2.3. Why is there a custom to play with a dreidel on Chanukah?

1. The Yevanim enacted decrees forbidding the learning and teaching of Torah. However, the Sages of the time came up with an ingenious tactic. They devised the game of dreidel, so that if the Yevanim encountered Jews learning Torah, the Jews would quickly take out their dreidels and pretend that they were playing the game. Therefore, the dreidel allowed the Jews to continue learning and teaching Torah right under the noses of the Yevanim.

The custom of playing dreidel on Chanukah remained thereafter to commemorate the miracle that, with the help of the dreidel, the Torah was saved from being completely forgotten from Israel.

(Octar Kol Minhaigel Yishurun 19:4)

3. A dreidel is made up of four sides, a single point at its bottom upon which it spins, and the handle from which it is spun at its top. The four sides of the dreidel represent the four corners of the earth (north, south, east, and west) to which the Jews have been exiled, as well as the four kingdoms who have subjugated Israel in those exiles, and who stand diametrically and eternally opposed to Hashem and His Torah. In contrast, the small central point at its bottom, upon which the entire dreidel spins, represents the Jewish people, who are exceedingly small in number, yet around whom the world turns, while the handle at its top represents Hashem, who controls (i.e., spins) the world.

When the dreidel spins, it whirls until the four corners blur into a sphere. Yet during the spinning, the one small point at its bottom and the handle at its top remain in one place. The Jewish people have been spun around by every nation on earth, and every kingdom thinks that it will last forever. Yet the truth is that it is Hashem Who keeps the dreidel spinning from above, and those nations have disappeared, while the Jews remain.

The letters of the dreidel, ש.נ.ד and ו, stand for שנודכאמר — 'A great miracle happened there, because wherever the Jews have been while spinning through the exile and the world, they survived there,' only through Hashem’s miracles.

When observing the blur of the spinning dreidel, what visually emerges is the trustingly steady axis between the handle at its top and the spinning point at its bottom, showing the direct connection we have with Hashem. As such, a dreidel spinning on its axis reveals the true reality, which is that despite man’s schemes, there is only one constant. As nations come and go, as the world spins around on its axis, Hashem and the Jewish people, and their eternal bond, remain constant and intact.

3. The dreidel, therefore, is a microcosmic depiction of the story of the Jewish people and the history of the world. It encourages and reminds us that, in the end, all the nations who have oppressed us from the four corners of the earth will blur into oblivion, but the one constant, Hashem and the Jewish people, will endure. Moreover, through this symbolism, the dreidel teaches us that, on Chanukah, we have the opportunity to seize on this realization of the true reality, and use our new awareness to reconnect with Hashem.

(Bnite Yissachar, Maamarei Chodshi Kislev-Teves 2:25; A.P.S.)

4. We play dreidel on Chanukah because, just like a dreidel turns, so too did Hashem 'turn' the ways of nature on Chanukah, so that the few weak Chassidim could vanquish the many mighty Yevanim.

(Bnite Yissachar, Maamarei Chodshi Kislev-Teves 2:25)

6. The Avnei Nazer explains that since outside of Eretz Yisrael we are generally unable to accomplish pirsumei nisa by lighting our menorahs outdoors, families must endeavor to spend as much time as possible gazing at the menorahs we light indoors to bring about pirsumei nisa. Therefore, to increase our mitzvah of pirsumei nisa, we play dreidel with our children by the candles, so that the maximum pirsumei nisa is fulfilled.

(Avnui Nazer, cited by Sefer Chumakas David, p. 22)

7. We play dreidel with our children to inspire them to learn about the miracle. Through playing the game, the children will come to ask about Chanukah, and, as a result, parents will be able to explain that Chanukah was established to commemorate the miracles that occurred for our ancestors, who risked their lives to save our holy Torah, and that we too must sacrifice ourselves for the Torah. These ideas will consequently become ingrained in their hearts and souls, helping them to grow to be ehrliche Yidden (wholesome Jews).

(Sefer Noz Mitzvah, cited by Ohr Yisrael, Kovetz L’maynai Halochah U’Mishpah, vol. 14, p. 54)

2.4. Why does the dreidel bear the letters ש.נ.ד and ו and why do even some in Eretz Yisrael use such dreidels, instead of those with the letters ש.נ.ד and ו?

