

Parasha Re'eh

Can a Woman Wear Talit and Tefillin?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I have a question. My daughter made her own tallit for her Bat Mitzvah, and we have my grandfather's tefillin for her to wear as well. I believe it will be very meaningful for her. I wanted to say something about the meaning of a woman wearing a tallit, but haven't really found anything. Can you give me some insight into this?

Doris Tallisman (name changed)

Dear Doris,

First of all, mazal tov on your daughter's Bat Mitzvah. May she grow into a true Eishet Chail (Woman of Valor)! I understand that your daughter is excited about her tallit, that she made herself. Creativity by the Jewish woman is certainly emphasized in the Torah, especially the crafts of weaving and spinning. I'm sure you could find something nice to say about the importance of weaving for Jewish women and their role in weaving the Temple curtains. King Solomon praises the Woman of Valor for this skill as he writes: "She sets her hands to the distaff, and her palms hold the spindle" (*Proverbs* 31:19). Your daughter's Bat Mitzvah Parasha is *Parashat Re'eh* which instructs women and girls to rejoice in the holidays: "You shall rejoice in your festival, you and your son, your daughter, your servant, your maidservant, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that are within your gates" (*Devarim* 16:14). The Oral Torah explains that women rejoice by wearing new clothing and jewelry (*Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Holidays* 6:18), so the topic of women's garments ties in nicely. The reason why you have not found any sources for a Jewish woman wearing a tallit is because there are no sources for this in our tradition.

Time-bound Mitzvot that Women Must Not Perform

Women are exempt from performing time-bound positive commandments (*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin* 29). The Talmud derives this principle from the commandment of tefillin, which are considered 'time-bound' since they are not worn on Shabbat or holidays (*Ibid.* 33b). Nevertheless, women observe many time-bound mitzvot without being obligated, and they even get rewarded for such mitzvot as hearing the Shofar and sitting in the Sukkah. Although women and children are not obligated to sit in a Sukkah, it is still a mitzvah for each Jew to have his wife and children sit in the Sukkah as by sitting in a Sukkah they earn eternal heavenly reward (*Shulchan Aruch* 640:1; *Ran, Rosh HaShana* 33a). Women and children who sit in a Sukkah merit the cleansing of their souls and receiving heavenly goodwill (*Kaf HaChaim* 640:5). However, women do not have the custom of donning tallit and tefillin. Why should these mitzvot be different? The Talmud records that Michal, the daughter of King Saul, donned tefillin and the Rabbis did not object (*Eruvin* 96a). Also Rashi's daughters are said to have put on tefillin. However, these are exceptions and there are various reasons why women must refrain from this practice.

The Risk of Disgracing the Tefillin

There are generally no pitfalls when women take upon themselves various time-bound mitzvot. However, this is not the case with wearing tefillin. Donning tefillin requires a 'clean body' – that is – it is forbidden to pass gas while wearing tefillin. Naturally, this does not happen to women any

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more than to men, but since men are obligated in the mitzvah, they may be more easily excused, as opposed to women who are exempt. Since no-one today is on the level of Michal, Shaul's daughter, who was in complete control over her body, only a man, who has no choice regarding the mitzvah of donning tefillin is permitted to take the risk of disgracing this mitzvah. This explains why most Torah authorities agree that women should not don tefillin, (*Shulchan Aruch, OC 38:3; Aruch Hashulchan 38:6; Beit Yosef 38:3*). Donning tefillin is a commandment, which women have not historically practiced, and if women want to take it upon themselves, we object (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rem" a, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 38:3*).

No Cross-Dressing for Men and Women

Neither men nor women are permitted to dress in a way that is customarily associated with the other gender. Since a tallit is typically a male garment, women may transgress a Torah prohibition by wearing it: "A man's garment shall not be on a woman, nor may a man wear a woman's garment because whoever does these [things] is an abomination to Hashem, your G-d" (*Devarim 22:5*). Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel's translation of this Torah verse reads:

תרגום יונתן על דברים פרק כב פסוק ה לא יהיה גולין דציצית ותפילין דהינן תקוני גבר על איתא "A woman should not wear Tzitzit and Tefilin which are male garments..." (Targum Yonatan, *Devarim 22:5*).

The Strange Fire of Self-Centered Desire for Divine Service

I'm very proud of my alumna student, Ahuva Gamliel, who wrote a beautiful article on the topic: [Why I Don't Put On Tefillin](#). She describes how she felt a strong desire to don tefillin when learning about their wonderful mental, emotional, and physical health benefits. She was discouraged from this mitzvah by the various rabbis with whom she consulted, yet, was not satisfied with the reasons given for the prohibition of women donning tefillin. Here is an excerpt from her very well written article: "The sons of Aaron, the High Priest, Nadav and Avihu, were great men driven by a deep desire for closeness to G-d. They were inspired to serve G-d and made an offering that was not asked for and died. They were consumed by a fire – their passion – because they did what they wanted instead of just doing what G-d asked. This taught me that my great spiritual desire to connect with G-d was in fact egotistical. It was about me, me, me. I wanted to put on tefillin as a way of reaching my potential. I wanted to be closer to G-d, and thought tefillin would take me there. But this is not what G-d asks of me. My spiritual desire was, in fact, self-centered and not G-d centered. I didn't stop to think what would make G-d happy." Ahuva's frank self-awareness is in tune with the general halachic concern to refrain from a particular activity that is deemed ostentatious. This rule applies equally to men and women. It would be an act of religious arrogance (*yuhara*) for women to wear tallit and tefillin, from which she is exempt, since women do not regularly wear such garments (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rem" a, *Shulchan Aruch, OC 17:2*).

Male Oriented Antennas

On an inner level, the mitzvot of tallit and tefillin are male oriented and entirely unnecessary for a woman. The superior and inherent spiritual wisdom of women does not require time-bound religious imperatives (Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, *Vayikra 23:43*). Ahuva Gamliel expands on this concept in such a deep and personal way: "It is clear to see that tefillin are unnecessary for me. It is as if I

already have an instant satellite connection, with the best reception possible while thinking that putting an antenna on will help to beam me up. This thinking is clearly flawed. The antenna in this case is redundant and will not do anything for me. In fact, it may be detrimental, causing avoidable marital problems, G-d forbid. This redundancy may be a *chilul Hashem* (G-d forbid) because it is doing an act in vain, even if the intentions are great, like Nadav and Avihu. While it must be greatly satisfying to earn a relationship and close bond through prayer, actions, and pure intentions, I can rejoice and celebrate that I don't have to work as hard for that reality. I was born with a direct connection and the ability to be G-d like through the creation of children (G-d Willing soon). Just like G-d created a space for humanity to exist and to bestow His love upon them, I, too, have this ability through procreation. I have been gifted with the ability of co-creating with G-d, in a way that men do not experience: My microcosm reflecting His macrocosm. I can emanate G-d's ways in a deep way that men cannot- and that is priceless." Baruch Hashem, in the merit of Ahuva's humble, sincere quest for truth and embracing her femininity, she is engaged to a wonderful man of her dream. I bless Ahuva to raise a beautiful Jewish family upon the traditional Torah values that she imparts.