

Excerpt from “The Dreidel That Saved Hanukkah” – play by Stuart J. Brown

<https://stuartjbrown.com/full-one-act-plays/the-dreidel-that-saved-hanukkah/>

SCENE 1

[A man, dressed as a dreidel, walks onstage and sits at a table. He is having a miserable morning. A few moments later, a woman, not dressed as a dreidel, enters the stage with a plate full of latkes.]

MIRIAM

Good morning, honey.

DAVID

Wrong holiday.

MIRIAM

What?

DAVID

I said wrong holiday.

MIRIAM

David, it's too early for games. What are you talking about?

DAVID

Honey. Honey is Rosh Hashanah. Today is the first day of Hanukkah.

MIRIAM

Wow, you are in one foul mood. What's the problem?

DAVID

Like I just said, it's the first day of Hanukkah.

MIRIAM

I know. Here, I just made a fresh batch of latkes. Homemade. No mix this year.

[MIRIAM places a latke on a plate and puts it in front of DAVID.]

DAVID

I don't feel like eating.

MIRIAM

Don't feel like eating. You love my latkes.

DAVID

Not this morning. Thank you anyway.

MIRIAM

How 'bout a bagel? I went out early this morning to Lox & Company. They had everything bagels just out of the oven. I even got you some whitefish salad.

[MIRIAM starts to get up.]

DAVID

Maybe later.

MIRIAM

David Dreidel, what is going on here?

DAVID

I'm sorry, Miriam. I'm just not feeling myself.

MIRIAM

I can see that. Is it because of today?

DAVID

I think so.

MIRIAM

I thought we got this all sorted out at our sessions with Dr. Moskowitz?

DAVID

I did too.

MIRIAM

David, I know, in the past, once the High Holidays hit, you started to feel...

DAVID

Insignificant?

MIRIAM

Don't be so hard on yourself. I was going to say...

DAVID

Trivial?

MIRIAM

Can I finish my sentence?

DAVID

Dunsel?

MIRIAM

I'm afraid to ask. What is a Dunsel?

DAVID

Remember how I've said that everything in life revolves around Star Trek?

MIRIAM

Are we going to start this again?

DAVID

There's an episode in the original series...

MIRIAM

I know I'm going to regret asking. Is Star Trek the one with Dr. Spock, or is that Star Wars?

DAVID

It's Mr. Spock. He's the Vulcan science officer. Dr. Spock is the baby doctor.

MIRIAM

How could I make that mistake?

DAVID

In the episode, a computer takes the reins of the Enterprise and successfully defends the ship in a mock war game battle. Kirk suddenly feels useless, and someone refers to him as Captain Dunsel.

MIRIAM

You lost me at "in this episode."

DAVID

Captain Dunsel is a derogatory term for a part serving no useful purpose. The computer was being put in charge of the Enterprise, so Kirk felt useless. Just like me.

MIRIAM

Your analogy isn't exactly working for me. How are you irrelevant?

DAVID

I'm a toy. A top. An add-on. You don't need me for Hanukkah. Look at my cousins Lulav and Etrog. They're indispensable for Sukkot. Without them, forget the harvest.

MIRIAM

I think you're overreacting.

DAVID

And then there's Uncle Afi at Passover.

MIRIAM

He's such a show-off. Come find me, or you can't complete the Seder meal. What a narcissist.

DAVID

The point is...I'm not needed. If I weren't around, Hanukkah would go on fine without me...one candle at a time.

MIRIAM

David, oh, David. You are essential. Think of all the joy you bring to the children.

DAVID

I don't know, Miriam. I just don't know.

MIRIAM

Do I need to call the doctor?

DAVID

No, no. He's just gonna ask what thoughts are twirling around in my head.

MIRIAM

What about those meditation exercises he prescribed?

DAVID

They never work. They're like those deep-breathing drills we practiced during the Lamaze classes. Thoroughly pointless, especially when it came time for the big push.

MIRIAM

Oh, give it a try. It couldn't hurt.

[DAVID gets up from the table and twirls clockwise a few times.]

DAVID

There. Satisfied?

MIRIAM

Do you feel any better?

