

IDENTITY AND EMBODIED PRACTICE: GENDER AND JEWISH RITUAL OBJECTS

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Foreword

Shaking my hand firmly with genuine warmth, Rabbi Gerber asked, "Why aren't you wearing your tallit, Talia?" Despite seeming straightforward, the question was a loaded one. Even though Jewish women have not traditionally worn the prayer shawl, the egalitarian service in my Conservative synagogue allows males and females to pray wearing a tallit. I was over halfway done with my high school career at this point and had been supporting Women of the Wall, an organization that fights for a woman's right to wear a tallit and read from the Torah at the Western Wall, a religious site in Israel controlled by ultra-Orthodox Jews. I felt so connected to the cause that I wrote a piece that had been posted on Women of the Wall's blog. So why wasn't I connected to wearing my own tallit?

The rabbi's question at first made me feel like a hypocrite. To my family and friends, I was the young feminist, the one who spoke out for equality in all situations, especially when women's rights were concerned. How could I speak out for the rights of women at the Western Wall when I was fortunate enough to be part of such an open community yet did not seize the opportunity to wear my own tallit? In an attempt to reconcile these nagging questions, I reassured myself that I didn't feel the spiritual pull to wear my tallit because of what I was used to; my mother and many other congregants did not wear the prayer shawl, still a newer

practice for women. I decided that I would begin to wear the tallit that I had been given at my bat mitzva not only to physically support Women of the Wall's mission, but also to show younger girls at my synagogue that women can wear tallit.

– August 2013

Like many female members of egalitarian Jewish communities, I stopped wearing a *tallit* soon after my *bat mitzva*. I paid little attention to the decision until my feminist, cisgender male rabbi invited me to think critically about the ways in which I engaged with Jewish ritual. At first, I re-adopted the practice of wearing a *kippah* and *tallit* to align my actions with my values and to set an example for younger girls, but this practice later took on great personal, spiritual, and religious meaning. Laying *tefillin* also became a part of my practice during my first year of college. While I now better understand my personal connection to the *mitzvot* of donning *tallit* and *tefillin*, I continue to think about the ways in which communal standards regarding gender and ritual objects affect individual experience.

Looking back, many aspects of my exchange with Rabbi Gerber stand out. First, it took a male rabbi's encouragement for me to adopt these practices. This distinction should not belittle all that Rabbi Gerber's guidance means to me; he has been one of my greatest mentors, and my journey would not be the same without his support. However, it remains salient that, at the time, I had very few female role models in religious Jewish spaces. Today, I am grateful to be friends with a number of intelligent, feminist Jewish women and to have Jewish role models of all gender identities, but that has not always been the case. Second, I understood at the time that religious objects communicated messages about social dynamics; not seeing other people who looked like me wearing *tallit* influenced my (lack of) practice, and the desire to send a message of solidarity to other female Jews and of encouragement to younger girls motivated me to wear *tallit*.

While literature about gender and *halakha* exists, much of it focuses on analyzing Jewish texts or constructing a feminist understanding of Judaism. Some people have written articles about gender and Jewish ritual objects, and Talia Nudell recently wrote a

master's thesis about *tallitot* in Conservative/Masorti Judaism.¹ All of these pieces enhanced my understanding but did not fully answer the questions that most fascinated me: When women and gender non-conforming individuals wear *tallit*, *tefillin*, and/or *kippot*—objects traditionally worn by cisgender men—do these objects become degendered, or do non-male individuals end up performing as male? How do perceptions of gender and community norms affect the ritual experience of the individual wearing the object(s)?

Method and Survey Questions

Wanting to study the sociological aspects of these practices, I realized it would be helpful to collect new data. I created a survey and sought out participation from individuals of diverse ages, gender identities, sexual orientations, and Jewish backgrounds. The only prerequisites for participation were identifying as Jewish and having feelings or opinions about *tallit*, *tefillin*, and/or *kippot*. While this would not allow me to make any conclusive statements about a particular group² (nor was that my intent), it provided substantial insights on the questions I hoped to explore, among others. The survey asked questions gauging individuals' relationship to *tallit*, *tefillin*, and *kippot* and their beliefs about who can and should wear

¹ Talia R. Nudell, "Does This Tallit Make Me Look Like a Feminist? Gender, Performance, and Ritual Garments in Contemporary Conservative/Masorti Judaism" (University of Oregon, 2016), accessed at https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/20713/Nudell_oregon_0171N_11706.pdf?sequence=1 on October 28, 2017.

² The pool was self-selecting, and most individuals knew me personally; there was a disproportionate number of responses from people affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement, the Conservative movement, and egalitarian communities, and, specifically, from millennials.

these objects.³ Participants also reported their gender and Jewish identity.⁴

I have synthesized responses and present this analysis to help Jewish communities think critically about future engagement with these practices. The research is broken down into the following topics: motivations for wearing ritual objects, what messages these objects convey, perspectives on obligation, queer Jews, and degendering ritual objects.

