

DOES THIS TALLIT MAKE ME LOOK LIKE A FEMINIST? GENDER,
PERFORMANCE, AND RITUAL GARMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY
CONSERVATIVE/MASORTI JUDAISM

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Folklore Program
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

September 2016

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Does This Tallit Make Me Look Like a Feminist? Gender, Performance, and Ritual Garments in Contemporary Conservative/Masorti Judaism

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Degree awarded September 2016

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts

Folklore Program

September 2016

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This paper explores the way contemporary American Conservative Jewish communities express ideas of egalitarianism and feminism through active use of specific ritual garments (tallit and tefillin). It addresses the meanings that these garments currently have on individual, communal, and institutional levels. Additionally, it considers women's changing roles regarding ritual and participation in these communities. It also considers that in this context, when women take on additional religious obligations they are simultaneously representing feminist and religious issues and actions, and the conversations between these ideas.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my most sincere appreciation to Professors Carol Silverman and Daniel Wojcik for their guidance and assistance in preparing this thesis. Additionally, I would like to thank Professor Lisa Gilman and my colleagues, Amber Berrings, Jules Helweg-Larsen, and Nikki Silvestrini for their support during this program. Special thanks to the members of Adath Jeshurun, Congregation Beth Israel, and Temple Beth Abraham for welcoming me during my visits. Special thanks also to my participants for offering their valuable insight: Rabbi Mark Bloom, Liba Casson-Nudell, Tobi Cooper, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, Judith, Rachel Karpf, Joni Lacks Charatan, Rabbi Sharon Litwin, Ellen Mandel, Rabbi George Nudell, and Sandy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Is there anything feminist about wearing a fringed shawl and a leather box on your head? Like other fashion statements, it depends on where you are, who you are, and who else is wearing the same outfit. In my thesis, I will look at patterns of ritual commitment and belief, style preference, and meaning making in American Conservative/Masorti communities¹. When a woman from one of these communities wears a ritual object as a sign of additional religious obligations, her actions simultaneously represent feminist and religious issues. Therefore, I will analyze the varied ways that Conservative/Masorti institutions, communities, and individuals view the ideas of women's obligation and egalitarianism. I examine these broad ideas through the specific lens of women's interactions with two ritual garments: *tallit* and *tefillin*.

A tallit (plural "*tallitot*"), also called a prayer shawl, is a four-cornered garment with fringed corners. Tefillin are leather boxes containing parchment scrolls, worn strapped to the head and arm. These garments are found globally in every religious Jewish community. Frequently, pictures of Jewish people that might be termed "exoticizing" depict men wearing them, often in tandem. In most of these communities, they are considered men's garments, that is, men are expected and encouraged to wear tallitot and tefillin, and women are not permitted to do so. However, women's access to them has been increasing. In part, this is because of decisions made by the more liberal denominations with strong footing in the United States. These denominations tend to lean more toward gender equality, although their interpretations of what this means can vary considerably.

Within this realm and more specifically, within the Conservative/Masorti movement, I read tallitot and tefillin as a visual representation of how women interpret their obligations within Jewish law, as well as how they creatively individualize ritual. I focus on the presence of female bodies in prayer ceremonies and other ritual settings, and the social changes that they reflect and instigate. Additionally, I will look at how these recent changes reflect patterns of gender innovations that have occurred throughout Jewish history.

Outline of Chapters

I offer a close look at one set of ritual objects, giving insight into the gender dynamics going on in this group, and especially how they have changed in the past generation. There are many more changes to ritual and liturgy that also deal with these dynamics, and which vary across communities. However, tallitot and tefillin are particularly interesting because of how personal and expressive they can be. I am looking at these changes on three levels: the institution, the community, and the individual. On an institutional level (Chapter II), I look at the general symbolism of tallitot and tefillin as objects that represent community, descent, and shared identity. Further, I explain the ways changing gender dynamics in the Conservative Movement redefine those ideas and redefine women's interactions with ritual. In Chapter III, I examine how different communities explore and play with the changing standards, as well as how the presence of women's bodies and their performances impact changing norms. Lastly, in Chapter IV, I turn to individual experiences with tallitot and tefillin, the meanings they hold for women, and their experiences.

I apply Vanessa Ochs's understanding of anxiety and change in Judaism,

including her observations on how social change is achieved through repeated historical patterns. Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo's work on the body and social change helps us understand how meanings are produced and how people interact with the objects. In this mode, I will look at how women who wear tallitot and tefillin challenge and change the expectations surrounding the garments by wearing them. I am also looking at Richard Bauman's performance theory ("Verbal Art as Performance") and Patricia Sawin's feminist critique of it. This combination of work on performance and women's experience of it is helpful in understanding the responsibilities of audience and performer to each other, as well as ways they may conflict with each other. I will also use Bauman's work on intertextuality (*A World of Others Words*); while I am not looking at verbal texts as he does, his main concept deals with the ideas of verbal performances having layered meanings because of their histories and everything that might be associated with them. The materials I analyze carry similar layers of meaning because of both their history and their presence throughout worldwide Jewry. Further, I will apply David I. Kertzer's analysis of how symbolism and ritual can be used to either make political changes or maintain stasis, in order to look at genres of ritual objects via their categories and uses, with the goal of examining the relationships between expected purpose and actual use.

Tallitot and Tefillin in Context

Contemporary American Jewish communities vary greatly in ritual, language use, gender norms, dress, and institutional structure. One of these structures, the Conservative/Masorti movement, creates a specific context and is most prominent in the United States (where it is usually just called "Conservative"). It attempts to adhere to standards of *halakhah*ⁱⁱ while maintaining an interactive relationship with the secular

world at large, and other communities. Its self-described philosophy is that it, "...insists on observance of tradition and respect for visionary change" (Artson). According to Rabbi Nudell, one of my participants, the movement believes that Torah is a response to God's perfect divine revelation, but also acknowledges that it was filtered through imperfect human minds and social structures. Others sometimes describe it as a middle ground between the stricter branches of Orthodoxyⁱⁱⁱ and more liberal movements such as Reform^{iv} and Reconstructionism^v; Rabbi Nudell dislikes this comparison because he says the Conservative/Masorti movement agrees both with Orthodoxy that Torah is divine, and with Reform about human agency over systemic changes.

Zechariah Frankel founded Conservative Judaism in the late nineteenth century in response to shifting social and religious pressures (Rubin Schwartz 153). The movement has always had its strongest footing in the United States, however its numbers and active participation have begun to decline, prompting a great deal of inquiry into how people engage with the movement and its ideas. In a piece on shifting trends in the movement, Barry Kosmin explains, "Conservative Judaism evolved in America during the early part of [the twentieth] century in the face of strong evidence that traditional normative Judaism was failing to adapt to the New World. Orthodoxy and an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle were rejected, particularly by the masses of the U.S.-born second generation" (232). Kosmin goes on to analyze how, several synagogues in North America have succeeded or failed to engage with "Jewish continuity," particularly focusing on education, family participation, and egalitarianism.

Despite my focus on the United States, one cannot discuss contemporary Jewish identity politics without acknowledging that they take place in a global context. For

example, the patterns and norms that exist in the American Conservative context take on a much more politically charged nature in an Israeli Masorti context where the right for women to publicly wear tallitot and tefillin and Torah at the Western Wall, is debated legally. I also note this context because there is a great deal of conversation and transference of people between American and Israeli communities.

Contemporary Conservative/Masorti Judaism and its members identify and portray themselves as egalitarian. Largely this means that men and women may participate equally in most ritual activities, although it can also sometimes refer to other ritual issues. However, the reality and practicalities of this dynamic are more complex than simply viewing and treating all adults equally, and did not occur all at once. In 1953, the Rabbinical Assembly (rabbis leading the Conservative movement) added a clause to their official ketubah^{vi} that tied Jewish divorce to civil divorce^{vii}. 1955 brought a ruling that allowed women to have *aliyot*^{viii}. In 1973, the Conservative Movement began counting women in a *minyan*^{ix}. The first Conservative female rabbi (Amy Eilberg, interviewed for this paper) was ordained in 1985 (Rabbinical Assembly). Additionally, Judaism as a whole is rooted in a patriarchal system; the Conservative/Masorti movement values halakhah and any accommodations it makes based on contemporary social values still have a basis in Jewish law. Sometimes, this complexity can result in a time lag regarding social issues, such as the six years between the movement stating it approved of same sex marriage and producing a ceremony it deemed appropriate according to halakhah (Dorff).

It is important to note that although Conservative Judaism and other liberal movements are fairly accepting of those who identify as transgender or gender non-

binary and many synagogues make strides to include these individuals in ritual and other activities, the garments I am dealing with exist in a strictly gendered system, and I have chosen to refer to them accordingly.

Additionally, Hebrew is a highly gendered language, which can sometimes complicate the Conservative/Masorti movement's actions. For example, one calls women rabbis "Rabbi," even though the grammar is technically incorrect. In Modern Orthodox settings, institutions began ordaining women as clergy in 2016, and one of the issues is what to call them; in that setting the term "rabbi" is inappropriate because it is masculine and refers to an established idea of who should hold that position. Proposed alternatives include *maharat*^x and *rabba*^{xi}, which are more preferred in that community, and may make more legal sense, and certainly more grammatical sense (JTA). On the other hand, Conservative/Masorti Judaism has ordained women since 1985, in spite of its poor grammar. However, while the movement values its interpretation of egalitarianism and actively manifests it in many ways, there are still times when its activities run counter to equality. The vernacular codes that develop around the garments I analyze reflect this tension.

Although many women in Conservative communities in the United States wear tallitot on a regular basis, it is unusual for these women to wear tefillin. This discrepancy is noteworthy because both these objects fall into similar theological and ritual categories; there are also common vernacular understandings, actions and interpretations among Conservative women relating to tallitot and tefillin. In Judaism, certain types of ritual behavior, including wearing ritual garments is theologically obligatory for adult men. In Conservative/Masorti Judaism, this obligation extends to adult women who have

actively chosen to take on the ritual obligations, at least according to halakhah.

According to vernacular interpretation, any adult can and should wear both a tallit and tefillin^{xii}. This connects closely to secular ideas of egalitarianism.

However, in terms of the way people actually participate in ritual, much depends on individual choice and the degree to which a specific community emphasizes and encourages egalitarianism as a concept and policy. Additionally, current debates about Jews retaining enthusiasm, self-identification, and active ritual participation are also relevant. The variable ways people use tallitot and tefillin reflect these tensions. Further, there is a question of how comfortable people within the Conservative/Masorti movement are with their own vernacular understanding of egalitarianism. As noted above, egalitarianism is a common value in the liberal denominations of Judaism, although its practice varies. Some liberal Jews are satisfied with its current standing, and value the progress of the last thirty years. However, in situations where a woman wearing tefillin is still seen as a feminist statement, it becomes apparent that the conversation about egalitarianism is still active.

With all of this in mind, I will analyze the way women use and interpret tallitot and tefillin, and their intertextual symbolic meanings. Specifically, I am viewing these garments as simultaneous forces of resistance to and reinforcement of gender norms within Conservative/Masorti communities. Further, I am looking at how the act of a woman wearing tallitot and/or tefillin can be a challenge to these norms. While one could look at this phenomenon simply as a feminist challenge or an assertion of my participants' Jewish identities, it is more complicated. Each participant has multiple motivations for how and why she wears or does not wear tallitot and/or tefillin the way

she does. Her motivations might be personal, artistic, political, spiritual, or any combination of these factors. Tallitot and tefillin are especially interesting because of their long history, ubiquity throughout Jewish society, and simultaneous representations of personal and group dynamics.

Methodology

I am approaching this topic from an emic perspective. My academic background is neither in historical Jewish Studies nor in Religious Studies, but rather my expertise comes from lived experience and my particular positionality. I am the daughter of a rabbi, and am therefore privileged to view my synagogue's inner workings, as well as to those of surrounding communities, including their formal rules and informal practices.

