

# Proposal for An Israelite Tzitzit

By

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“Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue.” Israelites are commanded by God to wear these fringes and to *make them for ourselves in each generation* “that ye may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God.”<sup>1</sup> This essay briefly examines all Torah laws and pertinent customs related to these fringes called tzitzit (צִיצִית) and proposes a distinctive way of making our tzitzit that will distinguish Israelites as a unique community within the diverse world of modern Judaism.

In Biblical time, men and women wore robes that had four corners. As pants became the common form of dress for men, tzitzit that could be worn over or under contemporary clothing were designed to fulfill this obligation. The tallit or prayer shawl worn in the synagogue serves the same purpose—except that it is often more beautiful and allows the wearer to be wrapped in the garment as a person wishing to be immersed in the spirit of the law. Unlike the Levites, who were prescribed to wear a specific priestly attire when entering the holy places, all Israelites are required to wear these tzitzit as part of our daily clothing. Just as a wedding ring signifies that the wearer is married and reminds him of his vows, so do these fringes signify our everlasting covenant with God.

Those who wear the tzitzit concealed under their clothing may be said to fulfill the verse “You shall see and remember” when they dress and undress each day. The law clearly states that “you shall see”—which means that the public is not required to see what you are wearing. Moreover, the injunction in Deuteronomy merely requires that, “Thou shalt make thee twisted cords upon the four corners of thy garment.” The fact that these cords are present meets this minimal requirement.<sup>2</sup> Those who chose to make their tzitzit visible to the public at all times are permitted to do so. Some scholars argue that it must be visible at all time to serve as a reminder. Both interpretations of these laws are plausible. However, it seems that this appendage was intended to be inconspicuous. Keep in mind that fringes of some kind have been universally used by cultures throughout history. You find them adorning clothing, hats, pipes, uniforms, etc. The blue thread called tekelet (תְּכֵלֶת) is what makes our tzitzit unique. Yet, such a small thread could be easily missed—and even when seen—its meaning would not be understood by people outside our culture. This strongly suggests that gentiles were not expected to recognize the tzitzit. We must also remember that the Levites were prohibited from wearing their priestly attire in public to make a distinction between holy and secular and to prevent their garments from being used as a symbol that elevated the wearer rather than the God he serves. Therefore, whether one wears the tzitzit concealed or visible, it must be worn modestly rather than as a flag of superiority.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 15:38-40 and Deuteronomy 22:12. JPS 1917

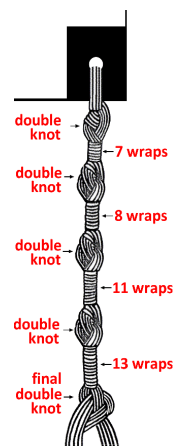
<sup>2</sup> Abraham Chill, *Minhagim: The Customs and Ceremonies of Judaism, Their Origins and Rationale*, 3 edition (New York: Hermes Pub Co, 1979), 12. The fact that valid tzitzit must be “twisted” is a matter that I will discuss in reference to our design proposal.

Israelite women may both wear and make tzitzit. The law was given to “the children of Israel,” a term that refers to the entire nation. Many rabbinic authorities exempt women from “any positive commandment which has to be performed at a definite time.”<sup>3</sup> According to this tradition, the duties of a woman’s household may take precedence. Our scholars who are affiliated with the Israelite Board of Rabbis, take a dissenting view. On this subject, it appears that the laws of tzitzit are fulfilled simply by getting dressed. In contrast to prayers, which are performed at specific times, the simple wearing of tzitzit will not interfere with any familial responsibilities by women or men.

Many communities do not require the wearing of a tallit at night because their leaders have ruled that the tzitzit can not be seen in the dark. The Israelite Board of Rabbis differs from this position; we believe that since our synagogues and homes are well lit in the evenings, we can easily see the tzitzit. Therefore, we hold that the tallit should be worn during all prayer services in the synagogue.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the act of wearing the tallit enhances *kavanah*, which is focus and concentration in prayer.

The presence and significance of other elements associated with a tallit such as borders, colors, and decreive elements vary with each community –and sometimes according to the personal tastes of the wearer. However, the laws prohibiting the mixing of wool and linen fabrics must be strictly observed.<sup>5</sup>

There are many mystical and Kabbalistic qualities associated with the tzitzit. The ancient sages taught that every word—indeed, ever letter—had numeric and spiritual significance. To this day many Ashkenazi Jews do not have the required blue thread in their tzitzit because they lack the ingredients our ancestors used to make the dye.<sup>6</sup> The Talmud stated that 4 fringes were used in each corner of the garment. When folded through the whole and tied with a knot there would be 8 strings. The Talmud did not describe how they should be twisted. Maimonides advocated winding 1 of these threads 39 times. (The traditional sequence separated by knots is 7-8-11-13). Using the mathematical calculation of Hebrew letters called gematria, the number 39 is equivalent to the declaration “The Lord is One.” Rashi extrapolated that if you took a variant Hebrew spelling of the word tzitzit from the Mishnah and added this figure to the number of threads and knots the sum would be 613. That number, according to the sages, corresponds to the 613 commandments that are in the Torah.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 18. All prohibitions apply to both genders at all times.

