**a ritual garment,
the synagogue, and
gender questions**

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ABSTRACT

Jewish women in some synagogues have recently taken to wrapping themselves in a prayer shawl, tallit. For women to use this ritual garment is a historic change in custom because for almost 2,000 years the prayer shawl, tallit, was worn by men only. Jewish tradition placed women in a gender-segregated space in the synagogue, denied women all synagogue roles such as rabbi, cantor, and Torah reader and excluded them from wearing ritual garments such as tallit. In the last thirty years in synagogues of the Conservative branch of Judaism women have taken on all these ritual roles including wrapping themselves in tallit in the synagogue. I examine the context in which this historic change is taking place and the meaning that change has for women, the tallit itself, and the synagogue. I raise the following gender questions: Has the tallit been feminized? Are women worshipers simply incorporated/co-opted into a traditional (male) custom? Has the gender of the synagogue changed?

Keywords: synagogue, ritual objects and women's tallit, historic changes, God's shelter, sacred texts, prayer

The Lord said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages . . . That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them . . . Thus you shall remember all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God.

Numbers 15.37–40

Cloth is “a kind of symbolic skin, technically complex, that is most often used as a wrapping or covering . . . It is not accidental that the very physicality of cloth, its woven-ness, and its potential for fraying and unraveling denote the vulnerability in acts of connectedness and tying, in human and cultural reproduction, and in decay and death.”

Weiner, 1992: 58–9

After a cold, gray, and snowy winter, the weather suddenly changed in Rochester on a Saturday morning on March 19, 2005. Sunlight streamed through the glass windows of Bet Tehilah synagogue and brightened the sanctuary as congregants stood folding their prayer shawls and placing them in their special bags.

Watching people tucking away the prayer shawl, tallit, at the end of the Sabbath morning service I saw Sue with outstretched arms holding the two ends of a large square tallit and carefully and attentively folding and refolding, straightening the fringes, tzitzit, tucking them neatly between the folds and placing the tallit in its pouch.

When I had interviewed Sue some weeks earlier she told me that this prayer shawl was her second, her first one was smaller.

I wanted a larger tallit, something with which to wrap myself more completely. I went with something very traditional but it's in white and silver. I didn't feel that [the customary men's] black and white stripes was me; white and silver felt comfortable. I put it over my head when I first put it on in the morning and say the traditional prayers that one is supposed to say after donning the tallit. And feel very connected to God. It just connects me.

When Sue invokes connecting to God it is because wrapping oneself in this ritual garment represents an immediate link to God who brought the Children of Israel out of slavery and draws on the text in the book of Numbers (15.37–41) in the Hebrew Bible. The tallit symbolizes and activates both a social tie to a people (through a shared past) and a religious obligation to follow a righteous life (God's commandments) in the present. A tallit “is a ritual garment, square or rectangular in shape. From each of its four corners a tasseled fringe is suspended. These fulfill the commandment of Numbers 15.38, to wear fringes on the corners of our garments. Looking at the fringes or tzitzit, we are to remember the God Who brought us forth from Egypt and ordained us to a life of holiness” (Green 2000: 206).

For centuries the commandment to wear the ritual garment was incumbent on men only and the tallit was closely bound with male identity. For Sue and other women to take on the commandment to wrap themselves in tallit is historically groundbreaking. For a woman to do so in public, in a synagogue service is a major departure from Jewish custom. Women who have taken to wrapping themselves in ritual garments such as the tallit signify a monumental change in a long tradition of a gendered synagogue. It was a synagogue in which, as Sered phrased it, “men write the prayers and make the laws” (Sered 1992: 15).

Synagogues have become the center of Jewish religious life since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. The focus of religious communal public life has shifted from the centralized space in Jerusalem and spread to local synagogues. For centuries, the majority of Jews lived outside the Holy Land in all corners of the world and synagogues, in the east and the west, in Christian and in Muslim countries, were the centers of religious communal rituals. The synagogue and its rituals have been, always and in all places, men's domain. All synagogue leadership roles, such as rabbi, cantor, and Torah reader, were gendered as well. Men were the actors, members, participants, leaders, and full social persons in a sanctuary that excluded women. Women were relegated to sit behind a divide, a mechitza, and were excluded from all roles of synagogue rituals (Grossman 2001; Sered 1992; Swidler 1976).

Women were not counted in the quorum of ten, the minyan, which is required for communal prayer, and were excluded from using ritual objects such as phylacteries (tefillin), and from wearing ritual garments such as the tallit. The question then is: What are women like Sue doing wrapping themselves in a traditionally male ritual garment in the sanctuary of Conservative synagogues like Bet Tehilah?

