

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.



Child brought to a Chasidic Rebbe for *Chalaka*

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.