Reflecting my folklore training, I am choosing to discuss tallitot and tefillin in terms of material culture and performance, although they do not fit neatly into either of these genres. I acknowledge that analyzing these concepts through these folklore genres is somewhat problematic. Judaism has its own established methods of categorization and analysis that were in part designed around the rituals and objects that I am discussing.

Placing them into an etic frame is difficult and, frankly, does not work perfectly or allow one to interact with all of their aspects and overlap. I will address this interface in Chapter II where I discuss institutional reactions to changes in ritual.

In order to reach my conclusions, I interviewed nine women from various parts of New Jersey and Minnesota, including two female rabbis. I also interviewed two male rabbis: my father, who works as a rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, and the rabbi at Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, California. My goal has been to determine why and how individuals wear these ritual garments, and to what

degree they participate in associated ritual activities. I am considering my participants' experiences and observations in the context of both the place based communities in which they live as well as the larger community of the Conservative/Masorti movement and the global Jewish community. I thereby gain insight into the ways they interact with rules, standards, and the way Conservative communities express ideals of egalitarianism.

In the summer of 2015, I observed several *Shabbat* and weekday services at Congregation Beth Israel, as well as a few at Adath Jeshurun in Minnetonka, Minnesota. Additionally, I spent Rosh Hashanah^{xiii} in Northern California that year, and made some observations about ritual garments worn at Temple Beth Abraham. The majority of people to whom I spoke are either members of my father's synagogue, his rabbinical colleagues, personal friends of mine, and/or family. The colleagues in question are women rabbis in both New Jersey and in Minnesota. The members of these congregations are primarily of *Ashkenazi* descent; each synagogue also has a few *Sephardi* families. Most are presumed white, although each of the synagogues I worked with has at least one presumed African American family. The synagogues' members are mostly also middle to upper middle class.

I largely based my choice about whom to approach for interviews on my personal knowledge and relationships with individuals, or on observations from fieldwork. I believe that my positionality as a "rabbi's kid" may have inhibited my ability to arrange interviews with some individuals, however I generally found people very willing to be open throughout our discussions. With the exception of two email interviews, all of my participants spoke with me either in person or via Skype and allowed me to record the interviews. I am quoting many of these interviews below and indicating the speakers in

the text. In some sections they are also paraphrased and cited by name. These participants are also listed in “References Cited.”

Congregation Beth Israel is located in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, a suburb in Union County. It was founded in the 1960s, and currently has approximately three hundred seventy five member families, making it a mid-size synagogue. It is important to note that I am very familiar with this particular synagogue. My father is the rabbi, and I attended its services and religious school regularly while growing up. The synagogue holds religious services four times a week: Sunday morning, Thursday morning, Friday evening, and Saturday morning. The services have mixed gendered seating (currently considered normal for Conservative/Masorti communities) and women frequently participate in ritual activities, and are counted in a minyan. The rabbi and cantor are both men, and have both worked with the community for over twenty years.

On its website and in its printed literature, for example the laminated pamphlets placed in the sanctuary pews meant to introduce guests to some of the ritual activity that goes on in the services, Congregation Beth Israel refers to itself as egalitarian. I have also noticed that it has made a point of visually showing its policies on gender inclusion, for example on a photo display in the lobby showing a girl from the community putting on tefillin (discussed further on page 48). As mentioned previously, this overt statement on gender inclusion is in direct contrast to the number of women who actually wear tallitot and tefillin and therefore emphasizes the discrepancy between practice and policy. However, the deliberate use of visual signs of gender inclusiveness may be intended to reach an outside audience, or make a political comment to Jewish visitors, rather than represent reality.

In terms of ritual garments, the synagogue provides communal tallitot and head coverings (kippot of several varieties and lace doilies) in the lobby for those who have not brought their own. Men and boys are expected to wear a head covering in the building and adult women are expected to wear a head covering on the *bimah*. Girls under the age of twelve are not expected to wear head coverings. Many, although by no means all, men wear tallitot at appropriate prayer services. Few women wear them regularly and those that do frequently choose more colorful garments than their male counterparts.

While many of these features are shared with other Conservative synagogues, there are some variations, both based on factors like size and location, as well as community preference. For example, Temple Beth Abraham and Adath Jeshurun both provide communal tallitot and head coverings, refer to themselves as egalitarian, and use language associated with official Conservative institutions. However, many more women wear tallitot at these two synagogues than at Congregation Beth Israel, and the designs that both women and men wear appear more colorful and of a greater variety. Additionally, both of these synagogues have larger member populations and sometimes hold more than one service at the same time and therefore have a wider variety of liturgy and style of prayer. All of these synagogues continue to experience changes as their demographics and preferences change. Equally important is the ongoing dialogue between the synagogues, their members and the institutional branches of the Conservative/Masorti movement. In the next chapter, I will explore the changing gender dynamics and expectations within these aspects of Conservative/Masorti Judaism.

Notes

ⁱ Usually called “Conservative” in the United States. The term Masorti (“traditional”) appears alongside it in some official capacities, such as Rabbinical Assembly, and is otherwise used as the primary name in most other countries where the movement has an institutional footing.

ⁱⁱ *Halakhah* is a body of law, distinguished from custom (*minhag*). Its tenants are in the Talmud (est. beginning 200 CE – see endnote xvii) and Shulkhan Arukh (fifteenth century) and largely consist of commentary upon *mitzvot* (literally “commandments” from the Torah, given to the Jewish people by God). Halakhah has informed all aspects of Jewish life to varying degrees at different points in history. In contemporary America, different denominations place differing amounts of emphasis on halakhah’s role in daily life and the ways it applies to contemporary and civil issues.

ⁱⁱⁱ Orthodoxy believes in the divine revelation of Torah and the rabbinic interpretation. According to Rabbi Nudell, Orthodoxy fears that each generation loses some of the understanding of God’s will, thus it rejects change in the observance of tradition and restricts the power to interpret Jewish law to a select few scholars in each generation. It usually has strict gender divisions.

^{iv} According to Rabbi Nudell, Reform Judaism believes Torah was inspired by God, but was revealed through enlightened humans such as Moses and other prophets. Reform Judaism believes Judaism is dynamic, changing with each generation, and empowers the laity to impact the progress of that change; has aimed to eliminate gender differences since its inception in the mid 1800s and frequently involves prayer in vernacular languages.

^v Reconstructionism is an offshoot of Conservative Judaism that began in 1948, influenced by the writings of Mordechai Kaplan. According to Rabbi Nudell, Reconstructionist Judaism rejects the concept of a living God and prefers to think of God as a concept. That concept is formed by the historic understanding of God from ancient times to the present. Jewish traditions are still held as sacred folkways, as Kaplan referred to them in scholarship, because they embody the values of Torah.

^{vi} Marriage contract.

^{vii} Without the Lieberman Clause or similar provisions, divorce (through a document called a “*get*”) is subject to a husband’s discretion.

^{viii} An *aliyah* (plural *aliyot*) is a ritual performed when the Torah is read publicly. A Jewish adult recites a certain prayer before and after each section of Torah is read; considered an honor.

^{ix} Quorum of ten men/men and women (always adults over *b’nai mitzvah* age) needed for certain prayers.

^x Female spiritual leader – an acronym.

^{xi} The feminine form of rabbi.

^{xii} Wearing tallit and tefillin are both time-bound mitzvot and are therefore both considered obligatory for adult men under the strictest interpretations. However, other interpretations view the commandment as gender inclusive, partly because they see time-bound status (explained in Chapter III) as no longer relevant and partly because the commandment is phrased in the second person (Litwin).

^{xiii} The Jewish New Year.

CHAPTER II
FROM THE FRINGES:
TALLITOT AND TEFILLIN AND CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL GENDER
DYNAMICS

The Conservative Movement and Egalitarianism

In spite of halakhic and social impediments, Jewish women have worn tallitot and lain^{xiv} tefillin since the thirteenth century (Grossman 194). One of the more famous medieval women to do so was Yocheved, Rashi's daughter^{xv}. However, these women appear to have been among the intellectual elite, and it was not a widespread practice. It has become more and more common as standard practice, or as a standard option, in the last century, especially in the last fifty or so years. The choices a Jewish woman makes in her ritual attire are part of a feminist challenge to an inherently patriarchal system; they also reflect other concerns, such as personal or political statements, self-expression and a re-inscription of the wearer's Judaism. Other than who gets to wear ritual garments, it is helpful to look at how gender roles have changed in American Jewry in general and the Conservative Movement in particular. Many of the overall social changes are related to gender, and tend more and more toward egalitarian practices. Some, described in Chapter I, such as counting in a minyan, having aliyot, and agency in legal documents, involve including adult women in a sort of citizenship. Others, such as the creation of *bat mitzvah* and baby naming ceremonies, center on including girls and women in life cycle rituals, which are central to Judaism. Rabbi Amy Eilberg explains that, on an institutional basis, women claiming equality with men involves claiming obligation to *mitzvot*, "Whereas in American culture equality is a given, and it's a matter of rights, in Jewish culture,

tradition, the Jewish system, equality was very much grounded in obligation as well.”

American Jewry specifically, has addressed the issue of women as leaders and role models particularly in tandem with American feminist struggles over labor, family roles, leadership positions, etc. A woman wearing tallitot and tefillin embodies the role of a potential leader. Whether or not she leads a service, her presence in that role makes a statement to others, indicating that a woman in this position is normal and expected; she is implicitly acting as a model, tapping into ideas of empowerment. Both the ability to speak for themselves and to access and display their Jewish identities are important to my participants. I explore this more in Chapter III.

Jewish people in other cultural contexts have different interpretations of women wearing tallitot and tefillin. In Israel, the idea of women using these garments can be viewed as reflecting social and political issues, specifically the right of non-Orthodox denominations dictate religious matters. Religious pluralism is currently contentious in Israel and events around the issue changes almost daily due to protests, court cases, and decisions on who has the right to pray at the Western Wall, how to use a *mikvah*^{xvi}, and who has authority over conversions. For example, there is a group known as Women of the Wall, who wish to pray publicly at the Western Wall, read Torah there, and wear tallitot and tefillin. Currently, they may pray in the women’s section, but they face protests from Orthodox groups, especially when performing some rituals. There is an ongoing legal battle to establish an egalitarian (meaning mixed gender) prayer space, which they would be able to use. While the Women of the Wall are far from the only issue of religious pluralism currently at stake in Israel, they are used as symbols of this issue, and are frequently featured in the media. News articles that discuss the court case

tend to show pictures of a woman wearing a tallit and tefillin, visually representing and symbolizing their goal (Stern Hoffman, Maltz); additionally the overarching branch of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs (officially associated with the Conservative Movement) has a program supporting the Women of the Wall's Bat Mitzvah Initiative, which aims to hold bat mitzvah ceremonies at the Western Wall ("Worldwide Wrap"). Further, the Men's Clubs have a program called World Wide Wrap Day, where members of synagogues' Men's Clubs mentor young students, both men and women, as well as adults, and learn about the ritual's roots. They also watch a video, which has egalitarian and non-egalitarian options, where people discuss their spiritual experiences with the garment.

Gender changes reflect broader shifts in the Conservative Movement. In "Coming of Age in the Conservative Synagogue," Barry A. Kosmin interprets the Council of Jewish Federations 1990 Jewish Population Survey, offering insight into the way synagogues are interpreting egalitarianism. His analysis focuses on: education, socialization among teens, members' level of religious observance and attitudes toward cultural concerns such as intermarriage, and the effect of egalitarianism on participation in synagogue activities. He notes that institutional Conservative Judaism in all regions has been moving steadily toward "gender equality" since World War II (249). Kosmin describes several activities that indicate egalitarian behavior: women reading from the Torah (88% of synagogues), counting women in a minyan (83%), women leading prayer services (79%), treating bar and bat mitzvah students "exactly alike" (78%). He also mentions statistics on teaching boys and girls to put on tefillin (76% and 36%) (250). This last discrepancy mimics the one that I have noticed; although many women appear

to participate in ritual activities, many fewer wear tefillin, despite claims of egalitarian behavior.