Intention: Motivations for Wearing Ritual Objects

Tallit and *tefillin* have a textual basis in Judaism, and covering one's head is a longstanding custom.⁵ For individuals who wear *tallit*, *tefillin*, and/or *kippot*, however, many additional factors influence their practice.⁶

Some people who filled out the survey wear these objects because they feel committed to halakhic and/or communal norms. Of those who attributed their choice to wear these items to *halakha*, most, if not all, belong to a more traditional community. Given this demographic group, it's important to note that some Jews might not explicitly consider intent when observing *halakha*. The Babylonian Talmud famously debates whether or not intentionality must underlie the performance of Jewish ritual.⁷ However, while some of the individuals surveyed might not think about obligation in terms of intent, it makes sense to do so in this paper for the purpose of distinguishing among different motivations behind the same practice.

³ For survey questions, see the Appendix of this article.

⁴ Survey respondents are described in this paper as they identified at the time of the survey, Fall 2016. No ages, gender, etc. have been adjusted for current publication.

⁵ For one Masorti responsum on the history of wearing kippot, see Rabbi David Frankel of the Va'ad Halakhah, "The Wearing of a Kippah by Men and Women" (Jerusalem, Israel: 1995), as accessed at http://www.responsafortoday.com/engsums/6_3.htm on October 28, 2017.

⁶ Some participants cited more than one of these additional factors.

⁷ See Berakhot 13a and Rosh Hashana 28a-b.

It is worth noting a few demographic aspects of the respondents who discussed *halakha* as the driving force of their practice: People of all gender identities identified *halakha* as a motivating factor. Every woman who shared this sentiment belonged to a non-Orthodox, egalitarian community at the time of the survey. While women and men spoke of halakhic obligation, only men spoke of being obligated by their community.

For some, community influence came in the form of “tradition” rather than specific policies or rules. For others, the composition of the community is what matters. A 20-year-old who identifies as genderqueer and nondenominational (but whom others often read as male) wrote that they feel most comfortable wearing a *kippah* “in communities where non-male presenting people are also wearing it.” For this person, the choice to wear a *kippah* relates to how the community will or won’t read gender into the practice.

For others, community (or lack thereof) resulted in *not* wearing certain objects. One 20-year-old cisgender male habitually wears a *kippah* and *tallit* in services but does *not* lay *tefillin* because he usually does not attend morning prayers (and does “not have much of a prayer practice outside of communal prayer”). One cisgender female, 29 years old and a first-year student at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) at the time of the survey, said that, growing up, she was “taught that only ‘obnoxious,’ ‘aggressive feminist women’ wore them,” and her mother still has a “negative” and “vocal” reaction to the idea of her wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*. At the time of the survey, this woman was not in the practice of wearing *tallit*, or *tefillin*, despite attending a rabbinical school that requires students of all gender identities to develop these practices.

Some people wear ritual items to visibly express their Jewish identity. Many survey participants who wear a *kippah* and/or *tzitzit* daily do so for observance/halakhic reasons, yet some of those individuals specified that these practices also serve as an intentional way of marking oneself publicly as a Jew. A 20-year-old cisgender man who identifies as traditional egalitarian and wears a *kippah* all the time wrote, “If it’s safe, *kippot* are a nice outward symbol of a community/civilization/people.”⁸

⁸ Concerns about safety came up in a few other responses as well.

This physical expression, however, has been gendered as male. Even though some women (albeit a minority) wear a *kippah* and/or *tzitzit* virtually all the time, these objects have a particularly masculine connotation in public, given their historical background: As Blu Greenberg writes, men performed *mitzvot* in the public sphere, and “women function[ed] primarily as ‘inside persons.’”⁹ While the public/private dichotomy has become less prominent in egalitarian communities over time, this gendered perception still persists. In a 2014 article for *New Voices*, List College student Amram Alzman writes, “The fact that *tefillin* and *tzitzit* are masculine and public, of course, is linked; they have to do with the appearance of the observant Jew in the public sphere, and of course appearance in the public sphere is deeply gendered.”¹⁰ In the same article, Avigayil Halpern, a cisgender female who wears *tzitzit* all the time, says, “I’ve been asked several times if I wear *tzitzit* because I wished I was a boy.”¹¹ Halpern prefaces this statement by explaining that, for her, *tzitzit* had to do with following *halakha*, and even though her action challenges a gender binary, she does not wear *tzitzit* as a means of expressing her relationship to gender. However, the assumptions people make about Halpern support Greenberg and Alzman’s assertions about the gendered nature of Jewish identity in the public sphere.