DAVID

I feel nauseous.

MIRIAM

How about a hot beverage? A nosh, then? It'll settle you down. Get something in your stomach.

DAVID

I told you I'm not feeling very hungry.

MIRIAM

These latkes aren't going to eat themselves.

DAVID

Maybe later.

MIRIAM

How 'bout some gefilte fish?

DAVID

Why would I want gefilte fish? Especially first thing in the morning?

MIRIAM

Everyone loves gefilte fish.

DAVID

No one loves gefilte fish. No one even knows what gefilte fish is. It's just a tradition for the start of every meal. Serve a piece of unappetizing food so the rest of the meal will be delicious in comparison.

MIRIAM

I can wash the gelatin off.

DAVID

Now I really don't feel well.

MIRIAM

Suit yourself. More for me.

DAVID

Miriam, I haven't been altogether truthful with you about the way I've been feeling.

MIRIAM

What are you talking about?

DAVID

It's hard for me to explain.

MIRIAM

David, you know you can tell me anything. I've always been here for you and always will.

DAVID

I know. That's why I love you so much and why this is so hard for me.

MIRIAM

I understand. Take your time.

[A few moments go by. MIRIAM and DAVID are just sitting. Finally, MIRIAM breaks the silence.]

David, I didn't mean to take that much time. Spit it out.

DAVID

It has to do with Hanukkah.

MIRIAM

That much I could have guessed.

DAVID

The holiday.

MIRIAM

We're gonna be here all day at this rate. Look, I have an idea. Get up...c'mon get up.

[DAVID gets up from the table.]

Now move to the center of the room. Good. On my count, spin yourself.

DAVID

What for?

MIRIAM

Because I say so. You're gonna spin yourself, and depending how you land, is how you're gonna tell me what's on your mind.

DAVID

But...

MIRIAM

Just do it.

[DAVID spins himself and, after landing, MIRIAM examines the side facing up.]

Gimel! Good, now spill the beans.

DAVID

What? What's gimel gotta do with this?

MIRIAM

I gave you a sporting chance. If you landed on nun, that would be nothing, so you wouldn't have to tell me anything. Hey, you could go halfway in and tell me part of what's troubling you.

DAVID

What about if I landed on shin?

MIRIAM

I hadn't figured that one out, but was betting you wouldn't land shin side up.

DAVID

So, gimel is...

MIRIAM

All in. Now that we've had our fun and games...what's wrong?

DAVID

You know this time of year, my self-worth is at a low point. But, recently, it's also something more than that. It's believing, no, taking to heart the very meaning of Hanukkah.

MIRIAM

I didn't know you felt this way, David.

DAVID

Yeah, I've been sorta been able to put it aside, but this year it became more pronounced.

MIRIAM

To paraphrase, why is this year's holiday different from all other holidays?

DAVID

It's Chrismukkah this year.

MIRIAM

Really? Huh. I guess I didn't think of that, but you're right. Hanukkah begins at sundown on Christmas Day. That doesn't happen very often.

DAVID

It's like the fifth time in the last 100 years. Give or take a year or two.

[MIRIAM sits on the couch.]

MIRIAM

Bubbalah, come over here and sit with me.

[DAVID moves over to the couch.]

Let's talk about this. Why didn't you ever bring this up in our sessions with the doctor?

DAVID

All he would have said is spin three times and take a hot shower.

MIRIAM

I don't think you were giving him enough credit. He is a professional.

DAVID

I'm not one to open up to strangers.

MIRIAM

So, why did we go? I could think of a lot of things I would rather have been doing.

DAVID

I thought it might help, and I knew you wanted it for me.

MIRIAM

I only wanted what I thought was best for you. Okay, so you don't like talking to strangers. I'm no stranger. At least I hope I'm not.

DAVID

You've been hanging around long enough, so I've gotten used to you.

MIRIAM

Well, thank you, Mr. Beacon of Light. I guess I should take that as a compliment. Now, let's talk.

DAVID

So, I'm a dreidel.

MIRIAM

Okay, we're making progress.

DAVID

I'm a toy, an add...

MIRIAM

I think we covered this ground already. Remember - you landed on gimel, so out with it already.

