

**The Transformation of Tallitot:**  
 How Jewish Prayer Shawls Have Changed  
 Since Women Began Wearing Them  
 By  
 Rebecca Shulman

*"For some time, Frieda Birnbaum came to morning prayer at the Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue with a tallit\* in her briefcase.*

*She had been scared to take it out and put it on.*

*She had been scared to buy it. ("For my nephew," she mumbled to the salesman.)*

*Davening\*\* alone at home, she wore the tallit. But she couldn't summon up the courage to wear it in shul and would end up "shlepping" it on the subway to her job as a computer programmer.*

*One morning, Frieda Birnbaum said to herself:*

*"Dammit! If I can daven in my tallit at home, I can sure as hell daven in my tallit in shul!" And she did. A friend of hers arrived, and she did too. These were the first women known to wear tallesim\*\*\* in shul in the New York area. Revolutionary heroines."<sup>1</sup>*

In the early 1970s, as the women's movement was gaining strength in the United States, Jewish women were simultaneously struggling for equal rights within the Jewish community. The tallit helped to define this struggle: by putting on tallitot women loudly and visibly proclaimed themselves equal members of the Jewish community. By changing the appearance of prayer shawls -- by wearing tallitot of colorful silks, for example -- women claimed these ritual objects as their own.

There has been an ongoing debate in the Jewish community about whether appropriation of male-associated rituals and objects is a fitting or useful way to demonstrate equality. Those who argue against it say that to co-opt

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\* A Jewish prayer shawl, traditionally worn by men.

\*\* Praying.

\*\*\* Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish plural form of tallit. The Sephardic plural "tallitot" will be used throughout this paper.

"patriarchal symbols" is demeaning. The debate concerns the definition of equality. Does it mean that women have the right to participate in the same rituals as men? Or should women create their own rituals, which men may or may not choose to join? By both wearing and redesigning tallitot women have done a little bit of both; they have taken a male-associated ritual garment and refashioned it into an object with a new look and, arguably, new significance.

The debates about how meaningfully to appropriate a tradition are being played out in many contexts across America and elsewhere. For example, the American gay and lesbian community has questioned the need for federally sanctioned same-sex marriages even as they fight for them. The issues surrounding tradition and ownership are currently being tackled by nearly all American Jews. This paper, however, will examine a single example of this ongoing discourse through the experiences of a small number of Conservative Jews.

This paper will focus primarily on the Washington D.C., Conservative community with some attention to Jews elsewhere, especially in New York City. However, although we are studying one small community the implications are broader than might be assumed.\*

This paper will look primarily at tallitot since women began wearing them 25 years ago. After considering the historical developments leading women to adopt them, we will examine how the appearance of tallitot has changed as well as the motivations for wearing them. Ultimately, this paper will see how a few women have become deeply committed to the principle of tallit, and turned this affinity into an art form.

## **I. Historical Development**

***"The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "Speak to the sons of Israel and tell them to put tassels on the hems of their garments, and to put a violet cord on this tassel at the hem.***

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\* In the 1960s Conservatism spawned the Havurah movement. "Havurah" simply means "fellowship within synagogue."<sup>1</sup> Although havurah groups frequently decline to label themselves Conservative, a large number of those participating in havurot (the plural of havurah) are, in fact, Conservative. Therefore, havurot have been included in this study.

***You must have a tassel, then, and the sight of it will remind you of all the commandments of the Lord." (Numbers 15:37-15:39)***

Tallitot, according to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, are "usually white and made either of wool, cotton, or silk ... [with] black stripes"; they are "worn by males during the morning prayers ... as well as all Day of Atonement services". According to Jewish law a tallit can be almost any four-cornered piece of cloth to which specially tied fringes called "tzitzit" are attached. The tallit is merely a device that allows the wearer to don tzitzit. These fringes were attached to the four-cornered outer-garments worn regularly by Jews thousands of years ago. The fringes are mandated in the Bible, (Numbers 15:37-15:39 as above) .

The fringes may originally have served as a cultural marker--a way to easily identify other Jews. The blue or violet thread woven into the tzitzit was colored with dye from a certain mollusk, the identity of which has been lost. The animal may have become extinct, the dye may have grown too expensive, or the ancient Romans may have lost control over the area of the Mediterranean where this mollusk was found; in any case, Jews seem to have stopped using the blue thread sometime between 500 and 750 C.E.

Even without the blue dye mandated by the Bible, the tzitzit and the tallit have both taken on great symbolic as well as cultural significance. The tzitzit are primarily a reminder of the 613 mitzvot, or commandments, given to the Jews in the Bible. Gathering the four sets of fringes together symbolizes both the four corners of the earth and "God's Oneness" - the basic tenet of monotheism. The blue fringe represents the heavens, where God dwells<sup>2</sup>, or God.<sup>3</sup>

Not only are tzitzit meaningful, the act of wearing the tallit is significant as well. "He who observes the duty of tzitzith well will reach to behold the face of the Omnipresent God," say the sages.<sup>4</sup> Since the tallit is an item of clothing, it serves to distinguish mankind from the animals. The tallit is a sign that the wearer is one of the "chosen people": "In those days [of the Messianic Age], ten men of each language will grasp the corner of [a garment containing Tzitzith, worn by] a Jewish man, and they will say, 'Let us go with

you, for we have heard that God is with you."<sup>5</sup> But tallitot are most important as reminders of God and the commandments.

