

Luck Be a Dreidl Tonight: "Millionaire," Chanukah and Other Games of Chance

By Jennifer E. Krause

People are talking about two new shows: ABC's "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" and Fox's "Greed." "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" and its host, Regis Philbin, burst on the television screen during the ratings dust bowl days of August, amidst re-runs and re-runs of re-runs. An estimated five million people responded to the show's call for contestants, and reportedly some 18 million people tuned in to witness the spectacle. Even now, amidst the stiff competition of November "sweeps," the fascination has not waned.

The "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" set is all neon and sweeping spotlights, and the music sounds eerily like the music you hear when newscasters are interrupting your regularly scheduled programming. The main attraction, of course, is that contestants can walk away with a million dollars in one night simply by answering a few questions. Before offering an answer, each person has to choose whether to go for broke or take the money and run. It is an alarmingly thrilling process to watch. I hesitate to say that I find myself sitting on the edge of my seat as "Reege" takes his sweet time revealing the right answer. I worry that Don from Tuscaloosa might lose his \$64,000 jackpot trying to take a guess at the \$125,000 question on "The Sound of Music." How many of those von Trapp kids were there? One wrong answer and you could lose it all, Don! What about your kids' college funds, that dream trip to Hawaii? The pressure mounts. Anything could happen. I love this game.

"Greed" is another form of nail-biting fun, an excellent knock-off of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" right down to the music and the set, with (of course) a few greedy little flourishes. Contestants don't play solo, they play on teams for a prize that can soar to \$2.2 million. But on "Greed," things can get far uglier than they ever could on Regis' watch. For instance, contestants periodically get the opportunity to eliminate their teammates when a device called "the Terminator" springs into action. There is no way of knowing who will be terminated, which makes for suspenseful viewing. The same tense moments arise between the contestants' answers and the host's confirmation, the same thrill of watching as contestants dare to risk their earnings for the bigger, better prize. What are America's five most popular kinds of cheese? Do you have to go to a commercial now?

I guess it shouldn't surprise us that, at a time when '80s music and '70s fashions can be referred to as "retro," the 1950's quiz show format has also come back new-and-improved. But there has to be more to it than mere retro-chic or simple nostalgia. Something tells me it might have to do with the fact that we can vie for sixteen different lotto jackpots on any given day of the week. It might have

something to do with the fact that Vegas is crawling with more visitors humming "Luck, Be a Lady Tonight" than ever before. That for those for whom Vegas just isn't in the cards, there are hundreds of other casino alternatives just a hop-skip-and-a-jump from the local church or synagogue. Or perhaps that you can try your luck at a friendly game of bingo in your local church or synagogue.

These are games of chance where the outcome is largely out of our control. They quicken our pulse, raise the stakes, sweeten the deal, and make us feel alive.

It may not surprise you to know that the rabbis were not big fans of these sorts of games. Not only did they find them frivolous, but a ridiculous pastime that could turn into a dangerous addiction as well. They knew people in their communities who abused spouses and spent family savings simply to be able to keep playing dice or shell games, or to bet on pigeon races. And they worried that even if folks were playing these games as a hobby, they were still wasting precious time, energy, and money on big payoffs based on nothing but timing and luck. And judging from the number of rules and laws the rabbis enacted to curb this habit, they were rather unsuccessful in convincing their communities to lay off the games of chance. People loved their games, loved the thrill, the rush, and they were not about to stop playing just because the rabbis said so.

Yet the rabbis did approve of games that required skill, such as chess. Some even owned silver chess sets for special games on Shabbat. Of course, no money was to be involved on Shabbat or on any other day of the week that they played. The thrill of this game was the skill, the endurance. That was the pay-off, and they knew it could take hours, even days, to get there. It was probably in the rabbis' best interest to promote a game such as chess over something such as cards or dice. I would venture to guess that they knew they would be hard-pressed to instill the value of perpetual study and prolonged struggle with text in a community of people hooked on games offering momentary thrills and guaranteed excitement with little time or effort involved.

Interestingly, the happy game of dreidl managed to pass under the rabbis' radar screen, perhaps because people played for such small sums of money that it seemed too harmless to merit a fuss. Not to mention that by the 17th century people were playing cards and other games so much that one rabbi, Chaim Yair Bacharach, decided to permit games of chance during Chanukah, Purim, and the intermediary days (chol ha'moed) of holidays like Sukkot and Passover. Some rabbis also allowed people to play games of chance during minor fast days or if someone was sick in bed and needed to pass the time. I personally am grateful for this particular ruling, as I would never have made it through the chicken pox if my grandma hadn't taught me how to play gin rummy!

Yes, 'tis a human thing--not just a post-modern, turn-of-the-century one--to want to roll the dice every once in a while. This is kind of funny when you think about how much of our lives we spend fearing that everything really is just a roll of the

dice, afraid that the universe is just one big spinning dreidl, and where she lands nobody knows. Why is it, then, that some of the most thrilling games are the ones that hinge on chance alone? Maybe the exhilaration comes from the fact that the outcome is immediate (give or take a commercial) and the payoff instant. When we play them, it's as if we inhabit a tiny world filled with concrete answers--yes/no, right/wrong, true/false, red/black, hit/stick, win/lose. In a world as complicated as ours, that little world of chance has value. In fact, it's easy to see why we find it so appealing.

Hillel and Shammai had a famous debate about the thrill of the big moment and instant gratification. It focused on Chanukah candles. Shammai argued that the chanukiyah (Chanukah menorah with eight branches, instead of seven) should start filled with all eight, and that one should be removed with each passing night. Hillel insisted that we start with one candle, adding a light each night. He taught that at every opportunity we should increase the holiness in the world, not decrease it. Because no provocative game show theme music accompanies this piece, I won't keep you in too much suspense: Hillel won the argument.

If we did things Shammai's way, the big night would be the first night--instant gratification, like Fourth of July fireworks that start with the grand finale. This wasn't necessarily a bad idea. If there was ever a holiday that might call for us to celebrate in a big, boisterous way, if there was ever an occasion to herald the thrilling and triumphant Big Moment, it would be Chanukah. The stunning military victory and the grand re-opening of a thoroughly renovated Temple against all odds--fuggedaboutit! After all, if anyone took a big-time gamble, it had to have been Judah Maccabee and his rag-tag team of Hasmonean rebels. They put it all on the line, let it ride, and came out the big winners. Chanukah is a gamblers' holiday, and it ain't because of the dreidls!

But Hillel's way saves the best for last. The glow of the candles on the first night is pretty, but it is sparse. It will be a whole week before the chanukiyah burns its brightest. Perhaps this is why the last night has come to be called "Zot Chanukah--This is Chanukah," as if to say, "This is the moment you've all been waiting for!" It is, in many ways, a celebration of the enduring spirit when the spirit of thrill could just as easily have been the main attraction. This way, the Big Moment is the moment that evolves over time, one that contains the littler moments and is made richer for them. Million-dollar moments have their place in our lives and in our history--moments when the dreidl lands on gimmel and it is winner take all. Those are thrilling, magnificent times. But most of our lives are more like nights three or four on the chanukiyah, filled with in-between moments and just enough light to see where we're going. The thrills appear over time, but they come through commitment and sustained connections, through an eternal covenant and enduring love. And often they are not the moments we gamble for.