

Women Wearing Tzitzit
*Preliminary Investigation into the Rabbinic History & Halachah
as a background for further discussion*

Tim Hegg • TorahResource

Some Rabbinic texts which deal with the issue at hand:

Sukkah 11a

MISHNAH. IF HE TRAINED A VINE OR A GOURD OR IVY OVER [THE SUKKAH] AND COVERED IT WITH THE COVERING OF A SUKKAH, IT IS NOT VALID. IF [HOWEVER] THE SUKKAH-COVERING EXCEEDS THEM IN QUANTITY, OF IF HE CUT THEM, IT IS VALID. THIS IS THE GENERAL RULE. WHATEVER IS SUSCEPTIBLE TO [RITUAL] UNCLEANLINESS AND DOES NOT GROW FROM THE SOIL MAY NOT BE USED FOR SUKKAH-COVERING, BUT WHATEVER IS NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO [RITUAL] UNCLEANLINESS AND GROWS FROM THE SOIL MAY BE USED FOR SUKKAH-COVERING.

GEMARA. R. Joseph sat before R. Huna, and in the course of the session he stated, [with reference to the ruling] OR IF HE CUT THEM, IT IS VALID, Rab said, But he must shake them. Said R. Huna to him, This has been said by Samuel! R. Joseph turned away his face [in annoyance] and retorted, Did I then tell you that Samuel did not say it? Rab said it and Samuel also said it. It is this that I say, said R. Huna to him, As to that, Samuel said it, and not Rab, since Rab declares it valid [without shaking], as in the case of R. Amram the Pious who attached fringes to the aprons of the women of his house. He hung them but did not cut off the ends of the threads. When he came before R. Hiyya b. Ashi the latter said to him, Thus said Rab, [In such a case the threads] may be cut and they are valid. Thus it is obvious that their cutting is their [valid] preparation, so here also, their cutting is their [valid] preparation.

Menachot 43a

Rab Judah attached fringes to the aprons of [the women of] his household; moreover, he used to say every morning the blessing [‘ . . . and hast commanded us] to enwrap ourselves with the fringes’. But since he attached [the fringes to the womens’ garments], obviously he is of the opinion that it is a precept not dependent on a fixed time; why then did he say the blessing every morning? — He follows Rabbi's view; for it was taught: Whenever a man puts on the tefillin he should make a blessing over them, says Rabbi. But if so, at any time [of the day whenever he puts on the garment he should say the blessing]? — Rab Judah was a most decorous person and would not take off his cloak the whole day long. Then why [did he say the blessing] in the morning? — That was when he changed from night clothes into day clothes.

Sifre 115 (Commentary on Num 15:37-41)

"[Since the phrasing is 'say to them,'] even women are included in the requirement. R. Simeon declares women exempt from the religious duty of wearing fringes, because it is a religious duty involving an act of commission dependent on a particular time, and from a religious duty in that classification women are exempt. This is the encompassing rule that R. Simeon stated, "As to all religious duties involving an act of commission dependent on a particular time, men are liable and women are exempt, and such duties do not apply to women, for those duties apply to those fit for doing them and not to those unfit." R. Judah b.

Baba says, "In particular sages have exempted the woman's veil from the requirement of fringes, while they did not require her to wear a prayer cloak only because there are times that her husband wraps himself in it."

(This English translation is from Neusner, Sifre to Numbers, vol. 2, p. 176).