The laws concerning tallitot are complex and have undergone much interpretation. The law of tzitzit mandates only that any four-cornered garment must have fringes attached. As 20th century Americans do not regularly wear four-cornered clothing, the tallit has become a contrivance that, at least in Conservative communities, is worn only for prayer. According to modern rabbinical injunction the wearing of tzitzit is considered a commandment.

At least since talmudic times (200 B.C.E. - 500 C.E.), rabbis have raised the question of whether women should wear tzitzit. The complex arguments center on the idea that the tzitzit may be considered a "time bound" commandment, meaning that they only have to be worn at certain times. Tzitzit should be worn during the day, but never at night.\* Women are traditionally exempted from most time-bound mitzvot, presumably because they have important family duties which would interfere with fulfilling these commandments.

During talmudic times some women did in fact wear tzitzit. "The Sages...claim [that women are] obligated [to wear tzitzit].... It is interesting to note that at least two later talmudic rabbis tied tzitzit on the garments of their wives because, like the Sages, they held that tzitzit is a non-time-specific commandment..."<sup>6</sup> Fifteen hundred years ago the argument that women were not only allowed but required to wear tzitzit was already being promulgated.

By medieval times conventions surrounding tzitzit had begun to change. The strand of blue had disappeared. They were worn attached to undergarments and shawls worn only during prayer, not tied to everyday outer garments as these clothes were no longer constructed with four corners. Rabbis prohibited women from wearing tzitzit, or, if they wore them, from saying the blessing over them.\* In this way tallitot became a male item forbidden to women.<sup>7</sup>

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\* Some Orthodox Jewish men still wear tzitzit all day attached to a garment underneath their clothing. Conservative Jews wear only the tallit, which is put on for prayer.

\* Saying a blessing when one is not required is considered a profanation of God's name, which is included in the blessing.

By modern times tallitot had developed a fairly consistent look: a white piece of silk, wool or linen, with black , or occasionally blue , stripes decorating the cloth. "The ancient Hebrews wore a striped costume," according to tallit-maker Shirley Waxman, and the stripes may now be worn "as a connection to our ancestors."<sup>8</sup> Stripes may have been a sign of royalty. Ancient Egyptian paintings depict people in positions of power wearing stripes, and Joseph's "coat of many colors" in Genesis has been translated as striped coat.<sup>9</sup> Either way, the stripes are traditional and date back far into history, although no one seems sure of their original significance.

The portion of the tallit that touches the neck is often lined with an "atarah" (crown). (See Appendix A for a diagram of a tallit.) The atarah sometimes bears the blessing for donning the tallit. or is decorated with patterns.<sup>\*\*</sup> The atarah, according to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, is worn "in order to beautify the Mitzvah."

According to *The Jewish Catalog*, "[t]he size of the manufactured silk tallitot commonly found in synagogues today is approximately five feet by two feet.... Traditionally, the ... tallit was approximately six feet by three or four feet."<sup>10</sup> Some modern tallitot are as large as six feet by four feet; most are much smaller. Shirley Waxman argues that the size of the tallit is directly proportional to the wearer's personal comfort with his or her religion.. Regardless, until the 1970s tallitot, large or small, were worn almost exclusively by men.

## II. Motivation

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Plural of "atarah"; crowns.

*"My original decision [to wear a tallit] was in response to a question to me at my former congregation, Tifereth Israel. We had had complete gender equality for about a year, and a friend said to me that she thought that... we should... assume the obligations, in other words start wearing a tallit and a kippah.\* I'd never thought of that before. I agreed with her but felt funny about wearing them, particularly the tallit.... Some time later,... at the start of the Shabbos morning service, the person leading it started by asking all the men to say the [blessing over putting] on their tallitot together -- and, he added, any woman who wanted to. My friend and I, from different parts of the room, both immediately got up and went to get a tallit. I felt very comfortable in it and have been wearing one ever since."<sup>11</sup>*

The appropriation of tallitot by women is both more common and more complex in the Conservative movement than in either of the other major Jewish denominations. In the Reform movement the wearing of tallitot is often optional. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, stand firm in their resolve to keep the male and female traditional spheres separate. The status of women, and thus the issues surrounding women wearing tallitot, are extremely complex in the Conservative movement.

Conservative Judaism strives to appeal to "the large number of Jews who [are] thoroughly American in the habits of life and modes of thinking ...."<sup>12</sup> Because of this, the movement is sensitive to shifts in American society. However, it refuses to abandon halakhah - Jewish law - as Reform Judaism has done. Conservatism therefore mandates constant interpretation of the law, using traditional methods - and not so traditional - to change tradition.