The Conservative Movement: A Paradox of Changing Gender Roles while Conserving Tradition

This paper draws on my field research in Rochester New York, a city with four Conservative synagogues; Bet Tehilah (a pseudonym) is one of the four. An overarching argument of my paper is that women like Sue (all names are pseudonyms) who undertake ritual wrapping of tallit, and the Conservative synagogues to which they belong, display a paradox of changing gender roles while conserving tradition. A discussion of the history of the Conservative movement is outside the scope of this paper, however a few details are needed to demonstrate some crucial elements of the paradox.

The Conservative movement began in the United States in 1887 as a rabbinic school that aimed to conserve Jewish religious tradition and at the same time to respond to the challenges of modernity (Freeman 2002; Gillman 1993). The founders “saw themselves as the heirs of traditional Judaism. They wished to conserve the traditional liturgy, language, prayer and ritual practice, modifying them only insofar as

it was absolutely necessary to attune them to modern conditions" (Weissler 1989: 105–6).

The Conservative movement saw itself as positioned between Reform Judaism on the one hand and the Jewish Orthodox branch on the other. It saw the former as abandoning tradition, discarding traditional prayer books, and rejecting ritual garments such as tallit, in favor of modernity and the outside world, in new rituals that imitated Christian church services and music. The Conservative movement saw Orthodox Judaism as unresponsive to the challenges of modernity and to critical issues of the time that required attention and called for change (Freeman 2002; Gillman 1993).

Structural change began in the sanctuary of Conservative synagogues by allowing, early on, mixed seating and in essence doing away with a divide, a mechtiza, and the women's section. The range and nuances of the paradox of changing-while-conserving tradition was evident in the fact that the Conservative movement supported, but did not demand, mixed seating. Change was open-ended and was expressed in the fact that the movement refrained from coming down with a formal binding decision on seating even though it had a Law Committee with the authority to do so. The final decision whether to go to mixed seating or maintain a gender divide, rested with each congregation and its rabbi. Yet, perhaps not surprisingly, the movement's nonbinding position on change "proved bitterly divisive in many congregations" (Gillman 1993: 93).

In 2005, all four Conservative congregations in Rochester had mixed seating. Bet Tehilah synagogue, its founders told me, decided from the outset in the 1950s, to have no divide. Esther, a founding member, said that the founding families decided to have a synagogue affiliated with the Conservative Movement "because the women wanted to sit with men." Her husband Abe, a former president of Bet Tehilah added, "That was the major issue there. We agreed to go Conservative because we did not want a separation of the women and men. I was in favor of sitting together. I did not want the separation. That was the one thing I objected to at the Orthodox. It just didn't seem right that I couldn't sit with my wife. That was important to me and of course the fact that my daughters could sit with us rather than having to sit upstairs [in a women's section]."

Yet while in the 1950s some Conservative synagogues like Bet Tehilah had mixed seating little else had changed for women. Despite women's presence in the sanctuary the rituals and ritual roles remained men's domain. Women could not be ordained to be rabbis or serve as cantors, they were not counted in the minyan of ten, did not lead services, did not read from the Torah, and did not wrap themselves in tallit.

In 1973 the majority of the Law Committee of the Conservative movement voted that women could be counted in the minyan. Again, it was left to local congregations to decide whether or not they wanted to follow suit. The local congregations in Rochester began to include women in the

minyan at different times. Bet Tehilah was first in 1978 and the last one voted in 2004 to count women in the quorum of ten.

The process in Bet Tehilah congregation to include women in the minyan reveals how women's commitment to tradition was at the heart of the change in their status. In 1978 Bet Tehilah got a new young Rabbi. Esther told me, "We went to the Rabbi . . . it was Millie [leading] and we had a young woman, Shelly . . . The two of them went to the Rabbi and he said he would help us in any way he could. The only thing he asked was commitment from the women. Millie asked him only for women to be counted in the minyan. It had nothing to do with reading Torah. It was just to be counted."

To be counted in the minyan, in the required ten, in socioreligious terms was no small matter. It meant that women would be, like their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers, full religious persons and full members in the sanctuary, the sacred space of ritual life. But it meant that women who were traditionally exempt from praying three times a day in fixed times would now have to make a personal commitment, a kind of pledge to participate in prayer services.

