

THE PRACTICE AND MEANING OF TALLIT: AN INTRODUCTION^o

Rabbi Debra Orenstein

A baraita taught: “That you may look upon [the fringe] and remember all the commandments of Adonai”: this commandment is of equal weight to all the other commandments combined.--Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 43b

Tallit Stories

Watching the sky turn dark through the window, the elder begins to cloak himself in white. It feels funny—almost illicit—to be donning this costume so late in the day. Nostalgically, he begins to count how many times he can remember this exact scene—the darkening sky, the chill in the air, the feel of the wool against his skin, the thrill of the crowd and of his own anticipation. Just days in a lifetime, but they were foundational days. He *must* be an elder—they can no longer be counted just on fingers and toes. “How do you get to be old?” his bubbe used to query. And before anyone could answer, she gave the wry response: “Too many *afikomens*.” Watching the sun go down, he chances to see his own reflection in the window. He looks holy, like a sage. Can he truly recognize himself?¹

“It’s the proudest day of my life,” she whispered to herself, and then she felt self-conscious. A living cliché! Yet, it was true. She savored the moment, taking in the guests, the flowers, all the carefully-appointed details. The scene was elegant and warm. A few steps above her, stood her two sons, her nephew, and a boy she didn’t even know, carrying aloft and between them the one and only family heirloom. Passed down from great-grandfather, to grandfather, and then to her father. It was her daughter’s for today. Her “little girl” would soon stand under it, surrounded by the boys she grew up with, and be joined to the man she would grow old with. One day, on some special and joyous occasion, maybe *their* children would hold onto this fabric again, catching their great-great-grandfather’s coat-tails and riding his merit.

The girl is amazed to find that her knees are literally knocking—she had thought of this only as a figure of speech. Trying to calm herself and her unruly legs, she takes a deep breath and searches for a familiar face in the crowd. Her eyes light on her father. “You’ve trained for this, darling; you’re ready,” she can hear him saying. She wraps the gift she received not ten minutes ago closer around her, and begins to chant a prayer of gratitude.

He is hungry, but he won’t be eating today. The rumble in his stomach reminds him, as if he needs reminding, that today is special. The house is awake; he hears guests and family talking downstairs. His father opens the door a crack and says gently, “You awake, son?” Seeing the answer for himself, he steps all the way in, carrying a garment bag. “What were you planning to wear today?” he jokes, hanging the bag on the closet

^o This article is dedicated to my uncle, Dr. Solomon Mowshowitz, whose erudition and sharp eye improved it. Solomon has taught me a great deal about both Yiddishkeit and generosity. He typically answers requests from strangers, friends, or relatives with the reply: “Thank you for the opportunity to do a mitzvah.”

door. Uncharacteristically, dad blows him a kiss. “There are a few surprises in there,” he says, closing the door gently behind him. Stretching and rising out of bed, the son unzips the bag—out falls an envelope (a card he’ll save for later) and a box of stunning cuff links. He’s never worn a tux before in his life (except to try on), and he’s never worn what hangs behind it—a gift from his parents, hand-made and imported from Israel. He had wondered about the cost, and his father had said, “I’m hoping that on a “per use” basis, this is the cheapest gift we ever bought you.” Never one to stop campaigning, is he? The son smiled at the father, and at the tradition he so loved.²

Another weekday morning—and pure chaos. There has to be a better way than scrambling for the kids’ clothes and school books and inevitable lost shoes. Well, they are out the door. Now, there is no time to get to *minyan*, but there are a few minutes for peace and service of the heart. The surrounding mess is distracting—but it’s easy enough to close one’s eyes and begin reciting from memory. Covering, wrapping, enveloping, chanting—doing it all by habit and by feel. It adds something, centers something.

An older man on Kol Nidrei night, a mother at her daughter’s wedding, a girl at her Bat Mitzvah, a young man on his wedding day, and a Jew on an uneventful morning simply *davening*—all these people find and are reminded of holiness in the tallit.

What Is a Tallit?

“Tallit” simply means gown or cloak, reflecting the fact that it was originally worn throughout the day. It probably resembled the *abbayah* (blanket) still worn by Bedouins.³ The word tallit isn’t originally Hebrew and does not appear in the Bible; rather, other words meaning robe or garment are paired with words meaning tassel or fringe to indicate the proper attire. After the destruction of the second Temple and the Diasporic dispersion, the tallit came to be worn as a prayer shawl.

