

# MAY WOMEN TIE TZITZIT KNOTS?

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## שאלה

May women tie tzitzit knots?

## תשובה

Traditional sources engage in much discussion and disagreement regarding whether women are permitted or forbidden to wear tzitzit (and perform other positive time-bound mitzvot). That, however, is not the question being addressed in this paper. This paper makes no assumptions regarding women wearing tzitzit, but rather deals only with the issue of women making tzitzit. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has other papers to deal with the broader issues of wearing talit, tefilin, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The Gemara does contain statements regarding who may make tzitzit and who may not. The focus, however, is not with women making them, but with non-Jews making them. For example, in Menahot 42a, we find a statement forbidding non-Jews to make tzitzit:<sup>2</sup>

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב, מניין לציצית בעובד כוכבים שהיא פסולה? שנאמר  
"דבר אל בני ישראל ועשו להם ציצית" – בני ישראל יעשו ולא העובד  
כוכבים יעשו.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: From where is it derived that

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<sup>1</sup> See, for a discussion of positive time-bound commandments and their relation to talit and tefilin: Joel Roth, "On the Ordination of Women as Rabbis" in Simon Greenberg, *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988), pp. 127-148.

<sup>2</sup> B. Menahot 42a. Note that on the following page [42b] there is a different version of this statement with the opposite meaning:

tzitzit [made] by a non-Jew are pasul? Because it is said, “Speak to the children of Israel and they shall make for themselves tzitzit”; the children of Israel shall make [tzitzit], and not the non-Jews.

This statement in the Gemara refers only to non-Jews. There is no discussion regarding the permissibility of women making tzitzit. Tosafot, however, is concerned with this question and extends the implications of the Gemara to apply to women.<sup>3</sup>

מנין לציצית בעובר כוכבים שהיא פסולה? משמע הא אשה כשירה....

From where is it derived that tzitzit made by non-Jews are pasul?  
It teaches that a woman is kosher. . . .

Tosafot focuses on Rav’s method of reaching his conclusion in the Gemara. He could have argued logically, using the principle that non-Jews may not make tzitzit because “whoever does not wear, does not make” (אינו בלבישה אינו בעשייה). Were he to have used this line of reasoning, women as well as non-Jews would be forbidden to make tzitzit, for women (like non-Jews) do not wear them. Rav, however, chose not to use this reasoning. Rather, he used a verse to prove that non-Jews may not make tzitzit. This verse he interprets as specifically excluding non-Jews, but not necessarily women. Therefore, Tosafot concludes that women may indeed make tzitzit.

This is by no means a universal opinion, however. In Gittin 45b, we see that Tosafot maintains the position that women may tie tzitzit, but Rabbenu Tam is quoted as disagreeing. The argument here is placed within the context of the types of activities permissible for women (and people of other various statuses). The Gemara makes no actual mention here of tzitzit. It speaks only of writing a Torah scroll, tefilin or mezuzot. According to the Gemara, these scrolls are pasul if written by certain categories of people because of the verse, וקשרתם... וכתבתם – “And you shall bind them. . . and you shall write them.” The Gemara infers from this that those who are subject to “bind” may “write,” but those who do not “bind” may not “write.”

Based on this statement, Rabbenu Tam (as quoted by Tosafot) extends the argument to women being forbidden to tie a lulav or make tzitzit because they are not commanded to perform these mitzvot:<sup>4</sup>

כל שישנו בקשירה ישנו בכתיבה – מכאן אומר ר"ת דאין אשה אוגדת לולב ועושה ציצית כיון דלא מיפקדה....

“For all about whom it is taught regarding binding [i.e. tefilin], it is taught regarding writing [i.e. a Torah scroll, parchments for mezuzah or tefilin]” – from here Rabbenu Tam says that a woman may not tie a lulav or make tzitzit since she is not mentioned [regarding these mitzvot].

Tosafot, however, rejects Rabbenu Tam’s ruling. Rather than extend the argument to mitzvot outside of the ones mentioned in the Gemara, Tosafot applies the restriction only to the mitzvot actually stated: writing a Torah scroll, tefilin or mezuzah:

R. Mordecai said to R. Ashi: You have had it reported so; but we had it reported thus: Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav, From where do we know that the tzitzit made by a non-Jew is valid? Because it says, Speak to the children of Israel and they shall make them fringes; others may make [tzitzit] for them.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Tosafot s.v. מנין.

<sup>4</sup> B. Gittin 45b; Tosafot s.v. כל.

...ואין נראה דהא מדפסלינן בריש התכלת ציצית בעובד כוכבים דדריש בני ישראל ועשו ולא בעובדי כוכבים מכלל דאשה כשרה... ודוקא בס"ת וציצית ומזוזות דכתיב וקשרתם וכתבתם דרשינן הכי.

