

My Tzitzis Fill Me With Jewish Pride—Here's Why



Tzitzis are often one of the first *mitzvos* a Jewish man encounters, whether in a religious home or through a campus *kiruv* program. That was my experience as a college student.

The idea of wearing a simple undershirt with ritual fringes felt manageable, but also unfamiliar enough to make me think. It captured the tension I was living with at the time: I wanted to appear to the world as a Jew, yet I was still unsure how that distinct identity fit with the broader Western values I held. Over the years, tzitzis have come to represent that ongoing negotiation for me. Both Jewish tradition and a series of personal encounters have shaped my understanding of their meaning.

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Tzitzis seem to embody Judaism's balance between particularism and universalism. The Torah describes the Jewish People as a holy nation, set apart in its way of life, yet also commands us to bring blessing to all humanity. This tension runs through Tanach, rabbinic literature, and modern Jewish thought. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it simply: "To be a Jew is to be true to our faith while being a blessing to others regardless of their faith."

Judaism approaches this balance through several complementary strategies. The first is to *instantiate* universal moral intuitions in concrete practices. These are the commandments that reflect values any functioning society would recognize: honesty, restraint, responsibility, and the awareness that our actions matter. What Judaism adds are the discrete rituals and reminders that keep those values fresh in our consciousness.

I once encountered a striking example of this approach on a sidewalk not far from home. A young woman waited at the crosswalk beside me. She seemed to be staring, though I tried to ignore it.

The light changed, and as I began to walk, I suddenly felt a strange tug beneath my shirt. I turned to find her still standing there—one of my tzitzis grasped in her hand.

“Hey,” she said, “what are these?”

“It’s a religious article,” I stammered, probably blushing.

“But what’s it *for*?” she pressed, examining the strings more closely now.

I searched for a simple answer. “You know how people tie a string around their finger to remind themselves of something? It’s like that. It reminds religious Jews of the commandments.”

“Oh, right on,” she said, smiling as she finally let go—and just in time for me to make it across the street.

Even without sharing my beliefs, she immediately grasped the basic human need for reminders. We all sense that life should be more than instinct and impulse, and that we want to live with a measure of intention. In that moment, my tzitzis simply instantiated a value that we both recognized. Their power was not in some hidden mystical message, but in how they made a familiar moral instinct harder to ignore. And in a world saturated with devices that pull our attention in every direction, the idea of a simple piece of “attention tech” seemed to resonate across cultural lines.

The Talmud tells a similar story. A young Torah scholar, on the verge of succumbing to temptation, feels his tzitzis “slap him in the face,” jolting him back to himself. The woman he had sought out is so moved by his self-restraint that she ultimately converts. The Sages specifically use tzitzis to portray a universal human ideal—the desire to remember who we want to be when it matters most.

Still, it would be a mistake to think Judaism only highlights values that humanity already intuit. The Torah also introduces ideals that challenge prevailing norms and expand our moral imagination. This is the second way Jewish particularism engages with the universal: it *informs* the broader moral landscape. Judaism does not only affirm what the world already knows; it often teaches the world to see things differently.

The Sages saw tzitzis as a symbol of this dynamic as well. One tradition describes a future in which the nations of the world come to recognize the truths of the Torah, illustrated by their “grabbing onto the tzitzis” of the Jewish People.

I once encountered a faint echo of that idea in the most unlikely place. A friend and I had taken a road trip through the American Southwest. In northern Arizona, a weathered sign advertising dinosaur footprints proved too intriguing to pass up. We pulled off the road, where a Native American man offered to give us a short tour.

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Then, mid-tour, he noticed our tzitzis.

“Hey, my brother wears those,” he said. “They’re made of nylon, right?”

“They’re wool, actually,” I replied. “You said your *brother* wears them?”

“Yeah, in prison. He pulls the nylon out of his waistband and ties it up like that.”

I later learned that this is a real thing—some inmates twist the nylon threads from their clothes into improvised religious symbols, emblems of spiritual devotion in a place that makes it easy to forget.

Our guide went on to explain that he believed the Navajo were one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Because of that, he felt a natural kinship with the Jewish People and saw Jewish tradition as a source that shaped many religious currents around the world, including aspects of his own. In his mind, the Torah was not only a particular inheritance but also a wellspring from which other spiritual paths had drawn.

We had come to look at the dinosaur tracks, but we left with something grander: a sense that our particular practices had radiated outward, reaching others in unexpected ways. I had never considered that people far outside the Jewish world might see their own traditions as connected to ours, or even shaped by them. For our Navajo guide, Judaism did not simply reflect universal values he already held; it helped frame how he understood the spiritual story he inhabited.

