

The Road to Wearing a Tallit. Why an Orthodox Woman Wears a Tallit

By Bat Sheva Marcus

I will never forget the first time I saw a woman wearing a *tallit*. I was 27 years old, living in Israel and attending the first International Conference on Women and Judaism. I arrived early, stumbled upon the “wrong” room and came upon a room full of women praying. Many had on *tallitot*, *tefillin* and *kippot*.

I thought I was going to throw up.

To me it looked awful. It looked like a mockery of everything I loved. It seemed to me a caricature of the pictures I held close to my heart, of my father standing in the early morning in a faintly lit room wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*. I backed out of the room, and went into the ladies room to calm down. Even then, I was rational enough to be annoyed at myself for my violent overreaction.

So here I am, 15 years later, a *tallit*-wearer. I often marvel at the transitions we go through in our lives.

I cannot pinpoint exactly when my feelings began to change, when my sense of disgust transformed itself into an indefinable longing, when I began to look over the *mechitzah* at my husband wrapped in the white *tallit* and find that I too wished I could be wrapped in white, feeling cool cotton transport my existence into a space of holiness. Somewhere, somehow my feelings had changed.

Maybe it was that I got older, and as I got older right and wrong often seemed less set in stone.

Meeting different people, discussing issues openly, somehow I found out that in so many areas of my life, right and wrong were not quite as black and white as I had originally assumed them to be.

Maybe it was also that I could not seem to get myself into a good space for *tefillah*. I grew up in the day school system, praying daily. I grew up in a home where *tefillah* was expected to be a part of my daily life, even on vacation days, but I never really *davened*. Usually I daydreamed. Often I moved my lips to mimic the prayers. And then I found myself an adult, no longer praying to fulfill someone else's expectations, yet unable to sustain regular, daily, ongoing prayer. The agonizing fact was that, philosophically, I believe prayer to be critically important in our lives. It is a chance amidst the chaos and the self-centeredness of our generation to stop and thank God for all the everyday miracles, for our children, our community and our health. So here I was, 35 years old, still struggling with daily prayer and full of frustration and guilt over it.

And then my daughter was born. If I knew one thing as a parent it was that if she did not see me *davening* daily, it would be hard, if not ridiculous to expect her to. In my heart of hearts I knew that if I did not want her to grow up with the same struggle, it was time for me to resolve the issue once and for all.

And then my oldest son celebrated his *bar mitzvah*.

I watched with growing wonder and no small sense of envy, the excitement with which he approached the tangible elements of becoming an adult in prayer. The day his *tefillin* arrived from Israel, he ran to the neighbor to pick them up. He tried them on. He was in love with his *tefillin*. He went with my husband to buy a *tallit*. He tried it on. He looked at himself in the mirror. He tried it on again. I watched, and my sense of amazement grew.

I went to his yeshivah the day of his school *bar mitzvah*, and the pride and excitement in the boys, newly wearing *tefillin*, was tangible. They felt grown up. Much like a married couple wearing wedding rings, you could tell that they felt a sense of respon-

sibility and a sense of commitment. And the girls? They sat, as they always had, on their side of the *mechitzah*, some *davening* quietly, some just moving their lips. And I felt a sense of loss and sadness. I decided that day that my daughter too must have, at her *bar mitzvah*, a tangible expression of her commitment to prayer and a transitional object that would allow her to feel like an adult in her relationship to prayer.

I spent a great deal of time thinking over the issue. Somehow *tefillin* seemed less obvious. For me, there was something decidedly masculine about *tefillin*. And then again, *tefillin* carried with it so many more *halakhic* concerns. But *tallit*, that seemed almost perfect. White cotton, white silk, soft cloth, wrapping yourself in gentleness, in holiness all tied to the *tzitzit*, to which so many prayers refer. And this garment carried with it negligible, if any, *halakhic* concerns. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tzitzit*, III:9) states that a woman may wear a *tallit*. And although the Rema in his glosses to the *Shulhan Arukh* disputes this position, the only reason given is “*yehora*” or religious arrogance.

So I made the decision. I would wear a *tallit*.

That was three years ago. From that day to this, I have not missed *davening* one day. I love the soft feel of the *tallit* as I wrap it around me. Whenever possible I daven outside, on the porch, so that the sun can shine through on me, and in my fantas-

ty, I am wrapping myself in the warmth of the *shechina*.

Do I concentrate on the *tefillah* everyday or even most days? Certainly not all of it; probably only parts of it. Is my *davening* where I would like it to be? No. But it is so much better than before.

Am I seeing the *tallit* as a magical solution? For me it was. Well, perhaps not magical. Maybe mystical. But somehow it manages to serve for me as both an expression of serious and deep commitment and a tactile experience with which I can connect daily.

I look back at my transformation and what strikes me most is not that I now wear a *tallit*, but rather my own sense of transformation. I am struck at how much we can change and grow and learn. I look at myself as a young woman who thought the idea of wearing a *tallit* was disgusting, and I see myself today wearing a *tallit* daily, and I wonder what tomorrow will bring.

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FROM THE EDITOR

JOFA recognizes that there are many times and situations in life at which prayer is particularly difficult for Jewish women, when it is hard to find meaning in the texts and when synagogue frameworks appear unwelcoming. We would like readers to share their experiences by writing to jofa@jofa.org or by joining our Women and Synagogue discussion group. To join, visit our website www.jofa.org and click on “discussion forums”. We would also like to hear of ways in which individuals have been able to make their prayers more meaningful at different stages of their lives.