ויאמר ה' אל משה. ועשו להם ציצית. (מנחות מג) אף הנשים במשמע. ר' שמעון פוטר את הנשים מן הציצית מפני שמצות עשה שהזמן גרמה נשים פטורות שזה הכלל אמר רבי שמעון כל מצות עשה שהזמן גרמה נשים פטורות ונוהג באנשים ולא בנשים בכשרים ולא בפסולים. רבי יהודה בן בבא אומר בייחוד פטרן נוטלים חכמים את הדרדור של אשה מן הציצית ולא חייבן בטלית אלא מפני שפעמים שבעלה מתכסה בו: ועשו להם ציצית. (שם מא) אין ציצית אלא דבר היוצא ודבר כל שהוא וכבר נכנסו זקני בית שמאי וזקני בית הלל לעליית יונתן בן בתירה ואמרו ציצית אין לה שיעור. כיוצא בו אמרו לולב אין לו שיעור: ועשו להם ציצית שומע אני יעשה חוט בפני עצמו תלמוד לומר (דברים כב) גדילים. (שם) מכמה גדילים אתה עושה אין פחות משלשה דברי ב"ש וב"ה אומרים שלשה של צמר ורביעי של תכלת והלכה כב"ש בד"א בתחלתו אבל שיריה וגרדומיה כל שהוא. ועשו להם ציצית שומע אני יעשה כולם גדילים ת"ל ציצית הא כיצד שתהא גדילה יוצא מן הכנף וציצית מן הגדילים: על כנפי בגדיהם שומע אני אף בעלי שלש ובעלי חמש ובעלי שבע ובעלי שמונה במשמ' תלמוד לומר על ארבע כנפות כסותך יצאו בעלי שלש ובעלי חמש ובעלי שש ושבע ושמונה מן המשמע משמע מוציא את אלו ומוציא כרים וכסתות תלמוד לומר אשר תכסה בה (שם) שומע אני כסות לילה במשמע תלמוד לומר וראיתם אותו ביום ולא בלילה ואם היתה מיוחדת ליום ולילה תהא חייב' בציצית. משמע מוציא את אלו (שם) ומוציא את כסות סומא ת"ל והיה לכם לציצית מכל מקום:

The rabbinic debate seems to be construed over several issues:

1. the issue of time-bound commandments
 - a. women are generally exempt from time bound commandments, since their inability to fulfill some of these (which required ritual purity) was limited by their monthly cycle.
 - b. Since Shimon b. Gamiliel is accredited with this ruling, it is post 70CE, and this should be kept in mind when the discussion of time bound commandments is undertaken.
2. the issue of the kind of garment worn (the material of which it is made, and the normal use of the garment):
 - a. of what is the garment made? (Rambam seems to rule that only garments made of cotton or wool require tzitzit, while others rule that all garments of four corners that are big enough to cover a child require tzitzit)
 - b. when is the garment normally worn? If normally worn in the daytime, then it requires tzitzit. Likewise, garments normally worn both in the day and the night, require tzitzit. Conversely, garments worn only at night do not require tzitzit. This is based upon the requirement to "look upon them."
 - c. This might help explain the use of tzitzit on aprons, since these would be worn both in the daylight and at evening, when the sun has set.
 - d. This also explains the question of why R. Judah said the blessing for tzitzit in the morning (Menachot 43a). Since he wore his cloak all day long (meaning even into the evening), it was a garment that was both for daylight and nighttime. He did take his cloak off when he went to bed, so the blessing was repeated in the morning when he dressed again. This would indicate that he conformed (in measure) to the prevailing halachah that did not require tzitzit on garments worn only at night.
3. the issue of fitness (or wholeness) to wear tzitzit
 - a. thus, children are exempt, because they might not sufficiently understand the import of wearing the tzitzit, or what they are to "remember" when they look upon them
 - b. the Sages may be saying something similar about women who might be untrained or education in halachah. But this would not exclude all women, particularly those who have taken the effort to learn the ha-

lachah and wear the tzitzit in accordance with accepted halachah.

- c. it hardly appears cogent that women would be exempted on the basis of their monthly uncleanness. If such were the case, one might reason that a male who is ritually unclean is exempt, but that would foil the very purpose of the tzitzit, i.e., to remind him of the laws of purity, and especially that he could not enter the Temple precincts while in a state of ritual impurity.

