

The Gift of Tallit

by Dianne Saxe

L'auteure nous fait part de sa joie lors de la création de son propre tallit.

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When I became *bat mitzvah*, (as a last minute add-on to my brother's *bar*), I wore no *tallit*. In the "temple" of my childhood, *tallits* were mere "scarves"

worn over flowing black robes by the (male) rabbis; they had nothing to do with me. The *bat mitzvah* itself had scarcely more. I memorized a series of incomprehensible Hebrew words, recited them nervously before a crowd of my parents' friends and relatives, and promptly abandoned the active practice of Judaism.

All that I kept from the experience were some presents. With the money I bought a sewing machine. I used it for a while, then put it too aside.

In my mid-twenties, I was casting about for a spiritual anchor and framework. After several false starts, I decided to give Judaism a try. *Shabbat* became my protection from unceasing labour, and I joined a small, friendly synagogue. I was surprised to learn that, in this *shul*, both men and women wore the *tallit*. These bore little resemblance to the "scarves" of my childhood; these *tallits* were large and generous, flowing over the shoulders and well down the back. Sometimes people needing a moment of silence would pull the *tallit* up over their heads, creating for themselves a small shelter. It was as if they could wrap themselves in the elusive shelter of God's wings.

I experimented awkwardly with the spare *tallits* left thoughtfully for guests at the back row. To my surprise, the

act of putting on the *tallit* made concrete, and therefore easier, the transition from ordinary life to prayer. And as the *tallit* enfolded me, I felt more accepted by the community within which I prayed.

To make this experience truly my own, I needed a *tallit*. Years later, when I first went to Israel, one of my objectives was to buy myself a *tallit*. I found one in the holy city of Jerusalem, but only by pretending to buy it for my husband. It was a rather anonymous *tallit*, conventional in blue and white stripes, and much too big for me, but I loved it. I crocheted for it a vibrant red bag and wrapped myself in it every *Shabbat*. That *tallit* comforted and strengthened me through the joys and sorrows of the next 14 years. I even nursed children under its shelter. In some countries and in some *shuls*, where women do not normally wear the *tallit*, my *tallit* elicited disbelief, dismissal, hostility, or simple curiosity, but I was always proud to wear it.

I began to be restless in that *tallit* only on *Tu B'shvat*¹ of 1989. At a Jewish women's retreat which focused on the meaning of trees, we studied references to trees in the Torah, we envisaged ourselves as trees, and we danced interpretations of the meaning of trees in our lives. At the end of the retreat we each made a *kippah* (skull cap). On mine I put the tree that I had imagined myself to be, with the bare branches of a woman who feels herself to be vulnerable. It required courage to expose myself so clearly on something I wore in public, but it also gave me a sense of power and of peace.

I began to long for a *tallit* that would express my own soul in the same way. After a year's hesitation I began to work in earnest. For six months I searched for the special tree that would express my soul. I searched tree identification books, nature pho-

tography, encyclopedias, and magazines. I stalked the streets of my city looking at trees, searching for the shape I was seeking. I took rolls of film and did dozen of sketches, but none of them captured the right tree. Finally, I took my small daughter to a local art gallery which featured art play for children. On this particular day the children were cutting shapes out of black and white paper. I squeezed into a tiny chair and cut out piles of paper leaves. For hours I moved them around on the paper, seeking a combination of strength, hope, vulnerability, survival, and beauty. At last, the tree that I had been seeking emerged.

My tree doesn't have the proud security of an oak or a maple. It suggests the endurance, the peacefulness, and the productivity of an olive tree, the fruitfulness of an apple tree, and the lonely strength of a wind-blown pine. My tree has a double, twisted trunk to represent the dualities I struggle with: Judaism and feminism, God and my daily life, male and female. The seven branches are mostly bare, slender, and twisted, but unbroken. The leaves, one for each year of my life, toss in a strong wind, grouped into seven drifts.