Additionally, in her ethnography, “Communities of Choice and Memory,” Riv Ellen Prell writes about two Conservative synagogues in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area circa 1995. She focuses her attention on the synagogues’ goals and rabbis’ professional initiatives, such as increasing Shabbat and *kashrut* observance (348). Prell also makes a few key observations about gender in these two synagogues. She notes the difference in the way men and women interpret the idea of wearing a tallit. Prell explains that men in these synagogues expect and are expected to wear a tallit while, “When a woman chose to wear a tallit it became a personal statement and a ritual act that more consciously linked her to Jewish practice” (341). I find that many of my participants view their own interactions with tallitot much the same way, discussed further in Chapter IV. She explains that her female participants viewed Torah reading in a similar self-conscious and decisive manner.

As a point of comparison, I suggest we examine another ritual that contemporary American Jewish communities have invented to include women: naming ceremonies for girls. Generally, the ceremonies are invented rituals meant to parallel *brit milah* (circumcision) ceremonies for boys, adopting aspects regarding naming and introduction to the Jewish people (without circumcision). However, apart from giving the baby a name, they tend to differ a great deal from boy’s ceremonies; in addition, there are many variations girls’ naming ceremonies. In “Jewish Naming Ceremonies for Girls. A Study in the Discourse of Tradition.” Simon Bronner looks at their relatively recent popularity, history, connections to and differences from *brit milah* ceremonies, and ritual features.

He discusses some of the versions of the ceremony that exist, their various names, and various opinions of them (214-5). Examples include the tradition of giving one or more parent an aliyah after their daughter's birth, holding a ceremony in the synagogue or in the home, and variations of the religious intensity of the ceremony (212-3). There are distinct efforts to make the ceremony distinct rather than an imitation of the brit milah. These include using biblical verses and actions that reference the biblical figures Sarah and Zipporah, both of whom Bronner notes as having a personal connection to the covenant (214). Bronner also discusses the Sephardi naming tradition (*zed habat*) that exists independently of Ashkenazi traditions. It includes a *misheberakh* (prayer for healing/health) and a ritual of wrapping the baby in a relative's tallit (216).

Bronner notes that contemporary naming ceremonies approximately correspond with Van Gennep's outline for rites of passage. Rites of passage are divided into three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation; the ceremonies include rituals like opening blessings, presenting, naming, and passing the baby, and closing prayers at meals. Bronner says, "the ritual composition of the naming ceremony coming early in life pushes the child toward incorporation... but arguably the girls' naming ceremony more than other comparable observances contains a number of transitional activities that indicate liminality, toward a resolution of paradoxes..." (218). He explains that these paradoxes are frequently commented on during the ceremony, as are ideas of meaning and ritual choice. Bronner claims the ceremonies' introduction in the 1970s was part of a "feminist statement on women's participation in Jewish life," and that they have now become normative. He notes an increase of interest in Miriam as a female role model, including her inclusion in the naming ceremony, sometimes taking on Elijah's role.

There are two important connections between these naming ceremonies and women's use of tallitot and tefillin. First, as mentioned above, is the general trend toward gender inclusion and participation. The second is the vocal, physical act of welcoming a girl into the community. This idea relates back to agency; although she is usually an infant at the time, the girl who is named is simultaneously recognized as a member of the community and therefore a potential, expected participant and agent.

However, the concepts around girls' naming rituals differ from rituals using tallitot and tefillin in the following ways; one difference is the genres to which these concepts refer. Naming ceremonies are verbal, and are highly personal rituals intended to change a person's status. While they access ideas of the larger Jewish community, they are mostly focused on direct lineage. Tallitot and tefillin are material objects that can be shared, but also involve personal spiritual moments. Their secondary focus is one's relationship to the extent of religious Jewish history. In addition, while there frequently are visual and material differences between men's and women's tallitot, these are only ornamental. Both men's and women's tallitot and tefillin can be identical, could be traded between people, and any visual difference are only personal choices. In contrast, a girl's naming ceremony is inherently different from a boy's, because a boy's involves circumcision. According to Talmud^{xvii}, this is essential in making him part of the covenant, referring to the relationship Jews have with God. However, girls are considered to be part of the covenant when they are born, making the naming ceremony extraneous in that respect, and shifting its focus to the baby's place as an agent, as described above (215).

In this discussion of shifts in gender, demographics, and vernacular practice, I

must mention the 2013 Pew Report. In the fall of 2013, the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project released findings from a survey of U.S. Jews, which garnered vocal reactions from the American Jewish community. In general, Pew reported on both religious and cultural Jewish self-identification, how it has changed, and the factors that play into various forms of identification. Pew reports,

The percentage of U.S. adults who say they are Jewish when asked about their religion has declined by about half since the late 1950s and currently is a little less than 2%. Meanwhile, the number of Americans with direct Jewish ancestry or upbringing who consider themselves Jewish, yet describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or having no particular religion, appears to be rising and is now about 0.5% of the U.S. adult population. (7)

Additionally, the survey described a generation gap, showing that 32% of Jewish Millennials (defined by the survey as born after 1980) do not identify based on religion, contrasted with 7% of the Greatest Generation (defined by the survey as born between 1914-1927). While the survey points out that this data is reflective of an overall U.S. trend, it also notes that, "Compared with Jews by religion... Jews of no religion are not only less religious but are also much less connected to Jewish organizations, and much less likely to be raising their children Jewish" (8). The survey also offers statistics on intermarriage, commenting that rates have risen, that intermarried Jews are less likely to raise their children Jewish, and that the connection between secular Jews, intermarriage, and raising children "seems to be circular or reinforcing" (9). Additionally, the survey made various observations on the specific denominations of Judaism most common in the U.S. and their changing statistics.

From my own experience, I would characterize the reaction to the survey as a mixture of defensiveness and panic. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* catalogues a number of responses, including opinions stating that the Jewish center is disappearing, that religious identification is decreasing but cultural identification is increasing (*Haaretz*). Most importantly, there has also been an overall increase in awareness in the flexibility of Jewish identity.

This flexibility appears when one looks at the idea of choice. Choice has become central to the contemporary American patterns of change in Jewish rituals. Contemporary Jewish rituals, such as naming ceremonies and women's use of tallitot and tefillin, reflect both stability and change as they attempt to both maintain a link to the past and adapt to a constantly changing present. These ideas are contrary to many in, for example, Orthodox communities where wearing a tallit and tefillin was expected of men and almost unheard of for women. Instead, for both women and men in contemporary communities, many decisions now surround these rituals. Changes in women's ritual participation and commitment impacts Judaism as it undergoes demographic shifts. When a woman makes an active choice to wear tallitot and tefillin, it indicates that she views Judaism as a commitment. However, because the rituals themselves are not designed to be optional, the tension between choice, commitment and identity remains unresolved.

Tallitot and Tefillin in Jewish Folklife

Tallitot and tefillin are often paired together, however it is important to differentiate them. Apart from the material and ritual difference, discussed in more detail in Chapter II, a key difference between the two objects is their degree of customizability. Designers and companies make tallitot in many different colors and fabrics, while the requirements for

tefillin are rigidly set. Scribes, called *sofrim*, make tefillin by hand; they also make Torah scrolls and similar objects. Any person, regardless of gender, who wears tefillin has no choice in what they look like, and little choice in how to put them on, assuming they are trying to wear them for ritual purposes in a communal setting. When wearing a tallit, people have dozens of choices of color, fabric, and size, whether they will wear a communal tallit or their own, if they have one. Lastly, there is the aforementioned discrepancy where women appear to wear tallitot more regularly than tefillin, to be discussed in Chapters III and IV.

As material objects, tallitot and tefillin each carry many visual symbols and references to Jewish history and values. While they both have specific requirements, those for tefillin are much more strict, and they are largely the same in Jewish communities worldwide. While tallitot can vary quite a bit in appearance, their basic structure and key details are set. Likewise, the general meanings behind the material features for both garments largely remain constant. In part, this consistency is because of the garments' textual basis. Instructions for how to wear them appear in the Torah and indicate that they are reminders of mitzvot. Many of their other broad symbolic meanings relate to the responsibility to pass on knowledge from generation to generation, a consistent theme throughout Jewish folklore. Additionally, because wearing some form of these garments is part of Judaism's oldest rituals, their symbols, meanings, and functions have been and continue to be act of reinforcement that maintains stability. However, this history also creates the opportunity for change, for example, in expected gender roles, producing layered meanings.

Symbols and Meanings of Tefillin

Tefillin are small polished black leather boxes (called a “*bayit*,” literally “house”) containing parchment scrolls, attached to the head and arm with straps. I spoke to my father about how tefillin are made, worn, and their symbolism. According to Rabbi Nudell, when putting on the arm tefillin, one wraps the straps seven times around the arm and wraps the hand is so that it displays the letter “*shin*,” “*dalet*,” and “*yud*,” spelling “*Shaddai*,” or “almighty,” the head tefillin has a knot at the back and straps that hang over the shoulders. Aside from the parchment, they are made entirely from leather and sinew. The scrolls contain passages from the Torah, written by a scribe, from the *Shema*, which is also part of everyday prayer. The passages discuss placing the words on our hearts, between our eyes, binding them on our hands, teaching them to our children, speaking of them (including when we wake up and go to sleep), and putting them on our doorways. The mitzvah^{xviii} regarding tefillin is to put them on nearly daily. There are differing opinions on whether or not one needs to pray wearing them to fulfill the mitzvah. They are only worn weekdays; not on holidays or on Shabbat (Sabbath). There is a great deal of repetition associated with tefillin: reiterated prayers, multiple versions in multiple places, which speaks to the pattern of reinforcement.

In a section on how newly formed political systems borrow rituals from their predecessors to maintain continuity and stability, Kertzer discusses the standardization of ritual and its effects. Explaining the connections ritual has to both stability and change, he writes, “One of ritual’s most distinguishing features is its standardization. This, along with its repetitive nature, gives ritual its stability. Stability, in turn, serves to connect ritual to strongly felt emotions: emotions experienced in past enactments of the ritual

reemerge at subsequent reenactments” (42). Both laying tefillin, as a ritual, and their material features embody the ideas of stability, repetition, and connection to shared emotion. Tefillin are made from very specific materials that remain largely consistent throughout time and different communities. Rabbi Nudell explains that tefillin serve as a tangible connection between the Jewish people and the past. They consist of materials that one could have used in the desert thousands of years ago, and have been found at archeological sites dating back at least two thousand years. Additionally, they sit near the brain and heart, which implies closeness to God and an intimate relationship.

Repetition is a key feature of both laying tefillin and wearing a tallit, and includes physical repetition and intentional memorialization and participation. As discussed earlier, women wearing tallitot and tefillin participate in a feminist challenge to a patriarchal system. However, the reason these acts matter and have impact is in part due to the nature of the ritual. The person wearing tallitot and tefillin is instructed to participate in active memorialization and to educate the next generation on both the ritual and the content it discusses. These rituals reinforce the idea of descent and responsibility to the group, and when women participate in them, they radically alter the agents who memorialize Jewish history.

Further, the visual and material sameness of tefillin directly reinforce the concept of descent and collective identity. Tefillin remain mostly unchanged no matter the location of a Jewish community or who wears them; the only variations are slight ones in size. In this way, they also serve as a tangible connection to other Jewish groups and people. Rabbi Nudell explains that all tefillin look alike no matter the cost; all are expensive and can cost several hundred dollars, although there are programs that aim to

provide them to people affordably^{xix}. In contemporary communities, many stores and gift shops import ritual objects such as tefillin from Israel, reinforcing their connection to collective history (Safran 46).

