



## What is a tallit?

The tallit (also pronounced tallis) is a prayer shawl, the most authentic Jewish garment. It is a rectangular-shaped piece of linen or wool (and sometimes, now, polyester or silk) with special fringes called Tzitzit on each of the four corners. The purpose of the garment is to hold the Tzitzit.

Most tallitot (alternative plural: talleisim) have a neckband, called an Atarah, which most often has the blessing one recites when donning the tallit, embroidered across it.

## Why wear a tallit?

The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the Lord your God. [Numbers 15:37-41]

The purpose of the tallit, then, is to hold the Tzitzit, and the purpose of the Tzitzit (according to the Torah) is to remind us of God's commandments.

The tallit is worn for morning prayer, during the week as well as on Shabbat and other holy days. It is not worn for afternoon and evening prayers because of the commandment that one should see the Tzitzit, which has been interpreted as meaning to be seen by the light of the day. The Shaliach Tzibur (who leads the prayer) usually wears a tallit, as well, even in the afternoon and evening.

## Who wears a tallit?

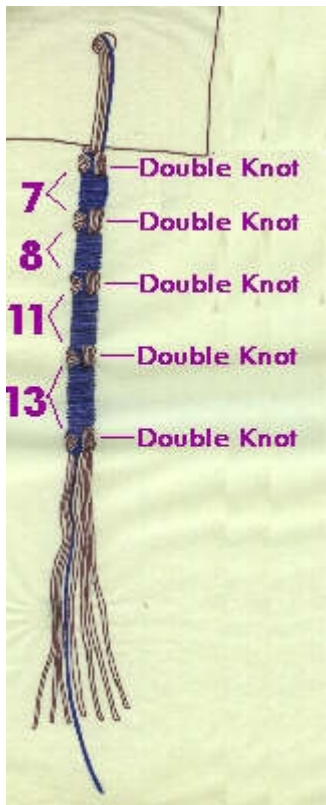
Generally, a Jew (or a convert to Judaism) who has reached the age of majority (in most communities, this is 13, though in some communities) wear a tallit. There exists a

custom, not widely practiced, of not wearing a tallit prior to marriage: This custom was explained by the Maharil (Rabbi Yaacov Mollen, 1356-1427) based on the juxtaposition of two verses in the Torah. The first, Deuteronomy 22:12 articulates the commandment concerning the wearing of tzitzit. It is followed by Deuteronomy 22:13, which says, "If a man takes a wife..." This custom is not widely practiced, however, in large measure because it prevents one from fulfilling a commandment between the age of 13 and the time one marries.

In congregations where a tallit is generally worn, you will find a rack of tallitot available for use by visitors near the entrance to the sanctuary.

## How are the Tzitzit tied?

Tying Tzitzit is a Jewish art, a form of macrame. A hole is carefully made and reinforced in each corner of the tallit. Through each hole, four strands are inserted: three short strands and one long strand. The longer stranded is called the shammash and this is the one which is used for winding around the others. To tie the Tzitzit, line up the four strands so that the three of equal length are doubled evenly, and the four strand is lined up at one end with the other seven ends. With four strands in one hand, and the other four in the other, make a double knot at the edge of the fabric. Then take the shammash and wind it around the other seven strands seven times in a spiral motion. Make a second double knot, with four strands in one hand and four strands in the other. Then wind the shammash around the seven strands eight times and make another double knot. Wind the shammash around eleven times and make a double knot. Finally, wind the shammash thirteen times around the remaining seven strands and make one final double knot. When done correctly, the Tzitzit will have 7-8-11-13 winds between the double knots.



## What does the 7-8-11-13 windings pattern mean?

There are a number of wonderful interpretations for this pattern of windings. One interpretation employs Gematria, Jewish numerology, which assigns to each Hebrew letter a numeric value: aleph is 1, bet is 2, gimmel is 3, and so on. In this second interpretation of the windings of the Tzitzit, the numbers 7-8-11-13 have special meaning:  $7+8=15$ , which in Hebrew is written yod-hay, the first two letters of God's name (the Tetragrammaton);  $11=\text{vav}+\text{hay}$ , the third and fourth letters of God's name. Hence the first three windings "spell" God's holy name. Thirteen, the last set of windings, is equivalent in value to the word "echad" which means "one." Hence, all four windings can be interpreted to say, "God is one."

Yet another interpretation holds that when we consider the windings between the knots, 7, 8, 11, and 13, the first three numbers equal 26, which is numerically equivalent to the

Tetragrammaton and the remaining number, 13, is equivalent to "echad" ("one"). Hence the windings tell us that God is One. If we take the sum of the first three numbers (7+8+11) and equate that with God's Name, then the 13 which remain can also be interpreted to reflect the 13 attributes of God, as articulated by Moses Maimonides and set to verse in the Yigdal.

By still another interpretation, the Gematria value of the word "Tzitzit" (tzadi-yod-tzitzit-yod-taf) is 600. To this we add the eight strands plus the five knots, totaling 613 in all. According to tradition, God gave us 613 mitzvot (commandments) in the Torah. Just looking at the tallit with its Tzitzit, therefore, reminds us of the commandments, as the Torah says, "You should see them and remember all God's commandments and do them."

## How to put on a Tallit

1. Open tallit and hold in both hands so you can see atarah (the collar band on which the blessing is often embroidered).
2. Recite the berachah (Transliteration: **BA-RUCH A-TA A-DO-NAI E-LO-HAY-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM A-SHER KI-D'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV V-TZI-VA-NU L'HI-TA-TAYF BA-TZI-TZIT.**)



1. It is traditional (yet not commanded) to kiss the end of atarah where the last word of the blessing is embroidered, and then and beginning where the first word is.
2. Wrap the tallit around your shoulders, holding it over your head for a moment of private meditation.
3. Adjust the tallit on your shoulders comfortably.

## Customs of wearing a tallit

1. If you borrow the tallit for the service, say the *berakhah* (blessing) before putting it on.
2. Don't take it into the bathroom. Many synagogues provide hooks outside the door.
3. If you take the tallit off for a short time (eg. to go to the bathroom) you don't need to repeat the *berakhah* when putting it on again.