

Shabbat Hanukkah 5783 - What's the Deal with the Shamash Candle?
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Jerry Seinfeld loved to wonder "What's the deal with...?"

What's the deal with grape nuts? No grapes, no nuts!

What's the deal with decaf coffee? How do they get the caffeine out of there, and then where does it go?

So if Seinfeld were giving my sermon today, he might title it, What's the deal with the Shamash candle?

This is indeed a unique candle. The Shamash is visually prominent - it stands *taller* than the other Hanukkah candles, or it's distinctly lower or to the side. But it's *subservient* in other ways - it doesn't count towards that night's candles. On each night we light that many candles...plus the Shamash.

Let's get this out of the way: it's not a "helper candle." Its role is not just to light the other candles.

Think about it: with oil and wick Hanukiyot, it is physically impossible - and extremely dangerous! - to light one lamp with another oil lamp. And these are the original Hanukiyot.

On many wax candle Hanukiyot, it is also impractical or impossible to use the Shamash to light the other candles. And these Hanukiyot are still Kosher. Of course, when possible we *should* use the Shamash candle to light the others, but it's perfectly fine to use a match or a lighter to light the other candles when the Shamash won't work or will be unsafe.

The better translation for Shamash is "*attendant* candle."

Hanukkah candles are very different from Shabbat candles, which of course do not have a Shamash. Hanukkah candles are purely symbolic and are not to be used functionally for anything. We're not allowed to benefit from them - to read by them, eat next to them, or the like. Because they represent the miracles of Hanukkah, and if we

were to treat them like ordinary light and actually use them to see what we're doing, they would lose their special status as *Pirsum Hanes*, publicizing the miracle.

After we light Hanukkah candles, we read or sing *Hanerot Hallalu*, which affirms that the lights themselves are holy, and we may only gaze at them. Because Hanukkah lights are strictly for show, we have the Shamash to claim we are using this one specific candle's light instead of the others'. It's kind of like the fall guy, the one who takes the hit. So if we open presents by the Hanukiyah, we say we're actually using the Shamash's light to see instead of the other Hanukkah candles'.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed teaches in his Jewish law book *Peninei Halacha*: "Technically, one does not need to light a *Shamash* in a room that has electric lights. Nonetheless, many people still light a *Shamash* in order to emphasize the difference between the *Hanuka* candles, whose light we may not use, and the *shamash*, whose light we may use. However, in order to avoid miscounting the candles, we place the *Shamash* at a different height or a distance from the other candles, to make it clear to all which are the *Hanuka* candles and which one is the *Shamash*."

We see that the Shamash is important because it preserves the other candles to be used only for a Mitzvah. But the Shamash is by definition a lesser status than the others.

That's what the Shamash does. Now what does it mean?

First I'll share a Chabad interpretation from Rabbi Menachem Posner. He writes: "The Shamash is not a mitzvah candle. Yet, it is important because it is the instrument that enables all the other candles to form a mitzvah. Each of us has the potential to be a Shamash. Following the Shamash, the path to elevation is not through pushing others down, but by sharing with them and coaxing out the flame they carry within."

That's a beautiful idea. Sometimes we can each generate a Mitzvah on our own. Other times, we need someone else to set us up. Kind of like how many soccer goals need an assist in order to happen. The Shamash is the soccer assist and reminds us that each of us can set up *others* to do Mitzvot too, in addition to our own. For example, it's a Mitzvah to donate blood. But it's a greater Mitzvah to organize a blood drive, like our Men's Club and Sisterhood do, because then many more people can donate blood. Each of us can be a Shamash and set up others for kindness and Mitzvot.

And here's my own take, which I learned from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory. He teaches that when we make ourselves smaller, we actually make ourselves

greater. The Shamash candle takes a hit in that it's willing to be lit along with the others but not count as a Mitzvah in order for the other Hanukkah candles to count. For its selflessness, the Shamash gets rewarded by standing tall and standing out.

When we make our egos smaller, we actually maximize the goodness we can do. When we serve a cause or a community, we actually more fully unlock our potential to impact others, and we elevate ourselves in the process. This reminds me of Jon Stewart, another well-known comedian. For many years, Stewart has been a fierce advocate for September 11th first responders. He has become one of the loudest voices pushing Congress to allocate more dollars to cover the health care of those who risked their lives responding to the 9/11 attacks. Stewart has called out Congress's inaction every time the fund has seemed at risk, and he has forcefully testified in its favor. He deserves real credit for the bill passing a few years ago that replenishes these funds. So Jon Stewart's legacy is more than being a brilliant comedian. Because we see that he *serves an important cause*, we know he has a heart of gold too. He is a Shamash in the best sense of the word.

For Jon Stewart, for us, and for the Shamash candle: to serve is to shine.

Shabbat Shalom.