

1 Rabbi Miriam C. Berkowitz

2 OH 17:2

3

4 Tallit on the Bimah: Optional or Required?

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6 Approved on June 12, 2018 by a vote of 16-3-2. Voting in favor: Rabbis Pamela
7 Barmash, Noah Bickart, Elliot Dorff, Reuven Hammer, David Hoffman, Jeremy
8 Kalmanofsky, Jane Kanarek, Steven Kane, Jan Kaufman, Gail Labovitz, Jonathan
9 Lubliner, Micah Peltz, Robert Scheinberg, David Schuck, Iscah Waldman, Ellen
10 Wolintz-Fields. Against: Rabbis Baruch Frydman-Kohl, Joshua Heller, Amy Levin.
11 Abstaining: Rabbis Susan Grossman, Deborah Silver.

12

13 Question:

14 Question: Should individuals wear a tallit (prayer shawl) when leading services,
15 reading Torah or called to the Torah for an aliyah?

16

17 Response:

18 Introduction

19 The tallit is at once a symbol of divine presence and command, a social marker of
20 membership in the Jewish community, and a symbol that the wearer is fulfilling a
21 function in leading the community in prayer. While there is consensus that married
22 men should wear a tallit during morning services, there are a variety of practices
23 regarding unmarried men, women and girls. Rabbi Pamela Barmash's teshuvah
24 "Women and Mitzvot" (CJLS 2014) established the expectation for Conservative
25 communities that women, as full members of the community, are obligated to tallit
26 as to prayer and other positive- time bound mitzvot from which, for historical and
27 social reasons, women were considered by some to be exempt.

28 This teshuva will therefore only address the question of whether those who for
29 some reason do not wear a tallit for their private worship should nevertheless don
30 one to play a public role in leading prayer.

31 The answer to this question hinges on tallit as a symbol of reverence and authority
32 for the prayer leader as representative of the community. In traditional Judaism
33 there is no general category of "honors." There is the shaliah tzibbur who leads
34 the service, a Torah reader, people who come up for aliyot (Torah blessings) and
35 people who open and close the ark. Recently we have added other honors such

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

36 as reading a prayer for peace or prayer for the State of Israel which in the past
37 were done not at all or were done by the prayer leader or the entire congregation
38 together. This teshuvah will focus on the first group.

39 We will look at the tallit as a symbol of dignity for the prayer leaders. The tallit be-
40 gan as a garment worn daily as clothing, and it symbolized dignity and stature in
41 the community. It has retained its connotation of dignity through its transition to a
42 prayer accessory. We have an intuitive sense that people who lead the commu-
43 nity in prayer or publicly perform other ritual parts of the service should approach it
44 with a higher level of intention and seriousness, in order to give honor to God, the
45 Torah, the service and the community. This value is indeed borne out by sources
46 from many layers of Jewish law and tradition.

47 This teshuvah will clarify that the people participating in leading the service should
48 do so with a respectful and serious attitude, since their comportment affects not
49 only their own prayer experience but that of the entire community. Clothing and rit-
50 ual garb is one way Jews have shown this kind of respect. We will conclude that
51 it is becoming for all Jewish adults in synagogue to wear tallit, as a way to en-
52 hance and fulfill their obligation of personal prayer. It is even more essential for
53 those with honors that affect the group prayer experience, not only their own.

54 There are several compelling reasons that women (in some case other adults) do
55 not wish to wear a tallit, and these need to be given fair attention and considera-
56 tion. However, we do not wish to take a laissez faire approach, or wait yet another
57 generation before fully integrating tallit for girls and women. Synagogues can pur-
58 sue a variety of educational measures to ascertain that their regular members
59 have full information and access to tallit. However in the event that synagogues
60 wish to be less coercive for women- and potentially even for all Jewish adults – ad-
61 ditional suggestions are made in the conclusion to differentiate between honors
62 such as leading services and reading Torah, which represent the community and
63 seem viscerally to require an extra level of commitment, and more symbolic hon-
64 ors such as opening the ark or reading a prayer, which are often done by guests
65 and thus harder to educate or enforce, and also seem to have a “lighter” level of
66 status.

