10 Women wearing the *tallit*

Tracing gender, belonging, and conversion of new Jewish women

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Introduction

> In our shul,[1] women can perform services, pray aloud, we're called for roles in service, wear a tallit. . . . But to be honest, I don't wear a tallit myself either. It doesn't feel right. I can't really explain why, but it doesn't feel right.
>
> Naomi

Naomi[2] is a woman in her late twenties who became Jewish when she was 19 years old, which is an exceptionally young age considering the challenging study trajectories of converts. Naomi and I met in 2018 in the context of my dissertation research about women's conversion.[3] Converting to Judaism as a non-Jew, called *giyur*, is often a yearlong process in which *giyur*-candidates participate in synagogue services and social life, learn (Biblical and Modern) Hebrew, begin to eat kosher, and keep Shabbat rest. The process often also includes negotiating different gender norms. Traditionally, shul life is rather patriarchal and active participation is reserved for men, while women take on most responsibilities for ritual life at home. In the past century, calls for change and modernisation resulted in – among others – the establishment of so-called liberal synagogues, where there is less clear gender segregation in ritual life outside of the home. In this chapter, I analyse the different materialisations of such gender discourses in relation to belonging as a newcomer, like Naomi.

Jewish tradition is known for its emphasis on ritual and bodily regimes, and for its segregation on the basis of gender. In recent decades, there have been many studies about lived religion of (Modern and Strictly/Ultra) Orthodox women that particularly focus on gender conservatism (cf. Avishai 2008; Davidman and Greil 1993; Kaufman 1991; Longman and Schnitzer 2011). Less attention has been given to gendered dynamics in non-Orthodox, or Liberal, forms of Judaism (e.g. Brasz 2016; Weissler 2007). Gender equality has been one of the prime topics by which Liberal Judaism came to distinguish itself from Orthodoxy globally, particularly in the Netherlands. A symbol of these differences in gender dynamics between Liberal and Orthodox groups is the use of the prayer shawl with fringes (*tallit*) by women during prayers in the synagogue. Wearing a *tallit* marks their inclusion as active members

of the *minyan*,[4] which is limited to men in Dutch Orthodox Judaism but can include women in Liberal synagogues. I undertook fieldwork in different Liberal and Reform communities in the Netherlands, primarily located in the broader Amsterdam urban area. I am not Jewish myself, so I was in many respects an outsider to these communities. In the broader research that this chapter is based on, I included women who converted to all forms of Judaism, but limit myself here to the 14 non-Orthodox converted women, as well as six interviews with Liberal rabbis. The *tallit* appeared from my research material as one of the most important symbols of belonging, but also as something contested among liberal converted women and their congregational surroundings. Even though the option to wear a prayer shawl was often seen as an indication of gender equality, some women rejected the use or take on a particularly 'female' *tallit*. In order to understand the importance of the *tallit* in converted women's practices, the next section first gives a brief historical overview of Liberal Judaism in the Netherlands, after which some theoretical considerations of conversion are provided. The third part focuses on the role of the *tallit* in women's Judaism more broadly, before turning to the different ways converted women relate to the practice.

Dutch Liberal Judaism

In the 19th century, different groups of Jews responded to challenges from modernisation in different ways. With the rise of feminist movements and capitalism came Liberal Judaism, a self-defined 'modern' form of Judaism that became mainly popular in western European, white, and higher-class Jewish communities. These developments led to the establishment of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) in 1926 (Kaplan 2000). I was told by my interlocutors that the main renewal in Liberal Judaism focused on the interpretation of the Torah and its commandments (*mitzvot*). Up until today, Orthodoxy is perceived as determined by strict adherence, while Liberal Judaism considers the guidelines as adaptable to contemporary times. With this liberal modernisation came a reinterpretation of gender segregation in ritual life. However – contrary to common discourse – the assumption that orthodox equals conservatism, while liberal implies progressiveness, is not clear-cut. Even though Liberal Judaism often invokes terms such as equality in its self-representation, there are different ideas and performances of gender that cut across Orthodox/Liberal lines.

With the rise of Liberal Judaism also came the common term to describe non-Liberal communities as Orthodox. Daniel Boyarin argues that the term Judaism – as referring to a religion – is a modern invention, traced to 18th-century Germany and heavily influenced by Christian understandings of religions. In this genealogy, Boyarin considers the notions of Liberal and Orthodox as two sides of the same modern Jewish coin (Boyarin 2018). Dutch Orthodox rabbis such as Rabbi Raphael Evers and Chief Rabbi Binyomin Jacobs actually prefer to use the term 'traditional Judaism'

[*traditioneel jodendom*] instead of Orthodox, because of its negative connotation. The term 'orthodox', argued Chia Longman, carries in it notions of anti-modern backwardness. This creates a false assumption that orthodox is somehow unchanging and fixed (Longman 2008). Another reason to question the presumably clear Orthodox/Liberal distinction is that Jacobs and Evers do not consider Liberal groups rightfully Jewish and "Liberal Judaism" thus as a contradiction. Important for this chapter, neither do Orthodox rabbis recognise Liberal converts as Jews (de Vries 2004). In spite of these official differences, in practice there certainly is mutual respect between Orthodox and Liberal rabbis and groups. Although they don't see eye to eye on religious levels, they collaborate when it comes to socio-political issues, for example, in the joined efforts to counter anti-semitism, and in the recent debate on ritual slaughter (Valenta 2012). The terms Orthodox and Liberal were furthermore commonly used by my interlocutors – including rabbis – which is why I do use these, but merely as a descriptive emic term.

