

FRINGES ON THE CORNERS OF THEIR GARMENTS THROUGHOUT THEIR AGES

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ABSTRACT

Capstone Project: Fringes on the Corners of Their Garments Throughout Their Ages

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My own wearing of tzitzit has garnered much attention during the 9 years that I've worn them, and the way that this mitzvah entered my practice was not necessarily religious in nature. My hunch was that, for Reform Jews and Jews in general, there might be many different ways the tallit, both *katan* and *gadol*, as well as tzitzit are used and understood in our modern day. This ritual garment, that can be a part of one's life from baby naming to the grave, has re-entered many Reform congregations, and I became interested in finding out more about the variety of roles that it has and continues to serve. Throughout this Capstone Project I explored necessary components religiously, textually, culturally and materially to uncover what might be needed in understanding the role of the tallit.

The following pages are filled with 10 sections of analysis and reflection on some of my most interesting finds throughout the year of immersion in this subject. There is a recounting of the process, which followed the timeline of the Jewish people, descriptions of the many biblical, rabbinic, academic and literary roads traveled, as well as interviews with brilliant Jewish thinkers, photographs that helped document parts of the project, and a list of suggested resources. This written component of the project documents the body of study that I endeavored upon, which gave me a well-rounded and informed education of the history, use and religious significance of the tallit and some new understandings of its role in our community.

The final phase of this Capstone Project was the actual making of a tallit for myself. The design of the garment was informed by all of the research done including choices made in how the tzitzit were tied, material chosen and many other categories I encountered along the journey of research.

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INTRODUCTION

“And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, which incline you to go astray.” (Numbers 15:39)

This Capstone Project really began in 1988, about a year after my Bar Mitzvah. There was a particular Shabbat morning at Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, CA where I, in classic teenage fashion, chose to be rebellious. Having been brought up in an Orthodox family, I had family members whose custom it was to not wear a tallit *gadol* until they were married. When my mother inquired that Shabbat morning why I wasn't wearing the tallit I had received at my Bar Mitzvah, I responded with our family's custom as a deflective excuse. The truth was I had no interest in wearing this odd ritual garment. It was itchy and I didn't particularly care for the color, and there was nothing in it for me of great significance. Many years passed before I once again put on the tallit.

It took a long time before the above quoted verse, from the book of Numbers, held any relevance, but now, it is one of the most important verses of Torah to me. For over a decade, I had been “off the *derekh*”, not engaged in any sense of Jewish living, and when I returned and started doing the sacred work of personal *teshuvah*, I took on the mitzvah of the fringed garment. This choice has become formative along my Jewish journey.

In early 2007, having returned to a Jewish life, I asked my mother for forgiveness for that particular Shabbat morning back in my teenage years. She posed the question, “Do you know why your cousins wait to wear a tallit? Because they all wear *tzitzit* on

their tallit *katan*. Michael, they are fulfilling a mitzvah from the Torah, which you are not.” I was overcome with a clear sense that one way of amending this situation was to not only understand more about this, but to try it myself. That week, I received my first set of tallit *katan* and started to wear them daily. It did not take long for the verse in Numbers to come alive. I spent hours staring at the fringes hanging down from my belt line, I started contemplating Torah in a new and exciting way, and the more of my focus that was spent on this ritual garment, the less I sought my own will, the more I sought of God’s, and since then I have not strayed from the path of Jewish living.

Within my own personal story lies an effective experience with the mitzvah and practice of tallit, both *gadol* and *katan*, and tzitzit. This Capstone Project is an attempt to examine this category of Jewish living in a deeper intellectual, academic, and ritual way to serve as a resource for someone interested in exploring Jewish fringed garments more thoroughly. During the past year, I have studied numerous Biblical and rabbinic texts, including Midrash Sifrei Bamidbar, Mikraot Gedolot on the verses of Torah that instruct about fringes, Chapter 4 of Tractate Menakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, Mishneh Torah on Hilkhot Tzitzit, Mishna Berurah on Morning Conduct, as well as a section of the Passover Haggadah. Throughout the project I read numerous chapters of books, articles, and responsa. I scoured the internet for interesting and useful material. In addition to this textual research, I also arranged to interview some of my teachers who I knew to have a relationship with tallitot in one form or another. During these interviews I asked questions about tallit and tzitzit, and drew out their stories and insights on the topic. Additionally, throughout the project I personally examined many tallitot and spoke with people about them whenever possible. Fascinating conversations were had during

meals on Shabbat, after lectures on campus, before and after worship services at various synagogues, and even some interactions with tallit shop owners, which were not conversations, unfortunately, but rather simply became sales pitches.

What will follow in the written component of this Capstone Project will be analysis and reflection on what I consider to be the ten most important moments I encountered while immersing in resources and subjects that fall under the topics of tzitzit and tallit. Also included will be highlights of the written transcripts of the interviews that were conducted, some interesting photos that I compiled during the project, and a bibliography/suggested resources sheet, which I hope one day will help some else's research about this subject. There will also be a concluding section that I hope to use to gather together some thoughts about the whole process and the role of the tallit and tzitzit in today's Jewish world.

TaNaKh, Numbers 15:37-41, Deuteronomy 22:12

Attempting to go deep into understanding tallit and tzitzit, the first major area of study I immersed in was TaNaKh and some of the corresponding Rabbinic commentaries. It seemed important that, if I was going to relate the journey of the garment and fringes to my own journey with the garment and fringes, I should start at the beginning. The two sections of the Torah where the commandment for fringes appear are in Numbers 15:37-41 and in Deuteronomy 22:12. These two sections are often grouped together, but in actuality do not have that much in common. The particular Hebrew words that identify the fringes are different, the context in which the words are delivered by the Torah are different, and only one gives the reader an explanation of purpose along with the prescribed action.

The verses that appear in Numbers are quite poetic and well known. These verses seemed like an old friend after reciting them so often in *v'ahavta*. Upon re-reading these verses, the first thing that jumped out at me was the instruction to make tzitzit was coupled with seeing them. We are instructed to really look at them, for the purpose of remembering “all” that God has commanded. How was it going to be possible that “all” of it was wrapped up in these small strings? Rashi comes in to clarify that there is a numerical context that is equal to 613, the total number of mitzvot. The word tzitzit in gematria is equal to 600, and with the addition of 8 strings and the 5 knots, the tzitzit become a literal and visual reminder of the “all” the mitzvot. There are commentators who disagree with Rashi, who challenge him on the math, or on the actual word that the instruction to look is applied to (another option would be the tekhelet), but I found Rashi’s explanation to be quite satisfying.

Rashi also makes note of the word *taturu*, and connects it to the word *mitor*, meaning spy. There is a wonderful connection in the notion that these verses are found in the same *parsha*, Shelakh Lekha, as the story of the spies scouting out the land of Canaan. It seems that the rabbis who broke the *parshiyot* up for reading may have had something in mind. Does the way that the spies see the land reflect on our own worldview? Are the tzitzit, which are meant to be looked upon and to help us take the action of remembering what God has commanded of us, there to help us from “spying”? Also, worth noting is that in the chapter, the verses leading up to the tzitzit verses are all about sin, and the verses immediately following in the next chapter are all about Korach and rebelliousness. I believe that the Torah is instructing us to create a physical item to use as a support system against the dangers of sin and rebelliousness, in addition to remembering God’s commandments.

In contrast, the verses in Deuteronomy are surrounded and connected to two very specific notions. Immediately before Deuteronomy 22:12, which uses the word *gidilim* to define the fringes, not tzitzit, is the prohibition against combining wool and linen together, which many commentators read as noteworthy. The common understanding is that one should tie tzitzit even if they must use this prohibited combination. This notion speaks directly to the thread that runs throughout this Capstone Project that tzitzit matter greatly. In this case, we are given an example of how much it matters that you could break a prohibition to perform this mitzvah. Immediately after this verse are instructions regarding marriage and some detailed and problematic instances. Today, we often use a tallit as a *huppah*. What does the connection of these two verses teach us about the sanctity of the moment of marriage and remembering and commandedness? Another

thought that I appreciated was the connection of these two verses that the Eskenazi/Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, notes by drawing out that this “law appears to be gender neutral, in that women are not excluded from wearing tassels.¹” Such specific correlations and connections regarding the placement of these verses help the Biblical instructions to come alive throughout the generations.

The verses from Numbers also sing out that this action is one of personal and individual venture. The instructions are all written in the Hebrew plural, but there is no doubt that the instructions are for each of us. The fringed garment was a common item in antiquity, which led me to thinking about what makes it personal if it is so common. In response to this, I became drawn towards tekhelet, the blue thread that is instructed to be included in the tassel. This colored cord is what might distinguish the tzitzit from other common fringes on garments of the day. The Eskenazi/Weiss Torah commentary beautifully notes that the cord is identical to the one that hangs from the high priest's headdress in Exodus 28:37². That connection seems to make this thread a uniquely Israelite experience. There is, of course, so much more that can be drawn out from the Biblical text.

I would like to make an observational note in my own reflective way. I started with a few threads from the short verses of Torah which, over time, have led to hundreds upon hundreds of comments by the rabbis, a prohibition against the use of them within Reform Judaism, a huge tent of memory filled with sacred life cycle events and prayer experiences involving this sacred garment, and online stores filled with beautiful and

¹ *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, URJ Press, 2007, p. 1170

² *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, URJ Press, 2007, p. 885

distinct tallitot. The possibilities seemed like they wouldn't actually end, like the stripes of the blue and white tallit worn at my Bar Mitzvah. That particular tallit is still to this day the thinnest, smallest, and skinniest tallit I own. Each tallit since then has grown in size and intention of choice. The largest tallit I will own will be the one I tie tzitzit on at the culmination of this project. What a fitting metaphor that the verses of Torah have expanded to something with such largess, and along the way, my tallitot have continued to grow in size and meaning.

RABBINIC TEXTS THROUGH THE AGES

Considering the minimal instruction and description in the Biblical texts about tzitzit, one might be surprised at the massive amount of rabbinic exploration and explanation of the tzitzit and tallit. There are sections upon sections devoted to understanding and properly executing the mitzvah of tzitzit. The rabbis are not hesitant to argue with each other across time and space to develop the most pure and holy way to act out this mitzvah. While I read many sections of many books that might fall under this category, in the interest of reflection I will share here some of my favorite moments from the many hours of study from three bodies of work in particular, Sifre to Numbers, Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Menakhot, and Rambam's Mishneh Torah: Hilkhhot Tzitzit. I will share these in chronological order from earliest to most recent, which was also the order in which I studied the texts. This should be seen as a metaphor for the developmental process, which over time, grew, expanded and eventually produced this body of work.

When one contemplates the existence of tzitzit at its core, it might seem a bit strange or odd. In all honesty, there is no real functional purpose to the fringes, and they could be a deterrent to productivity in one's daily life. They can make lots of things more complicated than if they weren't there, i.e., using the bathroom or reaching into one's pocket. I can recall one time that mine even got caught in a car door. Therefore, I can understand and appreciate the desire of the taanaitic rabbis of the Sifre to Numbers to make sense of how to do this strange commandment, which had such a profound meaning attached to it. I will explore here two of my favorite moments from study of the Sifre to Numbers 115.

The text of Sifre to Numbers 115, 2:4, comes to teach us that R. Ishmael says: The four of them constitute four individual acts of religious duty. He is referring to the four individual tzitzit that are to be tied, one to each corner of the four cornered garment. The question he is trying to answer is whether each tzitzit is a mitzvah in itself, or whether the garment as a whole is the mitzvah. What strikes me about his understanding, with which others often disagree, is that it opens up the space for each one of the tzitzit to have its own relevance religiously. Each moment that we are engaged in the performance of a mitzvah has the power to matter. Each moment is sacred and worth our giving it attention and focus. This is what I will be thinking of when I tie my tzitzit, not only tying each one in a different style, but also setting an intention for each one.

A few lines later, I found an amazing text to support all of the times that I wore my tzitzit outside of my clothing. For many years I did this, not just as a reminder for myself of the mitzvot, but also with the intent of being controversial and starting a conversation. The question I loved hearing was, “why is the Reform rabbinical student wearing tzitzit?” In 2:7 the Sifre to Numbers, I found validation for that desire. The text comes to teach that R. Hanina ben Antigonus says: What does everyone who carries out the religious duty of showing the fringes say? In those days, ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you” (Zachariah 8:23). I believe this proof text is speaking of a time to come when all will know God’s name and presence. This is a vision of a time when people of all backgrounds will be speaking of God, contemplating God, and praising God, from all corners of the earth. An outward expression of Judaism and Jewish practice, such as wearing tzitzit outside of the clothing, invites others to see, to

think about, to contemplate, and to curiously approach God. At the very least, it might cause someone to ask. It seems to me that creating ways in our lives to talk about God is one of the holiest actions we can take.

In a very different approach to tzitzit, one of my favorite Talmudic tales appears on Menakhot 44a of the Babylonian Talmud. It was taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Natan said, “There is not a single easy mitzvah written in the Torah that does not give a reward in this world - and in the world to come, I can not even imagine how great!” Go and learn this from the mitzvah of tzitzit. The Talmud goes on to discuss the concept of reward and punishment and tells an incredible and fantastical tale about some unexpected and wildly imaginative characters. Regarding reward and punishment, I find the rabbis’ use of tzitzit as a framework for this discussion to be a phenomenal choice. There are many mornings that I put on my tallit *katan* and question what the reward will be for wearing this garment. There are many other mornings where I contemplate the possible things that might go wrong in my life if I did not. For many years now, I have gained the benefit of experience, and the feeling of being held by God, from wearing my tzitzit. Would losing those things be a punishment? The rabbis here in Menakhot do not expand upon punishment, but they do give a wild example of reward.

The tale, in summary and with a bit of exaggeration, goes like this; a student of Torah travels a great distance to visit the world’s most expensive prostitute. As he is about to receive the services he has paid for, his tzitzit defy the laws of gravity and fly up and hit him in the face, reminding him of his true purpose in life and he does not commit the sinful act. As if that wasn’t a reward enough, from his wearing of the tzitzit, the prostitute becomes so intrigued that she follows the student back to his hometown,

converts to Judaism and ends up marrying him, which allows him the opportunity to legally perform the act that he so wanted to perform in the first place. The reward for wearing tzitzit in this world seems pretty fantastical in this story, but if that is the case, then how can we even fathom the reward in the world to come. This story may seem exaggerated, but when I put on my tallit *katan* it does give me a sense of hope that perhaps there is some sort of reward in this world that is beyond my wildest dreams, and not even worth trying to articulate for what is to come after this life. With this story in my back pocket, I will continue to wear my tzitzit each and every day.

The Rambam's Mishneh Torah, his attempt to make the Oral Torah digestible and practical for someone who knows the written Torah, has a detailed and useful accounting of what is needed for one to perform the mitzvah of tzitzit in the section called, Hilkhos Tzitzit. He gives clear instructions on the types of materials, the lengths of the strings, the ways that one should tie the knots, the do's and don'ts of tekhelet, and what to do if your garment is only three or five cornered. Of course, there is an element of minutiae in this text, and alongside that specificity is an incredibly beautiful work of loving detail. I would even say that his use of Hebrew is poetic. There is much word play and word flow throughout the descriptions of the word choices to describe the intimate details of the cord, the string the knot, the tassel, and the fringe. Rambam simultaneously makes each piece unique and brings them together in a glorious flow of instructive love. There are two pieces of two halakhot that I would like to mention here.