67 We will reaffirm that non-Jewish guests must not wear a tallit, even if they are try-
68 ing to be respectful, as it is misleading when counting the number of people for a
69 minyan and not appropriate. The honors they do receive in some communities,
70 such as reading an English prayer, or even opening the ark, generally carry a dif-
71 ferent level of ritual status [see teshuvah by Rabbi David Booth EH 16.2013a].

72

73 Context:

74 It is the practice in many congregations for Jewish men to wear a tallit gadol on top
75 of clothing, as opposed to undershirt-like garment worn under the clothing)for sha-
76 charit on most days and for all services of Yom Kippur and the afternoon of Tisha
77 Be’Av. If for some reason they are not wearing it for the whole service, they wear
78 it when called for an honor, such as being called to the Torah. The custom is also
79 to wear a tallit when leading afternoon and (in some communities) also evening

80 services. This is the case even for Ashkenazi males who choose not to wear a tallit
81 until they are married.

82 In a contemporary egalitarian synagogue context, the most inconsistent tallit practice
83 concerns women. Practices tend to vary based on the individual and the community.
84 Some women neither take honors nor wear a tallit, some do both, some do
85 not wear a tallit regularly but are willing to don one for honors. At present, there
86 are Jewish adults (often women) who are willing to take an honor but are not comfortable
87 or accustomed to wearing a tallit. This may be rooted in ideological opposition
88 as well as lack of personal familiarity with the custom, even though it may
89 seem logically inconsistent.

90 This teshuvah is concerned with addressing the needs of communities grappling
91 with these questions and seeking uniformity of practice. Some synagogues are
92 seeking “teeth” from this teshuvah to tighten their policy to “no tallit, no aliyah!” As
93 an active member of such a synagogue states, “No one says they have to take the
94 honor but if they feel comfortable enough to do that, they should wear a tallit.”
95 These synagogues feel that the egalitarian principle as well as the educational
96 principle need to be pushed in our generation rather than waiting yet more time.
97 The feeling is that women, as participants with equal rights, must accept the attendant
98 equal responsibilities. Consistency is important - when people get accustomed
99 to seeing all honorees wearing a tallit, it will become the visual and ritual
100 norm. Also, unmarried men should be encouraged to wear tallit and not rely on
101 the custom of waiting which has outlived its purpose. The benefit of connection to
102 the mitzvah and enhancing the separation between prayer and the rest of life has
103 an important value and seems more weighty than the custom of waiting.

104 Other synagogues/ rabbis remain comfortable with the policy of “recommending”
105 that all adults wear a tallit but want more ideas on ways to implement this and to
106 educate the community (not waiting until someone is already offered an honor and
107 then having the gabbai run after her waving a tallit and saying “put this on!”).

108 We maintain that if a woman is comfortable leading parts of the service she should
109 do it in the manner consistent with that community’s standards and use a tallit, according
110 to Rabbi Barmash’s ground-breaking teshuvah.¹ Our teshuvah unpacks the symbolism
111 of tallit and of honors in the prayer service, and it will look at various practical
112 and theological considerations. It can be used as an educational resource to teach
113 about the significance of tallit, as well as a halakhic resource for synagogues,
114 camps and schools revising or determining their approaches and policies.
115

116

117 Symbolism of tallit

1 See the 2014 CJLS teshuvah of Rabbi Pamela Barmash, and concurring opinions of Rabbis Reuven Hammer, Avram Reisner and Elliot Dorff which obviate the need for a separate teshuvah on the topic of wearing a tallit for individual prayer purposes.

118 The Torah instructs the Israelites to attach fringes (צִיצִית tzitzit) to the corners of
119 their garments (Numbers 15:38): "make twisted cords for you upon the four cor-
120 ners of thy covering, with which you cover thyself" (Deuteronomy 22:12). Orig-
121 nally there was no requirement for people to wear a tallit- the requirement was on
122 the garment- IF you have a four-cornered garment (which most people did in Bibli-
123 cal times), it needs to have fringes. The purpose is clear: "it shall be a fringe for
124 you, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord
125 and do them; and do not stray after your own heart and your own eyes, after which
126 you often are drawn (to evil); so that you may remember and do all of My com-
127 mandments and be holy unto your God." (Numbers 15:39–40). At some point in
128 history-though it is difficult to pinpoint a specific reference- when fashion changed
129 and people no longer wore these types of clothes, the tallit was recast as a prayer
130 specific garb and it became assumed that people would make the effort to wear it.²

