

Let's play dreidel!

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“Play dreidel!” said the strange man who had joined us at the station.

“Play dreidel!”

“He might be the Eternal Jew”, it struck me. “He might be the soul of forefather Jacob, which, as the only one of human souls, is not naked and can trespass from the next world to this world. Or is he an angel? Or a prophet?”

He did not introduce himself to me but told me the following story.

Once upon a time there were two brothers, two sons of one father and one mother. The older one was Josi and was twelve. The younger one was Asher and was ten. Both were dark haired with brown eyes. Both were nice, devout, clever boys. But Josi was not only clever, he was exceptionally clever. And the mother was very proud of her first born son since his birth. And why not! Josi's eyelashes were long and black, his eyes big and beautiful. He was standing in his cot before he was six months old. He started walking when he nine months, he could speak when he was one year old. Other mothers and grandmothers said they had never seen such a miraculous child. The father was proud of him, too. Josi could read when he was four, he could speak three languages, he could add, subtract, multiply and divide when he was six. The father called his son *gaon* (genius).

“He could go to bar mitzvah when he is nine,” grandfather Leo suggested. The rabbi said that Josi was the cleverest of cheder and he would once be a great scholar.

“He might be the one with one soul in one thousand. One thousand people will start to study the Scripture,” the rabbi used to say, “but only one hundred succeed. One hundred will start to study the Mishnah and only ten will succeed, ten will start studying the Talmud but only one will succeed.”

And as if this was not enough he was praised by teachers in state school, especially teachers of mathematics and history. Josi was a gifted musician, too. His violin teacher said he had never had such a talented pupil. Josi was also popular among boys in the street – he was very good at football and was the fastest of them all.

Asher was an ordinary boy. He was also dexterous, he was not dumb, but compared to his more clever, outstanding brother he felt like a nitwit. Still he loved Josi. And Josi loved Asher and the brothers usually got on really well with very few conflicts.

And it was Hanukah, the Festival of Lights. Their little sister Rivka was wearing her best dress and was singing
(and the strange man sang too):

Sevimon sov sov sov, Chanuka hu chag tov.

Chanuka hu chag tov, sevimon sov sov sov.

Chag simcha hu laam nés gadol haja šam

Nés gadol haja šam chag simcha hu laam.

The mother was frying levivot – doughnut heats. And the father was preparing presents for children. Chanukia the father had lit when the third star appeared in the sky was shining through the window. Everything was cozy and pleasant.

All was cozy and pleasant until the mother gave a bowl with nuts, raisins, almonds and chocolate to everybody. And until father brought forth the dreidel.

Do you know dreidel? It is a four sided spinning top. On each side there is one Hebrew letter carved: nun, gimel, hey and shin – the first letters from words in the sentence *Nes gadol haya sham* (The great miracle happened there – in Jerusalem in the time of the Maccabees). Players place their sweet bet into the bank in the middle of the table, spin the dreidel and wait for what they get. If it is the nun, it is neither good luck, nor bad luck, the nun means you take nothing and lose nothing. The best is the gimel. If a player gets the gimel, they rejoice as they get all there is in the bank. The hey is also fine, if the player gets the hey, they get one half of the bank. The shin is the worse, it means add something to the bank. This game can hardly be influenced. Somebody is lucky, others unlucky. Sometimes players are lucky for a while, then unlucky and lucky again. Sometimes you are just unlucky. Dreidel is played at Hanukkah for fun and enjoyment. Playing dreidel is mitzvah.

Something strange was going on this Hanukkah – it was already the fourth day of the holiday and Josi had had no nut, no almond, no raisin. He had not won much and what he had won, he lost and he lost even more. In the previous three evenings all sweets had been won by his younger brother or sister. And he was no luckier this evening. He had got three nuns and two shins. The sweets he had got from his mother for the play were almost gone while his brother's bowl was full to the brim.

Josi was very unhappy – in fact he was not used to losing. He had had no chance to learn to lose. How could he have when he had always been the winner, always outstanding? He was the eldest child in the family. He was the best in cheder and at school. He had never met anyone who could be a match for him, who could beat him.