[DAVID gets up and paces.]

DAVID

I think my questions about self-worth started when I was a little boy, and I found out that dreidels were not mentioned in the Torah. You can imagine what a shock that was for me. Not in the Torah. All the other holiday symbols in my Hebrew School class were there. Scott was the worst.

MIRIAM

Who was Scott?

DAVID

Scott Shofar. He was so high and mighty. He would strut up to the front of the congregation at the conclusion of Rosh Hashanah services and blow Tekiah-teruah-tekiah gedolah.

[DAVID mimes the blowing of the shofar.]

He would look my way, and I could tell he was laughing. Hey, look at me, you insignificant dreidel. Here's how a real icon acts.

MIRIAM

David, you never told me.

DAVID

What would have been the point? He and his friends would sneak up behind me and give me a quick spin. I was still learning balance and landing, so I'd careen out of control and smash into the wall or knock someone over.

MIRIAM

Kids can be so cruel.

DAVID

In a way, who could blame them? Not only are dreidels missing from the Torah, but Hanukkah itself isn't in the holy scriptures. You got the biggies like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Passover, but not The Festival of Lights.

MIRIAM

But why should that matter? You are beloved, especially by children. For many kids, you are Hanukkah. Isn't that worth something?

DAVID

Maybe. It's not exactly something I'm gonna cry from the rooftops.

MIRIAM

Of course you can. Be proud of what you've got. Why do you always have to look at your wine glass as half empty?

DAVID

Because, to add insult to injury, my ancestry isn't even Jewish. I'm descended from the English or Irish.

MIRIAM

I knew I shouldn't have gotten you that DNA kit from 23andMe. Look, everything in that report may be true, but we all have to come from somewhere. The point is, your forefathers emigrated to Germany, were adopted into the culture, and became part of Hanukkah. What's wrong with that?

DAVID

If that happened thousands of years ago, I'd feel different. I'd feel like I was more a part of something even if we didn't make the cut for the Torah. But you know as well as I do that it hasn't been thousands of years. It's only been a few hundred years since some top maker or, more likely, a kid on the streets came up with the idea of a dreidel.

MIRIAM

They don't know that for sure.

DAVID

Who are you kidding? There's no physical evidence or references to dreidels before the 1700s. I'm just as old as the common sandwich and margherita pizza.

[DAVID spins off-stage.]

MIRIAM

Where are you going?

[After a few moments, DAVID returns with a sandwich in one hand and a beer in the other.]

DAVID

I made myself hungry...and thirsty. Oh, did you know that sparkling beer was introduced in Australia at the same time as I was?

MIRIAM

I'll make sure to add that to my trivia night questions or the next time I throw a shrimp on the barby. David, I understand where you're coming from. We all have feelings of worthlessness at some point in our lives. No one's immune to those feelings. Okay, so you're a worst-case scenario...

DAVID

Miriam!

MIRIAM

I only say with love and the best of intentions. You know that.

DAVID

Yes, of course.

MIRIAM

And you know I've always supported you. Don't you?

DAVID

Without question.

MIRIAM

Then, let's attack this feeling of dread and failure...

DAVID

I think failure is a bit overdoing it.

MIRIAM

Sorry, how about feelings of dread and...ineptitude?

DAVID

Try again.

MIRIAM

Cluelessness?

DAVID

You're getting closer.

MIRIAM

What about despair?

DAVID

I can live with that.

MIRIAM

Then let's tackle your feelings of dread and failure head-on? You and I have been walking on eggshells far too long. What'd say?

DAVID

I guess so, but I'm not in the mood for some therapeutic spinning right now. I've got a long day ahead of me, and I'll have more than my share of going round and round and round. Oy, thinking what those kids are gonna do to me later is giving me a headache. And what about everything else? These feelings of self-respect go a lot deeper than my lack of confidence.

MIRIAM

One spin at a time, David. One spin at a time.

[DAVID gets up and does some quick shadow boxing.]

DAVID

Okay, coach, I'm ready. What's our first step?

[MIRIAM walks over to a bookshelf and pulls out a volume.]