The argument itself would most likely indicate that women wearing tzitzit was not the majority practice, but this is only speculative. It might as easily be argued that a situation where women were failing to wear tzitzit brought upon the halachic discussion. The fact that someone of such high regard as R. Judah would have attached tzitzit to the aprons of the women in his household should carry significant weight, since he was surely a leading authority in halachic matters. Moreover, the issue that brings this notice to arise in the talmudic discussion is that of timing for saying the berachot. Since aprons are worn both in daylight and after the sun sets, the issue is not so much about who is obligated to wear tzitzit, as it is whether all who wear tzitzit are obligated to pronounce the berachah, and if so, when. It appears that the halachah followed those who allowed women to wear tzitzit, but exempted them from pronouncing the berachah for them when the garment is put on. It may be that the use of the tallit, which apparently is a post-destruction phenomenon, brought new halachic issues to bear upon the use of tzitzit. We may see this in Sifre, where a woman is exempt from wearing tzitzit because her husband is wearing a tallit (meaning that if she were to wear the same tallit, it would be violating the commandment regarding a woman wearing a man's clothing).

Also, by all we know, the number of female proselytes in 1st Century Judaism far exceeded male conversions. Is it possible that the issue of women wearing tzitzit was heightened after the destruction, in light of the fact that a growing number of female converts were wearing tzitzit? This is, of course, only speculation, since no data of which I am aware gives this picture. But it is interesting that in our own Torah movement, the desire of women, and particularly non-Jewish women, to wear tzitzit, seems to have brought the halachic question to the fore, and required some response. Perhaps the same was true in ancient times.

Finally, seeking to understand the halachah of rabbinic Judaism on this subject should not be construed as suggesting that the halachah of rabbinic Judaism is always binding upon those of us who are Messianic. Our primary reference in regard to halachah are the Scriptures themselves. In this regard, it is clear that the term בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל (often translated “sons of Israel”) is not a gender-specific designation. Clearly *b'nei Yisrael* includes both male and female in many (if not most) of its occurrences. Consider, for instance, the use of the phrase *b'nei Yisrael* in Num 15, the very chapter that includes the commandment of tzitzit:

- vv. 2–3 uses *b'nei Yisrael* in connection with the command to offer sacrifices. Women as well as men offered sacrifices, for women were required to bring a sacrifice for purification after giving birth to a child (Lev 12:6).
- vv. 15–20 uses *b'nei Yisrael* in connection with offering the first fruits of the land. There is every indication that this was incumbent upon both men and women, for all who have produce from the Land are obligated to give the first fruits as an offering.

- v. 26 uses *b'nei Yisrael* to designate the “congregation of Israel.” Here, the term relates to the fact that the congregation as a whole (including the alien) is forgiven of unintentional sin. This clearly includes women as well as men.
- v. 29 uses *b'nei Yisrael* as an all inclusive term, that there should be “one Torah” (one rule/procedure) for anyone who sins unintentionally. This clearly includes women as well as men.
- v. 32 uses *b'nei Yisrael* to designate the nation of Israel: “while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness....” Surely women as well as men were part of the nation who were in the wilderness.

Thus, every time that *b'nei Yisrael* is used in Numbers 15, it is an all inclusive term. The only conclusion one can reach is that when v. 38 states that the commandment of tzitzit is for *b'nei Yisrael*, it includes the women.

Note also Ex 13:2 and Num 3:12 –

Ex. 13:2 “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.”

Num. 3:12 “Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every firstborn, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine.

The phrase “the womb among the sons of Israel” (רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *rechem mib'nei Yisrael*) clearly shows that “sons of Israel” is not gender specific. Some of the “sons of Israel” have wombs!

Given these data, it is clear that the tzitzit commandment should be understood to include both men and women.