The Conservative movement began "as an effort to make possible the observance of the tradition with those modifications deemed necessary to accommodate the tradition to contemporary taste or circumstance."<sup>13</sup> Conservative scholars and rabbis work to modify modern religious observance within the boundaries of halakhah. To allow women to wear tallitot, is not as simple as deciding that this change is in accordance with the way modern Americans understand women's roles. It demands searching

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\* A small cloth head covering, also traditionally male.

through the annals of Jewish law and tradition to find some proof that such a change would not break any rules. This is very different from the two other major sectors of Judaism. Reform Judaism maintains that "Judaism indeed has an 'essence' which can be defined and preserved amid change."<sup>14</sup> They keep traditions that remain relevant and discard others which seem irrelevant or outdated, arguing that biblical and Jewish laws were created in and for a specific time and society. Orthodox Jews have "a commitment to halakhah as the binding force in Jewish life."<sup>15</sup> Their tradition is more rigid and slow to change.\*

One milestone incident occurred in 1972. The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) is "the focal point of the [Conservative] movement,"<sup>16</sup> In the early 1970s, JTS first began considering ordaining women rabbis. This issue spawned a major controversy which "almost broke the Conservative movement apart at the national level."<sup>17</sup> Amidst this controversy a Jewish women's study group called Ezrat Na'ashim emerged as an important feminist voice. Although not invited, they decided to attend the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly of 1972 in order to promote their feminist philosophy, and constructed tallitot in preparation for their appearance. Their demands to the Assembly included that women count in the required quorum for synagogues and prayer groups; that women be allowed to participate fully in religious observances; that they be permitted to become rabbis and cantors; and that women be "considered as bound to fulfill all mitzvot equally with men."<sup>18</sup> The tallitot, which they wore during the morning prayer sessions, were a visible manifestation of their demands.

It is interesting hear the ideas about this new display from members of the group. Martha Ackelsberg described her 1972 tallit as a plain piece of sage green wool material with tzitzit attached to the corners. Like most women who started wearing tallitot in the 1970s, she made her tallit herself as a way both to personalize the custom and to "be a little different."<sup>19</sup> Arlene Agus, another member, redesigned the shape of the tallit, cutting arm holes into a scarf-like piece of fabric that gathered at her shoulders and reached down to her knees. Agus said she made her tallit different in part because of her Orthodox background; in her home, only the men wore tallitot. She wanted to be able to fulfill the commandment of tzitzit without compromising herself

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\* This is an over-simplification of a complex sector of Judaism: there is a wide range of practice within Orthodox Judaism, and varying degrees of traditionalism.

in terms of gender<sup>20</sup> by putting on a male item of clothing, which is prohibited by Jewish law.

In an essay on "Ritual and Role Transition," Stuart Schoenfeld outlines three options for Jewish women considering a response to traditional, "patriarchal" religion. These are "(1) withdrawal ... (2) the development of female religiosity which aims at the rehabilitation of female images of divinity ... and (3) the movement toward gender equality".<sup>21</sup> The current debate among Jewish feminists considers both the second and third categories: should women appropriate male traditions, or do they need to create their own? While creating new traditions appears more freeing, it places women outside of the culture and tradition that they want to make their own. It is, in its own way, withdrawal. These questions arise repeatedly: how do you make a tradition your own? And, even once appropriated, whose tradition is it really?

One rabbi takes a stand on this issue as it relates to tallitot: "There are certain Jewish symbols so tied into male chauvinistic behavior and clothing styles that their use by women becomes a desperate travesty ... [honoring] those traditions which were built on the exclusion of women. Self-respecting Jewish women do not seek to rescue the signs of humiliation."<sup>22</sup>

Most women who don't wear a tallit seem make that choice based on practicality, comfort, or tradition. Aliza Shapiro, who once choreographed a dance around tallit, does not currently wear one in part because for her, tallitot are about her father, not her mother. Many women who do wear tallitot achieve a comfort level by making the object their own. They achieve this in a variety of ways: by making them silky and scarf-like, bright and feminine; or designing them to stay on even when running after small children. The feminist attempt to appropriate tallitot, as with other rituals and ritual objects, has transformed the look and possibly the use of tallitot.

In 1983 in another landmark, JTS accepted the first female candidates for the Conservative Rabbinate. Judith Plaskow later wrote in *Tikkun* magazine:

"That step was not premised on a commitment to religious equality, but on the narrower argument that women who accept all mitzvot (commandments) as obligatory should be counted in

a minyan and allowed to exercise religious leadership on the same basis as men. The effect of the decision was to create two distinct categories of women--those who would choose to become like men and those who would choose to remain Other. In acting on this basis, the Seminary both foreclosed the possibility that women might explore and exercise their obligations in new and distinctive ways and set up two problematic options that could only reinforce its own ambivalence."

Wearing feminine tallitot seems to defy Plaskow's equation, with women being neither like men nor becoming the "Other."

