Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz
Minhag Ashkenaz: Sources and Roots

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Cutting A Boy’s Hair
Without Doing a Chalaka (Upsherin)

The German custom to bring a young boy to the synagogue with a wimpel
(wrapping for the Torah scroll) has no connection whatsoever to the
practice of the chalaka (the Arabic term حلق for Upsherin) observed by
Sepharadim and later adopted by many Chasidim. The custom of holding a
special celebration marking the boy’s first haircut developed among these
groups. The celebration takes place at a specific age, usually three. The
festivity is customarily held near the gravesite of a tzadik or in a
synagogue. This custom was unknown in ancient Sephardic and
Ashkenazic communities.

The earliest reports of the chalaka celebration are found in accounts
written by Sepharadim early in the period of the Acharonim. Some three
centuries later, we find the first indications that the custom had made its
way into Chasidic circles. The most important source concerning the
chalaka is the account of the celebration in which the Ari-zal is involved.
The details of this story are somewhat vague, and it is unclear whether the
Ari-zal made a chalaka for his son, or whether the account refers to his
disciple, Rabbi Yonatan Sagish. There is also some question as to whether
the Ari-zal participated in Lag Ba’omer events in Meron after his
kabalistic insights because the custom to conduct a chalaka on Lag
Ba’omer runs in opposition to the Ari-zal’s final ruling that forbade hair
cutting during the omer period.

Furthermore, the custom of the chalaka has given rise to some questions as
to the propriety of hair cutting at a gravesite or synagogue, which might
constitute an infringement upon the sanctity of the site. Some have also
questioned the permissibility of haircutting on Lag Ba’omer, during bein
ha-metzarim (the three weeks before Tisha B’Av) or during Chol
Ha’mo’ed. Yet another concern was the immodest behavior that
occasionally accompanied this event. Most Sephardic and Chasidic rabbis applauded, or at least defended the practices observed in their circles, though there were those who forbade the custom in this manner.

Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik of Brisk (1889-1960) disapproved of bringing children to rabbis on their third birthday for the chalaka, claiming that this practice “has no reason or basis.” He noted that there are sources indicating that one should introduce the child to matters of Torah at the age of three, but none that involve haircutting. Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky [the “Steipler Ga’on,” (1899-1985)] also opposed this practice, and would send away parents who brought their children to him for the chalaka haircut.
The tendency among Ashkenazi communities to refrain from this practice stems, according to one view, from the concern that the chalaka transgresses the prohibition of imitating pagan practices. Cutting a child’s hair at the age of three was a well-known custom among several nations in ancient times, and thus observing this practice may constitute an imitation of pagan ritual. Some, however, dismissed this argument, claiming that to the contrary, the chalaka perhaps began as an ancient Jewish practice which was later adopted by the gentiles. There are some older customs, originating in the times of Chazal and the Ge’onim, such as fasting on Erev Rosh Hashana and the ceremony of Kapaprot on Erev Yom Kippur which were opposed by some rabbis since they feared that their origins could be found in pagan rites. In any event, although some communities accepted this custom, Ashkenazi communities were never aware of such a practice. They did not receive this tradition from their forebears, and they found no mention of it in the writings of the Rishonim.

The primary site of the chalaka observance is Mount Meron in Northern Israel (the burial site of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai), where many fathers bring their three-year-old sons on Lag Ba’omer for their chalaka. Besides the questions surrounding the chalaka, the Chatam Sofer opposed the entire celebration at Mount Meron on the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai’s death, noting that this celebration does not commemorate any miracle and is not mentioned anywhere in the Talmud or its commentaries. Furthermore, he added, according to Halakha the anniversary of a tzadik’s passing should be a day of fasting and mourning and not of celebration and festivity.

The ancient tradition among Ashkenazi communities was to cut a boy’s hair at a very young age. In fact, during the times of Chazal, parents would cut an infant’s hair not long after birth, and they even permitted cutting a baby’s overgrown hair on Chol Ha’mo’ed. In the times of the Rishonim, too, boys’ hair in Ashkenaz was cut already within the first several months after birth. The phenomenon of children with overgrown hair simply did not exist in Germany, and a boy with overgrown hair would have been mistaken for a girl.
The custom of *chalaka* was never accepted in *Ashkenazic* countries or other regions in Western Europe, not even among the *Sephardic* communities in these areas. The practice earned acceptance in Eastern Europe among certain *Chasidic* circles, but only in later generations. Among other circles, boys’ hair was cut when they began speaking, and no special affair was held to celebrate the event.