What follows on the next page are comments given by Sarina Roffé, based upon a lecture by Dr. Zvi Zohar of the Bar Ilan University. I do not endorse all that is mentioned in this brief essay, but thought it interesting to show that even among observant Jewish people of our day, there are those who are willing to admit that in more ancient rabbinic sources, it is clear that some of the authorities felt women could wear tzitzit, and others appear to have thought it a requirement for women.

I include the essay simply as a matter of interest, without endorsing the idea that wearing tzitzit will somehow give us “merit” before HaShem. We believe that any merit we have before the Almighty is that which is ours in Yeshua HaMeshicheinu, Yeshua our Messiah.

By Sarina Roffé,
Based on a lecture

by Dr. Zvi Zohar
of Bar Ilan University and the Shalom Hartman Institute (May 2002/Sivan 5762)

The idea of a woman putting on tallit and tefillin is completely alien in Orthodox Jewish circles in the 20th and 21st Centuries, but was it always so? What do rabbinic sages say about this practice? Are women obligated to do so? Should they say the brachot?

This article will discuss commentary from several rabbinic sources but will emphasize the writings of a father and son, Rabbi Israel Yaakov AlGhazi (d. 1756) and his son Rabbi Yomtov ben Israel AlGhazi (d. 1802), two Chief Sephardic Rabbis in Jerusalem in the 18th Century, based on a lecture by Dr. Zvi Zohar of Bar Ilan University and the Shalom Hartman Institute.

Writings by Rabbi Israel Yaakov AlGhazi indicate that in general, according to Halakha [Jewish religious norms] women are not obligated to perform time-bound mitzvot, such as putting on tefillin and tallit. But, while some Talmudic rabbis held that women were forbidden to perform such mitzvot, others held that they may do so, if they so choose. All post-Talmudic rabbis accepted the second view, i.e., women may take on greater obligations than required and perform time-bound mitzvot, even though they are not required to do so. Indeed, God appreciates women who voluntarily perform these mitzvot and women get a heavenly reward for performing them. However, a person commanded to do the mitzvot and who fulfills his obligation receives a higher reward than a person who is not required to do so.

Rambam [Maimonides] tells us that women may put on tallit and tefillin but may not say the bracha for doing so. But another 12-13th Century Talmudic sage, Rabbi Ya'akov Tam, the grandson of Rashi, ruled that women who perform the mitzvot of putting on tefillin and tallit are permitted to say the bracha. Over time, it has become generally understood that Ashkenazic Jews permit the women to say the bracha over time-bound mitzvot, and Sephardic Jews do not.

Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov AlGhazi and his son Yomtov AlGhazi were each (in turn) holders of the office of "Rishon LeZiyyon", Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and were in the first rank of Sephardic rabbis in the world. They characterize the figure of the "Woman of Valor" [the ideal Jewish woman, "Eshet Hayyil"] as one who not only performs mitzvot, such as putting on tefillin and tallit, but also recites the appropriate blessings. Moreover, these two rabbis explain that the ideal woman is one who is learned in Halakha, and therefore is able to decide when it is a good idea to consult with rabbinic sages and when it is best to act without such consultation. Knowing that contemporary rabbis might advise her to refrain from tallit and tefillin, the ideal, wise woman acts in her own best religious interest, and acts without seeking rabbinic approval. Such a woman will receive a great heavenly reward.

Moreover, the two rabbis AlGhazi go on to say, such a woman shall receive a heavenly reward no less than men, who are fully obligated to fulfill these mitzvot. Why so? Because a woman who performs the mitzvot of putting on tefillin and tallit, is observed by those around her, especially her family. Her example will encourage men in her family and community to be even more conscientious in fulfilling mitzvot. She will therefore receive special additional Heavenly merit not only for her own increased spirituality but also for her influence on the "spiritual ecology" of her surroundings.

Sephardic rabbinic texts such as these broaden our horizons as to the range of possibilities within Jewish tradition and offer interesting alternatives to conventional views on authority, autonomy and spirituality in Halakhic Judaism.