

# Minhagim on Chanukah: Dreidel and Sufganiyot<sup>1</sup>

## I. Importance of Minhagim

The students of the Maharil (Rabbi Yaakov Moelin, 1365-1427) offer a chilling story about their teacher in his collection of laws pertaining to Yom Kippur.<sup>2</sup> The Maharil was once chazzan in the town of Regensburg during the Yomim Noraim, and decided to insert a piyyut into Mussaf composed by Rabbeinu Ephraim, who happened to be buried in Regensburg. Although the leaders of the town informed him that this was not their practice, he did not listen to them based upon his logic, saying that it would be an honor to Rabbeinu Ephraim to recite the piyyut. A few days later, on Yom Kippur, the Maharil's daughter died. He understood that this was a punishment for changing the *minhag hamakom* (local tradition).<sup>3</sup>

This background provides a remarkable insight into why the Maharil emphasized the importance and centrality of minhagim, and how he became the single most influential and accepted codifier of Ashkenazi practices.

Writing during the time of the sprouting of the Reform movement, the Chasam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, 1762-1839) was a strong advocate of keeping minhagim. He felt that unorthodox practice began by “simply” changing a few minhagim.



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As such, he called those that change minhagim “violators of the Torah.”<sup>4</sup> This remark is based upon Tosfos, *Menachos* 20b (s.v. *Nifsal*) — “*minhag avoteinu... Torah*” — the tradition of our forefathers is considered Torah. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained that this phrase from Tosfos extends beyond the basic obligation to heed to the minhagim of one's community. It also applies to the requirement to study and understand minhagim and their origins, just as one wrestles to understand each and every word and halacha mandated by the Torah to the best of one's ability. It is based on this that the Rav dedicated much time from his shiurim teaching minhagim and their sources, with the same depth of methodology and rigor that he would use when teaching halachic concepts to his students.<sup>5</sup>

## II. What is the Origin for Spinning Dreidel?

The most popular explanation for spinning dreidel on Chanukah is the result of a decree of the Assyrian-Greeks that Jews were prohibited from studying Torah. This is why we

mention in *Al Hanisim* “*l'hashkicham Toratecha* — [the Greeks tried] to cause them to forget the Torah.” At that time, Torah was taught orally and had to be studied with a teacher. Therefore, Torah would have been lost forever had teachers not continued to study with their pupils. In order to circumvent this decree, Jews studied privately and kept their dreidels nearby; if a soldier came to investigate, they would spin their dreidels to feign playing a game rather than learning Torah.<sup>6</sup>

While this well-known explanation places the game of dreidel back to the period of Chanukah itself, others argue that dreidel is a much later invention of non-Jewish origin. They contend that dreidel is taken from a game played in the 16th century called Teetotum, in which a top, similar to a dreidel, had four sides each with one of four letters. A German or Yiddish teetotum would read: G, H, N, S. G= ganz(all), H halb (half), N nischt (nothing) and S schict (put).<sup>7</sup> Yet, even if the minhag of playing dreidel on Chanukah evolved from Teetotum, one can still find symbolism and meaning in the dreidel.

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### III. Symbolism and messages of the Dreidel

#### A. Connection to Redemption

R. Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov (Bnei Yissachar 1783-1841)<sup>8</sup> relates the playing of dreidel to *galut* and *geulah* — exile and redemption. He notes that the letters of the dreidel גשנה correspond to the four stages of *galut* (גופני, שכלי, נפשי, הכל) [body, mind, soul, everything]. The symbolism of spinning the dreidel connotes the idea that although we are surrounded on all four sides with kingdoms and oppressors during our lengthy *galut*, nonetheless the Jewish People are at the center of reality. When the dreidel spins from the center it has control of the four outer sides, just as one day soon we will see the day when all of the nations will recognize G-d and be subservient to Him.

