

The Dreidel: Four Kinds of Hope

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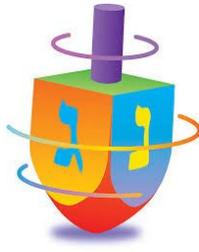
Shabbat Vayeshev, Right Before Chanukkah – December 1, 2018

You know the thing about – the optimist sees the glass as half full, the pessimist sees it half empty? Then there's the consultant they bring in to mediate, and she says you know, the glass is twice as big as you really need it to be.

Chanukkah starts tomorrow night, and that's kind of what it's about -- the legend of the cruse of oil that seemed so small, only enough to keep the Temple lamp burning for a day, but it lasted longer and longer. My old friend and teacher Rabbi Jon Jay Tilsen calls it: "an eight-day Mediterranean cruse."

But to go back to the consultant – I've come to think about a lot of things in life in terms of portfolio management. People talk about investment portfolios –long-term and short-term, stocks and bonds. I think Chanukkah can teach us creating a *hope portfolio*. Hope. Chanukkah is a story that begins with hope – how this group of Jewish rebels somehow kept going, when they were up against an empire that wanted to squelched out Judaism, when they had to face people in their own community ready to give up and sell out.

But hope isn't always like that – impossible odds, and you win anyway. Seeing the glass always full. That's one part of it. But I think Chanukkah teaches us about a hope portfolio that is essential to our spiritual wellbeing. I get my hope portfolio not from some expert with a technologically sophisticated algorithm, but from a very simple device:



-- the dreidel, with its four sides, its four symbols. Each one represents a certain kind of hope, and together as a portfolio they keep us in the right balance.

The way the dreidel game works is that you've got a pot of M&Ms in the middle, or these wrapped Fair Trade chocolates you can get tomorrow in our gift shop -- and you take turns spinning the dreidel. If it lands on *Gimel* you get everything. *Hay*, you take half. *Shin*, you put something in. *Nun*, nothing happens.

To me, these are four different kinds of hope. *Gimel* hope, *Hay* hope, *Shin* hope, *Nun* hope.

Gimel is when you get everything in the pot. *Gimel* stands for *gadol*, great or large. *Gimel* hope is going for broke, hoping and praying for everything, and actually getting it. *Gimel* hope is the final definitive cure from an illness. It's seeing someone you love come out of a rough phase of life and seem happy again. It's when a neighborhood in an American city or a village in the developing world that had been mostly poor is transformed, through schools and solar power and clean water. *Gimel* is the idea that our friends at the Nashua Soup Kitchen and Shelter have that Nashua will be the first medium-sized city in America where no child in school will ever have to miss even a single meal on a single day.

Gimel, the great miracle, doesn't always happen. But when it does, it means that the world or life is exactly the way we dream it should be. If there weren't some *Gimel* in the world, we could never hope at all. It's the *Gimel* every so often that keeps us going. When the world as it is, suddenly crosses with the world that we know is supposed to be.

When the dreidel lands on *Hay*, you take half the pot. *Hay* hope is hope for something part-way to amazing. It's a remission in cancer. It's a good few days during the months after a concussion. It's when some basically good and decent people win in the most recent round of elections. It's when some time after a divorce, you're with people and feel connected, feel like the new version of yourself is someone you might be happy being.

A lot of the good things that happen to us, or that we achieve, are *Hay*. Hoping for a *Hay* isn't settling – it's a real kind of hope.

A third scenario in dreidel is *Shin*. If you get a *Shin*, you don't get anything – actually you have to put something back into the pot.

That doesn't seem like any kind of hope. It seems like the opposite of hope.

But it's not. *Shin* is what you do that gives someone else hope. *Shin* stands for the Hebrew word *sham*, which means "there", somewhere else.

When we get together like this in prayer, we might have prayers for ourselves, things that we need or are concerned about, things we are thankful about because of what happened to me this week.

But just as important is what we do for each other. In a little bit, when we get to the prayer for healing, some of us will say the names of people we know who are sick. And all of us are going to hear those prayers, and acknowledge them. All of us are going to say *Amen*, and stand by you, and hopefully be willing to support you and the person who is not here who you are caring for in whatever way you are. That's our *Shin*.

