



CHAPTER 1

THE MYSTERY  
OF THE TALLIT

**M**ORE AND MORE, as I travel to speak in churches, I meet people who are seeking to understand the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. They will blow the shofar, pray the Shema, and don a tallit during prayer. At the synagogue I lead, we keep tallitot (the plural form of *tallit*) for guests to use during the service, and many are eager to do so. Coming under the tallit often helps a person seek Yeshua without distraction and commune with the Ruach HaKodesh (Spirit of God) in a whole new way. I have heard many people say that coming under a tallit in prayer helped them deepen their intimacy with Hashem. The tallit does not have special power in itself, but it reminds us of God and His Word, in which we find all power.

We experienced this vividly during a recent service at the congregation I lead, Gesher Shalom. It was a Saturday night, and we were meeting for the Erev Shavuot (the evening of Shavuot, which is known as the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost). Shavout occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, which falls between mid-May and mid-June, and it commemorates the day God gave the Torah to the entire nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai.

The service began with over an hour of prayer during which we welcomed the presence of Adonai and the outpouring of His Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). After our time of prayer, we read from Scripture and I gave a short d'rash, or sermon, but the Holy Spirit was moving in such a way that we spent most of the evening in praise, worship, dance, and prayer. The service lasted for about six-and-a-half hours and could have continued for more.

During that time, we felt the presence of the Ruach in

a most powerful way. I sensed a leading to call those who wanted to rededicate their lives to the Teacher, Yeshua HaMashiach, to come forward and stand under the tallit. Over one hundred people responded to the call. We prayed, among other things, for deeper revelations of His Word, breakthroughs, and special protection for family members.

One woman who came forward prayed for her son's protection. Little did we know, he and his friends had decided to visit a club that night, but when he stepped inside, the young man felt he should leave, so he did. Later that night a gunman entered the club and opened fire, killing dozens of people.

After receiving prayer under the tallit that night, a seven-year-old boy broke down and cried for a long time. The Ruach fell upon him in such a powerful way that he was able to release his hurts to the Lord. A fourteen-year-old boy who also came and stood under the tallit asked his mother, "What is this different feeling I am experiencing?" She told him it was the infilling of the Ruach HaKodesh, and after that night his desire to serve Yeshua intensified. One woman who had been in pain for several years and couldn't sit for more than five minutes told me she had been able to sit for more than two hours that night and experienced no pain.

The breakthroughs and testimonies from that prayer meeting are still coming in to us. Prayer under the tallit can bring powerful results when the dunamis power of God is present! As we came under the tallit that night, we were reminded of the holiness of God, His Word, and His power, and we experienced His presence in a dynamic way.

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So if praying under the tallit can have this kind of impact, you may be wondering, “What exactly is a tallit and what makes it so special?”

So if the tallit can be this significant in a person’s relationship with God, you may be wondering, “What exactly is it and how is it used?”





The tallit is the Jewish prayer shawl. It is rectangular and generally white with blue or black stripes, and it has tassels on each of its four corners called tzitzit. The tallit can be large (*tallit gadol*) and cover a person's entire body, or it can be small (*tallit katan*). But it must be long enough to be worn over the shoulders as a shawl and not just around the neck as a scarf. Men often wear a tallit *katan* under their shirts with the tzitzit left hanging out so they can look at the tzitzit all day long and remember God's commands. A person wearing a tallit *gadol* will generally keep it draped over his shoulders, but during times of prayer he will use it to cover his head.

Traditionally men have worn the prayer shawl because Jewish law did not obligate women to wear them and the Torah discourages women from wearing men's garments. But now there are many styles and colors available that are very feminine, so both men and women wear tallitot. Although the stripes on the tallit are usually navy or black,

they also can be any color of the rainbow. The tallit is classically made of wool, cotton, or silk, but it can be made out of any material so long as the prohibition against combining linen and wool is observed.

For a Jewish person, the tallit is typically used in every major life cycle event—from circumcision to bar/bat mitzvah to marriage and even death. But it is most frequently used in prayer. Tallitot are generally worn at morning Shabbat services and during morning prayers. An exception is the Kol Nidre, the evening service on the eve of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), during which the tallit is also worn. Yom Kippur is considered the holiest day of the Jewish year, a Sabbath of Sabbaths observed on the tenth day of the Hebrew month of Tishri, which falls in September or early October. All work is suspended and observers fast for twenty-five hours, beginning before sunset the evening before Yom Kippur and ending after nightfall on the day of Yom Kippur. It is a time when we “afflict the soul” and atone for sins committed and promises broken to God and between people.

