

What Am I?

Celebrating a mystery item



Print a "What Am I?" [sign](#). Add a "clue" in the text box, print, and post on your bulletin board. Post a different clue every day or so and see who can identify the mystery item. Then plan a "What Am I?" discussion and other related activities.

Do you know what I am? Here are some clues:

1. I am linked to *teetotum* gambling games, which were popular in ancient England and Ireland and later in Germany.
2. The game played in England today is also known as "Put and Take."
3. Some people think of me as a toy, but I am much more than that.
4. New games that use me have been appearing in the United States since 2007.
5. In the past few years, tournaments involving me have been held in major cities on the east and west coasts.
6. Astronaut Jeffrey Hoffman took me aboard the space shuttle *Endeavour* in December 1993.
7. A song about me has a catchy tune and is a favorite of children.
8. I am associated with a miraculous story.
9. I have four flat sides with a Hebrew letter on each side.
10. Outside of Israel, the letters stand for the Hebrew phrase "A great miracle happened there."
11. In Israel, the letters are changed and stand for the Hebrew phrase "A great miracle happened here."
12. The English name for me comes from the Yiddish word *dreyen*, which means "to turn."
13. The Hebrew name for me comes from the Hebrew word *sovev*, which also means "to turn."
14. I am a popular item among collectors of Judaica, or Jewish ceremonial art.
15. I have a handle on the top to start me turning and a pointed spinning tip on the bottom.

16. I am not religiously mandated for a holiday, but I am recognized for my historical and cultural significance.
17. I am closely associated with the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.
18. People usually play a game with me after Hanukkah candles are lit.
19. Children usually play with me, and winners receive a prize of raisins, nuts, or chocolate coins.
20. I spin like a top.

Have all these clues made your head spin? Wait—that's it! The item we're taking about is a dreidel!



Print a copy of the [pictures](#) to pass around as you share and discuss the information in the article with the group.

Introduction

While it looks deceptively like a child's toy, the dreidel is far more than that. It can be large or small, simply or elaborately decorated, and made from almost any material as long as it carries the requisite symbols. It is typically seen for a just a few days each year. Its history dates back millennia and is linked to a miraculous story and an ancient game of chance. Altered along the way by European custom and language, it's currently enjoying renewed popularity.

The Teetotum and the Dreidel

It's most likely that the dreidel evolved from the *teetotum*. The *teetotum* was an object resembling a top. It was popular in 16th-century England and Ireland and is thought to have descended from an ancient gambling game from the Middle East that involved spinning stones. The English *teetotum* had four flat sides that displayed the letters T (for "take all"), H ("take half"), P ("put in"), and N ("nothing").

The Jewish people of Germany and Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish, a language that combines Hebrew and German and is written with Hebrew characters. They substituted the Hebrew letters producing the same sounds: *nun* (for the Yiddish *nichts*, meaning "nothing"); *gimel* (for *ganz*, meaning "all"); *hay* (for *halb*, meaning "half"); and *shin* (for *stell ein*, meaning "put in"). The name *dreidel* comes from the Yiddish word *dreyan*, which means "to turn or spin." In Israel, the dreidel is called *sivivon*, which is the Hebrew word for "spin" or "turn."

Today, almost every country in the world has some form of dreidel game. You'll find most dreidel-like games have essentially the same put-in-and-take-out rules, although it appears that only Hanukkah dreidel games are associated with any religious holiday.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever played a dreidel game at Hanukkah? Did you play for foil-covered chocolate gelt or nuts? Share your memories.
- Do you know of any other games that seem to have evolved in one country and spread to others? (e.g., card games)
- There is an element of chance involved in playing dreidel games: on which of the four sides will the dreidel fall? Because of this, some people consider it to be a gambling game. What do you think?

The Miracle and the Mystery

No one knows exactly when or why the dreidel became so closely associated with Hanukkah. At some point, the four Hebrew letters—*nun*, *gimmel*, *hay*, and *shin*—became representative of the Hebrew phrase *Nes Gadol Haya Sham*, which means “A great miracle happened there.” In Israel, dreidels are inscribed with the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hay*, and *pay*—*Nes Gadol Haya Po*, meaning “A great miracle happened here.”

This refers to the miracle that occurred after the Jewish Maccabees (MACK-uh-beez) defeated the Syrian-Greeks in 165 BC and reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem and their freedom to worship. The Syrian-Greeks had prohibited the Jews from learning about their religion or practicing it and had defiled the holy Temple. When the Maccabees wanted to rededicate it, they found only enough pure oil to light the Eternal Light for one day. The oil miraculously lasted for eight days, allowing time for more oil to be pressed from olives and purified for use. The Hanukkah menorah, or *hanukkiyah*, is a special nine-branched candelabrum with a place to light a flame for each of the eight days. The ninth holder on the menorah is for the shamash, or “helper,” which is the candle used to light the other eight. It symbolizes the miracle of the oil and celebrates the freedom won for the Jewish people by the Maccabees.



