

The Tales of the Tallit

A tallit (also known as a prayer shawl, especially by Christians) is a rectangle or square cloth with tzitzit (fringes) on each of the four corners and an atarah along the collar. It is worn in obedience to the biblical commandment to wear tzitzit found in Numbers 15:37-41. The passage reads:

"The L-RD also spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the L-RD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your G-d. I am the L-RD your G-d who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your G-d; I am the L-RD your G-d.'"

Historically, the tallit is a Jewish garment, with black stripes, worn by Jewish men only. However, the tradition has developed and more and more Jewish women also wear tallits now. In addition, tallits are no longer limited to plain black stripes. An interesting development recently has been the number of churches and Christians who have begun using tallits and prayer shawls in their services, prayer meetings, or in their personal devotional times. Read on to learn more!

A tallit can be made in a variety of fabrics, including wool, cotton, silk, polyester, rayon, dacron, and more, although that worn by a "cohen" or "levite" cannot be made of a mixed fabric. Some have a blue thread in the tzitzit called techelet, in accordance with the original biblical commandment, but even those that do not have the techelet can have it added by special request.

The traditional style to wear the tallit is to put it over the shoulders and draped down the back, then pull the two front corners up over the shoulders & down the front. Often tallit clips are used in the front to hold the traditional tallit in place. Contemporary tallits are often smaller, resembling shawls, and these just hang around the neck or across your shoulders and upper part of your back. Both types of tallit often now have contemporary designs rather than the traditional stripes, ranging from the Etz Chaim (tree of life), to multi-colored stripes, from a bold red background to Chagall's windows, from the Jerusalem skyline to a flowers design, and more; the possibilities & options are almost endless.

When the tallit is put on it is customary to say a traditional blessing, known as a b'racha. This blessing, either in full or just the last part of it, is sometimes stitched or painted on the atarah (collar) of the tallit, but it does not have to be there in order for the tallit to be kosher. The b'racha for putting on the tallit is as follows:

"Baruch ata adonai, eloheynu melech ha-olam, asher kidd'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tsivanu l'hitatef b'tzitzit."

"Blessed art thou, O L-rd our G-d, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by thy commandments and has commanded us to put on the tzitzit."

Tallits are worn during the morning prayer on weekdays, including Shabbat and other holy days, but are not normally worn during the afternoon or evening prayers. One exception to this is on Erev Yom Kippur at the Neilah service where it is customary to wear your tallit. The tallit can be worn by both men and women, although in Orthodoxy women do not generally wear one. While it is a commandment for an adult Jewish man to "don the tzitzit," it is only "permissible" for an adult Jewish woman to do so, not commanded. It is, however, encouraged that a woman who wears a tallit would use a woman's one rather than a man's, and there are many many beautiful designs and fabrics now available specifically for women. In addition, it is not traditionally encouraged for someone who is not Jewish to wear a tallit, even though it is becoming more common for some Christians to wear the tallit, or prayer shawl, during their prayer or worship times. Whatever the case, it should be stressed that this is a holy garment and must be treated with respect and honor to the biblical commandments and the Jewish tradition of which it is an integral part.

If you are looking for a tallit or prayer shawl, you can find discount tallit warehouses online and shop from your armchair! A good online tallit shop will offer tallits and prayer shawls in a range of sizes, both traditional and contemporary styles for men, women, and bar/bat mitzvah children, in a variety of fabrics & designs. They will even include the techelet as a custom order if requested, and will work with you as an individual to find the perfect tallit for you!

About the Author

Adam Barnett works for Studio Shofar Judaica & Gifts, and hopes to help educate the judaica market to better understand judaica products in general. Visit his website to learn more about such items at <http://www.studioshofar.com>

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