A tallit is a four-cornered garment made of wool, cotton, rayon, or silk. Some Talmudic sages and wealthy Jews wore special cloaks made of fine fabrics, distinguishing their social position.⁴ Many rabbinic authorities, however, favor a simple tallit of pure white wool as the classic biblical garment, basing themselves on the verse “let your garments always be white” (Ecclesiastes 9:8).⁵ The *tzitzit* (threads or fringes) attached to each corner are traditionally made of the same fabric as the tallit; however, wool fringes are always permissible.

On each corner, four strands are folded in half to make eight. One of the strings should be longer than the others. This is dubbed the *shamash* and is used for winding. The order of the winding commonly used by Ashkenazim is as follows: double knot; shamash winds around the seven strands seven times; double knot; shamash winds around eight times; double knot; shamash winds around eleven times; double knot; shamash winds around thirteen times; double knot. Below the final double knot, the fringes hang loose.

The *atara* (literally, crown) is the portion of the tallit that wraps around the neck or collar; often it is embroidered with the words of the tallit blessing. Tallitot (the plural for tallit) can come in all sizes. For an adult male, they are customarily about six feet by four feet. Traditionally, a tallit should be large enough to reach one’s waist, with two corners hanging in front and two in back. Thus, the wearer is literally surrounded by the

tzitzit. In many liberal synagogues today, a tallit is worn around the neck with all four corners hanging in front.

According to biblical law, each tallit should include a thread of blue-violet (*tekhelet*). The stripes on modern tallitot are meant to allude to this unique shade of blue. Even in ancient times, not every tallit had the *tekhelet* color. According to oral tradition, the dye was taken from a *hilazon*, a rare animal—probably a snail-- which “resembles the sea in its color, and in shape it resembles a fish; it appears once in seventy years, and with its blood one dyes the blue thread; and therefore it is so expensive.”⁶ The price of *tekhelet*-colored thread was driven prohibitively high, and the dye fell into disuse. Today, there is no agreement about what exactly a *hilazon* is or was.

Traditionally, men wore—and many people still wear—a *tallit katan* (small tallit) under their clothes on any day when one would wear a tallit for prayer. This garment is also sometimes called the *arba kanfot* (four corners). Its Yiddish name is *labisdeckel* (body cover). Many people let the *tzitzit* of the *tallit katan* peek or hang out from under their clothes all day long, in order to fulfill the biblical wording “and you shall see them.”⁷

Who Wears A Tallit?

In many Polish and Sephardi communities, a prospective groom receives his first tallit just before the wedding, as unmarried men do not wear tallitot.⁸ In the traditional Ashkenazi ritual, by contrast, even young children wore tallitot; of course, the garments were appropriate for their size. In many communities, a boy received his first *tallit katan* and his first haircut on his third birthday.⁹ Today, in many liberal Ashkenazi Jewish communities, parents present a child with his or her first full tallit on the day of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony. It is also customary that those reading Torah, called to the Torah, or leading services wear a tallit, even during services when congregants do not normally wear a prayer shawl.

Women Wearing Tallit

According to traditional Jewish law, women are permitted, but not required, to wear a tallit. Therefore, there is some controversy about whether they can recite the blessing for donning the ritual garment. The words “who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us to wrap ourselves in a tallit” may be undermined if one prays them without, in fact, being commanded. Some contemporary rabbis have endeavored to solve this problem by encouraging women to take on the obligation to wear a tallit. Joel Roth originally suggested this approach in his responsum on women becoming rabbis.¹⁰ Rabbi Roth also warned that encouraging women to take on an obligation could potentially create a whole new class of sinners. He argued that not wearing a tallit is a neutral act for a woman who hasn’t assumed the mitzvah; however, not wearing a tallit becomes a sinful act for a woman who *has* assumed the mitzvah.

This halakhic solution is problematic, if not divisive. First of all, it creates two classes of women—the ones who “come up” to the male level of obligation and the ones who don’t. Secondly, it ignores the fact on the ground that both male and female Jews experience themselves as “taking on” tallit. In Orthodox settings, this act is so automatic for men as to be transparent. But in liberal Jewish communities, both men and women must *decide* to wear a tallit, and to take that commandment as their own. My halakhic

stance is that Jews are obligated to commandments. My experiential reality is that Jews must take on that obligation for it to be real.