Liberal and Reform communities today

New forms of Liberal Judaism were successfully introduced in the Netherlands in 1931, when the first Liberal synagogue was founded in Amsterdam (Brasz 2016). The Jewish community in the Netherlands nowadays is small, consisting of between 35,000 and 50,000 people (depending on the definition used), and a large portion of this group is not a member of a particular synagogue.[5] The Shoah has had an inconceivable impact on Dutch Jewry, when around 75 percent of the 140,000 Jews perished (Croes 2004). After World War II, only 50 people continued life in the Liberal shul in Amsterdam. Since then, Dutch Liberal Judaism has appeared surprisingly successful and resilient: the group grew to 3100 members in the past years (Wertheim, Frishman, and De Haan 2011). The Orthodox synagogues continue to have most members and synagogues in total, and are connected in the Organisation of Jewish Community (*Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap*, NIK).[6] Yet the impact of the Liberal Jewish Community (*Liberaal Joodse Gemeente*, LJG) with its nine synagogues should not be underestimated. Just like the NIK, the LJG has its main location and community in Amsterdam, with the largest shul currently in the neighbourhood of Buitenveldert.

Many LJG members I spoke with over the course of this research reiterated the idea that Liberal Judaism implemented modern notions of women's emancipation more than their Orthodox neighbours and regarded this the most important difference. A Liberal rabbi explained the adaptation to modernity in the Dutch LJG to me as follows:

> In Orthodoxy, the exemption of certain mitzvot was changed to a sort of prohibition. From 'you don't have to do it', to 'you aren't allowed to do it'. . . . First, [we believe that] if you say you don't *have* to, doesn't mean

> you shouldn't be *allowed* to. And second, a hundred years ago women weren't even allowed to study, something which wouldn't be accepted nowadays. So the world back then . . . you see, there were no women at all as political or religious leader. That wasn't a particular feature of Judaism, but a worldwide phenomenon. All of that has changed, so this should change too.
>
> Bracha

An important expression of the change Bracha refers to is the ability to take part in the *minyan*. In Orthodox shuls, only adult Jewish men are part of this group, and assigned the primary role in ritual services and practices outside of the home.[7] LJG congregations made a ground-breaking change in this regard by including adult women in the *minyan*; permitting them to take on ritual tasks; and allowing men and women to sit together during service. That being said, some elements are less likely to change, for example in the roles actually taken on by women during services, and the stance toward LGBTQ issues. Some shuls provide a wedding blessing ceremony for same-sex couples, but this is not an officially recognised Jewish marriage (*chuppah*). The character of the service in general is quite traditional, which is why the LJG has been seen as more similar to US Conservatism than American Reform Judaism.

More recently, two independent Reform shuls were founded in the Netherlands. Just as Liberal and Orthodox, I use this term Reform merely on an emic level. In many countries, Liberal and Reform are used interchangeably and refer to a similar tendency. In the Netherlands, by contrast, the Reform shuls differ significantly from the LJG synagogues, especially on the issue of gender. The Reform shuls are known for their explicit gender equality and LGBTQ-friendly policy and discourse, while the LJG is more conservative on these issues. There are collaborations with the LJG but some important differences as well. Reform Judaism in the Netherlands developed out of the same liberalising tendencies during the 19th century and is part of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Typically, the services are less formal and more musical than those in LJG or Orthodox synagogues, and they are explicitly open to non-Jewish people. In the Netherlands, Reform synagogues advocate for the acceptance and celebration of sexual diversity, and both hetero- and homosexual couples are allowed to have a *chuppah* wedding ceremony. This form of progressive Judaism is marginal, with the first synagogue founded in 1995. In 2003, the same shul was the first in the country to have a female rabbi, with the appointment of Elisa Klapheck. Compared to other countries, this was rather late.[8] The LJG followed in 2008, with Hetty Groeneveld as first woman rabbi. Nowadays, five of the eight smaller LJG synagogues outside of Amsterdam have a female rabbi, as do the two independent Reform shuls. Among their members are people who were born to a Jewish mother, but also people who became Jewish later in life after a *giyur* trajectory. This latter group is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

Embodied conversion and ritual objects

"Becoming Jewish", I was told by a rabbi, "is not about knowing Judaism, it's about feeling Jewish." This 'feeling' took time to take shape and to become engrained in a person's day-to-day existence. A *giyur* process often takes years of classes, self-study, and participation in the synagogue. Different from most religious groups, Jewishness is not self-assigned but determined by a rabbinical court, which decides whether converts can "become part of the Jewish people and religion", as the official definition of *giyur* reads. Conversion in a Liberal synagogue tends to be somewhat easier on an institutional level than in Orthodox communities, where there is hardly any support from rabbis or teachers. The suspicion toward newcomers by Orthodox (or 'traditional') communities is known across the whole Dutch Jewish community. When not immediately rejected, people interested in Orthodox conversion undertake long individual studies without clear expectations. Liberal groups take a different strategy and tend to be more open to newcomers, especially those with a Jewish father but not mother. For potential converts, such Liberal or Reform communities are often easier to access, and they offer an organised study programme. The Reform shuls differ from the LJG in that they accept everyone with at least one Jewish parent as a full Jew, and thus member. The LJG only recognises those born to a Jewish mother as Jewish, but the *giyur* trajectory tends to be more accessible for 'father-Jews' than for people without any Jewish family.[9] Notwithstanding these differences among Orthodox, Liberal, and Reform processes, almost all interlocutors described their process as intense, life-altering, and at times difficult. Converts study for years, while implementing Jewish traditions in their daily life. Becoming part of the people means a reconfiguration of kinship bonds and gaining a different sense of Jewish history, of the Shoah, and at times changing perceptions and performances of gender and sexuality.

