



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and  
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

### **MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.**

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

---

Reel  
61

Box  
19

Folder  
1214

Is Chanukah For Children?, 1981.



Is Chanukah For Children?  
Daniel Jeremy Silver  
December 20, 1981

in the cycle of Torah readings which is the custom and the practice of the synagogue, this week is devoted to the opening - I can only hope that you do better tonight.

Is Chanukah for children? The answer in 1981 must be yes. Chanukah is a time of gifting and singing, a time of bustling around the house <sup>for</sup> and the children who are very young of great anticipation. But behind the children's Chanukah lies many another story and I'd like to tell you two of those stories, two adult stories, not x-rated stories but adult stories, today. And I'd like to do so on the basis of two well-known children's songs. They're almost doggerel. You know both of them. One goes, I had a little dre<sup>d</sup>dle, I made it out of clay, and when it's dry and ready, then dre<sup>d</sup>dle I shall play. And the other children's song goes this way: on this night we will light one little candle fire... Now, what could be lovelier, more childlike and child-pleasing than these two little songs. Let's look at them though more carefully.

The dre<sup>d</sup>dle, a top. Children love to play with tops. They spin, they fall, they go all over the room, and this top is a good teaching device, at least for four of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet because it has, as you know, on its sides letters nun, yimel, heh, shin, and as our teachers in the Religious School make sure that the children know this stands for very simple, very pious line, which reflects the message of Chanukah, it's an acronym - nes, gadol, hiyah, sham - a great miracle took place there, and this is the miracle, the miracle of the lights which when, you will recall, there was only enough oil for one day's use. It required eight days presumably to mollify, to prepare new oil, especially for the lights of the Temple and that one small cruse of oil lasted the eight days of Chanukah, eight days of the dedication. Every child in the school knows that. Every child in the school loves to play with the dradle. What could be more childlike or beloved by children until - until you meet up with a medievalist and that medievalist



takes one look at the dreidel and he says, oh, I've seen this before. You call it a dreidel. It's called in middle high German a trendl and it was one of the major gambling devices that was used in Germany in those years. And if he happens to be an expert in medieval England he'll say in England this was called a tetotem. It was a gambling device, a gambling top, and it was called a tetotem because tea was on one of the sides and totem is the Latin for all and when it fell with the tea up it meant that you took the whole pot and so it came to have in Shakespeare's time the name teatotem. And if you really meet up with an expert in middle high German folklore he'll tell you that in some of the German museums there are even examples of the trendel which are like loaded dice where the one side has been loaded so that the particular point that you want to come up comes up. And so you find that the little pious phrase, the acronym, nes, gadol, hiya sham, is really an overlay of four German words: the nun for nyecht, nothing happens, you've lost your turn; the gimmel, for gans, take it all in, the pot's yours; the heh for halb, you get half the pot; and the shin for shtelein, you've got to match the pot, put it in, you lose. Somehow, this children's game then takes us back to the world of gambling and reminds us of the fact that in the moralistic literature of our people from about the third century Mishnaic times down to modern times gambling was a very special, very particular vice of Jews. By that I don't mean that other people didn't engage in it. I simply mean that the rabbis again and again pounded the pulpit in frustration about the gambling propensities of Jews. Now, the Christian moralist banged the pulpit about drunkenness and the Muslim moralist banged the pulpit about wenching and Jews banged the pulpit about gambling. And you'll find that gambling plays an inordinate role in Talmudic literature. The Talmud talks again and again about the one whose massed kugya, one who plays with dice, and it declares all forms of gambling a sin. It tries to discourage gambling in every way possible. It says that one who is an inveterate gambler or a professional gambler is disqualified to act as a member of a court and his testimony is not to be accepted in civil cases on



the grounds that one who lives in this world has so accustomed himself to deceit, has learned never to say openly what is in fact the fact, the cards that he holds, what he's thinking about, that he cannot be trusted to be honorable and honest when it comes to matters of justice and law. And as you come down through Jewish history you find again and again the rabbis complaining about the gambling proclivities of the Jewish people. For all of us who love the game of tennis I'll tell you a little tidbit from Jewish history.