### III.

*"Rabbi Rebecca Trachtenberg Alpert... led a workshop in Philadelphia a few years ago on women's use of these symbolic garments. She comments: 'I raised the issue of whether women should choose to take on "male" symbols such as tallit.... I suggested that experience would really be the best teacher. The workshop participants then proceeded to say the blessing... and, one at a time, wrapped themselves in the tallit.... One blind woman was moved to tears. She said she could really feel her Jewishness about her for the first time.'"*<sup>23</sup>

Tallitot are a powerful symbol of the feminist movement in Judaism. Certainly equality is "not just a matter of putting on a tallit" as one woman studying Torah commented.<sup>24</sup> But tallitot are highly visible. Moreover, they are clothing, and to put on the clothes of the other sex is a highly charged action. The Bible admonishes: "A woman must not wear men's clothes (begged ish)nor a man put on women's dress; anyone who does this is detestable to the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 22:5) Although the tallit did not begin as a man's garment, by the Middle Ages it was clearly marked for male use only, and many women as well as men today feel that the traditional

tallit is a male item. The act of putting on a tallit, therefore, is a potent symbol of female advances into male territory. In the powerful words of Yentl, the cross-dressing heroine of I. B. Singer's novel (and later Barbra Streisand's movie): "What a strange power there is in clothing."<sup>25</sup>

To put on a tallit is to make a statement. Rabbi Avi Weiss, an Orthodox American Jewish leader, is aware of this when he demonstrates at the United Nations or at Auschwitz draped in a tallit. For a man to wear a tallit in public is a symbol of religious Jewish presence, perhaps a sign to the world that God is behind the man in the prayer shawl.

For a woman to wear a tallit in synagogue has its own meaning. In her article "A Song for Women in Five Questions" Susan Dworkin raises powerful issues about the treatment and equality of women. Under the heading "The Question of Equal Access to God" Dworkin begins with Frieda Birnbaum's story, the anecdote that introduces this paper. Dworkin uses Birnbaum's story to illustrate the difference between law and tradition, and to show one woman's struggle to claim what by law is allowed, but by tradition is denied. Donning a tallit is presented as a small but powerful first step toward changing that tradition.

Tallitot are used to assert equality in a physical way. To wear a tallit is to say that separate is not equal, and that a woman's traditional role is not, perhaps, enough. Tallitot are used to claim a tradition; to show that women have ideas to offer and changes to make, changes which could be as significant as putting on the tallit:

"I commissioned my tallit from Elsa Wachs, a Judaica fabric artist in the Philadelphia area. I had very strong ideas of what I wanted it to look like, and she executed my vision.... I wanted a very feminine tallit. The body of the tallit is made of an off-white silk/linen mix... The stripes are made of dusty pink silk overlaid by lace, as is the atarah. I sometimes joke that if Victoria's Secret made tallitot, this is what they would look like."<sup>26</sup>

The emphasis on redesign comes from a number of directions simultaneously. The first is the Biblical injunction against wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. By redesigning, and often "feminizing" the tallit, women can be sure that

they are not wearing men's clothing. Personalization is a second motive: like the members of Ezrat Na'ashim, women buying or making a tallit want something that is truly theirs. Psychological comfort with the garment is also important. There is a wide and probably correct assumption that many women are uncomfortable wearing a traditional tallit. For these reasons, women have frequently redesigned both its form and decoration..

*The Jewish Catalog* gives directions for making a tallit. It emphasizes creativity of design and decoration, suggesting tie-dye and batik - the contribution of the 1960s counterculture. Despite these radical suggestions the authors worry that it may be difficult "for women who have been raised in a tradition where only men wear tallit to readily accept the same type of tallit for themselves. Since any four-cornered garment with tzitzit can be used as a tallit, there are a variety of forms and options available to women." They offer two alternate designs: a poncho and a "shepherd's coat."<sup>27</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider notes that "you can count on seeing at least a few women wearing the standard tallit... or an alternative model--sometimes a fringed shawl or a hand woven serape."<sup>28</sup> In a recent survey, one woman mentioned owning a tallit which is "a ritual robe with tzitzit"; another wears an Ethiopian tablecloth with fringes on the corners.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1970s women have radically rethought the standard, rectangular shape of the tallit, while maintaining the commandment of attaching tzitzit to a four-cornered garment.

The traditional black-striped pattern of the tallit has also been rethought and often replaced by women. Erica Jacobs, a weaver in Baltimore, allows her clients to choose the colors of their tallitot themselves; Larry Kaplan, a rabbi at a Florida synagogue, ordered new, peach-colored congregational tallitot in an effort to encourage girls and women to don prayer shawls. "The fact there are ... companies making tallitot in those colors in itself is telling," commented Kaplan.<sup>30</sup> One woman who owns a number of tallitot describes each of them as having "a pink or peach stripe and silver or gold threads and white background.... I wanted them all to include a purely feminine color so that it would be obvious... that they were women's garments."<sup>31</sup> Pamela Nadell, of Washington, D.C., bought her tallit ten years ago in New York City; the Orthodox shopkeeper, guessing that the tallit was for her, brought out a small tallit decorated in pinks and golds; it was fairly feminine-looking, although it could easily have been worn by a young boy..<sup>32</sup>

The appearance of women's tallitot has had an effect on men the design of men's tallitot. As more women begin to consider what they are or aren't wearing, and why, men are also giving more thought to the tradition. Suzanne Sadowsky offered the following insight into her congregation: "As women become more involved in public life... the wearing of a tallis seems right. Several women in our congregation wear them and even a few men who hadn't put one on since their bar mitzvahs are thinking about wearing them."<sup>33</sup> Susan Fendrick, director of American University's Hillel in Washington, believes that fewer men wore handmade tallitot before women started wearing them. Alef Judaica, a major vendor of tallitot, has seen a rise in the number of silk and colorful tallitot sold to both men and women.