First, I was very moved to read the instruction given in 2:3. The Rambam teaches that a person must dye tekhelet with the intention that it be used only for the mitzvah. If one did not have such an intention, it is unacceptable. What this means to me is that one

must be not just focused in mind, but in deed as well when it comes to the mitzvah of tzitzit. One might think they could make extra dye to use for a new shirt, or perhaps make extra cords to tie a package closed. The Rambam says no, that one can only do this particular action. It must be pure and singular. This serves for me as another example of a great Jewish thinker who sees the absolute importance of the mitzvah of tzitzit.

The Rambam goes on to teach in that same halakha, that the entire dye must be used just for tekhelet, and that even the wool used for checking to make sure the blue looks right needs to be burned. The care and attention given to this intention of singularity of purpose is striking. The Rambam wants there to be no doubt at all that what we are doing is totally focused. We are literally to destroy by fire any evidence of what might have been not for the sole purpose of making the mitzvah complete. A test serves no value in his eyes, only the final product which was conceived in intention from the beginning of the process until its final outcome is good enough for fulfillment here.

After studying the Rambam's chapter on this topic, I was struck with one other notion about purpose. He instructs in 3:8 that no blessing should be recited on the tzitzit when making them. At first this threw me off even though there are other times in Jewish life that one does not say a bracha, i.e. beginning to build a sukkah or when planting a tree. One of the instructions in the Torah is for us to make them, so why shouldn't there be a blessing of God for the opportunity to do this mitzvah? Why shouldn't one acknowledge and sanctify this moment with a blessing? The Rambam goes on to explain that there is something larger at work. He teaches that it is because the ultimate purpose of the mitzvah is that one should wrap oneself. He is referring to the actual being wrapped up in a tallit. This gave me a great and joyous pause. For the Rambam, who

spends four chapters filled with exquisite detail of how to tie the tzitzit, the fabrics, the patterns of knots, and so on, his real goal is for each of us to be wrapped in, what I sometimes call, the blanket of God's love. While we must pay incredible attention to the detail in creating this, we are doing the creating so that each and every day we have the opportunity to say the blessing upon wrapping ourselves in the ritual garment of a tallit.

Spending time wrapped up in the many texts I studied was one of the great joys and intellectual challenges of this capstone project. How many more gems of wisdom would be uncovered in the texts that were left unexplored? How many smiles and a-ha moments would have occurred in *chevruta* with my beloved teachers? How much more relevant is the idea that the tallit is a garment for the ages? One that transcends time and space, and yet in one swift swoop over the head, can so quickly and easily bring us to right here and right now? The rest is commentary, go and learn it.

TEKHELET

The Biblical instruction to include the blue string of tekhelet in the tzitzit is one that had gone unfulfilled for many generations on the worldwide Jewish stage. In recent years, there has been a revival, and the blue string has been appearing more often in tzitzit. According to a midrash, “we have only white, for the tekhelet has been hidden.”³ Is it possible that the majestic blue of tekhelet has re-emerged from the place it has been hiding? The commandment to include tekhelet in the tzitzit is remarkable because it serves to remind us of all the other commandments. Therefore, the search and exploration to bring tekhelet back into the conversation associated with tallit seems to be an important one. By achieving a greater understanding and relationship with tekhelet we can have a greater understanding and relationship with the mitzvot as a whole.

In the Sifre, in Shelakh 15:39, Rabbi Meir said: Whoever observes the mitzvah of tzitzit, it is as if he greeted the Divine Presence, since tekhelet resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles God’s holy throne. According to this understanding, by having the blue of the tekhelet accessible to our sight, we are able to see a vision of where God sits, as if we are sitting in front of the Divine. In a subtly different understanding, in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 14, we learn that tekhelet resembles sapphire, and that the tablets were made of sapphire, to tell you that as long as the Children of Israel gaze upon tekhelet they will be reminded of what is inscribed on the tablets, and observe the commandments, as it is written, “And you shall look upon it, and remember all the commandments of God, and you shall do them (Numbers 15:39).” One understanding links us to a vision of God in the hopes that we will be reminded that

³ Midrash Rabbah, Bamidbar 17:5

we are always in front of the Divine Presence. The other understanding links us to the instructions that are to guide our lives, which will connect us to the Holy One. In other words, the rabbis see the tekhelet as something sacred and of great importance.

There are other elements about tekhelet that I found that are worth noting as additional elements of representation. First, tekhelet is mentioned in Exodus 25:4 as part of the list of offerings of materials for building the *mishkan*. The Torah gives us the same word to identify an element of what is necessary in the building of God's dwelling as it does in the description of how to complete and make sacred the garment that we would use to house our own bodies on a daily basis. Perhaps we need to see the tallit as our own *mishkan* more often than we do. Secondly, the Zohar connects the Divine attribute of justice to tekhelet, and compares the blue to the blue fire inside of a flame⁴. Can tekhelet serve as a reminder of the need to do social justice work and bring about the inspired work of *tikkun olam* in our broken world? Lastly, I was moved by a thought expressed in Sefer HaHinukh, mitzvah 386, which identifies white tzitzit with the physical world and the blue of the tekhelet with the spiritual world. Are we able to combine and intertwine the two in our daily thinking and actions? How often do we see them as separate in our busy and complicated lives? How wonderful that all of these understandings of a simple cord tied together with white and blue string could serve as a reminder of the work yet to be done in this world.

It is with thoughts like this in mind that Jews have been trying to rediscover the authentic blue of the tekhelet. Archeologists, marine biologists, chemists, and philanthropists have all come together to try to find the *hilazon*, a snail described in the

⁴ The Zohar, Shelakh, 195

Talmud which houses the glands needed to supply the liquid for the beginnings of the process of making tekhelet dye. In his studies, in 1858, the French zoologist, Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers, came to believe that the Murex Trunculus was the *hilazon*. This argument is further supported by an archaeological find with a large collection of shells uncovered at Tel Dor that date back to 1300 B.C.E. The shells at this find were of broken Murex Trunculus shells that had been broken in the exact place so as to obtain access to the glands. I learned this information from a non-profit organization called P'til Tekhelet, in Israel. They operate a small museum dedicated to the study of the various theories on tekhelet, are publishing a children's book, work in partnership with numerous universities, and offer hands-on experiential day tours, of which I participated in one. During this day trip I heard a fascinating lecture about the *hilazon* and the Murex Trunculus, we studied some of the halakha and rabbinic understandings of tekhelet. We also snorkeled in the Mediterranean and searched for our own shells before the culmination of the day, making our own tekhelet.

Our tour guide and instructor, Mois Navon, states about the process of making tekhelet, "When the liquid comes out of the snail's gland it is a murky substance with no color. Once you add light and oxygen it changes to yellow, green, blue and finally settles at almost blackish purple. Then you put it in boiling water, add a reducing agent, an acid that neutralizes the pH of the solution, and the wool is then soaked in it. At this point the wool has a yellow color, but slowly as the solution oxidizes, it turns purple if the reduced solution was kept in the shade or the magnificent blue of tekhelet if it was exposed to UV rays." The gemara of Menakhot 42b teaches how one is to make the dye for tekhelet, "Abaye said to Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yehudah: This thread of tekhelet, how do you dye

it? He replied: We bring the blood of the *hilazon* and certain herbs, and we put them in a pot and boil it. Then, we take a little bit of the dye in an eggshell and test it with a wad of wool. Then we spill out the dye left in that eggshell and we burn the wad of wool that was dyed for the purpose of testing.” It was a powerful experience to live out an ancient act described in the Talmud, granted it was with a glass beaker instead of an eggshell, but the tangibility of this process was impactful on my journey with tallitot nonetheless.

One of the moments of learning that was new for me at the time was the fact that many different teachers and customs exist for how to actually tie the tzitzit, especially when it comes to the inclusion of tekhelet. On this tour, we were shown the different tying styles of the Rambam, the Ra’avad, Isaac Luria, Rav Amram Gaon, The Vilna Gaon, and a classic Yemenite style. So many subtle differences and so much specificity in each, and I would come to learn later that there are even more.

There was a time when the blue dye, which is understood by history to have been highly valuable in price, was a visual representative of royalty. Today, it appears that we have access to what may be the process and the *hilazon* in a much more accessible, affordable, and user-friendly method. The Rambam taught that the most important thing about the tekhelet dye was that it was colorfast and does not change.⁵” It is my belief that adding the blue tekhelet to my tzitzit for this capstone project will give it another element of timelessness, another link to the past while simultaneously experimenting and reimagining the future, and a greater understanding and relationship with the commandments and God. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav offered this prayer, “Let us merit the return and revelation of the *hilazon*, that we may be privileged to fulfill the

⁵ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Tzitzit 2:1

commandment of tekhelet in tzitzit.⁶” I believe this has happened and I look forward to fulfilling this mitzvah in the tying of tzitzit of this capstone project with this in mind.

MODERN REFORM

My own Jewish journey did not involve Reform Judaism until approximately 6 years ago. Having grown up around men wearing tallit and tefilin, I found myself comfortable with the idea of ritual garments. Through the research in this project I hoped to gain a greater understanding of why, within Reform Judaism, ritual garments had disappeared. Additionally, I wanted to know why the four cornered ritual garment had begun to reappear on such a large scale in recent years.

The reaction of early Reform Judaism to what later would be referred to, as traditional Judaism was a strong one. The early Reformers wanted their Judaism to be personal and rational which led to language that represented the opposition to some particular ritual acts. Michael Meyer points to Kaufmann Kohler describing the rituals of tefilin and mezuzot as originating in primitive blood daubing and he referred to the wearing of a tallit as fetishism⁷. Harsh language like this was not uncommon. In 1885, there is record of Congregation Emanu-EL having ‘abolished’ the tallit⁸. I would imagine that the great passion I feel today for my various tallitot is likely exceeded by the passion of the early Reformers to cleanse their community of these garments that served no purpose in their understanding of their religious life.

⁶ Likutei Tefilot 1:49

⁷ Meyer, Michael A., *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.273

⁸ Meyer, Michael A., *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.237

As a movement, Reform Judaism rid itself of the tallit in the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform which states that “all such Mosaic and rabbinic laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.” It is relevant to note that the “present” plays an important role in the choices to not use ritual garment because the “present” is what each generation of Reform Jews will express their Judaism within. For hundreds of years, tallit, kippot and tefilin were defining visual representations of a Jew, but “bareheadedness spread from the last decades of the nineteenth century and achieved the status of identifying Reform Jews.”⁹ The shift in that “present”, towards the practice of no garments being worn had become commonplace in the Reform movement by the end of the century.

As time went on, the relevance of certain ideals allowed a shift towards the return of not only the garment but also the power contained in an individual's relationship with spirituality. In the 1937 Columbus Platform, permission was given to the individual for retention and development of customs that “possess inspirational value”. Who could judge that value other than the person exploring the choice of practice?

It became clear by the time of the publishing of the CCAR's Centenary Perspective of 1976 that there was not only room, but also precedent for the tallit to return to the shoulders of those who desired to wear them. This document emphasized action as a primary expression of Judaism, which led to much reconsidering of the old thinking about ritual garments, and even to the reversal of some previous decisions on

⁹ Meyer, Michael A. & Plaut, W. Gunther, “The Kippah Syndrome” in *The Reform Judaism Reader, North American Documents*, UAH Press, New York, 2001, p.59

various types of practice. Individual clergy and laypersons began to reclaim their relationship with ritual garments. Part of the reason that this renewed attraction occurred with ritual garments was their value in demonstrating a rejection of their parents' embarrassment with Jewish culture¹⁰. Modern Reform Jews were expressing their religiosity in a way that in some ways looked like the Judaism of old.

While the outside appearance was starting to shift to look one way, it seems that the greater impact was actually internal. For many Reform Jews, wearing a tallit was increasing the *kavanah*, intentionality, of their prayers. They were relating the tallit to the fulfillment of the mitzvah of prayer more so than the mitzvah of tying tzitzit. This deep meaning, separate from the minutiae of the mitzvah of tzitzit¹¹, shows a clear shift from the Reform Judaism of the past where enlightened believers were taught that moral teachings were infinitely more significant than ritual practices¹².

Today, one doesn't have to look far to see many Reform congregations where worshippers are wrapped in tallit. Many have embraced the traditional act of gathering the tzitzit and kissing them during certain parts of the service to show devotion and love for the mitzvot¹³. In many communities, including the daily prayer space on the campus of the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, the wide array of garment practices are completely embraced under the guise of Reform Judaism. While sitting in a seat during

¹⁰ Levy, Richard N., *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*, URJ Press, New York, 2005, p.117

¹¹ Levy, Richard N., *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*, URJ Press, New York, 2005, p.119

¹² Washofsky, Mark, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, UAHC Press, New York, 2001 p. 6

¹³ Klein, Isaac, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1979, p. 5

services, one can view tallitot of all shapes and sizes and colors, tefilin, kippot, or none of the above, all living side by side in an experimental and vibrant prayer space. This serves to prove that as the future leaders of the Reform movement are being trained “there are indeed few more visible signs of a “return to tradition” within the American Reform synagogue than the reappearance of these items of “Jewish religious apparel’¹⁴.”

¹⁴ Washofsky, Mark, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, UAHC Press, New York, 2001 p. 7

THE MINHAGIM BY RABBI ABRAHAM CHILL

Chill has compiled a clear and useful collection of rabbinic laws, understandings and the origins of some of the main parts of the tallit and tzitzit corpus. This chapter in “The Minhagim” is filled with the minutia of tzitzit. Early on, in my own exploration, this chapter would have likely turned me off to the details, but after spending many months researching tzitzit I found his chapter to be very useful and concise. Easy to follow explanations of the function of tallit *katan*, borrowed garments, numerical insights, tekhelet, and the reasoning behind blue and black stripes on a tallit fill the pages. Sadly, I think that for many Reform Jews that do not wear ritual garb, a chapter like this would only deter someone from exploring tzitzit.

While reading this chapter, it was hard not to think of the physical sensations of a tallit. The minutia of the law is not a place I would start in encouraging the average Reform Jew in the pew to begin. Instead, I must state that the very act of putting on a tallit is one that needs to be visceral. It is a unique ritual that calls out to be experienced. In Chill’s recounting of fringes tied by a non-Jew¹⁵ and noting that this attachment of fringes would not qualify halakhically. I am reminded to consider the importance of personal association with the physical realm, which I believe to be a big part of engaging with a tallit. There is much sensory play at work with a tallit. The sight involved in the looking of the Torah commandment, the smell of an old tallit, the tickle of the fringes, and the sound of the whoosh when flinging the garment around one’s head. Tallit is a personal and sensory experience.

¹⁵ Chill, Abraham, *The Minhagim: The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, Their Origins and Rationales*, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1979, p. 14

It was also within this chapter that I found the most useful accounting of the *atarah* in all of my research. Chill notes two main reasons for the *atarah* being a part of the tallit. First, that it helps us to know which end is up. The notion that we, in the same way that a shirt label shows the wearer how a t-shirt is to be worn, will be able to properly and consistently repeat time and time again the same ritual act in the same way with the same garment. This helps one to achieve the meditative nature of this mitzvah. Secondly, Chill notes the assistance that the *atarah* offers by helping the tallit to not slip from one's shoulders with its balanced weight. This seems aesthetically useful, but I think there is another reason that needs to be acknowledged. The *atarah* is often out of the sight of the one wearing it while it being worn as it lays on the back of the neck. Perhaps, this is to help to draw our attention to the tzitzit, which is what the Torah clearly commands us to look at. In this way, no matter how beautiful our *atarah* is, we are drawn back to the Torah commandment.

While reflecting on this chapter, I was also interested in the *aggadah* that¹⁶ Chill notes where tzitzit play a role in have a calming effect on the raging waters of the Red Sea. In this story, the people's tefilin, tallitot, tzitzit and God all team up with each other upon the physical human to metaphorically cause the calming of an internal enraged sea. Not only is there an explanation in this for why many have the custom of draping the tallit over one's shoulder to examine their tzitzit and look upon them, but the image of being surrounded by calm waters is one that I think many of us yearn for today in our turbulent lives.