In the late 17th century the Jewish community of Verona in Italy owned a tennis court. It was a municipal tennis court. It was indoors but it was a municipal court. And the rabbis in about 1678 issued a ban of excommunication against any who played on this tennis court and tried to force the Jewish municipality to sell the tennis court because Jews were wagering so much on every game that some families were bankrupting themselves. Now, today you think of tennis as a relatively neutral, unbetting venue, but in those days Jews bet on anything and on everything. Chess, what could be a more thoughtful, more demanding, more interesting game? But again you'll find the rabbis fulminating against chess not because of the game and not because of the intelligence required but because Jews were gambling on the outcome of every game that was taking place in the community. Now, again they tried to turn the screws on the gamblers, to try and void this tendency, in part because it was causing great hardship to many families. There were any number of tragic cases of women who found themselves married to inveterate gamblers who couldn't bring home enough money to feed the family because they lost whatever money they had between the time their wages were paid or they took the money out of the store and they came home to their families. So the rabbis decreed in the Middle Ages that gambling debts were not collectible in the courts, there was no way of enforcing the collection of such a debt, and they tried to organize the various societies, the honorary societies of the community, the Hevrakedisha, the various societies that were important in the life of the community, so that inveterate gamblers were black-



balled from admission to these societies, but nothing worked. It's interesting to speculate where this urge to gamble comes from. The anthropologists tells us it's one of the most primitive acts of primitive people, one of the first things you notice in a primitive society. And they believe that this comes out of the reason that primitive people fail to make a separation between the supernatural world and the real world, and that gambling is for them a way of testing the waters, of seeing whether or not the gods, whoever they worshipped, is in fact smiling on, encouraging their particular action. This kind of gambling is really a form of divination. In the Greek world and the Roman world and the Persian world almost everybody gambled to discover whether or not this was a good day into a business deal, this was a good day to undertake something. If luck was with you it wasn't luck, it was the gods. If the gods were with you they would be with you all day, and so it was a good day to complete your business as well as whatever your nefarious business was around the gambling table. But this wouldn't explain why gambling was such an interest of Jews. And here I suggest a fact that I have noticed in our literature. If you read in the Bible you find the prophets thundering about every conceivable vice. Judeans are accused of being insensitive to needs of the poor; they're accused of perverting justice for their own benefit; they're accused of not being careful of the rights of the alien, the stranger who is within their midst; they're accused of not providing the tithes that are necessary for the upkeep of the Temple and the schools and of the poor. They're accused of lying abed if they're rich on couches of ivory, listening to slaves singing songs, getting drunk in the middle of the day, all manner of vice. But the Bible never once mentions the vice of gambling. It's only when the era the Bible closes which is that only once the Temple is destroyed, once Jews lose their sense of being rooted in a particular place, once the exile, once the diaspora begins, that the urge to gamble arises among the people. And so I would suggest to you that part of this propensity of gambling - every group gambles - but this very special Jewish propensity for gambling has some-



thing to do with homelessness, with being uprooted, with being denied the opportunity to own land, to feel secure. Jews lived on a narrow edge day in and day out and for many centuries they couldn't do anything but live by borrowing and selling and by lending out money and trying to get it back as best they could. They lived on the narrow edge. They were gambling every day. Business was really a day-long gamble. Their lives had such tension to it there was no security, whatever you had could be stripped from you tomorrow by an order of exile or appropriation from the local duke, prince or king, and they carried this sense of tension along with them, this sense that life really didn't make any sense, what reason was there to squirrel away the money since it would be taken from them anyway, let's gamble for the big stakes, perhaps - perhaps - perhaps we'll win. Whether that explanation is accurate or not, it is certainly clear that as times got worse in the late Middle Ages the drive to gamble became greater, and the rabbis tried, as modern ethicists and politicians have tried to do, to moderate the vices of a people by making them semi-legal. And so they tried to say, Jews are gambling almost every day, let's say that Jews can gamble only on certain days. And so they said we'll gamble on Purim and we'll gamble on Chanukah, they're holidays they wouldn't be working on anyway, and once they gave that permission it was Purim and Chanukah and then it was the intermediate days of Sukkot and the intermediate days of Passover and then there was Rosh Hodesh, the new moon. They found excuses, in other words, to add and to add and to add. And then they decided well, perhaps since that hasn't really worked what we ought to do is to bring gambling into the synagogue. And in the 18th century you find the rabbis beginning, some of them at least, to encourage lotteries, the modern version is bingo games, lotteries in the synagogue, on the argument that the State of New York did when it created off-track gambling and off-track betting, the argument that we do in the State of Ohio when we tie the support of our schools to the tote boards at race tracks and the amount of alcohol that's sold, that at least we'll get some benefit out of people's vices and indulgences. And now you have the rabbis on the side of gambling in a sense, and you find, interestingly, in the 18th and 19th centuries



