

DREIDEL

a short play by

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DREIDEL

CHARACTERS:

ZAYDE -- The grandfather, in his 80s.

YOUNG RACHEL -- His granddaughter, 8. Called *Ruchell*, Yiddish for "Rachel."

RACHEL -- His granddaughter, 45-50.

CHAIM -- Zayde as a boy, age 8.

THE PEDLAR -- A seller of goods, male or female. 50 or older.

The setting: The living room of Rachel's home; and the outskirts of a small village in the Old Country

The time: The first night of Chanukah, this year; and just before the first night of Chanukah, more than 70 years ago.

Production history

OnStage Atlanta, Decatur, GA (2011)

Neighborhood Playhouse, Decatur GA (2005)

AT RISE: *The Dreidel Song* is heard as the LIGHTS RISE to discover RACHEL.

RACHEL

When I was eight years old, my grandfather gave me this. It's a dreidel -- a small top children play with during Chanukah. I did, when I was a girl; I'm sure you have, too. Each side has a letter; you spin it and whatever side it falls on? you win -- or you lose. The letters -- Shin, Hey, Gimel and Nun -- stand for "A great miracle happened there" -- they mean the oil in the temple lasting for eight days -- that's what Chanukah celebrates, the tiny flask that held just enough for one day, but lit the Jerusalem temple's sacred lamp for eight days while the Jews rebuilt what the Romans had destroyed. But, my grandfather told me, when *he* was eight years old, a great miracle happened to him -- on the first night of Chanukah. And the night he *gave* it to me, he said:

(LIGHTS rise on a large rocker/recliner in which ZAYDE sits, with YOUNG RACHEL seated on the floor before him.)

ZAYDE

Tonight, Ruchell, I'm going to tell you a story.

YOUNG RACHEL

About what, *Zayde*?

ZAYDE

About this.

(HE takes a dreidel, identical to the one RACHEL is holding, from his pocket.)

This is a very unusual dreidel. And while I'm telling, you hold it. All right?

(YOUNG RACHEL nods and takes the dreidel. SHE looks at it carefully.)

You can spin it if you like.

YOUNG RACHEL

While you're telling the story.

ZAYDE

All right.

RACHEL

And he leaned back in his rocking chair and he told me the story. ... When he was a boy, my *Zayde* -- that means "Grandpa" in Yiddish -- lived in the old country. This was long, long ago. Life in the old country was hard, but the children there? they had a tradition:

ZAYDE

Every year, just before Chanukah, we gathered clay from the bank of the small stream that flowed near the village, and every child made a dreidel.

RACHEL

And, like his brothers and sisters, my *Zayde* made one too. But that year, the day Chanukah would begin,

ZAYDE

I was playing with it -- and it broke! It spun off the table and fell against the floor, into a dozen pieces.

(YOUNG RACHEL closes her eyes. On her palm, SHE begins to turn the dreidel. ZAYDE "talks" to her as:)

RACHEL

And as he talked, I closed my eyes and I spun the dreidel, slowly, in my hand, and I *saw* - pictures in his words, *heard* sounds: A village, of small houses, and narrow streets filled with clopping horses and clattering carts; then, the splash of thick waters, the deep voices of great horns and a city, large and tall on the horizon.

ZAYDE

And so I went out into the cold afternoon to dig the clay to make another. Chanukah just wouldn't *be* Chanukah, without a new dreidel? ... Rachel?

(SHE stops turning the dreidel and opens her eyes, quickly.)

YOUNG RACHEL

I *was* listening, *Zayde* and then, I don't know; I guess I started - dreaming

ZAYDE

(With a smile)
I know, child, I know.

YOUNG RACHEL

Will you tell me the story?

(HE nods and kisses the top of her head.)

ZAYDE

Yes. As long as you need me to tell it. Go ahead. Turn the dreidel.

(Eyes open, YOUNG RACHEL does.)

RACHEL

He sat back in his chair and rocked, and then ...

So
ZAYDE

he said,
RACHEL

ZAYDE
I walked all the way to the stream -- more than mile --
(CHAIM appears with a stick and performs the actions described.)

RACHEL
and he knelt on the bank. And he tried to dig up some clay.

ZAYDE
But the bank, all the ground around it, had frozen. I walked all along the edge, poking at the earth with a stick, but it was solid -- like your old *Zayde's* head, eh, Ruchell, for forgetting: When it's cold, the ground freezes too. So, I thought: No new dreidel. And, feeling very sad -- because not having something you really think is special *is* sad, yes? --

YOUNG RACHEL
Yes, *Zayde*.
(SHE closes her eyes and turns the dreidel until SHE speaks.)

RACHEL
And as I spun the dreidel, I saw a boy, his small hands in his pockets, head down, walking sadly across winter fields toward a village of small houses and clattering horses and clacking carts, and chickens and chimneys wisping smoke.

ZAYDE
I walked

RACHEL
And I saw the boy walking, now and then wiping his eye. The boy came closer, his face became clearer and

YOUNG RACHEL
(Opens her eyes)
Zayde! that's you!

ZAYDE
Yes.

YOUNG RACHEL
But how...?

ZAYDE

(Shakes his head)

I don't know, Ruchell. I don't know. But -- let me tell you the story. ... As I came near the village, it was nearing sunset. I could see the smoke rising from the chimneys -- as you did just now, yes?

(YOUNG RACHEL nods, closes her eyes, turns the dreidel.)

RACHEL

At the edge of the village there was a low hill. He stood at the top and he watched the villagers hurry about, and the other children talking excitedly or playing along the streets, spinning their dreidels. And, he told me, he was very sad:

CHAIM

I wish I wasn't going to be the only one in the whole village who doesn't have a new dreidel on the first night of Chanukah.

RACHEL

And then ...

ZAYDE

And then...

YOUNG RACHEL

(Excitedly)

You heard a voice.

ZAYDE

(With a chuckle)

I did.

(From "nowhere," the PEDLAR -- very old and very ragged -- appears.)

PEDLAR

So, Chaim. What are you doing out here alone, and it's almost the first night of Chanukah?

CHAIM

How do you know my name? I've never seen you before.

PEDLAR

(Laughs)

I know many things.