Of course, the idea of “taking on” a mitzvah is absurd from a traditional halakhic perspective. The force and obligation of a mitzvah obtain, regardless of an individual Jew’s preferences or practices. However, from an empirical point of view, Jews most certainly do “take on” commandments. Modern Jewish philosophers have distinguished between Commandment (the instructions given at Sinai and preserved in the written and oral law) and Commandedness (the Jew’s receiving of such instruction as his or her own).¹¹ No matter what the miracle or the power of revelation, no matter what the debt owed to God and community, a mitzvah cannot be a mitzvah without a *metzuveh* (commanded one) who “volunteers” to be obligated. It is by now a cliché to say that in our generation every Jew is a Jew by choice. What communal authority, what stigma, what restriction from participating in the general culture forces us to be Jews? Obviously, none at all. But even the ancient Rabbis, who did not live in an open society, acknowledged that everyone has a choice about whether or not to buy in to the system. That is the meaning of the teaching: “everything is in the hands of Heaven, except reverence for Heaven.”¹²

For more on women and tallit, please see Aviva Cayams article on page X of this volume.

When Is A Tallit Worn?

Tallitot are worn primarily during day-time services. Evening services were excluded because of the biblical instruction to see the fringes. (“See” to the ancient Rabbis meant “see by daylight.”) Even today, however, the occasions for wearing and using a full tallit extend beyond Shaḥarit (morning) and Minḥa (afternoon) services. The habits and customs of donning a tallit are more complex than they might at first seem. Occasions for use include the following:

For Liturgical Moments and Honors

A tallit is worn for daily, Sabbath, and holiday morning and afternoon prayers. It is used for individual prayer, or prayer in a *minyan* (prayer quorum).

As noted above, it is traditional to wear a tallit when called to the Torah for an *aliyah* (the honor of reciting blessings before and after the Torah is read). Most people also use the fringes of a tallit to kiss the place in the Torah where the reading begins and ends.¹³

In many synagogues, prayer leaders wear a tallit even for the evening service. Similarly, rabbis and cantors may wear tallitot to conduct weddings or funerals.

Many people have the custom of putting the tallit over their heads during the Amidah (silent devotional) prayer.

Kohanim (members of the priestly class) also cover their heads with the tallit when reciting the priestly benediction (duchening), and some service leaders do likewise during other parts of the service, as well. The precedent for leaders to cover their heads with the tallit goes back to the days of the Talmud.¹⁴

Some people hold up the fringes of their tallit when the Torah is lifted and shown to the congregation, as if they could reach out and touch the letters with their fringes. (They then kiss the fringes.)

Many people use the fringes of the tallit to (this time, literally) kiss the Torah, as it is taken around the congregation.

It is customary to hold the fringes of one's tallit to the eyes during the first line of the Shema, and to kiss the fringes when mentioning them during the recitation of the last paragraph of the Shema (Numbers 15:37-41). The *tzitzit* are also kissed upon saying the last word of the Shema prayer: "*emet*" (truth).

It is also customary to gather the four corners and fringes of one's tallit during the prayer that precedes the morning Shema: "bring us peacefully [back to our Land] from the four corners of the earth."

Finally, the *tzitzit* are kissed during the prayer that follows the Shema on the words "*kayamet*" (enduring) and "*uleolmei olamim*" (forever and ever).

On Holidays

On the holiday of Simḥat Torah, a tallit is spread over Hatan Torah and Hatan Bereishit—those honored with ending and then beginning the reading of the Torah.

Kol Nidrei is the only night of the year when a tallit is worn.

Tallit, along with Tefilin, are omitted as a sign of mourning; for example, on the morning of the fast day of Tisha B'av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem.

At Weddings

In some communities, the groom wears a tallit during the wedding ceremony.¹⁵

Sephardim customarily put a tallit over the heads of bride and groom during the wedding ceremony.¹⁶

Some grooms receive a tallit as a wedding present, and wear a tallit for the first time at their wedding (see "Who Wears a Tallit?" above).

Many *huppot* (wedding canopies) are made of tallitot.

For Brit Milah and Baby Namings

It is common to hold baby boys in a tallit at the time of circumcision. This custom becomes a central ritual behavior in some baby naming ceremonies for girls, when the girl is swaddled in a tallit. The word *tzitzit* adds up to six hundred in Hebrew numerology (*gematria*). Together with the five knots and eight strings of the *tzitzit*, this makes a total of 613—the number of commandments. Thus, when we wrap the baby in a tallit, we are symbolically enveloping her in Torah and mitzvot.

