

What is the Tallit?

by Zakayn (Elder) Grant Burgess

Talit Talk

Unlike the kippah, which is regarded as having no inherent sanctity, the tallit [prayer shawl] is a highly respected object in Judaism. Wearing a tallit is a public declaration of one's love, respect, and devotion to Torah and Judaism. The tallit (also pronounced tallis) is a prayer shawl, the most authentic Jewish garment. It is a rectangular-shaped piece of linen or wool (and sometimes, now, polyester or silk) with special fringes called Tzitzit (pronounced tsee-tseet, known in English as "fringes" or "tassels") on each of the four corners. Most tallitot (alternative plural: talleisim) have a neckband, called an Atarah, which most often has the blessing one recites when donning the tallit, embroidered across it. The purpose of the tallit, then, is to hold the Tzitzit, and the purpose of the Tzitzit (according to the Torah) is to remind us of God's commandments.

ADONAI said to Moshe, "Speak to the people of Israel, instructing them to make through all generations, *tzitziyot* on the corners of their garments, and to put with the *tzitzit* on each corner a blue thread. It is to be a *tzitzit* to look at and thereby remember all of *ADONAI'S mitzvot* and obey them, so that you won't go around wherever your heart and eyes lead you to prostitute yourselves; but I will help you remember and obey all my *mitzvot* and be holy to your God. I am *ADONAI*, your God, who brought you out of Egypt in order to be your God. I am *ADONAI* your God." (Numbers 15:37-41, *Complete Jewish Bible*).

What is the significance of Tzitzit?

The Tzitzit can be seen as symbolic of all of Judaism. This is why the Tallit is accorded such respect, and worn by Jews with such great affection. "The tzitzit are the epitome of the democratic thrust within Judaism, which equalizes not by leveling but by elevating. All of Israel is enjoined to become a nation of priests." [Jacob Milgrom, commentary to Numbers, JPS Torah Commentary, p. 414] The Tzitzit consist of eight dangling threads, or more accurately, four threads doubled over. The four threads are attached to the garment by being passed through a small hole near the corner, being doubled over, and then having knots tied in them to secure them. A total of five knots are customarily tied into the threads. Between the knots, one of the threads is wound around the others.

The five knots tied in each tassel can be viewed as symbolic of the five Books of Moses. In English, these books are known as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This is the material written in the Sefer Torah [Torah scroll]. Of course, the Torah is the foundation for all of Judaism. The knots and windings are also considered symbolic of the Shema (shem-ah):

Sh'ma Yisrael! *ADONAI* Eloheinu *ADONAI* Echad

Hear, Israel! Adonai our God, Adonai is One Deuteronomy 6:4 *Complete Jewish Bible*

(In prayers, "Israel" refers to the Jewish people. It is shorthand for "Children of Israel.")

As always, traditions must be tested against Scripture before being accepted into Messianic Jewish practice. Wearing Tzitzit is a tradition within Judaism, which is Scripturally commanded. Wearing Tzitzit was followed by Yeshua and His disciples in the practice of their Judaism. Yeshua himself, being perfect in his Jewishness as in all else, naturally wore fringes, as is described in Scripture in Matthew 9:20, concerning the woman who had had a hemorrhage for 12 years. She touched the tzitzit [Greek "kraspedon," fringe or tassel] on His robe.

Who can wear a Tallit?

A person who has reached the age of majority in a Jewish community (in most communities, this is 13, though in some communities, girls reach the age of majority at 12) can wear a tallit. Many Messianic Jews and Messianic gerim (proselytes) wear a tallit simply because it is something that G-d commanded, and also for the purpose of identifying with the Jewish community. In congregations where a tallit is generally worn, you will find a rack of tallitot near the entrance to the sanctuary. These tallitot are available for use by those who are prepared to wear one showing respect and devotion to Torah and Judaism. Women can wear a tallit if they so choose, but are not required to wear one. One will notice that most women at services do not wear a tallit, while virtually every Jewish male does. Why is this so? Before egalitarianism was introduced into Judaism, a relatively recent event, a woman simply was not allowed to wear a tallit. This is no longer true today, but the old practice lingers on. At Adat Yeshua, women are welcome to wear a tallit. (Note: if a woman chooses to wear a tallit, covering the head is in order, to display respect for the tallit.)

When is the Tallit worn?

The tallit is worn for morning prayer, during the week as well as on Shabbat and other holy days. It is not worn for afternoon and evening prayers because of the commandment that one should see the Tzitzit, which has been interpreted as meaning to be seen by the light of the day. The Shaliach Tzibur (who leads the prayer) usually wears a tallit, as well, even in the afternoon and evening. A tallit is (normally) worn only at morning services. It is worn at every morning service, weekdays as well as the Sabbath. According to Jewish tradition, the act of putting on a tallit only has "religious merit" if it is done during daylight. It is not (normally) worn at a Friday evening service, or any other evening service. There are three exceptions to these general rules; a tallit is worn at the following evening services:

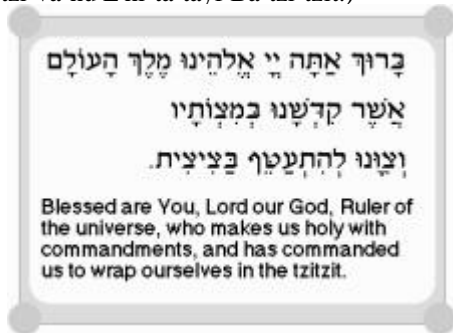
- Evening Kol Nidre service of Yom Kippur.
- Evening service of Simchat Torah.
- Special Friday evening services that include a Torah reading.