the rabbis beginning to create a gambling liturgy. I found one text in which the rabbi was asked by somebody what prayer do we recite after we win. And the answer is that you hianu, it kept us alive and allowed us to enjoy the benefits of this day. Nobody asked him what prayer we say when we lose but, in any case, you begin to get an aura of sanctity around this activity, all out of an attempt to limit it and to domesticate it. And the dreidle represents part of this agenda of domesticating gambling. Chanukah was gambling time, it lasts eight days, it's a wonderful way to have a binge in mid-winter when you can't be working in the fields anyway. It lasts eight days. They gambled heavily, and so if we could turn the gambling of Chanukah into a child's game and take the marks and the florens away from the game and put nuts and raisins and marbles instead perhaps we can live with that kind of gambling, and that's really what's behind the dreidle. The dreidle doesn't appear until the 17th century and is part of a conscious effort on the part of the moral leadership of our people to limit the gambling proclivities of our people. And from my observation it has limited them on Chanukah but we are still a generation of gamblers.

I'll take you one step further into the so-called child centeredness of Chanukah. We give presents. Tonight all around the Chanukah bush will be a whole variety of packages for all the little ones. And your grandparents and great grandparents justified this aping of Christmas on the grounds that in their communities in Eastern Europe on Chanukah they had given something called Chanukah gelt, you've all heard of it, coins were given to the children, coins were given to the students and what's the origin of Chanukah gelt? It's fascinating. Chanukah gelt does not appear at all in the Sephardic world. There's no mention of it until the 18th century and it seems to have grown for this reason. The students who were in the yeshivot, the rabbinical students, were notoriously poor. They saw everybody else gambling on Chanukah and they had nothing to gamble with so they began to tell the people they lived with, they had a system, they lived in a different home every day and they ate in a different home every day and, really, at Chanukah time they really ought



to give them some Chanukah gelt, some money with which they too could gamble during the Chanukah season, and so the concept of giving gifts tonight is even part and parcel of this whole process on proclivity of gambling among our people. So much for the dreidle. Enjoy it but remember what it's all about.

What about the Menorah? Our children love to place the little multi-colored candles in the menorah. It reminds them, as it reminds us, of a history we dimly recall, something way back when some Greeks went into the Temple and they put up an idol and the Maccabees didn't like the idol so the Maccabees finally won out and they took down the idol and then the oil lasted for the eight days and we light a different light each day for the eight days. Now, a nice story, most Jews know just about that about the story, but when we look more closely at the menorah and at the nine lights, really, of Chanukah we find another story, a story within a story.

Chanukah is the one holiday for which we have a firsthand account of the original Chanukah. Not only did Juda the Maccabee recapture Jerusalem and purify the Temple, but then after a further 18-year struggle his brothers, he didn't survive, but several of his brothers were able to establish their family's authority over an independent Judea and we had what was called the rule of the Hasmonean Dynasty, and very early on they hired some professional historians to write the chronicles of the Hasmonean Dynasty and these chronicles survived in the apocrypha, they're called the Second Book of Maccabees, and here is the story written, probably, on the basis of firsthand witness, of the original Chanukah.