Esther told me how the women of Bet Tehilah met to discuss the issue of their inclusion in the minyan and the Rabbi's request that the women commit themselves. "Shelly . . . explained what was going on, what request we had made and what the Rabbi was asking of us. And we had to show, by a show of hands, who was interested. And as I recall most of them were scared stiff. They didn't want to make a commitment. First of all none of us knew the blessings. The women were scared." Esther and the other women understood the issue of commitment and despite the fact that they were scared they voted "yes" and so did the congregation. Only one member left to join an Orthodox synagogue since the Orthodox branch maintains separate gender spaces in its synagogues and the exclusion of women from all synagogue rituals.

At the national level of the Conservative branch, the change to ordain women took some time. It was only in 1983 after years of debates and struggles that "the Rabbinical Assembly urged the Seminary to ordain women" and three years later "in 1986 the Seminary accepted women to train as cantors" (Gillman 1993: 98).

Tallit: A Metaphor of/for the Paradox of Changing-while-Conserving Tradition

The Conservative branch brought forth historic changes in the gender of ritual practices; women like Sue and Esther can now take on the ritual of wrapping themselves in tallit. Yet the change in the ritual finds meaning in the very Jewish tradition it is altering. In wrapping themselves in tallit women, like men, demonstrate connecting to God and to traditional ideas that God is praying with tallit of light. One of the earliest Jewish sacred texts on Jewish law and customs, the Talmud, says that God himself is praying wrapped in tallit of light (Unterman

1991). When women wrap themselves in tallit they, like men, imitate God who is wrapped in a garment of light and at the same time take shelter under God's wings and symbolically under the tallit. Women's tallit (change) comes to represent (traditional) God's light and shelter.

Here is what Rachel told me about how she felt when she wrapped herself in tallit. "I like the extra warmth [of the tallit]. If I want to think about creating some kind of safety for myself, I see that the tallit would create a sacred space for myself even when I am within the community. I like the fact that it is an outward symbol that I can show people that to the best of my ability and understanding in most given moments I try to wrap myself in God's light and live a truthful life. My experience with God is actually very tactile also and I actually feel like I am being wrapped in this moment, like a reminder."

What women like Rachel say reflects traditional Jewish ideas about the ritual. "The ritual of wrapping oneself in tallit in a ceremonial fashion as it appears in prayer books is influenced by Kabbalist tradition that saw in the wrapping ritual a symbol of the person's entering under the wings of the Shekhina [the presence of God in the world] and a sign of a special closeness to God. Thus before and after the blessing of the wrapping one finds the added verses about God's garment of light and the human who is sheltered in it" (Shannan, 1999: 104).

This Kabbalist tradition is preserved in both the Orthodox and Conservative prayer book. Women like Sue, Esther and Rachel, in synagogues like Bet Tehilah recite from their prayer book before they put on the tallit, "Let all my being praise the Lord who is clothed in splendor and majesty, wrapped in light as in garment, unfolding the heavens like a curtain." And after they put on the tallit they recite, "How precious is Your constant love, O God. Mortals take shelter under Your wings." Change in ritual roles for women is embedded in tradition. It is seen in the way they view the fact that they can now wrap themselves in tallit in the context of a Jewish tradition of praying with intention, *kavanah*.

Sue said, "The first time I put tallit on felt significant to me. In a way that's hard to put into words. I felt I was doing something to increase my spiritual depth. And since I still don't think of myself as a particularly learned Jew I felt I needed all the help that I could get. And what I found is that it did exactly that and over time it became a signal to me on a very basic level. Donning a tallit puts you in a different space, in a space that makes it easier to connect to the prayers, in a way that's very hard to understand. It's a matter of increasing intentionality, *kavanah*, increasing focus and marking out special, sacred space and time ... I think of the garment as special and part of me, and part of my spiritual focus. The few times that I've gone to an Orthodox synagogue for a friend's celebration, *simchah*, and not worn my tallit ... I found it interfered with my focus. I found it made it more difficult for me to pray. Not impossible but more difficult. I didn't have the outward symbols that tell me at some heart level that now is the time for this kind of focus."

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Tallit: A Ritual Garment of Tying and Unraveling

In using the term “changing-while-conserving tradition” I want to acknowledge that I draw on, and paraphrase, what Weiner (1992) coined as the paradox of “keeping-while-giving” in exchange rituals. I find the word “while” highly useful in my use of “changing-while-conserving” because it highlights Weiner’s argument that rituals are often marked by paradoxes and that attention to women could reveal otherwise hidden aspects of such paradoxes. Since the focus of this paper is women taking on tallit, a ritual cloth garment, I follow Weiner’s theorizing cloth as a metaphor for the paradox of changing-while-conserving. Weiner writes that “Cloth may be the most apt metaphor to visualize the paradox of keeping-while-giving as all societies in all parts of the world associate weaving with acts of tying and unraveling, sacred threads and dangerous dyes . . . expressions of longed for unity juxtaposed against the realities of death, destruction and change” (Weiner 1992: 153).

