

Hanukkah Gelt

By: ZVI RON

Although not mentioned in many classic works on Jewish customs,¹ there is a popular custom to give children money at Hanukkah time. This money, called Hanukkah *gelt* (Yiddish for “money”), is considered a more authentic Jewish practice than giving gifts, which is understood to be influenced by Christmas. Hanukkah *gelt* has evolved into chocolate coins wrapped in metallic foil, and is a symbol found in various Hanukkah decorations, stickers and magnets. In this article we will explore the origin and development of this widespread custom.²

Charity on Hanukkah

Rambam (*Hilkebot Hanukkah* 4:12) rules that even a person who receives charity for food must borrow money or sell his clothing to purchase oil and candles to light. This is because the lighting of Hanukkah candles entails popularizing the miracle (*pirsumei nisa*) and is similar to the obligation to have four cups of wine at the Seder even if this comes from charity.³ This would later be codified in *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 671:1. It is thus not unusual to find early sources that describe Hanukkah as a time of year when charity is distributed to the poor.

The earliest mentions of giving money to anyone on Hanukkah concern charity to the needy distributed at this time. For example, R. Shlomo ibn Aderet (Rashba, 1235–1310) discusses a case in a responsum involving a benefactor who would distribute money on Hanukkah to

¹ For example, it is not mentioned in *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim, Ozar Kol Minbagei Yeshurun* and *Ozar Ta'amei ha-Minbagim*.

² An excellent overview of this issue can be found in David Golinkin, *Responsa in a Moment* vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2017), pp. 157–170. I am indebted to that article for pointing me in the direction of many valuable sources.

³ *Magid Mishnah, Hilkebot Hanukkah* 4:12.

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poor people, widows and orphans.⁴ The simple explanation is that this was done to enable poor people to celebrate Hanukkah festively.⁵

It was particularly significant to give charity to poor Torah scholars at Hanukkah. Many sources from the 1500s detail the practice in Italian and Sephardic communities to collect money for clothing for teachers and poor students at Hanukkah.⁶

Ashkenazic sources also note the practice of rabbis, *shamashim*, cantors, ritual slaughterers and teachers to collect money and sometimes food by going door to door on Hanukkah.⁷ R. Yitzchak Liefitz writes that the practice of communal workers going door to door to collect money on Purim and Hanukkah was one of the ways to ensure they had a livelihood.⁸ The custom of educators and students collecting money on Hanukkah has persisted into modern times.⁹

The particular connection between educators in general and Hanukkah is explained in various ways. Some point to the connection between the word Hanukkah and the word *hinuch* (education).¹⁰ R.

⁴ Aharon Zeleznik, ed., *She'elot u-Teshuvot Rashba* vol. 3, (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1996), p. 164, *siman* 297. In the Worms community, the new *gabbaei tzadaka* were appointed at Hanukkah. See Avraham Meir Haberman, "Minhagei ha-Kehila b-Vermiza Mitoch Sefer ha-Minhagim shel Rav Yuspa Shamash," *Sinai* vol. 79:5–6 (1976), p. 258.

⁵ See Ephraim Greenblatt, *Riveros Ephraim* vol. 1 (Memphis, TN: 1975), *siman* 440:3, p. 350; David Cohen, *Gvul Ya'avetz* vol. 1 (Brooklyn, New York: 1987), p. 158. See also Sidney Hoenig, *Hanukkah: The Feast of Lights* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1937), p. 116, "Hanukkah shares with Purim in being a time in which gifts of money are distributed among those in need."

⁶ R. Shmuel di Medina (Maharashdam, 1505–1589) discusses a case where the amount of wool collected for a teacher was not enough for Chanukah clothing, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Maharshadam*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 372. See also Simcha Assaf, *Mekorot l-Toldot ha-Hinuch b-Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1925), vol. 2, p. 135, item 2, p. 168, item 19.