It is widely known that the letters on the dreidel highlight the fact that a great miracle occurred in Eretz Yisrael during the time of Chanukah. However, how the dreidel indicates that the miracle transpired there
depends on one's location. Outside of Eretz Yisrael, dreydels bear the letters 3, 5, 8, and 9 as they stand for the words חולם חמש במשה - A great miracle happened there (in Eretz Yisrael), while dreydels in Eretz Yisrael bear the letters 3, 7, 8, and 9 for standing for the words חולם חמש - A great miracle happened here.

1. The Beis Yissachar explains that the source of the letters ו, 3, 5, 8, is the word נטש, which is comprised of those letters. The word נטש appears in Parshas Yisgash when Yaakov, on his way down to Egypt, sent Yehudah ahead to meet Yosef in the Egyptian province of Goshen, where the Jews were planning to reside (see Bereishis 46:28). His purpose in doing so was to have Yehudah set up a yeshivah there in time for Yosef’s arrival (see Rashi there). The passuk reads: ימי נתשלו במצרים ירח ירח ושתהו פרדס arter גרש (יחד) - And he [Yaakov] sent Yehudah ahead of him to Yosef, to show the way before him to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen.

The Beis Yissachar notes two curious points: First, he questions why Yaakov specifically sent Yehudah, as opposed to any of the other brothers, and second, he inquires as to why the passuk uses the complex word נטש, meaning “to Goshen,” instead of the simpler phrase ירעה, which also means “to Goshen.”

He explains that when Yaakov was descending to Egypt, he recognized that the Egyptian exile that was about to begin was the source of the four major exiles that the Jews would endure throughout history: the Babylonian exile, the Persian-Median exile, the Syrian-Greek exile, and the Roman exile (which we are still in today). The term נטש was used because its letters allude to these four exiles. Every person has four kochos (strengths): (1) the koch of the נ, the soul; (2) the koch of the ט, the physical body; (3) the koch of the ש, the intellect; and (4) ש, all, a strength that comes when all of these kochos are combined together.

Each one of the four exiles corresponds to one of these four kochos, in that each nation focused its designs on obliterating one of them. The Babylonians went after our souls, as they were the first to stop the daily korbanos (offeregs) and destroy the Beis HaMikdash. The Persian-Medians went after our physical bodies, as Haman, who lived in that era, wanted to kill every Jew at the time of Purim. The Syrian-Greeks wanted us to assimilate into Greek culture and forget Torah and mitzvos, and so they went after our intellect. And finally, the Romans went after our souls, bodies, and intellects. They went after it all! By using the word נטש, Yaakov alluded to these four exiles, as the letters of נטש stand for the words נפש, נפש, נפש, and נפש.

Yaakov specifically sent Yehudah ahead to meet Yosef because Chazal tell us that when Mashlich comes there will be two redeemers who will appear in immediate succession. First will come Mashlich ben Yosef (a descendant of Yosef), and then Mashlich ben David (a descendant of David HaMelech, who descends from Yehudah). Through his actions in this passuk, Yaakov was offering encouragement to his children in a hidden way. He was effectively saying: "My children, I know you will be going into the four exiles represented by the word נטש. Do not despair, however, because I have sent Yehudah to meet Yosef in נטש, meaning that Mashlich will come to rescue you from those four exiles, so be assured that those exiles will come to an end.”

Moreover, by specifically using the word נטש, he hinted that the salvation and redemption will surely occur because the letters of נטש have the same gematria as the name Mashlich. In addition, נטש also has the same gematria as חולם חמש במשה - Hashem reigns. Hashem reigned, Hashem will reign for all eternity, further alluding to the time of Mashlich, when the whole world will recognize Hashem’s dominion, and acknowledge that it is Hashem who controls everything.

The letters of נטש are inscribed on our dreydels to remind us of Yaakov’s encouragement. As mentioned above (see 2:3), we play dreydel on Chanukah because the Yevanim made it illegal to study Torah. When the Jews defied the decree and studied Torah, they made sure to always have a dreydel handy, so that if Greek-Syrian soldiers came by, the Jews could quickly take out their dreydels to fool the soldiers into thinking that they were just playing the game. It was a tough time of gogus (exile), but by putting the letters 3, 7, 8, and 9 on their dreydels when they had to hide their Torah learning, it reminded them of Yaakov, giving them a sense of hope that the gogus would eventually end.