But it does not appear that [Rabbenu Tam is correct that] we disqualify them [women], for at the beginning of פרק התכלת (Menahot 42a), we disqualify non-Jews based on the interpretation of a verse, (B'nei Yisrael make tzitzit, not non-Jews). From this, we can make a general rule that women are kosher [to make tzitzit]. . . and it is דווקא [limited] to a Sefer Torah and tefilin and mezuzot that we refer when we interpret "and you shall bind them and you shall write them."

In summary, the Gemara shows no concern regarding the question of women making tzitzit. It focuses instead on whether or not non-Jews may do so. The conclusion is that non-Jews may not make them because of the verse which has Moses telling "B'nei Yisrael" to make tzitzit. Tosafot then expands the discussion to question whether women should be permitted to make them. In Menahot 42a, Tosafot states that the Gemara didn't argue, "Anyone who doesn't wear, doesn't make." Rather, it argued from a verse. The Gemara's interpretation of the verse excludes only non-Jews. Therefore, women are permitted to make tzitzit. A second Tosafot agrees with the first, despite the fact that Rabbenu Tam raises an objection. Thus, Tosafot permits women to make tzitzit, although not all Rishonim agree with this decision.

The issue as expressed in the Gemara and Tosafot is restated in the codes by Rambam and the Hagahot Maimoniot. Like the Gemara, Rambam is concerned only with the case of the non-Jew, and does not mention the issue of women making tzitzit: **ציצית שעשה** **ארתו כותי פסול** – tzitzit made by a non-Jew are pasul.<sup>5</sup>

While the Rambam does not mention how his statement might or might not apply to women, the Hagahot Maimoniot does extend the **איסור** to apply also to women, arguing that neither a non-Jew nor a woman fall into the category of "B'nei Yisrael." One must note, however, that while in the end the author rules against women making tzitzit, the contents of his statement show that he is clearly aware of cases **למעשה** where women are indeed making them.<sup>6</sup>

מכאן פסק ר"י ורבינו יהודה שנשים יכולות לעשות ציצית מדאינו ממעט אלא עכו"ם וכן הודה רבינו יהודה לאשתו לעשות ציצית אבל בשם מורי שי מצאתי דאין להם לעשות ציצית משום דכתיב "בני ישראל ועשו" אבל שאר תיקוני הטלית וטויית החוטמים יכולות לעשות.

From here [Rambam's ruling that non-Jews may not make tzitzit], the Ri and Rabbenu Yehuda ruled that women may make tzitzit, for this [statement of the Rambam's] excludes only non-Jews [and not women]. And so, Rabbenu Yehuda taught his wife to make tzitzit. But in the name of my teacher, I found that they [women] may not make tzitzit because it is written, "b'nei [translated as 'sons'] of Israel shall make." But the rest of the preparation of the talit and the spinning of the strings they [women] may do. . . .

<sup>5</sup> Rambam, M.T. Hilkhot Tzitzit 1:12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Hagahot Maimoniot.

Thus, Hagahot Maimoniot makes it clear that there are two opinions regarding whether or not women may make tzitzit. He argues against it based on his interpretation of the verse in the Gemara, but he acknowledges that there are others who do permit it (including Rabbenu Yehuda who actually taught his wife how). In order to further bolster his argument against women making tzitzit, Hagahot Maimoniot quotes Rabbenu Tam's opinion from Tosafot Gittin 45b (despite the fact that in the context of Tosafot Gittin 45b, that ruling was rejected). Finally, the passage ends with the mention of several more actual cases of women who did tie tzitzit. (One of those cases was declared פסול by Rabbenu Tam, based on his ruling quoted in Tosafot Gittin 45b.<sup>7</sup>)

וכן היה מעשה בטריו"ש באשה שהיתה רגילה לתקן ציצית להגדילם  
בטליתות ופסלם רבינו תם מההיא דפרק השולח כל שישנו בקשירה ושנו  
בכתיבה.

And thus there was an actual case in Troyes where a woman used to prepare tzitzit to tie onto talitot. And Rabbenu Tam declared them to be pasul, according to the ruling in chapter "Ha-Sholeah" – "All about whom it is taught regarding binding, it is taught regarding writing" [Rabbenu Tam extends this principle to include tzitzit].

Thus, it is clear that the Hagahot Maimoniot does not approve of women tying tzitzit, despite the fact that there were actual cases of women doing it and of rabbis who approved of it (i.e. Rabbenu Yehuda).