⁷ See Isaac Rifkind, *Yidishe Gelt* (New York: Academy for Jewish Research, 1959), pp. 103–104. Regarding Rifkind and this book, see Shimeon Brisman, *A History and Guide to Judaic Dictionaries and Concordances Part 1* (Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, 2000), p. 153.

⁸ Yitzchak Liefitz, *Sefer Matamim* (Warsaw: 1910), p. 26, item 7. Homiletical explanations for this practice are given there on p. 26, *siman* 8 and p. 27, *siman* 13.

⁹ Nachum Wahrman, *Chagei Yisrael u-Moadeibem* (Tel Aviv: Achiasaf Publishing House, 1970), p. 97, reports that this still took place in Jerusalem "a generation ago."

¹⁰ See R. Zvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov in his *Bnei Yisachar*, Kislev-Tevet, ma'amar 2, Or Torah, *siman* 16; R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Ein Ayab – Shabbat* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Machon haRav Zvi Yehuda Kook, 1993), p. 63, *siman* 8.

Ephraim Greenblatt writes that R. Menachem Klein further explains that since the miracle of Hanukkah occurred because of Jews persisting to learn Torah (עוסקי תורתך), it is significant to support poor Torah scholars in particular on Hanukkah.¹¹

However, a major factor influencing this custom seems to be the practice of having a school break during Hanukkah. This is noted in the 18th century work *Hemdat Yamim*, where the author explains that the Hanukkah break from school was used as an opportunity to collect funds on behalf of impoverished students and poor Torah scholars. He says that over time this transformed into students bringing money to their teachers and poor people, not just scholars, going door to door asking for money.¹²

R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne (1710–1784), student of the Ba'al Shem Tov, in his classic work *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, describes how rabbis would visit smaller communities on Hanukkah to teach them Torah and the members of the community would give them donations. Over time they would just send donations to rabbis and educators on Hanukkah irrespective of a communal visit.¹³

The 18th century kabbalist R. Alexander Susskind of Grodno in his *Yesod v-Shoresb ha-Avoda* notes that giving charity on Hanukkah, particularly to poor Torah scholars, repairs the “blemishes of the soul.”¹⁴ He explains this based on mystical concepts. This is also found in *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* (139:1).

Young Men Going Door to Door

R. Avraham Gombiner (c. 1635–1682), in his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, *Magen Avraham* (*siman* 670) mentions that it is the custom of poor young men (נערים) to go door to door collecting money on

Also, Paul Steinberg, *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Winter Holidays: Hanukkah, Tu B'Shevat, Purim* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), p. 33.

¹¹ Ephraim Greenblatt, *Rivevos Ephraim* vol. 1 (Memphis, TN: 1975), *siman* 288, p. 225.

¹² *Hemdat Yamim* vol. 2 (Bnei Brak: Machon Hemdat Yamim, 2010), p. 205, *siman* 29–31. Regarding the controversy surrounding this book, see Moshe Fogel, “The Sabbatean Character of Hemdat Yamim: A Reexamination,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 16:2 (2001): pp. 365–422.

¹³ Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Machon Da'at u-Tevunah, 2009), *Parshat Tzav*, p. 401.

¹⁴ Alexander Susskind of Grodno, *Yesod v-Shoresb ha-Avoda* (Jerusalem: 1940), 12:1, p. 261.

Ḥanukkah.¹⁵ Based on this, *Be'er Heitev* (670:3) and *Mishnah Berurah* (670:1) also mention that poor people go door to door on Ḥanukkah, not singling out young men in particular. Many historical sources attest that it was normative for poor people to go door to door asking for money on Ḥanukkah just as on Purim.¹⁶

R. Abraham David Wahrman (1770–1840) in his *Eshel Avraham*, explains that the Greeks wanted to destroy the three pillars of the world, Torah, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Ḥassadim* (Avot 1:2). For this reason, these three things must be increased on Ḥanukkah: Torah study, prayer and the giving of charity.¹⁷ This is the reason brought in the contemporary work on Jewish customs, *Oẓar Ta'amei Ha-minbagim*, for giving charity particularly on Ḥanukkah.¹⁸ Note that these sources don't specify that these poor people were Torah scholars or educators.