It has often been argued that conversion is not a mere change in worldview or mindset, but rather an embodied process of subject formation (Sachs Norris 2003; Winchester 2008). In such an approach, conversion is considered to encompass a conscious and performative learning of a new habitus. Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian moreover recognise the significance of the human body as a particular theme in contemporary conversion studies (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, 8). This is in line with more recent developments in the study of religion, with its emphasis on lived religion and religious materiality. This approach to 'material religion' does not only include the human body, but particularly pays attention to objects used in rituals. Birgit Meyer, a scholar on the forefront of material religion, argued: "In order to account for the richness and complexity of religious experience, we need theoretical approaches that can account for its material, bodily, sensational and sensory dimension" (Meyer 2006, 27). Such a perspective toward religion thus focuses on the material and bodily aspects of religion, including the study of religious experience through the uses of ritual objects.

Another field that constitutes part of my theoretical approach is the study of gender in conversion. According to Eliza Kent, gender as a category of analysis does not simply follow from attention to the body, but a critical gender perspective is valuable for the whole field of scholarship. She states that "[o]ne of the most important contributions of feminist scholarship on conversion has been to demonstrate incontrovertibly that religious conversion entails not merely a change of worldview or ethos, but a change in lifeworld" (Kent 2014, 319). In various studies, gender and sexuality have come up as important features in conversion trajectories, especially in studies of women's religiosity. By far, most anthropological research on women's conversion in the Global North focuses on Muslim converts (Van Nieuwkerk 2006; Vroon-Najem 2014; Peumans 2012).[10] One of few larger studies of women's conversion to Judaism outside of Israel was undertaken by Lynn Davidman. In her ethnography about Orthodox converts (1993), Davidman does not provide a thorough definition of conversion beyond an emic understanding. In a more recent interview with Dusty Hoesly, Davidman proposed the following working definition: "[C]onversion is a shift in one's discursive universe, social relationships, and embodied practices, a new role learned through language, behavior, and interpersonal boundary maintenance" (Hoesly and Davidman 2016). I follow a similar approach to conversion, but with particular attention to gender. I found that processes of Jewish converts' self-making are directly related to questions of gender and the possibility of taking on certain objects and tasks, among which the *tallit* appeared as the most significant religious object. In this chapter I aim to bring together the focus on material forms of religion with the study of conversion and gender. I therefore deliberately start from the material and ritual aspect of conversion and religious life from the *tallit*. As such, I take a step away from the dominant focus on conversion narratives of the interlocutors themselves. In order to understand this garment and its incorporation (or lack thereof) in a convert's religious practice, I first describe the materiality and use of this object in further detail.

The *tallit*

> The roughly fifty people in the small synagogue on Saturday morning sing the Hebrew hymns to open the Shabbat service. A *kaddish* announces the next part of the service, the prayers. About half of the congregants reach to their prayer shawl and give an inaudible blessing, only noticeable by their closed eyes and lip movements. They carefully place the shawl across their shoulders, some cover their entire shoulders as a blanket, others wear it more like a cape. I recognise a few of the women here because I recently interviewed them. I know that not so many years ago, attending a shul service was as new for them as it is for me today. One of them is Leah, a woman in her sixties who became Jewish less than a decade ago. She stands next to her Jewish husband, and both partners wear the thick white woollen garment with fringes around their shoulders. Halfway through the service, the rabbi

> calls for 'Leah bat Avraham v'Sarah' to step forward. Leah approaches the *bimah* and gives me a smile when our eyes cross. Together with the singer, the chazzan, Lea sets out to read the weekly passage of the Torah for about five minutes. She thanks the rabbi with a firm handshake. When she steps down and looks at me again, she cannot hide the tears in her eyes. When Leah became Jewish, she became the daughter of Abraham and Sarah, something confirmed with the white woollen cloth with fringes around her shoulders.
>
> (fieldwork notes, February 2018)

The *tallit* is a ritual garment that "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" (Emmett 2007, 78). It is worn during prayers, and is a tool to enhance the connection to God (also G-d, or the Eternal). The traditional prayer shawl is a white blanket-like shawl of about 1.5 meters by 2 meters in size. It is called a *tallit* in Hebrew or a *talles* in Jiddish; the first is most common in the Netherlands. There are no requirements for the fabric in the *Halacha* (Jewish law), besides the general rule that prohibits the combination of wool and linen in garments.[11] Most often, the shawl is made of thick white wool and has either black or blue stripes across the narrow sides. The shawl itself has no particular religious significance, but the fringes (*tzitzit*) added to the four corners of the *tallit* are important, which serve as a reminder of God's commandments.[12] Wearing these *tzitzit* used to be an all-day practice as a reminder of the commandments and as an enactment of piety.[13] Nowadays, the fringes are only a part of the daywear of strictly-orthodox Jewish men in the form of a *tallit katan*: a smaller *tallit* worn underneath one's clothing, but this is not an obligation for the vast majority of Jews.[14] During morning prayers and shul services, however, all observant Jewish men are expected to wear the traditional prayer shawl with its *tzitzit*, called *tallit gadol*. In what follows, I will focus on this last shawl and use the term *tallit* to refer to the prayer shawls, leaving the *katan* aside.

Before the prayer shawl is put on during prayers in shul or at home, a blessing is given.[15] After the blessing, the *tallit* is worn over the shoulders (as either a cape or a blanket covering the shoulders) for the most part of the service and over the head for the central prayers. Important to keep in mind for this current chapter is that only *halachic* Jews are allowed to wear it. Male – and some female – converts start wearing it only *after* they have undergone the ritual immersion in the *mikveh*[16] that signifies their entrance to Judaism.

Women's talliot

As it is with many of the *mitzvot*, women are 'exempt' from wearing a *tallit*. In Liberal Judaism, this interpretation changed to signify something that is optional, rather than forbidden, which is why the dominant opinion holds that women should be allowed to wear it, should they wish to do so.