Like tefillin, tallitot are based on ritual requirements. However, as discussed earlier, they are far more visually variable. A tallit (plural: tallitot, sometimes known as a prayer shawl) is a four-cornered garment. It has *tzitzit* (fringes) at each corner and usually an *atarah* (neck piece). The garment is made of different fabrics (for example, wool, silk, organza, cotton). Some people consider only wool to be permissible under halakhah. Other than having four corners, there are no requirements for what the shawl has to look like, however common designs include: stripes, trees, floral motifs, pomegranates, birds, and scenes or figures from Torah. If it has stripes (probably the most common design), they could be any color, but are frequently black or blue which some say symbolize *tekhelet* dye (described below). The *tzitzit* are attached to the shawl through holes at the corners. The fringes themselves are usually made of wool (whether they should match the fabric of the garment is currently of some debate) and are tied with a specific pattern of knots that includes a tied knot and a longer string wrapped around the main bunch at intervals; together the pattern adds up to the number six hundred and thirteen. There are six hundred and thirteen mitzvot in the Torah and the number has significance throughout Jewish culture and folk belief. The *atarah* is usually made to match the rest of the design and sometimes has a prayer written on it; one recites this prayer before putting on the tallit. Although they can be handmade, tallitot are often mass produced, or made in larger quantities by companies that specialize in Jewish ritual objects.

Because they are so variable, I offer my own tallit as a concrete example. It is

made of cotton and the main portion of it is white with large pink and purple stripes and thin gold stripes. The corners have pink and purple embroidery in swirled patterns and each has the name of one of the *imahot*^{xx} embroidered in gold. The atarah has similar embroidery, but with a pattern featuring birds, branches, and pomegranates. It has a matching bag that closes with a zipper and has the stripe motif repeated on the front. With marked feminine colors and referencing female Torah figures, this type of design appeals to women and potentially makes the object more acceptable for them to wear. Like other ritual objects, tallitot are popular items imported from Israel, or from companies run by Israeli designers (my own falls into this category; it was designed by Yair Emanuel and is available online)^{xxi}.

Tallitot are also mentioned in the Shema (described above), as follows: “Instruct the people Israel that in every generation they shall put fringes on the corners of their garments and bind a thread of blue to the fringe of each corner...” as a reminder to observe the mitzvot (commandments) (Numbers 15:37-41). Rabbi Nudell explains that in Talmudic times, this instruction was taken somewhat more literally than it has been in the past couple millennia; people attached the fringes to their everyday garments; the rabbis debated colors, what the garments precisely needed (e.g., how many corners). In some Orthodox communities, men wear a *tallit katan* (small tallit) that looks similar to an undershirt, with fringes attached. In Talmudic times, a marine substance called tekhelet was used to dye one thread of the tzitzit blue. The color was similar to the purple or blue that royalty used for their clothing. However, royalty often used indigo, a plant based dye which, despite its similar color, was distinct from tekhelet. Tekhelet was made from a marine animal, usually determined to be a snail or mollusk called a hilazon (Feliks).

Rabbi Nudell explains that recently, there has been an effort to revive the dye's use, but it is not commonplace.

Symbols, Meanings and Functions of Tallitot

In comparison to tefillin, tallitot are more practical and functional. One wears a tallit during certain prayer services or *davening*^{xxii}. With the exception of Yom Kippur, they are not worn at night. One of their functions is to create spaces within places. For example, when worn, the boundaries of a tallit creates a private space for prayer, both when davening and when praying in a public, communal setting. Tallitot are sometimes used for purposes other than prayer, such as the covering for a *chuppah* (wedding canopy, symbolizing the home the couple will build together) in other wedding ceremonies, or as a burial shroud, both of which serve the same purpose of creating a separate, personal space within a place. Another function is, as described regarding the text of the Shema, to remind the wearer of the mizvot. As in many Jewish rituals, the act of reciting or reading is a type of speech act, performing a function. During a prayer service, one gathers the tzitzit in one's hands just before the congregation recites the first part of the Shema. Then, one kisses the tzitzit as one reads silently through the third paragraph (containing the line in Numbers referenced above on page 25). They are also used during Torah readings (described in more detail below).

Kertzer also discusses the symbolic features of rituals that relate to power structures and political systems, and the way rituals can either stabilize or creates change. He explains that in general, symbolic systems are “the primary means, by which we give meaning to the world around up; they allow us to interpret what we see, and, indeed what we are” (4). He offers political examples such as flags, army uniforms, and governmental

structures (8). Building on the relationship between symbolic systems and political and other authority, he explains that symbols are therefore also a means of recognizing, reinforcing, and challenging that authority, depending on who uses them, and in what way (5).

Kertzer focuses a great deal on the way that rituals and symbols have the potential to change systems and are themselves mutable. He explains that, “[W]hen symbolic systems collide with refractory social or physical forces, the potential for change in the symbolic system is ever present” (4). In other words, if an established symbolic system clashes with or contradicts some other system, it may change to account for or accommodate that clash. Kertzer explains that both stable and changing systems use rituals of legitimation to reinforce authority. He also discusses how ritual can legitimize power imbalances. Commenting on the conflicting ideals that can exist in these cases, he notes,

One of the most striking features of ritual, in fact, is its ability to accommodate conflicting symbols while reducing the perception of incongruity. Thus in many societies, symbols of egalitarianism are combined with symbols of power and authority through rites involving elected officials. The grammatical rules of ritual symbolism are of a different sort than those of natural language, still less do they follow the rules of logic. (51)

The meeting of contemporary feminism and Conservative Judaism provide a context where multiple interpretations and meanings converse and clash with each other, yet appear to provide a congruent system. For example, Rabbi Eilberg, declined to wear a *kippah*^{xxiii} for many years because the customs for men and women covering their heads

have different origins, and, in short, she did not feel she needed to. She says,

It was about the sort of legal logic... [wearing a kippah] the same logic in my view did not apply to a kippah, which had its origin not in law but in custom... for men... the custom for women was to cover your hair as related to women as sexual object and I didn't buy any of that...

However, because people she interacted with were used to a (male) rabbi wearing one, and used to a kippah and tallit worn together, they disliked that she did not do so. In her words, "it drove people nuts in places I would visit especially... eventually I would be on the bimah giving a talk and I'd be wearing... a tallis and no kippah... it was very, very disturbing to people. And I would patiently... explain the origin... they didn't care what the legal argument was..." Thus she adjusted to audience expectations, and she began to wear them together. In this case, her kippah and tallit, symbols of authority, also became symbols of egalitarianism by virtue of her wearing them in these situations. Here, the rituals stretch to accommodate the discordant ideas, and continue to stretch and reform as they are recontextualized.

Institutional Change in the Conservative/Masorti Movement

These changes in vernacular practice on both an individual and communal level have also influenced official interpretations of halakhah. One example is a responsum written for the Conservative Movement in 1984 where Rabbi Joel Roth explains the debate on women's status according to halakhah. In this piece, he discusses the halakhic issues around ordaining women as rabbis. Roth addresses legal precedent regarding exemption from mitzvot, and status as an agent and a witness (736). He concludes that if a woman chooses to take on all of the spiritual and religious obligations that a man has

(in this frame, failing to fulfill a mitzvah is then considered a sin), then she may do so, according to both precedent and halakhah. The Conservative Movement has made many changes over the past century that edge toward gender equality in leadership and ritual practice, which the movement labels egalitarianism. The movement sees itself as based in halakhah but interacting with the modern world. Because of this its participants find it important to base any major change in an interpretation of halakhah.

Changes in halakhah and its interpretation are nothing new, nor are the ways in which new traditions and community standards get accepted into halakhic rulings, especially within the Conservative/Masorti Movement. Liba, one of my participants, explains that the law committee (one of the official branches of the movement) frequently attempts to adapt to its constituency's modes of behavior and practices, but that it still functions based on halakhah, and that this type adaptation is not unusual.

Vanessa Ochs discusses precisely this pattern in *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, where she describes both ritual innovation as a concept and how Judaism engages with it. In a section on Talmudic innovation, Ochs explains that, "The Talmud documents liturgical innovations that might have been considered idiosyncratic or anomalous when they were written and redacted. Some Talmudic innovations were retained and remain in use. Familiar examples include the blessings recited over natural phenomena and social events..." (142). However, a great many rituals have also fallen out of use, and others were never written down. Ochs hypothesizes that the rabbis only officially discussed those practices with which they were familiar; this explains why there is little record of women's practices. In terms of innovation, Ochs believes that, especially regarding non-Jewish practices that people adopted, "When they failed to defeat a new practice, the

Rabbis moved to authenticate and professionalize it. The ultimate strategy, in Talmudic times, was privileging *minhag*^{xxiv}, customs that had already taken hold, and creating some jurisdiction over them” (143-4).

Ochs also examines the way similar processes function in contemporary Judaism. She notes the slow pace of denominational law committees and synagogue ritual committees noting that they seem “out of sync with the fast-paced lives of real people. Perhaps that is a blessing in disguise... Typically, the ritual committee preserves the status quo.... When it comes to new ritual, the key players might be rabbis, but the real movers and shakers are the good people of the town square” (147). She mentions how it took thirty years (from 1972 to 2002) for the Conservative movement to begin discussing whether women should count in a minyan and be prayer leaders and to vote that they should; both were standard practice in many Conservative synagogues during that debate.

Partly because of her position as a *rebetzin*^{xxv} and partly because of her own studies and personal interest, Liba is well versed in the institutional basis for the rules and practices surrounding tallitot and tefillin. She explains the conversation around women’s participation in ritual activity that took place in the Conservative movement in the 1970s. First, the halakhic reasoning behind women not wearing tallitot and tefillin is that they fall under a category of mitzvot considered time bound. Liba explains, “So the legal part said, but the reason men get to do certain things is they are commanded in the Torah to do it. And women have different commandments... and fewer commandments as far as ritual because the idea in the old days was that they would be raising the children and taking care of the house.” However, a combination of the “grassroots” actions of community members and changing secular social norms prompted the Rabbinical

Assembly to consider how to act, “The strict opinion in the Rabbinical Assembly legal documents is women have to take a vow or make a promise, they are obligating themselves to do all the mitzvot that men are doing.” In this case, Liba is referring to decisions like those in Rabbi Roth’s responsum (described on page 28).

However, Liba explains that in general people in the Conservative Movement are not necessarily aware of these gendered nuances, or that women theoretically have to do anything extra. Rather, they see the obligation as referring to all Jewish adults regardless of gender. She also comments that there was always a discrepancy between what people did in practice and the recorded law, especially in Talmudic times, but notes that since what people did in their everyday lives was not recorded, the legal rulings are all we have to go on. As referenced earlier, she sees the pattern repeated in contemporary Judaism, “...society and Judaism has changed a lot in the past thirty years... where social egalitarianism or social fairness have... [been] accepted in society at large, they have to be implemented in Judaism no matter what. So...the law committee is always behind what’s happening in society and it’s always catching up...” In other words, when people change social norms in response to outside influences, eventually the law committee recognizes those changes in an official capacity.

The changes taking place here have to do with obligation and participation. On the one hand, there is the idea that, if all things are equal, women are just as obligated to perform certain rituals as men. However, there is the conflicting idea that participation in these rituals is beginning to depend as much on personal choice as it is social pressure. As Jews overall lean away from ritual, Jewish women also lean toward it, changing the norms that are in place. Further, as these connections to and interpretations of ritual

become more gender inclusive on a ground level, the institutional interpretations are still willing to accommodate and, with some effort will also adhere to social pressures.

Notes

^{xiv} “Laying” tefillin is the term for putting them on/wrapping them.

^{xv} Rashi (acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben Itzhak) was one of the most well-known and well-respected medieval rabbis.

^{xvi} Ritual bath used for conversion, marital purity, and other uses.

^{xvii} The Talmud is made up of the Mishna (Oral law; Six volumes of rabbinic rulings, compiled around the year 200 CE) and the Gemara (commentary on Mishna). On each page, the margins contain medieval commentaries written in different generations in conversation with each other about the piece of Mishna on that page and accompanying Gemara.

^{xviii} Commandment (from Torah); there are 613.

^{xix} According to Rabbi Nudell, the more expensive sets are made of single, connected pieces of leather rather than pieces sewn together.

^{xx} Torah matriarchs.

^{xxi} http://www.worldofjudaica.com/judaica/tallitot/p_yair_emanuel_colorful_matriarchs_cotton_embroidered_tallit#!#p=13291

^{xxii} Usually individual prayer.

^{xxiii} Standard round head covering; different groups prefer different styles; sometimes called a yarmulke or skullcap.

^{xxiv} Custom.