The *Bnei Yissachar* also notes that the gematria of גשנה is 358,<sup>9</sup> the same as משיח. Furthermore, he notes that one should specifically use a wooden

dreidel because the Navi Yechezkel (37:16), in the haftorah for Parshas Vayigash read during Chanukah, wrote his messages of *geulah* on a piece of wood.<sup>10</sup>

#### B. Connection to the Chanukah Lights

The Sokatchover Rebbe<sup>11</sup> (Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein, 1855-1926) suggests that due to the fact that we now light our Chanukah lights inside, *pirsumei nisa* (the requirement to publicize the miracle) depends on the members of the household being present. As such, the custom developed to play dreidel in order to keep the children awake at night so that they would participate in the mitzvah and provide the necessary *pirsumei nisa* for the household to light with a bracha.

The *Divrei Yatziv*<sup>12</sup> writes that we play dreidel to contrast how Jews practiced during the times of oppression under the Assyrian-Greeks, when they had to use dreidels as a ploy to study

Torah. Today we play dreidel and light outside demonstrating that we perform mitzvos in the open — the ideal way to perform mitzvos.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov<sup>13</sup> (1912-1976) suggests that the purpose of dreidel is to teach our children that even when they engage in recreation and relaxation it should be focused on the miracles:

*The widespread practice among Jewish children of playing dreidel games also reflects the theme of Chanukah. Since the children have money on hand (gifts from their parents), and since the lighting of Chanukah lights causes some bitul Torah, during the winter nights<sup>14</sup> the little ones are told, as it were: "relax tonight and spend your hours happily, so that you might take upon yourselves the yoke of Torah, and the exertion required for the performance of mitzvos after Chanukah. And even now, as you play, do not forget the miracles and wonders performed by Hashem for us."<sup>15</sup>*

The *Imrei Pinchas*<sup>16</sup> suggests that נגהש



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stands for the mitzvos of Chanukah<sup>17</sup> — eight lights and full recitation of Hallel. The Vizhnitzer Rebbe<sup>18</sup> connects Chanukah to Hoshana Rabba, using the letters of the dreidel to symbolize the end of the judgment period as: “ג – שנה” with gimmel referring to *g’mar chatimah tova*.<sup>19</sup>

### C. The Spinning of the Dreidel

The *Bnei Yissachar*<sup>20</sup> offers an insight into the significance of spinning the dreidel by comparing it to spinning a gragger on Purim. He notes that the dreidel is spun from the top, while a gragger is spun from the bottom. This signifies that on Chanukah the miracle was a function of intervention from above — “התעררותא דלעילא,” while on Purim the miracle and redemption came about through human effort and intervention<sup>21</sup> “התעררותא דלתתא.” During the miracle of Purim, Ester gathered all of the Jews to fast and pray, in order to save the Jewish people from the hands of Haman; however, the outright hand of G-d was hidden in the unfolding of the events (*neis nistar*). On Chanukah, we experienced a supernatural miracle (*neis nigleh*), so we spin the dreidel from on top in recognition of the redemption derived from above.<sup>22</sup> Later sources succinctly express this idea of the *Bnei Yissachar*: If we spin below (here on earth) then things will spin above (in heaven) — “אם מסובבים” — “למטה מסתובב למעלה”!

Similarly, Rabbi Armoni,<sup>23</sup> a contemporary Kabbalist in Jerusalem, notes that we spin the dreidel in a clockwise motion, while the gragger on Purim spins counterclockwise. Additionally, the dreidel spins on the ground while the gragger spins in the air. He suggests that on Chanukah, we are trying to bring down the sparks

of kedusha to the earth. Therefore, it spins left to right — from the “*klipot*” on the left to kedusha on the right and the dreidel spins as if it is trying to dig deeper into the ground. On Purim, we are rooting out those “*klipot*,” therefore it spins upward in the opposite direction towards heaven.

Rabbi Shalom Meir Wallach<sup>24</sup> notes another distinction between the dreidel and gragger. The gragger only spins while we spin it in our hands, while the dreidel continues to spin even after it leaves our hands. Similarly, on Purim, the events which unfolded were causative; future events arose as a result of discrete decisions made previously by people (e.g. Mordechai protects the king, which causes him to be rewarded with riding the royal horse through the streets of the city; Ester invites the king and Haman to a meal, which causes Haman’s demise, etc.). On Chanukah however, the outcomes and ramifications of each single action cannot be viewed as directly bringing about the redemption, but rather had a more long-term effect, similar to the dreidel.