There is still debate about what underlies these changes in the appearance of men's tallitot. According to Arlene Agus, the rise of havurot certainly did a great deal to encourage individuality in Judaism - the tie dyed and batiked tallitot of *The Jewish Catalog*, for example, seem a direct product of the counterculture nature of havurot. But havurot are committed to the inclusion and participation of men and women alike and so have served as a model for women's equality. A study of the synagogues in Washington, D.C. showed that a higher percentage of women wore tallitot at Fabrangen, a havurah, than at either of the more traditional Conservative synagogues. It seems possible that women's attempts to personalize ritual objects have had a large effect on the tallitot worn by men in havurot.

Shirley Waxman argues that men are buying her tallitot, as well as other hand-crafted, non-traditional tallitot, because they are "getting permission to be different." The men's movement certainly did encourage men to be different, but it did so based on the model of the women's movement. Men are getting permission to be different, but the permission comes from women -- in this case, from women who have remade the tallit to suit themselves.<sup>34</sup>

There are two Conservative synagogues in Washington, DC, Tifereth Israel and Adas Israel, as well as Fabrangen, a havurah. In November 1996, the author conducted a brief and unscientific study of congregants wearing tallitot at these synagogues.\*\*

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\*\* Only congregants over the age of thirteen were counted, as children are not required to wear tallitot.

	Total men	Total men wearing tallitot	Total women	Total women wearing tallitot
<b>Fabrangen</b>	22	--	28	9
<b>Tifereth Israel</b>	50	50	30	7
<b>Adas Israel - Gewirtz Chapel service</b>	--	--	≈2	1
<b>Adas Israel - Main Auditorium service</b>	--	--	≈75	1
<b>Adas Israel - Egalitarian minyan</b>	55	45	68	5

The study showed that most women still do not wear tallitot. The highest percentage of women wearing tallitot can be found in the havurah service. It is significant that despite the name of Adas Israel's "egalitarian minyan", only about 7% of the women attending wear tallitot.

Most of the tallitot throughout were fairly traditional looking. In the Tifereth Israel congregation, one woman and one man wore colorful silk tallitot. At Adas Israel most women who wore tallitot wore traditional-looking tallitot, but one woman in the main congregation wore a tallit gathered at the neck in an unusual manner. The tallitot at Fabrangen were the least traditional. Of the nine tallitot worn by women, one was made of lace, two were of pieced silk, and one was all white with a hand-embroidered atarah.

#### IV. Commitment

*"I began wearing [a tallit] in 1978. I was 19 years old and a counselor at a Jewish summer camp. My personal commitment for that summer was to be a role model for the girls.... Part of that commitment included wearing tallit... every day. While I no longer am in that setting or feel a need to be a role model in that way, I now wear a tallit regularly. Over time it has grown from doing something because it is a symbol of respect to feeling it more deeply as an expression of my self."<sup>35</sup>*

A more complex and perhaps more interesting question than the numbers of women who wear tallitot, or their description, is the question of motivation. In a recent survey, answers to this question included the following:

**It's a commandment:**

- "I have considered myself obligated to perform all Jewish commandments, and wearing a tallit is just one of them."
- "I think of it as a mitzvah"
- "Because in my egalitarian understanding of ritual practice... I have to..... Also, I like the way it feels."
- "It's not just men who need "props" to get into the mood for prayer."
- "[It] seemed in line with my overall level of observance/commitment."

**Creation of a holy space:**

- "Wearing a tallit feels to me like a way of making "holy space" around me."
- "I am [equal], I like the enclosed-within-prayer feeling it gives, I like kissing the tzitzit at the prayer after the shema \* ..."
- "I wear a tallit to create a spiritual place around me when I pray in shul."
- "It's a way of creating a sacred space around myself."
- "To wrap myself in prayer and keep out mundane matters."
- "It is a wonderful "security blanket." It symbolizes for me... sanctuary."

**Egalitarianism:**

- "It links me with other Jewish feminists."
- "To be a role model..."
- "It makes a statement about egalitarianism."

**Self-expression:**

- "It feels right."
- "It has grown from doing something because it is a symbol of respect to feeling it more deeply as an expression of my self."
- "I enjoy wearing one... it is a physical reminder of praying."

Men, who were also included in the survey, similarly note that they feel good about wearing a tallit both for its sense of refuge and creating a physical

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\* An important prayer

prayer space, as well as because wearing tzitzit is a commandment. However, when asked why they wear a tallit, the most common answer was that it was expected of them. Interestingly, no men mentioned "self-expression" as an incentive. On the other hand, wearing a tallit may be a form of self-expression for women precisely because it is still unusual for them to wear one.

There has been a great deal of resistance to the idea of women wearing tallitot. The most dramatic example is still occurring -- In Israel, in response to a feminist prayer In Israel a feminist prayer group called Women of the Wall has been gathering at the Western Wall in Jerusalem every month to pray since 1988. The Western Wall is divided up into male and female areas; the men's area is by far the larger. The Women of the Wall group carries a Torah and wears tallitot in the women's section. This was groundbreaking action: "for a woman to be seen dancing with a Torah and wearing a prayer shawl ... is a revolution!"<sup>36</sup> Men have yelled and thrown stones at the women from their side of the wall. In defense of their orthodoxy the men have appealed to Israel's courts to keep the women away.