^{xxv} Rabbi’s wife. There is no official term for a rabbi’s husband, although I have heard two joke answers as to what one would call him: “lucky” and “rabbit.”

CHAPTER III

A KNOTTY QUESTION:

WOMEN'S RITUAL PARTICIPATION ON A COMMUNAL LEVEL

In this chapter, I examine the ways women's bodies and their ritual agency challenge and change systems. Because tallitot and tefillin are such powerful communicative objects, the way women use them is a key feature of this challenge. I take an in depth look at tallitot and tefillin in terms of their visual and material features, as well as their general symbolism. In order to better describe this symbolism and its complexity, I also apply an intertextual lens, in the sense of layered meanings in conversation with each other (see Bauman "World"). Furthermore, because tallitot and tefillin are garments that are actively worn and displayed, I apply a performance frame of analysis (see Bauman "Performance"; Sawin).

How Women Who Wear Tallitot and Tefillin Change Systems

One of the key features of a woman wearing tallitot and tefillin is the woman herself: her very presence in a certain space, the act of her wearing that attire, and her participation in ritual. These features connect to the way body has the power to impart information and impact social norms. In "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World," Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo discuss the body and its sociocultural meanings. They look at body modification, varying definitions of beauty, and the varying forms they take, analyzing the way these definitions express different sociocultural values. Additionally, they argue that the ways specific regions and groups socially interpret and manage bodies are reflections of cultural values and contexts (299). Reischer and Koo explain two different theoretical ways of viewing the body, as a

symbol or text and as an agent (297).

As a symbol, the body indicates social information through its appearance and its accouterments. Reischer and Koo explain that this information is culturally specific and changes over time, for example, “whereas Americans would understand a ring worn on the third finger of a woman’s left hand as a signifier of her status as a married woman, they are likely far less adept at deciphering the significance of a woman’s white robes in India, which indicate widowhood.” Thus, while the physical act of a person wearing a tallit means that a person has put on a fancy shawl, the vernacular interpretations of this act is generally that one is ready to participate in certain rituals and mitzvot, such as having an aliyah and reading Torah. Further, because these mitzvot deal with agency and actions performed on behalf of the community, when that person is a woman, the act is more complex and may be interpreted as a feminist statement.

Expanding on the idea of bodies accessing and communicating social ideas, Reischer and Koo explain that, “bodies have the potential to express core social values” (300). Referencing Ellmann, they refer to the body as a “powerful ‘form of speech’” and explain that it can communicate social and political symbols (303). Therefore, while one woman wearing a tallit might make an individual feminist statement, a community-wide expectation that women should wear tallitot makes a broader feminist and egalitarian statement on behalf of the community, or even the denomination.

Along these lines, one of my participants, Rabbi Sharon Litwin, director of congressional learning in Congregation B’nai Israel in Millburn, New Jersey comments on how it is common for women in liberal denominations to wear tallitot and tefillin, but strange for Orthodox groups. This distinction is important because individual styles in

Conservative synagogues are so variable. However, the identity that the group projects overall tends to follow a more liberal pattern. Despite the varied community expectations in the synagogues I observed, I found Rabbi Litwin's observation fairly accurate. In Congregation Beth Israel, I am one of about four women who wear a tallit regularly, and when women do wear tallitot they tend to be in more presumed feminine colors and fabrics. However, in California and Minnesota nearly all the women who were middle aged and younger wore them. I observed people of all genders wearing tallitot with more variety in color and fabric all around in both of these places. Rabbi Litwin observes that in most Conservative and other liberal communities, a tallit is no longer regarded as particularly gendered, although individual tallitot can certainly make specific statements.

Because tallitot can be so individual, the statements they make can potentially be more specific, for example, communicating social and political ideas, connections to belief and the divine, or even personal interests. Two of my participants alerted me to this concept by pointing out queer Jews wearing tie-dye rainbow tallitot. My own tallit has the names of the imahot embroidered on it, again meant to be a feminist statement. Wearing a "traditional" black or blue and white (coded masculine) tallit versus one that is particularly pink and frilly, or has other designs, is more unusual for women. In terms of personal interests, in California, I saw a woman wearing one depicting what appeared to be a swim team; she also wore a kippah with an appliqué fish on it.

Return to the idea of the body's power to impact social norms, I note that as an agent, the body can be the cause of social change, or contribute to a larger conversation about it. Reischer and Koo specifically refer to the way that the body can "participate in the creation of social meaning" (308). In other words, the body plays a role in the way the

self interacts with and changes the world around it. They emphasize the idea of embodiment, or that body is the means by which the self interacts with the world. Because the body has such symbolic resonance and the ability to act, it has the potential to be highly political (308).

One of the points they discuss is the way some groups negotiate and balance norms as social positions change. They give an example of the way that a woman might highlight her femininity in a male dominated workspace in order to succeed. They reference Rodin who proposes that women must be “feminine but not too feminine... they must display their femininity to compensate for their display of putatively “unfeminine” qualities associated with success in a ‘man’s world’” (313). One can see similar patterns in how some women’s sports teams dress and use makeup. They note that these types of negotiations and changes tend to coincide with changes in women’s social positions. As women’s status in Judaism continues to change, the way women visually represent themselves and their status is also negotiated; overtly feminine tallitot may indicate this same trend: women are performing the same activities and wearing (ritually) the same garment as men, but visually marking themselves, and the garment, as distinctly feminine.

However, practices around tefillin appear to follow a different pattern; in all of the communities I worked with, it is far less likely for a woman to wear tefillin than a tallit. Two of my participants, Liba and Rachel, indicate that when a woman wears tefillin, it makes more of a feminist statement than when she wears a tallit. Reischer and Koo’s analysis suggests that this is because, tefillin, unlike tallitot, cannot be altered to appear more feminine; the act of laying tefillin is strongly gendered and coded masculine-- it

cannot be tempered by feminine colors; therefore, a woman who wears tefillin may have a different impact. Additionally, we need to examine the garments' function. While one can have an aliyah and read Torah without wearing a tallit, the two are visually and symbolically connected, and are more readily accessible to women; according to Rachel and others, even some Orthodox women will read Torah. As mentioned above, tallitot also have other functions such as a wedding canopy and burial shroud.

Access to tefillin, however, is more complicated. According to halakhah, a woman is exempt from the mitzvah of tefillin because it is time-bound. This means that it is a mitzvah that could theoretically be performed at any time, but the Torah requires that it be performed within a certain window of time. For example, blowing a shofar on Rosh Hashana, building a Sukkah before Sukkot, etc. However, a woman is theoretically exempt from these because she is presumed to be occupied with other mitzvot such as child-rearing: these take precedence, following the teaching that one should not stop performing one mitzvah to do another. However, because (as mentioned on page 23) tefillin visually and materially imply a ritual authority and a closeness and access to God, women have also been historically cut off from the social authority that comes with their use, leaving it exclusively available to men. Rabbi Litwin explains that as she sees it, we are in a “post time-bound” state, regarding gender restrictions or, that this reasoning about mitzvot no longer applies because of modern conveniences and sensibilities. In terms of speech, action, and ritual, a woman has fewer options for wearing tefillin than wearing a tallit. However, when she wears tefillin, she is participating in a more exclusive ritual and therefore embodying more radical ideas, and implicitly inspiring social change.

When women wear tallitot and tefillin, they are accessing the cultural capital that comes with use and knowledge of the items. I refer to cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense of the knowledge and practices that someone exhibits that shows them to be effective, aware and able to navigate the expectations of a culture, and which determine class, status, and other distinctions (Coles 36). For example, when a woman wears a tallit in public, she claims the ability to participate in these rituals and therefore to complete mitzvot on behalf of the community. Likewise, when she wears tefillin, she claims access to active Jewish practices. In this way, she is asserting her own status as a participant within this space, as someone who can act with authority on ritual matters, and on behalf of others in a ritual capacity.

Rabbi Litwin discusses the impact other women rabbis have had on her Jewish ritual experience. The first woman rabbi she met, "was amazing, she was a mentor... and I actually swung the pendulum very far to the left and got involved and started leading the Reform [group] at our Hillel..." Later, after she had begun wearing a tallit, she explains that the first time she wore tefillin, a woman rabbi was putting on a set and offered to let Rabbi Litwin try. She helped Rabbi Litwin put them on and told her to say Shema. Rabbi Litwin says this,

...blew her out of the water... spiritually and emotionally-- it felt like it was something that had been reserved for somebody else to have-- that experience of "bind them as a sign upon your hand and between your eyes," that, I wasn't really a part of that but now I was [and] opened up a whole new world of understanding of what egalitarianism could mean.

In this anecdote, a woman in a position of authority shows another how to complete a

ritual that symbolizes her access to mitzvot and participation in Jewish ritual. Similarly, Rabbi Litwin and the rabbi she interacted with are accessing ideas of participation and authority.

Tallitot, Tefillin, and Intertextuality

Because these vernacular practices combine so many ideas, from social contexts, history, and liturgy, it is helpful to look at them through an intertextual lens. In the introduction to *A World of Others' Words*, Richard Bauman describes the term intertextuality as the “relationship of texts to other texts” (“World” 1). This relationship refers to the way that texts share connections to their own histories, as well as to the histories of those who perform them and have cultural connections to them. Describing this idea, Bauman gives an example of an Icelandic storyteller’s conclusion frame for a story, which references both the genre and the idea of its descent through generations. He explains that “linkage of [the storyteller’s] performed text to other texts by filiation and genre is part of the discursive work by which he accomplishes his performance; the relationship of intertextuality that ties his story to an antecedent story is an interactional accomplishment, part of his management of the narrative performance” (“World” 2).

Further, he explains that cultural knowledge and background operate as context for performance and communication, saying that, “the sociohistorical continuity and coherence manifested in these inter discursive relationships rests upon cultural repertoires of concepts and practices that serve as conventionalized orienting frameworks for the production reception, and circulation of discourse” (“World” 2). Because he is looking at the idea of texts in relation to each other, he explains some of how discourse turns into something comparable. Bauman explains that genre is a key factor in producing,

interpreting, and framing a text. When a text is organized and framed, it becomes a sort of object that can then be decontextualized, repeated, and compared to other texts, a process that he calls “entextualization” (“World” 4). He explains Bakhtin’s notion that, “The text lives only” in dialogue with other texts, that is, that texts exist in context. Bauman explains that this idea implies, “each act of textual production presupposes antecedent texts and anticipates prospective ones” (“World” 4).

Bauman also talks about the way that intertextuality applies to performance. He explains that all discourse depends on intertextuality, but that performance uses it the most consciously, as a part of the communicative act. Specifically, while a performer is typically accountable to an audience, “the performer is [also] thus accountable to past performances, however the standards and measures of accountability may be construed in particular cultural and historical milieux,” which the performer takes into account (“World” 9).

Tallitot and tefillin carry their own intertextual meanings, As referenced above, some symbolic meanings are commonly shared by Jewish people as we exist as a worldwide high context folk group. On the community and individual levels, the use of tallitot and tefillin creates new symbolism that can vary based on specific values and context. In the United States, one can often read this context on the denominational and synagogue level. In addition to the community’s context, the individual wearing the garments brings their own context to the moment, both in terms of history and in terms of embodiment. They may indicate an adherence to broader communal and ritual standards, and knowledge of and willingness to participate in other ritual acts simply by wearing tallitot and tefillin. However, performer interpretations may differ from audience

interpretations.

For example, if I, a twenty-seven year old Ashkenazi woman, walk into a service wearing a tallit, my audience might consider me perfectly average, or politically motivated, or out of place and pretentious, or extremely offensive, depending on where I am and the community's own context. My choice in tallit communicates further details about me, my personality, and my relationship to the community in question, especially if it is handmade or particularly personalized, or if I have borrowed it from the collection of communal tallitot that is usually available. While one can narrow much of this focus by denomination (these and similar issues are part of why we divide ourselves by denominational categories), interpretations can still vary depending on the specific synagogue or location. Further, even in within the same context and my audience may interpret my attire and actions differently from me.