Thereupon, Judas and his brothers said, "Now our enemies have been defeated. Let us go purify the sanctuary and restore it." The entire army assembled, and they went up to Mount Zion. They saw the temple laid desolate and the altar profaned and the gates burned and the courts overgrown with plants as "in a thicket." and the chambers laid in ruins. And they rent their garments and made great lamentations and put on ashes as all signs of mourning. They prostrated themselves upon the ground and sounded the signal trumpets and cried out to Heaven. Then Judas assigned soldiers the duty of fighting the men who remained, the Greeks, that is, who remained in the fortress of Jerusalem while he purified the sanctuary. He appointed unblemished priests, lovers of Torah, who purified the sanctuary and removed the stones of the loathsome structure to an unclean place. They deliberated over what they



should do with the profaned altar and they came up with the good idea of dismantling it lest the fact that the Greeks had defiled it should be held to their disgrace. Accordingly, they dismantled the altar, and put its stones away on the temple mount in a suitable place until the prophet should come to give an oracle telling them what to do with them. Then taking uncut stones as prescribed by the Torah they built a new altar after the pattern of the old. They repaired the sanctuary and sanctified the interior of the house and the courts. They also made new sacred vessels, and they brought the candelabrum and the altar of incense and the table into the nave. They burned incense on the altar and kindled the lights on the candelabrum so that they illuminated the nave. They set loaves upon the tables and they hung curtains and brought to completion all the work which they had done. Then they rose early on the morning of the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month (that is, the month of Kislev), in the year 1948, and they brought a sacrifice according to the Torah upon the new altar of burnt offerings which they had built. At the very time of year and on the very day on which the Greeks had profaned the altar, it was dedicated to the sound of singing and harps and cymbals. The entire people prostrated themselves and bowed and gave thanks to Heaven Who had brought them victory. They celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, joyfully bringing burnt offerings and sacrificing peace offerings and thank offerings. And they decorated the front of the nave with golden cornices and bosses and restored the gates and the chambers and fitted them with doors

and so on. No mention of a cruse of oil, no mention of the Chanukiah, the menorah which is so well known to us. And we know from history, from research, that what these Maccabean people were really doing was to copy out the way in which Solomon had dedicated the altar in the First Temple in Jerusalem. It, too, had been dedicated during an eight-day procession which had followed the building of its house and the gilding of the implements and the utensils which were to be used in the sanctuary. It, too, was an altar built of uncut stones and the Hezekiah had some centuries later built another altar because the altar had been polluted by the acts of a king named Menasa. He, too, had a feast of dedication, a feast of Chanukah, the Hebrew word for dedication, which lasted for eight days. As a matter of fact, you won't find any mention of the menorah, of the lights of Chanukah, in any literature of a late period in our history from which there is a great deal of literature for almost half a millenium, for nearly 500 years.

What then does the Chanukah menorah represent if we look at it historically? In the ancient world around this time of the year people were in the habit of light-



ing great bonfires. Why did they light bonfires? Because this is the time of the year when the solstice takes place, when the shortest day of the year occurs, it occurs just five days from now, and as the ancient people saw the day growing shorter and shorter they feared that it might just continue to grow shorter and shorter until the earth is in fact surrounded with darkness which was one of their fears as to the nature of an ultimate destruction. And so they lit great bonfires in order to encourage God or the gods, whoever they worshipped, to light the sun up again, to give the sun more power, so that the sun would in fact bring about the spring, a new harvest, a new seed time and harvest. And one of the customs which seems to have occurred was to set lights in a row in a public place. And in the Talmud we're told that the menorah should be in a window where it can be seen, and people would light one light less each day as the days grew shorter and then they would begin when the days began to grow longer again, just to make sure, light one light more each day. It's sympathetic magic. It's symbolizing by a ritual what you want God, the gods, the sun, to do. And interestingly, the earliest discussion of the Chanukiah, of the menorah, in the Talmud in the fourth century is a discussion not of that ultimate cosmic question, shall we begin by lighting the first light on this side or the first light on this side, but a discussion of whether we should light all of the lights the first day and then seven of them the second day, and six of them the third day in diminishing order or should we do it, as is our custom today, in ascending order and it's a memory the rabbis no longer understand but a memory of that old pagan custom which attempted at this time of the year to make sure that the sun was born again. And I use those words deliberately to suggest that Christianity's placing of the birth of the Son is in fact part and parcel of this same old pagan inheritance.