For Bar/Bat Mitzvah

As noted above, many parents present a child with his or her first tallit on the day of the coming-of-age ceremony. This presentation has become a ceremony unto itself—with blessings, explanations, and personal remarks. Women often acquire their first tallit for an "Adult Bat Mitzvah" ceremony.

For Burial

Many people are buried in their tallit. Traditionally, one of the four sets of fringes is cut, making the tallit ritually invalid and echoing the symbolism of *keriah* (tearing one's clothing or a ribbon as a sign of mourning). Sometimes, a tallit is draped over the coffin.

For Sacred Moments Not Involving Synagogue or Lifecycle

Some rabbis and scholars have worn tallitot for sacred study, especially of the mystical literature.¹⁷ Judges wore tallitot in Rabbinic courts to mark the sanctity of the occasion for themselves and the litigants.¹⁸

What Is the Spiritual Meaning of Wearing a Tallit?

Tallit is a rich mitzvah. It alludes to our frailties and to God's strength, to the power of memory, sight, and touch. The basic instruction appears twice in the Torah, once in Numbers and more tersely in Deuteronomy. It is unusual for the Torah to provide a specific reason for a commandment. A few reasons are provided in the case of *tzitzit*: "that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of Adonai and do them; that you seek not after your own heart and eyes, after which you go astray; that you may remember and keep all My commandments and be holy unto your God."

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them that they make fringes (*tzitzit*) on the corners of their garments for all their generations; and they shall place on the corner of the fringe a [twisted] thread (*petil*) of blue-violet (*tekhelet*). And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of Adonai and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you go astray. That you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; I am Adonai your God.—Numbers 15: 38-41

You shall make tassels (*gedilim*) on the four corners of your garment, with which you cover yourself.—Deuteronomy 22:12

What does a tallit represent? Tallit has been compared to a string around one's finger, in that it is a cue to remember and achieve certain goals. Tallit has also been likened to a military uniform; it is an external sign of which side one serves in the battle between good and evil. Similarly, tallit has been called an insignia proclaiming that we are God's subjects. It is also considered a kind of shield, said to protect its wearers from sin, especially when they also perform the commandments of *mezuzah* and *tefilin*. (These practices, like tallit, physicalize the Shema prayer.) The four corners of a tallit are called "witnesses" because they observe and testify to the behavior of the wearer. Tallit has also been understood as a lash; its strings can convey a sharp reminder of standards when one falls short of them.¹⁹

Tallit achieves holiness both through what is done (donning the tallit, praying, seeing, remembering) and through what is not done (avoiding temptation, not "whoring" after one's eyes—the literal meaning of the Hebrew—which lead one astray). The tallit bears witness to its wearers' aspirations and commitments. Thus, wearing a tallit in the morning, but cheating in business in the afternoon is considered to be a form of taking God's name in vain.²⁰ Tallit is an outward sign that reminds us of an inner goal: namely, piety.

Tallitot engage the physical senses in order to trigger memory. In the words of the Baraita, “looking leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing.”²¹ The word *tzitzit* can be linked, homiletically, and perhaps linguistically, to the Hebrew root *tz.i.tz* meaning look. We not only look at the tallit and see its strings, we wrap ourselves in it, engaging our sense of touch. Further, we also wrap the *tzitzit* around our fingers and kiss them, while mentioning them aloud in prayer (invoking both touch and hearing).

According to Rabbi Meir, the color *tekhelet* was chosen for the tallit because it alludes to the sea, which reflects the sky, which in turn reflects the sapphire stone of God’s Throne of Glory.²² Sitting on the Throne, God is reminded of the Israelites’ loyalty to the commandment of tallit, and therefore grants grace and blessings. Thus, tallit serves as a reminder not just for us, but for God.

Tallit is multi-faceted and multi-purposed. It binds us to God and the mitzvot. It connects us to the larger community of tallit-wearers. It also provides personal space and a degree of privacy in the midst of communal worship.

Understanding the Laws of Tallit Symbolically

Some of the specific laws concerning tallit convey the meaning of the practice. For example, tallit is one of the few objects that a person may “borrow” without the owner’s permission. This reflects the Rabbis’ opinion that anyone would be delighted to help another perform such a beautiful mitzvah.²³ It also alludes to the individual and communal aspects of tallit just mentioned. Tallit is part of the communal uniform. In that sense, the tallit unifies and equalizes. Standing on the balcony of a synagogue and looking down, one sees a view that is whole—in which individuals become hard to distinguish. Any tallit might belong to any Jew; hence, the law permits unauthorized sharing. In the midst of that communal togetherness, tallit functions, too, as a physical barrier, a cocoon enfolding each person, touching the body and boundaries of each wearer. A tallit may be a highly personal family heirloom or a prized piece of Judaica, chosen to reflect one’s taste and background. Today especially, as this book testifies, an individual’s tallit is, in fact, individual. By saying “you can borrow this without permission” the Rabbis teach many lessons: generosity; the fact that we really don’t own anything—much less sacred objects; the claim of community on the individual; the superceding claim of God on both community and individual.