This more gender-inclusive policy was not met with open arms by all of the LJG. Several rabbis told me about this, three of whom were among the first women to be appointed rabbi since 2008. Rabbi Liesbeth told me during our two-hour conversation what becoming a rabbi, and wearing a *tallit*, had meant for her and her community:

> On the one hand, I always said I'd *never* become a rabbi [in my hometown], because I had to fight for the position of women for forty years. . . . Eventually, I did go back. And I've always said, when I become a rabbi, I'll wear a *tallit*. I won't do a service when I'm not wearing my *tallit*.
>
> LS: *Why not?*
>
> It's part of the deal. It's written in the Torah and is part of it all, and it doesn't matter if I'm a man or woman. I took on this commandment, and I have to be consistent with it. Besides that, it's sort of a uniform: a police agent wears a uniform, a rabbi wears a *tallit*. . . . Once I was appointed there, they knew I'd wear a *tallit* and it was no problem, it has never been up for debate.

Liesbeth currently wears a *tallit* made by the organisation Women of the Wall in Jerusalem. This group of, mainly Israeli, women strive for the right to wear prayer shawls and pray aloud at the Western Wall. Since 2016, praying aloud is no longer permitted for women at the Wall, which resulted in women from all denominations, including Orthodox women, to come together in protest services at the Wall, often leading to arrests. Influenced by this and other Jewish feminist movements, the *tallit* came to symbolise women's pious practice and quest for equality in Jewish ritual life. According to Ayla Emmett, the practice of women wearing a prayer shawl should be recognised as "historically groundbreaking" (Emmett 2007, 79). Emmett argues that the *tallit* is a garment that became loaded with symbolic value: "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"(2007, 79). In a same manner, the *tallit* appeared particularly important for my interlocutors in Liberal synagogues.

Like the *tallit* of Rabbi Liesbeth, nowadays not all *talliot* (plural) are made in the traditional way (thick wool, white with blue stripes). The past years have seen an increase in so-called women's *talliot*, specifically designed to cater to the wishes of pious Jewish women, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox (Weissler 2007). In answer to – mainly US and Israeli – Jewish women's desires to wear a *tallit*, a market developed for (non-traditional) women's *talliot*.[17] Such a *tallit* can be made of the same heavy white wool as the traditional one, but for example have pink stripes instead of dark blue. More often, women's prayer shawls are made of light silk fabric and are smaller in size than the traditional shawl. These silk versions are often white with

pink or golden embroidery, or sometimes made of bright colours or prints. Prices of these shawls are typically between 200 and 250 euros, which is about thrice as much as a traditional *tallit*. The latter can usually be borrowed in synagogues as well, while women's *talliot* are individually purchased, often handmade in Israel. The availability of women's *talliot* next to the 'traditional' *tallit* marks the practice of wearing this garment a particular gendered undertaking. These women reject the idea that women should not be allowed to wear it, or to pray aloud, and begin to wear the prayer shawl. At the same time, the difference between men and women is clearly marked because of the visible difference in materials and colours of the *talliot*, and thus can be said to maintain a clear separation on the basis of gender.

Converted women and the *tallit*

Some women in my fieldwork wore a traditional *tallit*, others a 'woman's *tallit*', and even others only wore it when they'd be called upon in service. Quite a few did not practice at all. Rabbi Tamar told me that she often asks *giyur* candidates if they will wear a *tallit* after their conversion: "We can't impose it, but I do always ask women the question: 'Will you wear a *tallit*?' Partly to just get them to think about it. . . 'I am allowed to do it, but do I want to?' " Before turning to the different answers to this question, I will provide some more background information on the different gender discourses among my interlocutors, which are crucial if we want to understand the significance of the prayer shawl. In the paragraph thereafter, I give the examples of five interlocutors as exemplary for the different positions women have toward the *tallit*.

Gender discourses

Gender dynamics were often a factor in deciding to pursue a Liberal rather than Orthodox *giyur*, besides the apparent difficulty (or, according to some, near impossibility) of Orthodox conversion in the Netherlands. I met 14 non-Orthodox women, quite a few of whom reflected on their community with terms such as equality [*gelijkheid, gelijkwaardig, inclusief*] and progressiveness [*progressief, vooruitstrevend, geëmancipeerd*]. About half of these interviewees had a view of gender as 'complementary difference', as Joan Scott called it in her book *Sex and Secularism* (2018). In such a framework, men and women are considered to be essentially different – based on biological determinism – but to have equal value. This is similar to the notion of 'equity discourse', which is more common in research with Muslim women (Van Nieuwkerk 2006; Jouili 2015). This perspective of complementary difference is then different from a Liberal feminist 'equality discourse', which is a more gender constructivist idea, which holds that biological difference should not predetermine social roles. Even though Liberal Judaism has a strong self-image of gender equality, I found that both discourses of equity and equality informed the perspectives to gender difference

of my interlocutors, such as 42-year-old converted Karen, who is a member of a Reform synagogue:

> I think that women have equal value [*gelijkwaardig*] to men. . . . I also believe that we're equal when it comes to gathering in the same place and doing the same prayers: we shouldn't have to sit separately. But personally, I don't think it's necessary that a woman wears men's clothes. I don't think so, no, but that's my personal opinion.
>
> Karen

I asked all women what this 'equal value' looked like, and consisted of in their community. Most interlocutors had an answer similar to Judith:

> Well, it means that you don't have to sit somewhere high and hidden. Yeah . . . that you can just celebrate with each other. And that you can have a female rabbi too . . . what I . . . well . . . the rabbis all wear a *kippah*, including the women. Yeah personally, that bothers me. Strange as that may seem.
>
> Judith

Judith – who will be introduced more fully in the next paragraph – described equality in terms of equal access: to space (women don't have to sit on the balcony "high and hidden"); to celebrations; and to positions of authority. At the same time, she notices a "strange feeling" of being bothered by women who wear a *kippah* (round cap traditionally worn by Jewish men) just like Karen expressed with regards to "men's clothes". In their view of inclusion, feeling uneasy with women wearing "men's clothes" appears strange, because – I argue – it is not consistent with their overarching view of equality as inclusion. In other words, there appeared to be some limits to the ideals of equality and instead a tendency toward an 'equity' discourse in which men and women are to some extent separated.

