nun* represents a neutral state in which nothing is gained, yet nothing is lost and the game continues with the next player. The experience associated with the *nun* is that things progress naturally. Let us explain.

We explained earlier how the dreidel’s Hebrew name, *sevivon*, relates to the concept of a “merchant.” There are individuals who aspire to leave the world as they entered it—without having damaged anything. In a certain sense this is a negative aspiration because one should strive to be successful (spiritually and morally, of course) and not

just come out unscathed. Imagine that a merchant would go to the marketplace to sell his merchandise and hope to come out with no more than enough to cover his initial investment—everybody would say he is a fool.

Every Jewish soul entered the world in order to be a merchant, i.e., to make a profit. Those who truly understand what is valuable invest their time and energy in Torah and good deeds, in their relationships with God and other people. Those that only have an external sense for the importance of making a profit spend their days chasing financial success.

Still, in the natural realm, coming out unscathed is quite an achievement because of the law of entropy, which states that everything in nature is continually losing ground to disorder. If a natural system can end up with the same amount of energy that it started with, it is actually ahead.

When explaining the correspondence of the *nun* to the east and the *sefirah* of beauty we noted that the rising of the sun is like a herald or banner waved by God, letting us know that even nature is miraculous. The miracle of nature, as we experience it in the constantly repeating cycle of the sun (sunrise and sunset, day in and day out), is that at this level, nature does not succumb to entropy. The Creator is continually infusing nature with more energy in order to sustain its steady state. Indeed, one can think of retaining beauty as the most illustrative example of beating entropy. Normally, as time passes, so does beauty. If any object (animate or not) can retain its beauty over time, that means it is fighting and winning the war against entropy.

Thus, when the player draws a *nun*, it is only fitting that his state remains the same: nothing gained, nothing lost, inspiring him to think about the miraculous within the natural and the need to connect with the Divine in nature in order to overcome its natural proclivity to degenerate.

Yud and Hei: A Whole and a Half

Both the *yud* and the *hei* yield a profit for the player. Since these two letters correspond to wisdom and understanding, the intellectual *sefirot*, the lesson is that when one is able to attain a state of mindfulness, there is real profit to be made. The difference is only in the amount.

Mindfulness indicates a state in which a person is wholly connected and guided by awareness of the Creator and His will as manifest through the Torah. When a person can sustain such a state, many good things come to him so that he may utilize them as part of his Divine service.

But, mindfulness can be divided into two types. The experience of mindfulness based on a feeling of self-nullification (the motivator of wisdom) before God is relatively masculine. Mindfulness based on a feeling of joy (the motivator of understanding) in serving God is relatively feminine. The coming together of masculine and feminine counterparts is described as “a whole and a half.” This is one of the foundational principles for comprehending the interaction between masculine and feminine in general.

An example of the application of this principle can be seen in the difference between Shabbat and festivals. Based on verses in the Torah, the Shabbat is described as “wholly for God,” while the festivals are described as “half for you and half for God.”⁷ This is one of the reasons for instance that it is permitted to perform actions on the festivals that are forbidden on the Shabbat, as long as they are meant to provide food for consumption (“half for you”).

But, what we do gain from this idiom is that wisdom is associated with a whole and understanding with a half. Because wisdom and understanding correspond to the letters *yud* and *hei* in *Havayah*, we see that numerically they also exhibit “a whole and a half” relationship, since *yud* (י) equals 10 and *hei* (ה) equals 5.

Thus, landing on a *gimel* (the letter corresponding to wisdom) represents a state of self-nullification resulting in the player winning the whole pot. Landing on the *hei* (the letter corresponding to understanding) represents a state of joy resulting in the player winning half the pot.

Dreidel Entropy

To explain the rule that spinning a *nun* results in nothing, we used the physical concept of entropy. As it turns out we can extend this analogy further to explain the rules pertaining to all 4 letters.

We noted that the *nun* inspires us to look at the miraculous aspect of nature. The greatest miracle in nature is its continual recreation *ex nihilo*, something from nothing (*nisht*, beginning with the letter *nun*, as above). In fact, our ability to recognize the origin of nature’s being in the Divine nothing and to then manifest this power of transforming the nothing into something is what allows us to truly and permanently overcome entropy. Translating this into the less philosophical realm of playing dreidel, to make a profit you first have to recognize nature’s miraculous origin in the Divine. So, the two letters *gimel* and *hei* make the player a profit because they represent an inspired outlook on nature.

To see this, let us take a closer look at the Hebrew phrase whose initials are inscribed on the dreidel, “A great miracle occurred there” (נִסְ גְּדוֹל הִיָּה שָׁם). The first word in the Hebrew is “miracle” (represented by the letter *nun* on the dreidel). “Miracle” is the subject-noun of the phrase. The *gimel* stands for “great,” the adjective describing the miracle, “a great miracle.” The *hei* stands for the verb, “occurred.” Like we said, first you recognize the miraculous (*nun*), then you can translate this recognition into a profit (*gimel* and *hei*). The noun, the miracle itself, is the necessary prerequisite.

The final word in the phrase, “there” falls under the realm of entropy, and so it loses energy (to the pot). This is because it implies that the miraculous has occurred somewhere else, not here. At present we are in a state of exile, a transient state of being, unable to fully utilize our connection with the Divine in order to overcome entropy as so the word “there” in its essence, falls under the law of entropy. Even changing this word to “here,” in the Land of Israel, does not fully solve the problem, as the possibility of change itself implies that the word is in a transient state, dependent on location.

1. Zachariah 6:12.

2. Since God creates nature anew at every moment, in effect even what we deem natural is actually an ongoing miracle, clothed in the guise of natural laws. As explained in length by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the highest form of miracle is actually the type that can alter the course of nature while appearing to follow its laws.

3. אור הסוכב כל עלמין

4. אור הממלא כל עלמין

5. As stressed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, to connect with God’s infinite aspect one should perform *mitzvot* from a place of infinite devotion. The more scholarly an individual is in the teachings of the Torah, the more inclined he or she is to act out of knowledge and understanding. But, dedication to the Almighty’s will has to set these aside and act out of a pure aspiration to do nothing but perform His will. This is called acting out of self-sacrifice (מְסִירַת נַפֶּשׁ) and above reason (לְמַעַל מִטַּעַם וְדַעַת), the two great virtues of the Maccabbees.

6. Zohar II, 215a.

7. Pesachim 68b.