However, *Magen Avraham* and *Be'er Heitev* themselves refer the reader to the book *Ḥanukat ha-Bayit* by R. Shaul b. David (c. 1569 – c. 1641), first printed in 1616, for an explanation of the custom.¹⁹ There the author writes that in the *at-bash gematria*, the word Ḥanukkah has the same value (269) as סוד צדקה (the secret of charity) which hints at the connection between charity and Ḥanukkah. He writes that it is particularly important to give charity to young men who learn Torah, and therefore “young men go door to door on Ḥanukkah and sing.” These young men homiletically represent the small jug filled with pure oil, through which

¹⁵ As restated in Abraham Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (NY: KTAV, 1980), p. 277: “According to Magen Avraham (18th century), it was the custom for poor yeshiva students to visit homes of Jewish benefactors who dispensed Chanukah money.”

¹⁶ See Isaac Rifkind, *Yidische Gelt* (New York: Academy for Jewish Research, 1959), p. 105. See there also regarding Yiddish folksongs that mention begging for money on Chanukah.

¹⁷ Yehuda Zinger, in his *Ziv ha-Minbagim* (Jerusalem: Dror, 1970), gives a more expanded version of this idea. He writes that to represent Torah, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Ḥassadim*, Jews established the lighting of Ḥanukkah candles (based on Proverbs 6:23 that a light symbolizes Torah), the recital of *Hallel* and *Al ha-Nissim* (*Avodah* is understood to mean prayer), and giving charity as an act of *Gemilut Ḥassadim*.

¹⁸ Shmuel Gelbard, *Oẓar Ta'amei Ha-minbagim* (Petach Tikva: Mifaal Rashi, 1996), p. 338.

¹⁹ For biographical information on this relatively unknown figure, see Menachem Adler, ed., *Tal Orot* (Jerusalem: ha-Ketav v-ha-Michtav, 1995), pp. 7–19. See also Eliezer Brodt, “A Forgotten Work on Chanukah: חנוכה הבית”, *Seforim Blog*, December 18, 2006, <https://seforimblog.com/2006/12/forgotten-work-on-CHANUKA/>.

the miracle was performed. They go door to door to popularize the miracle.²⁰

Money to Children

Later sources talk about giving money to children on Hanukkah, irrelevant of their financial need. It is sometimes noted as a Chassidic custom,²¹ and has been recorded as early as the 1800s.²² It was particularly associated with the fifth night of Hanukkah,²³ which already was considered to be a night of special spiritual significance.²⁴ It had additional significance for the custom of *gelt* since the fifth night of Hanukkah cannot fall out on Shabbat.²⁵ The Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, notes that originally money was only given to children one night, on the fourth or fifth night, in order to keep the practice exciting.²⁶ Based on this, the significance of those particular nights seems to be that it is the midway point/ tipping point of the holiday, an appropriate time to inject some extra festivity into the holiday. The simple understanding is that money is given to children to increase the joy of Hanukkah and in this way add to the popularization of the Hanukkah miracle.²⁷ R. David Cohen adds a layer of significance by suggesting that

²⁰ Shimon Hershler, ed., *Hanukat ha-Bayit* (Bnei Brak: Machon Nachlat Zvi, 1991), p. 72.

²¹ See Asher Waserteil, ed., *Yalkut Minbagim* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1977), in the sections on Chassidic customs by Tuvia Bloi, p. 145, 8:5; p. 169, 9:6; Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel* (Jerusalem: 1999), p. 308, 51:5, note 7.

²² Pauline Wengeroff (1833–1916) describes receiving Hanukkah *gelt* as a child on the fifth night of Hanukkah. See her memoir, translated by Shulamit Magnus, *Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century* vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 108. On the significance of this memoir, see Shulamit Magnus, “Pauline Wengeroff and the voice of Jewish modernity,” in Tamar Rudavsky, ed., *Gender and Judaism* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), pp. 181–190; Shulamit Magnus, “Kol islah: Women and Pauline Wengeroff’s writing of an age,” *Nashim* 7 (2004) pp. 28–64.