I've told you before, on this theme, about a congregant who was saying her mother's name for *Misheberach* for healing for many weeks a few years ago, until her mother died. When she and her husband came back to services the first time after returning from shiva in California, I had a pit in my stomach, thinking about the name we couldn't say. But then, she did something remarkable – she said someone else's name. She offered up a prayer for someone else's healing. Surely that prayer wasn't a *Gimel*, a hope for a certain cure. The prayer was a *Shin*, a response to personal loss by doing for someone else who had a need for prayer and a need for hope.

When I think of *Shin*, I also think of the late Israeli leader Shimon Peres. He was the loser of more elections than any candidate for prime minister ever. Not many M&Ms flowing his way, overall.

But he just kept adding to the pot. He was the genius behind Israel's original nuclear weapons program – then he became single-minded about peace with the Palestinians. Which has not happened, at least not yet. But in his 90s, while he was and after he was president of Israel, Shimon Peres helped expand Israel's latest green energy revolution. He became a mentor to young leaders, he channeled investments to their projects. He continued to talk about his vision for a peaceful Mideast, which he knew could only be possible after his own life. Peres died a couple years ago before he could see any of his dreams quite come true. All he could do was *Shin*, to pass them along to others.

The last outcome in dreidel, #4, is *Nun*, where nothing happens. You don't get anything from the pot and you don't put anything in. Strangely, *Nun* in Hebrew is the first letter of *nes*, the word for miracle. So how can hope be connected to nothing?

Nun is looking where others would have no hope – and having hope anyway. It's living by your values even when you don't get rewards or recognition. It's believing in the goodness of the world and the goodness of people, even on the days when you don't see any of it. It's looking at the *Chanukiyyah* the moment *before* you light the candle, seeing the darkness and believing that a bit of light is somewhere anyway. Hope in a *Nun* way isn't about optimism or predicting outcomes. It's a way of saying that some things matter no matter what is actually going to happen.

This is the portfolio of hope: *Nun*, *Gimel*, *Hay*, *Shin*. Hope for the biggest things imaginable, the ones that sometimes happen. Hope for partial healing and partial justice and partial happiness. Hoping for others, and just hoping when you can't give any good reason for doing so. 25% each is a good portfolio to start with. Hope isn't all or nothing; a spiritual person isn't one who has *Gimel* hope all the time. A skeptic isn't someone who refuses to hope.

We live for the *Gimel* and the *Hay* -- or so we think. But I think the *Nun* and the *Shin* are at least as profound, at least as hopeful. Hope doesn't just come, we don't just have it or not. It comes from somewhere else, from *Shin*, and it stays when there is nothing, *Nun*. We need all four in our portfolio.

Before the Maccabees found the cruse of oil, someone had to store it away. It takes a *Shin*, someone to buy the M&Ms for the game, someone to put them on the table in the first place.

That's what's happening here, in a synagogue, all the time.

We can hope because our ancestors kept passing along the Torah – a story about a people who were so far from freedom, the farthest possible, trapped by the most powerful tyrant on earth-- but who became free. A story of a God who could reach absolutely anywhere, take the lowliest people and rescue them, make them the first people close to God and then charge them with a mission to spread into the world.

We can hope because every Shabbat there's a gathering here where we dare to say words like love, peace, justice, *ahava, shalom, tzedek*, over and over, to keep them real in a world where they seem not to be.

We can hope because young people like Maggie and her classmates spend time learning those words and the stories spun around them, and get up on days like this and show us that our *Shin* is their *Gimel*. That they can say something new and original with what we have given them, and show us that they are starting to change our world.

So when you think about Chanukkah this year, think about that hope portfolio. And don't put all your M&Ms, all your investments, in *Gimel* and *Hay*; it's not only about those times when everything turns out, or when a lot goes right. Each of us needs a life of some *Gimel*, some *Hay*, some *Nun* and some *Shin*. Think what you can do to hope, when hope seems unreasonable. What you can do to make someone else's life more hopeful. To turn the first light of Chanukkah into two, then three, then eight, and beyond.

Shabbat Shalom, and *Chag Urim Samayach*, Happy Chanukkah!