MIRIAM

When I get down and need a little pick-me-up, I like to read from this book of uplifting quotes. I find a few that resonate with me, say them slowly while my eyes are closed, breathe deeply, and repeat them.

DAVID

And that really helps?

MIRIAM

It does. I even write down some of my favorites and put them in my purse in case I need to refer to them.

[MIRIAM takes out her purse and scatters dozens of small scraps of paper onto the table.]

DAVID

That's quite a few notes you have there.

MIRIAM

You should have seen what this looked like before I did my spring cleaning.

DAVID

So, hit me with some of your favorites.

[MIRIAM flips through the pages.]

MIRIAM

"A righteous man falls down seven times and gets up."

DAVID

That's fitting. Who said that?

MIRIAM

King Solomon. Proverbs, 24:16. I like it because it shows resilience.

DAVID

Not bad. What else?

MIRIAM

How 'bout - "If there is anxiety in a man's mind, let him quash and transform it into joy with encouragement."

DAVID

I like quash. So...crushing. Proverbs?

MIRIAM

Proverbs 12:25.

DAVID

This is fun. Anything non-denominational in your tome?

MIRIAM

"To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance." Oscar Wilde. "Be who you are and say how you feel, because those who mind don't matter." Dr. Seuss.

DAVID

That's a mouthful, but okay. One more. I'm feeling the burn.

[MIRIAM flips through more pages.]

MIRIAM

This one's perfect for you - "As long as the world is turning and spinning, we're gonna be dizzy and we're gonna make mistakes."

DAVID

Insightful, but obvious. King Solomon, again? Maimonides? Hillel?

MIRIAM

Mel Brooks.

DAVID

I'm getting into this. What's next?

MIRIAM

How 'bout a bit of pampering?

DAVID

I'm always in for that.

MIRIAM

Then number two on the list is getting a new haircut.

DAVID

What's wrong with what I have?

MIRIAM

That's not the point. You want to feel good about yourself. Right? What's better than going to a salon, getting a deep and luxurious hair wash, a cut, and a blow-dry? Maybe even a warm facial massage and shave?

DAVID

Can I have a pedicure too?

MIRIAM

Of course. Nothing is too much for my poopsie whoopsie.

[MIRIAM and DAVID embrace.]

Okay, soldier, drop and give me ten.

DAVID

What?

MIRIAM

I said drop and give me ten.

DAVID

Ten what?

MIRIAM

Push-ups. What else?

DAVID

Push-ups? I don't do push-ups, and why should I be doing push-ups?

MIRIAM

Exercise. You want to increase your self-worth, then you need to exercise more.

DAVID

Are you saying I'm fat?

MIRIAM

No, no, no...even though you are starting to get just the beginning of a jelly belly.

DAVID

How could you?

MIRIAM

Oh, don't be so sensitive.

DAVID

I am sensitive. Isn't that my problem?

MIRIAM

No...well, yes...well...that's not the point. You start an exercise routine, and you're going to get in better shape and feel better about yourself.

DAVID

So, what'd you have in mind?

MIRIAM

I don't know. What'd you like to do for exercise?

DAVID

I've been thinking of taking up golf.

MIRIAM

Good, good. It'll get you out in the fresh air, walk a few miles on a bucolic course.

DAVID

Does miniature golf count?

MIRIAM

No.

DAVID

How about if I take a golf cart.

MIRIAM

Doesn't that defeat the whole purpose of getting exercise?

DAVID

I guess so, but they're so much fun to drive. Vroom!

MIRIAM

What else.

DAVID

I did try swimming a few years back, but I'm just too buoyant in the water, and I could never finish a lap.

MIRIAM

Did I ever tell you what a catch you were?

DAVID

Snarkiness isn't going to help.

MIRIAM

Sorry. There must be something you like to do?

DAVID

I like the bicycle you bought me two Hanukkahs ago.

MIRIAM

It would be even more useful if you occasionally took it out for a ride.

DAVID

I'm planning on it.

MIRIAM

Wait.

[MIRIAM picks up a newspaper and leafs through it.]

Here we go. I knew I remembered seeing this. I have just the answer.

DAVID

It's not Jane Fonda's inspirational adage, is it?

