THE ANTIQUITY OF THE DREIDLE

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Dear Rabbi Dov,

As I mentioned to you a few days ago, the dreidle is actually an ancient toy, but I may be one of the very few people who knows this, and I discovered it by accident. A few years ago, I was reading the "ultimate" edition of "The Annotated Alice" about Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland books, by the late Martin Gardner. There is a scene in "Through the Looking Glass" where Alice is on a railroad train in the same compartment with an old woman whose large handbag is open, and there is an inventory of the items it contains. One of these items is a "teetotum", and Gardner explains that this was a toy in 19th century England, and from his brief description I realized that it was basically a dreidle. So I did a little research. Here is what my Cassell's "Concise English Dictionary", UK edition, 1997 says:

tee-to'-tum, 1. a toy, originally four-sided, turning like a top, used in a game of chance.
   2. any toy that is spun using the fingers.
   (for T-totum, take all: T, + Lat. totum, the whole, marked on one of the sides) So the T in teetotum corresponds to the gimel on our dreidle.

Then I looked in my fairly ancient copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica, and found "teetotum" at the end of the article on toys; where it said "known to the ancient Greeks and Romans; used in more recent times where dice were forbidden (sometimes with six sides, to mimic dice)."

So the actual item goes back to "the ancient Greeks and Romans", and is thus not of recent origin. How and when the Jewish version originated is not yet clear to me, nor how it got associated with Chanukah...but it was probably known in ancient Israel during the Hellenistic period, which was also the age of the Hasmoneans...and the borrowing could have gone in either direction. (Many Greek words entered Hebrew at that time, but there were also Hebrew words that entered Greek and from there to Latin, like "pita" for bread became the Greek word for "pie" to this day, and from there became the Latin word that in Italian became "pizza". Likewise, from "k'tonet", a Hebrew garment, the Greeks formed the word "kiton" which then became the Latin word "tunic".) In talking recently to an Iraqi Jew, they don't have the Yiddish associations (e.g. gantz, halb, nisht,...) for the four letters on the dreidle—he said that for them "nun" is the letter that means to take the entire pot!

The name "dreidle" is almost certainly Yiddish from the German verb dreien, to turn or spin. (Of course, in Israel, it is called "svivon", a "spinner".) Best wishes, Sol Golomb

I found another dictionary (my Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, ca. 1955) that actually listed the four Roman letters on the classical teetotum, and the Latin words they stood for. In addition to T for totum (all), there was N for nihil (nothing), D for depone (put), and A for aufer (take), closely corresponding to the Hebrew letter meanings associated with gimel, nun, shin, and heh. The definition given was "A kind of top spun with the fingers, especially one with four lettered sides used in a game of chance."