The Chanukah light represents one of the very few adaptations of a pagan system into Jewish life. By and large, unlike most other religions, Judaism consciously and deliberately put off almost every vestige of paganism that was around. We didn't



have idols. We didn't take Zeus and Minervah and Rah and Ossiris and turn them into Jesus and the Virgin Mary and the other statues of the saints that are in the churches. We put away the pagan things except for this one, and the question is why. And the answer goes to the very heart of how Chanukah became something of what it is today.

Chanukah was, after all, this first Chanukah that I read to you, represented a great triumph which was the inaugural day, the coronation day in a sense, certainly the day in which the rule of the Hasmoneans was legitimized. It represented independence and sovereignty and the fourth of July and it was celebrated as independence day, as the great day <sup>of</sup> the Hasmonean Dynasty, for almost a century until Rome took over that part of the world, and it continued to be celebrated as a national holiday, a holiday where the theme was national freedom, during the first century of Roman occupation and I suspect it was the holiday which was most beloved to the zealots and to the others who ultimately led the revolt against Rome. We had revolted against Rome twice and had been defeated twice and those were the two bloodiest defeats our people ever suffered in a military sense, defeats which took us from being a major political and numerical group within the Eastern Roman Empire and reduced us to the minority status which Jews have had to this very day. Once that had happened it became necessary for the rabbis to try and defuse, take away the nationalism, of the holiday and turn it into a holiday which celebrated something which was spiritual purely, something which would not cry out to people to try again to duplicate what Judah Maccabee had done. What had Judah done? He was small, head of a small band, and by guerilla war he defeated the most powerful empire in that part of the world, and one can see impressionable 13, 14, 15-year old young Jews feeling that if Judah could do it why can't I, and that was, of course, disaster not only for the small group that attempted this but for the whole community. And so the rabbis devised, crafted, found, we don't know quite how it happened, a story of the cruse of oil and they identified this existing system of having lights at this time of the year with this miracle, and they gave us a holiday, the holiday we know which is a holiday which symbolizes the ability of the religion to survive rather than the



ability of the nation to achieve its independence, a holiday which speaks of God's protection of those things which were central to Him, His faith, the Torah, the purity of worship and it is in that spirit that we light these lights.

Chanukah then, like so much in culture, is not quite what it seems. Please don't go home tonight and around the Chanukah tell your four-year old all that I've told you today. I'm telling it to you. Chanukah is a time to tell them their story and let them enjoy Chanukah their way. Spin the dreidle with abandon. Believe me, at the age of four and five and six they don't know what gambling is all about, but the next time you gamble remember what we try to do with Chanukah.





4 36 Thereupon, Judas and his brothers said, "Now our enemies have been defeated. Let us go purify the sanctuary and restore it." 37 The entire army assembled, and they went up to Mount Zion. 38 They saw the temple laid desolate and the altar profaned and the gates burned and the courts overgrown with plants as "in a thicket" or like "one of the mountains" and the chambers laid in ruins. 39 They rent their garments and made great lamentation and put on ashes. 40 They prostrated themselves upon the ground and sounded the signal trumpets and cried out to Heaven. 41 Then Judas assigned soldiers the duty of fighting the men in the Akra while he purified the sanctuary. 42 He appointed unblemished priests, lovers of the Torah, 43 who purified the sanctuary and removed the stones of the loathsome structure to an unclean place. 44 They deliberated over what they should do with the profaned altar of the burnt offering, 45 and they came up with the good idea of dismantling it lest the fact that the gentiles had defiled it should be held to their disgrace. Accordingly, they dismantled the altar, 46 and put its stones away on the temple mount in a suitable place until a prophet should come to give an oracle concerning them. 47 Taking uncut stones as prescribed by the Torah, they built a new altar after the pattern of the old. 48 They repaired the sanctuary and sanctified the interior of the house and the courts. 49 They also made new sacred vessels, and they brought the candelabrum and the altar of incense and the table into the nave. 50 They burned incense on the altar and kindled the lights on the candelabrum so that they illumined the nave. 51 They set loaves upon the table and hung the curtains and brought to completion all the work which they had done. 52 They rose early on the morning of the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month (that is, the month of Kislev), in the year 148, 53 and they brought a sacrifice according to the Torah upon the new altar of burnt offerings which they had built. 54 At the very time of year and on the very day on