The most frequently practiced legal instruction regarding tallit is to check the *tzitzit* before each wearing. The aim is to make sure the *tzitzit* aren’t torn and to separate any tangled strings. They should hang like “loose hairs”—one biblical meaning of the word *tzitzit*.²⁴ This conveys a general respect for the garment and what it represents. It also suggests that we should continually, in colloquial terms, “check for holiness.” Don’t assume that something which was once holy remains so. We look at the *tzitzit* not once, but over and over again because we need to renew and update and be reminded. It is no accident that ritual contamination and impurity are contagious and transferable, but ritual purity is not. Ritual and moral fitness are subject to erosion and entropy. Maintenance and vigilance are required. Perhaps that is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai taught: “whosoever is scrupulous in the observance of *tzitzit* is worthy to receive the Divine presence.”²⁵

So many times, we “have eyes and see not, ears and hear not.”²⁶ Consciously checking the *tzitzit* is a guard against that. In common parlance, “checking someone’s

tzitzit” means reviewing or questioning their religious authenticity. It is an affront to check someone *else’s tzitzit* and a mitzvah to check one’s own.

Gematria: Rabbinic Numerology

Many of the individual elements of the tallit are understood to have symbolic significance. The number of windings--first seven, then eight, then eleven, and finally thirteen--are considered significant. Seven is the number of completion and perfection--the ultimate example being Sabbath. The Talmud stipulates that no group of windings should contain fewer than seven (“to correspond to the seven heavens”) or more than thirteen (“to correspond to the seven heavens plus the six intervening spaces”).²⁷ The tallit and its *tzitzit* are as whole, pure, and complete as creation and the heavens. They are a reminder to us to aspire to be the same.

Eight is the number of transcending physicality—the ultimate example being circumcision, which happens on the eighth day. The tallit is meant, in part, to help us overcome the temptations of our physical senses, especially sight, and of our sexual urges. In the story of the Garden of Eden, clothing was introduced because of the shame and self-consciousness about nakedness which began with yielding to sin. One tradition teaches that Adam and Eve donned *tzitzit*.²⁸ Whether they covered themselves with fig leaves or *tzitzit*, tallit remains, symbolically, the garment that returns us to our pure and unashamed state. This idea plays out when, in one Talmudic story, a man’s *tzitzit* fly up to slap him in the face, reminding and deterring him from sexual sin. The devotion and restraint which these *tzitzit* inspire in him also, in the end, inspire the woman he was lusty after. She gives up prostitution and converts, and he “gets the girl” after all.²⁹

Rashi links the eight threads to the number of days between the time the Israelites began their journey out of Egypt and the time they sang the Song at the Sea. This, too, can be viewed as an example of transcending physicality. The Israelites walked across the sea on dry land to their freedom.

The total of the first two winding groups (7 plus 8) is fifteen—which corresponds to the first two letters of God’s name (yud, hey). The second two letters of God’s name (vav hey) add up to eleven—the number of windings in the third group. Thus, the first three sets “spell out” the name of God. The last group has thirteen windings, which adds up to the same numerical value as *ehad*—meaning One. Thus, the message is: Y.H.V.H. is one. Thirteen is also the number of principles for Torah interpretation used by the ancient rabbis as well as the number of God’s attributes named in Exodus 34:6-7—a text associated with tallit, as we shall see below. The total number of windings is thirty-nine, which corresponds to the numerical value of the words *adonai ehad* (God is one).

The five sets of knots are said to be reminiscent of the five senses, which all can and must be used and channeled to serve God. Five, of course, also stands for the books of the Torah.

Tallit, God, and Creation

God is imagined by the ancient Rabbis as wearing both tallit and tefillin.³⁰ One tradition suggests that God wore a tallit for the first time when giving Moses the first commandment for the Israelite nation: let this month be for you the first of months.³¹ Rabbi Yohanan teaches that when God answered Moses’ plea to “show me Your

glory,³² God offered not only a vision of the Divine back and a statement of Divine attributes, but also an example and instruction of how to pray.

Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing: this text [Exodus 34:6-7, which describes God's attributes] teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be God, wrapped the Divine Self [in a tallit] like the prayer leader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. God said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them [recite these words from Exodus about My mercy as a prayer] before Me, and I will forgive them.³³

Why would it be “impossible for us to say such a thing?” Because the anthropomorphism is so literal that it is almost scandalous. What body does our incorporeal God cover with the tallit? Yet, the notion is beautifully romantic in its appeal. Tallit becomes something we share with God. The commonality, in turn, becomes a bond between Divinity and humanity. We imitate and connect with God, simultaneously affirming our closeness and acknowledging the vast chasm that separates us. “God’s Tallith is high above our reach, but [God’s] Tzitzith hang down like a lifeline that we can grasp hold of.”³⁴

The following bolded quotations from the Bible, in particular, are understood by traditional biblical interpretation to allude to tallit:

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great; **you are clothed with glory and majesty. You cover Yourself with light as with a garment;** you stretch out the heavens like a curtain—Psalms 104:1-2

While I looked, thrones were placed, and One who was ancient of days sat, **whose garment was white as snow**, and the hair of His head was like pure wool; His throne was like a fiery flame, its wheels like burning fire.—Daniel 7:9

The former quotation compares light and garment. It also includes two themes which the ancient Rabbis link together: God wearing a tallit (clothed with glory) and God as Creator (you stretch out the heavens). All this is weaved together in an amazing midrashic claim: the initial light of creation came from a garment—and specifically from God’s tallit.

And God said: “Let there be light” etc. [Genesis 1:3] Rabbi Shimon berabbi Yehotzadak asked Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman: “Because I have heard that you are a master of sacred storytelling about the Bible [*ba'al aggadah*], tell me whence was the light created?” He replied: “The Holy One, blessed be God, wrapped the Divine self [*nitatef*] as in a garment, and illuminated with the luster of Divine majesty the whole world from one end to the other.” [*Nitatef hakadosh barukh hu bah kasalmah, vehivhik ziv hadaro misof ha'olam ve'ad sofo.*] Now [Shmuel] had answered [Shimon] in a whisper, whereupon [Shimon] observed: “This is written explicitly in Scripture: ‘Who covers Yourself with light as with a garment [Psalms 104:2],’ yet you say it in a whisper!” [Shmuel] said to him: “Just as I heard it in a whisper, so have I told it to you in a whisper.”

We whisper this strange picture of God wearing clothing. We whisper cosmological speculation. These are deep and potentially dangerous topics. Come closer, let me confide in you an inherited mystical tradition: the light of creation is the light of God's tallit. Before God said, "let there be light" already there were *tzitzit*. These fringes were God's protection against the potential for evil that entered the world with Creation. After all, as long as God was everything, then everything, by definition, was good. To make room for a universe, God had to retract the divine self (what the mystics call *tzimtzum*). Thus, a void was created, in which something not co-equal with God could come to exist. This empty space introduced the possibility of not-God, and therefore of not-love, not-justice, not-peace, and not-goodness. Just as God was protected by the divine garment, Jews are protected by the *tzitzit* against their evil inclination.³⁵ The light of God's garment is the same as the light of *hashmal*, usually translated as electrum, described by Ezekiel.³⁶ This fiery, amber light is what Ezekiel sees in his vision of God. In particular, it is what he sees when he looks at God's sapphire Throne (associate with *tekhelet*) and when he looks at the place on God where a human would have genitals.³⁷ God, as it were, creates the universe from the fire of Divine sex.

This points to two important principles: (1) that, indeed, God is beyond the corporeal and (2) that our Father-Mother in heaven, like human parents, creates out of love. Humanity does not make existence more perfect or even more manageable for God, any more than having children simplifies the life of a parent. From the point of view of this mystical interpretation, the tallit is a reminder that God valued relationship above perfection, love above order. Protection is needed in an imperfect, chaotic world. Tallit, in the imagination of the Rabbis, provided that protection for God during the process of creation. It continues to provide protection for us in its role of stirring our memory and bidding us to own--and not be owned by--our sensory urges. It is no accident that mercy is one of the key attributes of God and one of the main midrashic associations with tallit. Protection is provided by God and tallit *because* God is merciful. If a tallit alludes to all the mitzvot with its numerical value of 613 (600 in the letters of the word and 13 in the knots and strings of the shawl), then God's tallit conveys that the commandments are not just a protection from evil and harm, but the very source of our world.