²³ Hayyim Schauss, *Guide to Jewish Holy Days* (New York: Schocken Books, 1938), p. 233.

²⁴ See Yom Tov Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Moadim: Rosh Hodesh, Hanukkah, Hamisha Asar b-Svat* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1961), pp. 257, 260, 261.

²⁵ It is reported that R. Yaakov Kanievsky (the Steipler Gaon), gave Hanukkah *gelt* specifically on the fifth day of Chanukah since it never falls out on Shabbat. Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel* (Jerusalem: 1999), p. 308, 51:5, note 7.

²⁶ Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sha’arei Halakha u-Minhag, Oraḥ Hayyim* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Heichal Menachem, 1993), p. 280–281, *siman* 283.

²⁷ Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel* (Jerusalem: 1999), p. 308, 51:5, note 7, והטעם הפשוט כדי לפרסם הנס ביותר.

giving money to children in general was done so that the needy would not be embarrassed to receive charity.²⁸

This developed as an outgrowth of the earlier forms of the custom, money for the needy, Torah scholars, teachers and students. At first, parents would “give money to their small children for distribution to their teachers. In time, as children demanded their due, money was also given to children to keep for themselves.”²⁹ Still, originally the *gelt* was given to children “with the expectation that they would give some of it to their teachers.”³⁰

A more spiritual explanation of the evolution of the custom is brought by R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He teaches that money is given to children in order to encourage them to learn Torah. It is important to do so at this time, because Hanukkah is “a time of renewal of the Torah after the decree of the Greeks who wanted Torah to be forgotten.”³¹ He notes that although originally only given one night, because of the “increased darkness of exile, including and particularly regarding the deterioration of the state of education,” the custom should be increased to each day of Hanukkah, except of course Shabbat.³² This is the reason brought in the contemporary work on Jewish customs, *Otzar Ta’amei Ha-minbagim*.³³ A similar idea was stated by R. Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, the Ponevezher Rav, where he noted that when the Maccabees defeated the Greeks, they gave Jewish children a little money to encourage them to return to learning Torah, which he states is the function of Hanukkah *gelt* today as well.³⁴

In this manner, the custom expanded from money to Torah scholars to money given to children to encourage them to become Torah scholars, retaining the original theme of emphasizing the importance of Torah study.³⁵

²⁸ David Cohen, *Gvul Ya’avetz* vol. 1 (Brooklyn, New York: 1987), p. 158.

²⁹ Abraham Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1980), p. 277.

³⁰ Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: NY University Press, 2013), p. 10.

³¹ Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sha’arei Halakha u-Minhag, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Heichal Menachem, 1993), p. 279, *siman* 283.

³² Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sha’arei Halakha u-Minhag, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Heichal Menachem, 1993), p. 280–281, *siman* 283.

³³ Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta’amei Ha-minbagim* (Petach Tikva: Mifal Rashi, 1996), p. 338.

³⁴ Chaim Friedlander, *Sifte Ḥayyim: Moadim* vol. 2 (Bnei Brak: 1993), p. 134.

³⁵ Ron Wolfson, *Hanukkah: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), p. 125.

From *Gelt* to Gifts

Although “we have no idea when the first families began to exchange gifts” on Hanukkah, “it seemed to grow more common in the 1880s.”³⁶ “By the 1920s, though, it came into its own...as an exercise in consumption.”³⁷ Gifts on Hanukkah is considered “a new American Jewish trend, instead of the European custom of bestowing *gelt* on children at Hanukkah,”³⁸ although it was also reported in Western Europe, particularly Germany, where more assimilated Jews were concerned that their children would be envious of the Christmas gifts their neighbors received.³⁹ This created a major shift in the evolution of Hanukkah *gelt*, which although given to children still carried the expectation that some should be given to teachers. Now, “objects specially selected to please children or fulfill their needs became popular.”⁴⁰

This led to the widespread concern that Hanukkah is slowly being turned into “Christmas times eight.”⁴¹ Presents have insinuated themselves into the American celebration of Hanukkah, even among Orthodox families, along with other Christmas staples such as special sweaters,

³⁶ Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 97. Note that Christmas presents themselves only developed in the early 1800s; see Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 136.