Materialisations of equality

Whenever I asked converts how the gender equity or equality was expressed in their shul, the *tallit* often came up as a symbol and example of women's inclusion in ritual practice. I was motivated to analyse this practice more when I spoke with LJG convert Deborah:

D: Some things [in our shul] are deliberately progressive. Many women wear a prayer shawl, a *tallit*. . . . In orthodoxy there are certain things women can't do, like praying with a *tallit* or wearing *teffilin*.[18] You see what happens at the Wall in Jerusalem, Orthodox people and women who want to pray with a *tallit* are nearly fighting at the Wailing Wall! Because [these women] have a strong egalitarian idea that they want to have the same duties and responsibilities, they want to do the same as men.

LS: *Do you mean that those duties should be the same for everyone?*
D: Yes. Duties, but it's also about rights. It's quite a common desire among women to want to have the right to pray with a prayer shawl.

After Deborah converted, she started wearing the *tallit*. I noticed during participant observation that only a small minority of LJG women actually wears a prayer shawl in service, while a majority of Reform women do. Some other women, like Leah, only wear it when they know beforehand that they will be called upon in service, or during their *Bat Mitzvah*. In the Reform group, there were also women who wore a *kippah*, or something similar. I did not meet any congregants in the LJG who do so, nor who would like to wear a *kippah*. This was mainly because it was not part of "Jewish tradition". The call to wear a *kippah* mainly came from the rabbis I spoke with, although they are often careful in voicing these wishes so as not to alienate more conservative members of their community. LJG rabbi Tamar, who was born Jewish, told me about this:

T: Formally, men and women are equal. Women can wear a *tallit* here, but not a *kippah*. And that's very strange, I don't get it . . . but anyway, we have a notion of *minhag hamakom*, which means 'the local habit'. You adapt yourself to what's common in that particular shul. . . . It's very strange to me that as a woman, I can wear a *tallit* but not a *kippah*.
LS: *What are the arguments for that?*
T: It has nothing to do with the *halakha*, so not with the Jewish law, but more with what people are used to.

The aforementioned Women of the Wall movement includes women from all denominations, but in the Netherlands, these type of struggles for women's equality in shul are mainly undertaken by Reform, and some LJG, Jews. So far, this is all still rather similar to other studies of born Jewish women's use of the *tallit* (cf. Emmett 2007; Weissler 2007). What I find interesting, in the case of converted women, is that the *tallit* can be experienced as an important marker of belonging to the Jewish people and confirmation of the newly acquired status. On the one hand, the possibility of women's full participation in shul was considered an important and desired marker of equality. On the other hand, some women did prefer some form of gender segregation during service, where women do not "wear men's clothes", to use Karen's words, referring to a *kippah* or *tallit*. This points to a paradox in gender roles and performances, and shows that 'equity' and 'equality' discourses often overlap in daily life practices.

Different strategies

After coding the outcomes of my research, I found five different strategies for dealing with the *tallit* among my interlocutors, which all point to a different meaning given to the same material object of the prayer shawl.

As such, the *tallit* can have different interpretations and uses, ranging from radical gender equality to marking the otherness of converts. The following strategies can overlap, but together they represent all the different stances I found among my interlocutors. As such, each story is a representation of more women thinking and acting along the same way.

I Emphasising equality – Aliza

The most explicit advocate for a complete dismantling of gender difference in Jewish rituals was Aliza. Aliza is a converted woman who recently became a rabbi. She encourages women to wear a *tallit* in service, or to partake in more male-coded parts of service, such as carrying the Torah scrolls. Since a rabbi's role is not to prescribe certain acts, but to offer guidance and support, Aliza does not impose her opinion. Yet in one of our private conversations, she expressed her frustration with the reality of the Reform and Liberal Jewish community, where many people uphold traditional gender roles in practice. When she told me that she strives for equality, I asked her what this would entail. Aliza answered:

> Well . . . if everyone would wear a *tallit*, if everyone covers their head . . . if everyone can do everything during service, and does so. You know, not just *can*, but actually *does* it. . . . I think that if you want to be egalitarian, you have to *act* egalitarian. It's all nice if you're allowed to do it, but if no one does it, we don't get anywhere. [emphasis in original]

Aliza converted to Judaism when she was in her fifties, after she had discovered that her grandfather had been a Jew, something which was never spoken of in her family. She found her home in first a Liberal, and then a Reform synagogue, but this did not go without difficulty. Although she nowadays has an ideal of total equality for Jewish men and women, this was not always the case. She described how she had felt rather uncomfortable wearing a prayer shawl at first:

> There was a time in my life when I thought I wasn't going to wear a talles, because women don't do that. Even though I'm quite an emancipated person, I had to get used to it. . . . But I did [when I became a rabbi], because I figured 'well, I can't *not* wear it, I really have to start practicing.'

Similarly to Rabbi Liesbeth, Aliza considered a *tallit* a necessity for her role as rabbi, which gave her the final push to start practising. Wearing it nowadays feels "completely normal" to her, but she had to make herself familiar with the garment and its rituals, such as saying a blessing before putting it on. Besides a *tallit*, Aliza also wears a *kippah*, which is rather uncommon

among Jewish women, including women in her own synagogue. In her view, commandments about religious duties in services refer to people of all genders, which means that women would not be exempted from wearing ritual garments.