It should be noted that a good number of the people who wear ritual objects to express Jewish identity are, in fact, female. One 20-year-old cisgender woman who identifies as postdenominational but grew up in an Orthodox day school shared that, between fifth and eighth grades, she wore a *kippah* “during prayer and Torah studies...[as] a way to physically express [her] Jewish identity that extended beyond covering [her] knees and shoulders.” The fact that this individual did not want just her clothing to signal her Jewishness suggests that she wanted to be seen as a Jew, and not specifically as a Jewish woman. Perhaps the central role that gender

⁹ Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America), p. 84.

¹⁰ Amram Alzman, “Two Egal Jews Talk About Gender and Ritual,” in *New Voices: The National Jewish Student Magazine* (Nov 17, 2014), accessed at <http://newvoices.org/2014/11/17/two-egal-jews-talk-about-gender-and-ritual/> on October 28, 2017.

¹¹ *Ibid.*.

plays in mediating one's relationship to Judaism in the Orthodox world shaped her experience. One cisgender female rabbi, who identifies as a Conservative/Egalitarian Jew, wears a *tallit*, *tefillin*, and *kippah* because she "believe[s] it is the 'Jewish uniform' for an adult Jew." Another cisgender female rabbi, a 33-year-old who identifies as postdenominational/Reconstructionist and works at a Conservative synagogue, "started wearing a *kippah* all the time as an adult, largely to combat [her] internalized anti-Semitism." She "challenged [herself] to be fully 'out' at all times, and to handle any responses (or perceived responses) to that." Wearing a *kippah* served as a means of articulating her Jewish identity to the world and to herself. This rabbi's mention of "perceived responses" illustrates how complicated it can be to unpack the ways in which others influence one's relationship to ritual objects. Not only do explicit responses potentially inform her understanding of how she exists in the world as a *kippah*-wearing woman, but subtle messages and societal norms could also influence her experience and identity.

Another graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, a 60-year-old cisgender woman, wrote that she wears *kippot* when "it is important for those around [her], either as a model or as a sign of respect for the community customs." This idea of modeling behavior came up in numerous responses. One 20-year-old cisgender man said he wears a *tallit*, *tefillin*, and *kippot* "mostly to teach campers and set a good example for them at camp." This relates to the previously mentioned role of community in cultivating religious practices.

Others wear ritual objects to send a message to themselves, not the broader community. People gave a number of ways in which *tallit*, *tefillin*, and/or *kippot* influence action: A few people said these items put them in the right mood/mindset to pray, and one or two participants even called them the Jewish "uniform" for prayer. Others said it helps them to be present and focus. For some, religious objects send messages both to oneself *and* to others. A 27-year-old, cisgender, male rabbinical student wrote, "[wearing a *kippah*] encourages me to behave in line with my values (for example, I am more likely to give money to a homeless person if I am visibly wearing a *kippah*)." By using the adverb "visibly," he indicates that others' perceptions influence how he relates to wearing a *kippah*; the *kippah* serves as a reminder to him to act in line with his values not

just because it might remind him of religion and/or God, but also because, as someone wearing a physical marker of Jewish identity, he represents that religious community in the public sphere.

Relationship to God, relationship to prayer, and respect—perhaps overlapping motifs—showed up in a number of responses. Relationship to God came up most frequently in explanations of wearing *kippot*; some talked about the reminder that God is above them, while others mentioned humility. For some, these objects connected them to prayer by helping them focus; for others, these objects helped them connect to prayer itself and/or to God. Some people, mainly when writing about *tallit*, discussed the feeling of being wrapped in a prayer and/or feeling God's presence. One 21-year-old cisgender man wrote that his relationship to these objects depends on how he feels about daily prayer practice, which he says changes. For this individual, experience wearing these objects directly relates to ritual. Also, the idea of respect appeared in many different forms: respect for God, respect for community norms, and the vague but often utilized phrase "out of respect."

While gender intersects with other (previously described) factors, some people mentioned it as a stand-alone motivation (or lack thereof) for wearing these objects. One 22-year-old cisgender woman wrote, "I like the gender-bending aspect of wearing a *kippah*, especially within the context of more traditional communities." For others, ritual objects serve as a means of affirming gender identity. For example, a 34-year-old transgender male rabbi wrote, "[*tallit*, *tefillin*, and *kippah*] work with my gender and make me feel whole." One 21-year-old cisgender woman, who identifies as Conservative/Reconstructionist but does not wear *tallit*, *tefillin*, or *kippah*, wrote, "I grew up with the idea that these were male objects." This suggests that perceptions of these ritual objects as incompatible with her gender identity might have influenced her decision not to wear them.