³⁷ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (NY: 1994), p. 233. This timeline parallels the prominence of chocolate *gelt* as well; see Deborah R. Prinz, *On the Chocolate Trail: A Delicious Adventure Connecting Jews, Religions, History, Travel, Rituals and Recipes to the Magic of Cacao* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), pp. 63–64. Note that this also seems to have originated as a Jewish version of the chocolate coins associated with Christmas and Saint Nicholas Day; see there pp. 60, 65.

³⁸ Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (NY: NY University Press, 2013), p. 112.

³⁹ Nachum Wahrman, *Hagei Yisrael u-Moadeihem* (Tel Aviv: Achiasaf Publishing House, 1970), p. 97. See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: 1994), p. 235, where in the 1940s, Jewish parents were instructed that “Jewish children should be showered with gifts, Hanukkah gifts, as a perhaps primitive but most effective means of making them immune against envy of the Christian children and their Christmas presents.”

⁴⁰ Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 112.

⁴¹ Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 276.

and decorations for the home, elements not associated with other Jewish holidays.⁴²

In contemporary times, the excessive gift giving in some circles has created a backlash, and in many modern holiday guides, it is recommended that children engage in some *tzedakah* project as a way of commemorating Hanukkah.⁴³ In this fashion the custom has come full circle, from charity to *gelt* to gifts and back to charity again.

Historical Explanations

Some works attribute the significance of gold coins on Hanukkah to the coins minted by the Maccabees demonstrating their independence and victory over the Greeks.⁴⁴ The right to mint their own coins is specifically mentioned in I Maccabees 15:6 as a right granted by Antiochus VII to Simon the Maccabee.⁴⁵ While it is true that the right of coinage was involved in the Maccabean struggle,⁴⁶ historically Jews did not consider these coins particularly significant and they are not the inspiration for Hanukkah *gelt*.

It has also been suggested that Hanukkah *gelt* is just the Jewish version of the ancient Roman practice of giving gifts at the time of their winter solstice holidays.⁴⁷ These gifts, called *strenae*, included honey and fruits as well as gold coins.⁴⁸ Although the practice of *strenae* was known

⁴² This includes the Christmas “Secret Santa” gift giving practice, turned into “Mystery Maccabee.” Daniel Cohen, *What Will They Say About You When You're Gone?: Creating a Life of Legacy* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 2016), p. 120.

⁴³ See for example, Sharon Duke Estroff, *Can I Have a Cell Phone for Hanukkah?: The Essential Scoop on Raising Modern Jewish Kids* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), p. 232; Paul Kipnes, Michelle November, *Jewish Spiritual Parenting: Wisdom, Activities, Rituals and Prayers for Raising Children with Spiritual Balance and Emotional Wholeness* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2015), p. 181; Lawrence Bush, Jeffrey Dekro, “From *Gelt* to *Tzedakah*,” *Tikkun* (2000) 15 (6), p. 49.

⁴⁴ Ronald Issacs, *Bubbe Meises: Jewish Myths, Jewish Realities* (Jersey City, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, 2008), p. 81.

⁴⁵ Ron Wolfson, *Hanukkah: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), p. 125.

⁴⁶ See Solomon Grayzel, “Hasmonean Coins”, in Emily Solis-Cohen, *Hanukkah: The Feast of Lights* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1965), pp. 91–92.

⁴⁷ Yom Tov Lewinski, *Eileh Moadei Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Achiasaf, 1987), p. 113.

⁴⁸ Tad Tuleja, *Curious Customs* (New York: Harmony Press, 1987), p. 180.

to and possibly even practiced by some Jews in Roman times,⁴⁹ there is no evidence that this persisted for centuries to the time where Ḥanukkah *gelt* was customary.