which the gentiles had profaned the altar, it was dedicated to the sound of singing and harps and lyres and cymbals. 55 The entire people prostrated themselves and bowed and gave thanks to Heaven Who had brought them victory. 56 They celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, joyfully bringing burnt offerings and sacrificing peace offerings and thank offerings. 57 They decorated the front of the nave with golden cornices and bosses and restored the gates and

N OF

the chambers and fitted them with doors. 58 The people were overjoyed as the shame inflicted by the gentiles was removed. 59 Judas and his brothers and the entire assembly of Israel decreed that the days of the dedication of the altar should be observed at their time of year annually for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev, with joy and gladness. 60 At that time they







top opening same as Nilt = New ~~model~~ see in

2. Half = Half of the 1st or 4th

in the second Evening They spoke with a small

The old ~~low~~ <sup>junior</sup> ~~junior~~ <sup>senior</sup> ~~senior~~ <sup>came to be</sup>  
~~was used~~ <sup>used</sup> ~~number~~ <sup>number</sup> - ~~it~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup>  
 of a ~~great~~ <sup>great</sup> ~~site~~ <sup>site</sup> ~~at~~ <sup>at</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~place~~ <sup>place</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~use~~ <sup>use</sup>  
 as ~~convenient~~ <sup>convenient</sup> ~~used~~ <sup>used</sup> ~~for~~ <sup>for</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~purpose~~ <sup>purpose</sup>

years were given to heavy gunnery - - the  
new proceedings submitted as and described - an  
much revised document against immunity -  
 the revelation of an article from the beginning of the  
defense case against CRIMINALS



The Talmudic scholars gambles a bet - unusual game  
not only to parents, but to adult every age group of devoted  
children - children even now celebrate under the  
light and kind ways which are used - as we see  
the children celebrate and use (Mid T. to 26:7)  
Because the level of the world - it - a modern world  
which are not the same game are disrupted  
from each - judges in an unfamiliar to what are,  
but children are needed fast, the game has not yet  
on your side

It is intended and as perfect complex about  
may see the game as unfamiliar to what are  
will be lost - and it - a modern  
view of the importance of joint play - as it is designed  
you would have to see of children from each to  
a growing order of disproportion in style - as one  
intending a game from each and each kind is  
or you are not craft - all are used as one  
line to the game - to begin a game - by the game  
pledge to children

It is needed to unite the children from each and each kind  
along in the game - the game at each and each kind play



It seems a wonderful set - a way of life -

It is kind of and good and kind and kind for days.  
And then

For now it is just a game -

In the 16th century in 2nd of Texas we were  
found in a spot and American state were  
suggested in the matter - I was a man a ruler  
decide ~~found~~ by the ruler of CHAMBERS for the  
rehabilitate to all a man's life around Texas court  
bever for some families in the court for  
and high state and whole families were brought  
on the results of a simple matter

There was a ruler of CHAMBERS and

a ruler of CHAMBERS and

man of family and in CHAMBERS - 1941  
and then and in CHAMBERS at

They decided that family and  
not be collected CHAMBERS the  
court

The CHAMBERS and  
be a ruler of CHAMBERS and  
court in CHAMBERS and  
after and in CHAMBERS and  
man in CHAMBERS -

Family, and ruler - CHAMBERS -



How can we of the unhappy people - it might  
be said to benefit it - that it is  
spread in the country, of people are not  
to be concerned with it to be  
should be concerned

[illegible][illegible]











Why not write me out a record altogether?

Because it was necessary to defer recording - as  
I had been to visit my mother's day of her death -  
- I returned on 4 days later to find that my mother -  
was in her room and very ill - ~~she~~ <sup>she</sup> -

unable to move - fatal

Her body was buried in the ~~grave~~ <sup>grave</sup>

