

## Why a Tallit?

**A ruling by Jerusalem's District Court** in April 2013 means that women are allowed to wear a tallit when praying at the *Kotel* in Jerusalem. The wearing of *tallitot* by women has been debated for some time not only in Jerusalem, but at synagogues around the world. Some communities remain uncomfortable with the idea, while in others it has been standard practice for a long time, and services would feel strange otherwise.

**In the Middle Ages**, religions had to find new responses to the new scientific discoveries then emerging. In our times it is changes in society that synagogues, churches, mosques and temples must respond to. At a time when women are taking increasing responsibility in society, the ways in which women express their religiosity are also changing. Things that were previously permitted but were not common practise are now not only common, but have become important to many people.

**Why has the Jewish prayer shawl, the tallit, acquired so much importance?** The scarf itself actually bears no meaning at all – it's just a piece of cloth. What's important are the tassels on the four corners, the *tzitziyot*. Each *tzitzit* consists of 8 threads with 5 knots and 13, 11, 8 and 7 spirals between the knots. The 5 knots represent the five books of Torah. The **seven** spirals are reminders of Shabbat, the seventh day. The number **eight** symbolizes a new beginning. The sum of 7 and 8 is 15, which was the number of steps to the entrance of the Temple, and is also the sum of the numerical values of the Hebrew letters *yod* and *hey*, the first two letters of God's name. The number **eleven** is the numerical value of *vav* and *hey*, the last two letters of God's name, so that the first three spirals symbolise God's name. **Thirteen** is the number of God's attributes: patience, love, compassion, forgiveness and so on. The number 13 is also the sum of the letters of the Hebrew word *echad* ("one"). All the spirals together can thus also mean: *Adonai echad* "God is one."

After wrapping the tallit around the body, some Jews follow the custom of reciting Psalm 36:8-11: **"How precious is your constant love, O God. Mortals take shelter under your wings. ... With you is the fountain of life, in Your light we are bathed in light. Maintain Your constant love for those who acknowledge You, and your beneficence for those who are honourable."**

**Being wrapped in a tallit during prayer** thus symbolizes the idea of being gently and perceptibly, enveloped in Judaism's core statement that "God is one" (*Adonai echad*), in the notion that I am embraced by a merciful force (13 knots), and in the idea that my prayer guides me to Torah (5 knots), to my true identity (7 knots), and to hope (8 knots); while at the same time, by wearing the same garment as all those around me in the congregation, I declare myself part of the larger Jewish community.

**It was never forbidden for women** to express their loyalty to these core precepts of Judaism by means of the tallit, and many have long done so in private at home. In our time there is no reason why women cannot also publicly express this sense of being wrapped into Judaism, and over recent decades it has indeed become more and more common for women to wear *tallitot* just as many men do. Today, a woman can choose from many beautiful, feminine examples: colourful, embroidered or in silk. But what is important is not the piece of cloth, however beautiful it may be, but **the fringes on its four corners – and these are the same on all tallitot and unite us all during prayer.**

Thus, a tallit expresses two ideas. First, religion is something **very personal**, to be lived and expressed by each individual. And second, the Jewish religion **integrates each individual into a peoplehood**, and into traditions and customs that bind all Jews together: the connection to Shabbat, to Torah, the hope of new beginnings and the relationship with a merciful God.



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