The tallit is worn during the first evening service of Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre, which would traditionally begin before sunset. This is significant, because according to Jewish tradition, the tallit was to be worn only during the daylight. This is because the purpose of the tallit is to see the tzitzit and remember God’s commandments, or His Word, and in ancient times people were not able to see the tzitzit at night when it was dark. Therefore, the tallit is not traditionally worn during an evening service. Yet as believers in Yeshua, I believe we must be led by the Word of God and the Spirit of God and not place rabbinic law or

Jewish tradition above either. Therefore, I encourage my congregation to wear the tallit as they are led of the Ruach HaKodesh. We don them during our evening services and have seen God move mightily as we sought Him in prayer under the tallit.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE TALLIT

The wearing of the tallit commences in the Torah. We read in the fifteenth chapter of the Book of *Bamidbar* (Numbers):

*Adonai* spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to *Bnei-Yisrael*. Say to them that they are to make for themselves *tzitzit* [fringes, תִּצִיִּת] on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and they are to put a blue cord on each *tzitzit*. It will be your own *tzitzit*—so whenever you look at them, you will remember all the *mitzvot* [commandments] of *Adonai* and do them and not go spying out after your own hearts and your own eyes, prostituting yourselves. This way you will remember and obey all My *mitzvot* and you will be holy to your God. I am *Adonai* your God. I brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am *Adonai* your God.”

—NUMBERS 15:37–41

In ancient times, people in most cultures wore some type of blanketlike garment to protect them from the sun during the day and the cool air at night. So the command in Numbers 15 was not for the Jewish people to start wearing this type of garment but rather for them to add

the tzitzit on the four corners, which would set them apart from other nations. Even today, Bedouins wear abayas, which can resemble the tallit but lack the tzitzit.

But God's purpose for having His people add tzitzit to their garments was not merely to set them apart from other peoples. As the Torah states, it was so they would be constantly reminded of God's commandments. God had entered into a covenant with His people and promised to bless them if they were faithful to His Word. The consequences for disobedience were severe, even death in some cases. (See Deuteronomy 28.) God's desire was that by wearing the tallit with the tzitzit, the Jewish people would be constantly reminded of His Word. And as they walked in obedience to His commands, they would experience His continued blessing in their lives. This is still Hashem's desire for us—that we would experience His blessing as we obey His Word and His voice.

Initially after the law regarding the tallit commenced, the tallit was worn much like a daily cloak and not only during times of prayer. But over time it became more of a religious garment, and by New Testament times, ordinary people wore the tallit only on special occasions, if at all. The Pharisees, however, seemed to wear the tallit all the time, but it was often just for show. They wore extra-long fringes to prove their piety, a practice Yeshua condemned.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Amen, I tell you, they have their reward in full! But you, when you pray, go into your inner



room; and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, shall reward you.”

—MATTHEW 6:5–6

Hashem would never have us wear the tallit to appear righteous or holy. The tallit should always be worn in humility to bring honor to Hashem and to remember His Word to us, His children.

## PARTS OF THE TALLIT

In this book we will discover the spiritual symbolism hidden within the tallit. But I first want to explain the significance of each part of the prayer shawl.

### TZITZIT

As we have seen, the purpose of the tallit was to hold the tzitzitot, or fringes, to remind the people of the commands of God. The tzitzitot were to be tied on each of the garment's four corners so that when we look at the tallit, specifically the tzitzit, we would remember the commandments of God. Today there are T-shirts onto which the tzitzit may be tied at each of the four corners, illustrating again that the tzitzit are most important.

### TEKHELET

Traditionally on each tzitzit is a blue cord called the *tekhelet*. According to some, the blue *tekhelet* is to remind us of God's creation, the ocean, the sky, the tablets upon

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which the Ten Commandments were written, and His throne of glory. It can also remind us that God's Word is from above and that His people are meant to reflect His heavenly kingdom on this earth.

The particular color blue used in the *tekhelet* was once very hard to acquire and was thus used on special garments. During antiquity, it was derived from a type of snail found near the Aegean Sea, and it took thousands of snails to extract just a small amount of the dye. It has been thought that after the destruction of the second temple, knowledge of the actual source of the dye was lost. For this reason, it is now common for the *tzitzit* to have only white fringes. It is believed that some of the species that carry the dye have been found, but that is not universally accepted as fact.

