



Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the Hanukkah Menorah

by RABBI JACOB J. SCHACTER

There are some historical generalizations which are useful even though there is a danger that the inevitable attendant oversimplification may result in a distortion of the complexities of the reality. One such generalization relates to the existence of two geographically distinct and separate Jewries, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, throughout medieval times. Conventional wisdom asserts that in the early Middle Ages all Jews in lands under Roman domination received their religious traditions and culture from Palestinian Jewry, then also in Roman hands. Palestinian influence was most directly felt in Italy and spread from there into France and Germany. At the same time, with the rise to power of the Moslem Baghdad caliphate in the eighth century, the center of power in the Jewish world shifted to Babylonian Jewry. They, in turn, influenced other Jewries in the general Moslem orbit, including those of the Iberian Peninsula. Hence, Franco-German Ashkenazic Jewry was essentially Palestinian in origin; Iberian peninsula Sephardic Jewry was essentially Babylonian in origin. By the eleventh century, however, these two

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Jewries emerged as independent cultural and religious groups, no longer dependent on their centers of origin, and they continued as two culturally separate and distinct entities throughout the medieval period and into modern times.

Although indeed geographically separate and culturally different, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews did not flourish in absolute 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. (See H.J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim* [London, 1976], *in passim*.) One remarkable example of such influence in a *halakhic* (Jewish legal) context is provided by the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *ner Hanukkah* (the Hanukkah lights).

The Talmud states (*Shabbat* 21b) that the basic commandment requires only one light each night for the entire household. However, those more scrupulous in their observance light a separate candle for each member of the household each night. Finally, those who are unusually scrupulous (*mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*) add one additional candle each night (according to the view of Bet Hillel).

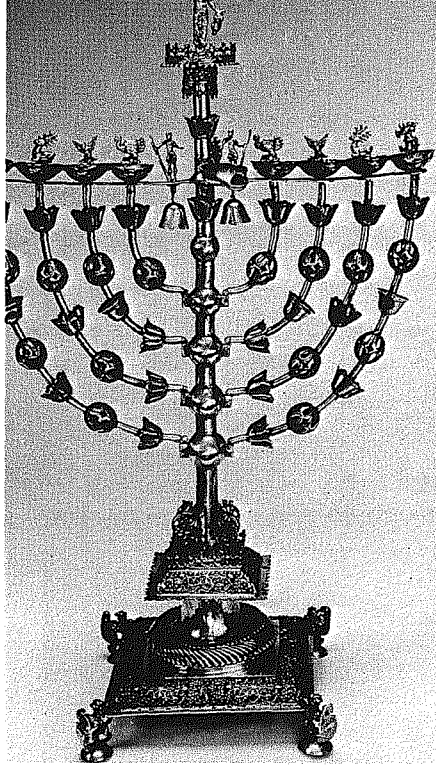
For some reason, the standard of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* has been determined to be the normative requirement, but its exact meaning is the sub-

ject of a dispute between Tosafot (Ashkenazic authorities) and Maimonides (a Sephardic authority). According to Tosafot (s.v. "*ve-ha-mehadrin*"), the most candles that can ever be lit is eight, on the last night of Hanukkah, regardless of the number of people present. Maimonides, however, also considers the number of people in the household as an active variable, with the result that if there are ten people there on the last night of Hanukkah, eighty candles would be lit — the number of people (ten) multiplied by the number of nights (eight) (see *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Hanukkah* 4:1-2).

However, within a few centuries something very interesting occurred. Not only was one culture influenced

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by the other, but, remarkably, each culture adopted the ruling of the other as normative *halakhah*. Tosafot's position was the accepted practice in Spain as early as the days of Mai-



