

Etl-betl—A Child's Game

By Philip *Fishl* Kutner

Have you taught your children/grandchildren how to play this child's game? Children's games are lots of fun and can make for an interesting vinkl meeting. Since children's games are interactive, it means that everyone can get involved. Etl betl can be played by those who are mobility impaired. It may even help exercise those arthritic hands.

On Mendele, April 24, 1994. Prof. Herzog noted, "... various figures include a betl and a shpigl."

On May 3, 1995 the following Mendele posts appeared. Hadass Klausner noted that In Hebrew it's called "Savta sorregget" (Grandma knitting). Prof. Herzog adds that the second figure in etl-betl is generally called a shpigl.

On May 4, 1995 Dan Leeson wrote that, Almost every position has more than one solution; that is, given a position one can go in any of two different directions depending on the solution method chosen. As I remember, there were about eight different patterns that were achievable including the dreaded pinky position. But the spiegel could be solved from the bottom or from the top, you got the same next step no matter which direction the attack. Other positions would yield quite different solutions depending on the direction of attack.

On April 27, 1997, Dan Leeson posted. "I have been teaching my daughter to play etl-betl, As she has become more adept at the two-person string/hand game, she has begun to name the various positions that one can get into. That's roughly 8 different geometric shapes that can arise as the string passes from a pair of hands to the other. The names she chooses are invented, I do not know of standard naming convention for the various shapes.

The most complex position (both to get into and to get out of) she has named "the spider." Other positions have other names, of course. One is called "the bridge" and another "coffee table."

I can't remember any Yiddish names given to the various positions.

The problem is that one has to get into the positions to describe them. I can't think of a way to word-describe the hand position/string geometry for each of the various shapes. Some use only the thumb and pointer finger. Others use the backside of the palm only. And really complicated ones use three or more fingers on each hand, with each one pointed in some weird direction.

Was etl-betl a game of the ghetto or did everyone, Jew and Gentile, play the game in Eastern Europe?

Google found some interesting sites with etl betl. Did you know it is a **Louvain Journal of Theology and Canon Law**?

Known as cat's cradle, it is a string game that produces various figures and is called etl betl in Yiddish. It can be seen online with all the steps at: www.ifyoulovetoread.com/book/chten_cats.htm

The steps are shown in photos as you move your fingers through the looped string.

At: <http://personal.riverusers.com/~busybee/catcradle.htm> you can view an excellent set of diagrams and an excellent explanation.

- Cat's Cradle
- Soldier's Bed (called Chess Board Korea), Church window in England, Mountaint Cat in Japan, and a Pond in sections of the U.S.
- Tramlines or candles (called Chopsticks in Korea and the Mirror in Denmark).
- The Inverted Cradle or Manger
- X's and Diamonds are really inverted Soldier's Beds.
- Cat's Eye (called Cow's Eyeball in Korea and Horse Eye in Japan).
- Fish in a Dish (called Rice-Mill in Korea and Musical Instrument in Japan).
- The Clock ends the game, or you can go back and repeat some of the others positions.

Creative people use creative names for their organizations or companies. There is a company called Cat's Cradle Needleworks that sells needlework accessories.

Apache Door, Little Finger, A Rabbit, Carrying Wood, Many Stars, An Owl and Jacob's Ladder are some of the many other string figures.

In Mathworld a set of string figures are shown. They mention Braid Groups and Knot Theory and a bibliography including Mathematical Recreation at: <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/StringFigure>.