### IV. Sufganiyot

Rabbi Maimon ben Yosef, better known as the Rambam’s father, wrote a commentary to the Siddur in Arabic, most of which we do not have. One of the few surviving sections relates to the minhag of *sufganiyot* on Chanukah:

אין להקל בשום מנהג ואפילו מנהג קל  
ויתחייב כל נכון לו עשית משתה ושמתה  
ומאכל לפרסם הנס (של חנוכה) שעשה  
השם יתברך עמנו באותם הימים ופשט  
המנהג לעשות סופגנין בערבי אלספלנג והם  
הצפחיות לדבש ובתרגום האיסקריטין והיא  
מנהג הקדמונים משום שהם קלויים בשמן

זכר לברכתו וכתב רבינו נסים במגילת סתרים  
כי כל מנהגי האומה באלו המנהגות כמו זה  
והראש בראש השנה החלב בפורים ובמוצאי  
פסח והפולים ביום הושענא רבה ואותם  
המנהגות אין לנו לבזותם ומי שהנהיגם זרין  
ומשתדל הוא כי הם מעיקרים נעשים ולא  
יבזו במנהג האומה וכבר אמר הנביא ע”ה  
ואל תטוש תורת אמך דת אומתך אל תעזוב  
ובקבלות הגאונים ראשי ישיבות נזכרו מנהגים  
כמו אלה בהנהגותיהם בסיפוריהם ולא יתבוזה  
דבר ממה שעשו הקדמונים.<sup>25</sup>

*Do not be lenient with any custom; even a light [seemingly unimportant] one, you are obligated in eating and drinking of simcha in order to make known the miracle (of Chanukah) which G-d did with us. There is a common custom to make sufganiyot, which are fried and sweet, and this is an old custom because they are basted in oil, symbolizing the blessing [of the miracle with oil]. Rabbeinu Nissim says in his notes that all customs of the nation such as this one [sufganiyot] and the head [of an animal] on Rosh HaShana, milk products on Purim and Motzei Pesach, beans on Hoshana Rabbah, and all similar customs, we cannot denigrate. Those that keep the customs are scrupulous [with the laws] because they are of the essence and one should not denigrate the customs of the nation. And the Prophet already warned us not to forsake the teachings of our Mothers [referring to customs]. These practices are already apparent in Geonic sources and written in their seforim, and do not denigrate what the earlier generation did.*

According to R. Maimon, minhagim in general should not be taken lightly, inclusive of the “old” practice of making donuts fried in oil, commemorating the miracle of oil on Chanukah. While this explanation could be used for any fried food; it happens to be that fried dough was a delicacy during the 12th century and earlier.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach<sup>26</sup> (1910-1995) offers a unique insight into why specifically fried *sufganiyot* are used to commemorate the miracle of oil. He notes the parallel structure and phraseology between Al Hamichya and Birkat Hamazon. The sentence in Al Hamichya beginning with “*rachem*” corresponds to the same paragraph in Birkat Hamazon, yet its wording differs. In Al Hamichya we add “*ve'al mizbachecha*” — and on your altars. The Gemara<sup>27</sup> mentions that after the war with the Assyrian-Greeks, the Chashmonaim entered the defiled Temple and attempted to purify all of the holy vessels. They were successful in purifying everything except for the stones that made up the Mizbeach. Distressed by the situation, they buried them underground. Therefore, explains Rav Shlomo Zalman, we should specifically eat *sufganiyot* — which are fried dough, and whose eating mandates the recitation of Al

Hamichya — in order to mention the Mizbeach during Chanukah.<sup>28</sup>

While Rav Shlomo Zalman's comments may indicate that the reference to the Mizbeach is intended to remind us of our inability to use the Mizbeach,<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Beinish Ginsburg<sup>30</sup> cites Rabbi Chizkiya Nevenzahl as developing the approach of Rav Shlomo Zalman with a positive emphasis. Since the Chashmonaim were unable to purify the Mizbeach, they dedicated a new one on the 25th of Kislev and began to sacrifice again on the newly established altar. As such, an individual should go out of his/her way to eat *sufganiyot* outside of the context of a meal,<sup>31</sup> in order to recite Al Hamichya and praise G-d for this specific miracle of restoring the Mizbeach.<sup>32</sup>

#### Notes

1. While this article focuses on two specific minhagim as related to Chanukah, there are many other minhagim that require further

analysis, such as: eating dairy products and latkes, women not performing melacha while the candles are lit, youngsters collecting tzedakah, “Chanukah gelt,” and gifts to rebbeim/teachers.

