

EDUCATION

Once again, lessons I was taught in Hebrew school are brought into question as I research the history of the dreidel. Legend would have us believe that when the study of Torah was outlawed by the Greeks, Jews would gather to learn whilst playing dreidel.

If a Greek soldier passing by were to observe the group it would appear as if they were gambling, and the soldier would pass them by. The story goes on to tell us that the symbols on the dreidel, nun, gimel, hey and shin stand for the phrase “a great miracle happened there”. While there are other explanations for the letters on the dreidel, like the numerical value of the letters add up to 358, which is also the numerical equivalent of messiah, or that each letter stands for an ancient kingdom that tried to destroy us, or my favorite, that the letters stand for soul, body, mind and the individual characteristics that make up a human being. The fact is, the game of dreidel does not belong exclusively to us, and those definitions came much later.

The game using a spinning top has been around for centuries and has been played by many cultures, putting their own “spin” on it (bad pun?), and using their own language. According to an article in Haaretz, by Anat Rosenberg, the game called teetotum, had the letters A, D, N and T, standing for the Latin words that meant take, put in, nothing and take all, and was brought to England by Roman soldiers. The game increased in popularity in England and Ireland and by the 1800’s, the letters were changed to T (take), H (half), P (put in), N (nothing). Teetotum became a popular game around the Christmas holiday and made its way through Europe, eventually arriving in Germany. Once again, the letters were changed, this time to G, H, N, and S, standing for the German words gantz (all), halb (half), nicht (nothing) and stell ein (put in). This is where the game caught on among the Jewish population. The letters on the top were changed to their Hebrew equivalents, and just like gift giving, the game called dreidel by the Yiddish speaking Jews, became part of the Chanukah celebration.

While it is entirely possible that some form of the game of dreidel was played back in the days of Judah Maccabee, the connection to Chanukah, the meaning behind the letters and even the letters themselves are a newer addition to our story.

Have a very Happy Chanukah!

L’shalom,
Morah Amy

DECEMBER DATES TO REMEMBER:

- Dec 2 Chanukah Chooplah/ Schiff Tichon Sinai
- Dec 15 Shabbat Family Program
- Dec 16 4th Grade Chavurah (Jewish Museum)/ Schiff Tichon Sinai
- Dec 19 - Jan 5 Winter Break