When we play dreydel, we internalize that encouragement of Yaakov as much today as the Jews did then, as we are still stuck in the midst of exile, and surely need the emotional support. In fact, it is interesting to note that while many dreydels in Eretz Yisrael bear the letter ג instead of the letter ש, some in Eretz Yisrael still use dreydels with a ג, to allude to Yaakov’s message of hope for the future, that the exiles of 3, 5, 8, and 9 will soon end.

(Besi Yissachar, Maamarei Chodshei Kislev, 2:25, A.P.S.)
T he story of this parshah is also the story of Chanukah. The suffering of the period of Hellenism led to wondrous miracles and the great salvation of Chanukah. On a larger scale, the oppression that Klal Yisroel withstood under the Greeks and then the Romans, was the necessary precursor to the emergence of the Tannaim and Amoraim (sages of the Mishna and Talmud, respectively). Hillel HaZeilein, for instance, became the preeminent Sage immediately subsequent to the period of Chanukah. Under the shadow of these two oppressive empires, the Jewish people experienced two of the greatest periods of Torah scholarship. The first led to the redaction of the Mishnah, and the second to the redaction of the Gemara.

Part of the process of transforming the suffering and degradation of a time of darkness into a time of illumination and growth, comes from understanding the nature of the evil that afflicts us. With understanding, it becomes possible to deal with what faces us. This can mean knowing how to fight and defeat the threat completely, or, when the threat is too powerful, how to minimize its effects and limit the damage. One who knows his enemy will be able to anticipate and prepare. Most importantly, it is best to know how to avoid certain situations in the first place, prevention being far better than cure. This is similar to Yosef saving the produce of the good years to be used during the time of famine.

In the summer of the year 42, Klal Yisroel was fettered and oppressed by the mighty might of the mighty. But one who is met with in unexpected times, is unexpected. The mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might was met by the mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might. The mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might was met by the mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might. Yossef (Joseph), the mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might saved the mighty, mighty might of the mighty, might.
the subsequent famine. Understanding the nature of the Chanukah conflict will help us to identify and deal with similar situations that we may face in our own lives.

The Midrash on Bereishis (Bereishis Rabbah 2:4) begins by explaining that the words ruha, bohe, choshech and tehom mentioned in the posuk (C. and דבש (דבש) represent the arba unhadchaya, the four kingdoms who imposed goles (exile) on the Jewish people.

"And darkness was on the face of the waters." This refers to Yavan (the Greeks) who dimmed the eyes of Yisroel with their decrees." HaKev Gedaliah Schur, "Aram, would frequently quote the Ramban who explains that choshech, darkness, is a time when the eye cannot distinguish one thing from another. Just as baker, or daybreak, (derived from the root תצורת) to examine) signifies a time that the confusion of darkness is lifted and the true nature of things is revealed, so too, erav is a time that signifies the onset of confusion, arvivah. As the sun sets and the world dawns, the identity of things becomes blurred.

Yavan possessed a tremendous power to confuse. They represented darkness. When Alexander the Great first conquered Eretz Yisroel as part of his wider campaign of empire building, he accomplished it in a relatively peaceful way. As opposed to other oppressors who were intent on brutally destroying Jewish life, the Macedonian Greeks were to all appearances, benevolent conquerors. Their main interest was not in oppressing their subject nations but in spreading the benefits of their culture to all. This was the main source of the confusion that Yavan spread among the Jewish people. An enemy that sets out to kill and destroy leaves no room for confusion. Faced with such a threat, there is no choice but to fight to the death. However, when the enemy comes bearing art, philosophy, literature and all the trappings of a beautiful, advanced culture and says it at your feet saying, come share this with us, he does not appear to be an enemy at all. The beauty of Hellenism blinded its beholders to the insidious threat to the kedushah, the sanctity of Klal Yisroel within. Tragically, in the wake of this confusion, many thousands of Jews made the mistake of embracing this new culture, while those who clung tenaciously to the traditions of our fathers were regarded as unnecessarily conservative and even backwards.

