

## Is Wearing a *Tallit Katan* (*tzitzit*) Required Today?

*To what extent are men obligated to wear a tallit katan? I currently do not wear a tallit katan and have received no clear answer on what I should do.*

Determining whether the wearing of a *tallit katan* is required today is contingent upon the kind of mitzvah *tzitzit* (fringes) is considered to be. Not all *mitzvot* are alike. Some positive commandments are called *hovah*. A *hovah* is a kind of mitzvah that demands of each person the ardent pursuit and fulfillment of the commandment regardless of personal circumstance. Examples of a *hovah* are the command to wear *tefillin*, the command to dwell in a *sukkah*, the command to take a *lulav* on Sukkot, and the command to hear the blowing of the *shofar*. It is about this kind of mitzvah that Maimonides wrote (*Laws of Blessings* 11:2): "... a man is obligated to strive for and pursue the performance of these obligations...which are termed obligations because every man is at all events duty bound to perform them." Some positive commandments, however, will vary according to personal circumstance. As Maimonides (*loc. cit.*) describes it: "There is a kind of mitzvah which is not an obligation but may be compared to an option, like *mezuzah*...where a person is under no obligation to dwell in a house which requires a *mezuzah* in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *mezuzah*..." That is to say, if a person lives in a tent or boat which never requires a *mezuzah* (see Shulhan Arukh, *Yoreh De'ah* 286:11–14) he is not required to move to a house so that the mitzvah of *mezuzah* might be performed. On the other hand, if a person lives in a structure that requires a *mezuzah*, he is duty bound to affix them. Abudraham (*Order of Daily Prayers*, Gate 3, beginning) calls this kind of mitzvah *reshut* or optional.

Among these different categories of commandments the authorities make a further division. There are some obligations that devolve on certain things

themselves while there are other obligations that devolve on the owners of the things. For example, the authorities differ on whether the law of removing leaven (*hametz*) before Pesah applies to the resident(s) of the house in which the leaven is found or whether it applies to the leaven itself (see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 12, p. 650). Similarly, the authorities differ on whether the mitzvah of *mezuzah* applies to the house or to the people who reside in it. In other words, some authorities rule that if a person owns a house but does not reside in it, no *mezuzah* is required while others rule that a *mezuzah* is required of all houses owned by Jews whether Jews reside there or not (*loc. cit.*, p. 648).

With regard to the question of *tallit katan*, if the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is considered a *hovah* in its fullest sense, then a male Jew would be obligated to make a four-cornered garment to which he must attach fringes. If he did not own such a garment, he would be obligated to go out and get one. If the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is considered a *hovah* which devolves upon the wearer of the garment, then a Jew would be obligated to put fringes only on the four-cornered garment he is wearing. If he is not wearing a four-cornered garment he would be exempt from the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. If the mitzvah of *tzitzit* devolves upon the garment, then all four-cornered garments owned by a Jew would require *tzitzit* but he would not be obligated to go out and get a four cornered garment if he did not own one. The last two cases, namely, whether the mitzvah of *tzitzit* devolves upon the wearer or the garment, are predicated on categorizing the mitzvah of *tzitzit* as optional.

The Talmudic authorities are divided: under which category is the wearing of a *tzitzit* subsumed (*Menahot* 42b)? Rav Nahman, following the opinion of Rav, says that the mitzvah of *tzitzit* devolves upon the person, while Rav Hisda, following the opinion of Samuel, says that the mitzvah of *tzitzit* devolves on the garment. The Talmud (*ibid.* 42a) tells that Rav Nahman found Rav Ada bar Ahava putting *tzitzit* on a garment and reciting a blessing "to make *tzitzit*". Rav Nahman mocked him (see RaShI *ad locum*) because there is no mitzvah to make *tzitzit*, only to wear them, which is an obligation that devolves on the wearer. To prove this he cites Rav's opinion: "making *tzitzit* requires no blessing". Earlier (*Menahot* 41a) we learn, Rabbah bar Huna happened to be in the home of Rabbah, the son of Rav Nahman. He said to him: "Do we say it is an obligation that devolves on the person? It is an obligation that devolves on the item of clothing itself!" said Rav Tovi bar Kisna in the name of Samuel. "Even clothes folded and stored in a chest require *tzitzit*." From all this we learn that there are two traditions with regard to the categorization of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. The first tradition, transmitted in the name of Rav, teaches that *tzitzit* is an obligation that devolves on the person wearing the garment since no blessing is required for the making of *tzitzit*. The second tradition, transmitted in the name of Samuel, teaches that *tzitzit* is an obligation that devolves on the garment itself since even clothes folded in a closet require fringes. The

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Talmud does not endorse one view over another but there is a well-known legal principle that in matters of ritual (which the question of *tzitzit* certainly is), when Rav and Samuel disagree, the Halakhah follows the opinion of Rav (see *Bekhorot* 49b and parallels), which in this case means that *tzitzit* is an obligation that devolves on the wearer of the garment.

