

The Customs Associated with Joy on Chanukah and Their More Obscure Sources

by: Eliezer Brodt

In previous posts we have discussed some of the customs relating to Chanukah, in this post I wanted to address those customs connected to Simcha (joy) and do so by highlighting some rather unknown sources. Amongst the topics I will discuss are eating a seudah, dairy products, sefuganiot, playing cards and dreidel.

1. Seudah

R. Eliezer Ashkenazi (1512-85) writes in the introduction to his classic work on Megilat Esther, *Yosef Lekakh* (first printed in Cremona, 1576), the reason that only on Purim do we celebrate with a seudah and not on Chanukah is because

סנ אל לארשימ המכ תתימ ידי לע התויהב תאז מג פא החורה התיה ודי לעו, החצנ יאנומשח המחלמהש תויה מעש
עגפ נ'אז נ'טש נ'אז מהיאנושב גורהו מהביואמ חנ התיה מהימיבו רתסאו יכדרמ נ'מזב נכ נ'אש המ. החנאו ווגי
מהינפב דמע אל שיאו מהינחמב

What R. Eliezer Ashkenazi is saying is that since on Chanukah we suffered many casualties so we do not celebrate with a seudah as opposed to Purim where there were no casualties.

The R. Mordechi Yaffa (1530-1612) in his *Levush* gives a different reason why there is no seudah on Chanukah:

אבש אלא נמה ימיב היהש ומכ הגירהל מהילע לשומ היהש דחא לשומ דיב נ'מז ותואב לארשי ורסמן אלש ינפמו
השעממ עוודיכ מתד לע מירעבהלו לארשי לע הפוקת מדי תויהלו הענכה אלא ושקב לאו המחלמל מהילע מיביואה
מתד רימהל ידכ תודמשו תורצ קר דימשהלו גורהל מהילע רזג אלש סכויטנא

Meaning that since on Purim there was no option to convert as opposed to Chanukah so therefore Chanukah was not as bad as Purim and we do not celebrate with a seudah. [Much has been written on this Levush but we will have to deal with this on a different occasion.]

Many Rishonim hold there is no obligation to eat a seudah and that is what the Mechaber in Shulchan Orach writes

The Rambam (Hilcos Chanukah Perek Gimel Halacha gimel), however, writes:

החמש ימי ולסכב מירשעו השמח לילמ נתלחתש ולא מהימיה תנומש ויהיש רודה ותואבש מימכה וניקתה הז ינפמו
ללהו

At first glance it does not appear that the Rambam is saying one has to eat a seudah rather its just days of "simcha and joy." However, R. Zev Boskowitz (1740-1809) in his work *Seder Hamishana* (recently printed from manuscript in 1989) writes the Rambam in fact means a seudah is required and furthermore such a seudah would considered a seudas mitzvah.

While until now, we have been parsing the words of the Rambam to locate an authority that holds there is an obligation to have a seuda, other Rishonim write straight out that there is an obligation to eat a seudah on Chanukah amongst them, Rashaba (vol 1, Siman 699) Tosofos (Tanis 18b), Marshal and *Chanukas Habayis* (p. 71). Additionally, R. Yeshuah Ibn Shu'eib, a

talmid of the Rashaba, in Ibn Shu'eib's *Derashot al HaTorah* (first printed in Istanbul, 1523 - end of parsha Meketz) also writes ונקתו ל"ז ונתנו זה... זה מידעומכ ותושעלו... זה ונקתו [1] this could imply a seudah.[1]

Some have used the Megilas Antioches [2] to adduce a seudah obligation on Chanukah. The Megilas Antioches (first printed in Mantau 1557 and typically dated sometime between the 2nd and 5th centuries of the Common Era, for more see the sources in note 2) describes Chanukah as התשמו התשמו thus, according to some, the "התשמו" would obligate a meal. But, this line in Megilas Antioches is only found in the Hebrew translations, whereas in the older Aramaic versions it only says התשמו and is lacking the key word התשמו

2. Instruments and Jokes.

As far as other aspects of Simcha on Chanukah in the *Sefer Hamaskil* (end of the 13th century) from the nephew of the Rosh, writes that although during the rest of the year it is prohibited to tell jokes (pg 12) or play musical instruments (pg. 22) on Chanukah it is permitted. This implies that Chanukah is days of joy, a joy on some level more than rest of the year.

