



## **Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic** **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

### **Script 17: Jewish “Dress” 101**

Jewish people have a history of dressing somewhat differently from their neighbors. This was originally encouraged by Jewish leaders in order to distinguish Jews from non-Jews and to encourage modest dress. However, by the Middle Ages, Christian and Muslim rulers had issued orders for Jews to wear distinctive clothing, including special hats and even Jewish stars, to both differentiate Jews and to humiliate them.

Today, most Jews wear the clothes of the secular society they live in. Ritually-based clothing items – such as the prayer shawl (*tallit*) and the skullcap (*kippah* or *yarmulkah*)- are worn when in the synagogue, or special holidays, or at a life-cycle event. Many traditional Jews wear these and other clothing items on a daily basis. We will look first at the skullcap (*kippah/yarmulkah*) and the prayer shawl (*tallit*) to understand their purpose and origins and then examine other pieces of clothing worn by Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox men and women.

The *kippah* is a small, round head covering made of cotton or sometimes knitted fabric worn today by Jewish men. However, many women and gender nonconforming individuals in the Reform, Conservative and other liberal movements also wear these during prayer. The main reason for this is to show respect and humility in the presence of God – just as in ancient times it was proper decorum to cover one’s head when facing a king or nobleman of high rank. Today a *kippah* may be a variety of colors, often decorated with Jewish symbols, Hebrew names or words, or even a favorite sports’ team logo. Some Jews will wear a *kippah* all day long and various sizes or knit patterns may help to identify a person as belonging to a particular Jewish group.

The *tallit* is a linen, cotton, or silk rectangular cloth or shawl which is worn around the neck and usually goes down to the hips or below, with white cotton fringes tied along the bottom, and several knotted ones in each of the four corners of this garment. This ritual garment fulfills the commandment of Numbers Chapter 15, verses 37-41, which states that the people were to wear a “fringed garment” so that they would remember and do all the Divinely-given laws. The large-size *tallit* is worn during morning prayers on weekdays, Shabbat, and holidays, whenever the Torah is read in the synagogue.

Orthodox Jewish tradition holds that women do not share the same ritual obligations as men, including wearing a *tallit*. Conservative, Reform, and other progressive Jewish communities encourage women and gender nonconforming individuals to voluntarily assume these obligations. As a result, many women in non-Orthodox movements also wear *tallitot* (plural of *tallit*) during prayer.

The standard *tallit* is white with two blue or black stripes near the bottom. This is said to symbolize darkness and light, evening and morning, and Heaven and Earth. The flag of the modern State of Israel is based on this design. If you visit a synagogue of a non-Orthodox movement today, however, you will see a veritable rainbow of colored *tallitot* worn by the congregants. A small-sized *tallit*, shaped like a sleeveless poncho, hangs down to the waist and is worn either under the shirt with only the fringes—*tzitzit*—showing, or on top of a shirt. This piece of ritual clothing is worn by some during the day, not just during prayer. On the New Year and Day of Atonement, many Jewish men will also wear a large white robe tied at the waist called a *kittel*. This may also be worn on Passover and by the groom at his wedding.

Another ritual item worn during morning prayers on weekdays as opposed to Shabbat and holidays are the phylacteries (*tefillin*), a traditional prayer symbol traditionally worn by men. These consist of two small leather boxes each containing verses from the Hebrew Bible that remind us to love God with all our heart, mind and physical strength. There are leather straps extending from two sides of the box and these are used to wrap one box on the upper non-dominant arm and around the hand. The other box is placed in the middle of the forehead and tied in place with the straps going around the head. Symbolically this is to fulfill the words of the Hebrew Bible in Exodus Chapter 13, verses 9 and 16, and Deuteronomy Chapter 6, verses 8 and 11. Verse 18 in the same chapter of Deuteronomy speaks about binding the words of the commandments as signs on one's hand and between one's eyes. *Tefillin* are not worn on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, special days that are themselves signs of God's love. As with the *tallit*, some women and gender nonconforming individuals in egalitarian Jewish settings also put on *tefillin* on weekdays.

The dress of many ultra-Orthodox Jews consists of the following items: a large brimmed black hat, sometimes trimmed with fur; a dark-colored coat, often like a robe closed with a tie; dark long pants (sometimes knickers worn with white socks); and dark leather shoes. On the Sabbath this may change with the wearing of a fur cylindrical hat and a dark silk overcoat. It appears that this outfit was once common to 17<sup>th</sup> century non-Jewish nobles and then adopted by the Hasidic movement which became a part of the ultra-Orthodox movement of our times. Many ultra-Orthodox men are distinguished by the side curls or *payot* and the beards they grow, in fulfillment of the verse in Leviticus Chapter 19, verse 27, that men should not “round the corner” of their heads. Boys begin wearing these clothes and growing their side curls from a very young age, about four or five years old.

Women of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities are very conscious about following the laws of modesty in their dress and appearance. There is a wide variety of interpretations and practices among Orthodox women in this regard. Since a woman's hair is considered sexually attractive to men according to traditional interpretations of Jewish law, married Orthodox women often cover their hair with a scarf, knitted cap, or a wig. Some married women will even shave their heads and wear a head covering.

Many Orthodox women will wear dark colored dresses, blouses and skirts that cover their arms, necks, and legs sometimes extending to their ankles, as well as dark-colored stockings and simple shoes. Others wear more modern clothing including colorful dresses. Still others are comfortable wearing pants and clothing that does not cover their arms and legs. These variations in head coverings and dress are yet another example of the rich diversity of Jewish religious and cultural expression in the world today.

---

**Academy for Jewish Religion**  
**Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic**  
**An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

*With thanks to...*

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, CEO and Academic Dean  
Cantor Michael Kasper, Dean of Cantorial Studies and Director of Student Life  
Rabbi Dr. Matthew Goldstone, Assistant Academic Dean  
Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, Project Coordinator

*AJR Faculty Contributors:*

Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine  
Rabbi David Evan Markus  
Dr. C. Tova Markenson

*AJR Alumni Writers:*

Rabbi Bruce Alpert  
Rabbi Doug Alpert  
Rabbi Dr. Jo David  
Rabbi Dorit Edut

*AJR Student & Alumni Narrators:*

Cantor Howard Glantz  
Cantor Meredith Greenberg  
Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine  
Cantorial Student Molly May  
Cantorial Student Turia Stark

*Guest Script Editor:*

Rev. Dr. Daniel Aleshire

---

*Director of Photography, Video & Sound Editor:*

Beth Styles | L'Dor Vador Films

**With appreciation to...**

- Lilly Endowment, Inc. for their generous funding of “Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic”
- The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for their continued guidance and support of this project.

To learn more about the Academy for Jewish Religion, please visit us at [ajr.edu](http://ajr.edu).