

The Role of the Shamash

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Most synagogues have at least one *shamash*, and Messianic synagogues are no exception. According to one online definition:

A *shamash* (שמש) is a person who assists in the running of a synagogue and ensures that its needs are met (for example, that the Jewish prayer services run smoothly). He may function as an assistant to a rabbi, or as the secretary or personal assistant to a Chassidic Rebbe). The role of the *shamash* crosses over to the responsibility of the *Gabbai*.

This definition of the role of a *shamash* is almost universally understood in Judaism, but *shamashim* of this kind are not found anywhere in Scripture. The role of a traditional *shamash* is akin to a church's sexton, and it is an appointed rather than an ordained position.

Messianic Jewish *shamashim* are different in that they do derive their definition and function from Scripture – albeit the Greek New Covenant Scriptures – and they are ordained by the laying on of hands of elders. Although we refer to them by the Hebrew word “*shamash*” for cultural reasons, they are more authentically described by the Greek word “*diakoneo*” or the English equivalent word “deacon.”

New covenant *shamashim* are very important in our communities, as they serve multiple roles in caring for both people and congregational property. Acts 6:1-6 tells us the circumstances upon which *shamashim* were first ordained:

“Around this time, when the number of talmidim was growing, the Greek-speaking Jews began complaining against those who spoke Hebrew that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called a general meeting of the talmidim and said, ‘It isn't appropriate that we should neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among yourselves who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will appoint them to be in charge of this important matter, but we ourselves will give our full attention to praying and to serving the Word.’ What they said was agreeable to the whole gathering. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Ruach HaKodesh, Philip, Prochoros, Nikanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas, who was a proselyte from Antioch. They presented these men to the emissaries, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

Now it is true that the initial ordination of *shamashim* was sparked by the community's need to see to a fair daily distribution for widows. However, we see how in many cases, *shamashim* such as Philip were used in ways that far exceeded serving tables (Acts 8:5-40). Philip, in particular, was noted for his gift of evangelism in Acts 21:8:

“On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.”

Even the occasional woman *shamash* was recognized by Paul, although it is doubtful, from what we know of Paul, that they served in the same way as the men. In Romans 16:1-2 Paul says:

“I am introducing to you our sister Phoebe, shammash of the congregation at Cenchrea, so that you may welcome her in the Lord, as God's people should, and give her whatever assistance she may need from you; for she has been a big help to many people- including myself.”

To be clear, Ohev Yisrael does not ordain women *shamashim*.

The ministry of *shamash* must have been seen as spiritual and not merely mechanical, for in his letter to Timothy, right after listing the character requirements of eldership, Paul gives a similar list for the qualification of *shamashim*. In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul says:

“Likewise, the shammashim must be of good character, people whose word can be trusted. They must not give themselves to excessive drinking or be greedy for dishonest gain. They must possess the formerly hidden truth of the faith with a clean conscience. And first, let them be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them be appointed shammashim. Similarly, the wives must be of good character, not gossips, but temperate, faithful in everything. Let the shammashim each be faithful to his wife, managing his children and household well. For those who serve well as shammashim gain good standing for themselves and much boldness in the trust that comes through Yeshua the Messiah.”

Ohev's position is that ordination should recognize what God has already done. In recognizing those whom God has made *shamashim*, the Ohev elders look beyond there being a record of service, since we all are called to serve the Lord and each other. The elders look for a pattern of leading others in service, coupled with biblical and Jewish knowledge such that the *shamash* can adequately, and with authority, represent Ohev and even substitute for elders in appropriate situations. There have been times, for example, when Ohev's elders were together on retreat, and *shamashim* were given charge of the *Shabbat* service.

Ohev's *shamashim* work together as a board, and also separately when appropriate. Although the wives of *shamashim* are not ordained, they are invited to attend board meetings from time to time, in order to provide a woman's perspective or otherwise assist. There is a general acknowledgement that husband-wife ministry teams are a good thing and ought to be promoted. For this reason, our decision to ordain a *shamash* involves our assessment of his wife's readiness to serve as well – mainly to support her husband in the office, but occasionally to work alongside him in it.

Today we gather to recognize and ordain our brother David Waggoner to the office of *Shamash* with full confidence that he is biblically qualified, and capable of representing Ohev Yisrael to the outside world. He comes to us with both Messianic Jewish and church experience and has, as a matter of fact, served as an elder and worship leader in one of his former churches. The elders of Ohev announced our intention to ordain David and allowed several weeks for

congregants' comments, the result of which was only praise of him, and belief that he will make a fine *shamash*. And so now there is nothing left for us to do but to do it, so David, Sharon, the elders, *shamashim*, and our wives please come forward!