

All About the Dreidel

Why do we play dreidel at Hanukkah?

Before the Maccabees defeated King Antiochus, Jews were not allowed to study Torah or celebrate any holidays. In order to continue to study, they would go deep into the forest and pull out their Torah scrolls in secret. But — if a Greek patrol walked by, they would quickly hide their Torahs and pull out small spinning tops to make it look like they were just playing. Today, we play the dreidel game as a reminder of those times.

What do the letters mean?

The Yiddish word *dreydl* comes from the word *dreyen*, meaning "to turn." The letters on the four sides of a dreidel have two meanings:

1. They stand for Yiddish words that help players remember the rules of the game. *Nun* stands for *nisht*, meaning "nothing"; *gimel* stands for *gants*, meaning "entire, whole"; *hey* stands for *halb*, or "half"; and *shin* stands for *shtetl arayn*, meaning to "put in."
2. The letters also are the first letters in each word of *nes gadol hayah sham* — "a great miracle happened there." (In Israel, the last letter is a *peh* and stands for "*po*" which means "here.")

What are the rules of the dreidel game?



1. 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, raisins, etc.

2. To start the game, everyone puts one game piece into the center "pot". (Every player also puts one piece in when the pot is empty or there is only one game piece in the pot.)

3. Each player spins the dreidel once during their turn. Depending on which side is facing up when it stops spinning, the player whose turn it is gives or takes game pieces from the pot:

If נ (*nun*) is facing up, the player does nothing.

If ג (*gimel*) is facing up, the player gets everything in the pot.

If ה (*hey*) is facing up, the player gets half of the pieces in the pot. If there is an odd number of pieces in the pot, the player takes half the pot rounded up to the nearest whole number.

If ש (*shin*) or פ (*peh*) is facing up, the player adds one of their game pieces to the pot. If the player is out of pieces, they are either "out" or may ask another player for a loan.

The game is over when one player has all the pieces.