More specifically, all of my participants are from communities where it is expected that adult women cover their heads in one way or another. However, their intentions and others' interpretations sometimes conflict. Tobi, from Minnesota, wears a tallit and kippah, and says, "I do not cover my head because I am married. I don't think it matters if you are married or single. I wear my kippah as a sign of respect [to God]." However, Rachel does differentiate between the two ideas, and further, between different styles of head coverings, saying, "Doilies are silly to me ... Doilies are there for married women who feel bad about the fact that they're not really covering their hair..." And on the connection to tallitot, Rachel adds, "I always associate a kippah and a tallis together. I know of a number of women who wear a tallis but not a kippah... it's two separate mitzvahs..." As mentioned above, Rabbi Eilberg began wearing a kippah for its symbolic

associations of authority, and her congregants' comfort. However, in terms of style, she explains that, "it just didn't feel right to wear... a regular man's kippah... I have a couple of different [styles]... beaded or they're very obviously not made for a man." Here, we have four different explanations and readings of why a woman will cover her head: Respect for God, marriage, because the act is connected to wearing a tallit, and ritual authority.

The acts that one engages in during these performative moments involve a great deal of communication. Communication that happens when women wear tallitot and tefillin may be charged because these practices are relatively new and because of the ways that they simultaneously disrupt and reinforce gender norms. As Bauman explains it, performance refers to acts of communication that occur within a designated frame. He notes that during a performance, the audience assesses the performer's competence. Referring specifically to verbal communication, he writes,

From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence.

Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself.

Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity. Thus conceived, performance is a mode of language use, a way of speaking ("Verbal" 168-9).

Applying this concept to the (mostly) non-verbal performance of wearing ritual garments,

one can see that audience assessment occurs nonetheless. Material objects communicate all sorts of coding and visual cues based on their physical structure and the symbols they employ. In our case, a congregation (audience) may assess a person wearing the garments (performer) based on both the fact that they are wearing them and how; audiences may also read into their competence in other areas. Ellen, who participates in rituals like Torah reading, says,

I feel in general... I don't feel the need to prove anything to anybody... I have always just the way I feel is just so centered... especially when it comes to Judaism, that the... issue of public display is important. I have never been interested in wearing a tallis. And I have walked past the tallis rack and I've said, "I wonder what that would be like to throw that over my shoulder," I'd have to remember the prayer or look it up... and I don't gravitate to that. I offered to buy [my daughter] a tallit and she declined and I said, "is that because I don't wear one?" And she said, "no I don't know why, I just don't feel like I need one..." And my son I didn't give him an option... so no, I don't need public displays... On the high holidays... I will wear a hat but [usually] I don't wear anything or I will pick up a man's kippah... and I have the frilly ones and I'm not interested in them, they seem ostentatious to me...

Here, Ellen is commenting on the idea that, at least in this setting, a woman wearing a tallit still stands out. Further, she is potentially subject to more scrutiny.

Applying a Feminist Critique of Performance Theory

Patricia Sawin's feminist critique of Bauman's performance theory considers the gaps in Bauman's argument. In relation to self consciousness and the definitions of art,

she points out, “The cornerstone of Western patriarchal hegemony, the way it is brought into being in everyday life, is that women are raised to know that they must continually, necessarily, self-consciously perform themselves prior to and simultaneous with any other kind of esthetic performance they undertake” (37). This concept very much speaks to the way that Conservative women are currently striving toward egalitarianism as an ideal. As much as women are now considered equal to men in terms of capability and responsibility, their less than equal participation is frequently still marked: by awkward changes to gendered prayers, by overt comments by community members, or by inconsistent participation in ritual activity. Partly, this is because of continued balance with halakhah; although some synagogues might expect a girl or woman to participate in these ritual activities, halakhah does not obligate her to, while it does obligate a man. Partly, it is because some of these changes are so new; for instance, the first woman rabbi in the Conservative Movement was ordained in 1985. In short, although the Conservative Movement values egalitarianism and expresses it as an ethos, in practice it is variable. My observations on the small variations from synagogue to synagogue further emphasizes this idea; practices that are generally standard in Judaism, such as tefillin, are extremely inconsistent for women, even within egalitarian spaces.

Sawin also directly addresses the question, “In what ways might a woman’s performance challenge male privilege or hegemonic structures that support male dominance?” She suggests that female performers might take on roles deemed to be in opposition to constructed “women’s roles,” might take on a usually male role that, “confers prestige and controls ritual knowledge;” this performance might evoke a more emotional response from the audience. Rabbi Litwin explains, “I wear [tefillin] always

when I daven... in a public place and especially now when I'm leading, for my students... I want the girls to see me in tefillin, even the boys... some of them never see tefillin anyway, but I want them to know... that's part of... a Jewish ritual experience..." In this way, she is showing her students that these rituals are accessible to them.

Other aspects of women's ritual participation also raise questions about male privilege. Liba explains that although she wore tefillin for a few years, she no longer does, because, "I no longer pray every day, I just pray on Shabbat, so I... wear my tallit because it's not customary to wear tefillin on Shabbat." She also reflects on her positionality as a rebetzin saying, "Was I actually being a good enough role model... for my daughter and the rest of the young women in the community? And for whatever reason I decided not to wear the tefillin and that is one question I ask myself sometimes. I'm not saying it's a regret because... I actually still feel a little uncomfortable with the idea, not so much legally but... I never really enjoyed putting on tefillin... I thought the whole concept was interesting but personally I had a little trouble relating to it. But had I been maybe more focused on being a role model maybe I would have done it anyway."

Personal comfort is very important to this decision as Rabbi Eilberg also points out. She says, Rabbi Eilberg also comments that, "tefillin are weird." She says that, "the harshness of the material is both weird and felt sort of masculine at the beginning." In terms of her own decision to wear tefillin, Rabbi Eilberg says that although the object is strange and felt gendered at first, she "pushed through that," because she felt that the logic behind the obligation was so clear. She comments that, "strapping pieces of Torah onto me is beautiful." However, currently Rabbi Eilberg does not let anyone see her in tefillin except other Jews at a public service, and still hesitates a little over their oddness.

She explains that she does not feel the oddness or hesitation around other Jews, so it may have to do with a feeling of being exoticized by non-Jews if she is seen with tefillin.

However, to my knowledge, many men who wear tefillin at weekday services do not wear them at home every day. This raises the question of whether Liba and other women who consider wearing them, are considering their actions in this context; that they should only wear tefillin if they can do so every day. The context here is that women are taking on an additional mitzvah, instead of fulfilling a social expectation as men are. Liba adds that if she really wanted to make a feminist statement, she would wear tefillin. Like most other participants she does not think of wearing a tallit as a particularly feminist statement, but rather calls it an “inclusionary statement... that there’s room for all types of Jews to be practicing Jews.” It is worth adding that since this interview, she has attended the Worldwide Wrap Day^{xxvi} at her synagogue, and worn tefillin again.

Further, regarding both the hyper-awareness and taking on of masculine roles that Sawin describes, this impacts the way women interact with the garments, despite a community’s egalitarian statements. One of my participants indicated that although she supports the idea of women wearing tallitot, she does not wear one herself because she is not comfortable with the connotations it displays about her willingness to perform certain rituals, although she does perform these rituals on occasion. She is cognizant of a tallit’s implications, that is, that wearing it communicates that one has knowledge of how to perform certain ritual activities. Again, when women access the cultural capital associated with mitzvot and ritual knowledge, we are communicating equal citizenship, in a manner of speaking, within the Jewish people as a whole. For this participant, while she likes the idea of this access, I interpret that she is not comfortable enough with it to

access it personally.

Returning to the idea of reinforcement of society's values and morals, Kertzer discusses the idea that, "Through ritual, beliefs about the universe come to be acquired, reinforced, and eventually changed" (9). Again using the Shema, the goal of the prayer is to remind the performer to learn, teach, and reinforce itself (and other mitzvot). However, when women are reciting the prayer in mixed sex seating in a synagogue wearing tallitot and possibly tefillin, the connotations associated with each of those ritual acts does, eventually change.

My participants have commented on this idea from a few different positions. Ellen, who is sixty, says, "When I think about the women I know who... lead... I don't give much thought to whether they're wearing a tallis or not, I only noticed the kippah because I thought it was a rule... [the synagogue's rules are] just something external... I might wear my son's [tallit if it was a rule]... The communal ones are... very visible... you almost, as a woman or a man, have to make a conscious decision not to take one..." Joni, the same age, comments that, "So now I have the opportunity to wear [a tallit] whereas fifty years ago I would not have had the opportunity..." Rachel, in her mid twenties, acknowledges the importance of this idea, but also looks at the rituals from the perspective of what she finds more spiritually appealing.

As the first woman ordained in the Conservative movement, Rabbi Eilberg has observed a variety of customs and changes in customs. She also comments on ideas relating to personal spirituality as well as norms and expectations. For example, she recalls her first thoughts around how tallit and tefillin, as an obligation, represent aspects of equality. She says, "the first ever conference of Jewish women happened the spring

of '73... I didn't go, my friend from Brandeis went and came back and it was the first time she'd seen a woman in tallit and tefillin, which I think was Rachel Adler... and it sort of... that was right for me... what I consider to be a really Jewishly grounded... [the] reality of obligation and therefore of equality... doing both..." She explains that because the idea of obligation (explained in more detail in Chapter II) is so essential to major aspects of Jewish ritual and law, it is also essential to equality. Norms and expectations include more than ritual garments. Rabbi Eilberg also explains conflicts she has had in her professional life around other aspects of dress, saying,

Every woman rabbi you talk to has her set of stories. My least favorite story is [this one]... it was the first time the *shul* had had a woman rabbi and... I always wore a mid calf [skirt], so I'm sitting on the bimah... with my legs crossed very demurely but knee over knee... and then I was called in and told that it a policy of the synagogue that no one was allowed to cross their legs on the [bimah] and that it was not a gender based rule I was told... [laughs] I was outraged, as sort of visceral, feminist, "how dare you tell me how to sit? ..." [Because] If you're wearing pants... there are different ways you can sit... so of course it's gender based... so [that example is] just part of the body of experience that all woman rabbis have... probably ten years of my rabbinate [were like...] that...

These experiences show a variety of experiences and opinions, but generally lead to the same result; that women's presence in these places have changed ideas of what and who is acceptable within ritual frames.

Kertzer also comments that, "Through symbolism we recognize who are the powerful and who are the weak, and through the manipulation of symbols the powerful

reinforce their authority. Yet, the weak too, can try to put on new clothes and to strip the clothes from the mighty” (5). Thus women are claiming previously male spaces, rituals and garments. Some congregations even make a point of displaying representations of women wearing ritual garments comments to indicate the community’s egalitarian stance on the garment issue. For example, Congregation Beth Israel (New Jersey) has a photo collage in the lobby featuring a bat-mitzvah aged girl (a community member) wearing tefillin. This indicates a feminist and egalitarian statement on the community’s part. However, I also note that no girls or women in this synagogue wear tefillin on a regular basis! This shows that the egalitarian ideal does not quite match up with the reality or the educational system, but the community still feels it important to communicate the message of equality, even if through a token example.

The rituals and symbols around tallitot and tefillin are part of a vast conversation within Judaism surrounding gender, legacy, and identity. Women’s recent participation in previously all male ritual activities has radically changed this conversation. Further, based on their own experiences and preferences, individual women appear to have varied expectations and desires regarding both their own ritual activity, and that of other women. Their heightened awareness of how and when their participation impacts a setting also speaks to the idea that the egalitarian values in their communities continue to shift.

Notes

^{xxvi} Annual event run by the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs (associated with the Conservative/Masorti movement) intended to teach people (gender inclusive) how to lay (wrap) tefillin and encourage them to do so regularly.

CHAPTER IV

THE TIES THAT BIND:

PERSONAL MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In the previous chapter I described the symbolism involved in certain rituals and communication associated with the tallitot and tefillin. Here, I turn to how these ideas function in individual practice, specifically through the observations I made during my fieldwork as well as the experiences of four of the women with whom I spoke. Throughout this section, as in the rest of my thesis, I aim to highlight my emic approach in a way that is reflexive and helpful.