¹⁶ Chill, Abraham, *The Minhagim: The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, Their Origins and Rationales*, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1979, p. 20

There is also a brief discussion about tallit usage that caught my eye. “Certainly, one who never prays has no need of a tallit, which for him, possesses no meaningful significance.¹⁷” The focus here has clearly shifted from the garment, to the person who is in possession of it and how they wouldn’t use the article. Chill clarifies that this is the person who is formally observant but has no genuine religious commitment. What I glean from this is the idea that perhaps the tallit can be an effective tool to make this person turn around the other way and become authentic in their practice. Perhaps someone sitting, wrapped in a tallit, in their own individual space, would help to lead them towards a closer relationship with the Divine, and a more genuine relationship and commitment to prayer and ritual. Possessing a tallit, even if it sat in a drawer untouched, allows the possibility of the person at one day wanting or needing it, eventually creating a moment or practice of meaningful significance.

The most important moment for me in my study of this chapter came in an unexpected form. Chill was the first writer that I encountered who wrote about the Ashkenazic custom of waiting to begin wearing a tallit until one is married. He attributes it to the custom in the Talmud¹⁸ when a married man was recognizable by the garment that he wore over his head and body. Additionally, there is a Biblical connection in Deuteronomy where the statement about fringes is immediately followed in the Torah by the charge to take a wife and be married. In Jewish tradition, it is a common theme that a man “cannot truly enjoy life without a wife. Therefore one begins to wear a tallit only

¹⁷ Chill, Abraham, *The Minhagim: The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, Their Origins and Rationales*, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1979, p. 23

¹⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 29b

once he is married.¹⁹” The importance of tallit is shown here in the metaphor that until a person is complete they cannot and should not even perform this part of the mitzvah. It is as if there is an inability to appreciate the wholeness that one can feel by wrapping and simultaneously separating their own prayer space without having the intimate knowledge of married life.

¹⁹ Chill, Abraham, *The Minhagim: The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, Their Origins and Rationales*, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1979, p. 21 (Sefer Ha’Matamim 45)

THE TALLIT BY RABBI DOV PERETZ ELKINS

Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins has compiled a gorgeous group of thoughts regarding the Tallit in this viewpoint that representative of the Conservative Movement in the mid-1970s. The ideas contained within this document explore the wonderful connection stretching back from Biblical times to the modern day tying together Jews across time. There is also a reflective and thoughtful description of some of the wrestling and tension that has occurred with the clash of ancient words and modern day sensibility. Rabbi Elkins acknowledges this with his description that the “tasseled tallit is a creature that has existed, in various forms, some three thousand years, and has all along accumulated many new faces and shades of coloration in purpose and meaning.²⁰” This statement might cause us to reconsider the tallit, not just as a ritual garment with all of its complexity and glory, but also as having a sense of aliveness to it. It has changed over time, and so has our relationship with it, but its core DNA still exists as a four cornered garment with tzitzit attached to it fulfilling a biblical command.

The unique element of this article that made it so useful and enjoyable for me was the way Rabbi Elkins chose to explore the “meaning” of the tallit for our modern existence. He does this through five primary categories: symbolism, esthetics, history and national identity, ideology and ethics, and the metaphysical.

First he discusses the symbolic nature of the tallit. He describes how we might use the tzitzit and tallit for the purpose of reminding its wearer to lead a life of holiness. Rabbi Elkins then compares the tallit to a flag “whose colors, shape and design conjure up the country which it stands for”, meaning that all of the ideals and struggles and

²⁰ Elkins, Dov Peretz, *The Tallit*, The Burning Bush Press, New York, 1976, p.5

inspired patriotism that a member of a country might feel from a flag, the tasseled vestment of the Jewish people might serve the same purpose in living out Jewish values and ethics in our lives. One aspect of the tallit, which is in accordance with the Biblical command for Elkins, is that it serves as visual stimulus for the purpose of symbolically being reminded of mitzvot and holiness.

Secondly, Elkins points to the esthetic value of the garment. He notes the physical beauty, differences in size, color and decorations as adding to its universal acceptance. His appreciation for the tallit as a wonderful opportunity for *hidur mitzvah*, the adornment of a commandment, is an element of the tallit that I hope more people will continue to explore. Not that I find anything wrong at all with the simple and classic blue or black striped tallitot that I would imagine are the most commonly produced, but there is a sense of personal and artistic empowerment, expression and glorification available to us when we make our own choices in the variable elements of a tallit. The ability for us to place upon our tallit a “positive emphasis on physical beauty²¹” can add to the mitzvah and create another level of the feeling of glory in our prayer space. The idea that each of us could have our own unique tallit is a personally meaningful one, but it does also make me consider the image of a community of people engaged in prayer, all covered in the same garment, and the humility that might come for a person praying and physically appearing as one amongst the many.

In his third category of interest, Elkins discusses the Historical-National view of the tallit. He weaves together a depiction of the tallit and its relevance to the State of Israel and her founding. He quotes Mr. David Wolffsohn, who designed the flag of the

²¹ Elkins, Dov Peretz, *The Tallit*, The Burning Bush Press, New York, 1976, p.10

state, and he recounts stories of the tallit from the Yom Kippur War in 1973. He makes an interesting argument for the colors of the tallit as “fitting for the symbolic transposition of a people’s ideals and aspirations into a cloth representation²²” which drawn upon biblical imagery from the books of Exodus and Ezekiel.

Elkins makes a fascinating move here when he categorizes the Ideological and Ethical understandings of the tallit as the fourth category. He calls out the messages of democracy in the tallit as part of post-Temple Judaism. He speaks of freedom, peace, humility and repentance as ideals found in this sacred garment. Within this section there was an idea that pulled on my heart strings, and challenged me personally along this capstone journey. As I prepared to make my own tallit, there was little doubt in my mind that I would use tekhelet in the cords, but Elkins made an argument that made me reconsider for a moment, not so much that I won’t be using tekhelet though, but worth pointing out. He quotes from the Babylonian Talmud 61b, which tells us that there is punishment coming to those who affix a thread of blue dyed with indigo and pretends that it is really from the mollusk. Meaning, that if the thread is blue, but not actually made the right way, that punishment will be a consequence. So, perhaps tzitzit without blue is a sign of pure intention? Elkins states, “The Talmud demands that we show our true colors in all matters, ethical as well as ritual.”²³ I read this as a call to integrity and purpose. My choice to use tekhelet is one rooted in research, exploration and a reminder of ethical living. While I don’t agree with Elkins regarding not using tekhelet, I do appreciate his underlying reasoning and find those same reasons to be the driving purpose in my choice to tie the royal blue into my new garment, integrity and purpose.

²² Elkins, Dov Peretz, *The Tallit*, The Burning Bush Press, New York, 1976, p.12-13

²³ Elkins, Dov Peretz, *The Tallit*, The Burning Bush Press, New York, 1976, p.20

Elkins fifth and final category of exploration is the Metaphysical, which he sees as the achievement of spiritual ecstasy and as the peak of religious exhilaration that one experiences by donning a tallit. Just those poetic words alone make me want to wrap myself up. He writes of an inspirational and mystical expression of prayer and Jewish practice, and he calls upon classic and beautiful texts to do so. He references texts such as Psalm 104, “wrapped in a robe of light” and also from unidentified Kabbalistic Kavanot.

He also quotes from Midrash Tehillim 90:18, which is how I will close this reflection. The midrash here plays with the *vav* of *u’ritem oto*, found in Numbers 15:39. It is then taught that the text doesn’t mean to say “so that you can look at it”, but rather “so you can look at Him”, referring to God. Imagine if when looking at the tzitzit hanging down from our tallit, if when we looked we were always reminded and inspired to go even further than the mitzvot, and we went all the way to that state of spiritual ecstasy where we were actually seeing God. *Kein Y’hi Ratzon!*

REB ZALMAN'S B'NAI OR TALLIT

One of the tallit designs that I started noticing popping up in many places is what is sometimes called “Joseph’s Coat” tallit. It is a manufactured rainbow-esque tallit that has a fascinating story associated with it, and has had a large impact that goes far beyond what appears to be its initial reasoning for being made. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who died in 2014, and was the father of the Jewish Renewal movement, originally designed this tallit. Reb Zalman, as he is commonly known, is remembered for his non-traditional approaches to Jewish spirituality, including creating ‘talisariums’ at Jewish summer camps where he would encourage campers to make their own tallitot.

When Reb Zalman left Lubavitch, he left behind the traditional black-striped tallit that he had worn for many years. In the 1950’s his first exploration into a non-traditional tallit is supposedly made from an Anderson clan tartan. Stories circulate about denim, burlap and tie-dyed tallitot coming out of the summer camp influence of Reb Zalman, but his greatest impact on the garment is what he called the B’nai Or, meaning children of light, tallit. This tallit drifted very far away from the simple blue or black stripes of more traditional tallitot. Reb Zalman’s vision for this garment had colored bands of psychedelic neon, which represented the mystical *sephirot* of Kabbalah. The stripes were to be set up in a way that had metaphoric representations associated with the width of the stripe along with the color and the order that represented the *sephirotic* tree as well as the days of Creation. For example, the blue stripe, which lies second in the colors, is supposed to be like the blue of tekhelet. It is meant to represent *gevurah*, strength, and it has no border around it because, according to Reb Zalman, *gevurah* also represents

restraint, so it is containment itself. The blue is also representative of the waters that were separated during the second day of creation²⁴.

This B'nai Or tallit is a strong representation of the acceptance of Reb Zalman's influence as it can be found on worshippers' shoulders in Reform and Conservative, as well as Reconstructionist and *havurah* communities. Its popularity goes far beyond the man who created it. Many people wearing it often have no idea that it was designed by Reb Zalman in the 1960's, and that each of the colored stripes is meant to represent a different mystically interpreted aspect of God²⁵.

There is a story, perhaps a myth, which is worth sharing about the first commissioned versions of the B'nai Or tallit. Reb Zalman is said to have taken his idea of the B'nai Or tallit from one tallit maker to another, all around Brooklyn, but was refused by all to make it. Eventually, one tallit maker agreed, but forced Reb Zalman to order five of them before they would agree to its manufacture. What happened to those five? "Reb Zalman got one, Abraham Joshua Heschel got one, Everett Gendler got one, Arthur Green got one, and the fifth tallit? Perhaps it belongs to all of us."²⁶ This story speaks to me because of this inclusion of 'the rest of us'. It is as if the fifth B'nai Or tallit is still floating around somewhere in a random congregation, on a random set of shoulders in a random place, filled with random prayer.

²⁴ Gershom, Yonasson. "Story of Reb Zalman's B'nai Or Tallit: Interview with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi", Online Publication, Havurah Shir Hadash, Ashland, Oregon, 2005

²⁵ http://myjewishlearning.com/history/Jewish_World_Today/Denominations/Renewal_Movement_Prn.shtml

²⁶ "The Emergence of the Clown Talit", Interview with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi by Yonassan Gershom, Divinity Is In The Details (blog), June 7, 2007

The anonymity that I believe to be associated with this mythical fifth tallit is somewhat akin to the other things that people think the B'nai Or, sometimes known as P'nai Or, (“faces of light”), tallit represents. I have heard from people that they wear it because it has the colors of the Rainbow Flag of the LGBT movement, but it does not. It is also often called “Joseph’s Coat” tallit. As I walked around the Mea Sharim neighborhood of Jerusalem this past summer, asking different tallit shop employees for Reb Zalman’s tallit, they had no idea of what I was speaking, but they all had heard of “Joseph’s Coat” and many of them had it in stock in numerous sizes. Is this really a representation of the Biblical tunic? It seems clear from the designer that this was not the intent of this “robe of rainbow light” as Reb Zalman referred to it many times.

I believe that the popularity of this particular tallit has given permission to many people to push the boundaries of what a tallit can look like in their own practice. I recall my own tallit that I made at summer camp as a young boy, black and white polka dotted cloth, which I now wear on Purim. I think of a rock n roll tallit that I saw recently that had patches of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix on it. On a weekly basis, I find myself staring at the tallit of a fellow rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College whose large tallit has a beautiful and ornate image of David’s harp filling most of the white space in the middle of the tallit. In the same prayer space where I see the tallit with the harp, I am also witness to a collection of tie-dyed tallitot that were made as a class project at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, inspired by the bright colors of the ark in that space. Although not directly inspired by Reb Zalman’s work, these beautiful and bright tallitot, with the tzitzit tied by a class of soon to be rabbis adorn the shoulders of students and teachers every day during worship, offering a daily reminder of the impact

of Reb Zalman's vision on the world of tallitot. His influence, through the B'nai Or tallit, as it was originally named, and many other tallitot, can be felt all around us when our eyes are drawn to many different styles and expressions found in the ever expanding artistic and religious expression of the tallit.

THE “ROBE OF RESPONSIBILITY” BY RABBI MIMI WEISEL

As I researched the tallit, one can imagine the joy to uncover this article written in the South Florida Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner, written by my own mother, Rabbi Mimi Weisel. This is a sweet and easily readable piece that articulates some of the journey of women wearing tallit, and has an important charge for future use of the garment. In thinking about the relevance of this article on a personal front, it brings to life the words of Numbers 15:38, which calls for the tzitzit to be made “throughout the ages”. In this capstone, I find a link that makes the examination of tallit concretized not just throughout the ages, but throughout the generations.

Rabbi Weisel tells the story of playing with her father’s fringes in synagogue and states that, “it was the beginning of a fond memory”. Why was it fond? This appears to be in stark contrast to the recounting of a similar scene by Rabbi Kelman²⁷ for whom this memory became one shrouded in pain. Was it simply that the progress that had occurred for women to comfortably wear tallitot in a decade was that great? Thankfully, when Rabbi Weisel looked back to her childhood memories, women wearing tallit was more common and more accepted. “I am especially grateful”, says Rabbi Weisel, “to the women who were the first ones to take the visible stand of wearing tallit in a synagogue where it had never been done before.” Standing up as a woman wrapped, in what was a distinctly male garment for so long, appears to be as true a statement of religious faith as it does a call for equality and justice during these important and ground breaking times.

In synagogues today, many young women are not wearing tallit during prayer services, even if they were given one at their Bat Mitzvah. I wonder if this is an issue of

²⁷ note: see interview with Rabbi Naamah Kelman on page 65.

general synagogue culture, or whether it has more to do with the personal experiences associated with the tallit, for the individuals, not having much significance. Rabbi Weisel states that, “it seems that they do not wear a tallit because no one else does.” Is it so far fetched to imagine a room of prayer filled with people being metaphorically and physically wrapped up in the moment? Is not seeing others doing it giving people permission to continue not to try it? When my mother notes, “I can be embraced by God’s love in a garment that reflects that embrace,” it brings me pause. I think about the impact on a child that a mother’s embrace has, and ponder how we might continue to develop the tallit as a physical symbol of God’s embrace.

CAROL LEVY'S "TALLIT OF MANY EMOTIONS"

Throughout my capstone project, I have been fascinated by the stories I have heard from others about their tallitot. The descriptive details in the associative tales have made the inanimate garments come to life in a way that sometimes transcends time and place. Shortly after the death of Carol Levy, wife of my friend and teacher Rabbi Richard N. Levy, I was bestowed an incredible honor; the chance to spend two months of personal time with Carol's tallit, in November and December of 2015. In the days after Carol's life, I found a new level of understanding, a different type of personal relationship than expected, and I was witness to a new type of tallit story being conceived and born.