Unlike the Gemara and the Rambam, the Shulhan Arukh is very clear about its opinion regarding women and tying tzitzit. It rules as follows:<sup>8</sup>

ציצית שעשו גוי פסול, דכתיב "דבר אל בני ישראל" לאפוקי גוים. אשה  
כשרה לעשותן.

Tzitzit that were made by a non-Jew are pasul as it is written in Num. 15:38, "Speak to the children of Israel" – this excludes non-Jews. A woman is kosher to make them.

Once again, we have the clear statement that non-Jews may not make tzitzit. The Shulhan Arukh is specific that the words "B'nei Yisrael" are intended to exclude *only* non-Jews from making tzitzit. But just in case there is any question remaining in the reader's mind, the text continues on to specifically state that women *may* indeed make tzitzit. There are absolutely no stipulations limiting their ability to do so.

Although this statement seems to be crystal clear, some of the commentaries try to temper it. The Rema, for example, does not openly disagree with the Shulhan Arukh. Rather, he qualifies the statement in order to discourage the practice, stating:<sup>9</sup>

הגה: ויש מחמירים להצריך אנשים שיעשו אותו וטוב לעשות כן לכתחילה.

There are those who are strict requiring that men make them; and it is good to do so לכתחילה.

According to the Rema, there are those who are strict regarding making tzitzit, and if asked whether or not a woman may make them, they will say no. But what if she has already

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> S.A. Orah Hayyim 14:1.

<sup>9</sup> Rema on S.A. Orah Hayyim 14:1.

made them? According to the Mishnah B'rurah's comment on this passage, we are told that after the fact, it is permitted – אבל בדיעבד מותר – אסור לכתחילה,<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these opinions, the codes preserve the most stringent view, that women are not permitted to make tzitzit under any circumstances (לכתחילה or בדיעבד). The Magen Avraham goes back to the reasoning offered by Rabbenu Tam in Tosafot Gittin 45b (despite the fact that Tosafot rejected this opinion), reasoning that one must be obligated by a mitzvah in order to make the objects involved:<sup>11</sup>

יש מחמירין – ולדידהו כל מצות שאין האשה מחויבת בהן כגון לולב  
וסוכה אינה רשאית לעשותן.

There are those who are strict – And according to them, all mitzvot for which a woman is not obligated (for example, lulav and sukkah), she is not permitted to make them [the ritual objects required].

Reading between the lines of the text, however, it should be clear that if the Magen Avraham says יש מחמירין (that there are those who are strict in their ruling on this), it also implies that יש מקילים (that there must also be those who are *not* strict regarding women making tzitzit). (This also applies to the Rema's ruling above.) Thus, there seem to be a multitude of opinions on the matter. In the latter codes, only the stricter ones are recorded in order to restrict what the Shulhan Arukh clearly permits.

### Summary

Historically, there has been halakhic disagreement regarding the permissibility of women making tzitzit. Neither the Gemara nor the Rambam make explicit statements regarding women. They concern themselves solely with the case of the non-Jew. The Shulhan Arukh explicitly permits women to make tzitzit. Other sources, such as the Magen Avraham, disagree with the Shulhan Arukh. In addition to the legal rulings, there are numerous stories which testify to the occurrence of this phenomenon, sometimes despite the objections of some of the commentators on the Mishneh Torah and Shulhan Arukh.

In light of the disagreement amongst commentators, and the clear הוראה given in the Shulhan Arukh, there is certainly plenty of room to permit women to engage in tying tzitzit. The only question is whether or not there is a compelling reason for them to do so.

While one could certainly argue that the Conservative movement's attitude toward egalitarianism gives a compelling enough reason to permit women to make tzitzit, there is an additional reason based on the needs of the day.

Many American Jews at the end of the twentieth century are searching for meaning in their lives. Rabbis in synagogues are constantly searching for ways to demonstrate to congregants that performing mitzvot can be a joyous and "spiritual" experience. In light of this, we should not only permit, but actively encourage, *both men and women* to make tzitzit and talitot. Educators know that successful teaching comes not only through the intellect, but also through tactile channels. It is our hope that an individual's personal involvement in this act of הידור מצוה will lead to greater participation in this mitzvah.

Many synagogues run highly successful bar and bat mitzvah programs in which parents and children together make talitot and learn about the mitzvah of tzitzit. Were we to forbid women from tying tzitzit, we would be discouraging these types of programs which are of

<sup>10</sup> Mishnah B'rurah, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Magen Avraham, loc. cit.

great educational and spiritual value to men and women. Thus, there is clearly a compelling reason to permit women to tie tzitzit.

### ***Conclusion***

We should not only permit women to tie tzitzit, but we should encourage them to do so, and we should offer them (as well as men) every opportunity to learn how.