The tradition of Aleppo Jews

Rabbis and officials from the Great synagogue of Aleppo at the beginning of the 20th Century

The tradition of many Jewish families from Aleppo (=Halab), Syria, is to light an extra candle in addition to the regular candles that we all light during Hanukkah. Thus, on the first night of Hanukkah, the Jews from the communities of Aleppo light three candles: 1. One regular Hanukkah candle. 2. The auxiliary-candle or shamash. 3. One additional candle. Tonight, the fourth night of Hanukkah, they will light four candles, the Shamash, and one additional candle, and so on.

Not all Jews from Aleppo follow this tradition; only those families who trace their origins to Spain do so. But why? When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 (or from Portugal in 1497), they fled to various destinations. Some of them arrived in Italy, Turkey, and Greece. Others settled in North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Many also came to Eretz Israel and Syria. In most of the cities where these refugees from Spain (called "Sepharadim" since then) settled, well-established local Jewish communities existed. The Sephardim integrated into the existing communities but still maintained their ancient customs and culture. In many cases, the Sephardim became the majority or the dominant minority, and gradually, the local Jews (known in Arab countries as musta'arabim) adopted the customs of the Spanish Jews and considered themselves "Sepharadim," even though their ancestors were never in Spain. In cities like Istanbul, Turkey, or Salonica in Greece, where most Spanish refugees arrived, they continued to speak ancient Spanish or Ladino, almost to this day.

For several decades after the expulsion from Spain, many Sephardic families arrived in Syria directly from Spain or after spending some time in Italy, Turkey, Egypt, or Israel. The famous Spanish traveler, Captain Domingo de Toral (1598-1640), wrote in his memoirs "Relations of Captain Domingo de Toral and Valdés" that when he visited Aleppo, Syria, in 1634, he found there, to his surprise, "More than 800 families of Castilian-speaking Jews."

But why did those families who came to Aleppo from Spain adopt the custom of lighting an extra candle?

The Sephardic Jews who arrived in Aleppo considered their safe arrival in their new destination nothing short of a miracle. The Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal, numbering around 250,000, were exposed to all kinds of dangers during their travels, especially at sea. Firstly, at sea, they were completely helpless, with nothing and no one to protect them, at the mercy of the captains of small ships and their crew, who only wanted to keep for themselves the few possessions that these refugees brought with them. Embarking on a trip at sea was an open invitation to all kinds of abuses. Many Jews drowned at sea (see below), and in the best case, some were sold as slaves. Even if the captain of the ship miraculously fulfilled his promise and attempted to take them to their destination, travelers still risked being attacked by pirates, suffering from starvation, being exposed to storms that could sink their fragile ships, and facing the ever-present threat of diseases and epidemics. All these tribulations claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Yehudim. Remember the story of Rabbi Isaac Caro? (See here). He left Portugal for Israel but never reached Israel and eventually ended up in Turkey. In that terrible journey, he lost his entire family, wife, and children, all except for one daughter…

Having arrived safely in Aleppo, probably around Hanukkah time, these families decided to recall their story and thank God for their miraculous salvation. And to do that, they decided to light an additional candle each night of Hanukkah.

It is worth noting that while for virtually all Mitsvot it is forbidden to do something extra or add an additional element (for example, it is not allowed to place five tsitsiot in a tallit, etc.), the amount of candles we light on Hanukkah has a minimum number: one candle per night, but there is no maximum number of candles we are allowed to light.

THE HAZARDS OF TRAVELING BY SEA IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In 1290, the Jews were expelled from England. Lord Edward Coke wrote: "The captain and crew of one of the largest ships assigned to deport the Jews conceived a dastardly plot to get rid of all its passengers, a particularly wealthy group of Jews with some extremely valuable luggage. Once all the Jews were aboard, the ship duly set sail down the Thames. However, as it was nearing the mouth of the river, at Queensborough, the Captain dropped anchor, leaving the ship to bob about until it was low tide. At last, when the craft was embedded upon the sands, the captain announced he was going to take a stroll and invited his Jewish passengers to accompany him, saying the air would do them good. The Jews, who thought they must be ashore and suspecting nothing, gladly accepted the captain's kind invitation and disembarked in high spirits. They spent many happy hours amusing themselves on the sands, and they were enjoying themselves so much that they failed to notice either that the tide had begun to come back in or that the captain had quietly tiptoed back to the ship. By the time they realized what was happening and the grave danger they were in, the tide was coming in thick and fast. But it was too late. When they ran back to the ship, calling out to be helped back on board, the villainous captain refused, laughing loudly and calling down to them, 'Don't ask me for help, ask your prophet Moses; if he could get your forefathers across the Red Sea, he's bound to be able to help you out of this!' And without another word, he left them to the mercy of the waves. Each and every one of them was drowned."

A NOTE FROM SHELOMO EZRA ANTEBI SACCA. Dec 29, 2016

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The wise scholar who composed in Sefer Yitzhak Yeranen, Siman Samekh-Daled, writes something similar to what you have described, and he says, "In my opinion, in memory of the miracle of their escape from the Inquisition, they lit additional Hanukkah candles to give thanks and praise to the Almighty. Perhaps their departure from the oppression occurred during Hanukkah."

In contrast, in the book Derech Eretz (Adas) on pages Kaf-Mem-Gimel-Dalet, it brings the words of Rabbi Yitzhak Zefrani (may he live long and well) who said that this custom was practiced even in Spain. He further writes there, in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak Tuwiel (may he live long and well), that "the sons of Spain were honorable and exalted people, and throughout the year, they would light two candles to illuminate their homes. Therefore, on Hanukkah, they did not recognize the distinction when lighting only two candles on the first night. Thus, they lit two shamashim, and consequently, on every night, they continued to add a candle, and so forth."

He also brings there in Derech Eretz on page Reish-Chet that it cites an article published in one newspaper where Rabbi Nathan Salim testified that this custom is because when the Jews of Spain went into exile, they roamed for months without finding rest. When they finally reached the shore in safety, they decided to add a candle on Hanukkah as a sign of gratitude for their salvation. This is similar to what you have written.