

Hanukkah Gelt

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Have you ever thought about why we give and receive Hanukkah gelt on Hanukkah? There seems to be no mention of gift - giving in the story of the Maccabees. So how did this custom begin? A bit of historical sleuthing turns up some answers.

Hanukkah has been celebrated for a very long time. The main part of the holiday has always been lighting candles for eight days. Traditionally, when the candles were burning, no work was done. This was a time when family and friends would gather together to celebrate the holiday and relax and enjoy each others' company. Often during this time the story of the Maccabees was told, and then both children and adults would play games. Children would act out the Hanukkah story. The adults would sometimes play a complicated game of riddles. As you know, each Hebrew letter has a number value. This is what made the game so hard: the number value of the letters in the answer to the riddle often had to add up to 44. This is the same number of candles lit during the eight days of Hanukkah.

During the Middle Ages in some communities, other games began to be played; among them, cards. At first, the rabbis were opposed to this because the Talmud does not approve of gambling. (In the Middle Ages, people gambled when they played cards). The rabbis then decided, however, that on happy occasions and holidays, such

as weddings, the New Moon, Purim, and Hanukkah, card playing was permitted.

Then card playing became more and more popular. People even began making up their own games and decks of cards. One game in-

olved using 31 picture cards of the Canaanite kings whom the Israelites fought against in Biblical times.

Soon another game became very popular, especially in Germany and Poland. This game was played often on Hanukkah, and it, too, included winning and losing. The game was called Dreydel - the same game we play today. The dreydel of course, is the four - sided top, with a Hebrew letter on each side. The Gimmel means "take all." The Heh stands for "half." The Nun stands for "nothing" and the Shin means "put in." After the drey-

del stops spinning whatever letter is on top tells the player what to do. So if the Shin is on top, you put all your coins or chips in the pot; if you are lucky enough to get a Gimmel, you take all the coins in the pot.

Dreydel is the perfect game to play on Hanukkah because the Nun, Gimmel, Heh and Shin start the words Nes Gadol Hayah Sham. This means, "A great miracle happened here." The story of Hanukkah and the Maccabees is certainly filled with miracles.

For a long time, only adults played cards and dreydel. Finally, in the 1700's children began to play. But they did not have any coins! It's certainly less fun if you cannot win or lose. To solve this problem, children were given coins of "gelt" so they could properly play dreydel. The children, of course, were delighted. From then on, they expected a small amount of coins of Hanukkah.

In the 1700's when the children began receiving gelt, it also became a tradition to give teachers bonus gifts on Hanukkah to show the dignity of the Torah and all its rewards. Presents were also given to the poor and to community workers. Brides and bridegrooms began exchanging presents. So Hanukkah became a time for gift - giving.

We now have some idea of why we get gelt and presents during Hanukkah. The reasons are all happy ones, just like the holiday.

REHOVOT (WNS) -- Prof. Michael Sela has been reelected to a second five - year term as President of the Weizman Institute of Science at the conclusion of the Institute's 31st annual board meeting.

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