After I put aside the immediate sense of being overwhelmed with emotion by the thoughtful and sacred honor of this gift, I found myself on my couch at home. I sat there staring at the case. What will this tallit bring to my life since it belongs to someone else? What will it be like to listen to the garment tell stories, rather than the owner? Will I wear it, pray in it, meditate in it? Some answers were to come in due time, but at first, I knew very little. In hearing a brief story about Carol's tallit, I know that it came from a social action trip to Ethiopia and I knew that she had used it. The rest seemed like Carol's story, not the story of the tallit.

The colors of the case were so vibrant. The solid purple, red, and green stripes that filled the main section of the tallit bag were jumping out. The colors were so very clean and almost appeared unused and new. The edges of the case were bordered by thin stripes of turquoise, faded white, and royal blue. Not the typical color combination we

often see draped over the shoulders of someone in prayer, or the classic velvet, single colored bags which house these garments. The dynamic visual representation of the thin lines on the edges, and the thick stripes filling the middle made me think about some of the experiences of my project as a whole. I thought of the skinny and faded light blue of the tallitot in the basket at Congregation Kol Ami at the front door of the sanctuary. I thought of the thick wool of the designer handmade tallitot in the small boutique shops in the Old City of Jerusalem. I thought of the silken purples of the tallit associated with Women of the Wall. Carol's tallit bag had a unique and boundless energy that felt very international, and I hadn't even taken out the tallit yet!

The more I stared, the more that was revealed. There was another repeated stripe that I had not noticed at first, this one was medium sized. It was an alternating checkerboard pattern of black and yellow squares. My mind wandered to images of the streets of New York. I thought of immigrant cab drivers. I thought of the struggles of living a religious life in such a modern and sometimes secular city. I thought of the cold winters and the humid summers and what purpose a garment like this might serve during these environments.

Before pulling the tallit out, I noticed that the bag had a name sewn into it, Yayou Zemen. What a wonderful piece of artistic work this human had created, with such detail. I then found a piece of paper that told a little bit of the history of this garment. This was a handmade product from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, designed in the traditional *mekenet* pattern, often used in gifts of courting when a Jewish man hopes to please a Jewish woman. I thought of the courting that must have occurred during the 43 years of marriage of Richard and Carol. I wondered if Yayou Zemen was married? The

sheet of paper told of the North American Conference of Ethiopian Jewry which this purchase was to benefit. I thought of the important work of social action and social justice that lives on through Carol's work in many communities. The informational description also noted that this bag, which I immediately assumed was a tallit bag, was actually a pillowcase. I thought of Carol's eternal place of rest, and also of the help that this purchase brought to an Ethiopian community. I imagined that the funds raised helped a Jewish family in need. That the bright colors of the bag made the bright smile of a child appear, at some random moment, thanks to the thoughtful purchase that Carol had made.

So many thoughts, stories, and emotions had occurred and I hadn't even let Carol's tallit come out of its resting place. I released the tallit from its bag and immediately unfolded it and held it out in front of my own eyes. Much of its design matched the patterns on the tallit bag. There were also large spaces of barren off-whiteness, kind of like clouds on a color-filled sky. It was big and had a unique feel to it compared to the hundreds of other tallitot that I had held in my life. The material was different, the colors were special, and the *atara* and corner patches were a different design than the patterns on the rest of the garment, and there was a weight that I couldn't describe. It was not light, nor was it heavy. I might describe it as *kavod*, in the sense that there was weightiness to it, which I felt perfectly and evenly when I donned it. After I said the bracha for wearing a tallit, and tried to make true the words of our tradition to make her life a blessing, I swung it over my head, felt it drape over my upper body, breathed in deeply and collected the garment in a similar way to how I normally would wear a tallit. It rested on my shoulders and neck evenly and completely balanced. Many

larger tallitot slide around on me, sometimes fall off my shoulders, and need a tallit clip to help them stay in place, but not Carol's. It rested perfectly.

It had a scent. I assume that my own well-worn tallitot have a scent as well, but because they are mine, I do not notice it. I noticed it on Carol's tallit. It wasn't exactly sweet, but it was pleasing. Perhaps it was a perfume or maybe the residue of the many places the tallit had journeyed during Carol's prayer life. What I found enlightening about this, as I breathed in over and over trying to identify what the smell was, was that the garment had engaged one of the five senses that I was not expecting, smell. If one of the purposes of a tallit is to help us remember and to be present in thought, this was a new level of consciousness that I was not expecting. I sat and meditated for a few minutes with this garment draped over me, feeling held like a baby in a swaddling cloth. I felt inspired by the sacred work of *tikkun olam* that its owner had done during her life, and the feeling of more emotions all at once than I was expecting thanks to the trust of the man who had given me this garment to spend time with. I was being affected by Carol's "Tallit of Many Emotions".

Carol's tallit traveled with me into quite a few spaces during the next two months. I wore it while meditating almost every day. I am unsure why, but I was inspired by her well-lived life and the strength of her hard fought battle against disease. These ideas found their way as values and areas of desired growth in my own spiritual practice. I also regularly wore the tallit while leading prayer services. To worship with others, while being wrapped in someone else's prayer shawl was exhilarating and challenging. There were days that I missed my own tallitot. On one particular occasion of leading I shared the story of what I was wearing before offering *ahavah rabbah*. As I gathered the tzitzit,

teaching about *havienu l'shalom*, I watched a woman in the front row shed a tear. Carol's tallit had touched the life of another through its story even after her life in this world had ended. There were also many occasions when I said nothing and just prayed. The glory and beauty of the many faces of a tallit has appeared in numerous ways during my time spent in Carol's tallit.

Upon reflection, I have learned so much from the experience of spending time with and in the "Tallit of Many Emotions". I have chosen to refer to it in this way because I have gleaned much Torah from it during our time together. One of the famous garments in all of the Biblical tradition is Joseph's coat, which we often refer to as "a coat of many colors". The impact of Carol Levy's tallit on my life and on this project was profound; especially in regards to appreciating the many emotions associated with this experience, therefore, Carol Levy's tallit of Many Emotions". I wonder what the emotion I will feel will be upon returning it to its rightful home?

MAKING FOR MYSELF FRINGES ON THE CORNERS OF MY GARMENT

Throughout this project I've always had the end goal of making my own tallit, tying the tzitzit, and having this garment as a memento, as a teaching tool, and as a prayer shawl, for the future. This tallit would be one of story and one of memory. In my mind, I wanted it to be a representation of the journey of the last year of learning and something to look upon, and inside of which to contemplate God and mitzvot.

I kept my eyes open for what might make the right four-cornered garment. I wandered in and out of fabric shops in Israel, I stared at a childhood blanket, and I thought of reusing something that had been left behind by someone else. During my interview with Melila Hellner-Eshed, as I told her the story of one of the most inspirational moments along this journey, in the very room in which I was conducting the interview, she offered me a piece of fabric which she had brought back from the south of India, purchased outside a temple there. It was lined with gold, “like the dress of the *kohen gadol*”, she said. It was bigger than life and so thin you could see through it. My garment had been acquired.

The string for the fringes was to be next. This was much easier to find, as all I had to do was go to my own dresser drawer, where I had a package of blue tekhelet that I had obtained at the conclusion of my P'til Tekhelet²⁸ tour. I had been saving them for a special tallit, and this was the one. I gathered the necessary elements; a newly tailored garment with holes sewn according to the halakaha, the fringes, instructions on various ways of tying tzitzit according to different rabbis, and decided on some quiet spaces

²⁸ note: see the section of this project called Tekhelet for more info on the P'til Tekhelet organization.

where I could set intentions, focus on the moment, and offer the work of my hands and these physical materials with my attention towards the eventual act of offering the appropriate blessing as I put on my tallit.

I tied the first tzitzit sitting at home at my desk, in the middle of the night when I could not sleep. My mind had been racing and I realized that it was time to take action toward becoming more centered. I uttered the words “*l’shem mitzvah tzitzit*”, for the purpose of the mitzvah of tzitzit, which I would eventually do for each corner, as I placed the strings through the hole. For this first cord, I chose to follow the instructions of Sefer ha-Chinuch, which systematically discusses the 613 mitzvot according to the Rambam. I contemplated how many generations had done this, and thought of what it means to have a teacher who goes outside of the box and teaches Torah that goes right at the soul, like Melila. I set an intention of new beginnings, even though this was approaching the end of my capstone project. I chose not to designate an *atara* on the talit, which as I grew more and more tired allowed me to drift into a state where it did not matter which way was up or down. My tallit was in process, and so was I. As the sun rose, I finished tying the tzitzit, I kissed it delicately and sat quietly and enjoyed the moment.

The second tzitzit I tied was in the style of the Vilna Gaon. I tied it in the empty sanctuary at Congregation Kol Ami during business hours; just the Torahs and me. I set an intention of nothingness. I tried to empty out my thoughts to become an empty vessel wanting to be filled with God, Torah, and Love. In this moment I wanted to be in total silence, knowing that eventually I will be in the midst of much loudness with the congregants who I will serve in the future. I asked God to continue to open and empty my heart to this idea, and to be reminded of it every time I look at my tallit.

The third tzitzit was tied in partnership with Rabbi Richard Levy. We sat in his office during our last meeting for this project. I showed him the pattern that the Ra'avad instructed, and we paused to make the moment a prayerful one. I felt like we were blessing each other, the garment, and God all at once. Rabbi Levy offered blessings using the metaphor of sails pushing the spirits of Shayna and I forward in relationship, strength to continue to let my personal story be told, and for the Torah embedded in this tallit. I offered blessings for the teachers, the wisdom, and the shoulders I will stand on as I become a Rabbi and let this tallit be a vehicle for the Torah coming from Sinai forward. As I tied, I stared at his hands. Those hands have written prayers and foundational words of the Reform movement. Those hands have gripped the Jewish tradition tightly. Those hands have held so many faces and given so many hugs. I will forever be grateful to have spent this last year learning with and from that man, and that he had a literal hand in the making of my tallit.

The fourth and final corner was tied again at my desk at home. Surprisingly, it just sort of happened. I tied it in the style of the Izhbitzer Rebbe, which is also the style that Chabad uses. It is the most common way of tying the tzitzit that I have seen during this project. I chose to not be specific in the intention setting on this last one, but rather just to allow it to come as I tied. I was struck by the dangling long threads that somehow felt like leftovers from the last year of study, I heard the idea flow that there is always going to be more to tie. This was not the completion of my tallit, but instead a beginning of the next chapter of the story. I kissed all the tzitzit like a newborn baby, I felt the texture of the material on my face, I quietly said the bracha and put my tallit on. I felt a

rush of feelings; this was new, this was mine, this was unique, this was holy, this was a true *shehekhiyanu* moment.

CONCLUSION: WRAP IT UP

When I set out on this journey, I was already in relationship with the tallit *katan*, tallit *gadol*, and tzitzit. Something happened along the way that is necessary to state in the concluding section of this capstone project. Having had this experience, and I believe that the tallit has the ability to do this without a year of immersive study as well, I got closer to God, Judaism and people. I discovered through this work that the more I entered into the protective canopy of the tallit as an individual, the more others came along with me. The more that I asked, read, studied, and shared along this path, the more I got to know other people and their traditions, which in turn led me to having to make specific decisions that brought about a deeper connection to my own Jewish identity. Throughout this project, I was surprised and happy to discover that this individual and often intentionally isolating garment has an unexpected ability to be inclusive, and bring people together. Jacob Milgrom said that these garments are “not restricted to Israel’s leaders, be they kings, rabbis or scholars. It is the uniform of all Israel.²⁹” I believe these words to be true.

In an age where membership numbers are down and the desire for spirituality is up, I think we need more tallitot. I am not suggesting that the number of tallitot that are produced needs to increase, rather that we need more opportunities in our days to wear them, to tie them, to share them, to meditate and pray beneath them, and to be wrapped up in them. It is a garment that can be with us during the cycles of life, if we let it. I envision a newborn baby being wrapped in a tallit that has significance to the family,

²⁹ Milgrom, Jacob, “The Tassel and the Tallit,” The Fourth Annual Rabbi Louis Fineberg Memorial Lecture (University of Cincinnati, 1981).

which makes appearances at special events throughout the child's life. I envision that child growing up and tying tzitzit on their own garment. I envision conversations where people include the particular tallit they want to be buried in as part of their conversations for end of life planning. The journey of the tallit from cradle to the grave is a tangible and important one that I pray more people will bring into their religious practice. The reward from a committed practice with a tallit, whether for an individual, a family, or an entire community can only be received later and if ritualized action was taken. The tallit can give us a sense of instant gratification at times, but I believe it can also give us something more long term. As Rabbi Levy writes, "study, prayer, and reflection on our actions will help us offer informed responses to the Torah's call to do God's will in our days. Such responses will help us to transform a life too often lived exclusively in a state of *chol*, ordinariness, into a life filled with *kedushah*, with holiness."³⁰ This project has proven to me that the tallit is a vehicle that can take us towards a life filled with holiness.

As Reform Judaism continues to evolve and grow, I am glad to see more and more tallitot appearing on the shoulders of people in prayer, or groups of meditators, or being held above a group of newly confirmed teens. These images are just the beginning. The list can keep growing if we open our hearts and minds to opportunities to bring out this blanket of Godliness. We should heed the words of Mark Washofsky who said, "Reform Judaism has always recognized the tendency of Jewish practice to change over time in response to its environment." In this case, changing direction and embracing the older custom while reimagining it for the future seems to me to be an important and

³⁰ Levy, Richard N., "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism: Third Draft" in *A Vision of Holiness: The Future of Reform Judaism*, URJ Press, New York, 2005, Appendix 6, p. 284

effective addition to the daily life of Reform Jews, if they choose to of course. How will the average Reform Jew know that this glorious cape of comfort is available to them unless it is presented, taught, and tried? Washofsky goes on to say that “an observance can be meaningful simply because it is traditional, because it evokes the religious experience of the Jewish people throughout the ages.³¹” The tallit can take us back through the centuries with one swift sweeping whoosh over our heads. It is up to us, what we do with the future.

One of my great takeaways from this project was the experience and the wisdom gained from the interviews. To hear and see people bring their stories to life through their tallit was a true gift. There were moments that were funny, some profound, but mostly they were genuine tales of changes in people’s lives. I saw the struggles of generations of different Jews in different places through the lens of their prayer shawl. I saw their family history play out against the backdrop of different stripes and colors. I saw emotions and faith come to the forefront of the conversation. The tallit became a bridge between us as individuals, and a bridge between us and God. It is with this in mind that I will close with the words of Midrash Tehilim 6:1, which are words of prayer: “So we pray that God spread God’s protecting tent of peace over us.” May the tallit and tzitzit be a part of the unfolding plan in the universe where peace rules over all.

³¹ Washofsky, Mark, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, UAHC Press, New York, 2001 p. 9

INTERVIEWS

RABBI DAVID LEVINE – July 21st, 2015

DL: I'm not a good storyteller, so I am going to give you three anecdotes. One, is the tallit that I regularly use is one that my wife, then bride, gave me when we were married. It has kind of yellowed over the decades. It was an all white tallit.

MS: Why is that the one you use regularly?

DL: I didn't always use it. I used to use a regular black and white one. I don't have anything dramatic about that. Another anecdote is that there is this thing that if you don't use tefilin for a certain period they have to be checked. So, what I used to do, when both my sons weren't into it, I would rotate my use of tallit and tefilin in the morning, and it was especially challenging because Nadav is a lefty. I had to play around. I would use them for a week or two every few months. And, it really inexplicably thrilled me when Nadav, who was just married and packed up his stuff, took his tallit and tefilin with him. That is anecdote number two.

MS: That is a beautiful story. I'm intrigued that it kind of thrilled you that they were going away from you.

