

The Tallit

or how the men's prayer shawl became a symbol of radical feminism



What is a Tallit?

- A tallit is a sacred Jewish prayer shawl
- Tallitot are typically bestowed at a B'nai Miztvah ceremony, where a young Jewish child becomes an adult in the eyes of their community, through chanting the Torah
- At a typical Jewish wedding a Tallit is hung above the couple, as part of the Chuppah, which represents their new home as a married couple and the hope that G-d will protect and shelter them.
- When you die, you are traditionally wrapped in your tallit.



Tzitzit, which represent the 10 commands

A bit of History



Halachic (Jewish religious law), states that the Tallit is a male garment

“A woman belongs on the *bimah* as much as an orange belongs on a seder plate”

1922

The first Bat Miztvah happens following the altering of traditional Jewish practice

**Reform movements begin to allow women to receive and wear tallits
1950s**

**Court rules in favor of Women at the Wall, a group working to allow women to be at and wear Tallit at the *Kotel*
2002**

1972

The first Jewish woman graduates rabbinical school, becomes a practicing rabbi

Women are still not allowed to receive a tallit or wear one in any orthodox space present



Tallitot as Resistance

Tallitot have a rich history in Jewish culture, but due to the recency in which they became available to women they have quickly become a controversial topic throughout the last century. The act of wearing a *Tallit* is more than a fashion choice. It is a physical representation of the shifting of religious gender roles, Jewish or not, and an affirmation of how people of all genders belong in positions of leadership and power. Wearing a *Tallit*, especially within conservative settings, is a symbol of feminism and hope for radical change.



Tallitot as Resistance (cont)

Another group who often is underrepresented in Jewish culture is the LGBTQ+ community. Binya Kóatz, an artist and activist based out of California, recalled how powerful it was for her to see a queer woman wearing *tzitzit*, or the fringe from the tallit, for the first time. Typically worn on a daily basis by orthodox men, it was extremely powerful for her to see that representation, of someone whose identity was so similar to hers, in a religious space. Inspired, in 2022 she partnered with the Tzitzit Project, a group aiming to design gender neutral *tzitzit* which work for a variety of body types, gender expressions and religious levels. “They just remind me of my obligations, my mitzvot, and my inherent holiness,” Kóatz said. “That’s the point, you see your tzitzit and you remember everything that it means — all the obligations and beauty of being a Jew in this world.” Through her work, combining religion with fashion, she is able to foster a more inclusive environment, where space is held for a diverse range of people, who are welcomed with open arms.

Tallitot as Fashion

When it comes to *tallitot* design is an essential part of the process. Though the traditional garment was white and blue, with horizontal stripes, there is much more nuance and room for creativity in modern Judaism. Most *tallitot* have *tzitzit* and the prayer for the commandment to wear *tzitzit*, but many women choose to embrace unique color and symbolism. For example, my mom's *tallit*, which we bought near the Western Wall in Jerusalem, has embroidered images of pink, gold, and red pomegranates, which represent female strength and fertility. My rabbi (who is a woman!) has a *tallit* which she painted herself, with images of the sea. Some choose to color their *tzitzit*, while others choose new age materials such as silk and sheer fabrics. They are a way to express yourself and your unique connection to Judaism. This customization and personal connection is especially popular amongst women and in reform communities.



Tallit Controversy

As with most religious garments, there is a thinly drawn line between fashion, and religious purpose/practicality. The *Tallit*, especially with its increasing accessibility, has caused public scrutiny over the past decade, especially as people question the intentions- appreciation or appropriation?



H&M was criticized for designing a scarf which people claimed to be a poor copy of a *tallit*. The design team quickly removed the scarf from stores, but justified their logic by claiming it was on trend.



In contrast, an attendee at New York Fashion Week accessorized with a *tallit* and was met with praise for “giving the tallit a moment of glory” and bringing into mainstream media.

Do you think these usages of religious garments for fashion are bringing representation for Jewish design or inappropriate uses of a sacred object?

**“Women belong in all
places decisions are
made.”**

**-Ruth Bader
Ginsburg**



The Atlantic

H&M's New Scarf Looks Remarkably Like a Jewish Holy Garment

None

 The Atlantic / Mar 22, 2022

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For Jewish Women, Choosing A Tallit — A Prayer Shawl — Can Get Complicated

When women wear the tallit, their choice of prayer shawl is both aesthetic and charged with meaning.

 The Forward / Nov 11, 2018

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H&M Apologises Over Scarf

The high-street retailer has said no offence was intended

 British Vogue / Jan 8, 2016

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