Shabbat Services at Congregation Beth Israel

During my fieldwork, I observed several services. These were services that I would attend normally, and included both weekday minyan, where one wears a tallit and tefillin, and daytime Shabbat services, where one wears a tallit but no tefillin. Here, I will describe two of those services, one in New Jersey, the other in California, and discuss how they connect to the previously outlined theoretical observations.

I chose to observe a service at Congregation Beth Israel in early September of 2015 on a Shabbat (Saturday) morning. It began at 9:30 am. The rabbi led the first section of the service, called *Pirke Avot*, and stood at movable podium he had placed in the center of the room between the two sections of pews. The bimah is at the edge of the room in Congregation Beth Israel's sanctuary, but many synagogues conduct services in a circle or similar rounded structure (Congregation Beth Israel does this with Friday night services in a separate room; the Torah scroll is not needed on Friday evenings, so they can use another room). Conducting the service from the middle of the group ideally

facilitates easy access to the Torah during readings, which was particularly important before amplified sound. In the contemporary United States, both styles are fairly standard.

By the time the cantor began *Shacharit* (the next portion of the service, delivered from the podium), more people began coming in; I would estimate there were about fifteen men and five women by this point. The Torah service began at about 10:00 am, and the rabbi and cantor moved to the bimah. People continued to come in throughout the service. Two women and six men had aliyot during the Torah service. By *Musaf* (the last portion of the service), there were even numbers of men and women, eighteen each.

At this service, I was the only woman wearing a tallit. Most of the men wore them, and the majority wore the traditional style: white and black or white and blue stripes. Men's variations include the cantor's tallit, which is white with stripes of several different colors, and one man's that is dark blue with black and gold stripes. Most women covered their heads during the service, either with a doily, colorful kippah, or in one case, a large flower made of ribbon (This ribbon-flower was given out at a bat mitzvah at the synagogue several years ago). A few women appeared to have matched their head coverings to their outfits, something several of my participants noted doing regularly.

At other services, I have seen a few other women wear tallitot, including Joni, who wears her father's old tallit (white and black with some decoration), a woman who wears one that is maroon with black and gold stripes, and my mother's which is from the same designer as mine and is white with purple, gold, and pink coloring but has a Jerusalem motif in place of the floral pattern.

New Year Services at Temple Beth Abraham

For Rosh Hashanah in 2015 (going into the Jewish year 5776) I went to services at Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, California. Rosh Hashanah is a two day holiday, with nearly identical services both days, beginning in the morning and ending in the early afternoon (approximately 9:00 am-1:30 pm at Temple Beth Abraham). I went to both days of services, accompanied by my mother. My mother and her parents were members of the synagogue when she was a teenager, and her parents maintained their membership throughout their lives. Temple Beth Abraham is a large congregation. According to friends of my mother, there were approximately eight hundred people at the service on the first day of the holiday and somewhat fewer the second day.

I observed the garments that the women wore to compare them to what I had seen in Minnesota and New Jersey earlier in the summer. It is important to note that in my experience, mostly in New Jersey but also in Massachusetts and Oregon, it is common to wear more elegant clothing on the High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) than at other times of the year. An example in Oakland is one woman's fascinator (a small, ornate hat, clip, or headband made of silk, netting, and sometimes feathers); she also wore a purple and green tallit). Three ritual clothing trends stood out among the women at Temple Beth Abraham: a wide variety of head coverings, but especially hats, creative tallitot, and garment coordination.

First is an abundance of hats. I saw few hats (distinguished from kippot, doilies, large hair clips, beaded kippot, or scarves) in Minnesota and none in New Jersey, except among Orthodox women. In California, however, I saw no fewer than seven women wearing hats in various styles and colors, which were not worn as ritual objects. Some

examples are a grey felt cloche hat, a red bucket hat, and a brown silk hat with a wide brim and flowers. Hats are not out of place in a synagogue; it used to be fairly common to see married women wearing hats on special occasions. However, this use of hats is distinctly different from the way hats are used at Temple Beth Abraham. In Oakland, some hats are worn with tallitot and some without. Those who wear a head covering with a tallit are indicating (by the presence of the tallit) that they are participating in egalitarian rituals. They cover their heads out of respect for God, not out of modesty, although there may be other reasons. Additionally, I did see some girls who appeared to be under the age of bat mitzvah (twelve) wearing kippot.

As discussed elsewhere, while it is common for a synagogue to require that adults wear head coverings of some kind, this expectation can become linked with other customs regarding head coverings. In Orthodox settings, for example, it is normal for married women to cover their heads, either with a wig, scarf, or hat, and for men and boys to wear a kippah or hat at all times. Many Conservative rabbis also wear a kippah all the time or almost all the time. Despite the different origins for tallitot and head coverings, described by Rabbi Eilberg, the two garments are frequently associated together. In Conservative and other liberal settings one frequently only wears a kippah in a synagogue and/or for services. Because the two items are so often worn only together, it makes sense that they are associated together. Additionally, many tallitot are sold with a matching kippah.

At one point in the service, a group of children led a prayer and a woman (who was wearing the cloche hat mentioned above and a blue tallit) handed out kippot to the girls who were not already wearing them and were on the bimah. Because not all women

and girls were wearing head coverings in the service, this performative moment indicates that there is a policy in this congregation that anyone who goes on the bimah should wear a head covering regardless of gender.

The second trend deals with themes and creativity. The tallitot in Oakland are again distinct from those in Minnesota and New Jersey. While people of all genders in the latter communities tend to prefer designs that focus on Jewish, natural, or abstract themes, designs in Oakland included non-Jewish themes. For example, in New Jersey, stripes are the most commonly featured motif, although one will also see floral patterns, Jerusalem themes, and similar patterns. In Minnesota, one sees more colors, florals, fruits and animals. In California, there were several times I was convinced I was looking at a lace shawl or wrap until I saw the tzitzit. Additionally, I saw a tallit made with University of Michigan fleece; the atarah may have been satin; it looked similar to those used for communal tallitot indicating the tallit was adapted or custom made. Many men and boys had kippot with sports themes, which I have observed many times. Another tallit had appliqués of people swimming; the woman wearing it had a similar fish on her kippah. Some of the teenage girls had tallitot in silk of various colors.

The third trend is less tangible, but is also worth noting because more than one of my participants referenced it. I noticed a significant amount of coordination in people's garments; not necessarily matching colors, but choices that seemed deliberate and personal based on their appearance. (For example, the woman in a grey cloche and blue tallit; another with a pink hat and pink and blue tallit). This phenomenon indicates the degree to which the people wearing the items have considered their garments; that is, they have made deliberate choices in what they wear.

Wearing Feminine Garments in Masculine Spaces

Here, I return to Reischer and Koo's observation that in order to succeed in a male dominated space, women sometimes highlight their femininity. In the examples above, many of the garments are personalized, used feminine colors, and also access other aspects of self-expression and fashion. Further, one can see a pattern where women disrupt the vernacular expectation of wearing a tallit and kippah together and wear either only a tallit or a tallit and hat (not a kippah). Despite their different origins and rules (as explained in Chapter III), the garments are still generally worn together. Therefore, this disruption emphasizes women's difference; while a man would likely never wear a kippah and tallit separately, a woman is more likely to do so, or to choose an alternate head covering in part because of the additional customs around women wearing head coverings. There is a similar type of disruption with hats. As mentioned on page 52, hats are popular with women at Temple Beth Abraham. Hats are generally associated with married Orthodox women; when women wear them in a non-Orthodox setting and participate in egalitarian rituals, they simultaneously disrupt and highlight masculine and feminine symbols as they combine them.

In terms of individuals, most of my participants have experience wearing a tallit and some have experience wearing tefillin. The major themes that arose in our conversations are: their backgrounds; their interpretations of wearing the garments (that it is a mitzvah, and the associated implications; that it is a right; or some combination of the two); their preferences, taste, and intent regarding their individual garments; vernacular interpretations of the garments, actions, and concepts; and communal expectations and interpretations of the women's practices.

I spoke to my mother, Liba, about her experiences with tallitot and tefillin, as well as her role as a rebetzin. Liba was born in Hyde Park, near Chicago, Illinois and grew up attending a synagogue that she describes as classical Reform.^{xxvii} Liba began attending Conservative youth programs when she was a teenager. She notes that, the Conservative Movement of the era was similar to the contemporary Modern Orthodox denomination (more strict theologically, somewhat more divided gender roles than Reform). She went to college at Brandeis University (known for its large Jewish population and overall Jewish ethos), where she met Amy Eilberg, a fellow student at the time (see below), and became more involved with participatory ritual roles, such as Torah reading, which Amy taught her to do fluently.

As mentioned above, Liba explains that, she wore tefillin regularly (weekdays, as she prayed the morning service) for about two years, just before she had children.

And I wore a kippah... and a tallit that looked like a men's tallit... this was the days before they made them for women... So, some people feel like they feel closer to God when they're wearing a tallit, because it's a shawl that envelops them and helps them concentrate on prayer... that's the idea behind it. And I guess some people feel like that with tefillin also, that they made a connection. I - interestingly I never felt that way with the tefillin... I have felt that way with the tallit. So that's why I continue to wear the tallit, but I no longer pray every day-- I only pray on Shabbat...

Regarding the difference between men's and women's tallitot, and Liba described the available styles: those that look like a shawl (frequently worn by younger men) are about six feet by twelve inches, made of a satin-like material and have a blessing on the atarah (collar). They are often white with blue letters and stripes. A "full size" tallit is larger,

almost a square, and frequently has black stripes (considered traditional), although either of these shapes can come in a variety of colors. Women will frequently wear the smaller size; Liba's first tallit was full size in style, but slightly smaller, designed for a teenage boy. When she and her husband bought it in an Orthodox gift shop they lied to the sales person, saying it was for a younger male relative. Liba says that in the mid-eighties, she started seeing tallitot in pink and purple as more girls started wearing them, and adds that they became a popular bat mitzvah gift. She thinks that feminine designs encourage more women to wear them because it becomes like an accessory, and that women appreciate having a feminine garment. She is proud to wear a feminine tallit, but adds that she misses wearing one that is full sized. Additionally, as a rebetzin, she likes to be a role model for other women in the community. She adds that if she really wanted to make a feminist statement, she would wear tefillin (she does not think of a tallit as a particularly feminist statement). It is worth adding that since this interview, she has attended the Worldwide Wrap Day^{xxviii} at her synagogue, and worn tefillin again.

As a teenager, Rachel Karpf laid tefillin, but she does not remember any other women doing so. Rachel is in her early twenties and currently lives in New York City. She grew up in Edison, New Jersey, and attended our synagogue in Scotch Plains (Congregation Beth Israel). She says that many women in her community wore head coverings during services but none wore hats that she remembers. Rachel believes that the women in her community wore head coverings to indicate their egalitarian standards, not to indicate their married status, which would be an Orthodox practice. For a while, Rachel identified as Orthodox, at which point she stopped wearing tefillin. At the moment, she describes her beliefs as somewhat "in flux."

Rachel comments that tallitot are more acceptable for women to wear than tefillin, and that the idea of women wearing tallitot is much more familiar to most people. For example, she had a friend who thought Rachel was the first contemporary^{xxix} woman to wear tefillin. I asked whether she thought more women in our age range wear tefillin than other generations. Rachel has participated in several youth groups and attended college in New York City, and so has been around many more young Jewish women than I have. She says that it is still difficult to assess the number of and effect of women wearing tefillin, such as weekdays. Other participants have agreed: weekday services are in general less popular; women do not regularly attend them, and so garments worn then might not have much ripple effect.

In terms of appearances, Rachel notes that she rarely sees woman in a “classic” blue tallit. Her own is feminine in style; her grandmother bought it as her bat mitzvah gift; she went to an Orthodox store, where they were unhappy about ordering a girl’s tallit, but eventually did. Rachel notes that in her experience women also generally do not use communal tallitot (usually the same classic blue, shawl style), but prefer to have their own. She notes that a tallit can function as a personal statement, citing queer Jews who have tie-dye rainbow tallitot.