Note, however, that from the outcome of this Talmudic passage, the obligation of *tzitzit* is of the optional kind as defined by Maimonides and mentioned above. This is clear from the Talmud (following the reading of *Shitah Mekubetzet*, *Menahot* 41a) that tells of an angel who appeared to Rav Katina wrapped in a fringeless, linen bedsheet (see RaShI *ad locum*). The angel said to him: “Katina, Katina! You wear a fringeless bedsheet in the summer and a fringeless mantle (see RaShI *ad locum*) in the winter. What is to become of the law of *tzitzit*?” To which Rav Katina responded, “Do you punish a sin of omission?”, meaning, according to the Tosafot (*loc. cit.*, s.v. *anshitu*), a man is not obligated to buy a garment requiring *tzitzit* if he doesn’t own one. The Talmud goes on to reason that this passage can only suggest that a person could exempt himself from the mitzvah of *tzitzit* if he had no garment that requires them. In fact, the Talmud (*Menahot*, *loc. cit.*) even says that our pious predecessor, Rav Ada bar Ahava, acted beyond the requirement of the law in making fringes for a garment that were not necessary. (See also *Shabbat* 118b and RaShI *ad locum* regarding Rav Nahman’s punctiliousness in wearing *tzitzit*.)

Therefore, the wearing of *tzitzit* is, like *mezuzah*, an obligation that devolves upon the person. And this is what Maimonides ruled: “Garments that would otherwise require fringes yet are not worn by a man but are, rather, folded and stored away, are exempt from fringes in that the law applies not to the garment itself but is contingent upon the man who has such a garment to wear” (*Laws of Fringes* 3:10). Rabbi Isaac Alfasi and Rabbenu Asher rule similarly. And Rabbi Joseph Karo (*Bet Yosef* on Tur, *Orah Hayyim* 19, s.v. *ein*) writes: “Since these three pillars of learning agree that it is an obligation that devolves upon the person, there is no doubt in the matter.” Nonetheless, Maimonides concludes his ruling with an addendum: “Even though a man is not required to buy himself a garment and wrap himself in it so that he can make fringes for it, it is improper for a pious man to exempt himself from this mitzvah. Rather, a man should always strive to be wrapped in a garment requiring fringes so that he may fulfill the mitzvah, especially during prayer. It is a great disgrace for learned students to pray uncovered by a fringed garment” (*Laws of Fringes* 3:11 and see Mishnah *Pesahim* 4:5). Even though Maimonides, is referring to the large *tallit*—what we call *tzitzit* or the *tallit katan* (small *tallit*) worn under the outer garments has its origins in Ashkenazic custom (see Responsa MaHaRaM of Rothenberg, Kahana edition, Nos. 9–11; Mordekhai, *Laws of Tzitzit* 943)—Rabbi Jacob ben Asher writes (Tur, *Orah*

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*Hayyim* 24): “In any case, it is good and proper for all men who are careful and zealous in the mitzvah of *tzitzit* to wear a small, fringed garment all day long because the essence of the mitzvah is to remember to perform the commandments at all times and the fringes are required for this....”

If Rabbi Jacob ben Asher is correct, namely, if the purpose of *tzitzit* is to remember all the other commandments as it is written, “That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them...” (Numbers 15:39; *Menahot* 43b; Maimonides, *Laws of Fringes* end), thus infusing this particular mitzvah with a general function, then why isn’t there any Talmudic authority that categorizes *tzitzit* as an obligation in its fullest sense, like the law of *tefillin* from which there is no exemption? Instead, the Talmudic debate surrounded the issue of whether it was a duty that devolves upon the object or a duty that devolves upon the person. Further, these days the mitzvah of *tzitzit* applies all day long, unlike that of *tefillin*, which nowadays are usually worn only during the morning prayers (see *Shabbat* 49a and *Tosafot ad locum*, s.v. *k’Elisha*; Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 2:3 and Rabbi Louis Ginzberg, *Perushim veHiddushim ba-Yerushalmi*, vol. 1, pp. 261–263; *Pesahim* 113b and *Tosafot ad locum*, s.v. *v’ ein*).