3. Maseh Yehudis and eating Dairy products.

Rabenu Bechayu (lived at the end of the 13th century) writes in his work *Kad haKemach* (first printed in Istanbul, 1515) that התשמו ידי לע היהש הכונה סנב ל"ז ושרד נכו. It is unclear, however, what the source in Chazal for this statement is. R. Chaim Bright in his pirish on the *Kad haKemach* called *Tzipchas Hasheman* (first published in the Lvov, 1880 edition of the *Kad haKemach*) brings that the source for Rabenu Bachayu is the sefer *Maseh Yehudis* (Book of Judith) [3] as part of what she did was tied to food. Specifically, Yehudis gave the enemy General Holofernes food and then proceeded to cut off his head.(p. 92) All this could be another possible source to make a seudah on Chanukah. The truth is the story of Yehudis is the source for another Halacha related to Chanukah and food. The Ramah writes some eat milchig (dairy) products as the miracle (of Yehudis) came about thru dairy products. Much has been gathered on this topic just to add one more source, R. Avrohom Saba (1440-1508) in his work on Megilas Esther, *Eshkol Hakofer*, (p. 40) writes

יהיו...הלחת וזמגהל לעבתש הלחת לכ לע ורזגו מינויה ימיב 'יהש נחזוי ר' לש ותב לע ימלשוריב ורמאש ומכ דחייב ותשיו ולכאיש תיצור איה המע בכשיש מדוקש ול הרמא וזמגהל לעבהל נחזוי ר' לש ותב הספתנ רשאכ הכונחב הניבג לישבת לוכאל ונקת נכלו...לארשיל סנ השענו...ניכס האיזוהו מדרנו...הניבג לש לישבת ותליכאהו סנ ותואל רכו.

The *Chanukas haBayis* also writes to eat Milchigs (p. 136). Chaim Chemerinsky [early 1900's] also writes that in his home they specifically ate dairy products during their seudah on Chanukah (*Eiyuriti Motele* p. 181). [4]

However, it is not so clear if one can use the sefer *Maseh Yehudis* as a source because many write the event in question did not even happen during Chanukah. The *Meor Eynaim* (end of ch 51), R. Yehudah Aryeh Modena (*Shulchan Orach*, p. 83), R. Yakov Emden (*Meor Uketziah* beginning of Hal. Chanukah) and the *Orach Hashulchan* (siman 670, 8) all write the

event was not on Chanukah.

4. Seufgoniot

Another food eaten by Jews on Chanukah is Seufgoniot (doughnuts). In Eretz Yisroel they start selling them a month before Chanukah and incredible amounts of these sefgoniot are sold each year. This custom also has very early sources just to mention two of them. R.

Mamion the father of the Rambam writes[5]

משה השעש סנה מסרפל לכאמו החמשו התשמ תישע ול נוכג לכ בייחתי. לק גהנמ וליפאו גהנמ מושב לקהל ניא
מוגרתבו שבדב תויחפצה מהו, גניפסלא יברעב, נינגפוס תושעל גהנמה טשפו. מימיה מתואב ונמע דרבתי
נמש דפבש סגל רמולכ - ותכרב רכזל נמשב מיילק מהש מושמ מינומדקה גהנמ אוה ניטירקסיאה

[Additionally, from this source, it appears from this that R. Mamion holds one should make a seudah on Chanukah.] Another early source who writes that people used to eat these נינגפוס on Chanukah is R. Kalnomus Ben Kolumnus (1286 - died after 1328) in his *Even Habochen* (p. 30) [more on him in a future post].

5. Latkes

Based on the words of R, Mamion it's easy to understand how the minhag of eating latkes came about as they are fried in oil as R. Maimon's highlights that the sufganiyot are "fried in oil."

Pauline Wengeroff records in her excellent memoir, Rememberings: "On the fifth night my mother invited all our friends and relatives.... The Invitation read, 'You are invited for latkes.'" It's very likely that this is the food described by R. D. Sassoon in his travels that people in Baghdad ate on Chanukah (*Maseh Bavel* p. 183).

6. Getting drunk and Cross-dressing

Besides for eating elaborate seudos and special foods we find other methods of entertainment that Jews did on Chanukah. R. Kalnomus Ben Kolumnus writes in his *Even Habochen* (p. 30) that people used to get drunk. The *Sefer Hamaskil* (end of the 13th century) [6] indicates that although he strongly disapproves of the customs, there was a custom to cross-dress on Chanukah. He writes:

מהישארב דיעצ מינתונה מירוחב נוגכ השא תלמש רבג שבלי אלד ואלמ רומשת מא שרית הולשו לחנת הבוט
רכשה אצי הוצמ משל והשעת מא וליפאו הזה ערה רבדב מהמ דחאכ היהת לאו... הכונחב מישנ ידגב מישבולו
דספהב

Meaning do not this terrible sin of cross dressing on Chanukah. [7]

7. Card Playing

Another pastime observed on Chanukah was card playing. [8] Professor M. Breuer brings early sources for card playing on Chanukah (*Ohelei Torah* p. 355). R. Yehudah Aryeh

Modena writes about himself in his autobiography how "during Chanukah of the year 5355 (1594) Satan fooled me into playing games of chance causing me no small amount of damage." (*The Autobiography of a Seventeenth Century Venetian Rabbi*, p. 97). R. Yakov Emden writes against this custom in his *Meor Uketziah* which he says people used to do on Chanukah [introduction to hilchos Chanukah and end of siman 670].

Eliezer Friedman [1870's] describes in his memoirs (*Zikhronos*, Tel Aviv, 1926) how his grandfather, an old litvack taught him one Chanukah exactly how to play cards (p. 61).