The tallit is a garment in which when fringes are tied ritually they produce connection and sacredness, wholeness and unity; cutting off the fringes signifies unraveling of life and the reality of death. The desire for wholeness and unity embedded in tallit was seen when women like Sue and Rachel talked about tallit as ritual garment that connected them to God and community. Yet, the tallit garment can also be seen in the larger frame of life-cycle rituals. The tallit accompanies major rites of passage. In Conservative synagogues boys and girls receive the tallit on their Bar and Bat Mitzvah to mark a change in relationship to God and community. On that occasion, girls and boys become accountable in a direct relationship with God and their status is changed from minor to adult in the synagogue; the tallit symbolizes the fact that they are now counted in the required ten for a minyan and are part of the religious community. The tallit could be used to mark the wish for wholeness in life-cycle events, such as wedding ceremonies in which it symbolizes the union of two people as the bride and groom stand under the tallit. In some Sephardi (Jews of Spanish origins) communities the groom wears a tallit during the ceremony. In Orthodox communities men begin to wear a tallit only after marriage to signify yet another change in status. Using a tallit signifies a new tie to a spouse and reiterates a tie to God and the community in this new (marital) status.

Upon death, the body (traditionally it would have been men only) could be wrapped in a person’s tallit, however, one side of the fringes had to be cut out. Wrapped around the body in death the tallit is no longer viewed as whole, viable, usable. The cutting of these fringes symbolizes the unraveling of the deceased’s social relations and the end of his/her ability to follow God’s commandment to make fringes on four corners of their garments as specified in Numbers 15.

The tallit as women’s ritual cloth garment is a metaphor for the paradox of changing-while-conserving tradition. When men take on the ritual they simply continue tradition. But, when women do it they unravel a traditionally gendered

ritual and at the same time they conserve tradition by tying themselves to the very same ancient commandment (Numbers 15) that men do, to put fringes on the corners of their garments.

At first glance the change in the gender of tallit ritual could be seen as a social phenomenon, a result of secular ideas, such as feminism, permeating American places of worship and challenging customs and traditions. In fact Gillman one of the leaders of the Conservative Jewish movement, gives it credence when he talks about the rituals and roles that opened up for women. He says, "The Women's League [for Conservative Judaism] can take credit for urging the Movement to recognize the significance of the feminist revolution in American life" (Gillman, 1993: 195).

This is certainly the case in my own field research; women and men that I interviewed, such Esther and Abe, often recognized feminism and/or the importance of gender equality in various spheres of their own lives as a motivation for supporting the change in the synagogue. Yet women's ritual wrapping in tallit does not easily lend itself to a simple story of a secular influence on customary (male) rituals, or of a secular (feminist) threat to tradition as some argue (see Wolowelsky 1997).

Close attention to women who undertake traditionally male rituals reveals what is less obvious if one pays attention only to secular or feminist ideas as the source of change. As I noted earlier, it is clear that for women like Sue and Rachel their desire to connect to God and their abiding commitment to tradition is a powerful motive when they take on the tallit.

Weiner's word "while" in the formulation of a paradox, as in changing-while-conserving can be seen when women engage in tallit ritual. While women, agents of change, prepare to put on the tallit they recite the appropriate blessing and tie themselves to tradition when they say, "I wrap myself in a tallit with fringes to fulfill the *mitzvah*, commandment, of my Creator, as written in the Torah: 'They shall put fringes on the corners of their garments in every generation'" (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 1985).

Women know that what they do is a historic change in tradition and as Esther said, they are even scared of the enormity of it, but they regard the ritual of tallit as a serious commitment to a traditional commandment. Their decision to take on the ritual garment is a process over time rather than a snap decision. Sue told me, "I undertook tallit . . . in conjunction with having an adult Bat Mitzvah and learning to chant the Haftarah [reading from the prophets]. It took me a while to think about [tallit] and to decide that I was ready for that commitment."

Linda told me, "It took me a long time [to decide to get a tallit]. I called a lot of people and talked to them. I talked to people for a year trying to figure it out."