A Comparative Look at Tallit, Tefillin, and Kippot

In addition to the *minhag/halakha* distinction between *kippot* and *tallit/tefillin*, respectively,¹² other differences among the objects influence why individuals might wear some but not all of these objects. In her graduate thesis focusing on these objects within the Conservative movement, Talia Nudell writes, “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.”¹³ However, the *mitzva* of wearing *tefillin* has an especially “gendered history” as male.¹⁴

Survey respondents and scholars have pointed to differences between *tallit* and *tefillin* that relate to this discrepancy. First, *tallitot* can be customized easily. They come in different fabrics, designs, and sizes.¹⁵ *Tefillin*, on the other hand, are essentially uniform in color, style, and material.¹⁶ Second, a *tallit* resembles a scarf or shawl,

¹² E.g., some *halakhic* unmarried Jews don’t wear *tallit*. Some *halakhic* female Jews who, because they follow *halakha*, wear *tallit* and *tefillin*, do not wear *kippot* (a traditionally male *minhag*), and don other head coverings instead.

¹³ Nudell, p. 6.

¹⁴ Rabbi Ethan Tucker, “Gender and Tefillin: Possibilities and Consequences” accessed at https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/CJLVGenderandTefillin.pdf?response-content-disposition=attachment%3B%20filename%3D%22CJLVGenderandTefillin.pdf%22&response-content-type=application%2Foctet-stream&AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAI3R4CRQOAU2ZIVA&Expires=1509333918&Signature=D6SxJUHOI3hVMeTaCIJr72hCNIM%3D on October 28, 2017 (New York, NY: Center for Jewish Law and Values at Mechon Hadar 2014), p. 10.

¹⁵ Nudell, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Though some non-leather tefillin exist, commonly used by individuals who object to using animal products. It should be noted that non-leather tefillin is currently not accepted in *halakhic* terms. E.g., see: Rabbi Adam Frank, “Non-leather tefillin” at **Be the Change You Want to See In the World* (May 25, 2016) accessed at

both feminine articles of clothing. One 19-year-old cisgender female survey participant, who called *tallit* the most “gender fluid” of the items, wrote both about the resemblance to a shawl and how *tallit* “can have gorgeous designs, which the other items don’t necessarily allow.” Additionally, laying *tefillin* is a highly embodied practice.¹⁷ Not only does this make it a more intimate ritual, but also it requires more instruction. Many non-male-identifying individuals are never taught how to wrap *tefillin*.

While Judaism offers textual basis for wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* and communal customs to explain head coverings, these are just a few of the many reasons why people might choose to don these ritual objects. The plurality of motivating factors for donning none, some, or all three of these objects highlights the power of societal dynamics in shaping ritual practice.

Expression: Messages Conveyed by Wearing Ritual Objects

As briefly touched upon in the previous section, wearing ritual objects sends messages, whether intentional or not. The highly gendered history of these objects shapes what they communicate. When asked to share reflections on and/or perceptions of men wearing *kippot*, *tallit*, and/or *tefillin*, people of different ages and denominational affiliations had, for the most part, similar responses. Most people, when reflecting on men, said these objects signaled a high level of observance and/or faith. Some people also talked about the public nature of observance. When reflecting on women wearing these objects, however, many people said they perceived women to be making a statement about values around gender and religion as opposed to religion alone. Some even acknowledged that they knew that women wearing these objects did not always intend to do so. However, in a world in which most people still associate these objects with cisgender males, any non-male presenting individual seems to be making a gender-related statement when wearing them.

http://adamfrank.typepad.com/adam_frank/2016/05/nonleather-tefillin.html on October 26, 2017.

¹⁷ Tucker, p. 10.

Furthermore, multiple respondents said that they assumed the woman wearing these objects were rabbis. One 20-year-old cisgender woman responded that she often reads “women wearing *kippot*...as Conservative or Reform rabbis, despite the fact that I’m neither and I wear one sometimes!” Even a female rabbi wrote, “Sadly, I do assume that women who wear a *kippah* all the time, or who wear *tefillin*, are probably rabbis.” Furthermore, some people perceive women who lay *tefillin* to be making a stronger political statement than those wearing *tallit*.¹⁸ These gender-based assumptions, among others, influence how people of all gender identities relate to wearing ritual objects. For instance, another female rabbi responded, “I wish my decisions about these things could be made without any awareness of what others see when they see a middle-aged woman put on these garments. But they can’t!”

Obligation: A Closer Look

When asked who “should be allowed” to wear each of these items and who “must” wear each of these items, every survey participant gave some variation of one of the following answers as a response, even though the question was open-ended: (1) Every adult Jew should be allowed to wear these items, and every adult Jew must wear these items. (2) Every adult Jew should be allowed to wear these items, and male Jews must wear these items. (3) Every adult Jew should be allowed to wear these items, and no one must wear these items.¹⁹ Different people’s responses seemed to correspond to their understanding of *halakha*:

- (1) Those who fall into the first category subscribe to a system of *halakha* that applies to all adult Jews equally, regardless of gender identity.
- (2) Those who fall into the second category believe that men have an obligation while women and

¹⁸ Nudell, p. 36.