There is another story linking the dreidel to Hanukkah: During the time when the Syrian-Greeks were in control, Jewish children would study their faith and pray in secret. If they feared they were about to be discovered by Syrian-Greek soldiers, the children would quickly pull out their ancient-style dreidels and pretend to be playing. This bit of subterfuge allowed them to avoid death at the hands of the soldiers and maintain their Jewish identity.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever seen an Israeli dreidel with the Hebrew letters that represent *Nes Gadol Haya Po*, “A great miracle happened here”?
- Have you ever had to fight to maintain your identity—religious, ethnic, or cultural? Share your experiences.
- Every religion has customs and traditions whose origins are lost in antiquity. Can you think of any customs that you link with a particular religious holiday but you don't know why? If so, do a little research to find the answer.

Give these dreidel questions a twirl and see if you can win the pot!

1. Who has the largest dreidel collection in the world?

Answer: Israeli author and politician Avram Burg is said to have the largest dreidel collection in the world with more than 3,500.

2. How many people does it take to play dreidel?

Answer: At least two, but any number can play.

3. What do you get when you combine the Hanukkah dreidel game with No Limit Texas Hold'em poker?

Answer: You get No Limit Texas Dreidel. Yes, it's really a thing.

4. How tall is the world's largest free-spinning dreidel?

Answer: The world's tallest dreidel is 22 feet tall and was built by students at the West Island Hillel in Montreal, Canada.

5. Who was the first American president to officially recognize the holiday of Hanukkah?

Answer: President Jimmy Carter officially recognized Hanukkah when he spoke at a menorah-lighting event in 1979.

6. Jelly doughnuts fried in oil—called *sufganiyot*—are a popular Hanukkah treat in Israel along with potato pancakes. Can you guess how many jelly doughnuts Israelis eat every year during Hanukkah?

Answer: They eat about 24 million doughnuts during the eight days of Hanukkah.

7. What's the record for the largest number of simultaneously spinning dreidels?

Answer: The record is 200. It was set at the Mayer Kaplan Jewish Community Center in Skokie, Illinois, in 1998.

8. *Dreidel* is the Yiddish name for the Hanukkah top. It means "to turn." What's the Hebrew name?

Answer: *Sivivon*. It also means "to turn."

9. The ancient English game that predated the dreidel was called *teetotum*. What is the dreidel-like game played today in England?

Answer: Put and Take.

10. When does Hanukkah begin?

Answer: Hanukkah always begins at sundown on the 25th day of the month of Kislev on the Jewish lunar calendar. This year it falls on December 24.

The Spinning and the Fun

No matter what the origins of the dreidel might be, everyone enjoys playing. After the Hanukkah menorah candles have been lit, the dreidels come out and the fun begins!

Grown-ups and children alike love to play dreidel. Each player starts with an equal number of game pieces (usually 10–15). The game pieces can be any small object, such as foil-covered chocolate coins called gelt, real pennies, nuts, or raisins.

1. At the beginning of a round, each player puts one game piece into the center “pot.”
2. Each player takes a turn spinning the dreidel once. Depending on which symbol is facing up when the dreidel stops spinning, the player gives or takes game pieces from the pot. Each symbol has a different name and meaning:
 - Nun – The player does nothing.
 - Gimmel – The player gets the entire pot.
 - Hay – The player takes half the pot. (If there is an odd number of pieces in the pot, round up to the nearest whole number.)
 - Shin or Pay – The player puts a game piece into the pot.
3. After a turn, the player puts one game piece into the center pot.
4. When players run out of pieces, they can leave the game or ask another player for a loan.
5. The game is over when one player has won all the game pieces or everyone gets tired of playing.

Competitive Dreidel Playing

In 2006, Eric Pavony held the first-ever Major League Dreidel Spin-off in a New York City bar. Contestants—many of whom were not Jewish—came from miles around to see who could spin their dreidel longest and win a pot of gelt. Pamela Goldman, the 2007 winner, still holds the record for dreidel spinning—17:88 seconds. In the past few years, Pavony has come up with games like Spinnings (dreidel baseball) and Target Tops (dreidel SkeeBall), played in the “Spinagogue,” which is a board game shaped like the Star of David upon which dreidels are spun.



Additional Activities

1. Watch and sing along with this YouTube version of [The Dreidel Song](#).
2. Watch this video of [how to play the dreidel game](#).
3. Sesame Street has an [adorable version](#) of a dreidel game.
4. Set up your own version of Major League Dreidel. See who can keep their dreidel spinning the longest.
5. Plan a traditional Hanukkah party and play dreidel with foil-covered chocolate coins.
6. Here is a [recipe](#) for Dreidel Surprise Cookies.



