

Chess in Rabbinic Literature

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THE ORIGINS OF CHESS

The game of chess is one of the oldest games known to man and has endured remarkably throughout the ages. The true origin of chess remains shrouded in mystery, with a number of countries (such as China and Iran) claiming to have conceived of it. The legend¹ that tells of chess being the brainchild of King Solomon appears to be a modern work of fiction².

One of the earliest forms of chess is reported to have been known to the Hindus under the Sanskrit name of *chaturanga*. As the game evolved and grew in popularity it ultimately made its way to Persia and Arabia, and by the year 1000 C.E. chess had been embraced throughout Central and Western Europe. Although not undisputed, this is perhaps the most plausible brief story of its origins.

CHESS AMONGST THE JEWS

Jews, too, held the game in great esteem. Rabbinic literature makes many references to playing chess, testifying to a great interest in it amongst Jews. Sources show that they found chess to be both a source of intellectual stimulation and a benign pastime. According Rashi (1040-1105) chess is mentioned in the Talmud, and Jewish legal (*halachic*) works, including responsa, address an array of legal and ethical questions pertaining to the game.

NAMES OF CHESS

While the modern Hebrew name for chess is *שאח* *schach* (from the Persian *Shah*, meaning “king” – the predecessor of the English *check*) and *שחמט* *schachmet* (“the Shah died” – the equivalent of the English *checkmate*), it also was referred to as *סיטרינג* or *שטרנינג* *chatrang* (in

1) *Beis Hamidrash, Yelenik (Milchamos Melech HaMoshiach* p. 124).

2) See *Yeshurun* XXI, pp. 758.



Persia and Arabia, deriving from the Sanskrit *chaturanga*), and "אישקק"י, "אישקאק"י and similar variants (from the French *échecs*, related to the English 'chess')³.

EARLY REFERENCES TO CHESS

According to many authorities, chess is mentioned in the Talmud under the name נדרשיר *nadrashir*, rendered by Rashi into the early French vernacular as אישקקי"ש⁴.

Some medieval scholars, such as Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141) in his *Kuzari*,⁵ see theological parallels to be gleaned from chess. He points out that victory in a chess

3) *Ma'adanei Melech* (p. 31 *et al* in Paris, 1864 ed.): Many names and descriptions are attributed to this pastime, born out of the diverse colloquial pronunciations of the countries and nations to whom this pastime has reached. Some refer to it as *Sträng*, which is Persian, and whose theme is to confront and subdue the king. Others deem it *Shāsh-Rāng* – meaning *six types*, an allusion to the six objects that comprise this pastime, [namely]: The King and Queen, the bishop, the knight, the tower, and the pawn. Yet others call it *Shak Iskäki* and *Ishchäki* – all names originating from the word **Shah** – "king" in Persian.

Rabbi Moshe Stern (1914-1997) points out (*Responsa Be'er Moshe* vol. 2, § 27): It is entirely possible that *Iskäki* and *Ishchäki* actually refer to two distinct games. But because the halachic decisors are imprecise in their rendering of the name, it is reasonable to assume that the two names [in their writings] refer to the same game.

4) The Talmud (*Kesubos* 59b) describes the laws related to tasks that a woman performs for her husband.

The Mishnah teaches: "If she brought him a maidservant into the marriage, she need not grind or bake or launder... R. Eliezer says: Even if she brought him a hundred maidservants, he may still compel her to work with wool, for idleness leads to unchastity. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Even one who pronounces a vow prohibiting his wife from doing work must divorce her and give her her *kesubah* for idleness leads to insanity."

The Talmud (*ibid* 61b) expounds upon the position of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel asking if his teaching says anything more than the ruling of R. Eliezer. The Gemara answers that the two opinions are not identical: they differ with regard to a woman who plays with puppies or *who plays chess* (נדרשיר), rendered into the vernacular by Rashi as אישקקי"ש).

According to both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabban Shimon, there would be no concern of inactivity leading to insanity, but Rabban Shimon is concerned that spending time with such matters will lead to promiscuity.

5) Rabbi Yehudah Helevi, *Kuzari* (circa 1140), Part V, 20: The Sixth Principle: "Man finds in himself this power of doing evil or avoiding it in matters which are in his hand. Any failure in this respect is accounted for by the absence of intermediary causes, or his ignorance of them. If, for instance, a strange