¹⁹ The absence of responses claiming that only males should be allowed can be attributed to the denominational makeup of the survey pool.

gender non-conforming individuals have a choice. This aligns with an understanding of tradition in which only men are bound by positive time-bound *mitzvot*, like *tallit* and *tefillin*. Out of 62 respondents, only four people subscribed to this belief. Out of the four, three were college students (one cisgender female, Conservative; one cisgender male, Conservative; one cisgender male, Modern Orthodox). The fourth was an adult cisgender male who serves as president of a Conservative synagogue, and his belief corresponded with the synagogue policy at the time, reflecting how role in community can shape relationship to ritual.

- (3) In this group, most participants were either uncomfortable with the idea of requiring someone to take on a religious practice and/or did not view *halakha* as binding.

Within all three groups, two motifs appeared frequently: intention when wearing objects and discomfort with gendered expectations.

Many of the respondents who thought that anyone can wear these objects qualified that this should be the case only if those individuals have the right intentions. What those intentions should be, however, differed from response to response. Some people did not clarify what they meant by “right intentions.” Also, the subjective nature of intentionality resulted in contradictory responses. For example, two respondents agreed that they did not like people donning these objects for show, but one made an exception for solidarity events like civil rights marches (what he called “*avodat hashem* [‘serving God’] in a broad sense”), while the other wrote, “[it bothers me] when people, men or women, wear them as political statements. It’s difficult for me when people put on a *tallit* at a rally for a photo op. It’s a holy ritual object and, I feel, belongs only in that context.” Many people (probably including the first respondent), however, would argue that the *tallit* is functioning as a holy ritual object at a protest. Discrepancies over intentionality would pose problems if intentionality were a litmus test. What the

subject of intentionality *can* offer is a reminder that, in considering questions of access to ritual objects, we should not lose sight of why one might want to wear the object in the first place. In fact, one participant believes that intention gives these objects their meaning. She wrote that, without intentionality, “[the objects] just become a hat, a shawl, and some leather straps.” While religious purpose does shape meaning, many other dynamics also imbue these objects with meaning,²⁰ as evidenced by the plurality of reasons why people do or do not wear them.

The discussion about gendered expectations brings us back to the discussion of community norms and standards. Many survey participants articulated discomfort, frustration, and/or anger about the distinction that communities often make between who can and who must wear certain ritual objects. While the Rabbinical Assembly, an international association of Conservative rabbis, issued a *teshuva* in 2014 saying, “Women and men are equally obligated to observe the *mitzvot*, with the exception of those that are determined by sexual anatomy,” most Conservative communities have not implemented this *teshuva*; many Conservative and other egalitarian communities obligate men to wear a *tallit*, *tefillin*, and *kippot* and just encourage women (and non-gender conforming individuals, though not all communities take these members into account when crafting language).²¹ For example, United Synagogue Youth (USY), the Conservative movement’s youth group, wrote in its attendance guide for the 2016 international convention:

An important *mitzva* or practice associated with daily Jewish living is wearing a *kippah* (at least during meals and *t’fillot*, prayers), and wearing *tallit* and *t’fillin* at *shaharit* (morning) services. All male participants at the convention are required to bring

²⁰ In *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America 2007), Vanessa Ochs writes that objects can develop new ritual meaning when “created, borrowed, or transformed” (p. 89).

²¹ Rabbi Pamela Barmash, “Women and Mitzvot,” accessed at <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/womenandhiyyuvfinal.pdf> on October 20, 2017 (Rabbinical Assembly: 2014).

and use these items. All female participants are encouraged to bring and use these items, as well.

Similarly, Camp Ramah in the Poconos, a Conservative movement overnight camp, writes on its packing list: “Boys: 10 *kippot* and bobby pins/clips. Tallit + Tefillin are required for post Bar Mitzvah boys. Girls: Those girls who have chosen to wear a Tallit, Tefillin or Kippah are encouraged to bring them.”²²

Both inside and outside of the Conservative movement, Jews have taken note and reacted strongly to the gap between egalitarian ideals and community policies. This can be seen in the frequency with which survey participants addressed this dynamic:

I was taught in a so-called egalitarian community that only men must do these things, and that women “don’t have to” but that doesn’t really seem “equal,” does it? I think everyone should be held to the same responsibilities.

– 23 -year-old cisgender man, Conservative

My biggest issue is in the Conservative movement, which considers egalitarianism as one of its foundational values, women very often do not wear a *tallit/kippah/tefillin*. For the men it is required, for the women it is optional. I’ve never been given a good answer as to why that is aside from tradition...I continue wearing these objects because if it is required for men, it is required for me. And because I want to take part in the beautiful opportunity we have to connect with G-d through material objects as well as spiritually, emotionally, etc..

– 22-year-old cisgender woman, Conservative

²² See Camp Ramah in the Poconos’ packing list, “Suggested Clothing List for Full Season Campers” as accessed at <http://ramahpoconos.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/ramah-overnight-clothing-list.pdf> on October 1, 2017.

Drives me crazy that Conservative movement is “egalitarian,” yet in Conservative shuls, the *kippah* patrol jumps out to make sure men cover their heads but not women.

