

## **The Event of a Half-Century**

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I'm picking out a new Tallis which I've learned from the shopkeeper in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is customary around this time of year, around Passover.

A Tallis is a prayer shawl, historically worn by men, but now in most American Jewish circles a non-gender specific prayer shawl. It is often woolen, sometimes made with synthetic fibers, traditionally white with black stripes, now in various colors and themes, and apparently customarily purchased this time of year. Customarily how?

I suppose, if you're using your Tallis every day for a year or two, it could be a little worn out by Passover. I've had my Tallis for 43 years, and it's a little short. It's not like I really ever cared. I probably only use it once or twice a year for 43 years. But when I do, I always miss the fact that it doesn't reach down, that it only hangs if I don't fold back the wings. I always wanted one of those long-winged ones, the kind you wrap yourself up in and close yourself off from the rest of the world, even though you know you're with a bunch of people you hardly know, and while wrapping yourself up are conscious of all the other people doing the same stupid thing, wrapping themselves up to be alone in front of all the people that they have never really known for years, never really known for a half-life.

So you wrap yourself up in a prayer shawl as if you are all alone in bed, in your own blanket, but knowing all along you're really in a place like a school or a library. In the library, you have the props of hardback books stacked on your desk and maybe a laptop to hide your face. In a synagogue, you can only manage to cover your head and cover your face, most often than not these days in shame.

You go, and yet it offers no solace or respite from the daily horrors of nationalism and religion, and now your religion that you never ever wanted anyway. Now you want it when everything is going to shit? When they have made a total mess of everything, built an entire edifice of empire that is supposed to be different, when really it's just one more garbage nation-state with its politicians and murderers, racial hierarchies, modern slavery, and ethical abandonment, parading around your childhood like some kind of golden paradise as elusive as a peacock in a Mughal Charbagh. Just as you catch a glimpse of it, it darts around one of the four corners.

I called the shop in Williamsburg with an unusual request. I spoke to a woman at the other end of the line. Had I walked into the shop, there would never have been a woman to speak with. I couldn't guess her age. She could've been a grandmother or she could've been a teenager. Nothing gave it away. And so she was, in that moment, a person on the other end of the line, the person I was to ask about Tallises. Now, as I write this, I realize she wouldn't presumably wear Tallis, since although Rasna has her own, and most of the women in my *shul* do, not this woman. Plus, when one buys a garment from a shopkeeper, it's presumably someone who is in the know, normally a woman or a man, since the worlds are so polarized that one cannot think of purchasing a garment in a shop that didn't somehow have navigational opposites, boys to the left, girls to the right, and one seeks out, or is directed to, the aforementioned salesperson for advice. But she doesn't wear a Tallis. My mind races to Barbara Steisand in *Yentl*, and Molly Picon in *Yiddle Mitn Fiddle* from 1936. Who is the Tallis Lady?

I wanted a simple Tallis which was long and I could wrap myself up during the high holy days when I'm thinking about everything gone wrong. I had already been on their website and scrolled through the endless options for a "Majestic Pesach 5786." I noticed the acrylic décor items promising to beautify a seder table. I was particularly taken by a bookstand with a clock (to watch the time?) while reading the *Haggadah* — the customary narrative of the Exodus story, recited in long passages in Hebrew with parts in Aramaic. Given that it is the

story of Moses in Egypt, and when one thinks of Joseph in Egypt having been taught 70 languages by the archangel Gabriel, according to rabbis, it is curious that none of the *Haggadah* is in Egyptian, neither demotic nor Coptic, no hieratic or hieroglyphic, even though it is meant to convey life in the Egyptian world-cultural capital of the time.

“Is Your Table Seder Ready?”

“Ready to Shop Passover Themes?”

Ready to join “The Pre-Pesach Tzitzis and Tallis Event of the Year?”