That summer I was ready for the great adventure of actually making the *tallit*. A friend helped me to buy lengths of silk and handfuls of lustrous beads. I dusted off the old sewing machine, took a three week vacation and fled to a quiet river valley. Once there I drew the tree over and over on large sheets of paper. At last, I laid the stretched silk over the chosen page. With a trembling hand and an inward prayer, I put my brush into the indelible paint and touched it to the white silk. After that there was no turning back. I made many mistakes, oh so many: I dropped the needle, tangled the thread, used the wrong tension, and put my elbow in the

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paint. I washed the fabric first when I should have ironed it first; cut the leaves too soon so that they frayed; used my brush too heavily so that paint blurred and ran. Sometimes

beads were ill chosen and had to be taken out and redone hour after laborious hour.

Despite it all, by Rosh Hashanah² a tree very close to the one I had dreamed of glinted on the silk.

The tree lies in a white oval like the shape of an eye, framed by blue borders. The blue is the grey-blue of the northern lakes I love. The eye is my inner eye, looking both inwards and outwards; it is also the eye of God. And from the very joy of the making, the tree had changed, becoming less lost and forlorn, and more serene and beautiful.

On the border of a *tallit*, it is customary to inscribe the blessing for putting on a *tallit*. Usually, this is a male blessing about a male God, designed to be recited by men. I replaced it with a blessing adapted from one of Marcia Falk's: "Let us bless the source of life as we weave the branches of our lives into the tradition of our people." This blessing reflects my struggle to integrate feminism with Judaism and, more broadly, to use Jewish tradition to give shape and meaning to my own life.

I spent one long afternoon learning to tie the *tzitzit*³ and then wore it for the first time. To celebrate the joy I felt, I invited my closest friends and family to inscribe the inner sides of the leaves. Now their love and good wishes lie against me as I wrap myself in my *tallit*, hidden from all but me. To me, my *tallit* is a joy to behold and a joy to wear.

Several years later I was able to pass

the gift of *tallit* on to my eldest daughter. The summer before her *bat mitzvah* I again brought out the old sewing machine, and made her a *tallit* in the same shape as my own: white oval, blue borders. But if a *tallit* is to express the soul of its wearer, and is to be cherished, the wearer must help to choose its blessing and its decoration. I thought, and we talked, but we reached no agreement, so I put her *tallit* away for the winter.

In the spring, when the flowers in our garden bloomed again, we brought out the half finished *tallit*. This time we agreed to leave the body of the *tallit* unadorned, for now. Its pure whiteness cascades down her back, leaving space for her to add a design when she is more sure of her own soul. Perhaps we shall do it for her wedding. In the meantime, I have simply decorated the blessing band with the roses that represent her name: two sprays of buds and one single, red bloom. For her blessing we chose a song from the women's group which first inspired me: "As we bless the source of life, so we are blessed." This expressed my hope that she will discover the joy that is contained in reverence for life, in the quest to do good, and in the traditions of our people.

By using my sewing machine, the legacy of my *bat mitzvah*, to create a *tallit* for my daughter's *bat mitzvah*, I experienced *shalom*, completion and wholeness. I redeemed the gifts which I had received at *bat mitzvah*, and I fulfilled in part my duty as a parent. I opened a door for her to the beauty of our heritage, and to the chain of generations which links us to it.

Ironically, my daughter walked through that door with so much force that she no longer wears the *tallit*. Having grown up without misogyny, she rejects feminism. From the easy welcome of our small *shul*, she has moved to the stricter observance and

greater formality of a large one. She prefers to pray with a *mechitzah*,⁴ and a male rabbi. Her *tallit* sits forgotten on a small shelf, with the regal silver and purple one I made for her non-religious brother. Still, I was blessed in making these *tallits*, and in giving them. Somehow, they will find a place in my children's future.

In the meantime, my own *tallit* continues to evolve. Whenever I pluck up courage, I add something. I add one new leaf for each passing year; as I grow, the tree flourishes. (An extra blessing—the spreading leaves now cover some of my mistakes!) The sombre tones of the tree are now brightened with magical fruits of sequins and beads, one for each decade. Each *Shabbat*, I connect more deeply with the living tree of our tradition, flowing ever more beautifully down my back. As we bless the source of life, so we are blessed.

Dianne Saxe is a Toronto environmental lawyer, and a volunteer cantor at the First Narayever Congregation.

¹The new year for trees, falling between January and February.

²The Jewish New Year.

³The fringes attached to each of the four corners of the *tallit*.

⁴The partition that separates men and women's seating in orthodox synagogues.

References

Falk, Marcia. *The Book of Blessings*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1996.