There has been resistance in the United States as well. At a Conservative Solomon Schechter day school in Long Island the school board forbade the female principal of Jewish studies - an ordained rabbi - to wear a tallit during morning prayers. The board claimed that while female students were permitted to wear tallitot the principal should not influence them in this practice!<sup>37</sup> This ambivalence seems to indicate that tallit is acceptable for the younger generation, but not the older. In Florida, a man stopped attending his synagogue when women began wearing tallitot.<sup>38</sup> And a male American rabbi pulled the tallit away from a female American rabbi when both were participating in a ceremony in Poland.<sup>39</sup> Tallit is the visible sign of the cry for equality, which represents a major shift in traditional Judaism. --Obviously its is a shift which many men, and some women, still oppose.

Generally, however, there is greater acceptance. *Siddur Sim Shalom*, a Conservative prayer book published in 1986, rewrote some traditional blessings in a style more inclusive of women. One of the changes is a female version of the prayer for putting on a tallit (with feminine Hebrew verb endings), indicating acceptance of and even encouragement of the practice. At one Montgomery County synagogue, girls are now required to wear tallitot at their bat mitzvah ceremonies a practice previously reserved for boys. As

twelve and thirteen year old girls buy tallitot for their bat mitzvahs, their mothers occasionally buy their own prayer shawls; it seems as though the daughters' liberation grants permission to older women to appropriate the traditions for themselves. Even in an Orthodox store on the Lower East side of New York one woman found a salesman willing to sell her a small, feminine-looking tallit, with the unspoken understanding that she would wear it herself.<sup>40</sup> At least in the Washington and New York communities, the practice of women wearing tallitot is now generally accepted and even encouraged.

## V. Turning an Affinity into an Art Form

*"One night [as I was making a tallit] everything changed,' [Laurie Gross] remembers. 'I had some coils of fabric I had woven, one-inch strips of silk cloth that I had wrapped in a silk handkerchief. I took them out for a friend, and they became the cross-section of a Torah scroll. I began to wind and unwind the coil and out of that grew Minyan. That piece was so exciting, it was a new experience. I knew immediately upon seeing it that it was the image of a tallit and that it was a very strong, successful piece of fine art.'"*<sup>41</sup>

Artists turn objects into art - something more than the object itself, inspired by a connection with the object. Men frequently take tallitot for granted, When they do connect it is often with too much reverence to turn the experience into art. Women, who have been exploring the tallit over the past twenty-five years, often wearing it as a form of self-expression., have taken its form and appearance to new artistic levels. A number of women have turned their experiences with tallitot into something beyond the tallit itself.

Laurie Gross is a fabric artist from New York City who wove her first tallit for her grandfather in 1975 as an art student. When she received her first professional commission in 1979, from a man, she began to research tallitot. She was wanted to understand the dictates of tallitot in order to make a traditionally acceptable object. As she studied she came to an epiphany regarding her own connection with God: the *gematria*, or numerical symbolism, of the word tallit contains the name of God, which has a male half and a female half. From this understanding, Gross began conceptualizing the tallit as a symbol of the completeness of God and the joining of parts of

herself within God. This led her into deeper inquiry regarding imagery and concepts of God.

People occasionally ask Gross why she works with a male symbol. But Gross does not view the tallit as such. In a text she wrote for an exhibition of her work, Gross said, "I see the tallit as a visual image for the metaphor 'the fabric of Jewish life'.... When I see someone wearing a tallit, I see a garment wrapped around the body as a covering, a tent, a shelter.... It is a womb-like environment. The tallit enveloping the body is an embodiment of the relationship between the individual and God. Entering into the tallit is like entering into the womb of God."<sup>42</sup>

A number of Gross's pieces focus on the concept of a minyan - the ten people necessary to hold a service and say certain blessings. One of these pieces, entitled *And Deborah Made 10*, illustrates recent efforts by women to be included in the minyan.

In 1991, Aliza Shapiro and Andrea Hodos were asked to speak at a celebration. Neither woman could think of an appropriate address and instead began choreographing a dance for two dancers using a tallit as the mediating prop. The tallit is used as a text, and the phrase "turn it over and over, for everything is in it," provides the central theme for the work.\* Shapiro and Hodos performed the piece in the United States and in Israel, changing and incorporating new ideas that often emanated from the audience. Shapiro calls the dance a "movement oral tradition." A 1992 version of the dance was videotaped.

Throughout the piece the tallit takes on different roles, becoming the wind, an extension of the dancers, or a chain. At one point one of the dancers puts the tallit over her head, appearing like a bride; this is especially striking as the tallit is traditionally worn by the groom. Shapiro says that "gender/acquisition issues are clear in the piece." She prefaces the dance by introducing the issue of a male tradition being examined by women. Her notes consider the phrase, "because women have neither covenant nor Torah."<sup>\*\*</sup> She also examines the lines: "There is no other wisdom for a woman except at the spindle. As it is written: Every woman of wisdom of the

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\* This phrase is from "The Ethics of the Fathers," which is a part of the Mishneh (a book of commentary) regularly studied on the Sabbath.