– 27-year old cisgender man, egalitarian/progressive

I hate that the rule at the camp I work at [a Ramah camp] is that men are required and women are “encouraged.”

– 22-year-old cisgender man,
nondenominational/postdenominational/traditional

I don’t feel comfortable with only men being obligated. It undermines the equilibrium you establish when allowing women in the club only if they elect to.

– 19-year-old cisgender woman, traditional egalitarian

While a few survey participants said that only men must wear these objects but women can, none of them explicitly articulated a desire to see this formalized in policy. Many people, however, expressed strong opposition to the divide between ideology and practice in certain Conservative communities.

While textual arguments could be (and have been) made about why people of all gender identities can be equally obligated, this paper will continue to take a more sociological approach, focusing on how such standards influence individuals’ relationships to *tallit* and *tefillin*. The aforementioned policy/practice divide in many “egalitarian” communities, henceforth referred to as the status quo, perpetuates the message that *tallit* and *tefillin* are gendered. How could these objects not be when the rules around their use have to do solely with gender identity? In the Conservative movement, men and women have equal rights, but they do not have equal responsibilities. What message does it send to young women if they are merely “encouraged” while their male peers are “required?” For some, exemption from certain *mitzvot* conveys the message that women are inferior. Whether or not communities that practice the status quo hold this view, their members might believe it based on communal norms.

This particular discussion is not about whether, in an ideal community, everyone would be obligated to use *tefillin* and *tallit*, especially given the complicated nature of obligation and embodied *halakha*. However, if we accept the premise of egalitarian Judaism, then individuals' relationship to religion should be equal regardless of gender identity. If an egalitarian community enforces *halakha*, that community should do so among all members. This has particular importance in the context of a religion in which rights and responsibilities relate; many see obligation and status as closely connected. For example, Rabbi Pamela Barmash of the Rabbinical Assembly quotes the Babylonian Talmud, specifically *Kiddushin*, in her *teshuva*: "Greater is the one who is commanded (to observe a *mitzva*) and does (it) than the one who is not commanded yet does."²³ Even if women have access to these *mitzvot*, they "are considered as lesser" so long as the status quo prevails.²⁴ It should be noted that Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, who authored an abstention, believes that Rabbi Barmash misinterpreted the line from *Kiddushin*. Rabbi Kalmanofsky argues that "greater" refers to the worth one derives from doing the practice rather than one's religious value.²⁵

However, from previous discussion of survey responses, we see how communal policies affect individual relations to and perceptions of ritual objects. Average synagogue members, especially teenagers first taking on these *mitzvot*, likely do not have a knowledge level similar to that of Rabbis Barmash and Kalmanofsky and therefore would not understand that men being obligated and women being encouraged arguably does not have to do with their religious worth. Implementing the *teshuva* could send a different message by putting "into effect the principle that women are created in equal status with men."²⁶ Requiring all physically able Jewish adults to observe *halakha* related to *tallit* and *tefillin* aligns more with

²³ Barmash, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*.

²⁵ Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, "An Egalitarian Abstention," accessed at <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/kalmanofsky-dissent-barmash.pdf> on October 31, 2017.

²⁶ Barmash, *ibid.*.

egalitarian values and could send a very different message than the one being sent now.²⁷

Not only does making certain *mitzvot* optional for women but required for men prevent Jewish communities from actualizing egalitarian values, but it also discourages young women from taking on these practices. It might seem to some as though encouraging women to take on these practices and offering role models would be enough. However, while some think that more women would wear *tefillin* and *tallit* (and even *kippot*) if they had female role models, multiple females' responses suggested this is not necessarily the case. One 19-year-old cisgender female said she does not wear a *kippah* even though her mother wears one, and she does not know why. A 21-year-old cisgender female wrote:

I don't wear a *kippah* because it was never presented as an option to me growing up. I guess theoretically it was always an option—I remember at religious school one of my rabbis would hand *kippot* out to both boys and girls—but at a certain point wearing a *kippah* became a thing that mostly boys and men did. There were a handful of women at my synagogue who wore *kippot*, and all the women rabbis wore them, but it definitely wasn't the norm for female congregants.

Even though these women saw some females (perhaps even their role models) wearing these objects, they did not perceive wearing ritual objects to be a widespread, normative practice among women. The aforementioned 21-year-old cisgender female also wrote that, “communal norms are really powerful...if girls saw the majority of the women in their communities wearing *tallit*, *kippot*, and *tefillin*, it would start to seem normal to them.”²⁸ Young female Jews need role models, but, in order to undo years of gendered associations with these objects, the number of role models needs to be increased, and the community's policies should send a message that makes young women inclined to wear ritual objects. Institutional policy can lead to

²⁷ See quotes from survey earlier in this section.

²⁸ Emphasis mine.

a shift in institutional culture/norms, subsequently influencing members' attitudes and behavior.

