The dreidel. A children's game, played in the firelight of a cold winter night, the Chanukah Menorah silently glowing in the window... The dreidel. Its four sides spinning around the still point in the turning circle; spinning so fast that its sides blur into nothingness... The dreidel. So seemingly insignificant - and yet this little dreidel contains the story of the Jewish People; the history of the whole world...

Our story starts not with the miracle of Chanukah, but 1,437 years earlier with Jacob's ladder. Jacob had a prophetic dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder that reached from the ground to the heavens. These angels weren't Hollywood extras with fluorescent tubes over their heads - they were, in fact, incorporeal spiritual messengers - the protecting forces of four great kingdoms. Four kingdoms that would in the future dominate and exile the Jewish People: Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. At first, Yaakov saw the angel of Babylon ascend the ladder 70 steps and then he came down: The Jewish People were in the Babylonian exile for 70 years. The protecting angel of the Empire of Persia and Media then climbed up the ladder 52 steps before he descended: The Jewish People were in exile in Persia 52 years. Then the angel of the Empire of Greece climbed 180 rungs - the domination of Greece lasted 180 years. Finally, the protecting angel of the Roman Empire climbed up the ladder, but he didn't come down. Yaakov feared that this final exile would never end, until Hashem promised Yaakov - If he will rise up like an eagle and make his nest among the stars - even from there I will bring him down. We are still in that final exile, in the softly asphyxiating embrace of Rome's spiritual heirs...
THE FOUR KINGDOMS

BABYLON
In the year 3338 (587/6 BCE), the first of our Holy Temples was razed to the ground, and the majority of the Jewish People led into exile by the Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar. Why was it such a tragedy that the Beis Hamikdash (Holy Temple) was destroyed? The Beis Hamikdash represents a unique pipeline between Hashem and Man. When it was destroyed, this flow of spiritual energy was severed. The level of this connection is linked to the word “nefesh” - soul (“When a soul will bring an offering”...Vayikra 2:1). Nefesh begins with the letter Nun, and Nun represents the kingdom of Babylon.

PERSIA
As we know from the story of Esther, Haman was interested in finding the final solution of the Jewish problem - genocide. The exile of Persia and Media represents the threat to the “guf” - the body of the Jewish People, the physical threat of annihilation. Guf begins with Gimmel which stands for the kingdom of Persia and Media.

GREECE
Greece, on the other hand, represents the attack on the Torah itself - the sechel - the wisdom of Israel. The Greeks weren’t interested in the physical destruction of the Jewish People; rather they wanted to destroy the spiritual core of Judaism - the Torah - and leave a Hellenized hulk that would conform to the Greek norms of aesthetics - drama and the superficial wisdoms. Sechel begins with the letter Sin - that’s the letter of the kingdom of Greece.

ROME
The fourth kingdom, Rome, is a summation of all the other exiles. At the beginning of their domination, the Romans, like the Babylonians, stopped the bringing of offerings in the Temple. Then, they destroyed the second Holy Temple and inflicted unthinkable carnage on the “guf”, the body of Jewish People: After the massacre of Betar, they used Jewish blood as fertilizer for seven years.

What is the point at the center of a circle?
Can you define it? And yet it exists. Just like the letter ‘yud’ in the Hebrew alphabet - a single dot - from which the whole universe was created - the threshold of existence. The still point in the turning circle - and around that dot turns the whole world. The Jewish People are that little dot - so infinitesimally small, and yet around this dot, the world turns.

What is the opposite to that little dot?
What is the opposite of the central point that occupies no space? Direction - North, South, East and West. Expansion in four directions. Four is the antithesis of the One. Four is the number of the Kingdoms who stand eternally opposed to the Jewish People. Eternally opposed to He who is One. And to His reflection in this world - the Jewish People.

What is carved on the sides of our dreidel?
Nun, Gimmel, Sin, Heh... On the surface, those letters stand for “Nes Gadol Hayah Sham - A great miracle happened there” - The commemoration of a miraculous victory of a faithful few over the might of the Greek Empire. But on a deeper level, the dreidel is a microcosmic representation of the four kingdoms, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome spinning around the center, the Jewish People.

The Hand that spins the dreidel comes from above...
Every empire thinks that it will last forever, but The Hand that spins only spins the dreidel of the Jewish People.

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Sources: Ramban Bereishis 28:12; Pirkei D’Rebbe Eliezer 35; Maharal Ner Mitzvah, Bnei Yisasschar, Kislev/Tevesz, Essay 2:25; ibid. Commentary on Bnei Yisasschar; Rav Nachman Bulman. Written by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair; Edited by Rabbi Moshe Newman; Graphics by Lev Seltzer; Published by Ohr Somayach/Tanenbaum College, PO Box 18103 Jerusalem 91180, Israel, Web: www.jer1.co.il/ohr; E-Mail ohr@jer1.co.il; © 1995 Ohr Somayach International. All rights reserved.