Regarding communal reactions, Rachel remembers one of her father’s friends who was upset at her tallit, and compared it to a boy wearing a training bra. She “definitely saw it as a very feminist act, a little militant feminist twelve year old, and I’m like, fuck the patriarchy! ... So it was definitely I felt like it was me... doing something that men did ‘This is a way to get closer to God,’ it was ‘Well if only some people can get close this way, it must be better...’” However, as mentioned elsewhere, Rachel

notes a difference in her current mindset, and feels closer to rituals with which she has a personal connection such as candle lighting. Like her tallit, wearing her tefillin, which she no longer does regularly, was a feminist statement, “because it wasn't something to do with family and, you know being Jewish, it was just another way for me to express my burgeoning feminism.” Rachel’s tefillin were not passed down to her by her father or any other family member: “My father never taught me to lay tefillin. He hadn’t lain tefillin since his bar mitzvah, . . . and, I don’t know--even if I was a son, I don’t think it would have been something he necessarily would have passed on.” Rachel sees tefillin as highly personal (and notes that they are extremely expensive), and adds that currently they have nothing to do with gender for her, only theology.

Rachel is highly aware of the theological halakhic intricacies of tallitot, tefillin, and kippot (and other head coverings). While she associates kippot with tallit as items that she should wear together, she knows many people who wear them separately, although she says she feels naked when she does that. In college, she would see women leading *Kabbalat Shabbat*^{xxx} and men leading *ma’ariv*^{xxxi}, but that women would not wear any kind of ritual garb. Meanwhile, Rachel explains that from an Orthodox perspective, women have more legal leeway to read Torah than to wear ritual garments. She thinks that halakhic requirements are largely not the issue. She thinks choices in ritual garments in both Orthodox and Conservative communities are more about appearances, statements, and women feeling judged, saying, “women already have so much on their appearance... a place where you’re not focused on that... what you wear... maybe you don’t connect to God through what you wear because [appearance is] so often a sense of, like, alienation... [socially].” She also notes that tefillin have a

more masculine appearance, and that there is less legal flexibility in their appearance (she also adds that it would mess up her hair).

Rachel's comments are interesting because of how much importance she places on personal connections to rituals. She values rituals with a personal or familial connection more than those with political associations, that is, those that make feminist statements or other statements. She explains that "I feel much more connected [to God] lighting Shabbat candles which was something that was... passed down to me by my grandmother with a special Yiddish blessing that she learned from her grandmother and... I have a history associated with that... my father never taught me to lay tefillin..." Here, I see a connection to the way Kertzer describes descent and caste rituals as fostering reinforcement of ideology and norms. He describes the way observance among common descent groups can reinscribe ideology, or potentially change it. Candle lighting is considered a feminine ritual and, aside from Rachel's specific reasons, her actions in this case reinforce the gender norm.

Joni makes a similar observation, but with a different result. She currently wears her late father's "everyday tallis^{xxxii}... he was buried in his good tallis," which her mother gave her. She describes it as, "nothing ornate, nothing fancy, it's black and white... it's as masculine as you can get, certainly not feminine, but this was his tallis, the only thing was my mom went out and got a tallis bag and she found one with a flower... I kind of wonder if I hadn't gotten my father's tallis, whether I ever would have started wearing a tallis. I don't know... this is my tallis and I feel really proud to wear it and sometimes I think about getting a nicer one... but I have mixed feelings... now that I think about it I have to go home and tell my family that when I die I want to be buried in

this tallis...” For Joni, much of the ritual’s importance comes from the connection to her father. However, especially because she is one of the few women in Congregation Beth Israel who wears a tallit, her presence leans more toward changing the ideology than reinforcing the gender norm.

Women Rabbis’ Decisions Regarding Wearing Tallitot and Tefillin

Rabbi Amy Eilberg currently lives in Minnesota. She teaches, writes, and travels for speaking engagements.. She learned to read Torah in college (Brandeis University) where she taught Liba. As mentioned above, Rabbi Eilberg explains what she sees as the conflict in the way secular and Jewish cultures respectively interpret equality, as a matter of rights vs. as taking on obligations. She explains that the connection occurred to her logically while she was in school, and at the time was very personal:

I was already davening every day, since age sixteen, once a day but... it occurred to me that if I missed it..., that I wasn’t technically obligated but that my male classmates were, and that that made no sense to me I just intuited... if I was claiming equality, which I was... leading services and so on... that it made no sense, there was no reason based on my life... Oh, I don’t have to daven^{xxxiii}, I’m a girl...

And the way to act out an intention for equality of obligation would be to take on the obligation of doing tallit and tefillin.

Further, she describes what she envisioned as a “reality of equality including both rights and responsibilities” that could be standard practice, but at the time was highly personal.

Currently, Rabbi Eilberg buys a new tallit every five or ten years. She thinks her first one was probably black and white, but she now prefers women’s styles, adding that the styles she chooses are creative, but a man could wear them comfortably. She changes

them by the season, currently wearing a black and purple tallit in winter and a navy blue tallit in spring. For years, Rabbi Eilberg did not wear a kippah or other head covering “together with a tallit,” which “drove other people nuts” because she was a rabbi. Although she was relying on “legal logic” because the two items have entirely different origins, it bothered people in her congregation and others that she did not wear the two items together, because they expected a rabbi, regardless of gender, to wear a kippah. She started wearing it for specific ritual occasions for example when she davened or ate. Later, she started to wear one regularly as part of her meditation practice. She prefers to wear one that is “probably made for a woman.” Rabbi Eilberg explains that where women use tallitot and tefillin, they are interacting with both American and Jewish values, and that this can create some tension. This idea also connects to Reischer and Koo’s description of how bodies can express core social values. In this case the emphasis on personalization and the choice to follow some customs but not all can be read as reflecting American values, while accessing tallitot and tefillin can be read as reflecting Jewish values.

Rabbi Sharon Litwin grew up in a Conservative, non-egalitarian synagogue, meaning that ritual activities were largely restricted to men. For example, at her bat mitzvah in 1987, she read a *haftarah* portion^{xxxiv} with no *brachot*^{xxxv}; haftarot are read with brachot when they are considered official, part of the service, and performed for the benefit or on behalf of the community as a whole; without brachot they are less official. As she got older, Rabbi Litwin became more Orthodox and went to a yeshiva for high school. However, her mother refused to let her go to an Orthodox university. Instead, she went to Washington University. Sharon explains that parents paid her tuition but made

her get a job. She ended up teaching Hebrew School in a Reform synagogue in St. Louis where she met a woman rabbi for the first time. She became very involved in the Reform movement and heard a sermon on the importance of wearing a tallit, after which she began doing so herself. Currently she works as director of congressional learning in Conservative Congregation B'nai Israel in Millburn, New Jersey.

Rabbi Litwin began by wearing a small tallit, but purchased one that was full size when she went to Israel. As mentioned above, she began wearing tefillin when a woman rabbi offered to let her try a set. Later, her brother gave her his set of tefillin because he never wore them (he had received them for his bar mitzvah from their grandparents). Rabbi Litwin explains that they were optional at her seminary (Hebrew Union College, Reform), but that several other women wore them as well. Eventually, she joined the Rabbinical Assembly, and is now a member of the Conservative movement. Currently, she does not wear them every day, but she does sometimes, especially when she davens Shacharit^{xxxvi} in a public place, to make a visual statement for students. Sharon is very passionate about her current job and explains that she has a pair of old non-kosher tefillin that she opens up to show students.

As Rabbi Litwin explains, in most of the places she has worked since finishing rabbinical school people view a tallit as a non-gendered Jewish ritual object. She sees this idea indicated by both men and women choosing to wear or not wear it, emphasizing choice for both. Rabbi Litwin also discusses the ways that tallitot can serve as markers for other kinds of identity. She tells a story of a tallit she bought in 1995, and replaced about three years ago, because she was asked if she were gay. Rabbi Litwin adds that she

chose a new design, “not because I don’t support that community... but because I didn’t want that to be a self identifier for me.”

Some of my participants have discussed vernacular understandings of how to wear tallitot and tefillin, either by women or by community members in general. For instance, both Rachel and Rabbi Eilberg focus on the idea of tallitot and head covering worn together. Rachel does not like to wear a tallit without a kippah (or other head covering), because it makes her feel “naked”; Rabbi Eilberg similarly remarks on her congregants’ and acquaintances’ discomfort at the idea of wearing a tallit sans kippah. Here, the discomfort is not with a woman wearing what some groups or those in the past might consider a masculine garment, but rather that if a woman chooses to wear a tallit, she should conform to an expected pattern of behavior (that is, wear a kippah), regardless of the fact that this is not supported by halakhic reasoning.

Similarly, although tefillin should theoretically follow the same halakhic logic (as Rabbi Eilberg frames it), as tallitot in terms of whether a contemporary Conservative woman can or should wear them, the vernacular understanding appears to be that they are generally masculine items. It seems as though clergy (or their family members) may be more comfortable wearing tefillin, while laity such as Rachel who chose to do so still find themselves outside the structure of communal expectations.

Notes

^{xxvii} In her synagogue, neither men nor women wore tallit and tefillin; they also did not wear kippot, at the time, a deliberate choice by the denomination that distanced them theologically, physically, and visually from other denominations, although these practices have since changed.

^{xxviii} Annual event run by the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs (associated with the Conservative/Masorti movement) intended to teach people (gender inclusive) how to lay (wrap) tefillin and encourage them to do so regularly.

^{xxxix} Rashi had three daughters, at least one of whom famously wore tefillin; More biblically, King Saul's daughter Michal is believed to have done so as well.

^{xxx} A portion of the Friday evening service mainly focused on communal singing.

^{xxxi} An evening service.

^{xxxii} Alternate pronunciation of "tallit".

^{xxxiii} Pray.

^{xxxiv} Portion of the TaNaKh read weekly; each is matched to a Torah portion, but comes from another book.

^{xxxv} Blessings.

^{xxxvi} Prays the morning service.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As this study of the gendered ritual use of tallitot and tefillin demonstrates, we are observing a phenomenon that is very much in progress and still being sorted out by individuals. As mentioned above, focusing on this one set of rituals shows patterns reflective of other aspects of Jewish folklife. I find the dialogue among institution, community and individual interpretations fascinating, especially as the Conservative Movement continues to strive for a balance between halakhah and shifting social values. Throughout this conversation, three themes stand out: choice, personal connections, and the crossover between secular and Jewish values.

First, choice in how and when to participate in Jewish ritual is becoming an ever more relevant issue. The specific ways that people interact with tallitot and tefillin emphasize this idea. Rachel's shift between denominations and their expectations, for example, is becoming a more common experience. Her experimentation with what rituals are most comfortable and meaningful to her reaffirms the importance of choice. Similarly, the general focus on personalization, either of garments, or of experience, also plays into the idea that choice, option, and individual experience have become centrally important to Jewish ritual.

Building on the notion of personal experience is the second theme: the importance of personal and familial connections. Many of my participants have emphasized how both personal and familial connections to these rituals impact their own actions and what they hold to be ritually valuable. For instance, while Joni supports egalitarian ideals, her own actions are spurred by familial links to ritual objects. Alternatively, Rabbi Litwin

identifies the practice with her own spiritual experiences and how they caused her to reexamine the inclusiveness of tallitot and tefillin and her own connections to them.

Last, egalitarianism is an important value in these communities, and remains in conversation with similar secular feminist values. However, there are nuanced aspects of ritual that require reworking in this egalitarian frame, and which can manifest somewhat differently in different communities, and be individually adapted, in spite of institutional guidance.

The balance between halakhah and shifting social values here is a concept that Conservative/Masorti individuals think about consciously as they perform usual rituals. Maintaining this balance involves introspection and awareness. My participants, both laity and clergy, have all explained how carefully they consider their actions and the implications they may have. This idea reflects back on the rituals around tallitot and tefillin themselves; they are centered around memorialization and actively thinking about and passing on ritual observance. These types of reflexive rituals are important tools, especially as Jewish women continue to contemplate access to ritual activities and obligations, personal spirituality, and the success of egalitarian ideals.

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