131

132

133 The Mishna gives us guidance on how to prepare for prayer in general:

134 Mishnah Berakhot, Chapter 5, Mishna 1 states:

135

136 One should not stand up to say Tefillah except in a reverent state of
137 mind. The pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying in order
138 that they might direct their thoughts to God. Even if a king greets him [while
139 praying] he should not answer him: even if a snake is wound round his heel
140 he should not stop.

141 אין עומדין להתפלל אלא מתוך כבוד ראש. חסידים הראשונים היו שוהים שעה
142 אחת ומתפללים, כדי שיכוננו את לבם למקום. אפילו המלך שואל בשלמו – לא
143 ישיבנו. ואפילו נחש כרוך על עקבו – לא יפסיק.

144 These requirements apply to all individuals and certainly to the leader. Today's
145 equivalent of koved rosh (preparation) might include arriving on time, especially
146 when having an honor, not chewing gum, being well-groomed, learning the words
147 well and preferably also learning their meaning if one has a "speaking part" in the
148 service, and paying attention to the other parts of the service and other readers,
149 etc.

150 Donning a tallit is another way to set aside daily concerns and shift one's focus to
151 the prayer experience. One holds the tallit in readiness to wrap oneself and makes
152 the blessing over the tallit. One then wraps the tallit around oneself before transi-
153 tioning to the morning prayer service. The prayerbook includes a meditation (taken
154 from Psalms 36: 7-9 or 8-11 depending on the version) after putting it on:

155

² For more background on tzitzit see Mishna Brura OH 1: 8-24 for more on how to tie the tzitzit, how to attach, fix and carry them etc. and see entry on tallit in the Encyclopedia Judaica.

156 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
157 The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
158 They feast on the abundance of your house,
159 and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
160 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.
161 Extend Your kindness to those who know you
162 And Your charity to the upright of heart.

163

164 מה יקר חסדך אלוקים: ובני אדם בצל כנפך יחסיון: יריוון מדשן ביתך ונחל עדנך תשקם:
165 כי עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה אור: משך חסדך ליוודך וצדקתך לישרי לב:

166 Wearing a tallit can invoke a sense of comfort, being wrapped in a safe and private
167 space, making a transition between regular life and the moment of prayer, connec-
168 tion with Biblical times, and respect for the Divine.

169 The question raises the presumption that clothing/ ritual garb is also part of how
170 one should prepare to take part in and especially lead services. In Rabbinic (post
171 Second Temple) Judaism, where prayer replaces sacrifice as the main avenue of
172 worship, the importance of respectful dress is emphasized.

173 As R. Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (Lithuania, 1829 –1908) wrote in Arukh Hashulhan
174 OH 91:2:

175 There are those who are punctilious to avoid praying in a long coat in
176 the afternoon and evening services when, if one were to do so, there
177 would be some minor discomfort. But on Shabbat and Festivals, we
178 pray with a long jacket since pain should not be alluded to on Shabbat
179 and holidays. And the congregational leader wears a long jacket or tallit
180 even on weekdays. And this is the accepted custom in these countries.
181 And also for an aliyah to the Torah they wear a long jacket out of re-
182 spect for the Torah, and also for lifting the Torah.

183

184 יש שמדקדקים עתה דאיכא צערא בעלמא, לבלי להתפלל מנחה ומעריב בחול
185 בבגד עליון. ובשבת ויום טוב מתפללין בבגד עליון, דאין להזכיר צער בשבת ויום
186 טוב. והשליח ציבור גם בחול לובש בגד עליון, או ששובש הטלית. וכן המנהג
187 הפשוט במדינות אלו. וגם בעלייה לתורה לובשים בגד עליון מפני כבוד תורה, וכן
188 בהגבהת התורה.

189 R. Epstein explains that dignified dress/tallit is required for certain events such as
190 leading the congregation, going up to the publicly read Torah, and displaying the
191 Torah.