II Commitment – Deborah

As stated before, wearing the *tallit* is also crucial for Deborah, yet not so much based on emancipatory ideals. Instead, Deborah pointed to the spiritual importance of prayer and the prayer shawl, and did not voice her wishes in terms of striving toward equality. Instead, the *tallit* had a primarily religious and pious connotation. Deborah became Jewish in her early thirties, after studying Hebrew for years. She joined a LJG synagogue and was involved in all kinds of shul committees when I spoke to her. I actually came to the topic of the *tallit* because Deborah was the first to explicitly point to its importance:

LS: *Why is it important for you to wear a prayer shawl?*
D: It's something . . . it is a part of praying. That's one of the things I learned. If you start praying with a prayer shawl, you take on that obligation, and you should continue to do it. . . . For me, it's something that has meaning for me, on a personal level, because it's connected to Jewish prayer.

Having the ability to participate fully in (individual and group) prayers and fulfil the obligations, was very important for some women in the continuing reinforcing of piety. This is something not necessarily particular for the convert group, as the Women of the Wall also point to such pious desires in striving for their rights to pray, and this group includes both convert and non-convert Jewish women. The fact that Deborah became Jewish later in life did add an extra dimension to this meaning of the *tallit*. I asked her if she could explain what it means for her to wear it, and after she took some moments to think about it, she replied:

> For me it means that I'm really Jewish and I'm really committed in the moment. And also . . . that I fully grasp what is happening, that I know the prayers. I think it's important that if I wear it, I should fully understand what I'm doing.

Joining the prayers indicates, for Deborah, that she does not only have the right to wear it, but that she earned her right and place within the Jewish community. She shows that she knows her prayers and is committed, not only to herself or to God, but to her fellow Jews.

III Imitation – Karen

Karen then, the third example, sees the *tallit* in similarly emancipatory terms as Aliza, but rejects the practice for that same reason. Karen is a woman in her thirties who became Jewish (in the LJG) about eight years prior to our meeting and wishes to adhere to more, in her terms, 'traditional' forms of Jewish practice. This includes a segregation between men and women to some extent. Karen does value the possibility to sit with men during service. Because of this, she is able to participate on the same ground level, as opposed to Orthodox synagogues where she can't follow the whole service because women often sit on a balcony. Yet equality in religious duties and rights should not mean that women try to "imitate men". She said:

> You sometimes see women with a *kippah* or with a prayer shawl. That's a step too far for me. I think that's something typically masculine. I can't explain why, I can't argue with facts or with hard texts or anything definite. It's a feeling. I absolutely don't see any need for it, and I even reject it. . . . It's something, I don't know, it evokes something inside of me. Aversion or something, I'm not sure, I can't really explain. It evokes something like . . . well, I don't see any value in it. I think it takes things too far, and I don't like that.

The response of Karen to women wearing a traditionally coded masculine garment, either a *kippah* or *tallit*, came from an emotional space. This is different from the motivations of the previous two women, who have a more rational approach and did not speak about their bodily feelings or emotions in the same regard. Karen, however, described a feeling of repulsion "inside of her", which she cannot justify with texts or "anything definite"; in other words, which she cannot legitimise rationally for herself.

IV Passing – Naomi

The fourth example is that of Naomi – also quoted at the start of this chapter – who is currently active in the organisation of her LJG synagogue where not many women wear a *tallit*, even though women are allowed to do so. The following is an excerpt of one of our conversations:

LS: *Do you wear a tallit during service?*
N: No, I don't.
LS: *Why?*
N: I'm not sure, to be honest. See . . . the thing is, if you take a look at our community . . . actually only people from an older generation who did a *giyur* wear a *tallit*. The older generation of women who've done a *giyur*.
LS: *That's quite a specific group*.

N: It's not a big group, but it is still a group. And also a bit . . . it's a group of elderly feminists, in their fifties, sixties. . . . It's a feeling. I have to be honest here, it's partly because of group pressure – if I'm being totally honest – because actually no women from my generation wear a *tallit*. And that's part of it. It would mean you'd profile yourself in a certain way. It may be childish, but it does influence [my decision]. Also considering my status, that I think . . . it's difficult.

LS: *Your status?*

N: Well, both my status as *giyur* – the fact that I haven't been Jewish for as long as others – and my status in shul. I think it would give some kind of signal. I find it difficult, and it's something you just have to find a balance in. And quite frankly, there's some anxiety . . . taking into account my status as a newer Jew . . . a fear of many older Jews that new Jews want to take over and change things too much. So concerning those issues, you have to be a bit cautious. Do I want to make a statement about these things or not? And for me, I don't have the feeling that I would be a better Jew [*dat ik beter Joods ben*] if I do [wear the *tallit*].

Naomi shows many similarities to my other interlocutors. Similar to Karen, she told me she doesn't really know why she does *not* wear a *tallit*. By this, Naomi meant that she does not have any *halachic* or scriptural foundation to her decision. Similar to Aliza, she recognises the prayer shawl as a sign of equality, but in that case of a particular feminist agenda of some older converted women (who were quite similar in profile as Aliza herself). No younger women or born Jewish women use the prayer shawl, and Naomi is afraid that if she would, she would be perceived both as too feminist and as someone who did *giyur*. This might limit her sense of belonging and raise questions among her congregants about her Jewish status. She thus strives to 'pass' as a Jew in her community, and prefers not to stand out too much. Importantly, Naomi does not have any particular pious motivations to wear, or not wear, a *tallit* like Deborah had; Naomi does not feel she would be a 'better Jew' if she would. Some women of this second-wave feminist generation do urge her to start practising. Especially because of her important role in shul life, some rabbis did urge her to start wearing a *tallit*. She doesn't feel the need herself, but: "I've gotten some complaints about it from rabbis, too. That I *don't* wear it. But that's all from the older feminist female rabbis." For other converted women, these rabbis, such as Liesbeth, Aliza, or Tamar, can function as an important role model as well. This was the case with Judith, the last example.