Beyond the Gender Binary

Language in Judaism that dichotomizes gender puts people who are not "male" or "female" in a bind. Not only does the status quo have negative implications for females, it also disenfranchises gender non-conforming individuals. Even the language of the 2014 *teshuva*, which speaks about "women and men," essentially erases non-gender conforming members of the Jewish community. For egalitarianism to be truly realized in Jewish spaces, policies must apply not to "men and women," but to "Jews of *all* gender identities." One 36-year-old cisgender male Conservative rabbi acknowledges this, writing, "if one believes in equality for men and women, and that ALL are obligated to take on the rights AND responsibilities of Judaism, then this would apply to gender non-conforming individuals as well."

Historically, feminist causes in the Jewish community have paved the way for LGBTQ+ inclusion. In *Balancing on the Mechitza*, Rachel Biale, the author of *Women and Jewish Law*, writes that the "great strides" that have been made in the Jewish community "with the issue of homosexuality... would not have been possible... without the foundational work of feminism, which continues to undergird today's conception of gender identity."²⁹ One survey participant, a 22-year-old genderqueer/trans/non-gender conforming Renewal Jew expressed their gratitude for "the women before [them who] put in the work" for "traditionally-male things" to be reclaimed. Considering the history of gender in the Jewish community and how struggles are linked, these developments should not be minimized. Yet when it comes to ritual objects, it is not enough to start with equality for men and women and later get to gender non-conforming and trans members of the community. Reshaping understandings of gender requires a comprehensive

²⁹ Rachel Biale, "Beyond the Binary Bubble: Addressing Transgender Issues in the Jewish Community" in Noach Dzmura (ed.) *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in the Jewish Community* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books 2010), p. 213.

reevaluation of the relationship between gender and Judaism, not just a leveling of the gendered playing field. This includes and affects Jews of all genders.

Reconsidering Gender

A reformulation of gender dynamics in Judaism necessitates coming to an understanding about what (if any) role gender should play. The survey responses conveyed an overwhelming desire to degender *tallitot*, *tefillin*, and/or *kippot*. For some, this stemmed from beliefs about to whom *halakha* applies. A 26-year-old cisgender male JTS rabbinical student wrote, "I want all of these things to be degendered because I believe all adult Jews should wear them." A 19-year-old cisgender female wrote, "I think the standard [for wearing these objects] should be observance [not gender]; if you live an observant lifestyle, you should lay *tefillin*, etc." Others shared the end goal of degendering these objects but seemed motivated by a broader opposition to gendered practice. A 29-year-old non-gender-conforming rabbi wrote, "I like when gender non-conforming individuals see *kippah/tallit/tefillin* as objects that engender religious responsibility and not mere masculinity." A 22-year old cisgender woman replied, "I wish I had been taught from a younger age not to ascribe these things based on gender." All of these individuals agreed, however, that gender should not be tied to any of these objects. One person, a 20-year-old cisgender woman, even articulated how the current gendered nature of these objects detracts from their ritual value, writing, "Seeing them through only a gendered lens diminishes their spiritual and religious significance."

For other people, though, especially some of the Jews who do not fit into the gender binary, these objects have been a helpful means of expressing gender identity. For the 34-year-old transgender male rabbi who wrote that these items "work with [his] gender," his journey back into Jewish tradition, including wearing *tefillin*, paralleled his gender journey. Also, a 21-year-old cisgender, queer male wrote:

Gender is also created through performing (or not performing) these rituals, and for some people, that

can be equally empowering and affirming of the way that they see themselves as Jews and gendered beings. I'm not entirely sure how to reconcile that point—especially when, in my ideal Jewish community, everyone would have access to, and be expected to perform, these rituals to the extent that they feel comfortable doing so.

While it might be difficult to reconcile the desires of those who wish to degender these objects and those for whom the gendered nature of these objects has been beneficial, it could be possible to degender these objects while preserving/creating other avenues for expressing gender identity in Jewish spaces. This could allow individuals to still articulate their gender identity in Jewish spaces while democratizing access to important ritual. Let us consider how and why this might be done while acknowledging that a larger debate—one about whether to eliminate the notion of gender or to allow for a multiplication of gender identity that would be more inclusive to non-binary individuals—still exists.

Since Jewish head coverings have to do almost exclusively with custom and vary by denomination and location, I will focus on *tallit* and *tefillin*, consistent for all Jews who follow *halakha*. So long as individuals associate *tallit* and *tefillin* with men, these practices remain less accessible to anyone not cisgender and male, regardless of whether or not the community “encourages” or “requires” others to wear *tallit and tefillin*. Degendering these ritual objects would create more inclusive, dynamic, and empowered egalitarian Jewish communities. Changing long-held associations will take time and effort, but, given (1) that actually performing these rituals is not contingent upon any physical aspect of gender and (2) that Jews' relation to these practices has always been informed by contemporary understandings of gender, I am optimistic that it could be done.³⁰ To bring about this change, communities would have to reformulate policies so that *all* are either “encouraged” or “required,” and subsequently must make a concerted effort to use gender-neutral language when talking about these rituals. With time,

³⁰ Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2013).

future generations will no longer perceive these objects as gendered. Rabbi Ethan Tucker writes, “Those who grow up with mothers who put on *tefillin* at home and with girls who do so at school will no longer feel the gendered associations in the same way that their ancestors might have.”³¹ This hopefully applies to non-gender conforming Jews as well.