2. Maharil, *Hilchot Tefillat Shacharit of Yom Kippur* #11.

3. Rabbi Hershel Schachter explained the Maharil's reaction as follows: Minhagim represent the mesorah. Since he violated a minhag, G-d took away part of his own mesorah as a *midah keneged midah*.

4. *Teshuvot Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah* #107 and *Orach Chaim* #51.

“ע”ע שו”ת הרמ”א ס’ תר”צ, שו”ת מהר”ם פדוואה ס’ עה, שו”ת גינת ורדים או”ח ב:כה, שו”ת הרשב”א ס’ ט, שו”ת חוות יאיר ס’ רלד.

For additional sources see the introduction to *Minhag Yisrael Torah* (Rabbi Yosef Levy).

5. *Nefesh HaRav* p. 24. For background on the general obligation to follow minhagim and for an explanation to many practical minhagim, see the latest volume in the series of *Imrei Baruch* written by Rabbi Boruch Simon entitled “*Tokef HaMinhag BeHalacha*.”

6. *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (19:4), an 18th century work on minhagim.




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7. See *Sefer HaMoadim* (Levinsky) Vol. 5 p. 226, *Edus Journal* Vol. 1 p. 73, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teetotum>, and <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2005/12/chanukah-customs-and-sources.html>.

8. Kislev 2:25.

9. Other sources also point to the connection between the letters of the dreidel and that of “Goshen” גוֹשֵׁן, where the Jews lived while in Egypt, in order to avoid the negative influences of the Egyptian society. As such, Chanukah is a time to reflect upon our past struggles with the Assyrian-Greek culture and how we can maintain true to the Torah throughout each generation.

It is reported that when R. Aharon Rokeach (the Belzer Rebbe, 1880-1957) moved to Israel, there were no dreidels available with the letters נגהש because in Israel it is traditional to use a פ instead of ש. He sent a shamash to search for a dreidel with a ש and commented that one should not change the letter to פ. Presumably this is due to the gematria connection to משיח. It should be noted, however, that Rabbi Moshe Armoni (באחי לארמוני פרשת וישב) suggests that נגהש is the same gematria as צמח, which is another name of משיח.

10. It is reported that the Chasam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, 1762-1839) played with a silver dreidel on Chanukah. Whenever someone would enter to visit him he would spin the silver dreidel on his table once (*Siddur Chasam Sofer* as cited in *Peninei HaMoadim* p. 125).

11. Cited in *Piskei Teshuvos* (570:4) and *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* #468.

12. *Orach Chaim* 2:283, Rabbi Yekusiel Y. Halberstam, 1905-1994.

13. *Book of Our Heritage* Vol. 1 p. 283.

14. See Rambam, *Hil. Talmud Torah* 3:15, regarding the importance of learning Torah at night — אף על פי שמצוה ללמוד ביום ובלילה, אין אדם למד רוב חכמתו אלא בלילה.

15. This idea fits nicely with the historical background. Even if one assumes that the dreidel originated as a secular toy, Jews decided to make something meaningful out of it. The experience of merely playing a game can be transformed into an educational and religious experience. This approach is the opposite of those that turned the dreidel into a game of frivolity and an excuse to gamble.

See *Kedushas Levi* (*Derushim LeChanukah* s.v. *Yaduah*), *Shut Chavot Yair* #126, Rabbi Yaakov Emden in *Mor Uketzia* (end of Siman #670) and *Aruch HaShulchan* (Orach Chaim 670:9) for their great displeasure with that practice. See also *Sefer Chanukah* (authored by Rabbi Zvi Cohen) 2:5 and *Nitei Gavriel* 51:3.