The answer, it would seem, is that *tzitzit* was a reminder of all the other commandments only when the thread of blue was included. As the passage in the Talmud (*Menahot* 43b) relates: “It was taught: Rabbi Meir used to say, ‘What is the difference between *tekhelet* (i.e., the blue-green color the Torah links to *tzitzit*) and all other dyes? *Tekhelet* resembles the sea and the sea resembles the heavens and the heavens resemble the Divine throne.’” Without that special dye the *tzitzit* loses its power, so to speak. Even though the absence of the dye does not impair the performance of the mitzvah itself (Mishnah *Menahot* 4:1 and 38a; Maimonides, *Laws of Fringes* 1:4), it is, nonetheless, somewhat lessened. [Therefore, when the Talmud tells how the angel castigated Rav Katina (see above), our reading, which includes the words “*shel tekhelet*” is certainly in error and these words should be omitted (see *Shitah Mekubetzet* and *Dikdukei Soferim ad locum*) since in Rav Katina’s day they no longer netted the sea creature that produced the dye (see *Menahot* 40a).] This is what Rabbi Solomon ibn Aderet meant when he wrote: “From here we learn that it is forbidden to go out beyond the *eruv* in our prayer shawls since our prayer shawls are not made properly: they do not have *tekhelet* which is essential” (*Responsa RaShBA*, vol. 1, no. 878). Even though the RaSHBA’s opinion is not accepted as Halakhah, it does emphasize the fact that it is the dye’s presence that determines the efficacy of the *tallit*.

It may be argued, therefore, that since *tzitzit* is categorized as a mitzvah which devolves upon the wearer who is under no obligation to buy a four-cornered garment to which to attach fringes, and that since *tzitzit* are worn only as an act of piety implying that it is optional, and that since, in the absence of the proper dye,

it is a diminished mitzvah anyway, a *tallit katan* need not be worn at all.

Nonetheless, it is the opinion of the Panel of Halakhic Inquiry that a *tallit katan* ought to be worn. Today, no less than generations before, a reminder to perform the commandments of the Torah is sorely needed. Also to be remembered is the admonition of Rabbi Isaac: "He who loves *mitzvot* never has his fill of them" (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 4:8). Moreover, it is important for Jews today to affirm that even a diminished mitzvah is still a mitzvah. This applies not only to *tzitzit*. There are other *mitzvot* which are performed today even though they are somewhat diminished from their earlier efficacy like the eating of bitter herbs in the absence of the paschal lamb (see *Pesahim* 120a) or reciting the priestly blessing even though we cannot vocalize God's ineffable name (see *Tosefta Sotah* 13:8 and *Sotah* 38a and *Tosafot ad locum*, s.v. *harei*; *Yoma* 39b; *Kiddushin* 71a; Maimonides, *Laws of Prayer* 14:10; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 128:44 and Rabbi Moses Isserles *ad locum*) or counting the 'omer even though there is no 'omer offering today (see *Menahot* 66a and *RaSHI ad locum*, s.v. *Amemar*; *Tosafot ad locum*, s.v. *zekher*). The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is diminished from what it used to be, unlike other *mitzvot* such as *tefillin*, *lulav*, *sukkah*, etc. Yet despite its diminution—or perhaps because of it—we today should be more careful with the observance of this lessened mitzvah for it, too, is a mitzvah like all other *mitzvot* of our holy Torah. Hence, it is good and proper to wear *tzitzit* all day long (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 24:1).

That a *tallit katan* ought to be worn does not indicate how it should be worn. Some follow the authorities who rule that in order for *tzitzit* to be a viable reminder, it must be a visible reminder. Thus *tzitzit* should be worn outside one's clothes (see *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 8:11; Rabbi Abraham Gumbiner, *Magen Avraham, ad locum*, subparagraph 13; Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen Kagan, *Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim* 8:26). Others (cf. Rabbi Yehiel Michal Epstein, *Arukh haShulhan, Orah Hayyim* 8:17) follow the practice of Rabbi Isaac Luria (cited in *Magen Abraham, loc. cit.*) who insisted that the *tzitzit* be worn under one's garments. This is generally the Sephardic custom (see Rabbi Joseph Mesas, *Otzar Mikhtavim*, Part 3, Elef 761). Wearing *tzitzit* inside has the additional benefit of avoiding the potential derision of others—Jews and non-Jews alike (Rabbi Joseph Mesas, *loc. cit.*; *Magen Avraham, loc. cit.*). These days, when special care ought to be exercised neither to embarrass the majority of Jews who do not wear *tzitzit* at all nor to contend with those who wear *tzitzit* inside their clothing and thus unnecessarily create further divisions among Jews, it is preferable to follow the Lurianic practice and wear the *tallit katan* under one's clothing.

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