For me it was the Tallis event of a half-century. The choices were overwhelming. It was a world of its own. Did I need a general Tallis or a *Hamefoar* Tallis, the most splendid, magnificent, and luxurious of the Tallises? An Ultralight or a Nonslip? Shall I get the one called Traditional or the *Rimon* (the pomegranate), representing Jewish practice in its magnitude? Should it be one with black stripes or the Belz, the blue stripes of the Hasidic dynasty of western Ukraine? Deluxe or ordinary? With thick *tzitzis* (strings at the ends) or frilly *tzitzis*? Should they be regular or *meyuchad* (special) strings, produced under supervision to be thin, uniform and durable, “available with various tying options, including Sefardi (one hole) and Ashkenazi” – does that mean two holes? Should my Tallis have a lining? Should it have a middle-band? Should it have a decorated *Atarah* (a neckband)? Should the decoration crowning the collar be made of sterling silver for \$450.00 or traditional silver and satin for \$125.00, or the most obscure of all, the “MR-10 Style,” also for \$450.00? Then I realized there are 23 *Atarahs* to choose from. Oh no, not 23. There is another page. There are 46 different collars to choose from. But what is this all for? I had never cared in the least. I just wanted something to be wrapped in now and when I finally depart.

No. No silver and gold to appease an unsatisfied deity who gave us genocide and Bibitrump and endless wars. I just want to be wrapped in something before I die. I turn back to my

interlocutor waiting patiently down the phonenumber as I tried to explain what I was looking for, when I hadn't even known the half of what feels like once a half-life ago.

"I must apologize before I even begin, but I have a question that must not be very common, so please forgive me for asking, but I noticed that some of the Tallis say 'Made in Israel' and I was wondering if there are any not made in Israel?"

"Not made in Israel?"

"Yes, not in Israel."

"Well, yes" she said, kindly, but rather matter-of-factly. "We do have Tallises not made in Israel."

"Where are they made?"

"They are made in China."

Oh, China. Do I want a Tallis made in China?

There was that article in the *New Yorker* on kosher food made in China and the rabbi that traveled there to inspect the production carried suitcases full of prepacked Kosher food, and ate from his suitcases while he worked and inspected the kosher premises. He was there to ensure that there was no contamination — not of food quality standards that you and I may think of when seeing red, green or yellow health department signs on a restaurant window. This inspection is based on ancient and medieval food preparation practices. On occasion, the journalist noted, a factory supervisor will address him as "Rabbit," as in: "yes Rabbit, no Rabbit." And I thought: well sure, they are looking for a real word. Rabbit is a real word, Tùzǐ (hu-zu-ee) in Mandarin, and the rabbit is certainly not from the health department. But what I didn't understand is if the kosher food inspector was coming all the way, from wherever he was coming from, to mainland China to inspect and authenticate packaged Kosher food, why was he eating from his suitcases?

But no, did I really want a Tallis manufactured in China?

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I know this is an unusual question and I don’t want to give you the impression that I am *frum* (religious) and it’s a little bit of delicate question, and please forgive me if I say something wrong, but you see I recently had a chance to read the Three Oaths of Rabbi Teitelbaum, and I wanted to buy a Tallis from the Satmar to commemorate this. I want to pray with a Tallis that’s not connected to Zionism.”

I wasn’t making it up. I had just read Teitelbaum with Shaul in our Thursday night *Shiur* (reading group). Shaul’s translation and commentary has since appeared with the UC Press as [Jewish Anti-Zionism as Political Theology: The Major Writings of Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum](#). If you are going to buy a Tallis, why not buy it from the Satmar community who have held on to the Three Oaths (Ketubot 111a)? The First Oath sounds good to me: Not to repress, not to occupy, not to subjugate the Holy Land and the people that live in the Holy Land. Sure, you can go there. You can live there with other people. But don’t seize Jerusalem like everyone other rotten state has done. Don’t build a wall around Jerusalem, don’t seize territory like every other horrible state or empire, or seize it for the Kingdom of God, even worse, which never ends up being the Kingdom of God but always rather some barbaric Hell-on-Earth. Don’t “ascend like a wall” or be like a wall to the people of the Holy Land, or better yet, don’t ascend the wall that was established in exile, the wall being the oath to remain in exile and not to implement this “heaven on earth” with a gun, a bomb, a knife, to establish a Law of History or Law of Nature, but rather to create the groundwork for golden paradise in this world, or maybe even the radical or revolutionary conditions of a utopian “here and now,” so that such a place could be made possible in the Holy Land for all people, which includes the Jewish people.