16. Rabbi Pinchas Shapira of Karitz (1726-1791), *Chanukah* #68.

17. Rabbi Eliezer Zvi Safrin (as cited in *Pardes Yosef* Chanukah p. 160) cited a slight variation גוה שמן, הלל, גדול.

18. Cited in *Beshvilei HaMinhag* vol. 3 p. 119.

19. There are indeed many connections between Sukkos and Chanukah, beginning with the source for the opinion of Beis Shamai as to why we count down from eight to one, reminiscent of the sacrifices offered during Sukkos (*Shabbos* 21b). See also *Sefas Emes* Chanukah, *Baal HaTurim* Vayikra 24:2, and Rav Karelstein, *Kuntres Beinyanei Yemei Chanukah* p. 49-53.

20. Kislev 4:5.

21. Based on this, Rabbi Abuchatzera (as cited in *Pardes Yosef* on Chanukah p.54-55) points out that this may also answer why Talmud Bavli does not have *Masechet Chanukah* to commemorate and discuss the holiday of Chanukah, whereas Purim has *Masechet Megillah*. The story of Purim, unlike Chanukah, unfolded through our fasting and prayers and after the salvation, our decision to commemorate the miracle with much joy and festivities. It is only through our efforts and investment that we merit additional Torah development as part of Torah Shebaal Peh.

22. The *Sefer Matamim* (cited in *Peninei HaMoadim* on Chanukah p. 123) notes that the dreidel cannot stand up straight naturally. This signifies that the entire story of Chanukah is of the supernatural victory of the Chashmonaim, “many in the hands of a few.” See also the *Azor Eliyahu* on Chanukah (cited in *Taamei Haminhagim* Chanukah # 859, in the footnote) who therefore explains why on Purim we say הרב את ריבנו, while on Chanukah we say רבת את ריבם, placing the focus on G-d as the one who was victorious and not us.

23. *Bati L'Armoni, Parshat Vayeshev*.

24. *Maayan Hamoed* p. 90 (as cited in *Pardes Yosef* Chanukah p. 162).

25. Available at <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=22994&st=&pgnum=8>.

26. *Halichot Shlomo* vol. 2 p. 318-319.

27. *Avodah Zara* 52b.

28. It is interesting to note that we do not mention Al Hanisim in Al Hamichya, only in Birkat Hamazon. See *Harerei Kedem* 1:178, and *Teshuvot Yabia Omer* 3:36, for explanations as to why this is so.

29. From the citation of Rav Shlomo Zalman in *Shalmei Moed* (Fried) p. 246, it does seem to be of negative significance that we no longer had the Mizbeach. He also adds that this is perhaps the reason why we use jelly in the sufganiyot, since the Gemara, *Sotah* 48b, says when the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed, it also brought about the end of the sweet taste in the fruit that we eat.

30. *Ner Mitzvah VeTorah Or* p. 114.

31. There is a discussion in the poskim as to whether the fried dough is considered *pat haba'ah b'kisin* and would require one to wash and say Birkat Hamazon if one was to make a meal from it. As such, they suggest not eating large amounts (the size of three or four eggs, about 200 grams, *Mishna Berura* 168:24, *Iggerot Moshe* O”C 3:32, *VeZot Habracha* Ch. 4 FN#23) of fried dough outside the context of a meal. This is probably also a good idea from a health perspective. Additionally, there is a question as to whether Birkat Hamotzi covers the bracha on donuts served at the end of the meal. See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 168:13 and *Mishna Berura* #76. Rav Shlomo Zalman *ibid.* is quoted as not requiring a bracha on doughnuts eaten for dessert.

32. Mentioning “*ve'al mizbachecha*” may be a fulfillment of “*mei'ein hameora*” as we do for *R'tzei* on Shabbat and *Ya'aleh V'yavo* on Yom Tov. However, see also Rabbi Hershel Schachter in *Eretz HaTzvi* #5 for further development of this concept — especially toward the end where he assumes that the concept of *mei'ein hameora* only applies to holidays from the Torah, not inclusive of Chanukah and Purim. The reasons we insert Al Hanisim in Shmoneh Esrei and Birkat Hamazon is a fulfillment of extending our gratitude for our salvation and not of *mei'ein hameora*.