

THE TALLIT

Tallit

טלית

כְּרוֹךְ אֶתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְהִתְעַטֵּף בְּצִיצִית.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You hallow us with Your mitzvot and teach us to wrap ourselves in the fringed *tallit*.

COMMENTARY

The טלית (*tallit*), prayer shawl, with its צִיצִית (*tzitzit*), or fringes, has been worn by Jews since biblical times. Today, many Jews continue to wear the טלית. Among Reform Jews the wearing of a טלית at worship is optional. The commandment to wear the צִיצִית is found in the Torah, in the Book of Numbers:

The Eternal spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages.... Look at it and recall all the Eternal's commandments and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes to do evil.

Numbers 15:37–39

Why?

Why have Jews worn the צִיצִית from biblical times until today?

We know that dress has always played an important part in the way people relate to one another. The Native American headdress, for instance, indicates the tribal position of the person wearing it. The uniform a soldier wears tells us his or her rank in the army. A Catholic priest is known by the white collar he wears.

Dress is also associated with various kinds of rituals. There is the white dress of the bride, the robes of the priest, and the animal masks worn by some Native American tribes at special festive occasions.

Often ancient people wore special garments or charms because they believed this practice would protect them from evil spirits or be pleasing to the gods. Today, many people still wear what they call “good luck” charms, believing that the charms will bring them safety, good health, success in their sport, or even protection from harm.

Originally the Hebrews, like other peoples, may have worn the ציצית for protection from evil or for good luck. The Torah, however, transformed these superstitious practices and gave them a higher, spiritual meaning. The Torah teaches that the ציצית were meant to help us “recall all the Eternal’s commandments.” The Hebrew word for “commandment” is מצוה (mitzvah). A מצוה is a Jewish responsibility. The word מצוות (plural: מצוות, mitzvot) is also used for any good deed or act of piety or kindness. Later on (pages 55–57), we will discuss the variety of different מצוות in Jewish tradition.

The Tallit and Prayer

The מצוה of prayer is one of the most important responsibilities of the Jew. Prayer is our opportunity to share our Jewish faith, to express our love of God and humanity, to judge our actions and relationships with others, and to seek ways of improving ourselves and the world in which we live.

Putting on the טלית with its ציצית is the way some Jews “dress up” for prayer. Wearing the טלית helps many Jews get into the mood for worship. When we put on the טלית, we do something that Jews have done for centuries when they prayed.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, a great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, taught that “it is a מצוה to be properly dressed for prayer.” Would you agree with him? You may wish to arrange a discussion or debate on what is “proper dress” for prayer. Should you have such a discussion, be sure to include the טלית and the wearing of the כִּפָּה (kippah), yarmulke or skullcap, and תְּפִלִּין (t’fillin), phylacteries. You may also wish to discuss if “proper dress” includes the kinds of clothes we choose to wear to services. Are there certain outfits that add to or detract from our ability to pray? Do you think that there should be standards for what “proper dress” means in the synagogue? Why or why not? If “yes,” what would some of these standards be?

