

# TALLIT STORY

A BIBLICAL COMMANDMENT TO WEAR TASSELS HAS EVOLVED INTO ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS, BEAUTIFUL AND MEANINGFUL OF JEWISH SYMBOLS

BOBBIE DAHDI EXPLORES THE HISTORY AND CUSTOMS AND TELLS OF HER OWN RECENT 'TALLIT EXPERIENCE'.

Bobbie Dahdi in her tallit designed by Shirley Waxman



The *tallit* or *tallis* is the Jewish prayer shawl that has *tzitzit* (tassels) at the four corners. The custom of wearing *tzitzit* pre-dates the *tallit* and originates in the biblical commandment: "Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them that they make themselves tassels in the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the tassels of the borders a thread of blue; And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them." (Numbers 15, 38-9)

The *tallit* was the Hebrew name given to the large square outer garment worn widely in the Mediterranean area and Middle East from Biblical times onwards. During the first to third centuries CE, the *tallit* was worn by all classes and became a Jewish garment only when *tzitzit* were attached to it. It was probably similar to the *abaya* cloak, worn by the Bedouins for protection from sun and rain, and which has black stripes at the ends. The finer *tallit* was probably similar in quality to the Roman *pallium*, and was worn only by distinguished men, rabbis, and scholars. The *tallit* was sometimes worn partly doubled, and sometimes with the ends thrown over the shoulders.

The *tallit* evolved into an identifying marker for Jews, worn to every morning service except on *Tisha B'Av*, when the destruction of the Temple is commemorated.

Until recently associated solely with men, the number of women now wearing *tallitot* is growing rapidly, particularly within the UK Reform and Liberal movements.

## RULES

Most *tzitzit* are made in Israel, since yarn spun especially for the purpose is required. The *tallit*, on the other hand, can be made from cotton, silk, wool or any acceptable fabric. Jews are biblically commanded not to wear a mixture of linen and wool. Ancient Egyptian aristocrats wore linen-wool mixtures, as did

the High Priest of the Temple, so the fabric may have long-forgotten associations with high rank. Out of this evolved a prohibition on synthetics.

Stripes are usual but not obligatory. They connect Jews to their Hebrew ancestors. Slaves wearing striped costumes, similar perhaps to Joseph's coat of many colours, can be seen on the walls of Egyptian tombs. It has also been suggested that they are a reminder of the blue thread which was once required in the *tzitzit*. The blue stripes in the Israeli flag were put there as a reminder of the blue stripe that was traditionally put in the prayer shawl.

Strictly Orthodox men wear a small *tallit* under their clothing all the time and a larger *tallit* for prayers. Traditional laws governing size specify that a *tallit* should cover two thirds of the body and be long enough to reach from fingertip to fingertip, running behind the neck of a person standing with their arms by their sides.

*Tallit* designer Shirley Waxman believes that the size of *tallitot* reflect people's level of comfort with their Judaism. This has led, she maintains, to tiny *tallitot* in Berlin and gravity-defying examples in the US!

The knots and strands of the *tzitzit* make up the number 613, the total number of commandments to be found in the Bible. There is continuing discussion about how the strands should be wrapped and the knots tied.

The commandment in Numbers 15 specifies that a blue thread should be put in the tassels. The dye came originally from a *chilazon*, possibly a Mediterranean mollusc, although nobody is quite sure. These became scarce and the Mishnah permitted the use of *tzitzit* with all white threads. Eventually a severe *chilazon* shortage caused people to stop and then forget the dyeing process.

Today it is the custom to have undyed *tzitzit*. Some Jews demand blue thread for their *tzitzit*, whilst others would not hear

Courtesy of P'itil Tekhelet



Different opinions of how tzitzit strands should be wrapped and knots tied

of it, since the rabbis decided that the right colour could not be reliably emulated.

It is traditional for a *tallit* to incorporate an *atarah*, a 'crown', really a collar. Some have inscribed the blessing for putting on *tallit*, but this is not essential. Shirley Waxman suggests that this was put there in the first place as a 'crib sheet', because someone could not remember the Blessing.

## SYMBOLISM

When Jews don a *tallit*, whether for synagogue service, prayers at home or for a rite of passage, it serves as a boundary marker between secular and religious life. A *tallit* can also be a very personal symbol. "Religious experience is more commonly absorbed through the senses than through the intellect," writes Dr. Abram Kanof in *Jewish Ceremonial and Religious Observance*.

In the case of Zdenka Morsel, who guarded a *tallit* in the concentration camps, it stood for continuity. She survived to give it as a wedding present to her husband, Marek. Aged 87, he still wears it and thinks of her.

*Tallitot* are most popularly linked to the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, the ceremony by which a Jew becomes a Son or Daughter of the Commandment and assumes their place within the community. This traditionally occurs at 13, but not all of us make it then and, as you can read in the box below, my own celebration of this event was as an adult.

A *tallit* is also increasingly used to mark births, marriages and deaths. In the US particularly, some parents welcome a newborn daughter into the covenant by wrapping her in a specially made *tallit* when she is named.

The *tallit* is sometimes used as a *chupah* (wedding canopy), the space where a couple stands to be married, and symbolises their future home. My eldest son planed wood and assembled a *chupah* from his *tallit*, a gesture which movingly demonstrated that he was taking his wife 'under his wing'.

When a person dies, their *tallit* is passed on to the next generation or the deceased is wrapped in it. Through its connection with accepting Jewish Commandments, it can be thought of as symbolising the good deeds they performed.

## TRENDS

There is no doubt that the range of *tallitot* available today, whether off-the-shelf or custom made, is growing. There is joy in beautiful religious objects and a *tallit*, proudly worn, is no exception. Under the rule of *hiddur mitzvah*, Jews are not just allowed but commanded to make their ritual objects as beautiful as they can.

Perhaps because of a need experienced by women to create a garment that is meaningful to them, rather than simply copy male tradition, there has been a free rein on creativity in recent years, particularly in the US. "The *tallit* is as much a personal garment as it is a ritual object," says Elsa Wachs, a fibre artist working in Pennsylvania.

Colour is no longer taboo. The rich purple, scarlet and blue of the ancient Temple proliferate. Fine silks, sheer wools, embroidery, weaving, painting and appliquéing are experimented with. The *tallit* can be made to tell a story. Heirloom lace or antique fabrics can be incorporated into a contemporary design. Elsa Wachs used her grandmother's tablecloth, a wedding dress and a piece of precious jewellery.

All this is not, however, as revolutionary as one might think. Extravagant, tapestry-style, silk *tallitot* were in huge demand in 18th and 19th century Italy. *Plus ça change...* ■

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Last April, celebrating an adult *Bat Mitzvah* and becoming a Daughter of the Commandment after several years of serious illness, I wanted to mark my renewal with a new prayer shawl. It would be a state-

ment not just of my restored good health but of my femininity. I no longer wished to slavishly follow the men's styles. Neither did I want to look like a rainbow, however. "I want people to notice my *tallit* as they talk to me, not from across the

synagogue," I told designer Shirley Waxman, in Maryland. Following a flurry of emails and transatlantic telephone conversations, *Chag Aviv* – spring festival – as Shirley named my new *tallit*, was

mine. It is poncho-shaped and never slips. The inscription on the collar is from Ruth, my Hebrew name. Two of the four corners are embroidered flowers, symbolising spring, one is a dove of peace and the fourth

a fish, whose eye never closes, like the eye of God, watching us always. The painted design is of flowers and lambs, grounded by a mosaic collage representing the earth. I wear my story *tallit* with pride.