

Rabbi Israel B. Koller's Thoughts on Hanukah - 2007

There is always a good reason for why Jews have the customs we have as a religion. At the same time, however, there is almost always a **real** reason for the customs we have as well. And when it comes to the dreidel and the latke, two particular objects of Chanukah we all know so well, the good reasons are not real and the real reasons are not good!

Next to the menorah, the shofar, and the Torah, the dreidel is perhaps the best known Jewish object. Here is what we do know about the dreidel. It is a four sided top with the Hebrew letters nun, gimel, hey, and shin. When you put the letters together, they form an acronym that stands for the phrase: "Nes Gadol Haya Sham" or "A great miracle happened there". On Chanukah, it is customary to play a little gambling game using this top to celebrate this joyous holiday.

But **why** do Jews play dreidel? In other words, where does the dreidel come from? When did it start and why? Did Judah Maccabee start the tradition? Was it a custom created by the rabbis of the Talmud? If so, why a top and why gambling?

So here is the **good** reason for **why** we play dreidel, the reason we always hear. Dreidel was created a long time ago out of a need to be able to teach and pass on our faith when it had to be passed on in secret. During Roman times, when the study of Torah was outlawed, Jews had to find ways to fool the authorities and teach our faith when it was dangerous to do so. Thus, Jews created dreidel and other types of innocent games that could be played without arousing suspicion from the authorities. Dreidel conveyed the meaning and message of the holiday and allowed the story of Chanukah to be told without fear of discovery. Good reason.

Unfortunately, it is not the **real** reason. In fact, the dreidel originally had **nothing** to do with Chanukah and actually had more to do with the **Christmas** season!

Here is the **real** reason we play dreidel. In the winter (around Christmas time) in England and Ireland, a popular game called **totum** or **teetotum** was created. **Totum** was a game that started in the 1500's to pass the time during the long winter season. **Totum** was a four sided top used for gambling with four letters – T (take all), H (take half), P (put down) and N (get nothing). In Eastern Europe, a similar game grew out of this **totum** and German letters were added to this pastime: – N (Nicht/Nothing), G (Ganz/All), H (Halb/ Half), S (Shtel-in/ Put In). In Germany, the game was called "trundle" and when Jews started playing it, they put **Hebrew** letters on it and called it in Yiddish "varfl" (to thrown in) or a "dreidel" (to spin).

So dreidel has its origins in England around Christmas time and later in Germany. Jews, therefore, who won't buy or use German products or use anything associated with Christmas will have to rethink playing dreidel this year!

Oh, and don't delve too deeply into the history of the **latke**, either. If you take some measure of pride in **that** Jewish delicacy, you will likely lose your appetite for it. Here, too, while the **good** reason is that the latke was created by Jews to celebrate the miracle of the "oil" (since the potato pancake is fried in oil), it actually didn't start with us. The "latke" was actually a popular winter dish common throughout much of Poland centuries before Jews even got there. We took it and grafted it into our culture as well. Like the dreidel, the latke is not Biblical, Talmudic or even Jewish. It is no more Jewish than a hamburger.

(And don't even ask me to tell you about Chanukah money or "Gelt". I'm sorry to say that it, too, originally had nothing to do with Chanukah.)

Now, why am I doing this to our Chanukah traditions? Because I think this teaches us something very important about Judaism and Jewish **survival**.

Chanukah celebrates the story of the Jewish people rising up against those who would wanted to purge us of our heritage. It is the story of the Syrian-Greeks, in the year 165 B.C.E., defiling our

Temple, trampling our religious way of life and demanding that we assimilate and become Hellenists. They wanted us to give up our identity and our religion.

You might think it ironic, therefore, that on this very holiday which celebrates victory over **assimilation**, that we play the dreidel game and eat latkes which are perfect examples *of* assimilation. After all, are we not using a game that was popularized by Christians and eating a delicacy from a culture that was not our own?

But my point is that Jews have survived because our people have been adept at making a distinction between assimilation and **acculturation**. Assimilation is the cultural absorption of a community *into* the main cultural body. Acculturation is **adapting** to new and different cultures and surroundings, being influenced but not swallowed up by those cultures. Acculturation is the **only** way to survive as a minority.

Jews have always had to battle to survive as a people. Christians, with nearly two billion followers, do not worry about their survival, nor do a billion Muslims, but the tiny Jewish minority of just under 14 million worldwide have always been embattled. When we weren't being persecuted, we had to find ways to keep ourselves distinct and avoid disappearance. When we weren't fleeing for our lives, we **had** to answer: how can we survive as a people without assimilating?

And for the last two thousand years, the Jewish religion has been able to survive precisely because Jews have successfully **acculturated** to society, adapting our heritage and faith to our surroundings. We like to think of Jews surviving because we were stubborn and refused to adapt to the surrounding cultures. Just the opposite! The truth of the matter is we successfully **found ways** to take aspects of every society we lived in and incorporate them into our own practices.

That is the meaning of dreidel, latke and a whole host of customs and tradition we do to this day. They were never part of the Torah, the Talmud or even the Codes of Jewish Law. They were traditions of the societies we lived in; we **adopted** them and **adapted** them into our world to be used to keep our faith and our people alive. We took the **totum** and made it a **dreidel**. That is not assimilation; that is acculturation and there is nothing wrong with that. Acculturation is the only way a minority can survive.

Think I am wrong? Look at how Jews took the German language, added Hebrew letters and created Yiddish; we also took Spanish, added Hebrew and created Ladino. Jews in Middle Eastern cultures created a more Eastern form of Jewish expression and Jews in Europe created a more Western influenced faith, from the foods we ate to the language we spoke to the prayers we recited. The religious "core" always stayed the same but the "trappings" changed to conform to the societies they were in.

The very key to our survival is found in the dreidel and the latke. The Jew didn't assimilate, nor did he drop his heritage, but acculturated to the society he was in and found new ways to practice the faith of his ancestors. When faced with the challenge of survival, the Jew **always** acculturated as a way of maintaining his identity.

Look at what has happened to Chanukah in America, from the decorations that we have added as a result of Christmas to fancy menorahs that are more closely related to the American experience than anything seen by Judah Maccabee and his warriors. Purists may be mortified by what they are seeing but I am not. I think it is the ongoing acculturation of our Jewish community, maintaining our cultural identity in a society that calls us to fully assimilate. **Isolation** is not an option and **assimilation** is cultural suicide; **acculturation** is how a people survives.

Acculturation is what Jews have done for centuries, from eating a **Polish** Potato Pancake and making it a Chanukah tradition, to taking a popular Christmas-time toy called **totum** and making a game that tells the story of Chanukah.

That's the way we survive as a people!