DL: Anecdote number three happened just a month ago. Our daughter, Shira, and her husband just had a baby boy. From the day that the sonogram showed that it was a boy, they worked themselves up into a frenzy about the *brit*. On the one hand it was clear to both of them that they were going to do it, and, on the other hand it was a source of tension. What happened was that for the *brit* itself, it was just the parents and grandparents at our house. The *mohel* came over. A week later, they did an event for their family and friends. Now, who was going to be the *sandek*? Shira and Amot decided they

didn't want Amot's father to do it. He's older than I am and he has a tremor in his hands. So, I was the one that held the baby. Shira brought her tallit. Amot wore it when he held the baby, and for some reason when I put on a tallit, I didn't automatically go to the one that I wear daily, but I opened up the drawer. And, then I saw my grandfather's tallit that I took from his bed stand in the old age home when we cleared it out. Its one of those, more a shawl than a tallit, but it is big. It's what he was wearing during the last years of his life.

MS: So he wasn't buried in it?

DL: He wasn't buried in it. I don't know which tallit he was buried in. I don't know what tallit they used, if at all. In America, Buffalo, it is more antiseptic, it is a white washed experience, than funerals and burial in Israel, if only because there is no coffin.

MS: Can you identify what made you to go to the drawer?

DL: No. It might have been something as trivial as that's where I was standing. The drawer was an arm's length away, and the other tallit was across the room, over some books on the shelf. It was more of a shawl that you wear over your shoulders and bring into your arms. Different than what I usually wear, where you kind of bring the corners over your shoulder. So that was it, so I wore the tallit, tried to gingerly hold the baby's feet, fixated my eyes to a point on the wall. Tried to burrow a hole in the wall with my eyes while I waited for the thing to be over. And then it was.

MS: When you put on a tallit or maybe tzitzit, do you feel differently? And did it feel differently wearing your grandfather's tallit?

DL: I didn't put on tzitzit since I was a teenager, since high school. The only reason I did it then was that it was mandated, it was part of the school. It was left by the wayside

when I didn't have the mandate anymore. But, according to most authorities, I am still *yotzei* by putting on a tallit in the morning, which is fine by me. Vis-a-vie my grandfather's tallit and the day of Yanai's *brit*, that is just reporting the facts. What I do find myself doing, is when I do put on a tallit, maybe on Shabbat or a regular morning, when there is more leisure, I find myself when its wrapped around my head, taking a deep breath, and saying the *pseukim* that go with it, *mah yakar chasdecha elohim*, that people shall find shelter beneath the shadows of your wings. That's the most off the beaten path touchy-feely thing that I have got.

MS: Do you have any other customs that you associate with tallit?

DL: Besides the gathering of the *tzitziyot* at *havienu l'shalom*? No, I don't ever put it over my head or anything like that.

MS: If you would like to be buried in a tallit, are any of these tallit one that you would want to be buried in?

DL: To the extent that I've ever given it thought, I've kind of dismissed it. Let someone else make the decision, I don't really care (laughter).

MS: Do you have a favorite text to teach associated with tallit? To help people expand their relationship with tallitot?

DL:.. Probably, the Yehuda Amichai poem, which you probably know. That seems to be, at least in the Israeli or Hebrew-speaking context, something that both secularizes and also brings in and seeks to experience the tallit.

MS: It is in *Mishkan T'fila*, in English.

DL: Ahhh! So, its been canonized! If its been canonized, then I would probably look for something else. We don't want canon. Theres' a 12th century Ashkenazic Responsa by

the Ra'avan, Eliezer ben Nathan, he gives a halakhic issue, but it's fun because it is so idiosyncratic. He's the only halakhic authority that I have been able to identify who designated the tzitzit as *cheftza* and not *gavrah* meaning that you are only required to affix fringes if you are going to wear a four cornered garment. You're not required. It is an obligation that falls on the garment, the *chefetz*, and not on the person. Because most people say you are obligated to wear a four cornered garment in order to require yourself to apply fringes to that garment. Even though that is rejected, it stands out as a fine halakhic distinction and a lone voice. I like challenging the practice, the custom, the law, keeps us honest. Did they locate fringes in the caves in the Judean desert? That would be something, to have tzitziyot from 2000 years ago! There was teflin there. That gives a sense of historic depth and what's at stake, trying to fashion your own stance towards things. If there is a safeguard against the flippancy of personal autonomy that would be the one has the weight of that type of responsibility.

MHE: In Duties of the Heart, Bahya ibn Paquda has this wonderful chapter about retreating and solitude, and a desire to worship God by being alone, he's very Sufi. He says maybe once people didn't have to move so far away, so outside of their town or their village in order to get into the *kavanah* of what they are trying to cultivate. He says but now, we have to do it because we've lost that, this is the 11th century, the noise makes us have to do it. In my feeling, the reason that tallit is so wonderful is because it's dedicating this time. It's like saying I am sitting with you and if I don my tallit we're saying we are in a different space now. I think we need to separate, to have sacred space. People are yearning for it, to differentiate from screen time and from work time. To wrap yourself under a *huppah* or blanket or inside the smell of your tallit, to be in your space, it's something we need. You could do body art, but this is a statement. I think we need it ritually and to differentiate from time and noise. It also puts a sacred string around people who are going to do prayer. And if you are wearing one, and I am wearing one, and we are standing next to each other, we are in a different relationship because we are both in our own spaces, in our tallit.

Also, the tallit allows us to speak in a mode that we wouldn't be doing if we were in a coffee shop just shmoozing or talking or discussing. You are allowed, and I think this is the most important thing for rabbis, a big part of what you will be doing, is bless, to bless! A tallit is a Superman thing. I am now not talking *divrei chulin*, I am not talking now mundane talk. It's what you do with a tallit, you can say "y'varechecha".

MS: That's what my tzitzit are for, to remember that.

MHE: *Nachon*, tzitzit for you are for memory. So, is a tallit softer?

MS: tallit is warm, interesting, fuzzy, and my main tallit has a coffee stain from the day I went with my class to Women of the Wall.

MHE: Tallit can go with you through your life stations, and that was a life station!

MS: I'm finding that tallitot have stories and some of them are associated with life stations. I have a tallit, with a matching kippah and bag, that I will probably never wear again, but I also would not give away, from my Bar Mitzvah.

MHE: You could sew it into your baby's blanket.

MS: That feels so different than what I think the rabbis intended.

MHE: There are a few things that I have in my reservoir of stories. I'll tell you about a few tallitot. I have a lot of them. Tallit are also a wonderful thing to give. My first tallit was 1982 when I went to India. I walked into a shop of gujarati handcrafts. I saw this, everything was very very colorful, and suddenly there was one piece of a simple woolen shawl, and I thought, that is going to be my tallit. My friend Amichai Lau-Levie, he brought the tekhelet, we sat together and made *kavanot*, and did the four corners. It was a very intimate wonderful.

A few years later I went to South India. I saw that when they come into the temple, the men wear two pieces of material. They wash, they have to be ritually clean, and they wear two pieces of material, like a white diaper, and a tallit. Beautiful white material with golden edges. I loved it. I thought *eizeh yofi!* This is not for anywhere, this is your *kodesh* clothes. So, I bought this thinking this was going to be my summer tallit.

There are also all kinds of tallitot that I was given that I have passed on. I don't need seven! But, I've never bought one, I've always made them. As a woman, it was a choice

to say that until now it wasn't important to me, but now I want it. I really want it. I want to stand as a praying person.

One day in the back of the ashram, a place where people were actually coming off of drugs, in the lost and found, someone found a woolen tallit. And someone took it to sleep under, to use as a blanket. There was an Israeli guy there, secular, not religious at all, and he was up in arms. He was like "you can not do this!" This was sacrilegious for him. And, also, someone had left it and someone needed a blanket. Both are right. It was a moment of how do we treat *cheftzei kodesh*.

If you read *chazal*, tallit is something you wrap yourself in, you carry your wood for burning in, it's something you use, you might use it for your table. It might be your kafia.

MS: I think about kippot, and how we don't kiss them. But our tallit, we kiss them all the time.

MHE: It's your sacred blanky! Of course you kiss it. In the Talmud, it says in the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Yehoshia when there wasn't enough room, we would sit four under one tallit. It isn't like a pristine transcendent garment. It's something you can give and take. It gets cut through the middle, *zeh shelo, zeh sheli*. We have to see it that way.

When Elisha Ben Abuya dies, his student comes and places his tallit over the grave.

When my father dies, he is wrapped in a tallit. They want to leave the world with that blanket.

When Rabbi Mayer puts his tallit over his teachers grave. "Sleep".

What Boaz says to Ruth when he covers her. That's part of the experience of safety. We are covered, not exposed. She says "*kanafecha*". *Chazal* sees *kanaf* and says she is not going to lie there naked, "wrap me"!

I think the most primordial image is God wrapping himself in a tallit of light in order to create, and then there is the beginning of creation. Such a beautiful image of covering, uncovering.

Hmm, tallit. The old man in Mishpatim (from the Zohar). The old man, they say to him, teach us, and he is not so sure he wants to share stuff with. No, No No! He says to himself, just do it, this is Torah. you don't have to be ashamed. *Nitatef v'yashar lifneihem*. He wraps himself with a tallit! It's like saying, now we are doing it. We can get under it, into it. That's what tallit is for us.

MS: Do you change when you put a tallit on?

MHE: Sometimes I feel that just being wrapped in a tallit, I put it over my head, I can really be in my space, I can cry more easily. I feel it allows me just to be. It's not out in the open. It's protecting me.

[Melila presents me with a piece of cloth]³²

MHE: This is for you! This is all hand woven. I learned from Amichai Lau-Levie something. You have to do the fringes with someone you love. Someone you enjoy being with. It doesn't have to be sacred without laughing, but, it is special, we are making a tallit. It is from Kerala in the south of India. I got it in the *mikdash* as we ought to.

³² This is the piece of cloth that the tallit for this project ended up being made from.

RABBI DON GOOR – July 21st, 2015

DG: I have two tallitot that I wear and I have three tallitot. I have one that I wear all the time, and my myth is that I got it at my Bar Mitzvah. I grew up in a Reform shul, no tallit, no kippah. But, we had Orthodox family friends who gave me a tallit and tefilin. It's black and white, very traditional, which is what makes me think it's from my Bar Mitzvah. The ones I've bought since aren't. It's the one I wear the most. It has some stains on it and it's older.

I have two tallit bags that I keep in my drawer. One that my Grandmother made for me, I was in college by then. I have one that I bought here in Jerusalem, you know the "Joseph's tallit". I don't wear it too often, ironically, because I think it's too gay.

The third one that I don't wear is the one we got wrapped in at our wedding. It's a much bigger one and I am not so comfortable with such a bigger one. It's white with light blue. I don't know if Evan ever wears it, but I don't.

MS: Do you feel differently when you put a tallit on?

DG: Yeah, I very much resonate to that Yehuda Amichai poem. To the beach towel and wrapping, and the notion of taking off and the airplane. And at the synagogue, it used to totally set my mood. I used to find that before services I was very frenetic, worrying about every detail. Is the Bar Mitzvah family here? Do I have my *drosh*? I always waited until the last minute to put my tallit on, because I didn't want to put it on and then be doing details. It really transforms the moment. Absolutely.

MS: Do you have any minhagim associated with it?

DG: Yeah, I turn and face the ark and put it on alone, not looking at anyone. I left out of this whole narrative earlier about the other tallit that I had at Judea. We had sets that

matched. I had an artist make them. I always thought that was a really important symbol to have the congregation see us all together. We had a set for *chag*, one for weekday, and eventually another weekday set. I always thought it was a really nice sign of a team. Eventually, not everyone agreed, and they wanted their own. You didn't have to wear them, but on *chagiim* we wore them. Shabbat you could wear your own, and there were state occasions when we would wear them, the notion of everybody being a part of one community, sharing.

MS: Was there anything special about their design?

DG: The *atara*, each of us chose which text we wanted. Which became very complicated when people left and other people came. They had to inherit the other person's text. Each person's text was symbolic of them and their *kavannah*.

MS: Have you ever tied your own tzitzit.

DG: Many times. And I taught every kid in 6th grade to tie tzitzit and put on tefilin. It was really important to me that they had a tactile notion, not just going to a store and picking out a tallit that matches their dress, which is very common. So, every year I would tie one hundred some odd, and I would always do it with them.

Tallit are a very important symbol. For my installation at Judea, I wanted a symbol of community. I had an artist commissioned to design a huge tallit, it ended up being a wall piece, disappointing because I loved the design. I envisioned we would use it at ritual occasions; to install a board, consecrate kids, but it became much too heavy. An artist designed it and hundreds of people implemented it. It was like paint by numbers, blue is number 6, any sequence of string, of fabric, and as long as you chose the right color palette you could do anything in your square. Every family had a square. So it was very

symbolic to me, and disappointing to me that it never got used. But it is symbolic of a community event. It's up on the wall at Judea right when you walk in. It doesn't come out of its frame.

MS: Did you ever wear tallit *katan*?

DG: I have tallit *katan* because I wanted to try, but no. I don't think I've ever even opened them.

MS: Do you have a tallit that you would want to be buried in?

DG: I'm trying to think. We've paid for our burials. It's all done, including notes for the service. I don't think I included that. But, yeah, I would want the one from my Bar Mitzvah that I wear every week. We don't have kids so we're not going to pass it on. I don't have my dad's tallit and he only died three years ago. I can't remember if we buried him in his tallit. We probably did, and his tefilin. Yeah, an interesting note that I need to ... it's so interesting because if you prepay a funeral they ask you all that stuff, but I don't remember tallit being part of it.

MS: What text did you use when you worked with the kids?

DG: *Havienu l'shalom*, I would show them the four corners and *ahava rabbah*. I like that tactile moment of grabbing the four tzitzit, so that also connects. The text that was on all my tallitot where a text was chosen was "*p'tach libi toratecha*." Because, to me that's what tallit is all about. To help remind me to open my heart.

MS: So the thing that sort of closes you off, is meant to open you up?

DG: (grins) Yeah. (pause) With the kids, we did the Yehuda Amichai poem and mostly I focused on the bracha. I wanted them to learn the bracha and know what it means to wrap yourself.

MS: Anything else?

DG: My tallit I find very private. Last week, Dan Moskowitz was here and he said, “I forgot my tallit, can I borrow yours?” and I felt weird giving him my Bar Mitzvah tallit. It’s mine! The fabric smells and feels of you, unlike a book. I would never mind loaning someone my Mishkan T’fila or my Plaut. To me, fabric has a whole different richness. It felt weird to give it to him. I took it out of my grandmother’s tallit bag. I put it in the other one. I didn’t want to give him my grandmother’s tallit bag. It’s mine! It’s very personal. At a wedding, I always tell them to bring their own. First of all, I want them to buy one, but I wouldn’t want to use mine.

MS: What do you think is the flip side to growing up classical Reform without all of this?

DG: I missed. I missed that deeper feeling that tallit brings me, going deeper into prayer, that it creates a space that I feel safe and connected in. Tefilin doesn’t do that for me. They don’t create that feeling for me. And yet, I wanted every kid to put them on. I wanted them to know what they were and never laugh at someone who wears them. And some of them might choose. I resented that I didn’t get that chance as a kid. My dad grew up Orthodox, which it may have been his response, but before he died he was back in his tallit.

RABBI NAAMAH KELMAN – July 28th, 2015

NK: My relationship with tallit goes back to unbelievable memories of hiding under my father's tallit. I think a lot of little girls go back to their father's tallit, playing with the tzitzit. Sitting under it while I am in the men's section of the Jewish Theological Seminary, peering out of there. Realizing that wow, I am looking at the *gedolim* of the Conservative movement at JTS, and then, I am banished at age 12 when I couldn't sit in the men's section anymore. Like I had been banished from *gan eden*.

