

Tallit

TALLIT (Heb. טלית, pl. *tallitot*; Yid. *tales*, pl. *talesim*), prayer shawl. Originally the word meant "gown" or "cloak." This was a rectangular mantle that looked like a blanket and was worn by men in ancient times. At the four corners of the *tallit*, tassels were attached in fulfillment of the biblical commandment of **zizit* (Num. 15:38–41). The *tallit* was usually made either of wool or of linen (Men. 39b) and probably resembled the *abbayah* ("blanket") still worn by Bedouin for protection against the weather.

The *tallit* made of finer quality was similar to the Roman *pallium* and was worn mostly by the wealthy and by distinguished rabbis and scholars (BB 98a). The length of the mantle was to be a handbreadth shorter than that of the garment under it (BB 57b). After the exile of the Jews from Erez Israel and their dispersion, they came to adopt the fashions of their gentile neighbors more readily. The *tallit* was discarded as a daily habit and it became a religious garment for prayer; hence its later meaning of prayer shawl.

The *tallit* is usually white and made either of wool, cotton, or silk, although *Maimonides and *Alfasi objected to the use of the latter. Strictly observant Jews prefer *tallitot* made of coarse half-bleached lamb's wool. In remembrance of the blue thread of the *zizit* (see **Tekhelet*), most *tallitot* have several blue stripes woven into the white material (see Zohar, Num. 227a). Until a few decades ago, however, they only had black stripes.

Frequently the upper part of the *tallit* around the neck and on the shoulders has a special piece of cloth sewn with silver threads (called *atarah*, "diadem"), to mark the upper (i.e., the "collar") and the outer parts of the four-cornered prayer shawl. Some *tallitot* have the benediction, recited when putting on the *tallit*, woven into the *atarah*. Others, especially those made of silk, are often richly embroidered and some have the benediction woven into the entire cloth of the *tallit*. The minimum size of a *tallit* is that which would suffice to clothe a small child able to walk (Sh. Ar., OH 16:1).

The *tallit* is worn by males during the morning prayers (except on the Ninth of Av, when it is worn at the afternoon service), as well as during all Day of Atonement services. The *hazzan*, however, according to some rites, wears the *tallit* also during the afternoon and evening services (as does the reader from the Torah during the *Minḥah* prayer on fast days). Before putting on the prayer shawl, the following benediction is said: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our G-d, King of the universe, Who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments, and hast commanded us to wrap ourselves in the fringed garment." When the *tallit* is put on, the head is first covered with it and the four corners thrown over the left shoulder (a movement called *atfat Yishme'elim*, "after the manner of the Arabs"). After a short pause, the four corners are allowed to fall back into their original position: two are suspended on each side. On weekdays, the *tallit* is donned before putting on the **tefillin*. Among strictly observant Jews, it was the custom to put on *tallit* and *tefillin* at home and to walk in them to the synagogue (Isserles, to Sh. Ar., OH 25:2). They also pray with the *tallit* covering their head; to be enfolded by the *tallit* is regarded as being enveloped by the holiness of the commandments of the Torah, denoting a symbolic subjection to the



Divine Will (see also RH 17b). Generally, however, people pray with the *tallit* resting on their shoulders only. The *kohanim*, however, cover their heads with the *tallit* during their recital of the Priestly Blessing . It is customary in the morning service to press the fringes to the eyes and to kiss them three times during the recital of the last section of the *Shema* (Num. 15:37–41) which deals with the commandment of *zizit* (Sh. Ar., OH 24:4).

The custom of wearing the *tallit* differs in many communities. In the Ashkenazi ritual, small children under bar mitzvah age dress in *tallitot* made according to their size, whereas in the Polish-Sephardi ritual only married men wear them (Kid. 29b). In most Oriental rites, unmarried men wear *tallitot*.

In Reform synagogues , the *tallit* is part of the synagogue service garments of the rabbi and the cantor. For male congregants, the wearing of a small prayer shawl, resembling a scarf and worn around the neck, is optional. Those called to the reading from the Torah, however, always don a *tallit*.

In some communities, it is customary for the bridegroom to dress in a *tallit* during the *huppah* ceremony. It is likewise customary to bury male Jews in their *tallit* from which the fringes have been removed or torn.

The **zizit* worn by men with their daily dress is known as **tallit katan* ("small *tallit*").