Any discussion of Jewish particularism also has to acknowledge the long history of Jewish isolation. Sometimes that isolation was imposed from the outside; other times, Jews chose it to preserve a way of life that could not survive full assimilation. This is the third way particularism interacts with universal values: by *insulating* them when the surrounding culture threatens to erode them.

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Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the leading rabbinic figure of pre-war Europe, spoke about this role. He knew many Jews felt uncomfortable wearing their tzitzis in public and urged them to reconsider. If a king entrusted you with something precious, he asked, wouldn't you display it with pride?

Tzitzis may look unusual, and they certainly mark their wearers as part of a distinct people. But for Rabbi Kagan, that visibility was not accidental. It signaled that Jews have a specific mission and that, at times, preserving that mission requires creating distance from cultural pressures that would dilute or distort it.

Later on that same road trip, we stopped in Silver City, New Mexico—a small, eccentric town once home to Billy the Kid. It seemed like the last place on earth to meet another Jew.

As we walked down a historic boulevard, a voice suddenly called from behind us: “Not often we get *members of the tribe* around here!”

We turned to see an older man in colorful glasses, blue jeans, and a bright tie-dye shirt.

“Would you happen to be one yourself?” I asked.

“Guilty as charged!” he laughed. He told us he’d recognized our tzitzis because his nephews in New York wore them too. “They even have those curly hair things,” he added, twirling his fingers in pantomime. Then, perhaps sensing our surprise at meeting a fellow Jew here, he told us about his favorite TV show—*Northern Exposure*, about a Jewish doctor from New York who moves to rural Alaska.

“In one episode,” he said, “the doctor wants to say *kaddish* for his uncle, but he can’t find nine other Jews for a *minyan*. Then he wonders, why am I chasing after strangers? Just because they’re Jewish? These people here, in this quiet Alaskan town, they’re my real family. So he decides to say *kaddish* with them instead.”

He smiled before concluding: “That’s how I feel, living here in Silver City.”

Then he shook our hands and walked away.

There was something sincere and even admirable about his broad sense of human connection. At the same time, we couldn’t help noticing a tension: he spoke of being a “member of the tribe,” yet saw the citizens of Silver City as his true spiritual family. In his case, the balance between the particular and the universal had collapsed. What remained was a universalism with no roots.

The episode of *Northern Exposure* he described celebrates the beauty of a community coming together to comfort a mourner. But it glosses over the fact that this sensitivity emerged from a specific ritual, sustained by a particular people who preserved it through centuries of isolation. That is precisely what the third category—insulation—seeks to explain. Jewish particularism does not reject the universal value of communal care; it carries and protects it. Like a seed bank, Judaism guards certain moral intuitions until they can take root in the broader culture.

Classical Jewish teachings and my own experiences suggest that tzitzis capture something essential about how Judaism relates to the wider world. Whether we are instantiating universal values, informing cultural norms, or insulating what needs protection, tzitzis function as a steady reminder of the distinctiveness of the Jewish mission.

But why are tzitzis such an effective symbol for all three modes? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers an insight that brings the question into focus.

The laws of tzitzis contain two unusual features. First, the ideal tzitzis has one section tightly knotted and a much longer section left loose. Rabbi Hirsch reads this as a guide for moral life: we secure the foundations—our core commitments—but most of our choices unfold in the open space of human freedom.

Second, tzitzis are a voluntary mitzvah. They apply only to a four-cornered garment, and no one is obligated to wear one. For Rabbi Hirsch, this voluntariness reflects a deeper principle. Ideally, Jewish life is not meant to be lived through external pressure. Its strength comes from cultivating the kind of inner conviction that motivates a person to take on responsibility, even when they could walk away.

Taken together, these features offer a way to understand why tzitzis embody the full spectrum of Jewish identity. They acknowledge that moral life contains fixed elements and open ones, inherited obligations and personal agency. There is no single formula for how Jews should engage the world. Most of life remains “loose,” requiring judgment, flexibility, and a willingness to hear one’s own conscience.

That flexibility can shape how Jewish particularism functions on the world stage. By embracing the moral autonomy that tzitzis embody, we gain the capacity to place our particular values in a productive dialogue with the broader society: instantiating the moral truths we already recognize, informing the culture with insights from our tradition, and insulating the ideals that offer hope for our shared future.