Any male called up to the bimah for an aliyah [saying the blessings before and after a Torah section is read] or other honor is expected to wear a tallit. It should be noted that the Rabbi and Cantor normally wear a tallit when conducting services, with the exception of funeral services as a sign of mourning. It is considered disrespectful to wear a

tallit in a restroom. Always take off your tallit before entering the restroom. Some even consider it disrespectful just to carry an uncovered tallit into the restroom; if it's yours, put it in its pouch first; if it's the temple's, hang it on the rack outside the sanctuary. Note that none of this applies to the kippah; it is normal to leave it on when in the restroom.

How to put on a Tallit

- Open tallit and hold in both hands so you can see the atarah (the collar band on which the blessing is often embroidered)
- Recite the berachah - "Ba-ruch A-ta A-do-nai E-lo-hay-nu Me-lech Ha-o-lam A-sher Ki-d'sha-nu B'mitz-vo-tav V-tzi-va-nu L'hi-ta-tayf Ba-tzi-tzit.)



- Kiss the end of atarah where the last word of the blessing is embroidered, and then where the first word is.
- Wrap the tallit around your shoulders, holding it over your head for a moment of private meditation.
- Adjust the tallit on your shoulders comfortably.

Customs of wearing a Tallit

- If you borrow the tallit for the service, say the berachah.
- If you use it just for an aliyah, no need to say the berachah.
- Don't take it into the bathroom.
- If you take the tallit off for a short time (e.g. to go to the bathroom) you don't need to repeat the berachah when putting it on again.

Kissing the tzitzit

There are several times during the service when people kiss the tzitzit symbolically. First is during the recitation of the third paragraph of the Shema (Numbers 15:37-41) which mentions the tzitzit three times. As the worshiper reads the word "tzitzit," it is customary to kiss the tzitzit, which were gathered together in one hand prior to reciting the Shema. When the Torah is removed from the Ark and carried around the synagogue in a Hakafah (procession), those within reach touch the Torah mantle with tzitzit (if they are wearing a tallit) or a siddur (prayer book) if they are not. They then kiss the tzitzit or siddur which touched the Torah scroll. This is an expression of love and affection for the great gift which Torah is to us.

The history of the Tallit

During Bible times, the Jews (and other peoples of the region) wore four-cornered garments. In Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12, G-d commands the Jewish people "throughout the generations to come" to wear fringes on the corners of their garments so as to remember G-d's commands. Since this command was never rescinded, we believe that all Jewish men, including Messianic ones, should wear fringes. When people stopped wearing four-cornered garments, some Rabbis ruled that the law only applied to when one is wearing a four-cornered garment. Those who were not so interested in doing their best to fulfill this law were satisfied with only wearing a four-cornered garment with tassels during prayer, (especially in synagogue) as a prayer shawl, or tallit. Those who wished to do everything in their power to fulfill G-d's commands created a four-cornered garment to be worn under one's shirt, called a tallit katan ("katan" means small). Since in the western world we no longer wear four-cornered garments, Orthodox Jews wear a tallit katan.

Because a tallit katan is normally worn as an undergarment, the fringes are made long enough to extend outside of one's trousers. This is important, since the tassels are meant to be seen so as to remind us of G-d's commands. Some more liberal "branches" of Judaism have done away with the wearing of tzitzit and the tallit. The way in which the fringes are traditionally tied has ancient Rabbinic origins. Although various versions of "mystical" significance has been placed on the traditional method of tying the fringes, it is unclear where this method originated. Since we have no reason to think that it is anti-Biblical, we continue as Messianic Jews to tie them the same way.

Another Rabbinic interpretation concerning fringes is that they should no longer contain the blue thread. The Torah commands that tzitzit contain a thread of tikhales (blue). According to tradition, the dye for this color came from a species of the snail family called Chilazone. According to the Talmud, the Chilazone appears only once in seventy years (Menachot 44a). Rabbinic literature indicates several locations for Chilazone. Some tzitzit are now available with the dye from the Chilazone.

Another tradition suggests that the blue thread was removed because in the time of the Roman occupation, the Romans would not allow anyone to wear royal blue. Many historical purists in Israel today are wearing the blue thread anyway. Others reject the blue thread because the specific blue dye used in Bible times, was lost for years. They maintain the tzitzit should be white! Both blue and white tzitzit and all white tzitzit are worn today.