The Sephardi Origins of the Dreidel
Rabbi Shalom Morris, Rabbi of the Bevis Marks Synagogue

While visiting Portugal, I was given a gift. It appeared to be a dreidel, though I was told that it was actually a Rapa, a Portuguese term used by children during Christmas. The store’s website, however, claims that it is based upon the dreidel, a traditional Jewish game. The Sephardic origins of the dreidel have also been asserted by some in the American Southwest. There are Spanish individuals in that region who posit Jewish Sephardic ancestry. They claim that hundreds of years ago they arrived in the farthest northern reaches of was then Spanish Mexico to escape the Inquisition. Some researchers have attempted to prove this Jewish ancestry based upon dreidels that have been found in some of their homes.

The word dreidel is of course yiddish (a Judeo-German language spoken by Ashkenazim). The word is likely from the Yiddish word dreydel, to spin, as in ‘to drey a kupa’ which basically means to drive someone crazy. The letters on the sides are nun, gimmel, hey, and shin—which may stand for nes gadol hayah shem (a great miracle happened there). It was in 1887 that the Hebrew word sevivon was first created by Itamar Ben-Avi, the son of the great Hebreav revivalist Eliezer ben Yehuda. The story goes that he was five at the time, playing with the dreidel. He took the Hebrew word for turning, savi, and created the word sevivon, for a spinning top. Later in Israel the shin (for shem – there) was changed to a peh (for po – here).

The game of dreidel is today widespread throughout the Jewish world. A player spins the top, and depending on how it lands, they win or lose part or all of the pot of coins (or gelt in Yiddish), in the middle. The origins of this game are said to date back to Hanukkah times (165 BCE), when Jews would play dreidel as Greek soldiers entered their homes. They did this to hide the fact that they had actually gathered to study Torah, an act prohibited by the Syrian-Greek king, Antiochus. Significantly enough, according to the Seferim Blau, the dreidel origin story only first appeared in print in a book published in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1890. The author, Rabbi Eliezer Hershovitz, came from Kovno, Lithuania.

So, is it possible that the dreidel is in fact a pan Jewish custom, dating back to ancient times, and even perhaps Sephardic in origin? Probably not. Not only is the game a yiddish word, and not only does the origin story only appear in the late 19th century, but similar tops are found across Europe, and in some places are even traditionally played at Christmas time. In Portugal it is called a Rapa, in other European cities it was a called a teetum. Depending on the country and language, the letters appearing on the four sides are different. In Yiddish the Hebrew nun, gimmel, hey, and shin actually stood for nish, ganz, halb, and shel arayn (nothing, everything, half, and give one).

The dreidel therefore is a cautionary tale, wherein we sometimes mistakenly project back in time, something which we know from the present. Because Jews today so famously play with a dreidel, some mistakenly assume that any four-sided spinning top must have come from the Jews, even the Sephardic Jews. There is, however, a last message and value contained within the dreidel.

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**Shabbat Mikkets-Hanukkah**

**December 30-31, 2016**


**CANDLE LIGHTING | 4:20 pm**

**MINHA | 4:15 pm | Main Sanctuary**

**FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS | Following evening services | Rabbi Soloveichik gives a talk on the topic “Light and Enlightenment: A Painter’s Perspective” | 2016-2017 season sponsored by the Julis Family**

**ZEMIRIOT | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary**

**SHABATIT (NISHMAT) | 9:00 am | Rabbi Soloveichik delivers a shiur on the topic “Totally Headless Holofenes: A Hanukkah Story?” To SHABATIT WITH LIZ AND SHANADE | Ages 9-14 | 10:00 am | Levy Auditorium**

**YOUTH GROUPS WITH RACHEL | Ages 5-12 | 10:00 am | Elias Room**

**JR. CONGREGATION | Ages 5-12 | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue**

**KIDDUSH | Levy Auditorium**

**SEUDAH SHELISHIT AND PIRKEI ABOT AFTERNOON SHIUR | Rabbi Soloveichik on the topic “The Most Missed Haftarah: The Story of Solomon” | 3:30 pm | Levy Auditorium | Fall semester sponsored by Lewis Lipez**

**MINHA/ARBIT | 4:15 PM**

**HABDOLAH | 5:05 PM**

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Weekday Service Times:
Mornings: Sunday—Monday: 8:00 AM, Tuesday—Friday: 7:15 AM, Evenings (Arbit Only): Monday—Thursday: 6:30PM

