

# DEFINING WOMEN'S TZITZIT: A THOUSAND MILES TO "PURE & SIMPLE"

When Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut asked me to weave him a *tallit* in 1972, little did I know where this single step would lead, or how fulfilling the journey would be.



Having grown up in the liberal environment of Holy Blossom Temple, I wasn't clear on what a *tallit* was. Yet I was eminently equipped to ask questions, do research, and integrate what I found into the continuum of Jewish history and tradition.

It was also natural to enquire about how the *mitzvah* of wearing *tzitzit* applied to women.

There were several milestones along the path that reached its culmination in the current "Pure & Simple" series of women's *tzitzit*.

The first step was discovering the Biblical source for the practice. The word *tallit* (from the Aramaic meaning "cover") does not appear in Torah. The closest to a proof text is in Numbers 15:38-40, which refers to special fringes, but not to a specific garment used during prayer:

Instruct the Israelite people...to make fringes in the corners of their garments throughout their generations...Look at the fringe and recall all of the commandments...to be holy to your God.

The passage does not prescribe particular knots, nor

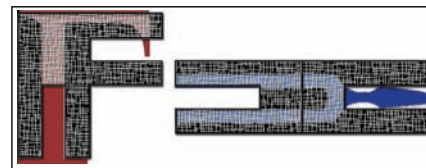
colours, nor size or shape of garment, nor prohibited materials. Nor does it specify a gender division between men and women. All of these were topics for discussion much later and into our own time; and each point has elicited mutually exclusive responses from equally eminent sages.

However, because there is a well established principle in Judaism prohibiting men and women from wearing each other's clothing, I struggled with what a specifically female, *halachachly* correct prayer garment would look like. Over the years I tried several approaches.

## Gamma corners

Rabbi Plaut pointed me to some archaeological evidence that the configuration of border stripes differentiated male from female garments at a time when both genders wore whole cloth coverings.

It was thought that the male identifier was a straight line with "tuning fork" notches at the end. The female



mark was described as a right-angled "gamma" shape.

Thus I would offer my women clients the option of gamma

corners for anchoring the *tzitzit*, as shown below left.

## Organic border designs (below centre)

Using softer materials and more fluid methods of embellishment, I retained the traditional *tallit* shape and the idea of border stripes. But these evolved into more organic forms, often reminiscent of leaves and buds.



### Serape style (above right)

This was commissioned by Cantor Anna Trabashnik, who wanted a *tallit* that would stay in place while she goes about her work on the *bimah*.

### Tallit as private space

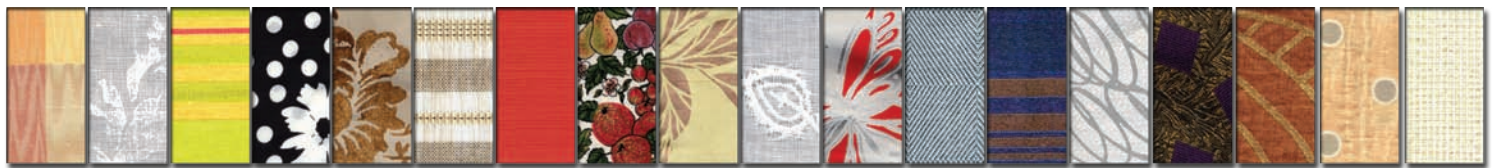
The actual *tallit* is attached to a larger garment and is draped over the head for private prayer. This one was commissioned by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, who wears it for Holy Days, when she is particularly on public view, but still engages in personal *tchuvah*.



These last two variations – designed specifically for working women – got me thinking about gender-related wearing styles. While many men seem to accept or even enjoy repeatedly hoisting a drooping *tallit* back onto their shoulders, most women just like to feel neatly dressed. And so I arrived at "Pure & Simple".

### Pure & Simple

This is made from a square of fabric into which is



inserted a triangular gusset. It is closed at the sides, forming an armhole. The back is several inches shorter than the front, so that the wearer is not sitting on the *tzitzit*, yet has a modest and flattering front covering. I use excellent quality designer fabrics in a wide range of colours and materials (see swatches below). There is opportunity for the wearer to add personally meaningful motifs in the areas of the corners or collar.

The positive response on both religious and aesthetic grounds from many women has been gratifying. They



understand that this *tallit* fulfills the original Biblical purpose of *tzitzit*, and appreciate that the style is specifically for a female body.

And so I was surprised and somewhat dismayed when recently a senior male rabbi commented as I showed the new design to his wife, "That's great! It's like a *tallit katan* and it doesn't slip around. I would wear that."

Temma Gentles

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