



Ashkenazim, Sephardim and the Hannukah Menorah: A Study in Cultural Cross-Transference

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

For a long time, conventional wisdom asserted that two geographically distinct and culturally different Jewries existed side by side in Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. After the second *hurban*, Palestinian Jewry's influence was most directly felt in Italy and, some time in the tenth century, spread to Germany and France. Around the same time, with the rise of the Muslim caliphate in Baghdad in the eighth century, Babylonian Jewry developed as a strong center of power in the Jewish world and, within a century or two, influenced other Jewries in the general Muslim orbit, including those living in the Iberian peninsula. By the eleventh century, these two Jewries—the Ashkenazim of Franco-Germany and the Sephardim of Spain—had developed into two independent religious and cultural groups no longer dependant upon their centers of origin and they continued as two separate and distinct entities throughout the medieval period into modern times.

The truth is that Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewries did not flourish in absolute isolation of one another. It has long been known, among other facts, that Sephardi scholars had close connections with Rabbenu Gershom, that the teachers of the Ramban (Spain) were from Southern France, that R. Avraham ha-Yarhi, author of the *Sefer ha-Manhig* (Provence), and R.

Moshe of Coucy, author of the *Sefer Mizvot Gadol* (Semag), traveled to Spain, and that the Rashba (Spain) had students in his yeshiva from Ashkenaz.¹ The life story of Rabbenu Asher (the Rosh) alone is enough to make this point, representing a combination of the Ashkenazi world of the first half of his life and the Sephardi world of the second.² In recent times, a large and growing literature has further highlighted the connections between these two Jewries.³

One remarkable example of this cross-cultural relationship between Ashkenazim and Sephardim is the matter of the number of candles lit on the holiday of Hannukah. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 21b) states that the basic requirement is to kindle only one light each night of the holiday for all the members of the household. However, it continues, those more scrupulous in their observance (*mehadrin*) light a separate candle for each member of the household each night.⁴ Finally, those who are unusually scrupulous (*mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*) add one additional candle each night (we follow the opinion of Bet Hillel).

For some reason, or set of reasons, the standard of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* has been deemed the normative requirement,⁵ but its exact meaning is the subject of a dispute between Tosafot (Ashkenazi authorities) and Maimonides (a Sephardi authority). According to Tosafot (*Shabbat*

21b, s.v. *ve-ha-mehadrin*), the only variable considered is the number of the night; hence one candle is lit the first night, two the second, and so on, until the eighth night when, at most, eight candles are lit, regardless of how many people are present. For Maimonides (*Hilkhot Hannukah* 4:1–2), however, the *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* level considers the number of the people present *in addition to* the number of the night; hence, the amount of candles lit any given night represents the multiple of the number of the night times the number of people present. As Maimonides writes, if ten people are present the last night of Hannukah, eighty candles are lit.

Within a few centuries, something very interesting occurred. Not only was one culture influenced by the other, but, remarkably, each culture adopted the ruling of the other as normative halakhah. In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Joseph Karo ruled (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 671:2) like Tosafot, that no matter how many people are present, the most candles that could be lit on the last night of Hannukah is eight, while Rabbi Moses Isserles follows the Rambam and allows for many more than eight candles to be lit in a house on the last night of Hannukah; each person present, he rules, lights eight. The Sephardi Rabbi Karo follows the Ashkenazi Tosafot while the Ashkenazi Rabbi Isserles follows the Sephardi Maimonides! In his commentary on the Tur (*Orah Hayyim* 671), Rabbi Yoel Sirkis (*Bayit Hadash, s.v. ve-kamah*) notes that “our (Ashkenazi) custom is like the opinion of the Rambam and the Sephardi custom is like the opinion of Tosafot.” His son-in-law, Rabbi David Halevi, actually went so far as to add, “*ve-zeh lo matzINU be-sha'ar mekomot*” (Taz, ad. loc. 671:1). While it has been suggested that this assertion is somewhat of an exaggeration,⁶ the remarkable phenomenon of this cross-cultural criss-crossed influence is certainly unusual and deserves particular attention.⁷ ■