He had these big tallitot. Someone had given him a tallit with a silver *atara*. A sign of the *hasidic* sect that his family was a part of, which always made him feel really uncomfortable.

MS: Why was it uncomfortable?

NK: It was kind of showy, the *atara*. and he was just more modest about it.

I didn't think about it as something so associated with men and boys. And then at age 15, I go to Camp Ramah and tie dyed tallit is all the rage. Everyone is tie dying tallitot. I find myself making tallit for my father and brother. They weren't tie dyed, but they definitely weren't your typical black and white tallitot.

MS: Do you remember what they looked like?

NK: Yeah, my father's was brown. Brown! And my brother's was light blue or turquoise. My father wore it proudly at JTS, because JTS ran Camp Ramah. His argument with JTS was that it was an institution that often held its own graduates in disdain because they weren't academic enough, or *frum* enough, or halakhic enough. And, here was a product of Camp Ramah, one of the Seminary's greatest inventions, and he's going to wear that

tallit. When you have people like Lieberman and Finkelstein who really see themselves as Orthodox. A tie dyed tallit? They don't get it. So, my father wore that very proudly.

MS: Do you know whatever happened to it?

NK: No idea. I wonder if Levi has the one I made for him.

The next story is, with the birth of feminism just around that time, is the realization of "maybe I should have one too". I can't remember if I put on a tallit at Camp Ramah for the first time. I don't remember, but I did do other stuff at Camp Ramah for the first time. They let me do *havdallah*. I was in a bunk that had *aliyot*. 1971, I was in Israel, and then I get to college, and I go to the first ever Jewish Feminist Gathering at the McAlpin Hotel in the fall of 1973. That really is the big bang of Jewish feminism. 500 women for the first time in a room talking about 2000 years of oppression and how we are going to take over. It was quite an experience. I was one of the youngest. My Hillel rabbi was wise enough to say, "oh, I got this invitation, it looks interesting, I am sending you." He changed my life not only because he sent me, but he also asked me to be his assistant in running High Holiday services. My first year as a freshman, he made me take an *aliyah* and I realized it wasn't God who is saying no, no, no. It was my Orthodox principal from Day School. I think in those years I am wearing other people's tallitot. I'm sure by 1974 I am wearing a tallit, I don't know which or whose.

MS: You've said you felt like tallit was an easy act in the world of feminism because of the sense of femininity associated with it as a shawl?

NK: Yes, I think it's the first religious accessory that women feel comfortable with because they can always (acts out a demonstrative placing of a scarf around her neck).

There is something so male about tefilin, so male about kippah. There is something about

tallit that is less male. It's become much more universal. I don't know what the percentage is for tallit. But then there's a drop for some sort of kippah and then a huge drop for tefilin.

MS: We've talked about a big tallit. And we often see skinny ones, which are easier to play guitar with, many tallitot are just smaller, was there a shift for you ever in size?

NK: I don't think I was ever into the huge ones. The one I made for my dad was middle sized. But, they've never been huge. I know my brother has his big rainbow one.

Fast forward, my mother has a tallit made for me for my ordination in 1992. It's actually falling apart. She liked this idea of red. She did it all by herself, which is so unusual for my mother. It's supposed to be like the walls of Jerusalem and it has my favorite quote from *tefila*. I picked the quote and she bought it for my ordination. So, I certainly wear this one at ordination. I wear the Women at the Wall tallit also.

MS: Will you tell me more about that one?

NK: Well I bought it just to support Women at the Wall. Over the years I gave one to my daughter, and I kept one. This is more to support my friend Anat Hoffman. I am not a big Women at the Wall person. I go maybe once a year when Anat calls. The Wall, *davening* at the Wall in an all women's *minyan* doesn't exactly speak to me. I feel that women should have the right.

MS: Do you wear it in particular instances?

NK: I wear it when I go there, and not in particular. I have another one from over the years. One that I wore when it was particularly unpleasant, it was raining, all the color drained, all the color ran out. That one is more symbolic, because we had to hide them. Sometimes I wear that.

My daughter has a tallit that she had made for herself, for her Bat Mitzvah. She doesn't wear it anymore but sometimes I wear it. That one has meaning for me. My other daughter had one that is sheer. I wear that because it's very light in the summer. She had stopped wearing it for a while and then she had another one made by the same woman in New York, for her wedding, and unfortunately it was in a suitcase that never arrived. So, she lost her wedding tallit. Which she did not get to wear at her wedding. At one point in her wedding, her husband wrapped his big tallit around her.

This is a new thing that people are doing which is like kind of a *bedeken*. She stood under my father's tallit. Her wedding was egalitarian in many ways. But, he wrapped her in his tallit. That was not happening when I got married.

Now, I am remembering, someone made me a tallit for my wedding with *etz haiim hee*.

That tallit I don't have, I don't know why. It had two trees, and *etz haiim hee lehmahchazikiim bah*, which was the theme that Levi talked about at our wedding. And there was a tiny little frog. Because, we had nicknames for each other, froggy or something. That tallit that I have worn since 1979 had a little frog. That's a tallit I wore for a very long time.

MS: What about tallit in places other than a normative prayer space? Baby namings?

Meditation retreats?

NK: Maybe a meditation retreat? I was in the second Institute of Jewish Spirituality cohort. By then, I brought my tallit and tefilin.

MS: Have you thought about tallit and the end of one's life?

NK: I know we wrapped my father in his tallit. We kept the silver one for weddings. We kept that for our children's weddings, it's ornate and no one really sees it.

MS: Did you ever consider wearing tzitzit?

NK: No, that doesn't speak to me. Anat gave me one of these cutesie things for women with tzitzit, but it doesn't speak to me. The tallit does a lot more.

MS: Do you have any *minhagim* associated with your tallit?

NK: There were years I put it over my head. During the *yamim noraim* I put it over my head. Since being at HUC, I do it less, but I do at Kol HaNeshama on the High Holidays. One thing I did start doing was for *shema*, I don't cover my eyes, I put [my fingers] on my heart and I don't say *shema* until I hear my heartbeat. Deep mindfulness is when you can actually hear your heart. The other thing we do is put it over children on Simchat Torah.

In my work here, the only act of religious coercion I have done in this country, was starting in 1994, at Tali Bayit VeGan, a school of which I was a founder, our 6th grade girls had a Bat Mitzvah. Now, they didn't have to wear tallit, but they had to be called to the Torah, and to this day, their teachers hold the tallit over them. In the years I did it, I wear a tallit of course. You have to imagine. There are secular, Reform, some get it, some don't get it and when we founded our school we had a whole kippah crisis. How do we get our kids to wear kippot? Should we? Shouldn't we? We had an incredibly gifted first grade teacher who made every kid a gorgeous kippah out of cloth. The Bucharian kippah had become a woman's egalitarian thing. I came into class and burst into tears. This was a dream of raising a generation who felt at ease, boys and girls, in kippot. Over the years I have felt that we have had mixed results with who wears and who doesn't.

MS: Do you have any texts associated with tallit?

NK: Well, of course, everyone loves the Yehuda Amichai poem, which has become the canonical one. Here is a really nice story about that. I did a Bat Mitzvah just after it came out where the mother made her daughter a tallit, where the *atara* quoted Amichai. That is what she put. No longer the bracha, Amichai!

My friend, Rabbi Shira Milgrom, in White Plains, they created a whole dance to a Danny Maseng song, a whole wrapping of the tallit that the whole congregation does. They choreographed putting on tallit together as a community. They lift, wrap, it's beautiful. Maybe it's to Mah Tovv? She told me that it really helped people wear tallit.

RABBI JOSH GARROWAY – October 7th, 2015

MS: I have never seen you wear a tallit.

JG: If you want to see me wear one you can look over at that picture. It's my ordination photo. It does exist.

MS: Is there a story about that tallit?

JG: When I was 12 ½, my Mom took me to the Judaica shop to get a tallit for my Bar Mitzvah, of course.

MS: Why do you say "of course"?

JG: Things have changed in the last 20 or 30 years in Reform Judaism. There are very few old-fashioned classical reform synagogues where people don't wear any ritual garb. Where you would be seen as bizarre if you do. The synagogue I was raised in was the furthest left leaning in the city. It was still normal for a Bar Mitzvah kid to have a kippah and tallit. When it comes to ritual garb generally, I know you want to talk about tallit but they often go together when Jews pray and generally speaking don't at other times. Tallit *katan* in our world is somewhat extraordinary.

For me, one of the main reasons why I don't wear ritual garb is a feminist issue. And it's based on a series of experiences after I was ordained when we were a part of a quote unquote egalitarian conservative *minyan* in New Haven at the Yale Hillel. Every once in awhile, and I have no problem wearing a kippah and I have no problem wearing a tallit. Every once in awhile we would make the walk down on a Saturday morning to the little room where the *minyan* was, I would go in with Kristi, neither one of us wearing a tallit or kippah, and invariably someone would lean over to me with a kippah, with eyes that

said “I am insisting you put this on”, often times people who were not regular members of the *minyan*, just there as guests. And of course I was a routine member there, and read Torah there and everything, and this person would assume that I needed help being shown where the kippah is and how to put it on. And then occasionally suggested that I put a tallit on. No one has ever done that to Kristi. That has been an experience that I now try to create over and over again. I go to a Conservative synagogue in Pasadena and it just happened, I think it was Rosh Hashana, and I was there with no kippah or tallit on, and the man behind me said “you know you aren't wearing a kippah?”, and I looked back and said “yeah, I know.” This led to a discussion with him where I explained to him that once kippah and tallit are expected for all members of this egalitarian community, I will wear a kippah and tallit, but I refuse to be a part of a supposedly egalitarian community where implicit in ritual garb is the idea that men are held to a different expectation than women. So for me, in a lot of ways, it's an expression of feminist ideals and egalitarianism and it has nothing to do with any personal meaningful experience with ritual garb, but you know me ...

MS: or potentially lack there of?

JG: Yeah, yeah. But people say, “what do you have against the tallit?” I have nothing against the tallit. If a sign said all people who enter this synagogue are expected to wear kippah and at appropriate times tallit, I would wear kippah and at appropriate times tallit. But, I will not do it when the sign says “Men are expected to wear a kippah” and I have a picture of it on my phone, and that's standard in the Conservative and Orthodox world, and that's fine. But if it's egalitarian, it should be egalitarian! And even in Reform

communities, there is still this notion that you are going to get an usher handing a kippah to a man before a woman, and that's not ok. That is part of it.

Another part of it, and maybe this relates more to tallit than kippah, is that to me, I don't experience prayer as some kind of transformative experience that is separated from my day to day experiences. A lot of that might be that I didn't pray in any sort of regular way until I was 22. And then I started praying everyday as part of my normal work experience. I went to rabbinical school where everyday at 10 o'clock you went to chapel and it didn't feel like a break in the day. It didn't seem like there was any need to mark that space off, entering into a different experience, by donning ritual garb. Even when I did go to synagogue on Saturday morning it still seems artificial for me, being a person who doesn't wear tallit *katan*, to somehow then put on a tallit because I am praying in synagogue, like I am somehow going to fulfill the mitzvah for that moment by putting on a Jewish costume for an hour while I do my prayers and then take it off when I go back into regular life? I have no problems internally switching into whatever prayer place I need to be. I don't need what I call the costume to change. With that said, there are a few moments in my life which I do see as transformative, where I want to be marked off as in a very specifically Jewish place undergoing change and so I think, I can't remember if I wore a tallit when I was married, but certainly when I was ordained, I plan on wearing one when I am dead.

MS: You do? Can you tell me more about that? You are the first person to bring it up.

JG: Well, it's a major life cycle event.

MS: Is there a particular tallit?

JG: Yes. It will be that one right there. That is my tallit. Bar Mitzvah, ordination, my whole wedding was a blur, I don't remember if it was incorporated into our kids *bris*, it might have been ...

MS: Has anyone ever given you a gift of a tallit?

JG: No one has ever given me a gift, they know better (snickers). To me, if the tallit is a meaningful garment, then I only want it to be used in the most meaningful Jewish experiences. Maybe that's what it is. And since *shacharit* in our chapel, at 10 o'clock on a Wednesday, is routine, I guess what I could do is to buy a routine tallit. There are other little things too. I often go to synagogue with a 3 year old, a 5 year old and a 6 year old. Which means all I am doing is running around and picking kids off the floor and getting them to stand up, and a tallit gets in the way.

MS: Some of the people I have interviewed would argue that sitting in services playing with their father's tallit was a formative Jewish moment.

JG: "Twiddle tallit". I think people just say that.

MS: You mentioned meaningful Jewish experiences. Does having a tallit in those moments elevate them more?

JG: I don't know if it elevates them more. It is one way of physically marking off their uniqueness in a way that daily or weekly Shabbat prayer is not remarkable.

MS: Do you have any additional ritual associated with the tallit that you have or have associated with it?

JG: No. I say the bracha and I put it on. The fact that it is making an appearance and that it is that tallit is all that matters.

MS: Speaking of making, have you ever made them? *Asoo lahem tzitzit?*

JG: No. I would consider making them as an interesting and creative project, but certainly not because I feel commanded by God or by some other force to wrap fringes around a certain number of times and put them on the side of a garment.

MS: You said you do not wear a tallit *katan*. Is this for the same reason?

JG: People are very complex. For me, tallit *katan* says Orthodox. Much of my Jewish identity is defined against Orthodoxy. I don't want to be identified with Orthodoxy in any way. And if you grow up for 18 to 20 years not wearing a tallit *katan*, it's just weird.

MS: I hear you. I didn't start wearing mine until I was in my 30's.

JG: I remember once being in Mea Sharim, I think I was shopping for a kiddush cup. Shopping for a tallit *katan* in a store like that is like shopping for a blue t-shirt at the Gap. There are buckets full of them. I remember looking at them thinking, maybe I should get one of these. And then I thought, why, this is such a silly custom. It's not Judaism as I understand it. Maybe for some people it is personally meaningful, but not me.

MS: Can you tell me the story of "that tallit" (points to ordination picture)? Is there more to it than "my mother took me to buy it".

JG: There's not really more to it. I grew up in a place that didn't have a lot of Judaica shops. The understanding was you get a tallit when you have a Bar Mitzvah. I think we got one that had a little bit of burgundy in it because, if I remember correctly, I was wearing a blue blazer, gray pants and burgundy or oxblood shoes or belt, and that would look nice. That was my first nice outfit. It's cream colored with some burgundy accents. I'm sure there are some lions. It's probably the symbols of the tribes.

MS: And you have a tallit clip here?

JG: Yes, for the Bar Mitzvah you needed to get registered so you needed to get 5 or 6 things. So I got Great Jews in Sports, a tallit, a tallit clip, and people got that for me for my Bar Mitzvah. I remember being 14, 15, 16 and thinking cool, I'm a grown up, I get to wear this. But then it fizzled. I didn't pray on purpose until I went to rabbinical school.

MS: In this picture you are also wearing a kippah?

JG: I think it depended on what the expectation was for bimah performance versus just being in the pews, and the certain aspects of *kavod*. If a certain person asked me to put on a kippah or tallit, I will put on a kippah or tallit, because the *kavod* outweighs the feminist or personal autonomy statement I want to exercise. And there are people for whom the opposite is also true. I think the New Haven *minyan* for chanting Torah, the tallit was expected for both men and women. So, no problem. Part of being *laissez faire* about tallit and kippah, I remember in Cincinnati, I just didn't care, sometimes in chapel I guess maybe I put a kippah on, sometimes I wouldn't, it just wasn't a thing. Put it on, put it off, it doesn't make a difference. I do remember that before ordination there was a big debate amongst my classmates before ordination about what we were going to wear. You can see that my friend Pam is not wearing kippah or tallit, and David is not wearing a tallit, and I decided that I wanted to respect my classmates and be a part of the collective consensus.

