

PARASHAS MIKEITZ

Behind the Gray Blur

All eyes stare riveted at the dreidel as it spins round and round, a cylindrical gray blur in the center of the table. Slowly, slowly, the spinning eases. Four flat sides come into view, featuring the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hay* and *shin*. Finally, the dreidel comes to a stop and falls on its side. The letter that is uppermost determines if the one who spun it has won or lost.

This simple game of chance has become so closely identified with the festival of Chanukah that it has practically attained the status of ritual. Indeed, many great sages have been known to give the dreidel a perfunctory spin or two as they sit beside the Chanukah lights. Clearly, there is a deep symbolism to the dreidel that connects to the broader themes of Chanukah. What exactly is this symbolism? And what is the significance of the letters etched into the sides of the dreidel?

Perhaps we can find some enlightenment in this week's Torah portion, which is always coincidental with Chanukah. As the curtain lifts, we find Joseph languishing in a dark Egyptian dungeon, forgotten by his family, seemingly bereft of hope. His life, whatever is left of it, is a miserable shambles. Then suddenly, everything turns completely around. Joseph is taken from his cell, washed and dressed and brought to Pharaoh. He makes such a powerful impression that Pharaoh appoints him viceroy of Egypt. The machinations of divine providence begin to emerge from concealment. One dramatic episode follows another. Joseph and his family are reunited. They settle in Egypt, and the long exile that would mold and shape the Jewish people begins.

During the Chanukah era, the Jewish people experienced a similar turnaround. Alexander's armies had swept away the old order and imposed Greek culture on the conquered peoples. In the face of the crushing power of the Greek empire and the allure of Hellenistic materialism, it seemed that flickering light of Judaism would be engulfed and extinguished. The dream of a special historical role for the Jewish people seemed to be coming to a bitter end. But even in the darkest hours, a few valiant men held fast to their belief in the constancy of divine providence. No matter how hopeless the situation appeared, they were convinced that Hashem's guiding hand was controlling events. They rose in rebellion against overwhelming odds, and Hashem rewarded them with a stunning victory, the victory of light over darkness.

Here may lie the key to the symbolism of the dreidel. The dreidel has four distinct sides, representing the four directions of the compass and the four basic forms of matter - earth, water, air and fire, in other words, solid, liquid, gas and energy. A turn from above sets the dreidel spinning, and its features are obscured in one dizzying blur. But even as the eye beholds confusion, underneath everything comes together to one focal point, the vortex from which all power emanates, the unifying power of the Creator of the Universe. And then, just when it seems as if the spinning will go on forever, it begins to slow down and the mysterious Hebrew letters come into view.

What do these letters stand for? Traditionally, they are an acronym for *nes gadol hayah sham*, a great miracle happened there. The mystical teachers also point out that the *gematria*, the numerical value, of these four letters is equal to the *gematria* of Mashiach. Ultimately, when the mad spinning will finally come to an end, when the gray blur comes into focus and the true nature of creation is revealed, the world will be suffused with transcendent illumination of the Divine Presence, and we will enter the Messianic age.

In our own lives, we must all struggle with the trials and travails of daily existence. Life is full of disappointments and disillusionment, and sometimes, it seems beyond our ability to cope. Let us take encouragement from the message of the Chanukah lights. We are not helpless flotsam and jetsam cast helter skelter into the raging ocean of life. At every moment, in darkness and in light, the loving hand of our Father in Heaven is gently upon us guiding us to our destiny and our fulfillment.