

Why Trump's Prayer Shawl Is Causing Such a Buzz

Recently, Donald Trump visited a church in Detroit where something unusual took place. Yes, one might say that something unusual takes place in many of Trump's appearances. But it wasn't something he did but, rather, something he received that created the buzz.

Trump was given a traditional Jewish prayer shawl, a *tallit*. Hosting Trump, Bishop Wayne Jackson of Great Faith Ministries draped the prayer shawl around the Republican presidential nominee's shoulders. The congregation burst into applause.

Since then, social media has been abuzz with all kinds of comments about the gift, ascribing implications to what that meant and why. Many Jewish friends contacted me, knowing of my close relationships among Christians, asking why a Christian pastor would give a Jewish prayer shawl to anyone. Bishop Jackson also gave Trump two Bibles, one for him and one for his wife. That requires less explanation.

In presenting the gift, Bishop Jackson explained it this way, "This is a prayer shawl straight from Israel. Whenever you're flying from coast to coast—I know you just came back from Mexico and you'll be flying from city to city—there is an anointing. And anointing is the power of God. It's going to be sometimes in your life that you're going to feel forsaken, you're going to feel down, but the anointing is going to lift you up. I prayed over this personally and I fasted over it, and I wanted to just put this on you."

Jews traditionally wear a *tallit* during daily prayers. This comes from the commandment in Numbers 15:38-40 to wear fringes (*tzitzit*) on four cornered garments. "*This shall be tzitzit for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the*

commandments of God to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray. So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments, and you shall be holy to your Lord."

Some Jews wear a *tallit* only during prayer, and some wear them all the time, what's called a *tallit katan*, or small *tallit*. This is typically worn under one's shirt, but some leave the fringes visible per our understanding from the Scripture "*when you see it.*" There's no obligation to wear a *tallit* per se. The obligation is to wear *tzitzit* on a four-cornered garment. So, if you're not wearing a four cornered garment, no need for *tzitzit*.

Yet my Jewish friends are stumped as to why Christians would adopt the practice despite no biblical obligation to do so. Bishop Jackson's suggestion that the garment itself brings an anointing is outside traditional Jewish thought. There are 613 biblical commandments that we are obliged to observe. The *tzitzit* remind us of that, daily. Some commandments make more sense on the surface than others, but they are all important whether we understand the implication or not.

These are commandments, not suggestions, and we do not consider commandments from the Creator of the universe a smorgasbord of options to pick and choose what we want. If He says do it, that's good enough. Therefore, *tzitzit* on all four cornered garments, some visible, some not.

But Jews do not look to the *tallit* as having any anointing. Yet, while wearing the *tallit* and grasping the *tzitzit*, we are reminded of our obligation to God and all the commandments. Twenty-five years ago I was the best man at a friend's wedding who spoke about the relationship between *tzitzit* and his wife, both visible signs of something sacred and precious. He interpreted that as his relationship is to his wife, so too is our relationship with the Creator.

Jews also do not ascribe a particular sense that by wearing a *tallit* we will be protected in our travels. Before embarking on a trip, even as basic as leaving one's own town, we pray the Travelers Prayer, asking God to lead us, bring us and return us in peace and safety. (Please feel free to contact me for a detailed version.)

There are different customs as to who wears a *tallit*, from what age. I received my first *tallit* at my bar mitzvah. My soon-to-be son-in-law will wear his the first time on the day he marries my daughter. Parents raise their children to anticipate the first day they are able to wear a *tallit katan*, usually at 3 years old. But as the boys grow up, it's harder to keep the *tallit katan* on as they interfere with sports.

A *tallit* is also part of our uniform. It makes us stand out as observant, God fearing Jews. The same way a Jewish man covers his head with a yarmulke (*kippah*). The closest to an anointing we get is that in doing so, in displaying our team uniform to the entire world—Jews and non-Jews—we also take on an element of responsibility that our behavior should be such that it represents all the Jewish people and what God expects of us.

That's not to say that some who outwardly wear the uniform don't mess up. That's what makes us human. And one Jew messing up does not detract from the Jewish people as a whole. But we do have that extra level of responsibility by identifying ourselves as observant Jews to be sure our behavior represents the team well, as well as the Coach. Any anointing is self-imposed, that we wear a *tallit* with *tzitzit* and take on the added responsibilities expected of us. It's not in the garment, but in the wearer of the garment.

Perhaps on this level, Trump would do well to wear his *tallit* often. With a reminder of the responsibility that we have to God, one of humility and sanctity, just maybe he'd make fewer brash and divisive comments. Maybe the reminder of wearing the *tallit* regularly would bring about a change of behavior that

is not meant to win votes but to serve his Creator. Arguably, more God-like behavior would appeal to voters and win more votes.

As Jewish friends have asked me why the *tallit* is important at all to Christians, I have done my best to explain. However, I hope this will be an opportunity for you to email me and share in your own words whether a *tallit* is important to you at all and if so, why. What does it represent to you? Do you wear one? When? Do others at your church? Does your pastor? If you don't, have you ever thought about it?

I look forward to the dialogue among friends and, if nothing else, am grateful to Bishop Jackson for highlighting a Jewish tradition that is one increasingly common among Christians, based on our respective faith and worldview, but united by our relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If that's all that comes out of this, it is a blessing indeed.
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