“Blessed is Israel,” says the Second Oath, “that does not refuse the nations of the world,” meaning not that they shouldn’t rebel, since they clearly were taught to rebel against the Pharo and slavery in Egypt. Rather it means that the Jewish people are a part of the nations of the world and do not reject being part of the nations, in all the very many ways that one is a part of different nations, and worlds, and cultures, and peoples by the nature of loving something, or doing something the way they do, or even appreciating the way other people do things. A nation cannot exalt or exclude itself, and most of all, not a nation that one is a part of. And in that way, it may serve as a light unto the nations, including a light unto itself.

The Third Oath is not really an oath. It is a promise. It promises that the nations of the world won’t enslave the people of Israel as they were once enslaved in Egypt. Since it is the third, one reads the Third Oath as contingent on the first two. But if one understand the Jewish people in the spirit of Joseph, who in speaking 70 languages is a part of 70 nations of the world, it stands to reason that Joseph can be a slave of no nation, since nations never enslave their own — they always pick on someone else, some other nation, or someone who is illegal, undocumented, unrecognized, illiterate in one of the 70 languages. States and nations always create an “Other” to enslave. Unless of course nations enslave themselves by voluntarily reducing their own cultures and values to the values of slaveholders and colonizers. It is true that when nations become slaveholders and colonizers, they too have a way of enslaving themselves to slavery.

There was a pause. I couldn’t imagine what she’s thinking. I couldn’t imagine it because there’s no way in normal circumstances that I’d ever get to speak to a person like this. If you walked into the shop on Wallabout Street in Williamsburg, invariably there would be a man serving you. He could be a fast-speaking man. He could be skeptical, considering how you’re dressed. He might have a beard — he would definitely have a beard. He might be kindly or inquisitive, or he might be funny. But the one thing he wouldn’t be is a woman. There would be no way to have this conversation in person other than by telephone. I

imagine this person on the other end of the line, whether a young mother or a grandmother, probably had a shaved head and was wearing a wig, wearing thick tights and a long skirt, and a blouse and a sweater, and maybe even a hat to cover her wig, who was working in the internet sales division as a way to put money on the table, to feed her family while her son or her husband, or her son and husband, were studying the Talmud day-in and day-out. Somebody had to put food on the table.

Knowing this was an occasion that was only afforded to me by the technology of the telephone, I waited for her reply.

“Yes, I understand. No, it’s not an unusual question. These Tallis that are made in Israel are made by our community, not the Zionists. It’s our own people who live there. But they put the ‘Made in Israel’ to sell the Tallis.”

“Oh, that’s fine, I understand.” I said. “I’ll definitely buy one then.”

“Wonderful, amazing,” she replied.

And I thought to myself “amazing?” — with all the miracles embedded in the word.

“I guess that’s great. I know exactly what I should order now through the website. Thank you so much for your help.”

She said “amazing” again and I don’t know if she said goodbye or if I said goodbye, but I think in a way we were both speechless about how far away our worlds were and how close they were at the same time. But perhaps I said “goodbye” and “thanks again” and I hung up the phone and I realized that their commitment to reside in Williamsburg, and not in the holy land before the advent of the Messiah, had finally caught up with the world, or world-history had finally caught up with them, as I watched my Tallis transfer from holy Brooklyn to broken-down Barre like any other package on its way.