

OH DREIDEL, DREIDEL, DREIDEL!

by Rabbi Label Lam

I can recall shrinking in shame when in public high school choir we would sing the one token Jewish song, "Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel". It always seemed embarrassingly unsophisticated and who amongst us knew it wasn't? So now, years later, maybe we can indulge ourselves with a brief appreciation of just how not silly that little dreidel is.

Our sages say, "If we are not prophets, we are the children of prophets." That means that if loyal Jews over the course of many generations have engaged in a given practice, there must be some extremely deep reason. Any thing deemed "classic" usually has an appeal to all ages and types. Both a child and an elder must be able to appreciate it on his own level. So it is with the dreidel.

On the most infantile level it is a spinning top that captures the child's imagination by its color and gyro abilities. The next oldest child may be fascinated by the opportunity to play a game and collect nuts and/or pennies. That's great. A slightly more mature youngster may already begin to appreciate the letters on the dreidel, NUN, GIMEL, HEY, SHIN. Kids spend months in kindergarten learning to distinguish between a NUN and a GIMEL. It's a little like the difference between a slightly high-heeled shoe and a flat heel. It takes some training to spot it quickly enough to read well. Then the budding scholar will report that the letters stand for, NUN-Nes, GIMEL-Gadol, HEY-Haya, SHIN-Sham: "A great miracle happened there!" How might the seasoned scholar view this simple child's game?

The Bnei Yisaschar teaches that the letters on the dreidel hint to the entirety of Jewish History. Represented there are the strategic forces of the four exiles. What is an exile? How does it begin? When does it end? The Jews are sitting in Israel with a Temple and a G-d and all is well until we start to wonder if maybe the idolatry of Babylonia is not just a bit more spicy and fun. Before long this curiosity becomes a national obsession till a horde of idol worshippers descend upon us and dominates for a time until we "get it".

What does it mean to "get it"? Someone told me that his father once caught him smoking in the garage. He wisely did not take the cigarettes away? He bought a carton and made him smoke continually until his face turned green and he was coughing violently. After that he never wanted another cigarette.

When the dreidel drops, one culture asserts its influence and a class in exile "X" has begun. NUN is for Nefesh, the soul. The Babylonians who destroyed the first temple tried to enforce that Jews

should bow to their idols in order to contaminate the soul of the people. The end of that 70 year period was dominated by the Persians and it was the wicked Haman's wish to destroy every man woman and child physically and therefore the next letter is GIMEL, for Goof, the body. The letter SHIN or SIN as it can be pronounced when the dot is on the left-side, stands for Sechel- Intellect. The Greeks wished to offer a competitive culture with the rigors of science and literature to replace Torah learning and the catharsis of sport and theatre to supplant prayer and kindliness. They were largely successful at seducing the minds of many a Jew till the heroes of the Chanukah story prevailed. Then we confront the letter HEY- which is for HaKol, everything. Rome, Edom introduced nothing new. They incorporated the worst of the others. Therefore for the duration of this brutal 2000 year old exile we have met the likes of the Spanish Inquisition where the Jewish Soul was tested with the demand to be obedient to some idolatrous form. Then there have been the Hitler types that have wanted to eliminate any breathing Jew. Now we face with the "enlightenment" an exile of assimilation whereby the nuances on the op- ed pages are promoted beyond the wisdom of our sages and so we melt into oblivion.

It's no mistake that those letters add up to 358 which spells NACHASH, the primordial enemy, and also MOSHIACH, the climax of history. If only that point on the bottom (that's us) loyally aligns with the miraculous "Hand on High" and avoids toppling again... Oh Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel! DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.