The most significant clue to the origin of the practice to give money at Ḥanukkah time is found in the early Ashkenazic sources of the custom referenced above, *Magen Avraham* and his source *Ḥanukat ha-Bayit*. Note that *Magen Avraham* stated that poor young men (נערים) go door to door collecting money on Hanukkah, and in *Ḥanukat ha-Bayit* it was noted that “young men go door to door on Hanukkah and sing.” This unusual phrasing led to homiletical interpretations of the term “young men” here.⁵⁰ Note that these sources do not note that these young men are teachers, students, scholars or connected to Torah study. Both of these practices recall the custom, known by a variety of names including *wassailing*, wherein gifts and money would be given to “roving bands of youthful males” who would go singing from door to door in the winter,⁵¹ a custom that would evolve into the Christmas caroling performed outside people’s homes.⁵²

Wassailing itself was part of the various aspects of “social inversion” associated with the Roman wintertime celebration of Saturnalia, which was the predecessor of Christmas. This was a celebration where regular social norms and roles were reversed, including those of men and women and master and servant.⁵³ One of the aspects of this merrymaking was that “prosperous and powerful people were expected to offer the fruits of their harvest bounty to their poorer neighbors and dependents,”⁵⁴ reversing the normal hierarchy of the poor bringing tributes to the rich. The way in which this occurred was that “the poor—most often bands of boys and young men—claimed the right to march to the houses of the well to do” in order to receive gifts. The young men in

⁴⁹ Leonard Victor Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome: Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 85.

⁵⁰ See Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal. *Mishneh Sachir* vol.2 (Jerusalem: Machon Keren Re'em, 2013), *siman* 298, p. 366.

⁵¹ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (NY: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 9.

⁵² Torstein O. Kvamme, *The Christmas Carolers' Book in Song & Story* (Miami, Florida: Hall and McCreary Company, 1935), p. 6.

⁵³ See Carole E. Newlands, *Statius' Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 227–229; Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 9.

⁵⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (NY: Vintage Books, 1997), pp. 8–9.

exchange would offer “their goodwill” in the form of “the performance of songs.”⁵⁵

Door to door begging was not considered socially acceptable in many communities; allowing it at this time of year was exceptional, and part of the theme of the inversion of normal social norms. This is found in Jewish sources as well; for example, the communal *takkanot* of Eisenstadt from 1732 and 1736 noted that Hanukkah and Purim (another time of social inversion) are the exceptions to the general rule of no door to door begging.⁵⁶

Even the aspect of giving money to poor students at this time of year is attested to in early European sources, in conjunction with door to door singing. “In Munich, authorized street singing for money to support students’ upkeep is documented at least as early as 1526.”⁵⁷

The giving of charity to the poor specifically associated with this time of year originated with the Roman Saturnalia, when “the wealthy were obliged to share with the poor.”⁵⁸ Of course it is not surprising that the needy would need special assistance during the cold winter season, and donations at this time of year would not be unusual. However, the early Ashkenazic sources of this practice, which specifically note the elements of young men going door to door and signing, connect it to the custom of wassailing. These elements do not appear in the Sephardic references to the practice to give charity on Hanukkah, which emphasize collecting for poor students and teachers, and do not mention young men doing the collecting, or singing door to door.

The door to door and singing aspects, although noted in 17th century Ashkenazic sources, dissipated over time, obscuring the connection between Hanukkah *gelt* and wassailing. Since this shared origin has been forgotten, the giving of Hanukkah *gelt* is considered appropriate for traditional Jewish families. On the other hand, these same families retain a resistance to and disapproval of gift giving at Hanukkah, since its connection to Christmas is still remembered. ❧

⁵⁵ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (NY: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 9.

⁵⁶ See Isaac Rifkind, *Yidische Gelt* (NY: Academy for Jewish Research, 1959), p. 105.

⁵⁷ Alexander J. Fisher, *Music, Piety, and Propaganda: The Soundscape of Counter-Reformation Bavaria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 213.

⁵⁸ Tad Tuleja, *Curious Customs* (New York: Harmony Press, 1987), p. 180.