HANUKA: Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions

Unlike other Jewish holidays like Pesach, there are no significant differences between the customs of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews regarding Hanukka. However, there are a few minor variations:

HOW MANY HANUKKIYOT DO WE LIGHT?

In many Ashkenazi communities, it is customary for every family member to light their own Hanukkiyah, even young children over the age of six.

In Sephardic communities, however, the custom is to light one Hanukkiyah per household (Mitsvot Ish Ubeito).

A similar practice applies to Shabbat candles: in Sephardic tradition, only the mother lights the candles, whereas in some Ashkenazi communities, each daughter lights her own Shabbat candles.

LEHADLIQ NER HANUKKA OR NER SHEL HANUKKA?

According to Ashkenazi tradition, the blessing is recited as: “Lehadliq ner SHEL Hanukka” (“…to kindle the light of Hanukka”).

Sephardim, however, follow the wording specified in the Shulhan Arukh: “Lehadliq ner Hanukka”, omitting the word “SHEL.”

Grammatically and semantically, there is no difference between these versions; one is not more correct than the other. Interestingly, the original version of this blessing (as per Maimonides, MT Hanukka 3:4) includes “SHEL”, similar to the blessing for Shabbat candles: “Lehadliq ner SHEL Shabbat.”

However, the Sephardic tradition—and the Shulhan Arukh, which generally follows Maimonides—bases this exception on the opinions of Mekubalim (Kabbalistic scholars like the Ari HaQadosh z”l). This might also explain why Chabad Hasidim, despite being Ashkenazi, use the Sephardic version. Some Sephardic communities, such as the Spanish-Portuguese Jews of England, who distanced themselves from Kabbalistic practices after the Sabbatean crisis, still retain Maimonides’ version, as seen in early Sephardic siddurim like Tefilat HaHodesh and Bene Tsion.

THE ROLE OF THE SHAMASH

According to Ashkenazi custom, the auxiliary candle (shamash) is lit first after reciting the blessing, and it is used to light the rest of the candles before being placed in its holder.

In Sephardic tradition, all the candles are lit using a match or auxiliary candle, and the shamash is lit last. For Ashkenazim, the shamash serves to kindle the other candles, while Sephardim does not use it this way.

The primary purpose of the shamash in Sephardic custom is to ensure that the light of the Hanukkiyah is not used inadvertently to benefit from it, which is prohibited.

Practically, this difference may also stem from the materials used: while most Ashkenazim use wax candles for Hanukka, Sephardim traditionally use oil lamps for the Hanukkiyah, making it imposible to light oil lamps with an oil candle.

TRADITIONS

Playing with the sevivon (dreidel, a gambling-related spinning device that originated in 16th-century Europe) is an Ashkenazi custom that Sephardim never adopted. Similarly, the practice

of giving Hanukka gelt (coins or gifts for children) is uniquely Ashkenazi.