



SEPHARDIM, ASHKENAZIM, & THE HANNUKAH MENORAH: HALAKHAH & HISTORY

It has already long been demonstrated that in describing Ashkenazim and Sephardim in the Middle Ages one cannot speak of two totally distinct and unrelated ethnic and cultural identities. Although geographically separate and culturally different, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews did not flourish in isolation from one another. Individuals and ideas moved from one society to the other and some measure of interaction between them existed throughout the medieval period.

There is much evidence for this phenomenon. Rabbenu Tam writes in his *Sefer ha-Yashar* that scholars from Spain “served in the presence of Rabbenu Gershon Me’or ha-Golah (“*shimshu lefanav*”),¹ the Spanish chronicler, Abraham ibn Daud, records in his *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* that in the

middle of the eleventh century “there came to the city of Cordova [Spain] a great scholar from France by the name of R. Paregoros”² and his book ends with a reference to Rabbenu Tam living in Ramerupt,³ Rashbam writes on more than one occasion that he consulted “*sifrei Sepharad*” in preparing his commentary on the Torah,⁴ the author of the *Shibbolei ha-Leket* presents a halakhic exchange between “*anshei Sepharad*” and “*hakhmei Zarfat ve-Erez Ashkenaz*,”⁵ the Rashba refers to Ashkenazi students who studied in his yeshiva (in Barcelona),⁶ R. Asher b. Yehiel spent roughly half his life in Germany and half in Spain,⁷ and there are more examples, many more.⁸

One particularly remarkable and unusual example of such influence in a halakhic context is provided by the

mizvah of ner Hannukah. The Talmud (*Shabbat 21b*) states that the basic requirement is to light only one candle per night for the entire household. Those more scrupulous in their observance (*mehadrin*) should light a separate candle for each member of the household, regardless of which night of Hannukah it may be. Finally, those who are unusually scrupulous (*mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*) add one additional candle each successive night of Hannukah (according to the opinion of bet Hillel).

For some reason, the standard of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* has been determined to be the normative requirement, but its exact meaning is the subject of a dispute between the Ashkenazi authorities, the Ba’alei he-Tosafot, and Maimonides, the Sephardi. According to Tosafot (s.v.

ve-ha-mehadrin), the most candles that can ever be lit in any household on Hannukah is eight, on the last night of Hannukah. In his view, the *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* position circumvents the *mehadrin* view and considers only the number of nights of the holiday as an operative consideration. One candle is lit the first night, two the second night, and so on, regardless of the number of people present. For Maimonides (*Hil. Hannukah* 4:1-2), however, the *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* view considers both the number of people present as well as the number of nights as equally relevant variables, with the result that if there are ten people present on the last night of Hannukah, eighty candles are lit – the number of people (ten) times the number of nights (eight).⁹

It is interesting to note that within a few centuries something very interesting occurred in the worlds of Ashkenaz and Sepharad. Not only was one culture influenced by the other but, remarkably, *each culture adopted the ruling of the other* as the normative halakhah. By the time we come to the sixteenth century, Tosafot's position was adopted

by the Sephardi R. Joseph Karo and Maimonides' opinion was followed by the Ashkenazi R. Moshe Isserles.¹⁰ In his commentary on the *Tur*, the seventeenth century R. Yoel Sirkis correctly notes that "our [Ashkenazic] custom is like the opinion of the Rambam and the Sephardic custom is like the opinion of Tosafot."¹¹ His son-in-law, R. David Halevi, actually went so far as to add "and this we do not find in other places."¹² While it has been shown that this assertion is a bit of an exaggeration,¹³ this remarkable phenomenon of this cross cultural, crisscrossed influence is certainly unusual and deserves attention.

This article originally appeared in The YU Lamdan, Winter 2014.

Endnotes

1. *Sefer ha-Yashar* (New York, 1959), 74a.
2. Gerson D. Cohen, *The Book of Tradition by Abraham ibn Daud* (Philadelphia, 1967), Hebrew, p. 59; English, p. 79.
3. *Ibid.*, Hebrew, p. 66; English, p. 89.
4. Devarim 7:14, 18:11. See too Shemot 23:24.
5. *R. Zidkiyahu b. Avraham ha-Rofe*, *Shibbolei ha-Leket*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1969), 147-48.
6. *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, vol. 1, #395.
7. Avraham Hayyim Freiman, *Ha-Rosh, Rabbenu Asher b. Yehiel ve-Ze'eva'av: Hayeiheim u-Fa'alam* (Jerusalem, 1986).
8. See Simhah Assaf, "Halifat She'elot u-Teshuvot bein Sepharad u-vein Zarfat ve-Ashkenaz," *Tarbiz* 8 (1937):162-170; H. J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim* (London, 1976); Avraham Grossman, "Relations between Spanish and Ashkenazi Jewry in the Middle Ages," in Haim Beinart, ed., *Moresheet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1992), 220-39.
9. I am not here dealing with the issue of who lights the eighty, one person lights all or each person lights eight.
10. See *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 671:2. Once again, the issue of who does the lighting is not now my concern.
11. *Bayit Hadash (Bah), Tur, Orach Hayyim* #671, s.v. *ve-kamah*. For an interesting historical explanation for this shift, see R. Yehezkel Kazenellenbogen, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Kneset Yehezkel* #17.
12. *Turei Zahav (Taz)*, ad. loc., #671:1, end.
13. See R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Ha-Mo'adim ba-Halakhah* (Tel Aviv, 1955), 166, n. 15.



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