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ליס כדי להציג את עליית היונים - גדלותuitive לשוב "הלקשה".
ולא רק זה, אלא גםЂביה, wir נפגשים בשתי שתיים ב sınıישן.
כדאי שלושת חמשים אנטם לא אחר, שהם י…”

"שנים ועוד לי" (יוסף בב') ממחזיק,
"מצטער, אני לא יכול…" (יוסף בב')
"אני יכול להظنתק את הש…and…" (יוסף בב')
"אני יכול להظنתק את הש…and…" (יוסף בב')

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2. The Klausenberger Rebbe elaborates that not only did the Jews use the dreidel to hide their ongoing Torah learning, but they also used it to hide their observance of the other mitzvos that the Yevanim outlawed. For example, when the Jews gathered on Shalbos or for a bris milah, they had their dreidels ready, so that if any Greeks came by to investigate the purpose of the gathering, they could quickly hide what they were doing and take out their dreidels to give the impression that the gathering was for the purpose of the game. Dreidels therefore also commemorates the mesiras nephesh (self-sacrifice) of the Jews to keep the mitzvos, despite the danger to their lives.

(See Sefer Divrei Yetsiv, Orach Chaim 283)
During the eight days of Chanukah the same spiritual lights that were created by the miracle are once again available to every Jewish soul. However, in order to experience and to feel this unique light, we need to detach ourselves from the natural order of things and thereby ready ourselves to receive that which emanates from above the natural order.

Sefas Emes, early Chassidic master

The story of Chanukah is the story of the defiance of the natural order of things. It is the story of a moment in history when what should have happened didn't, when the ordinary, the expected and the natural were overwhelmed by the extraordinary, the unexpected and the spiritual. The Jewish rebels turned back the mighty Greek army. Judaism and Jewish life survived the onslaught of a culture that changed world history and a small vessel that appeared to contain only a bit of oil became the source for eight days of light.

When we look at ourselves and say “that’s me” or “that’s not me,” we lock ourselves into the world of the ordinary and the expected. Chanukah not only reminds us that there is another dimension to life, but it also asks us to open ourselves up to that dimension by stepping outside of the mold we have created for ourselves. When we dare to defy what we would ordinarily expect of ourselves, when we make an effort to give new shape to our vessels, we then become capable of receiving a light that should only have shined for a day but that in fact continues to shine, even today.

5. We play dreidel on Chanukah as part of fulfilling the mitzvah of pirshei nisa (publicizing the miracle). The miracle of Chanukah came about as a result of the Jews of the time taking the initiative to go to battle, even though the situation seemed hopeless. And in the end, it was their tremendous mesiras nefesh that led Hashem to come to their aid and save them through the miracle of Chanukah.

Spinning the dreidel brings about pirshei nisa because it recalls the miracle and how it came about. Just as a dreidel must first be picked up and spun for it to stand tall and spin on its own, so too did the Chassonosim first make an effort to try and battle the Yevanim naturally, and then Hashem stepped in and brought about the miracle and the victory.

More than pirshei nisa, the dreidel teaches that for Hashem to perform miracles for us, we must take the first steps to help ourselves, just as an initial effort is required to turn the dreidel before it spins on its own.

(The Damesek Eliezer (Rav Eliezer of Vizhnitz), cited by Ohr Yisrael, Koveitz L’onya’ey Hailekah U’Mishnah, vol. 14, p. 53)

2. Fascinatingly, the Beni Yisschosar (Moamuroi Chodshoi Kisel-Teves 4:101) explains that the culmination of the annual Divine judgment period that begins with Rosh Hashanah actually takes place on Chanukah (see 1:19 for further insight). Effectively, the judgment is written on Rosh Hashanah, sealed on Yom Kippur, delivered on Hoshana Rabbah, and entered for execution on the last day of Chanukah. This means that even if a person did not yet do a full teshuva (repenance) by Yom Kippur or Hoshana Rabbah, and a negative judgment was decided for him in Heaven, he still, in some sense, has a chance to change his judgment before the end of Chanukah. The letters ב, ג, and ו of the dreidel hint to this, in that they can be arranged to read רע י, which stands for רע י, meaning “the end of the year,” or “the end of the year’s judgment (is on Chanukah).” It is a reminder that we must do a full teshuva before the end of Chanukah, so that רע י, this year, we will have a רע י, a good ending to our judgment.