\*\* A Talmudic phrase explaining why women are not commanded to say blessings.

heart was weaving with her hands."\*\*\* By using the tallit as a text, re-examining and re-casting it, Shapiro and Hodos act out the appropriation of a tradition with all the changes and forms inherent in the process.

## VI. Summary

*"I think that most women, and many men, don't know enough to be able to decide whether or not to wear a tallis. It would be nice if ...rabbis felt that the education of adults was as important as adults attending services."*<sup>43</sup>

Over the past 25 years, a number of women have begun wearing tallitot. In the process they have enhanced its look and significance, altering them to lay claim to a tradition. In Washington, D.C. about 10% of women wear tallitot during an average Saturday morning service; in any Conservative, Washington, DC synagogue a woman donning a tallit would at least be assured of company. This is a great change from the early 1970s, when Frieda Birnbaum "shlepped" her tallit back and forth in her briefcase, afraid to put it on.

In many ways women have left the tallit unchanged. It is still frequently a rectangle; even when the shape is more complex is generally hard to discern this when the tallit is draped over the wearer's shoulders. Most tallitot still have stripes and atarot. And most important, the tzitzit are unchanged.

However, some significant and very visible features of the tallitot have changed. The colors and decorative patterns of tallitot are brighter and more varied. Occasionally the garments incorporate lace and other very feminine materials. The shape has changed, as women design tallitot that are more likely to stay on as they perform various tasks. All these changes allow women emotional comfort with a previously male garment. Wearing a tallit is no longer "putting on your father's clothes."

But perhaps more important are the reasons women are wearing tallitot. At the current moment women are attempting to re-define their roles in Conservative Judaism, and indeed to redefine their roles in American society at large. As women struggle to redefine their identity within Judaism, the

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\*\*\* Another Talmudic quote, this one explaining a phrase from Exodus 35:25.

tallit has emerged as an important symbol. The meanings of this symbol are as varied as the individuals who wear tallitot, and as complex.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Susan Dworkin, "A Song for Women in Five Questions", *Moment* (May/June 1995, v.1 n.1), p. 45
- <sup>2</sup> Rabbi Max Ticktin, November 1996
- <sup>3</sup> Rabbi Donald P. Cashman, "On My New Tallit and Its Tzitzit of Techelet" (sermon), 1996
- <sup>4</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances* (London: The Soncino Press, 1962), p. 18
- <sup>5</sup> Zechariah 8:23, as cited in Aryeh Kaplan, *Tzitzith*, (NY: National Conference of Synagogue Youth, 1984) p. 7; brackets are his
- <sup>6</sup> Judith Hauptman, "Women and the Conservative Synagogue," from Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, *Daughters of the King* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), p. 166
- <sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, trans. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger (NY: Moznaim Publishing Co., 1990), p. 230-232
- <sup>8</sup> Shirley Waxman, interview, October 1996
- <sup>9</sup> Max Ticktin, November 1996
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, *The Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), p. 51
- <sup>11</sup> Barbara White, survey, October 30, 1996
- <sup>12</sup> Jacob B. Agus, "The Conservative Movement: Reconstructionism," from Neusner, *Understanding American Judaism*, p. 201
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5
- <sup>15</sup> Charles S. Liebman, "A Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Orthodoxy," from Neusner, *Understanding American Judaism*, p. 146
- <sup>16</sup> Agus, "The Conservative Movement: Reconstructionism," from Neusner, *Understanding American Judaism*, p. 201
- <sup>17</sup> Max Ticktin, November 1996
- <sup>18</sup> Ezrat Na'ashim, "Jewish Women Call for Change," 1972
- <sup>19</sup> Martha Ackelsberg, interview, October 1996
- <sup>20</sup> Arlene Agus, interview, October 1996
- <sup>21</sup> Stuart Schoenfeld, "Ritual and Role Transition: Adult Bat Mitzvah as a Successful Rite of Passage," from Jack Wertheimer, *The Uses of Tradition* (NY: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), p. 372
- <sup>22</sup> Rabbi Sherwin Wine, as cited by Susan Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 77
- <sup>23</sup> Schneider, *Jewish and Female*, p. 76
- <sup>24</sup> Gila Gevirtz, as quoted by Ruth Mason, "Adult Bat Mitzvah" *Lilith* (Fall 1989, v.14 n.4), p.22
- <sup>25</sup> I. B. Singer, cited in Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests* (NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 77
- <sup>26</sup> Rebecca Jacobs, survey, October 28, 1996
- <sup>27</sup> Siegel, Strassfeld and Strassfeld, *The Jewish Catalog*, pp. 51-57
- <sup>28</sup> Schneider, *Jewish and Female*, p. 76
- <sup>29</sup> Survey, October/November 1996
- <sup>30</sup> April Witt, "Tools of Tradition for High Holy Days," *The Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1996
- <sup>31</sup> Irene Stern Friedman, survey, October 29, 1996
- <sup>32</sup> Pamela Nadell, interview, October 1996
- <sup>33</sup> Suzanne Sadowsky, survey, October 29, 1996
- <sup>34</sup> There are three people in the immediate Washington metropolitan area who make tallitot (and more in Baltimore): Shirley Waxman, Reeva Shaffer, and Roz Houseknecht. Waxman sells about 60 tallitot each year, Houseknecht sells about twelve, and Reeva Shaffer sometimes sells as many as 400. Each tallit maker's products are distinct from the others.