192 Along the lines of the Mishnah, today we require dignified dress for public syna-
193 gogue roles. This is because the presence/demeanor of the person representing
194 the community helps shape the feel of the service and hopefully add elements of
195 respect and dignity to the prayers and, thereby, honor God and the community.

196 The prayer leader's wearing of a tallit does not stem from the obligation to wear
197 tzitzit rather is a matter of honor for the community, as mentioned in the Talmud
198 Tractate Rosh Hashana (17b) where God is likened to a prayer leader wrapping
199 Godself in a tallit. The Magen Avraham (18:2) and Mishna Brura (18:5) agree that
200 the prayer leader must wear a tallit except in communities where it is not the cus-
201 tom.

202 The Tannaim also noticed that dignified behavior and the respected status of the
203 prayer leader enhances the prayer experience for the entire community. As R.
204 Ephraim Zalman Margolis (Galicia 1762 –1828), a noted Ashkenazi authority, rules
205 in Shaarei Ephraim, Shaar (gate) 10 paragraph 8:

206 If someone is called to the Torah (for an aliyah) and is not wrapped in
207 a tallit (because he is unmarried, for example, or perhaps not wealthy
208 enough to own his own) he should borrow a tallit from someone else
209 and put it on- out of respect to the Torah (mishum kvod haTorah).

210

211 מי שקורין אותו לעלות לתורה ואינו מעוטף בטלית, יש לו לשאול טלית מחבירו
212 ולהתעטף בו – משום כבוד התורה.³

213 Dressing respectfully, with a tallit, is expected for one who is even temporarily in a
214 public religious role.

215

216 Why women might not wear or want to wear tallit

217 It is custom, more than classic halakhic rationale, that has created an emo-
218 tional reason for women to feel disconnected from tallit and feel it is a
219 “men’s mitzvah”. In terms of Halakhic texts, the anonymous – i.e. majority –
220 position among the Tannaim obligated women to add tzitzit (ritual fringes) to
221 their outer garment, in contrast to R. Shimon Baraita B.Menahot 43a; cf.
222 Sifrei Bamidbar, Shelah #115):

223

224 Our Sages taught: all must observe (the commandment of) tzitzit –Co-
225 hens, Levites and Israelites, converts, women and slaves. Rabbi Shimon
226 exempts women because it is a positive, time-bound commandment, and
227 women are exempt from positive, time-bound commandments.

228

229 ת”ר “הכל חייבין בציצית - כהנים לויים וישראלים גרים נשים ועבדים ר”ש פוטר
230 בנשים מפני שמצות עשה שהזמן גרמא הוא וכל מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא נשים
231 פטורות.

232 Post-Talmudically, leading medieval rabbis (such as Rambam MT Laws of Tzitzit
233 3:9) did not forbid women to wear tzitzit. However, they still viewed women as ex-
234 empt and as not allowed to bless God over the wearing of tzitzit (ibid).

235

236 Women, slaves and minors are exempt Biblically from tzitzit, but ac-
237 cording to Rabbinic law any minor who knows how to wrap himself in
238 tzitzit is obligated to do it in order to educate him/ accustom him in
239 the mitzvot. Women and slaves who wish to wrap themselves in
240 tallit should do so without a blessing as with all the other positive,
241 time-bound mitzvot from which they are exempt, and if women wish
242 to wrap themselves, one should not prevent them.

243

244 נשים ועבדים וקטנים פטורין מן הציצית מן התורה ומדברי סופרים שכל קטן
245 שיודע להתעטף חייב בציצית כדי לחנכו במצות ונשים ועבדים שרצו להתעטף
246 בציצית מתעטפים בלא ברכה וכן שאר מצות עשה שהנשים פטורות מהן אם רצו
247 לעשות אותן בלא ברכה אין מוחין בידן.

248 The reluctance on the part of some women to wear a tallit is understandable. This
249 is especially true for women raised decades ago, before the expansion in women's
250 ritual participation became common. Although the majority Tannaitic position obli-
251 gates women in the same way as men to add tzitzit to their outer garment, it
252 seems that this was never the widespread norm. Moreover, even in traditional rab-
253 binic cultures in which there was a higher percentage of economically autonomous
254 women who performed mitzvot with blessings, there was opposition to women
255 wearing a tallit. There, too, it was a very limited phenomenon (see, for example,
256 Sefer ha-Agur #27).