V Negotiation – Judith

Judith was still in the process of learning as *giyur* candidate in a Reform shul when we met in the Fall of 2018, and no follow-up interviews have

been undertaken at the time of this writing. We spoke a lot about her motivations and experiences in the *giyur* class. When I asked her if she had thought about wearing a *tallit* once she is Jewish, she replied that this had actually been on her mind a lot. Similar to many other interviewees, Judith perceived equality between men and women as a good virtue of Liberal Judaism, but not to the extent that it eliminates gender differences altogether, because "a man is no woman, and a woman is no man." Initially, she did not feel the need or wish to wear a *tallit*, because she considered this a "very masculine thing". When she encountered an interview in a newspaper with a female rabbi, her view changed. Judith described this interview as follows:

> She [the rabbi] initially had the same feeling I have: 'Why would I? Why would I wear a prayer shawl?' And that rabbi said the same thing I feel: that you'd just be imitating men. But then, the rabbi [told the interviewer] that she'd asked yet another rabbi about it, who had told her: 'It can also help you to focus on your prayers. See it as something that will help you to concentrate on being together, on being one with the divine and with your prayer.' And then she figured: 'Yeah, if I look at it that way, it does make sense.' So she had a *tallit* made by an artist. And it really suits her well, there's a beautiful quote on it. . . . It made me think, well, perhaps I will do it. It has a great symbolic meaning for this rabbi and for her relationship with the Eternal.

For Judith, the possibility of particularly female-coded prayer shawls could provide a means to fully participate in service as a Jewish woman, while maintaining clear gender boundaries. This can be considered a form of negotiated adherence and compromise between different discourses of the role of women as equal to men, but also as differently marked based on religious tradition and text.

Discussion

What is similar for these women is that wearing a *tallit* is often described in emotional and bodily terms. Deborah 'feels' she is recognised as a Jew when wearing the *tallit*, while Karen and Naomi 'feel' uncomfortable doing so. This confirms what has been argued throughout this book: religion is an embodied performance, and conversion is related to emotions, feelings, senses, and material objects. From the material object of the *tallit*, which can range from a thick white woollen shawl to a lightweight pink silk, I traced the different approaches to gender difference in Liberal synagogues in the Netherlands. The LJG and separate individual Reform shuls often pride themselves as adhering to values as women's emancipation, at least in comparison to Orthodox Jewish communities, assuming that these do not employ the same modern values of gender. To the extent of institutional

access to authority positions, this is certainly the case. In Dutch reform Judaism, women can become rabbi, make up the *minyan*, and fully participate in service. For converted Jewish women in the LJG, gender norms and policies were often an important factor in pursuing a Liberal instead of an Orthodox *giyur*. The prayer shawl can be considered an example of the lived materialisation of Jewish gender norms. In the Netherlands, the *tallit* became a symbol of a liberal self-image as modern vis-à-vis 'conservative' Orthodoxy – although internationally such efforts are not limited to non-Orthodox women alone. In the case of converted women, the prayer shawl actually turned out to be rather contested and negotiated, just as much as their Jewish status can be questioned by their community. What I have shown is that wearing a *tallit* is not an easy decision, and not all Liberal Jewish women share the same norms, desires, and feelings toward the *tallit* as a gendered ritual object. Instead, the notion of emancipation and equality is layered and performed in different ways. In this discussion I wished to untangle some of these layers and propose lines of future inquiry that can critically question hierarchical differences between concepts such as Orthodox and Liberal, traditional and modern, and oppressed versus emancipated.

First, the sense of equality seems to be directed one-way. Emancipation was mainly understood as the inclusion of women in traditionally male-coded spaces, but not the other way around. This was questioned by Rabbi Tamar, who would ideally encourage men to light the Shabbat candles as well; the female-coded Jewish ritual *par excellence*. The one-directedness of women's equality discourse has been questioned recently by scholars as well, such as Esther Fuchs. Fuchs sees a broader trend in Jewish feminism in academia and social movements:

> The hegemonic definition of Jewish feminism in general assumes that gender inequality in Judaism is the result of accidental, historical oversights that can be addressed by proving that women are as devoted to, interested in, and protective of Judaism as their male counterpart . . . and is considered a success when Jewish women gain access to the same privileges, resources, and symbolic assets that have previously been the preserve of Jewish men.
>
> (Fuchs 2018, 29)

Many interlocutors considered women's emancipation to be a struggle for access to the same privileges and symbolic assets as Jewish men. For some, the equal access to spaces of ritual performance was important, but they distanced themselves from a mode of equality that required men and women "to wear the same clothes". Such a discourse of gender can be called an equity discourse, or complementarity discourse, in which women and men are considered to have equal value but different roles and tasks in life. Looking at the daily religious practices, both notions of inclusion and gender

appeared to have different contested meanings, which were often carefully negotiated by the newcomers in the community.

Second, not all aspects of the use of the *tallit* are exclusive for converts, but some elements are. Conversion to Judaism is contested in the communities, even discouraged by many. Getting access to the liminal status as '*giyur*-candidate' by no means secures a space within Judaism. Instead, candidates are asked to study and perform for many years until they, as my interlocutors said, "feel Jewish" and their subjectivity is transformed, internally and externally, in line with expectations of the rabbinical court. All Liberal converts had to think about wearing a prayer shawl at some point during their *giyur* trajectory, or were asked to consider it by their rabbis. The far majority of my interlocutors had a desire to belong, to be 'passable' as Jewish, and to become uncontested members of the community. On the one hand, the *tallit* could be a physical expression of belonging, since only Jewish people are permitted to wear one. For women such as Deborah, the *tallit* functioned as a confirmation of their Jewish self, but in some spaces where *only* converted women wore it – such as in the synagogue of Naomi – wearing a *tallit* could have the countereffect of marking women's bodies as converted, and thus as different from people born to a Jewish mother. The widely shared desire to become unrecognisable as a convert thus could lead to both a wearing and a not-wearing of the prayer shawl.