MIRIAM

What's that?

DAVID

No pain, no gain.

MIRIAM

No, I think you'll really like this. It's a class at the YMHA that's just starting. It's a spin class.

[MIRIAM looks at the audience and gives a shrug and a wink.]

DAVID

I'll think about it, but can we stop? All this talk of improving my outlook is making me realize just how worthless I am.

MIRIAM

Don't say that. I think we're making progress.

DAVID

From your lips to God's ears.

MIRIAM

One more.

DAVID

Just one more?

MIRIAM

I promise.

DAVID

Good, because I still need to give Judah the talk before school.

MIRIAM

Oh, right. I nearly forgot.

DAVID

And with the way I'm feeling about myself and the holiday in general, I need time to gather my thoughts.

MIRIAM

There's not that much time before he has to leave.

DAVID

I know. So, hit me.

MIRIAM

This jives perfectly with what you need to do with Judah. A pep talk. You need to give yourself an in-your-face, no-holds-barred pep talk. That'll empower you and give you the chutzpah necessary when you speak to our son.

DAVID

I don't think chutzpah is the right word. Not that it has a negative connotation, but I think of it as someone who is impotent..

MIRIAM

Impudent?

DAVID

Right, Freudian slip...someone who is impudent or has moxie. That's what I need to have when I speak to him.

MIRIAM

You got it all wrong. Chutzpah is someone with a courageous spirit, of having a fearless pursuit of their goals, and someone with a strong sense of self-confidence.

DAVID

How do you know all that?

MIRIAM

I was re-reading the Joys of Yiddish last night. It's such a hoot. Schlemiel! Schlimazel!

[There is a brief pause. DAVID looks at MIRIAM.]

DAVID

Hasenpfeffer Incorporated.

[MIRIAM and DAVID link arms and start hop-skippping around the stage, singing the opening lines to the Laverne and Shirley TV theme song.]

MIRIAM and DAVID

One, two, three, four,
five, six, seven, eight
shlemiel, schlemazel,
hasenpfeffer incorporated
We're gonna do it

Give us any chance, we'll take it
Read us any rule, we'll break it
We're gonna make our dreams come true
Doin' it our way

MIRIAM

I loved that show.

DAVID

I had a crush on Shirley.

MIRIAM

I did have the hots for Carmine. So, how about it? Give the pep talk a try?

DAVID

Right now?

MIRIAM

It's not like you have time to practice.

DAVID

Okay, then.

[DAVID pauses for some vocal warm-up exercises.]

MIRIAM

Would you get on with it? We don't have all day.

DAVID

Now listen to me, David! This game of baseball is only one half skill. The other half is something else, something bigger!

[DAVID starts singing "Heart" from Damn Yankees.]

You've gotta have heart
All you really need is heart
When the odds are sayin' you'll never win
That's when the grin should start

MIRIAM

Stop with the musical theater warbling and get on with it.

DAVID

I thought it was actually appropriate.

MIRIAM

No.

DAVID

Wait. Wait.

MIRIAM

Don't tell me.

[DAVID clears his throat.]

This is the moment
This is the day
When I send all my doubts and demons on their way!
Every endeavor
I have made ever
Is coming into play
Here and now, today

MIRIAM

Let me guess. Jekyll and Hyde?

DAVID

I love that show.

[MIRIAM gives DAVID the evil eye.]

Okay, here goes. David, first of all, stand tall. Head up. Suck in that gut. Feet on the floor. And get a haircut. You say you feel inadequate? Insignificant? You want change? I say good. That shows me you're hungry. But are you hungry enough to care? To work day and night on your self-respect? I don't hear you!

[DAVID looks over to MIRIAM for a response.]

MIRIAM

Me? Yes, sir.

DAVID

I can't hear you.

MIRIAM

Yes, sir!

DAVID

You've been through hard times before, and guess what? You're still here. Give yourself credit, man. Stop and smell the roses, live for the moment, don't sweat the small stuff, seize the day...

MIRIAM

I get the picture.

DAVID

You've had doubts? Don't cry me a river. Everyone does, but that's not weakness, no. That's part of the game of life. And when life knocks you for a loop, you get back on that horse, you...

