



Torah for Turbulent Times

"Topsy-Turvy Times"

Dreidel isn't just for kids. It teaches us all about letting go during our topsy-turvy times. Give it a spin. Try again. Collect or put something in. Repeat. We aim to win with the spin of a *gimmel* and hope to get it all. Sometimes we get half and sometimes we get none. And, very often we have to put something in by giving back to the collective pot. This diminishes our personal gain, but makes it possible for others to benefit. Dreidel in many ways is like life with its rules of give and take, and its nature of chance. In the dreidel game of life our task is to give it a spin and try again. We may even feel topsy-turvy ourselves lately, like a dreidel, spinning around from day to day. In some ways living in our pandemic reality mimics the spinning top itself, as it whirls and swirls all around us. This Hanukkah we are grateful for the shining light of life, which burns brighter when we are able to persist with resilience and patience.

What are the origins of the game of dreidel? A legend teaches that the Jewish people played dreidel in order to fool the Greeks when they were caught studying Torah, which like many other Jewish practices had been outlawed during the rule of Antiochus (167-164 BCE). As it turns out, many scholars think that dreidel originally had nothing to do with Hanukkah. Some versions of it were played by various people in different languages over many centuries. Our game is directly based on the German equivalent: N=*Nichts*=Nothing. G=*Ganz*=all. H=*Halb*=half. S=*Stell ein*=put in. In German, the spinning top was called a "*torrel*" or "*trundl*" and in Yiddish it was called a "*dreidel, fargl, varfl*," that is, "something thrown." Beyond being a spinning game of chance, the dreidel speaks to an irony in Jewish history and identity. "In order to celebrate the holiday of Hanukkah, which is a victory over cultural assimilation, we play the dreidel game, which is an excellent example of cultural assimilation!" (David Golinkin)

Whatever the origins of the dreidel, it's also a pedagogical tool, or toy to teach us something. One traditional explanation for the dreidel's Hebrew letters, "*nun, gimmel, hey and shin*" is that they stand for the Hebrew phrase, "*nes gadol hayah sham* - a great miracle happened there." It may not be made out of clay anymore like in that classic Hanukkah song. But, tomorrow night we'll spin it to have fun, to lift our spirits, and to remind us that despite it all life is miraculous and full of chances. So, what do you have to lose? Grab some gelt and a dreidel. Give it a spin - that's what it's all about.

Happy Hanukkah and Festival of Lights,

Rabbi Mark

*Watch this video scripted by me for a refresher on [“What is Hanukkah?”](#)

*Enjoy this Hanukkah medley that begins with [“Dreidel, Dreidel.”](#)