There are places in Israel today where you can purchase the *tzitzit* with the *tekhelet*. They can be tied on to the four corners of a garment to make a tallit. During one of the tours of Israel that my wife, Racquel, and I co-led with two other rabbis over twenty years ago, we met an Israeli storeowner who sold the *tzitzit* with the *tekhelet*. I purchased a tallit *gadol* (large tallit) and a tallit *katan* from him, and I still wear them today. There are also many websites that sell tallitot, some of which include the *tekhelet*.\*

## ATARAH

The tallit has an embroidered neckband called the *atarah*. The primary purpose of the *atarah* is to help the wearer distinguish the inside from the outside of the tallit

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\* To learn more about how to purchase a tallit, you can visit our website at [www.GesherInternational.com](http://www.GesherInternational.com).

and ensure the garment is not worn upside down. The *atarah* also contains the blessing that is recited when a person puts the tallit on his shoulders.

## FORMING THE TZITZIT

Tying the tzitzit is something of an art, similar to macramé. According to the halacha, which is the rabbinical way, or the body of Jewish law supplementing the scriptural law and forming the legal part of the Talmud, the tzitzit is made by tying a knot in a braid-like fashion using four threads that are interwoven into the four corners of a garment possessing four or more angular corners. The halacha has determined that the threads of the *tzitzit* must be passed through a hole at each end of the cloth and then multiplied by two to produce eight threads (one of which is longer than the others and is referred to as the *shamash*). The threads should then be tied in a well-fastened double knot.

The *shamash* is then wound around the other threads, and additional knots are tied. There are various customs regarding winding and tying knots, but the two most common are of four groups of seven, eight, eleven, and thirteen *or* five, six, five, and ten windings with knots tied between them and at their end. Overall, there are five knots in the *tzitzit*.<sup>1</sup>

It is thought that the winding of the five, six, five, and ten represents the fifth, sixth, fifth, and tenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet. That would be yod, hey, vav, hey, as we read them from right to left: יהוה. Together these letters mean “Adonai” or “Lord.” So the tzitzit represents

Hashem. Some also say the free-flowing fringes represent the Israelites' emancipation from Egypt.

## DONNING THE TALLIT

Many don the tallit by first holding the *atarah* in front of themselves with both hands and kissing both ends, where the blessing is written. Then the blessing is recited:

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam  
asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu l'hit'ateif ba-  
tzitzit.* (Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the  
universe, who has sanctified us by His command-  
ments and commanded us to wrap ourselves in the  
*tzitzit*.)

After reciting the blessing, the person places the tallit over his head and puts his hands in front of his face briefly for a few moments of private meditation. Immediately afterward he puts it over his left shoulder and adjusts it into its correct position on his shoulders. This is how it is generally worn until it is time for prayer. At that time, the wearer will cover his head with the tallit.

Covering one's head with the tallit is symbolic of calling out to God and telling Him we desire a time of intimacy with Him. The tallit is worn during most Jewish prayer services, and some keep their heads covered with the tallit during the entire liturgical portion of worship. It is customary for many men and women to also don their tallitot for individual prayer in their own personal prayer closets.

In our congregation we also use the tallit during a time when we pray for the children. We set three or four tallitot up as a very large chuppah (canopy) and have the children stand under it as we pray the Aaronic Benediction over them. Others in the congregation who need a special touch from Yeshua can also come stand under the tallit and receive this unique blessing from Numbers 6:24–26, which says: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift His countenance upon you, and give you peace” (MEV).

Some say Christians should not wear the prayer shawl because the laws regarding the tallit were given to the Jewish people under the Torah. While it is true that believers in Yeshua are not obligated to wear the tallit, because Yeshua became a bridge that joined those born Jewish and those not born Jewish together in Him as one new man, anyone who chooses to obey the Word of God can wear the tallit. As a result, many believers in Yeshua who were not born Jewish have experienced very special times of prayer under the tallit.

## A SACRED GARMENT

So much detail goes into how a tallit is made and worn because it is considered a holy object. It represents Yeshua, His Word, and His covering and should always be worn with honor, love, and respect toward Hashem.

One Shabbat morning as I was preparing to enter the sanctuary and begin my services, I looked out the window and noticed a man drive up to the synagogue, find a

parking spot, and proceed into the building. He cordially introduced himself to me as Rabbi So-and-So, and I told him how nice it was to meet him. But then I asked him, “Are you really a rabbi?” He seemed a bit taken aback and asked me why I would ask him that. I responded by telling him that most rabbis would know that you don’t drive, especially on Shabbat, with your tallit as outer clothing and then allow your tzitzit to fall on the pavement as you walk to the synagogue.

As it turned out, the man was neither Jewish nor a rabbi, but he was interested in learning more about the garment that was worn by the Jewish Teacher, Yeshua. I told him we could make plans to meet at another time and I would be glad to teach him about the tallit.