The themes of light, creation, and garment are hinted at in Psalm 36, a portion of which is traditionally recited before putting on a tallit:

How precious is your lovingkindness, O God [who creates out of love]. The children of Adam [the first human created] take refuge in the shadow of your wings [symbolized in the expanse of Your tallit]...For with you is the fountain of life [Divine energy in the form of *hashmal*] in Your light do we see light [Divine Light is manifest as the light humans can see in the sky; Divine commandment, represented in God's own tallit, is echoed in the tallitot we wear].

Tallit and the End of Days

Biblical and Rabbinic interpretation suggest that the world as we know will end with tallit, just as it began with tallit.³⁸ God's tallit was used in creation, and the tallitot of Jews will help usher in Messianic times. Zachariah imagines a future time of peace and brotherhood, when people of all nations seek God in Jerusalem. "It shall come to pass, that ten men from the nations of every language, shall take hold of the corner of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'We will go with you; for we have heard that God is with you.'" ³⁹ The

word for corner is *kenaf*, the same word used in describing the tallit (Numbers 15: 38). Therefore, the image is of gentiles taking hold of the corner of the tallit from which the *tzitzit* hang, asking to join the Israelites in the worship of God.

How to Take on a Mitzvah, and Particularly This Mitzvah

Given the importance and richness of this mitzvah, many Jews wear a tallit, at least on some occasions. How should a Jew “take on” this mitzvah more formally and completely? This raises the larger question of how we choose our obligations, as discussed above, and how a Jew assumes and integrates any mitzvah.

I have a few guidelines that I generally recommend. I consciously use the first person and a more personal tone, because this is not a theoretical or scholarly discourse—this is rabbinic advice and counsel. When I share my recommendations, I am often told that other rabbis have given similar advice. Most notably, I have been told that the Lubavitcher rebbe made comparable recommendations. (The great rebbe and I don’t usually agree on Jewish legal issues; I love to acknowledge when we do!)

1. **Little by little.** People can easily be overwhelmed by taking on too many mitzvot at once. If you aspire to daven three times a day in full ritual garb, that is a laudable vision--not a starting point. Take one step at a time. That might well mean putting on a tallit daily, or committing first to weekly Sabbath services, or learning one prayer each week. Master and get comfortable with one behavior at a time. Then build from strength to strength.
2. **One discomfort at a time.** A related principle is that one’s religious practice should always be increasing. One’s spiritual “comfort zone” is that set of mitzvot practiced with regularity and relative ease. Many Jews fail to count at least some of what they do. Remember: long-established ritual practice isn’t worth less than what is new, and virtually every volunteer activity can also be counted as a mitzvah. A regular practice might include Passover seders each year, giving blood every Rosh Hodesh, lighting candles each Friday night, saying the Shema before bed at night, or tithing to good causes bi-annually. In the midst of a set practice (*keva*), I recommend that every Jew always be in the process of taking on and/or struggling with one mitzvah that *isn’t* yet comfortable.

Every mitzvah that is struggled over will have one of two fates: a) it will be integrated into your comfort zone of religious practice, making room for a new struggle or b) it will be abandoned, permanently or temporarily, when you conclude it isn’t workable or meaningful in your life right now. This, too, will make room for a new struggle. Lessons about self and religion are learned either way.

3. **What you take on, take seriously.** Because I allow for the possibility that a Commandment will not be integrated into Commandedness in the sense described above, I am very concerned about approaching mitzvot with proper reverence. Mitzvot are not t-shirts at a discount store to be tried on for size. In order to engage the tradition respectfully and remain realistic about our freedom of choice, I suggest that Jews take on a mitzvah for a certain period of time. For example, if you are exploring the mitzvah of tallit, you might commit to wearing a tallit daily for four months, or weekly for a year. That kind of extended commitment ensures that you will sometimes be engaging in ritual practice without “feeling like it.”