The other and perhaps most important component is education. Many of the survey participants who intentionally cultivated a practice of wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* had thought more deeply about the practices than those who grew up obligated to wear them. Democratizing this practice poses the risk of making it become “just what Jews do.” While this can happen with any aspect of religion, I emphasize it in this case given survey responses such as, “Men take [performing these *mitzvot*] for granted.” It is my hope that intentionality can change this dynamic in the future. In fact, pairing degendering these objects with education provides the opportunity to help people of all gender identities, including cisgender men, to connect to ritual in a deep and intentional way. A Conservative, cisgender male rabbi wrote, “When I have had the privilege of teaching someone about these objects—through conversion or just someone rediscovering *minyan*—it has been very rewarding and meaningful, for them and for me.” Another participant, a 22-year-old cisgender male, said he wanted to learn more about how other people connect to these *mitzvot*. Education could play a crucial role in transforming how Jewish communities relate to *tallit* and *tefillin*.

Degendering *tallit* and *tefillin* can create a more inclusive Jewish community and enhance the ritual meaning of these objects. As Rabbi Jonah Rank wrote after reflecting on the symbolism of Jewish objects, what matters most “is that the symbol’s meaning is ultimately fulfilled.”³² Let us build a world in which Jews of all identities feel empowered to fulfill the meaning of *mitzvot*, especially those, like *tallit* and *tefillin*, which remind Jews of their obligations—to God’s commandments, to each other, and to building a more just world.³³

³¹ Tucker, p. 12.

³² Jonah Rank, “The Fashion Statements of *Tefillin* and *Tzitzit*: Symbols of Jewish Identity, Expression, Consciousness and Action,” in *Amud: Columbia/Barnard Undergraduate Journal of Torah* 1:1 (2011), p. 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה
-רבי טרפון, פרקי אבות ב: כא

*You are not obligated to finish the task, but neither are
you free to desist from it.*

– Rabbi Tarfon, Ethics of our Fathers, 2:21

Appendix: Survey Questions

Section I:

1. Which (if any) of the following have you worn before (check all that apply)? Kippah, tallit, tefillin, none of the above
2. Which (if any) of the following do you wear at this point in your life (check all that apply)? Kippah, tallit, tefillin, none of the above
3. If you have worn/currently wear a kippah, tallit, and/or tefillin, please elaborate on when you wear/have worn each. (If you haven't, just write n/a.)
4. Please elaborate on why you do or do not wear a kippah, tallit, and/or tefillin.
5. Who do you think should be allowed to wear a kippah? Tallit? Tefillin?
6. Who do you think must wear a kippah? Tallit? Tefillin?

Section II:

1. Please share your reflections on/perceptions of men wearing kippot, tallit, and/or tefillin.
2. Please share your reflections on/perceptions of women wearing kippot, tallit, and/or tefillin.
3. Please share your reflections on/perceptions of gender non-conforming individuals wearing kippot, tallit, and/or tefillin.

Section III:³⁴

1. Gender identity: bigender, cisgender male, cisgender woman, genderqueer, trans, transgender man (female to male), transgender woman (male to female), gender non-conforming individual, other
2. Sexual orientation: asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, straight, other³⁵
3. Jewish identity: Conservative, cultural Jew, egalitarian, just Jewish, Modern Orthodox, nondenominational, Orthodox,

³⁴ All questions in this section allow for selection of more than one answer.

³⁵ Optional question.

postdenominational, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal,
traditional, traditional egalitarian, other

4. I am a feminist. (Yes/no question)

Section IV:

1. Please share any other thoughts you have about gender; kippot, tallit, and tefillin; and/or the relationship between gender and these objects.
2. Would you be interested in discussing this further? (Yes/no/maybe question)

Talia Kaplan graduates from Wesleyan University in 2018 with a B.A. in Government, Certificates in Jewish & Israel Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. Her senior thesis, for which she was awarded the Davenport Grant, explores the formation of attitudes and collective memory among American Jewish youth. Talia's passion for Judaism reaches beyond academia: She revitalized a chapter of USY in high school, co-created a new leadership structure for the Wesleyan Jewish Community, organized with J Street U and IfNotNow, and interned with T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights (New York) and Leo Baeck Education Center (Haifa). Driven by her enthusiasm for community and commitment to social justice, Talia aspires to mobilize people around human rights issues and to create meaningful pathways for Jewish engagement.