**Schedule Changes**
- Sunday Morning Classes will not meet on January 1st.
- Rabbi Soloveichik’s Monday class will NOT meet on January 2nd.
- Follow our emails for the next class.
- The Synagogue Office will be closed on Monday January 2nd.
UPCOMING PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

SAVE THE DATE:
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin Returns
to Congregation Shearith Israel
Shabbat Morning, January 14 | Following morning services
We are delighted to announce that Rabbi Shlomo Riskin returns to Shearith Israel to kick off an important lecture series in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem.
Rabbi Riskin is one of the founders and the first spiritual leader of the Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York, which he led for 19 years. In 1983, at the peak of his profession, he left New York to become the rabbi of Efrat, a new Israeli city 8 miles south of Jerusalem, which he helped found and establish. Efrat is now a flourishing community of close to 12,000 people. Rabbi Riskin founded and serves as Chancellor and Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone Institutions, a network of over 3,000 students ranging from junior-high schools to post-graduate programs preparing the leaders for world Jewry.

Back By Popular Demand!
Spaces are going fast! We expect to sell out again soon.
Exclusive Tour of “The First Jewish Americans: Freedom and Culture In The New World” Exhibit
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik
The New-York Historical Society
170 Central Park West (At 77th street)
Sunday, January 29 | 11:00 am
Back by popular demand, Rabbi Soloveichik will lead an additional tour of this fascinating exhibit, which is directly connected to the history of our community and congregation and showcases several important objects from our collection as well as extensive loans from the private collection of our newest member, Leonard Milberg. As spaces are highly limited, for now registration is open to sponsors ONLY. Register at shearithisrael.org/The-First-Jewish-Americans

Shabbat Dinner For Teens and Their Entire Families with Rabbi Soloveichik
Friday night, January 20 | Following Friday Night Lights
Teens and their families are invited to a special Shabbat dinner with Rabbi Soloveichik and his family. Register at shearithisrael.org/teens-Hollywood.

Special Dues Offer and End of Year Gifts
Through Midnight, THIS Saturday, December 31
Now is the last chance to support Shearith Israel and our special funds (e.g. Rabbi’s Discretionary Fund, Sisterhood, Hebra, etc.) with an end of year gift. If you have any outstanding balances, now is also a good time to take care of those. Finally, don’t miss out on our special offer to pre-pay you 2017-2018 membership dues at current rates. Please refer to your inbox for emails from us with details. If you have questions about your account, you may also contact our bookkeeper, Ruth Yasky, at 212-873-0300 x 228. To pay, go to shearithisrael.shulcloud.com/payment.php, log in and make a donation.

Incredible Kids Mega Challah Bake
Super (Challah) Bowl Sunday, February 5 | 10:30 am
At the New York Grand Hyatt in Midtown
Shearith Israel is a proud sponsor of the upcoming Incredible Kids Mega Challah Bake. CSI Youth are invited to join Jewish children from all over New York City to get together for the Incredible Kids Mega Challah Bake. The event is the brainchild of a diverse group of Jewish moms of every style, observance, and denomination, all with one common goal: unity. The event will host approximately 1,000 Jewish children, all ready to roll up their sleeves and make their very own challah loaves. Last year, the Guinness Book of World Records was on hand to declare it the world’s largest baking event. Want to help be a part of trying to break a new record? Register at kidschallahbake.com/rsvp.

WEEKDAY JUDAIC EDUCATION
For details go to: shearithisrael.org/judaic-education

Sunday
◦ Saadiah Gaon’s Book of Beliefs and Opinions | Simon den Hollander | 8:45 am | NO CLASS THIS WEEK

Monday
◦ Monday Night Learning: A Series on Early America and The Jews | Rabbi Soloveichik | 7:00 pm | Select Mondays | NO CLASS THIS WEEK

Tuesday
◦ Katzap Class and Breakfast | Following Morning Services
◦ Feasts and Fasts: The Festivals in Jewish Thought - A Class for Women | Rabbi Soloveichik | 9:00 am
◦ Talmud Class: Tractate Sanhedrin | Rabbi Soloveichik | 7:00 pm | NO CLASS THIS WEEK

Wednesday
◦ NEW: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Shearith Israel: A Monthly Q & A | Z. Edinger | 7:00 pm | On select Wednesdays | Next class on January 25 Email questions to zedinger@shearithisrael.org.

To sponsor a single class or an entire semester, go to shearithisrael.org/sponsoraclass

To find out when your favorite class is held, canceled or for special topics, go to shearithisrael.org/join-our-mailing-lists to select which emails you’d like to receive.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS
Condolences to Susan Hertog on the passing of her mother, Marilyn Gorell.