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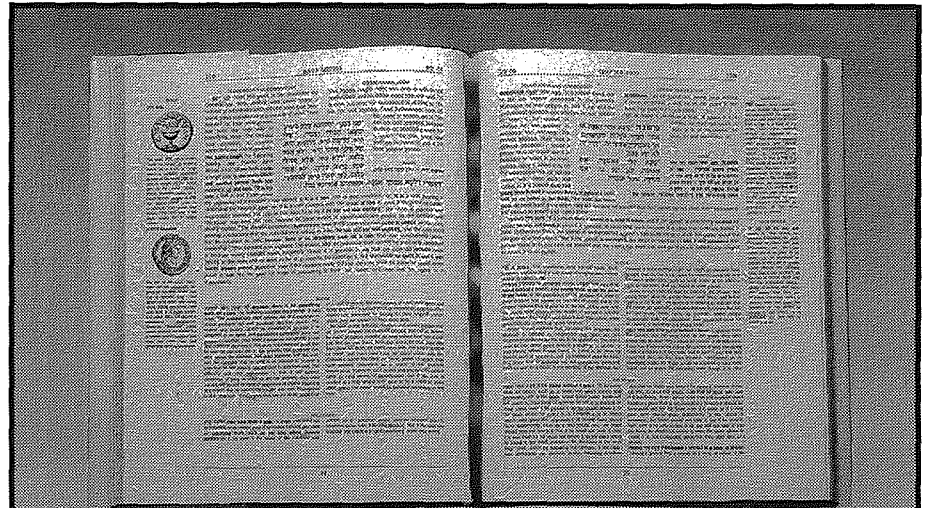
monides himself (*Hil. Hannukah* 4:3 and *Maggid Mishneh, ad loc.*) and Maimonides' opinion was already followed by Ashkenazic Jewry in the sixteenth century, if not earlier (see Rama, *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 671:2). In his commentary on the Tur (*Orach Hayyim* 671), the seventeenth century R. Yoel Sirkes correctly notes (in *Bayit Hadash, s.v. "ve-kamah"*) "our (Ashkenazic) custom is like the opinion of the Rambam and the Sephardic custom is like the opinion of Tosafot." His son-in-law, R. David Halevi, actually went so far as to add, "and this we do not find elsewhere," (*Taz, ad loc.* 671:1). While it has been shown that this assertion is a slight exaggeration (R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Ha-moadim bi-Halakhah* [Tel Aviv, 1955], 166, n. 15), the remarkable phenomenon of this cross-cultural, criss-crossed influence is certainly unusual and deserves attention especially in 1992, when the cultural and religious achievements of Sephardic Jewry are in the spotlight.

R. Yehezkel Kazenellenbogen (*She'elot u-Teshuvot Knesset Yehezkel*, #17) provides a very interesting historical explanation for this shift. He suggests that since Sephardic Jewry enjoyed a high level of comfort and security in Spain, they could light Hannukah candles outdoors, in full view of their Jewish and Gentile neighbors. As a result, they were obliged to light only one ad-

ditional candle each night so that all who saw them would realize that each successive night merited its own additional candle. In Franco-Germany, however, where the Jewish condition was more tenuous and insecure, Jews lit their candles in their own homes, behind closed doors. Since passersby would anyway be unable to see the candles, it did not matter if many more candles were lit each night.

We live today in a fragmented and bifurcated Jewish world, with a growing

lack of respect for Jews of backgrounds and orientations different from our own. It is precisely at such a time when we need to redouble our efforts at maintaining the viability of that terribly important unit known as *Klal Yisrael* and express our care and concern for all Jews. The close ties and mutual respect of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities is vitally important and will go a long way towards building bridges within our large, multi-faceted and wonderful Jewish community. □



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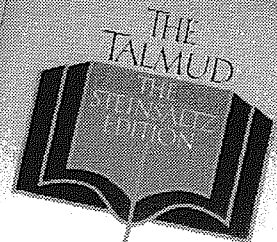
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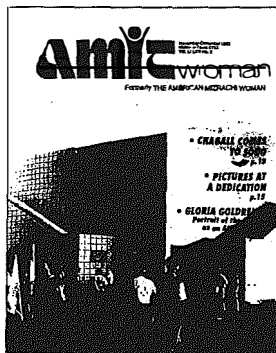
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ABOUT OUR COVER: At the Gala Dedication of the new state-of-the-art AMIT Rose K. Ginsburg Technological Institute



(formerly the AMIT Technological Institute, Gush Dan), students and visitors admire the Samuel Schreiber, z"l Cultural Center and Synagogue, one of several recently-completed structures in the Institute complex. The new facility opened its doors to students in September.

Photo: Scoop 80

AMIT woman

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