257 Yet contemporary women, full members of their Western societies, need the bene-
258 ficial effects of wearing a dignified tallit in front of God just as much as men do, to
259 enhance their prayer experience. Moreover, the congregations need to see those
260 men and women who perform public rituals do so in dignity – dressed in a tallit, in
261 order to make the service more respectful. Participation in public ritual obligates
262 women to bring honor and dignity to the mitzvot and to God just as adult men are
263 obligated to do.

264 Once women are participating in synagogue honors, they should dress with the re-
265 spect appropriate for those honors. Moreover, we would not turn back the clock on
266 these rulings. When women are considered respected and full members of the civil
267 community, it does not make sense to limit their ritual involvement, for educational
268 spiritual and social reasons. Furthermore, boys in Jewish schools and summer
269 camps may be reluctant to adopt Jewish rituals if girls do not have to do these
270 mitzvot and the girls may continue to feel less than fully participating members if
271 some mitzvot are still considered optional.

272

273 Saying a blessing over tallit

274 As we saw above, some men and women may not feel inherently obligated to
275 wear tzitzit daily. If they wore tzitzit on occasion, for personal use, they could fol-
276 low either the Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Tzitzit 3:9) and subsequent Se-
277 phardic decisors who say a blessing is not appropriate, or Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot
278 on Rosh Hashanah 33a) and subsequent Ashkenazi decisors who say it is.

279

280

281

282 (The Sephardic decisors say the phrase “who has sanctified us through his com-
283 mandments and has commanded us...” is an untruth since women are not com-
284 manded to fulfill time-sensitive mitzvot, thus the blessing seems like women are
285 adding a new mitzvah, against the precept bal tosif (adding a commandment or
286 adding a detail to a Biblical commandment. It is also problematic according to the
287 principle of not making a baseless blessing, a “brakha levatala, mentioning God’s
288 name in vain. The Ashkenazim say that women are accustomed to saying the
289 blessing as part of the ritual, and that since the men/ the Jewish people are com-
290 manded, women can join in).

291 Since the CJLS affirmed a teshuvah stating all adult Jews are obligated in the
292 commandments, we think they should say the blessing, but acknowledge there
293 may be cases where individuals do not consider themselves obligated.

294 In order to be able to say the brakha, halakha states that the person must “own”
295 the tallit. This can be accomplished by owning one’s tallit, borrowing it with the un-
296 derstanding it is a temporary gift, or borrowing it from the synagogue’s tallitot for
297 public use, which are there with the explicit understanding that they “belong” to an-
298 yone who takes them.

299 If the person is using the tallit simply as a sign of kavod hatzibbur and not for per-
300 sonal prayer, one might argue that a blessing is not necessary, because the gar-
301 ment is not being used for its tzitzit per se but rather as a piece of clothing. Mishna
302 Brura OH 14:11 discusses a specific case in which the tallit is borrowed from an
303 individual for a brief time such as for having an aliyah, and concludes no blessing
304 is necessary but states if one borrows a congregational tallit, one does say a
305 blessing. See Shulhan Arukh. O.H. 8, Mishna Brura 14:11.

306 However one can also argue the opposite, that if a person is going to represent
307 the community in leading prayer s/he ought to buy into the obligation for tzitzit and
308 exercise the highest amount of respect for the tallit and what it symbolizes, the ac-
309 ceptance of mitzvot. Therefore it seems intuitively that a blessing ought to be said,
310 with the caveat that one can follow the local custom in situations of doubt.

311

312 Conclusion

313 The tallit has several functions: it reminds us of God’s presence, guidance and
314 care. It reminds us of the mitzvot and encourages us to keep them (third para-
315 graph of the Sh’ma). It provides a connection with the traditionally dignified garb
316 of our Biblical ancestors, and with the traditional prayer garb of later generations.
317 It allows us to fulfil a commandment (putting fringes on the corners of garments),
318 and provides a way to transition from mundane to sacred time and space.