- This will yield a number of good results: (1) moods and feelings won't be driving the entire religious enterprise; (2) the effort will be sustained enough to foster spiritual discipline and its attendant rewards; and (3) the focus will be on "what does tallit teach me?" and "what do I bring to this practice?" rather than "should I do it this morning?" and "do I *have to*???" Studying texts related to the mitzvah is, of course, extremely valuable and instructive. There is no amount of book learning, however, that will communicate the rewards of ritual practice. That can only be experienced by an extended and persistent investment of time—and the meaning of any practice will be different for different people.
4. **No one is perfect.** All that being said, expect to fail sometimes. Use lapses in your commitment as information about what distracts you, where you tend to give up, when you get overwhelmed, how to resume or renew a worthy endeavor. Torah cannot be used—only misused--as a means of self-glorification or self-punishment.
 5. **Beautify the mitzvah.** We could all light our Hanukah candles on aluminum foil, but the principle of *hiddur mitzvah* (beautification of the commandment) dictates that we find and craft beautiful containers by which to remember and thank God for the miracles. Whatever mitzvah you are taking on, find a way to beautify it. "Beautify" necessarily means personalize. Create surroundings or tools for doing the mitzvah that you find beautiful. If you are taking on the mitzvah of tallit, use your grandfather's tallit, make your own, or buy one from an artist whose work you love. Find a place to stand at shul or at home where you can look at the window as you recite the tallit blessing. Write out the blessings in fancy calligraphy. To everything worthy, add beauty.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, I can think of no better message than the final words of the liturgy one recites before donning a tallit:

May it be Your will, O God and God of my ancestors, that my observance of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* be considered as significant as if I had fulfilled it in all its particulars, details, and intentions, together with the 613 mitzvot that hang on those *tzitzit*. Amen. Selah.

¹ Kol Nidrei is the only evening service during the entire year when one dons a tallit. Normally, tallitot are worn only during the day. A "protective canopy" (namely, the tallit) is not worn at night; instead, the Haskhiveynu prayer is recited. *Afikomen* is the "dessert matzah" eaten annually at the Passover seder.

² Three different customs prevail: people (or males) of all ages wear a tallit; people (or males) begin to wear a tallit at the age of mitzvah, 12-13; or people (or males) begin to wear a tallit from the time they are married. This example refers to the third custom. See Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 4. The custom can be traced to and/or justified by the juxtaposition of the Deuteronomic explanation of tallit (22:12) with the words immediately following: "if a man takes a wife" (22:13). Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin*, 29b comments on other changes in ritual dress upon getting married. See also endnote 8.

³ "Tallit," *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem: Keter, vol.15, 743.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra*, 98a. See also "Tallit," *ibid*.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat*, 153a.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 44a.

⁷ Numbers 15:39.

⁸ See endnote 2.

⁹ Aryeh Kaplan, *Tzitzith: A Thread of Light*. New York: National Conference of Synagogue Youth, 30. Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 42a, *Arakhin* 2b note that children wore tallitot from the time they could wrap themselves in one.

¹⁰ See Simon Greenberg, ed. *The Ordination of Women As Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988.

¹¹ Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Joshua Heschel, among others, make this distinction.

¹² Babylonian Talmud, *Meigillah*, 25a.

¹³ *Orah Hayyim* 14:3, Klein, 29.

¹⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashana*, 17b.

¹⁵ "Tallit," 744.

¹⁶ Klein, 402.

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Hagiga*, 14b.

¹⁸ Babylonia Talmud, *Shabbat*, 10a.

¹⁹ Tallit as reminder: Numbers 15, Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 43b. Tallit as uniform: Hayim Halevy Donen, *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service*. New York: Basic Books, 1991, 155. Tallit as protection: Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 43b. Four corners and *tzitzit* as witnesses: Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 44a. Tallit as lash: Zohar 1:175a and Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 44a.

²⁰ Pesikta Rabbati 22. Klein, 9.

²¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 43b

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Orah Hayim* 14:4, 25:13. Klein, 9.

²⁴ Ezekiel 8:3, Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 42a

²⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 43b.

²⁶ Psalms 115: 5-6.

²⁷ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 39a.

²⁸ Zohar 1:28b. Kaplan, 66.

²⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 44a.

³⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Berkhot*, 6a.

³¹ Exodus 12:2. Kaplan, 67.

³² Exodus 33:18.

³³ Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashana*, 17b.

³⁴ Kaplan, 69. See Zohar 3:175b and Bachya on Numbers 15:38.

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot*, 44a.

³⁶ Interestingly, the words *malbush* (clothing) and *hashmal* have the same numerology. See Kaplan, 63. Aryeh Kaplan introduces and expounds the connection among tallit, creation, and hashmal in Kaplan, 53-78.

³⁷ Ezekiel 1:27; 8:2.

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat*, 32b on Zachariah 8:23. Kaplan, 7.

³⁹ Zachariah 8:23.