

Lamplighters

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

Why do we light a shamash on the menorah in today's day and age? What does it signify?

The Non-Jewish Candle

Good Shabbos!

As often happens at public menorah lighting events in major cities the world over, non-Jewish public servants are also invited, whether mayors, senators, governors or even heads of state. It often happens that some honor must be given to them at the event. Now, because the actual menorah can only be lit by someone who is obligated to actually perform the mitzvah and recite the blessing over the mitzvah—meaning, a Jewish person, what commonly happens is that the public servant is honored with the kindling the “Shamash.”

So now the question is: what exactly is the significance of the Shamash? Isn't the mitzvah to light an additional candle each of the eight nights of Chanukah so as to commemorate the miracle of the jug of oil? And if so, why is there a ninth candle? Why the Shamash all of a sudden?

Well, before Thomas Edison invented the light bulb in 1879, anyone who wanted light in his house would light candles. So Chanukah candles didn't exactly represent any novelty in any Jewish home before that time, because you'd have candles burning every night anyway.

But that's exactly why the Sages established that the Chanukah candles be lit exclusively for the purpose of remembering the miracle of the oil jug—and that benefiting from their light was to be prohibited. As we indeed recite every night of Chanukah after we light the candles, in the “Haneiros Halalu” hymn: “And we have no permission to make use of them but only to see them alone.”

So the Sages established that one additional candle be lit on each night, so as to underscore that this candle is only being lit for usage of its light, in contrast to the actual Chanukah candles. And this candle is called the Shamash.

But since we live in the post-Edison era, meaning, that for the past 140 years we've had electric light and no need for actual candles to light our houses, certainly no one will err and think that the Chanukah candles are needed for interior illumination. So again, why do we need the Shamash?

There are two answers for that.

One, "*minhag avosainu b'yadeinu*"—"we hold our fathers' customs in our hands."

The second reason is that there is an additional function to the Shamash—we use it to light the Chanukah candles with. Why so? Because we don't light a Chanukah candle with another Chanukah candle. As the Rebbe said: "We can perhaps say that there are other reasons for the Shamash, such as not erring by lighting one candle with another." And so even today, we need the Shamash so as to light the Menorah's candles—and even after we've kindled the candles, we still need the Shamash, because if one of the candles goes out, we need the Shamash again.

A Shammash At Day

Now, there is an age-old Jewish custom of lighting a menorah in synagogue on each Chanukah day during the prayers. No blessing is recited on that lighting for the simple reason that it's not a mitzvah; however, the candles are lit for purposes of "Pirumei Nisa."

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Schapiro, a Chabad rabbi in Miami, Florida, recalls in his memoirs that on Chanukah of 1963, the Rebbe walked into shul for the Shachris morning services and saw the Menorah's candles burning—but immediately noticed that the Shamash had not been lit. The Rebbe asked why it had not been kindled. Of course, the shammis of the shul rushed forward to light the Shamash.

Later, this shammis asked the Rebbe in a letter why the Rebbe had instructed that the Shamash be lit—after all, the Shamash is there so that the actual Chanukah candles are not benefited from, being mitzvah objects as they are. However, he went on to write, all that applies only at night, when we are obligated to light—but the synagogue candles that are kindled by day are nothing but a custom, so why is the Shamash needed?

The Rebbe responded with something very interesting—that there is another

reason the Shamash is lit, and that that reason is relevant even when the Chanukah candles are lit by day. This reason, the Rebbe went on to write, is that the Shamash symbolized the Kohein Gadol who would regularly light the Menorah in the Beis Hamikdash. And so, the Rebbe concluded, it's proper to light the Shamash by day as well.

Now, what exactly is so important about commemorating the Kohein Gadol who would light the Menorah in the Beis Hamikdash? Isn't the whole purpose of the Chanukah menorah to remember the miracle of the oil jug, in which a one-day oil supply lasted for eight days? What difference does it make who lit the Menorah?

The Lamplighter

In the course of the 13 Tammuz farbrengen of 5763 (Toras Menachem 34, pg. 129), the Rebbe related that at one festive occasion hosted by the Rebbe Rashab (Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber, the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe), one Chasid asked him: "Rebbe, what is a Chasid?" And the Rebbe replied: "A Chasid is a lamplighter"—the person who walks the streets to light the street lamps at night.

Once upon a time, city streets were not powered by electricity or even gas. Instead, they had lampposts that held lanterns, and each city had an individual (or group of individuals) appointed to go around the streets and light the lanterns as each night fell. These individuals would go about wielding long sticks (since the lanterns were high up) that had burning candles or some sort of fire atop them; with these sticks, these individuals would light each street light so as to light up the night.

And this, added the Rebbe, is a Chasid—a Chasid is a person who walks around with a long fire-tipped stick to ignite lanterns, even though he knows that the fire isn't even his.

The Chasid asked: And what if the lantern is located in a desert? Does the lamplighter need to bother going out there to light such a lantern, too? The Rebbe replied: Yes! It is incumbent upon him to venture into the desert and light a lamp that's located even there.

And what if the lamp is located out at sea? The Chasid was not giving up. But the Rebbe answered: Yes, he should jump into the water and light that lamp.

“Is that what a Chasid truly is?” asked the Chasid, incredulous. The Rebbe stopped, thought for a moment, and then answered: “Yes—that is a Chasid.”

So, back in the present era, the Rebbe further explained the story and said that in fact, every Jew is a candle—as the verse states, “the candle of G-d is the soul of man” (Mishlei 20:27). The Rebbe continued and said, “To our pain, there are many candles going about in the world, but they do not burn because no one ever lit them. It’s likely that they are candles with profound potential to light up the entire world—but no one ever lit them and no one ever showed them that they even had such potential.”

The Chasid is one whose mission is to go out and light these candles, whether those candles are to be found in the “desert” of China or the “sea” of Alaska—wherever such candles are to be found, it is incumbent upon the Chasid to find them and light them.

Get the Menorah Promotion

That’s the function of the Shamash on the Menorah—the Shamash is the one who lights the candles.

What’s more, the Rebbe elaborated, this explains why the Shamash is placed higher than all the other candles (Likutei Sichos Vol. 10, pg. 315)—to ensure that no one will think that the Shamash is just another one of the menorah’s candles. Now, there are menorahs in which the Shamash is actually placed *lower* than the other candles—but with most menorahs, the Shamash’s place is higher than the candles. Why so? Explains the Rebbe that the Shamash symbolizes the Kohein Gadol who lit the Menorah’s candles—and the Chasid who lights Jewish souls.

Now, there are many candles throughout the world. But they all need a “Shamash” to kindle them.

My friends, a Chasid is not someone who walks around with a black hat and coat and with a long beard. A Chasid is someone who lights candles—who encourages another Jew to do another mitzvah. And so, anyone who sees to it that another Jew lights the Chanukah candles gets a promotion at the moment that he or she does so—he or she climbs up the ladder of menorah ranks and becomes a Shamash.

Because when you ignite another Jew, you uplift yourself.

Good Shabbos!