<sup>4</sup> We also find the injunction against wearing the tallit at night to be contradictory. The Talmud (Menahot 43a) states that even a blind man should wear tzitzit. Therefore, it is awareness of the act and its significance that is paramount.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 22:11 “Thou shalt not wear a mingled garment, wool and linen together.” Also Leviticus 19:19. Maimonides argued “*Nothing at all is forbidden in clothing mixtures except wool and linen mixed together.*” “Shatnez: Forbidden Mixtures of Clothing,” accessed May 16, 2016, <http://www.beingjewish.com/mitzvos/shatnez.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Chill, *Minhagim*, 16. For centuries people have speculated as to how this dye was made. It was postulated that a rare mollusk called “Hillazon” was the source. In the nineteenth century Rabbi Gerson Leiner thought he had discovered a cuttlefish that produced the correct dye. The Israelite Board of Rabbis is of the opinion that an unkosher animal would not have been the source of this dye. Academic debates about such matters should not preclude the observance of a commandment.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Birnbaum, *Maimonides’ Code Of Law And Ethics: Mishneh Torah*, Abridged edition (Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), 59; Solomon Ganzfried, *Code of Jewish Law (Kitzur Schulchan Aruch): A*

The Israelite Board of Rabbis advocates that we create a tzitzit for our community. The design described below fulfills all the requirements of Torah, has powerful Kabbalistic and symbolic meaning, and will provide a degree of uniformity that will define us in relation to other Jewish communities around the world such as the Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Karaite—all of whom have distinct tzitzit.

**Number of Threads in the Israelite Tzitzit**

Number	Meaning
5 Threads	Five Books of the Torah
1 Sky Blue Thread	Indivisible Oneness of the Creator
12 Strings (created when the 6 threads hang from a garment)	Twelve Tribes of Israel
18 (The total of 6 threads and 12 strings)	In Hebrew חַיִּים means “life”

**Method of Twisting the Israelite Tzitzit<sup>8</sup>**

Turns with Blue Thread	Hebrew Value
10	י
5	ה
6	ו
5	ה

The turns spell the ineffable divine name יהוה



For the Israelite community, the four corners of our garment represent the promise the God made to the prophet Isaiah: “And He will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather together the scattered of Judah from the *four corners of the earth*.”<sup>9</sup> We are the people

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*Compilation of Jewish Laws and Customs*, trans. Hyman E. Goldin, Revised edition (Hebrew Publishing Co., 1961), 20. The Hebrew spelling used is יהוה אהוה

<sup>8</sup> This method of twisting tzitzit has been used Sephardi Jews for centuries. However, they only use 4 threads, like the Ashkenazi. Hence, the Israelite Tzitzit is unique, yet within the pale.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 11:12; Also, Zechariah 8:23 predicts that nations will “take hold of the corner of the robe of him that is a Jew (יהודי), saying: “We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

of Israel who have been dispersed. Those of us who were scattered throughout Africa millennia ago are in the process of returning to our God and reclaiming our true identity. Hence, when we look at the four corners of the tzitzit and we look in the minor we see the fulfillment of God’s prophecy.

The purpose of the tzitzit is to remind all Jews of the law. Those who question whether we—the descendants of slaves—have a valid claim to the birthright and covenant must be reminded of this passage of the Torah predicting our enslavement and eventual return:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, 2 And shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; 3 *That then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee.* 4 If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee.<sup>10</sup>

Given the significance of the tzitzit to us, all Israelites should recite the blessing below before putting on a garment with tzitzit tassels. In addition, we should kiss the fringes when reciting the full Shema prayers each time the word “tzitzit” is mentioned. Moreover, we should stand and cover our heads with the tallit when reciting the Amidah prayers.

Stretch the tallit before you, holding it with both hands, and recite this blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheimu, melekh ha'olam*

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe

אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהִתְעַטֵּף בְּצִיצִית

*asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu l'hit'ateif ba-tzitzit*

Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to wrap ourselves in the tzitzit

We are looking for tailors and seamstresses who can make the “Israelite Tzitzit.” New tallitzim can be purchased, existing tallitzim can be updated with our Tzitzit, and a selection of Israelite Tzitzit we be made available to our community.

This proposal for an “Israelite Tzitzit” was submitted to the Israelite Board of Rabbis for consideration. Our Bet Din (rabbinic court) will rule on whether to adopt it as our official tzitzit during the Israelite convention, which will take place in New York City from August 19-21, 2016. Until that time, we welcome feedback, constructive criticism, and recommendations for improvement.

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<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 30:1-4.