319 All Jewish adults/ post bnei mitzvah should wear a tallit while davening in order to
320 enhance the prayer experience and become accustomed to the mitzvah. Ideally,
321 they should commit to davening daily and wearing it every time they daven.

322

323 Thus, ideally the question of wearing a tallit for an honor will not arise, as all Jew-
324 ish adults eligible for honors will be wearing tallit already. In cases where this
325 does not occur in practice, communities can invoke the additional principles of
326 “kvod haTorah” and “kvod hatzibbur” – giving dignity or honor to the Torah and to
327 the community - and request that people given honors don a tallit at least for that
328 portion of the service. It enhances the visual and emotional experience of the ser-
329 vice for other members and if they do not do it, makes the honorees seem like full
330 not partial members of the community. Women have been able to participate in
331 the service for decades, and yet tallit is still very uncommon. We wish to empha-
332 size this mitzvah and not wait yet another generation to make it more mainstream.

333 Yet while we consider this the ideal, circumstances in each synagogue are differ-
334 ent, and the way it is implemented will be determined by each rabbi and commu-
335 nity [see the appendix for a sample written policy by Rabbi Susan Grossman and
336 the Beth Sholom Congregation of Columbia, MD].

337 Synagogues are encouraged to take proactive measures to make observance
338 more likely- to make clean, new (not yellowed or frayed) feminine and masculine
339 looking tallitot available, with kosher knots (not ripped off or untied); to make sure
340 there are hooks outside mens’ and womens’ lavatories for hanging up tallit; to
341 teach about the mitzvah in adult education classes and sermons; to write about it
342 in the bulletin and make their policies clear to members and guests.

343 In order not to add to the financial burden of being an observant Jew, synagogues
344 should make sure to have available tallitot in good condition so that people who
345 borrow them will not feel they are at a lower level of hiddur mitzvah (beautifying
346 the mitzvot). A tallit is also easy to make; one can purchase tzitzit quite cheaply
347 and use any fabric. It can even be a synagogue or school activity and opportunity
348 to learn how to tie tzitzit and what they represent.

349

350 Psak⁴

351 **P’sak.** A tallit gadol should be worn by all Jews over bar/bat mitzvah age [for their
352 personal morning prayers and] when called upon to lead services or participate in
353 the Torah service. Even those [unmarried men and women] individuals who con-
354 tinue their family custom not to wear a tallit gadol in their private prayers should
355 put one on when called upon to lead communal prayers or to participate in the To-
356 rah service and say the appropriate blessing. Although a period of adjustment to
357 this more expansive practice may be necessary in many communities and syna-
358 gogues will have to determine their policy on this issue, our ideal is for all Jews

⁴ Thank you to Rabbi Danny Nevins for the language of the psak and other improvements and to Rabbi Pamela Barmash, Rabbi Reuven Hammer and Rabbi Jane Kanarek for many other suggestions and edits to this and previous versions of the teshuvah.

359 past the age of bar mitzvah to participate in this mitzvah which symbolizes aware-
360 ness of the divine presence, and acceptance of the commandments. Day schools,
361 Hebrew schools, synagogues and camps which have the opportunity to train the
362 next generation have a special role in encouraging this observance for all, based
363 on the principles of egalitarianism, kvod haTorah, kvod hatzibbur and hinukh (edu-
364 cation).

Appendix

From the Bnai Mitzvah book written by Rabbi Susan Grossman at Beth Shalom Congregation, Columbia, MD:

The tallit represents God's presence surrounding us with Divine grace and protection, certainly something we wish for all our children. Synagogue policy holds that in our egalitarian congregation, in which men and women are treated equally in the eyes of Jewish law, women (including girls) are to wear a head covering when coming to the bimah and (for women and post B'nai Mitzvah girls) also a tallit when coming up for an aliyah, reading from or holding or wrapping a Torah. They are encouraged to wear a tallit when coming up for other bimah honors, but are not required to do so. Synagogue policy requires that girls and women who wear tallitot also wear a head covering.

This response is dedicated to Mr. Hubert Brandt, a lifelong active member of the Conservative movement, a legalist, a man of principle and a man of action.