It is not just women who display a changing role while conserving reverence for tradition. The Conservative synagogue prayer service, in which women like Linda and Sue participate, displays the same paradox of

changing-while-conserving. The synagogue allows women to wrap in tallit but the prayer service itself is traditional in liturgy, in the use of Hebrew in the prayers, and since all words in Hebrew are either masculine or feminine the prayer book keeps a mostly traditional masculine language of the worshiper and of God. The prayer book offers an English translation and that too uses masculine references to the ancestors as fathers, and to God as He, Father, King, and Lord.

Right after putting on the tallit, for example, the appropriate blessing that women recite from the prayer book used in synagogues like Bet Tehilah reads, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe whose mitzvot [commandments] add holiness to our life and who gave us the mitzvah [commandment] to wrap ourselves in tallit" (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, 1985). As Harlow, the editor of the *Siddur Sim Shalom*, the Conservative synagogues' prayer book, states, "this (1985) edition of the prayerbook is an heir to the wealth of classic Jewish prayerbook traditions... A Jew of ancient or medieval times familiar with Jewish prayer would be at home with the overwhelming Hebrew texts in this volume" (Harlow 1985: xx).

Similarly, the Conservative Sabbath prayer service that includes the active participation of women is traditional in its emphasis on customary ritual acts during the prayer service. The rituals include standing, bowing, carrying the Torah scroll, touching it with a prayer book or the fringes of the tallit. The format of Torah reading is in Hebrew in a chant from a scroll that is unvocalized and unpunctuated. All of these customs have for the most part remained unaltered; the prayer service, in structure and content, is similar to a format used in Orthodox synagogues.

Does Gender Matter?

The tallit as metaphor for the paradox of changing-while-conserving does not allow for a simple approach on the issue of gender. It resists, as Weiner would have predicted, a simple yes or no answer to questions such: Has the tallit been feminized? Are women worshipers simply incorporated/co-opted into a traditional custom? Has the gender of the synagogue changed?

The answer to each of these questions is both yes and no. All men in the synagogue wear a tallit and most still wear the traditional large tallit with black stripes (Figure 1). Only a third of the women wear one and I have not seen or heard of any woman who purchased a traditional [male] tallit. When women who get a tallit think about the fabric and design it is as much about gender as it is about aesthetics (Figure 2). Karen's following account captures the spirit of what other women told me. Some wanted more color than others, they differed in the material they preferred but they all wanted to purchase a tallit that is not traditionally male white with black stripes.

Karen said about purchasing her tallit, "In 1985 we had a trip to Israel and one of the things I had my eyes open for

FIG 1
Traditional men's tallit.

was a tallit. And I didn't want a traditional man's tallit because I knew some people would object to women wearing 'men's clothes.' Even if it was mine. And I didn't want the flowery ones that didn't say 'tallit' to me... We went by a shop where somebody makes tallittot (plural for tallit) that are more traditional but slightly different material. It's a sort of knobbier, more natural wool and just a few little stripes through it. It's a little dressier than the typical men's tallit but again it wasn't one of the flowery things."

There is also maternal talk about tallit. Some women who themselves do not wear tallit strongly support the change for their daughters and granddaughters. And Karen added the perspective of adoption and her vision of herself as a mother with tallit. She told me, "Before we adopted our first child we had received a mailing from a group that advocates Jewish families adopting Jewish children who need to be adopted and one of the images they gave was of the child wrapped in the father's tallit. Allowing that child to grow up with that feeling. So it gave me the feeling that I could do that, that I could wrap my child in the tallit and give her that idea, get that feeling of being a part of the Jewish community."

The tallit and the synagogue have both changed and remained unaltered. Visually looking at the sanctuary on

FIG 2
New women's tallit.

any given Saturday at the Sabbath morning prayer service, in synagogues like Bet Tehilah, one would see that most men wear the traditional tallit but that some women also wrap themselves in tallit. A quick glance may suggest that the Conservative synagogue has been feminized but closer attention would reveal a traditional service, a traditional prayer book with masculine language to describe the worshiper and God. Looking at the texts one could be tempted to say that little has changed. But when the cantor who leads the prayer service looks up to see if there is a minyan of ten adults, he clearly counts the women and recites the Kaddish prayer that cannot be recited unless there are ten adults. On the one hand, Harlow was right to say that a Jew of ancient or medieval times would be at home with the Sim Shalom prayer book. On the other hand that Jew of ancient or medieval times would look at the women wrapped in tallit and counted as adults in the minyan and would conclude that the synagogue is unrecognizable.

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