On another occasion I went to a nonreligious meeting on a weekday night where there was a special guest speaker and a tremendous amount of praise and worship music. People were rejoicing and feeling free to worship in various ways. Some of the behavior appeared strange to me, but I am open to whatever Hashem desires to do through His Ruach (Spirit). One man in the middle of the large hall was wearing a large tallit. Unfortunately, more of the tallit was on the floor than on his back. It really bothered me, but I decided to mind my own business.

As the service went on, I noticed that people were trampling over his tallit as they rushed to the front of the sanctuary for special prayer ministry. After seeing the tallit become like an area rug that was repeatedly being walked on, I decided to go over and say something to the young man, but he was lost in the crowd. I am sure that

gentleman meant no harm, but holy objects should be worn with respect for the Holy One of Israel.

During weekly Saturday Shabbat services, we have a Torah march. All who are able stand as the Torah is walked around the sanctuary. Although the congregation in a Messianic synagogue is made up of people born Jewish and not born Jewish (we are all one in Messiah), at this point in the service most of the men and a few of the women typically wear tallitot. When the Torah passes by, each person in the congregation who is wearing a tallit will touch the Torah with the tzitzit and then lift the tzitzit to his or her mouth and kiss it.

Some people who visit our congregation don't want to stand up and participate, even though we provide tallitot for those who need one (including feminine ones for the women). They believe we are practicing a worthless ritual that puts us in bondage. They are so wrong! The tzitzit represent the commandments, or the Word of God, and Yeshua is the Living Word (John 1:14). So spiritually, when we touch the tzitzit to our lips, we are giving the Teacher a kiss and receiving one from Him, as the Scripture says: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine" (Songs 1:2, MEV). Kissing the tzitzit is symbolic of the Ruach's love touching us and bonding with our spirit. That is what takes place not only when we kiss the tzitzit during a service but also when the tallit is wrapped around us.

## A SOURCE OF PROTECTION

The tallit reminds us of God's Word, and Hashem gave us His Word to guard us from pursuing the cravings of our flesh. He did this because He loves us. He knows our fleshly desire to return to our sin nature can cause us to stray from our close relationship with Yeshua.

I once knew a man who was in leadership and would always wear his tallit *katan* with his tzitzit showing. One day I noticed that he was not wearing it. When I asked him why, he said he just didn't want to wear it anymore. I thought his response was strange, but I accepted his answer. A few weeks later I found out that he had been caught having an affair. It was sad, but I realized that it is hard to be enticed into sin when wearing a tallit. Wearing the tallit *katan* would remind you of the holiness of God and not to give in to the cravings of your flesh. Giving in to these temporary pleasures is a form of idolatry because you are putting your temporary gratification ahead of your relationship with Hashem.

In addition to reminding us of God's holiness and protecting us from falling into sin, the tallit also serves as a literal protection for certain holy objects. In Judaism, the Torah is considered the holiest book as the foundation of all the Scriptures, so the tallit is used to protect the scrolls of the Torah when they are moved. The tallit also protects other holy objects when they are worn out or unusable. An old tallit that is unsightly, torn, or unusable gets donated to the synagogue or a Judaic library. It is then used to wrap worn out or superfluous documents such as photocopies that include the name YHVH (יהוה)



or Adonai (אֲדֹנָי), the sacred name of God in Hebrew script, which are buried with dignity in a *genizah*, a section of a Jewish cemetery set aside for this purpose.

The Teacher said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt should lose its flavor, how shall it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Matt. 5:13). Likewise, the holy object that loses its holiness would be rendered useless. The old holy objects that contain the name of God or that were used for holy events but are now torn or worn out should be treated with respect. Consequently the tallit must be wrapped around the holy object and buried with it, with one of the tzitzit cut off to make it invalid. This practice of cutting off one of the corners of the tallit is also carried out when a tallit is buried with a person.

## THE TALLIT IN LIFE CYCLE EVENTS

To a Jewish person, the tallit is symbolic of his Jewish identity because it is used in all the major life events—from birth to burial. Yeshua the Teacher is with us from the beginning of our lives—from the moment of conception—until the last day of our lives and unto eternity for those who choose to receive Him. The use of the tallit in each of these life events reflects God’s presence with us throughout our lives. It is a reminder that He is with us and will never leave nor forsake us (Deut. 31:6). If we don’t experience Him, it is because we are not looking for His love notes!