MS: Do you know where your tallit right now?

JG: It's in my blue tallit bag that has a *yad* in it. If I am *layning* Torah, then I'm often bringing my *yad*, and if I have my tallit bag then maybe the tallit will go on, it usually doesn't. But, my favorite kippot are in the tallit bag, I might break out the kippah if I have the tallit bag, because it has the *yad*. By the way, one of my new systems when I am

at a new synagogue, I will wear a kippah but only if it's bright pink, which is my feminist statement. Only the people who know about me appreciate it.

MS: I think I want to buy you a bright pink tallit. Last question, do you have a go to text associated with tallit?

JG: I will say the Pittsburgh Platform, and asking the question, non-moral or ethical mitzvot? Mitzvot that are just about doing something really bizarre that the Torah says to do. What do those commandments mean for you as a person, as a liberal Jew, and that should be the question that people ask when people think about doing *kashrut*, tallit, *mikvah*. The question shouldn't just be about my personal experience and individual meaning, and I really like when I pull the tallit over my head and I feel like I am in a special sacred space. That's fine, some people will have that and some people don't. But, there are much bigger questions, like the meaning of mitzvot that something like the Pittsburgh Platform demands that you think about in a way that is often uncomfortable for modern Jews.

RABBI DVORA WEISBERG October 9th, 2015

DW: The first time I wore a tallit was when I read Torah at a Hebrew High School retreat. I had read Torah at my Bat Mitzvah without a tallit, I grew up in a classical Reform synagogue, and no one wore a tallit. But they said, oh you are reading Torah, put this on. It seemed fine. I went off to be a camp counselor at a Conservative summer camp the summer after high school and when the clothing list came it said “All boys over 13 have to bring tallit and tefilin, and girls may.” I thought, hey, that sounds interesting. I was given my late grandfather’s tallit that my father had. It was probably in shreds, in terrible condition.

MS: Do you remember what it looked like?

DW: It was white, not really really skinny, but not full, probably a foot from top to bottom, with little blue lines. It was likely gossamer thin by then as my grandfather had been dead practically all my life. It must have been 30, 40, 50 years old. It had those fringes that were really slinky. So, I actually went off to summer camp with this tallit and tefilin that I borrowed from my rabbi which he hadn’t put on since his Bar Mitzvah in Germany, and learned how to put everything on. I just felt like it was neat. It felt nice to pray in something. I was at a stage of life, 17 years old; I was very interested in a Judaism that was foreign to me. The Judaism of my childhood I had absorbed. It didn’t require much of you, it didn’t require much intellectually, it didn’t require Hebrew, it didn’t require that you do anything, and suddenly I was presented with this Judaism that had all of these objects; tallit, tefilin, and kashrut. You had to do things and do them a certain way. You had to pronounce your Hebrew a certain way. You had to bend your knees at a

certain time. I was just completely taken by the idea of structure and things that you could do and things you could be good at. Judaism could be something where suddenly I wasn't a nerd, I could do something right, and doing things right was a big deal.

Then I went off to college. I don't remember if I took my Grandfather's tallit, or if I acquired a tallit of my own. I do know that for my 18th birthday, at the end of my freshman year at Brandeis, everyone except my most Orthodox friend, chipped in and bought me my own tallit *gadol*. Suddenly I had this wool tallit, all white. It was great. And then you've got a tallit that you can fold over and it takes up a lot of space, it was beautiful and pristine, I loved that tallit. I had it until it collapsed at a certain point.

I also started to inherit tallitot. Because I had girlfriends at Brandeis who had tallitot, you know, the homemade ones. One of them was big and black and white, someone had a tie dyed one. They had clearly made them themselves. But, as we went through Brandeis, it became clear that wearing a tallit as a woman was fine at the egalitarian *minyan*, but there weren't a lot of guys at the egalitarian minyan. They were all at the Orthodox *minyan*, even the Conservative guys. You were socially rather odd if you wore a tallit. I didn't care, first of all I had boyfriends anyways, but when people were pushing back, I didn't care, I was having this great adventure, particularly guys saying you shouldn't be doing this, I was like who are you? How can you tell me what to do? You don't know anymore about Judaism than I do, and then I started studying. And, I discovered perfectly good arguments that I could wear tallit. I started studying text, I started reading whatever I could get a hold of. I started inheriting these girls tallitot because they wanted to get rid of them. I had all of these abandoned tallitot, so then I wore my own on Shabbat, and the

tie dyed one during the week, I think the black tallit ended up with one of my kids until it fell apart, but I was just hooked.

MS: So, these objects were a motivator to immerse even deeper into Judaism?

DW: When I started doing this at a camp in California, no one explained to me that this was odd. I had seen the “boys have to” and “girls don’t have to” thing, but at this camp, there were other adults, adult women, who wore tallit and tefilin. And there were these kids, particularly kids from Palo Alto. I had 15-year-old girls as campers who were wearing tallit and tefilin, so I didn’t realize this was a big deal, and then I got to the east coast, and then Oh My God! I couldn’t figure out how what I had been doing upset my parents because it was too religious, and suddenly I’d upset these religious people because it wasn’t appropriate. Some people would have responded with “ok, I shouldn’t be doing this”, and I was like “who do you think you are?” You are just some 19 year old guy that thinks he can tell me what to do. So I started studying *gemara*, and looking stuff up and then I wrote my B.A. thesis about it and came out perfectly convinced that I could be doing what I was doing, and the rest of the world should just change.

MS: Amen! You mentioned the tallit that you wore during the week, the one for Shabbat and the ones you gave away. Do you remember any sort of decision-making process involved in that?

DW: The tallit I started using during the week, which may have been at the end of college was much lighter, it was cotton. It folded up into a very small tallit bag, which is very convenient when you have to put your tallit into your backpack. Secondly, the white one. The problem with a white tallit, which I don’t own one at the moment, is so white that, you don’t want to wear it to camp. I took the other ones because I didn’t want it to get

banged up. Also, my white tallit, not only did these women buy me a tallit, but one of the women crocheted me a tallit bag, which was beautiful. I put my grandfather's old tallit bag inside as a lining. I didn't take it to camp because I didn't want it to get mucked up.

MS: Do you still have it?

DW: No I don't. At some point, when we got married, Neal bought me a tallit. We went to a weaver in Manhattan and we designed the tallit together.

MS: You and Neal?

DW: Maybe me and the weaver. This tallit that I do have is white wool with purple and silver stripes. As a matter of fact, three months after we got married, someone stole it from the Seminary synagogue, so I got it replaced. She just did it again.

MS: Is that your most significant tallit?

DW: I think when you get a new tallit, it is first invested with the significance of the source. Neal bought me a smaller tallit for my ordination, which I wear a lot. It's small, it fits in my purse. For me, I think the tallit is first invested with the occasion or the giver, and then is invested with use. So that you then associate the tallit with the prayer experience that you've had. Every tallit has a different sort of quality based on the experience, and the color, and the way you think about it. Every so often I get an idea that I need a new tallit. So I have a wool tallit, its too hot for the summer in LA. My little tallit is so little, maybe I need a big tallit that's made out of something lighter like cotton. It's not like accessorizing, but it's thinking about tallit in your prayer experience. Wearing this smaller tallit in a reform synagogue feels fine, but when I go off to a conservative synagogue I like a slightly bigger tallit because I don't want to look like someone who

has a tallit because she thinks it's an accessory. Then there's also the issue of your tallit when wearing it with tefilin.

MS: Have you ever tied your own tzitzit?

DW: I haven't tied my own, but I have tied for other people. One of my students upon her ordination got a tallit. Four of her teachers and friends each tied one tzitzit. Neal had to learn to tie tzitzit to be ordained at JTS, so when I need to take them off to go to the laundry or something I just have him do it. I realize I could do it if I just open the Jewish Catalog. I do make lots of tallit bags. Everyone in my family has a tallit bag that I made for them. My nieces got tallit bags that I made for their B'nai Mitzvah.

I think if I was making a tallit now, I've never had tzitzit with tekhelet, and I am not sure whether I like the idea or whether I am not really into it.

MS: What is the block there?

DW: Well, I've always had white tzitzit. Should I be concerned about the fact that we don't really know where tekhelet comes from, or it would just look really pretty, or what.

MS: Have you ever worn?

DW: No. I'm not into it.

MS: Because?

DW: It looks really messy, and women wear enough under garments already, I don't need more.

MS: So, it's all practicality.

DW: My understanding of the mitzvah is that it's not mitzvah *haguf*, it's mitzvah *habeged*. In other words, it's not incumbent on us to find a four cornered garment and wear it, it's incumbent on us if we have a four cornered garment to put tzitzit on it. And I

associate tzitzit with *tefila* because when I started wearing a tallit, the people who taught me to wear tallit associated it with *tefila*, and that is enough for me.

MS: Do you have any rituals when you put on your tallit?

DW: I never put it over my head unless I want people to go away. I just put my tallit on. That's what I thought you were supposed to do.

When I first started, I probably recited the *kavannah* in the siddur. But then at the Seminary, *tefila* goes very fast. You have to get your tefilin and tallit on very quickly, and now I can't really read a siddur without my glasses. It's very hard, I know people who have to wear glasses. It's very hard for me to figure out how the glasses and tefilin work together. Also, I am a Litvak and Litvaks don't do extra spiritual practices. Even with their tallit.

MS: Do you use your tallit for anything outside of prayer?

DW: The only life cycle I have officiated at was one wedding and I wore my tallit. Neal said, "you'll decide whether you are going to wear a tallit." Eenie, meenie, minie, moe. Karen Fox actually convinced me that I should wear it because she said, particularly as a woman, going to the wedding and you are not wearing a suit, you need them to know you are the rabbi, and the tallit will let them know you are the rabbi. I officiated a *bris* in the spring, but since the *mohel* was doing the bris, did I have a tallit? I may have worn it? I don't remember.

MS: Many people have talked about tallit being associated with sacred moments, but it sounds like for you it is more associated with the prayer experience.

DW: When you grow up not seeing ritual mitzvot, then you don't have a preconceived notion. A lot of the women I met in college had trouble with tefilin or tallit, even women

I know who went to rabbinical school, because they grew up in a milieu where that was associated with men, but I grew up with a milieu where I didn't associate it with anything because I didn't see it. When I started doing it, I didn't have that block of "this is weird because I am a woman". Those were those other people's problem, which wasn't my problem. Since it was introduced to me as something you do when you pray, and I didn't see many life-cycle events at 18 or 19 years old. What I was experiencing was "you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do this, this really bothers me when you do this."

When I was getting married, I went to visit my future in-laws for the first time. We were going to go to shul on Shabbat morning. My mother-in-law said to me, "I think it would be nice if you didn't wear your tallit." I said, "is the rabbi going to be upset?" My theory was, if I am going to a synagogue where it was going to cause problems I would just *daven* first and then go to synagogue. She said "oh no, the rabbi won't mind at all if you wear a tallit, but you are going to meet all of our friends and we want them to see you as you are and not be distracted by the tallit." I said to her, "but, this is who I am. Your friends are going to see it now or the next time we come, so let's just get it over with now." I was always amazed that the tallit was an issue, that it became a problem, like I was making some rebellious religious statement. When I first wore a tallit, I thought I was making a nice religious statement. Look, I am becoming more religious. I realized to my annoyance that if my brothers started doing all the things I had started doing no one would have minded at all. I wasn't trying to be a rebellious person.

MS: Would you like to be buried in a tallit, and have you considered if any of the ones we have discussed are that one?

DW: Yes, I certainly want to be buried in a tallit. It makes sense to me. I assume that shouldn't be any sort of problem. I would certainly put it in my wishes. I'm hoping to live a little longer, but I suppose if I were to drop dead tomorrow I would want to be buried in my wedding tallit, because it's my tallit *gadol*. I don't know if that tallit will still be around, but I suppose if it wears out I could be buried in it because the tzitzit are cut off anyways. I want to be buried in a tallit because that is who I am.

Part of this is my whole burial thing. I am gonna be dead, so I want to be buried the way Jews ought to be buried. I think if I didn't feel that way, if it wasn't a Jewish issue, I would say why don't we cremate me and save space, but I wouldn't say that because it's not what Jews do. I want to be buried in *tachrichin* and a tallit, but I don't care very much about the particulars because I am going to be dead. I guess for me when you are dead, you are dead; you are not going out to socialize in what you are buried in. I'd rather focus on my life.

MS: Do you have a go to text for tallit?

DW: I think if I was trying to teach someone who could deal with the fact that the Talmud isn't always serious, if I wanted to teach such a person how important the rabbis think tallit is, I would teach them that weirdo story from Menakhot with the prostitute. I wouldn't teach it to someone who was terribly earnest. There is an easier text in Menakhot where the rabbis say that if a Jew has tefilin on his arm and tzitzit and mezuzah on his door, that he is protected by the *shmira* of God. I actually think the meditation before you put on the tallit is the nicest text. The notion of God spreading out the light, that I think is really beautiful.

RL: Why don't we start with weekday tallit versus Shabbat tallit. I've often felt in general, with a whole Biblical back up to this, the importance of wearing different clothes on different days. That helps me, at least, to internalize the invisible difference in the days outside. I always wear white shirts on Shabbat. I have different kippot that I wear on Shabbat that all have a majority of white in them.

Esther Smith made this tallit for me after I did her daughter's wedding. She also made each of our daughters one for their B'nai Mitzvah. This was after that. She interviewed me and asked about things that were important to me. Originally, I would wear this during the week. What was interesting was, I had indicated to her that I am very fond of red (looks at the red accent wall in his office). My sense is that she is not, although she did incorporate red into the tallit for our kids. She changed here the red to purple. I mean all colors are lovely, but it's not one of my favorite colors. What she did do, which I did not say, just something from her own sense of me was something that I can't quite figure out how she did it. In this row of gold and blue, here the gold is on the inside, and she saw gold as Divine inspiration. Somehow, that gold makes its way around to the outside. And, the notion of feeling God's presence on the inside and then radiating out is one of the most gorgeous parts of this tallit. Of course, I would not have understood that if she had not interpreted that for me.

Another thing that she did which I had mentioned, we spent a number of summers in Boston. One summer we went to Salem, Massachusetts. We didn't get into witches, but we did get into the sea port. There was a sail making shop there, I was quite impressed that sails also have holes in the corner with ropes that tie them onto the mast. The notion

that a tallit is kind of like a sail was impressive to me. She reflected that by making this essentially in two pieces and having this as the connecting part.

MS: The thick and braided part that is the same color as the main part of the tallit?

RL: Yes. It was such an “a-ha” moment. In general, when you gather up the tzitzit, you are gathering them up *me-arbah kanfot ha’aretz*. The sense that this is an *aretz*, that a tallit is a whole universe. That, like a sail, you need things to be guided by and the tzitzit are guides. I did ask her to incorporate *rimonim* and she put them at the corners.

MS: Why did you ask her to include rimonim?

RL: Well, the traditional answer. They are full of seeds so we should be full of mitzvot. I don’t know that I’ve ever eaten a pomegranate in my life, but I like the notion. I didn’t suggest putting them at the corners, that was hers, but it’s wonderful that the tzitzit, suggesting mitzvot, flow out of the pomegranates.