In contrast, Asher knew how to lose. He had known losing too well. He had spent his life in the shadow of his older brother – a gaon. He was one of the better pupils in cheder and at school but he had never been outstanding. He was much surprised by his victory in dreidel. He was surprised and intoxicated – his eyes were sparkling with happiness and joy. He was jumping and laughing. The happier Asher was, the angrier Josi was. And the game continued. Dreidel was back in Josi's hands. Josi spun it – and was waiting. Dreidel was spinning nicely and long. Everybody was waiting, their breaths withheld – and it was the shin. Asher whooped. That was more than Josi could stand. He jumped up and knocked the table over. All sweets fell on the floor.

“A stupid game”, he said with defiance. “It is stupid and only babies like it.”
And with tears of anger he left the room and curled up in his bed.

Many hard years passed. Only Asher survived them.

“I reproached myself for having survived. Why didn't my genius brother survive?” Asher would say. “Or my beautiful little sister Rivka. And my kind Mum or my excellent father, or grandfather or grandmother or cousins? Why me? Was I any better than them? Or were they any worse than me?”

I struggled. I could not live fully in this world. I was living in the realm of regrets. I had to be treated at a nerve clinic. When we had work therapy – the therapist took us to a woodcarver's workshop and taught us to carve wood. I was not much good at it and did not dare to try anything very large so I carved a wooden cube. When I was finishing it my hands remembered the shape of the dreidel and they somehow unconsciously made a round point to the cube. I spun it – it did not spin as fast and long as the dreidel of my childhood but it spun. I borrowed a soldering iron and carefully burnt four letters on the sides – nun, gimel, shin and hey. Suddenly I remembered the fourth Hanukkah night when Josi had got so angry. And I also remembered how our father called him back to the table and every single word he had said.

“May be Josi thinks dreidel is not a clever game,” father said. “And he's right in a way. He's angry because the results are random, he cannot influence the game. But I'm afraid he wouldn't get furious if he weren't losing. If he were winning, maybe he would enjoy dreidel. I think it's not a bad game. It's not about what you get. It's about how you cope with it. You can eat your winnings alone but you can share them with who

is losing. You can be furious or cry that you're losing but you can also accept it peacefully and honestly. You can laugh at yourself and your bad luck. The fury that seized control over Josi today is the fury that drove Cain to murder. So much wrath for a few nuts and almonds?

How will he put up with real loss or real victory? There are people in the world who are born blind, deaf or without limbs. Their draw was unlucky and will affect all their lives. Should they be full of wrath or self-pity? Or those who are born strong and sound – should they keep their talents selfishly to themselves? Should they be greedy and make money only for themselves? Should they say they have deserved their luck because of their godliness?

Some will live beautiful and merry lives. Lives full of joy, health and work. Others will suffer from diseases and will live lives of forlorn and hopelessness. Some will die young, others will live to a ripe old age. Some women will give birth to a beautiful, healthy baby every year, others will never get pregnant or will give birth to stillbirths.

Some so called wise men claim that if people behave piously or if they say the right prayers, they will never be ill, no evil awaits them. But that's not true. Maybe sometimes. Mostly you cannot change your destiny. Godly and just people can draw a bad destiny as well as godless and sinning people can draw a good destiny. We don't know why. And it's not important. It's important what we do with our destiny. Will we forget Ribon ha-olamim for the good things? Will we raise ourselves above our god? Or will we grow bitter and weak hearted and blame and condemn Ribon ha-olamim?

My children, I don't know what awaits you in the future. But I wish you can face whatever awaits you as well as possible. I would like you never to forget good manners and Adonaj, whose name we never pronounce."

I was playing with the clumsy dreidel and suddenly understood. It did not take long before I could leave the clinic for good. I finished my studies and started work in a library. I love recommending books to young people, influencing their souls. I married a nice girl whom I've never ceased to love. I fathered and brought up four children. Now I am on my way to my eldest son to spend holidays with them. The grandson is just four – look – I am taking him almonds, nuts and chocolates – we will play to win them.

Not that I would understand why my clever brother didn't stay alive. I don't understand why all this happened. I still miss all of them. Sometimes I imagine they are all still alive. I often think how old they would be now and whether Josi would be grey and have backache like me. But I try to make the best of my draw.

Play dreidel! Teach your children to lose and win!