

The dreidel or sevivon is perhaps the most famous custom associated with Hanukkah. Indeed, various rabbis have tried to find an integral connection between the dreidel and the Hanukkah story; the standard explanation is that the letters nun, gimmel, hey, shin, which appear on the dreidel in the Diaspora, stand for nes gadol haya sham—"a great miracle happened **there**," while in Israel the dreidel says nun, gimmel, hey, pey, which means "a great miracle happened **here**."

One 19th-century rabbi maintained that Jews played with the dreidel to fool the Greeks if they were caught studying Torah, which had been outlawed. Others figured out elaborate *gematriot* [numerological explanations because every Hebrew letter has a numerical equivalent] and word plays for the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin*. For example, *nun, gimmel, hey, shin* in gematria equals 358, which is also the numerical equivalent of *mashiach* or Messiah!

Finally, the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin* are supposed to represent the four kingdoms that tried to destroy Israel, Judah and Jerusalem [in ancient times]: N = Nebuchadnetzar = Babylon; H = Haman = Persia = Madai; G = Gog = Greece; and S = Seir = Rome.

As a matter of fact, these elaborate explanations were invented after the fact.

The dreidel game originally had nothing to do with Hanukkah; it has been played by various people in various languages for many centuries.

In England and Ireland there is a game called *totum* or *teetotum* that is especially popular at Christmastime. In English, this game is first mentioned as "*totum*" ca. 1500-1520. The name comes from the Latin "*totum*," which means "all." By 1720, the game was called *T-totum* or *teetotum*, and by 1801 the four letters already represented four words in English: T = Take all; H = Half; P = Put down; and N = Nothing.

Our Eastern European game of dreidel (including the letters *nun, gimmel, hey, shin*) is directly based on the German equivalent of the *totum* game: N = Nichts = nothing; G = Ganz = all; H = Halb = half; and S = Stell ein = put in. In German, the spinning top was called a "torrel" or "trundl," and in Yiddish it was called a "dreidel," a "fargl," a "varfl" [= something thrown], "shtel ein" [= put in], and "gor, gorin" [= all].

When Hebrew was revived as a spoken language, the dreidel was called, among other names, a *sevivon*, which is the one that caught on.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-origin-of-the-dreidel/>

## Dreidel

*♩ = 90* C G C C G

I have a lit - tle drei - del I made it out of clay and  
It has a love - ly bod - y with legs so short and thin and

3 G G |1. G C |2. G C

when it's dry and read - y oh drei - del I shall play I drei - del I shall play oh  
when it gets all ti - red it drops and then I win Oh

6 C C C G

drei - del drei - del drei - del I made it our of clay and

8 G G |1. G C |2. G C

when it's dry and read - y oh drei - del I shall play oh drei - del I shall play



I have a little dreidel  
I made it out of clay  
And when it's dry and ready  
Then dreidel I shall play.  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
I made it out of clay  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
Now dreidel I shall play.  
It has a lovely body  
With legs so short and thin  
And when it gets all tired  
It drops and then I win.  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
I made it out of clay  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
Now dreidel I shall play.  
My dreidel is so playful  
It loves to dance and spin  
A happy game of dreidel  
Come play now, let's begin.  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
I made it out of clay  
Oh, dreidel, dreidel, dreidel  
Now dreidel we shall play.