MIRIAM

David, I think that's enough.

DAVID

But I'm just getting started.

MIRIAM

I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, but I've got to get Judah ready for school. Do you think you're ready?

DAVID

As ready as I'll ever be.

[MIRIAM leaves the stage. DAVID is talking to himself. A few moments later, MIRIAM and JUDAH come back on stage. JUDAH is not dressed as a dreidel.]

MIRIAM

I'll leave you two men alone.

[MIRIAM leaves the stage.]

DAVID
How are you this morning?

JUDAH
Fine.

DAVID
Ready for the big day?

JUDAH
I guess.

DAVID
You don't sound so excited. You get your wings today, so to speak. Have you been practicing?

JUDAH
Yes.

DAVID
Do you want to show me?

JUDAH
No.

DAVID
One little spin?

JUDAH
No.

DAVID
Not much for talking this morning.

JUDAH
Dad, I need to get some stuff done before school.

DAVID
I know, I know. I just want to...have a talk. That's all. I want to let you know how proud Mom and I are of you. First, your Bar Mitzvah and now you...

[DAVID gets choked up.]

And now you become a full-fledged dreidel today. We couldn't be happier.

JUDAH
Dad, it's no big thing.

DAVID
Judah, of course it is. It's not every day a young man goes through the sacred ceremony.

JUDAH
It's just an assembly at school.

DAVID

But not just any assembly. This has been a time-honored ritual that has been passed down for generations. There was my father, and his father before him and so on.

JUDAH

Whatever.

DAVID

Judah Dreidel. Have more respect for tradition.

JUDAH

How can you expect me to show respect when you don't?

DAVID

I most certainly do.

JUDAH

It's not like I don't know what goes on around here. I've heard your conversations with Mom. You talking about your lack of self-esteem and confidence.

DAVID

That's different.

JUDAH

How?

DAVID

Well, ah...it just is.

JUDAH

Dad, that's not a very convincing answer. You want me to be excited about becoming a dreidel when you're not.

DAVID

That's just something I'm working through, but that's me. Not you. You have your whole life ahead of you.

JUDAH

But what about Hanukkah itself?

DAVID

What about it?

JUDAH

I just have questions. Doubts.

DAVID

Does this have anything to do with those gambling tricks I showed you?

JUDAH

No. I just don't know if I believe in the core values of the holiday. I mean, in school, we're taught the significance of Hanukkah is in rededicating ourselves to our beliefs. Our hopes, that it's worth fighting for what we believe in.

DAVID

And what's wrong with that?

JUDAH

Do you believe that?

DAVID

Me? Well, sure I do.

JUDAH

You don't sound too sure about it.

DAVID

Judah, this isn't about me...

JUDAH

You say it's always about you.

DAVID

Yes, well, that's true, but in this case it's not. Hanukkah is a very special holiday with profound tenets we need to take to heart.

JUDAH

If you say so. I gotta go. See ya tonight.

DAVID

Judah, wait.

[JUDAH leaves the stage. A few moments later, MIRIAM re-enters.]

MIRIAM

How'd it go?

DAVID

What's worse than terrible?

MIRIAM

That bad, eh?

DAVID

I tried to get him excited about today, but I felt like I was talking to myself.

MIRIAM

What'd you mean?

DAVID

What I wanted to tell you before was how I'm questioning my faith. Yes, the self-respect is one thing, but I'm talking about the foundation of Hanukkah itself. What it truly stands for. And here's Judah spouting to me the exact same thing.

MIRIAM

He's young. Boys that age are always questioning or seeking a higher truth.

DAVID

But it shouldn't be that way. Yet if I'm coming across like that, even though I don't mean to be, what else is he going to think?

MIRIAM

What I think is you need to process this on your own. We can talk all you want, but you have to sort through your attitudes. Let Judah be Judah. Let's do this. After we light the first candle tonight, we can have a family pow-wow. See what we can sort out. How's that?

DAVID

I like it.

MIRIAM

Good. Now, I'm gonna drive Judah to school. I packed your lunch. You have a big day in front of you. I'll see you later.

[MIRIAM and DAVID leave the stage.]