Lastly, intergenerational differences played an important role in the perception of emancipation in general and the practice of wearing a *tallit* in particular. Many women over the age of 50, such as Aliza, were inclined to have a view of gender emancipation as total equality. Younger women showed more diversity, and some were not keen on a total elimination of a gender binary. This is partly influenced by second-wave feminism in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s, when a range of emancipatory movements struggled against the influence of religions (specifically the Christian church) and the unequal treatment of women by religious authorities. For my interlocutors who had been involved in these movements, or who came of age during this time, it was crucial to have access to ritual space and positions of authority. Nowadays, feminism has moved from legal and institutional spheres to social acceptance and recognition of multiplicity and diversity among women. Interlocutors younger than 45 often dismissed the views of their older-generation feminist community members, opting for a less 'radical' understanding of women's roles in shul. Future research could look into the impact of different types of feminism on women's religious practices, or reflect more on the intersectional aspects of Jewish women's struggles as impacted by other forms of difference such as race and class.

To conclude, the aims of this chapter started out small: to trace the use of the *tallit* among converted women in the Netherlands. Starting from this one object, many layers of analysis, negotiations, and ritual practices came to the fore. Instead of narratives or official guidelines, I was interested in

the lived realities of converts and their material self-making. *Giyur*, like all religious conversions, is a bodily process of transformation, played out in the use of certain kinds of objects. The *tallit* is not 'simply' a ritual object, but carries with it a whole history of women's role in Judaism, liberalism, feminism, and senses of belonging in a group where one's position is contested.

Notes

1 Yiddish for synagogue. Most research participants used the term *shul/sjoel* (in Dutch spelling) instead of synagogue or the Hebrew word *Beit Knesset*. The participants in this study (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi) tended to use a mix between Dutch, Yiddish, and Hebrew terms, and I will follow their language in this chapter.
2 All names are pseudonyms, and crucial information about the communities of my interlocutors has been omitted to ensure anonymity. Any resemblance to people with the same names is entirely coincidental. All interviews have been recorded, with informed consent, and transcribed. The author thanks Béracha Meijer for her help with the transcriptions. Translations from Dutch to English are by the author.
3 The research project includes three case studies in total. Besides Jewish women, it focuses on Pentecostal Christian conversion and Sunni Islamic (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020).
4 Group of 10 Jewish adults needed to hold a service, traditionally only men.
5 The national welfare organisation for the Jewish community in the Netherlands (JMW) estimated a number of 52,000 Jews in 2009, including everyone with at least one Jewish parent (Van Solinge and Van Praag 2010). According to the Organisation of Jewish Communities (NIK) there are 30,000 Jews. The NIK uses the *halachic* definition of matrilineal descent. This means that only people born to a Jewish woman are considered to be Jews.
6 Currently, Orthodox synagogues have the highest number of members and synagogues in the Netherlands, with about 4000–5000 active members and 40 synagogues. There is no specific synagogue for the 1500 strictly Orthodox Chasidic Jews; they are mainly members of one of the NIK congregations.
7 This does not mean that women are absent from Orthodox communities. Rather, because men historically had to spend quite a lot of time at the synagogue, women were traditionally the ones with jobs both in and outside of the home.
8 In 1972, Sally Priesand became the first ever publicly ordained female rabbi, at the New York City Stephen Wise Free Synagogue. In 1935, Regina Jonas was privately ordained in Berlin and the first female rabbi worldwide.
9 I was told by some rabbis that even though the giyur trajectory is formally the same, the LJG often uses the term 'confirmation' for so-called father Jews instead of 'giyur'. This is to acknowledge the Jewish history and family connection of these people.
10 There are some recent studies of conversion to Christianity in the Netherlands, but these often do not focus on gender (e.g. Klaver et al. 2017).
11 Lev. 19:19.
12 Num. 15:37–40.
13 Specifically, these strings and knots refer to the 613 mitzvot (commandments). The Hebrew word for these strings is *tzitzit*, which numerically adds up to 600. Each of the fringes contains eight strings and five knots, for a total number of 613 (Green 2000).

14 Shulchan Aruch Siman 19 states: "Tzitzit are an obligation on the person and not on the item, in that as long as he is not wearing the tallit, he is exempt from (the obligation of) tzitzit (i.e. on that tallit). Therefore, one does not say a blessing regarding the making of the tzitzit, since there is no commandment except in wearing them."

15 Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu l'hit'ateif ba-tzitzit: Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to wrap ourselves in the tzitzit.

16 After their supporting rabbi believes the giyur-candidate has learned enough about Judaism and practices a Jewish life properly, the candidate is invited to come before a Jewish rabbinical court, called a *Beth Din*. Once this court determines that the candidate can be allowed to join the Jewish people, there follows a ritual immersion in the Mikveh.

17 The marketing of women's religious objects has mainly been discussed in relation to Islam, such as the emergence of Islamic modest fashion (cf. Tarlo and Moors 2013).

18 Both men and women are allowed to wear *tefillin* (phylacteries), but when I asked via email about this, one of my key informants, a rabbi, replied: "There are not many women in the LJG who wear tefillin, but neither are there many men. It's an object with which most liberal Jews don't feel connected. Perhaps also because there aren't many daily prayers, this is mainly on Shabbat and holidays during which no *tefillin* are used."

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