

Explaining The Jewish Prayer Shawl

'They made the coats of fine linen of woven work for Aaron and his sons' (Exodus 39:27). 'You will make yourselves tassels on the four hems of your cloak with which you cover yourself' (Deuteronomy 22:12). 'Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them they should make tassels on the hem of their garments throughout their generations, and put on the tassels a cord of blue. It will be to you for a tassel so you may look on it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them so you not follow after your own heart and your own eyes ... Remember and do all My commandments and be holy to your God. I am Yahweh your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am Yahweh your God' (Numbers 15:38 to 41).

The cloak or coat (tallit) was rectangular, made of the finest linen, woven in one piece without any seams with knotted tassels (tzitzit, pronounced 'zeet-zeet') at each corner on the hem. Jesus wore a tallit with four tzitzit like this (Luke 8:44). The tallit was worn around the shoulders for warmth in the winter. During warmer months it was draped over one shoulder and came down to the ankles. The knotted tzitzit was attached in obedience to the Biblical command in Numbers 15. The tallit itself was not a significant garment but the four tzitzit sown onto the hem were very important. They were the constant reminders to the Jewish people to obey all of the commandments the Lord had given to them. In the Hebrew language, the language of the Bible and of the Jewish people, each letter of their alphabet has a numerical value so every word has a numerical value. For example, the name of the Lord Yahweh has the numerical value of 26. The word for number one is 'echad' and has the value 13, so the verse, 'The Lord is One' can be spelled out numerically on each tzitzit with four sets of windings, each separated by a double knot for a total of 39 windings. A second observation is the fact, all four tzitzit are a symbol of the 613 laws of Moses; 248 affirmations – 'you will' and 365 prohibitions – 'do not'. The numerical value of the word tzitzit is 600. Add the 8 strands and 5 knots each tassel is made of and you have 613. Each tassel has 7 white strands, the number of the Messiah Jesus, surrounded by a blue strand depicting royalty and Jesus is our King.

When we see a tallit today, it is rare to see the blue strands mentioned in Numbers 15. Most modern tallit have 8 white strands. The tradition of the blue strands had almost been lost, but recently the new tallit have been made with the correct shade of blue strands. In ancient times, the blue dye called techelet was extracted from the glands of the Murex snail, also known as the Hillazon snail. After wool or linen was dipped into the solution containing the techelet (dye), the fabric was exposed to sunlight to create the beautiful, Israeli blue hue. Thousands of snails were needed to extract a very small quantity of techelet. The snails were found in abundance in Israel and were free. However, the work involved in extracting the techelet from hundreds of snails would have been very time consuming, making the tzitzit very expensive. For that reason, when the owner of a tallit died, the blue strands of linen were removed and given to the son as a precious legacy and heirloom. Then the tallit was wrapped around the head of the deceased just before burial, just like the tallit Jesus owned. 'The cloth that had been on Jesus' head was not lying with the linen cloths, but was rolled up in a place by itself' (John 20:7). The snails are not readily available in the wild today but they can be bred in specialised farms.

The tassels (tzitzit) were there to remind the Israelites to obey all of the commands given by the Lord. The tzitzit also reminded the people, they were not to live by their own intelligence and understanding, independently without Him ("So you not follow after your own heart and your own eyes") but they needed to depend on God for everything. The life the Lord wanted for the Israelites was one of obedience, trust and faith in Him. This special garment attachment, the tzitzit, reveals how we should all live our lives. The correct use of the tzitzit is intended to keep a person's life pure, bringing us into closer communication with the Lord. There was no set maximum length for the tzitzit and some Jews in the time of Jesus had very long tassels. The Pharisees and scribes wore them long to appear to be more pious than others. Jesus said, "All the works they do is to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad, they enlarge the tzitzit of their garments, they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues" (Matthew 23:5 & 6). A phylactery, a Latin word, or tefillin in Hebrew, was a small case made of vellum, the fine leather from the skin of a lamb, enclosing some passages of Scripture, worn on the left arm or forehead during prayer, held on by a long thin vellum or linen strip wrapped around the arm several times or tied around the head. 'You will bind them for a sign on your hand and they will be for symbols between your eyes' (Exodus 13:9 & 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18). Orthodox Jewish men in Israel are often seen wearing a tefillin. From early childhood, most boys wear a small tallit and tzitzit under their clothes. The Israeli flag was inspired by the tallit, being white with two blue stripes and in the centre, the Star of David, an anointed king reminding the nation they are under the anointing and authority of God.

In Scripture the tzitzit represented authority. 'Boaz asked, "Who are you?" Ruth answered, "I am Ruth your handmaid. Spread therefore your tallit (hem) over your handmaid for you are a near kinsman"' (Ruth 3:9). Ruth laid down at the feet of Boaz, who was an honourable man, and he realised Ruth was placing herself

under his authority and after sorting out a family issue, they married, had a son named Obed (Ruth 4:17 to 22) and the three of them became ancestors of David and Jesus. King Saul, who pursued David for years, went into a cave to relieve himself. David took that opportunity to slice off a small part of Saul's tallit (hem). David could have taken that opportunity to kill Saul but embarrassed him instead and proved to Saul, he did not want to kill him (1 Samuel 24:1 to 12).

The tzitzit is also a symbol of faith. 'A woman had a haemorrhage for twelve years and had suffered many things by many physicians. She had spent all she had and was no better, but rather grew worse. Having heard the things concerning Jesus, she came up behind Him in the crowd and touched His tassels (tzitzit). She said, "If I just touch His tzitzit, I will be made well." Immediately the haemorrhage dried up and she felt in her body she was healed of her affliction. Immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself the healing power had gone out from Him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched My clothes?" His disciples said to Him, "You see the multitude pressing against You and You ask, 'Who touched Me?'" Jesus looked around to see the lady who had touched His garment. The woman, fearing and trembling, knowing she had been healed, came and fell down before Him and told Him the truth. Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be cured of your disease" (Mark 5:25 to 34). This unnamed woman knew she was touching the authority of God. This story confirms Jesus did wear a tallit with tzitzit. Another verse reveals Jesus wore a tallit, seamless from top to bottom. 'His tallit was without seam, woven from the top throughout. The Roman soldiers said to one another, "Let us not tear it but cast lots for it to decide whose it will be," so the Scripture might be fulfilled which says, "They parted My garments among them. For My tallit they cast lots." The Roman soldiers did these things' (John 19:23 & 24). This is the Psalm Apostle John was referring to. 'They divide My garments among them. They cast lots for My clothing' (Psalm 22:18).

In ancient times the tzitzit were a sign of nobility. Kings wore a tallit with ornate hems decorated with tzitzit. The tallit was like a God-given uniform to show the special status given to the Children of Israel. Wearing the 'royal robes' was a strong statement. The regal robes revealed to neighbouring pagan nations, the Israelites were God's chosen people, set apart for God's service, a holy nation, His royal priesthood (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9). It was also a witness to their faith in the one true God of the universe. Every time the Israelites donned their tallit they were reminded they belonged to God, they were His representatives and His light to the spiritually dark pagan world. Everything the Israelites did was a reflection of God. They were a holy nation and the whole known world at that time knew it. Israel is still the holy light of this world. "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will hold your hand, I will keep you and make you a covenant for the people as a light for the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

Amen and God bless you.

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