What she also did which was very odd, was she didn’t really make an atara. There is a difference in the top from the bottom and a sort of *atara* in white. I’ve had this tallit for a long time. Every time I put it on I still need to look carefully to find the atara. I think she did that as an emblem of modesty. It’s misplaced because the *atara* is supposed to be the crown of God. As the morning blessing, who crowns us with glory, that this is a praise of God. I’ve often thought of asking for an *atara*. I have worn it this way for a long time. The problem with it is I do like to gather up the four corners. Because it is big, and my shoulders aren’t so big, it’s very difficult to do, so I sometimes will spend a lot of time and it gets in the way of praying. One of the things I was determined to do, I had set as a goal to find a tallit with which I could do the *havienu* easily. So, I borrowed, one of the tallitot off the rack (from HUC’s Beit Midrash). This is what I use for daily *davening*.

And you know, one can still put it over one's head, but the tzitzit are easy to gather up. What I really loved was when Miriam Terlinchamp organized the ordination class to make these batik tallitot. Which of course don't have atarot at all but are really gorgeous.

MS: Is it the artistic expression that you love about them?

RL: Yes, I very often look for one that has something to do with what I am wearing. And, it's just beautiful. Years ago, when a number of us were involved in creating the Westwood Free Minyan in the 70's. People would wear tzitzit attached to denim. In fact, at one point, somebody made a mural showing someone in jeans with a denim tallit with tzitzit, which was one of our emblems of being a new kind of group. Plus, it turns out, these tzitzit are even easier to gather up than the small black and white one.

MS: They look thicker.

RL: They are thicker and it's a smaller tallit. They just hang there, so it's very easy to do. So once I started wearing this for daily worship, I continued to wear this for Shabbat.

MS: That was the transitional moment?

RL: It was that I didn't want to take 5 minutes to gather the tzitzit. It is now my Shabbat, festivals, I wear it as an *atara* at ordination. The place I go most often on Shabbat is the Leo Baeck *minyan*, which follows the older Reform custom of standing from Barchu through the Shema, which means that you have to do the *havienu* while standing, which is hard enough with this tallit sitting, let alone standing. So one pays the price for one's sins in all sorts of ways.

MS: Does it feel different now, wearing it on Shabbat or Chagim?

RL: Oh yeah. It's very much a festival tallit. Whereas for me, here during the week, tefilin is much more a part of my prayer garment than the tallit is. Particularly since it's a small tallit.

MS: One might tease out from that, that it is the weight and size of the tallit that has to do with those feelings of differentiation.

RL: I think so. Also, there is the custom of touching the arm and forehead of the tefilin. Again, if I had long tallit on, I'm not good with my hands in that way, so it makes it easier.

MS: Did you grow up wearing tallit?

RL: No.

MS: No Bar Mitzvah tallit?

RL: No, people in Reform congregations were not doing that then. In fact, even at HUC in Cincinnati, tallitot were forbidden. And, Nelson Glueck would "speak to you". The only person allowed to wear a tallit was if you were not from the United States.

MS: Things certainly have changed.

RL: That all reflects the Pittsburgh Platform.

MS: When did you start wearing tallit?

RL: Probably at HUC I guess. They were forbidden in chapel, but it was a requirement to *daven* for a week at the essentially Orthodox minyan at the Conservative shul, not too far from school. It was there that I bought my first tefilin, and probably bought a tallit there also.

MS: Would you tell me about the magazine?

RL: This was in 1998, I guess. Reform Jews had now been wearing tallitot in synagogue for a few years. Not without looks. Peachy (Levy) recalls that when she and Mark would come in with tallitot that people would look at them. Certainly people wore them on the pulpit, and when they were called to the Torah. They did exactly what I am pictured doing. Which is why, when I posed, I didn't think anything of it. Reform Jews do this at the Torah all the time, and I *davka* didn't wear tefilin because that seemed to me intentionally confrontational. Very few Reform Jews then, and not so many now wear tefilin. It turned out it didn't matter because people insisted that I was wearing tefilin in the photo. When you show them the cover, "oh yeah".

This was Aron Hirt-Manheimer, who edited the magazine, who edited a journal that we started at UCLA Hillel, he really wanted to advance the cause of "the principles". He and I go back a long way. He had run another story a year or so before, an interview with me. He really wanted people to pay attention to this. He asked his sister who was a wonderful photographer, to take a picture that would call people's attention to things. I knew what I was doing. I looked at the negatives. All kinds of Reform Jews did this. It never occurred to me that it would be a problem.

And, it was a problem! The President of the CCAR, on a national magazine, wearing tallit and tefilin, it was shocking to people over a certain age, to people in the South, in the Midwest. Among the most vociferous people were those on the Union board. I decided to show them what I had done. So, as I was talking to them, I think to the whole Executive Board of the Union, I decided I would go through the photograph with them. As I was talking to them, I unzipped the tallit bag and I put on the tallit, and then stopped. I said to them, "Am I any different then when I started talking to you and I put the tallit

on? Yes, and no.” When I went through it all, taking it out, kissing it, putting it around my shoulders, holding it so that in the end I looked exactly like the picture, I think they realized exactly what they had read into it.

MS: When you say “Yes, and no”, can you expand?

RL: Sure. I am wearing the *olam* on my shoulders. An *olam* connected and held up by 613 mitzvot through the tzitzit and I like to look at them. I am a person surrounded by all the things God wants us to do. On the other hand, I had breakfast this morning, I went to the bathroom, I got dressed, all those sort of quotidian things that one does. And, when I take the tallit off you wouldn’t know that I had been surrounded by the mitzvot. Part of that is what I think they felt too. The effect it had was to take me out of the picture of this. It was not as if I was a demon out to change the entire Reform movement. They still said, “We hope that you won’t bring it up in Pittsburgh”. I said, “There is so much opposition, I don’t know what will happen.” Happily, the board decided to bring it up, it passed by a very large majority. But, there was opposition everywhere.

MS: You mentioned some customs associated with tallit. Do you have any other non-typical moments in which you might wear a tallit.

RL: When I lead a service, I will as the *shaliach tzibur*. Sometimes yes, sometimes no at a minyan.

MS: Have you ever worn a tallit *katan*?

RL: No.

MS: Any particular reason?

RL: Someone suggested long ago that one should really wear tallit *katan* instead of a kippah because of what it stood for and a kippah being a later development. There are

some things I don't do because they seem to imply to me a piety that I don't think I have. I used to offer the *amidah* covered in a tallit and that became uncomfortable. I'm not one of "those". I certainly have my moments with God, but they don't need a big tallit to cover them. So I stopped doing that, and I think a tallit *katan* has that same sense. That seems to commit me, in a way that a tallit doesn't, to doing all the mitzvot.

MS: Have you ever thought about being buried in a tallit?

RL: I don't think about that much, although I probably should. There's a question of a shroud or tallit. I think I don't want to be buried in regular clothes. Probably a tallit with the tzitzit cut off. Which one? I'm not ready to make that decision.

MS: What text would be your go to text for exploring tallit?

RL: I'm fascinated where the *parsha* about the tzitzit falls and its relationship to the spies. It's so intentional. That could have well started another *parsha*. The rabbis who arranged it put it at the end of that one. It is so much about what you see and how you see the world. And to see the world as the two spies did, as a place where God is present will help you. As a place where God will help you achieve *geulah* or *yeshuah*, is, I think, just wonderful.

PHOTOGRAPHS

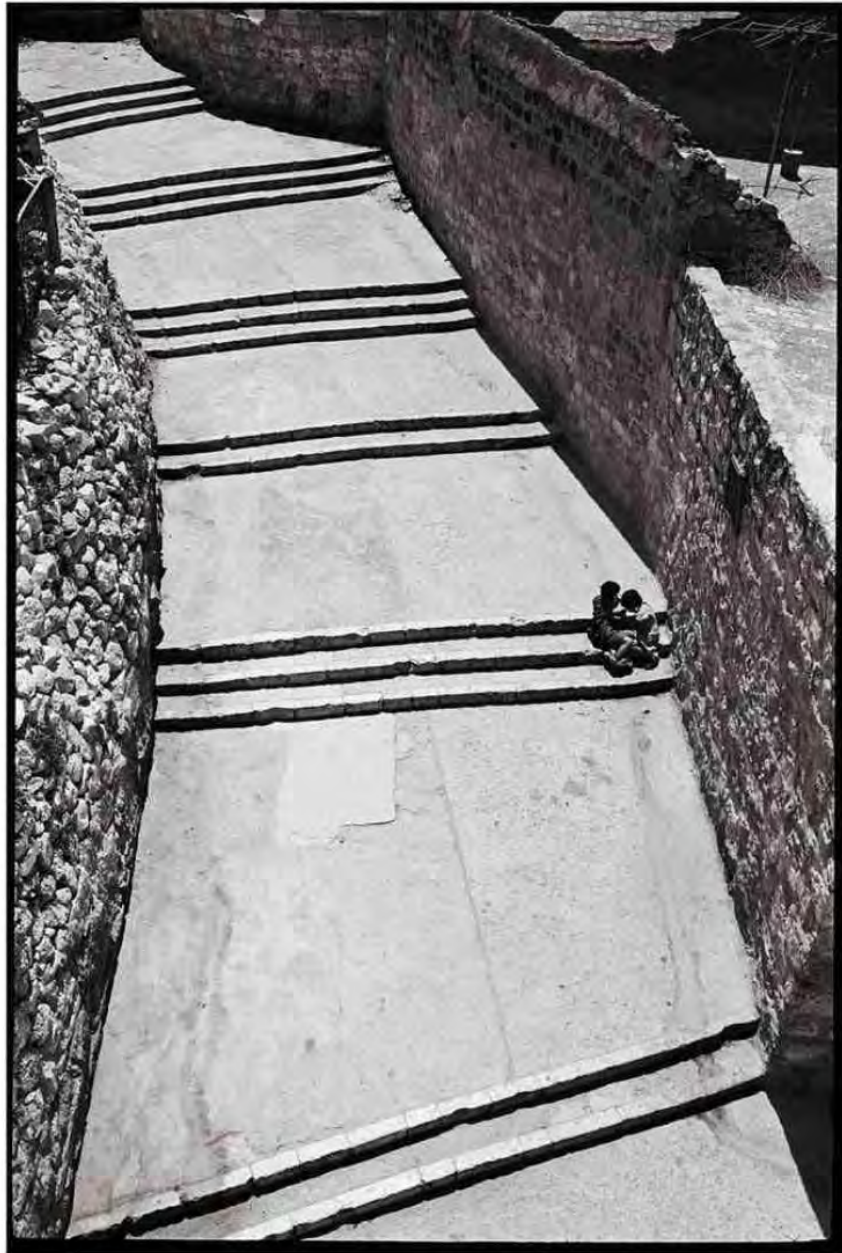
Melila Hellner-Eshed's talit which was worn by each student as they taught words of Torah, in her living room, at the end of our year of study together at the Shalom Hartman Institute.



Tallitot on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The variation of colors, sizes, and design was a constant inspiration as I immersed in this Capstone Project



A photograph from Bill Aron, which hung in the Beit Midrash at Hebrew Union College during my year of study of the tallit. This picture was a constant reminder of the importance of the tallit in the development of cultural imagery in Judaism.



Another tallit on display at the Israel Museum. The incredibly ornate atara is what caught my eye most on this garment.



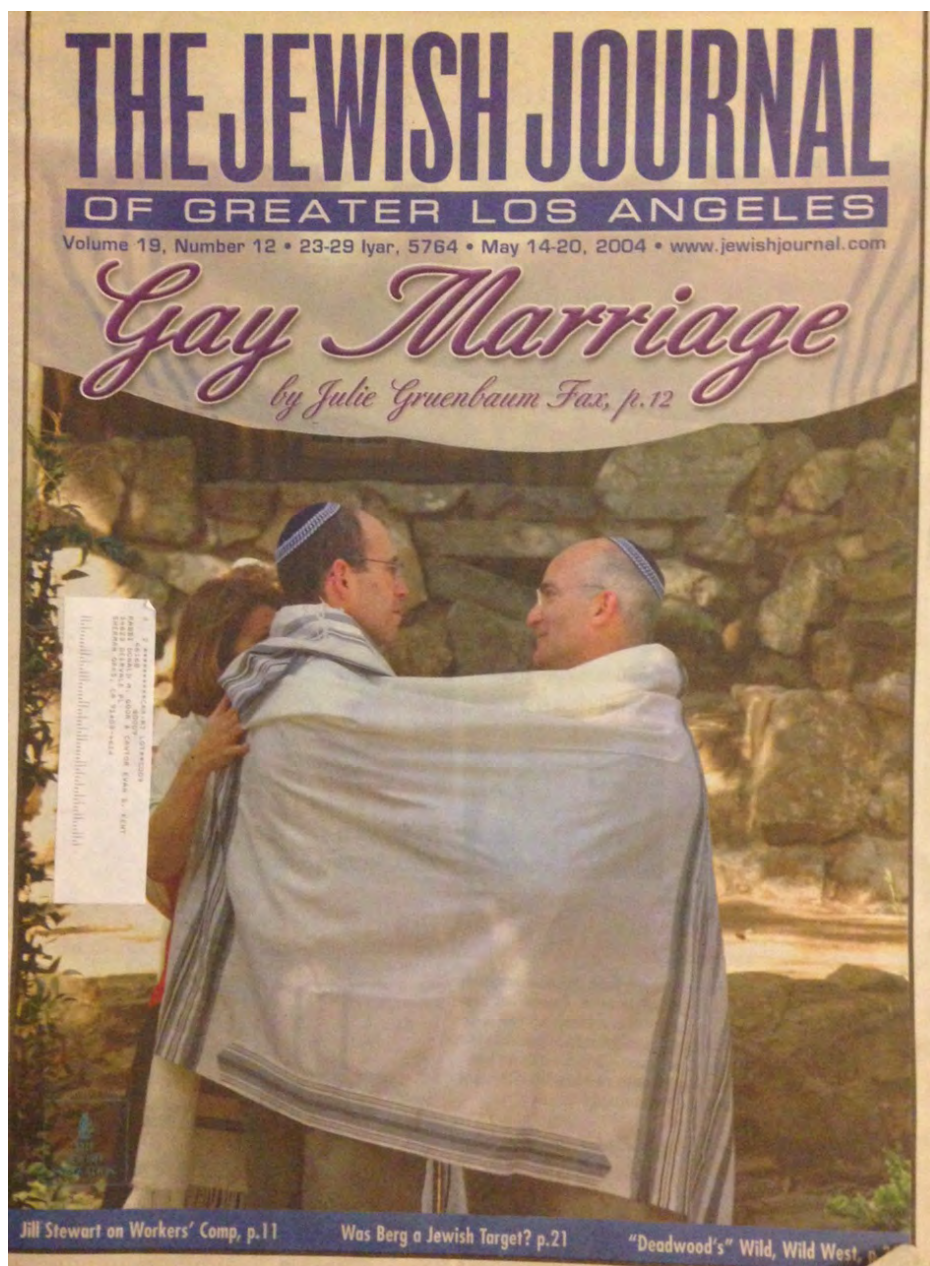
Carol Levy's Tallit of Many Emotions



A tallit shop in Mea Sharim. Oh so many ways to tie tzitzit.



Rabbi Don Goor and Cantor Evan Kent wrapped in one of the tallitot that was spoken of in Rabbi Goor's interview. The atara may have been at the bottom, but this beautiful moment at their wedding was most definitely elevated by their being wrapped in a tallit.



Rabbi Richard Levy on the cover of Reform Judaism magazine. A photo that would have myth, controversy and progress attached to it over time. The account of this photo is discussed in the interview with Rabbi Levy.



During an experiential day tour with the P'til Tekhelet organization I found this shell, which may have been the Hilazon, and dyed this piece of wool using the same process that the organization uses to make the tekhelet that is now on the tallit I created at the conclusion of this project.



Tying the fourth tzitzit of the tallit that would culminate this project at my desk at home.



Blessed is the One who gave us the commandment to wrap ourselves up
in tzitzit ...



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