Sephardic vs. Ashkenazi traditions in Hanukka

HANUKKA: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SEPHARDIM AND ASHKENAZIM

There are no significant differences between the traditions of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews regarding Hanukka. There are only some minor variations.

Examples:

THE FUNCTION OF THE *SHAMASH*

According to the Ashkenazi custom, the auxiliary candle or *shamash* is lit first. Thus, after saying the *berakha*, one uses the *shamash* to light the rest of the candles, and after lighting all the candles, the *shamash* is placed in its designated spot. In the Sephardic tradition, however, all the candles are lit using a match or a separate candle, and only at the end is the *shamash* lit.

For the Ashkenazi tradition, the *shamash* serves a dual function: it provides additional light and is used to ignite the other candles. In contrast, the Sephardic tradition does not use the *shamash* for lighting the other candles. The primary reason for lighting the *shamash* in the Sephardic tradition is to ensure that if one inadvertently benefits from the light of the Hanukka candles, it is the *shamash's* light providing that benefit. In other words, whereas Ashkenazim use the flame of the *shamash* to light the other candles, Sephardim use the *shamash* solely for its light.

WHERE SHOULD YOU PLACE YOUR *HANUKIA*?

Many Sephardic families, especially in Israel, maintain the original custom of lighting the candles outside the house, on the opposite side of the *mezuza* (as seen in historical

depictions). The Ashkenazi tradition, however, is to light the *hanukia* (also known as a *menora*) inside the house, near a window, so that the light can be seen from the outside.

HOW MANY *HANUKIOT* DO WE LIGHT?

In many Ashkenazi communities, the custom is for each family member to light their own *hanukia*, including young children who are older than six years. In Sephardic families, however, the custom is to light only one *hanukia* per family (*mitsvat ish u-beto*). This practice parallels the lighting of Shabbat candles. In Sephardic tradition, only the mother lights the Shabbat candles. In Ashkenazi tradition, each daughter in the family lights her own set of Shabbat candles.

LEHADLIQ NER HANUKKA OR *NER SHEL HANUKKA*?

In the *berakha*, the Ashkenazi tradition uses the phrase: *lehadliq ner SHEL Hanukka* ("to light the Hanukka candle"). Sephardim, following the wording of the *Shulchan Arukh*, say: *lehadliq ner Hanukka*, omitting the word "SHEL." There is no grammatical or semantic difference between these two versions, and one cannot claim that one is correct while the other is not.

Interestingly, the original version of this *berakha* as found in Maimonides' *Mishne Tora* (*Hilchot Hanukka* 3:4) includes the word "SHEL," similar to *lehadliq ner SHEL Shabbat* ("to light the Shabbat candle"). Although Sephardic tradition generally follows Maimonides, in this instance, it adheres to the opinion of the *mekubalim* (Kabbalists). However, some Sephardim, such as the members of the Spanish-Portuguese community of England (who distanced themselves from mystical-based traditions after the events of Shabbetai Zevi), retain Maimonides' original version. This version, which includes the word "SHEL," is also found in older Sephardic *siddurim* like *Tefilat haHodesh* and *Bene Tsion* and was the practice in Iran, as recorded by Mr. Nassim Bassalian.

TRADITIONS

Playing with the *sebibon* (dreidel) is an Ashkenazi custom that Sephardim traditionally did not adopt. Similarly, the practice of giving Hanukka *gelt* (coins or gifts for children) is an Ashkenazi tradition not typically observed by Sephardim.