Both Chaim Chemerinsky (*Eiyrti Motele* pp. 43, 178) and Pauline Wengeroff (op. cit., pp. 65-6) elaborately describe the card games that used to take place in their homes on Chanukah. R.M. Braver describes in his autobiography [mid 1800's] how in Galicia the yeshiva boys used to waste their whole Chanukah playing cards (*Zecronot Av U'beno* p. 67). His son, R. A. Braver in his autobiography also describes the card games that used to take place in Galicia on Chanukah (pp. 244-45). Elsewhere in his book he describes when the month of Kislev began how the boys started getting their cards ready for card playing on Chanukah (p. 352).

8. Dreidel

Another game played by Jews until today is Dreidel although it's unclear from where it came from but some sources of playing this game are: M. Zlotkin printed an autobiography from a Litvish Rav (available [here](#)) who supposedly lived in the time of the Vilna Gaon who writes how how in an effort to try to connect to the children on Chanukah he used to give them Dreidels (pp. 244- 245). In 1824 an extremely cynical parody work was printed called *Sefer Kundes* [in a future post I hope to write an elaborate post on this work] it describes things found in the pocket of a kundes – a trickster one of the items is a dreidel [In 1997, M. Zalkin thru the Dinur Center printed a critical edition of this very rare work, see p. 48].

R. Y. Weiss brings that the Chasam Sofer used to play dreidel on the first night (*Eleph Kesav* p. 145) Pauline Wengeroff writes that another popular game on Chanukah was dreidel (op. cit., p. 66). R. A. Braver in his autobiography writes before Chanukah they used to prepare their dreidels (p. 231) Later on he describes exactly how the game was played (p. 244).

R. Y. Falk in his *Choshvei Machshovos* (printed in 1970), an excellent unknown work on minhagim writes a few reasons for playing dreidel on Chanukah at the end he writes

ל"יו מש'יה לודג סנ ת"ר אוה וילע מיבתוכש ש"הגנ תויתואהש מירפסב 'יא יכ לרדערדב הכונחב ויקחשמש המ
וגיהנהו תורמסמ ועבק לכ לע מלועה יניעב טעמתהל ליחתה הכונח לש סנהש רוד ותואבש מימכח וארש מושמ
הכונח לש סנה מהיניעב וטקוי אלש לארשי ינב ררועלו ריכזהל... ת"ר אוהש ש"הגנ וילע בותכלו לרדערד תושעל
לודג סנ תמאב 'יהש

(p. 160)

Some recent sources on these topics [just to whet ones appetite]:

[1] On eating a Seudah on Chanukah See; R. S. Shick, *Seder Haminhagim* p. 32b; *Eleph*

Kesav, 1, p. 37 ; M. Rafeld in *Minhaghei Yisroel*, vol. 5, pp. 85-101; R. Nosson D. Rabinowitz, *Benue Shnos Dor Vdor* pp. 47-48; *Moadim Lisimcha* pp. 230-252; *Pardes Eliezer* pp. 463- 556; *Chazon Ovadiah* pp. 15-18.

[2] On this point see: R. Nosson D. Rabinowitz, *Benue Shnos Dor Vdor* pp.140-142 ;M. Rafeld in *Minhaghei Yisroel*, vol. 5, pp. 85-86; *Moadim Lisimcha* pp 258- 259; R. M. Leiter, *Mamlechet Kohanim* pp. 56,117-19.

On this Megilah in general see R. M. Strashun, *Mivchar Kesavim* p. 144; N. Fried in *Minhaghei Yisroel*, vol. 5, pp. 102-20; *Areshet* vol.4 p. 166; R. Nosson D. Rabinowitz, *Benue Shnos Dor Vdor* pp. 121- 151; R. M. Leiter, *Mamlechet Kohanim* pp. 40-159.

[3] On *Maseh Yehudis* in general see R. Nosson D. Rabinowitz, *Benue Shnos Dor Vdor* pp. 80-105 (especially p. 109); *Moadim Lisimcha* pp. 276-312; *Chasmunu Ubobov* pp. 114-129; R. M. Leiter, *Mamlechet Kohanim* pp. 359-442.

[4] For more on eating Milchigs see *Moadim Lisimcha*, pp. 286-292; *Pardes Eliezer*, pp. 557-581.

[5] On this statement of R. Mamion see S. Abramson, *Rav Nissim Goan* p. 328.

[6] On the *Sefer Hamaskil* see the excellent article by R. M. M. Honig, *Yerushcanu*, 1, pp. 196-240.

[7] On cross dressing and yom tovim see the excellent forthcoming article of Y. Spiegel.

[8] On card playing in general see; I. Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, pp.148-151; Y. Rivkind, *Yiddishe Gelt*; A. Shochet, *Em Chelufei Tekufos* (pp. 40-41) ; L. Landman *J.Q.R.* Vol. 57, No.4.(Apr.,1967) pp. 298-318 and *J.Q.R.* Vol. 58, No.1.(Jul.,1967) pp.34-62.