END NOTES

- 1 Many of these examples—and many more—appear in an article written almost eighty years ago. See Simchah Assaf, “Halifat She’elot u-Teshuvot ben Sefarad u-ben Zarefat ve-Ashkenaz,” *Tarbiz* 8:2 (1937):162–70. See too H. J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim* (London, 1976), in passim.
- 2 See the almost ninety year old series of articles by Alfred Freimann, “Ascher b. Jehiel: Sein Leben und Wirken,” *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft* 12 (1918):237–317; “Die Ascheriden (1267–1391),” 13 (1919):142–254. They were translated into Hebrew and published twenty years ago as *Ha-Rosh: Rabbenu Asher be-R. Yehiel ve-Ze’ezra’av* (Jerusalem, 1986).
- 3 See, for example, Avraham Grossman, “Ben Sefarad le-Zarefat: Ha-Kesharim ben Kehillot Yisrael she-bi-Sefarad ha-Muslamit u-ben Kehillot Zarefat,” in A. Mirsky, A. Grossman and Y. Kaplan, eds., *Galut Ahar Golah* (Jerusalem, 1988), 75–101; *idem.*, “Relations Between Spanish and Ashkenazi Jewry in the Middle Ages,” in Haim Beinart, ed., *Moresheet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy* 1 (Jerusalem, 1992), 220–39; Yisrael M. Ta-Shema, “Hasidut Ashkenaz be-Sefarad: Rabbenu Yonah Gerond— Ha-Ish u-Poalo,” in *Galut Ahar Golah*, pp. 165–94; *idem.*, “Rabbenu Asher u-Beno R. Yaakov Ba’al ha-Turim: Ben Ashkenaz le-Sefarad,” *Pe’amim* 46–47 (1991):75–91; Jeffrey R. Woolf, “Maimonides Revisited: The Case of the Sefer Miswot Gadol,” *Harvard Theological Review* 90:2 (1997):175–203; Benjamin Bar Tikva, “Reciprocity Between the Provencal School of Piyutim and the Schools of Catalonia and Ashkenazi France,” in Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, ed., *Rashi 1040–1990: Hommage a Ephraim E. Urbach* (Paris, 1993), 375–83.
For recent scholarship on Rabbenu Asher, see Yehudah Galinsky, “Ashkenazim in Sefarad: The Rosh and the Tur on the Codification of Jewish Law,” *Jewish Law Annual* 16 (2006): 3–23. My thanks to Dr. Ephraim Kanarfogel for this last reference.
- 4 I will not deal here with the issue of who does the lighting, the head of the household for each person (*hovat ha-bayit*) or each person for him or herself (*hovat ha-guf*). This is an important matter and the careful reader will note the different positions taken on this matter among Rishonim and Ahronim. See, for example, R. Yitzhak Mirsky, *Hegiyonei Halakhah* 1 (Jerusalem, 1989), 204–07. See also the article by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb in this issue of *Chavrusa*.
- 5 For one, well known, explanation, see R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Sefer Bet Halevi* (New York, 1973), 29a, s.v. *sham ve-ha-mehadrin*.
- 6 See R. Shlomoh Yosef Zevin, *Ha-Mo’adim ba-Halakhah* (Tel Aviv, 1955), 166, n. 15.
- 7 For a very interesting, albeit problematic, explanation for this shift, see R. Yehezkel Katzenellenbogen, *She’elot u-Teshuvot Kneset Yehezkel* #17.
For more on this issue, see R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, “Darkei ha-Hora’ah,” in *Kol Sifrei Maharatz Hayot* 1 (Jerusalem, 1958), 224; R. Yitzhak Mirsky, *Hegiyonei Halakhah* 2 (Jerusalem, 1998), 117–22. ■

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