Jewish Tribune – Vayeishev/Chanukah

**The Science of Spinning**

There are several family legends relating to my great grandfather, R’ Boruch Yaakov Golker. Although I never met him (he died about a decade before I was born), I have a particular affinity to him as I am named after him.

He was a scrupulously honest man with much yiras Shomayim and was blessed with a sweet voice. One time, the person scheduled to daven ne’ilah in Grove Lane shul, pulled out at the last minute. A quick and impromptu conversation ensued between the Rov and the president and it was decided that R’ Boruch Yaakov be asked to daven. This was Grove Lane in its heyday, with hundreds of mispallelim of yere’im and shleimim. Family legend is that he quietly accepted and walked to the amud as if it were a weekday ma’ariv.

Apparently, R’ Boruch Yaakov strongly disliked any form of playing of cards and when he would walk down the path, approaching a house where there was a game of cards going on, the chevra knew to quickly end their game for fear of rebuke.

Although the dreidel is only mentioned in Torah sources relatively recently (18th century onwards), many reasons have been given for the minhag of playing dreidel on Chanukah. Perhaps the most famous explanation is that it was a way for Jews under Hellenistic persecution to disguise their learning of Torah by pretending to be playing when they had actually gathered to learn Torah.

Many Gedolei Yisrael took the minhag of spinning the dreidel very seriously. Minhag Yisroel Torah (volume 2 p.302) says the Chasam Sofer used to specifically spin his own silver dreidel when guests would visit in order to fulfil this minhag and publicise the miracle of Chanukah in a distinguished manner.

I came across an interesting article by Rabbi Mordechai Becher where he cites the Bnei Yissascher (Chodesh Kislev Maamar 2 - Ohr Torah) who sees the four sides of the dreidel as alluding to the four kingdoms that have oppressed the Jewish people and are responsible for our golus: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome.

Ultimately, each will fall, whereas the two constants of the dreidel, the point around which history revolves (the Jewish people), and the “Hand” that spins from Above (HKBH) will emerge victorious with the future redemption.

The extremes will be united and the Jewish people will bring the whole world together, united in service of Hashem.

Rabbi Becher also quotes his Rebbe, HaRav Shlomo Fisher zt”l who uses some physics to offer a fascinating explanation in the concept of the dreidel.

When you spin a dreidel well, what stops it from falling over?

Dreidels, like all spinning tops, make use of angular momentum to defy gravity. The dreidel hugs its vertical axis as it rotates. As friction slows down its spin, the dreidel’s centre of mass leans outward, and gravity slowly pulls it down.

It emerges that if the dreidel is spinning very fast, then it is ultra-stable because the effect that gravity can produce is way too small to make it fall.

So, in order to stay upright, the dreidel must be spinning. The faster it spins, the less affect gravity will have on it. Based on this, Rabbi Becher adds a dimension he heard from his Rebbe, HaRav Shlomo Fisher zt”l.

Like the dreidel, the Jewish people, if left to natural, sociological and historical forces will fall. It is only because we “spin” continuously with the energy of Torah learning and performance of mitzvos that we are able to stay “upright” and survive.

So when we enjoy a game of dreidel this Chanukah, and munch on our winnings of jelly beans, raisins or chocolate money, we can appreciate a deeper understanding of this wonderful custom.

Not only is spinning the dreidel a silent tefilla to end the golus and unite us with Hashem, but it is also a reminder that it is the energetic performance of Torah and mitzvos that ensures our survival and keeps us “upright”.

And I hope that my great grandfather, Reb Boruch Yaakov Golker, would be agreeable to that.

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