

## Dreidel – Game played during Hanukkah



A **dreidel** (Yiddish: דריידל *dreydl* plural: *dreydlekh*, Hebrew: סביבון **Sevivon**) is a four-sided spinning top, played with during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

Each side of the dreidel bears a letter of the Hebrew alphabet: נ (Nun), ג (Gimel), ה (Hei), ש (Shin), which together form the acronym for "מש ידה דולג סג" (**Nes Gadol Hayah Sham** – "a great miracle happened there"). These letters also form a mnemonic for the rules of a gambling game played with a dreidel: Nun stands for the Yiddish word *nisht* ("nothing"), Hei stands for *halb* ("half"), Gimel for *gants* ("all"), and Shin for *shtel arayn* ("put in"). In Israel, the fourth side of most dreidels is inscribed with the letter פ (Pei), rendering the acronym, הפ ידה דולג סג, **Nes Gadol Hayah Poh**—"A great miracle happened here" referring to the miracle occurring in the land of Israel. Some stores in Haredi neighborhoods sell the ש dreidels.

### Etymology

The Yiddish word "dreydl" comes from the word "dreyen" ("to turn", compare to "drehen", meaning the same in German). The Hebrew word "sevivon" comes also from the root "SBB" ("to turn") and was invented by Itamar Ben-Avi (the son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda) when he was 5 years old. Hayyim Nahman Bialik used a different word, "kirkar" (from the root "KRKR" – "to spin"), in his poems, but it was not adopted into spoken Hebrew.

### Symbolism

Some Jewish commentators, such as Ja'cob, ascribe symbolic significance to the markings on the dreidel. One commentary, for example, connects the four letters with the four exiles to which the nation of Israel was historically subject—Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

While not a mandated (mitzvah) for Hanukkah (the only mandated mitzvot are lighting candles and saying the full hallel), spinning the dreidel is a traditional game played during the holiday and has become one of the symbols associated with Hanukkah.

### Rules of the game

Each player begins with an equal number of game pieces (usually 10–15). The game pieces can be any object, such as chocolate gelt, pennies, or raisins.

- At the beginning of each round, every participant puts one game piece into the center "pot". In addition, every time the pot is empty and sometimes if it has one game piece left, every player puts one in the pot.
- Each player spins the dreidel once during their turn. Depending on which player side is facing up when it stops spinning, they give or take game pieces from the pot:
  - a) If נ (nun) is facing up, the player does nothing.
  - b) If ג (gimel) is facing up, the player gets everything in the pot.
  - c) If ה (hei) is facing up, the player gets half of the pieces in the pot. (If there are an odd number of pieces in the pot, the player takes half of the total plus one.)
  - d) If ש (shin) or פ (pei) is facing up, the player adds a game piece to the pot.
- If the player is out of pieces, they are either "out" or may ask another player for a "loan".

### **Dreidel tournaments**

Dreidel is now a competitive sport in North America. Major League Dreidel (MLD), founded in New York City in 2007, hosts dreidel tournaments during the holiday of Hanukkah. In MLD tournaments the player with the longest Time of Spin (TOS) is the winner. MLD is played on a Spinagogue, the official spinning stadium of Major League Dreidel. Pamskee is the 2007 MLD Champion. Virtual Dreidel is the 2008 MLD Champion. In 2009, Major League Dreidel launched a game version of the Spinagogue and MLD tournaments and original games are now being played around the country during Hanukkah.

In 2009, Good Morning America published a story on Dreidel Renaissance reporting on the rising popularity of the dreidel. Dreidel games that have come out on the market since 2007 include No Limit Texas Dreidel, a cross between traditional dreidel and Texas Hold'em poker, invented by a Judaica company called Modern Tribe. Other new dreidel games include Stacabees and Maccabees.

### **How to Play Dreidel**

The Hebrew word for dreidel is *sevivon*, which, as in Yiddish, means to turn around. Dreidels have four [Hebrew] letters on them, and they stand for the saying, "*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*," meaning "a great miracle occurred there." In Israel, instead of the fourth letter "*shin*," there is a "*peh*," which means the saying is "*Nes Gadol Haya Po*"--"a great miracle occurred here."

Playing with the dreidel is a traditional Hanukkah game played in Jewish homes all over the world, and rules may vary. Here's how to play the basic dreidel game:

1. Any number of people can take part in this great game.
2. Each player begins the game with an equal number of game pieces (about 10-15) such as pennies, nuts, chocolate chips, raisins, matchsticks, etc.
3. At the beginning of each round, every participant puts one game piece into the center "pot." In addition, every time the pot is empty or has only one game piece left, every player should put one in the pot.
4. Every time it's your turn, spin the dreidel once. Depending on the outcome, you give or get game pieces from the pot:

- a) *Nun* means "*nisht*" or "nothing" [in Yiddish]. The player does nothing.
  - b) *Gimmel* means "*gantz*" or "everything" [in Yiddish]. The player gets everything in the pot.
  - c) *Hey* means "*halb*" or "half" [in Yiddish]. The player gets half of the pot. (If there are an odd number of pieces in the pot, the player takes half of the total plus one).
  - d) *Shin* (outside of Israel) means "*shtel*" or "put in" [in Yiddish]. *Peh* (in Israel) means "pay." The player adds a game piece to the pot.
5. If you find that you have no game pieces left, you are either "out" or may ask a fellow player for a "loan."