Shirley Waxman, of Montgomery County, makes "wearable art." Her tallitot are made of silk dyed a variety of hues. Almost all her tallitot are striped; the stripes are made of pieced silk. Waxman frequently

uses Yemenite embroidery for the atarah or on the body of the tallit. Used on the atarah it replaces the traditional words; Waxman likes to use Yemenite embroidery because, as with letters, the patterns are constructed to convey specific meanings. She frequently uses the embroidery to create patterns that are abstract and colorful, and look a great deal like conventional modern art.

Waxman began making tallitot about fifteen years ago. Her first commission was for a man who wanted something comfortable and colorful. A few years later Waxman made the tallit for the first girl in her synagogue - the Conservative congregation of Beth Tikvah - to wear one. Now approximately one quarter of her clients come from Beth Tikvah, and she has made tallitot for members of all three Conservative congregations within Washington, DC. Waxman has seen constant growth in her business: in 1981 she received three commissions; in 1996 she made approximately 60 tallitot. Over these same years all craft Judaica has seen a rise in popularity. Although initially Waxman received commissions from more men than women, she found that most women were more comfortable going to her for a tallit than they were buying one in a Judaica shop.

Roz Houseknecht is a weaver. Like Waxman she incorporates stripes into her designs: some are traditionally horizontal, while others are vertical. Some of her tallitot use both, creating a plaid design. A very few of her tallitot include lace-pattern stripes; these were commissioned by women who were concerned about their tallitot matching their outfits, and liked the idea of their clothes showing through the lace. According to Houseknecht, many women are concerned that their tallitot match their outfits.

Houseknecht made her first tallit twenty-two years ago. She wove the first few for male relatives. Houseknecht's first paying customers were women becoming bat mitzvah,\* who wanted feminine tallitot. Now, however, she receives more commissions for men than for women.

Reeva Shaffer is a calligrapher who paints atarah by hand. Her tallitot are made of hand-woven silk, with stripes of colored silk pieced on. Shaffer also uses ribbons and trims as decorations. Some of her tallitot are a traditional rectangular shape; others are quite narrow. Although Shaffer has found no differences in the patterns men and women choose she has noticed that women are more likely to choose pastel colors than men.

Shaffer has been making tallitot since 1989. From the start, she received commissions from both men and women. She sells her tallitot all over the country, through conferences and art festivals. She herself began wearing a tallit only after she gave a recent sermon during which she felt it was appropriate to wear one.

Both Waxman and Houseknecht ask their customers to tie the tzitzit themselves. Houseknecht asks the entire family to take part when the tallit is for a bar or bat mitzvah, and each member ties a corner. Waxman says that people are sometimes nervous, as the specifications for tying tzitzit are exact. She takes pictures of the customers tying their tzitzit. This ritual makes the tallit more personal, and the acquisition of a tallit more of an event.

<sup>35</sup> Sara Karon, survey, October 30, 1996

<sup>36</sup> Elisabeth R. Goldstein, "The Women at the Wall", *Daughters of Sarah* (March/April 1990, v.16 n.2), p. 13

<sup>37</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Im and B'li: Women in the Conservative Movement," *Tikkun* (January 1995, v.10 n.1), p.55

<sup>38</sup> Witt, *The Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1996

<sup>39</sup> Emily Faust Korzenik, "On Being a Rabbi," from Grossman and Haut, *Daughters of the King*, p. 252

<sup>40</sup> Pam Nadell, interview, October 1996

<sup>41</sup> Neil Reisner, "Shawl of Fame," *Friday Forum: A Supplement to the Jewish Exponent*. (June 22, 1973, n.13)

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<sup>42</sup> Neil Reisner, "Shawl of Fame."

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Bauman, survey, November 13, 1996

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- Arlene Agus, member of Ezrat Na'ashim, October 1996
- Susan Fendrick, director of The American University Hillel, October 1996
- Lauren Granite, anthropologist, October 1996
- Laurie Gross, artist, November 1996
- Roz Houseknecht, weaver, November 1996
- Pamela Nadell, writer, October 1996
- Elaine Orner, at Alef Judaica, October 1996
- Rabbi Gerald Serotta, director, George Washington University Hillel, October 1996

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Aliza Schapiro, choreographer, October 1996  
Reeva Shaffer, calligrapher, November 1996  
Aviva Shore, Brown University student, October 1996  
Shirley Waxman, fabric artist, October 1996

**Surveys:**

Answers to a survey regarding the wearing of tallitot came from members of the Bridges and Faubringen listservs (an Internet resource), as well as various others in the Washington area.

Synagogues surveyed for counts of congregants wearing tallitot were Tifereth Israel, Adas Israel, and Faubringen. The counts were taken over two consecutive Saturdays in November.

Rabbi Max Ticktin of the Jewish Studies Department at George Washington University was also consulted on this project.

**Biography:**

Rebecca Shulman Herz is the Education Program Manager for School Programs at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. She has a B.A. in English and Psychology from Columbia University and a M.A.T. from George Washington University.