

A Tallit for Good and Bad Parashat Korach

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There is a specific article of Jewish life that has been on my mind lately. It is a religious garb that has been worn for centuries upon centuries by men; and, only recently has it been adopted by women in the more liberal streams of Judaism. I have given much thought to the tallit (or tallis) in recent weeks because my oldest child Josh has begun to enjoy wearing one for fun.

Yes, he wears it sometimes at shul on Shabbat morning, but most of the time he just likes grabbing mine and wearing it around the house. It's very cute. Of course, he won't be commanded to wear a tallit for another eleven-and-a-half years, but I must say that it makes me proud to see him take my oversize white tallit out of its bag and try to wrap himself in it. If I go over to him and try to fold the tallit into a more manageable scarf-like garment, he gets upset and says, "No, I want to wear it like Daddy!" This means throwing it around his neck and back, enveloping himself in the entire shawl.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, writes the following about the tallit:

*Whoever put on a tallis when he was young will never forget:
taking it out of the soft velvet bag, opening the folded shawl,
spreading it out, kissing the length of the neckband (embroidered
or trimmed in gold). Then swinging it in a great swoop overhead
like a sky, a wedding canopy, a parachute. And then winding it
around his head as in hide-and-seek, wrapping
his whole body in it, close and slow, snuggling into it like the cocoon
of a butterfly, then opening would-be wings to fly.
And why is the tallis striped and not checkered black-and-white
like a chessboard? Because squares are finite and hopeless.
Stripes come from infinity and to infinity they go
like airport runways where angels land and take off
Whoever has put on a tallis will never forget.
When he comes out of a swimming pool or the sea,
he wraps himself in a large towel, spreads it out again
over his head, and again snuggles into it close and slow,
still shivering a little, and he laughs and blesses.*

In this morning's parashah, Korach, one of Moses' cousins from the tribe of Levi, mounts a rebellion. In truth, Korach is the archconspirator of four different rebellions of which he either is the instigator or at the very least associated with the rebellion. Korach argues that he has as

much right to lead the Israelites as Moses or Aaron, who are in the same generational line on the Levite family tree. Some commentators point out that he doesn't argue so much that he should lead the B'nai Yisrael in the position of Moses, but rather that he has as much right as Aaron to lead the priesthood.

So where does the tallit enter into this biblical story of mutiny? The Korach narrative begins with the words *Vayikach Korach*, which come immediately following God's instructions regarding tzitzit, the tassels with a blueish/purpleish cord (a *p'til tekhelet*) that are to be attached to ones tallit (or outer garment). Each four-cornered garment had to have four tzitziyot hanging from each corner. The Midrash Tanchuma notices the words *Vayikach Korach* – “Korach took” and attempts to imagine what Korach took by associating that phrase to the section preceding it.

מדרש רבה - במדבר (פרשה יח סימן ג)

ג ויקח קרח מה כתיב למעלה מן הענין (במדבר טו) ועשו להם ציצית קפץ קרח ואמר למשה טלית שכולה

תכלת מהו שתהא פטורה מן הציצית א"ל חייבת בציצית א"ל קרח טלית שכולה תכלת אין פוטרת עצמה

ארבע חוטין פוטרות אותה

The Midrash imagines that what Korach took were the words from above in the text concerning tzitzit. Thus, the Midrash presents a challenge by Korach in which he jumps up and says to Moses, “You told us to put *tchelet* on the tzitzit, tell me if the tallit is entirely made up of *tchelet*, this blueish/purpleish dye, would such a tallit still require four tzitzit?” Moses replies that it, in fact, would still require tzitzit.” Korach then responds with the challenge, questioning the fact that four strings of *tchelet* can allow you to wear a tallit, but a garment made entirely of *tekhelet* cannot be exempted from this restriction?” Korach isn't simply challenging Moses' authority, which we know comes directly from God; he is also mocking our leader and prophet.

Clearly, Korach uses the tallit, a holy ritual object, for a negative purpose. The tallit with its tzitziyot is worn to show that the Jewish people are a holy people, a nation of priests. Korach uses this garb to try to make Moses, the greatest prophet of the Jewish people, look ridiculous. He uses the tallit and tzitzit to undermine Moses' authority.

How do we see the tallit? For me, a tallit is not like a kippah. To wear a kippah, or yarmulke, is a custom, while the tallit is a mitzvah, a commandment. I have many kippot, I acquire new ones often, and friends will buy or make them for me without rhyme or reason. The tallit, however, is special. Amichai's description speaks to me because I too am very deliberate in how I put on a tallit. All the motions I go through in putting on my tallit have become habitual, part of my own daily ritual: the removal of the tallit from its bag, the way I fling it around my body, the way I adjust it during my prayers, even the way I put it away at the end of services.

The tallit that I now wear is only the third tallit I have owned in my life. I wore my first tallit with pride. It was a gift from my grandparents on the occasion of my becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Yet, it was one of those skinnier models, the one which some refer to as a “*bikini tallis*” and I eagerly awaited the purchase of new, larger version.

My parents purchased my large multicolored *tallit Gadol* in the Ultra-Orthodox Mea Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem in 1996. It was created by blind artisans in Jerusalem. This is the tallit that took me through college and Rabbinical School and you will often see me wearing it at the daily minyan. It was the tallit that I wore at many milestones including my Aufruf and at Josh's bris. It was the tallit often used to serve as a Chuppah when the children came up for their aliyah to the Torah on Simchat Torah.

The tallit that I am currently wearing was also a gift. And it too carries much meaning for me. This tallit is a gift from the Jewish Theological Seminary upon my ordination as a Conservative

Rabbi over two years ago. I wore it at morning minyan before Jonah's bris and Talya's simchat bat. While it is new and does not yet have many stories to tell, I am confident that in time it will.

Even Josh, who is only two-year-old, already has his first tallit. It was purchased from my friend, Danny Siegel – “the Mitzvah Man” – and it was made by Ethiopian women. It currently hangs in a plastic bag in my closet waiting for Josh's bar mitzvah when he will wear it for the first time with pride. Those of us who wear a tallit when we pray should have those feelings of pride. When we wrap ourselves in the tallit, we should feel embraced – be it by God, or by the love of our people, or by the strong ties we have to our Tradition.

When we wear the tallit, we should look down at its fringes, the tzitzit, and be reminded of God's love for us and of God's mitzvot. We should also wear it proudly and let it serve as a reminder of how Moses and the Israelites did not allow Korach and his gang to overthrow their leadership. Each morning when we wrap ourselves in our tallit let it serve to show that Korach was defeated and that the tallit should not be used for such negativity. Let us consider the words of Yehuda Amichai and be ever cognizant of the ritual of tallit – from taking it out, to folding it and putting it back in its bag. If you don't currently wear a tallit, whether you are a man or a woman, a teenage boy or a teenage girl, or if you already wear one but could use a new tallit, I hope you will acquire one soon and wrap yourself up in this great mitzvah. Whether you buy one in Israel or right here in our Sisterhood's gift shop, I'm sure it will soon take on special meaning for you.

In Judaism, we have many beautiful rituals and the tallit is a beautiful religious garb that allows us to perform many of those rituals.

Shabbat Shalom.