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### THE TALLIT IN BIRTH

Eight days after a male child is born, he is circumcised. During the *bris* (also called a *brit milah*), or circumcision, the father wraps the dressed infant in his tallit for a few moments and prays over the baby. In doing this, the father is symbolically wrapping the baby in the Word of God and the covering of Hashem. During this ceremony, the father, the *sandek* (or godfather, who has the role of holding the child on his lap during the blessings, as he and the godmother are supposed to look out for and guide their godchildren into maturity), and the *mohel* (the one who performs the circumcision) all wear tallitot. Consequently, the wearing of the tallit is again a reminder of the magnificent presence of the Most High God! For girls, there is a naming dedication ceremony that takes place eighty days after they are born.

### THE TALLIT IN BAR/BAT MITZVAH

The tallit is again used at a child's bar or bat mitzvah. This is a time when the young person is thought to come of age. He or she is presented with a tallit, and during the ceremony the young man or woman reads from the Torah, haftarah, and possibly the B'rit Chadashah if the family has embraced Yeshua as Messiah. The theme for this public reading is the same throughout each portion. The new adult is now taking on the responsibility of following the Word of God by becoming a son or daughter of the commandments. The child is responsible for his or her words and actions in the community. This person is now able to wear his or her new tallit to synagogue and

other events that require it. Once again, everything is done to acknowledge the presence of Yeshua in our lives.

#### THE TALLIT IN MARRIAGE

The tallit is again used in marriage. The tallit is placed on poles and is used to create a canopy called a chuppah. The man and woman then come together under the chuppah of God. Marriage is an institution that was created by Hashem before sin took place in the Garden of Eden (*Gan Eden*). “*Adonai Elohim* caused a deep sleep to fall on the man and he slept; and He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place. *Adonai Elohim* built the rib, which He had taken from the man, into a woman. Then He brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh from my flesh. This one is called woman, for from man was taken this one.’ This is why a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife; and they become one flesh [*basar echad*]” (Gen. 2:21–24). As Yeshua said, “What God has joined together, let no man separate!” (Mark 10:9).

Marriage represents the completion of the image of God. It represents the oneness, the *basar echad*, the unique composite that results from the coming together of man and woman. Consequently, our marriage reflects our walk with the Messiah. Under the tallit, a man and woman bond together in marriage. It is no longer about him or her; it is about them as a couple. In marriage, selfishness is no longer an option. We must love our spouse as Yeshua loves us. The Teacher tells us to “do nothing

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out of selfishness or conceit, but with humility consider others as more important than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

As a couple stands under the tallit in the marriage ceremony, they are joined together with Hashem as a three-stranded cord. His presence is in the midst of them. Marriage begins a new creation as instituted by our Creator. The couple entered the space under the tallit as individuals and leave it with a new “oneness” that is reflected in the unity of God. As His powerful will stands in the center of this new creation, the couple realizes that it is His will that must lead and guide them throughout their lives.

## THE TALLIT IN DEATH AND BURIAL

The tallit, as with the other life cycle events, is used in death. Those who have a tallit that has been passed down from generation to generation or who have a special tallit might desire to be buried in it. The tallit does not signify death. It epitomizes life in God’s presence and the covering of His powerful Word. It embodies Yeshua’s message of repentance, resurrection, and eternal life. Death is not the end. It is the beginning of an unimaginable eternity for those who know the Messiah.

When a tallit is used in burial, we must remember that it is a sign of holiness and sanctification. In life the individual wearing the tallit should be one who is set apart as unto Hashem. It should be worn by one who wants to be a light unto the nations. People should be able to look at this person and see something different about him or her and want that same special quality. The difference they see is the Spirit of Adonai.

A person should be buried in a tallit only if it represents who the individual was in life. Was the individual a man or woman of faith? Did he or she follow the commandments of Yeshua? Was the person one who tried to love his neighbor as himself? The Teacher followed all the commandments perfectly. Did the deceased person model his or her life after Yeshua? Was the person prideful, or humble? Was the person judgmental? Was the person generous, or greedy? Was he or she a person of prayer? Was the individual a person of character and integrity? These questions must be considered when determining whether to bury someone in a tallit, because it represents a love and respect for Hashem.

We know that the tallit, the garment to hold the tzitzit, was first spoken of in the Torah. Nevertheless, as we progress in our reading of the Tanakh and B'rit Chadashah (Old and New Testaments), Yeshua reveals to us more spiritual meanings of the tallit. It is more than a physical garment. Everything Yeshua gives us has a physical and a spiritual purpose. There is so much more to receive. Let's continue our journey to understand the tallit as we learn about hearing God under the tallit.

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