

Barbie wears Tefillin, do you? Exploring ritual garb

Lesson plan for Family/Congregational Education

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Tefillin Barbie: Considering gender and ritual garb,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan08/>.

This lesson would be an ideal way to introduce pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah students and their parents to the ins and outs of Jewish ritual garb, and also to some issues of gender and Jewish ritual.

For Background information on Tefillin, see:

www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/Prayer/Ritual_Garb/Tefillin.htm

For Background information on Tallit, see:

www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/Prayer/Ritual_Garb/Tallit.htm

1. Begin your session with everyone together. Ask them to tell you something about the prayer garb they have seen or heard of in synagogue use. What do these things look like? Ask for descriptions of them in some detail. Who wears these ritual objects and when?

Take out examples of each type as they are mentioned. For both *kippot* and *tallitot*, try to find examples that both males and females might typically wear. Ask participants to think about why there might be differences in some of these things (i.e., silk for women’s *tallitot*, or darker colors/stripes for men’s.) When *tefillin* come up – ask whether anyone has seen another kind of *tefillin* other than the “basic black” – (they may have seen a vegetarian version, but have they ever seen one that is “feminized” the way that *tallitot* and *kippot* have been?) Why might that not be a very common sight?

2. Show the participants a picture of Tefillin Barbie (which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan08/>). Lead a short discussion using the following questions to guide your discussion:

- Who is she supposed to represent?
 - What is she wearing, and does it seem unusual?
 - Her creator is a woman named Jen Taylor Friedman, one of the first *soferot* (female ritual scribe – this means that she writes everything from *tefillin* scrolls to whole Torahs). Why would she choose to put *tefillin* on a Barbie? What statement is she making by putting *tefillin* on a doll that is so well known?
 - Does Barbie “look Jewish?” Encourage any and all debate on this issue, since it is also at the heart of the question of what “looks” proper, a question that is very relevant to the issue of women and Jewish ritual.
3. Depending on the common practice of your community, this might be a good time to delve into some of the changes that have occurred within your movement or within your community regarding ritual garb and the leading of various parts of the service. Ask your Rabbi, Cantor or a knowledgeable long-time member to describe some of the changes that have taken place in the last 30-40 years. Have there been changes in what women can do on the *bimah*? Have there been changes in what children can lead? Do they require both men and women to wear *kippah*? *Tallit*? Do children learn to put on *tefillin* before their Bar/Bat Mitzvah? If so, does that practice extend to both girls and boys?
4. Family interviews: Have the families do the next activity together. Give them 3-4 minutes for each interview.

Students: Interview your parents about Jewish ritual when they were younger. Has their practice changed in any way from when they were young? Did they wear a *tallit* or *tefillin* when they were younger? Do they now? Was their practice different from others in their synagogue? If so, was that difficult? Is there anything they wish they did or would do differently?

- Parents:** Interview your child about what they might like their practice to be when they become a bar/bat mitzvah. Do they plan to wear *tallit*? *Tefillin*? Why/why not? What are some of the issues they are concerned about? If they wish to wear a *tallit/kippah/tefillin*, do they want to personalize theirs in any way? How might they want theirs to look?
5. Below are some suggested activities to round out your program in a creative way. (You can choose one or more, depending on time).

- **Design your own kippah:** you can provide students with suede *kippot* purchased in bulk and puffy paint, or use fabric *kippot* and use fabric markers.
- **Learn how to lay tefillin:** enlist your clergy members or regular members of the morning minyan to help out. If someone has a pair that are *pasul* (no longer usable) and are open, this would be a great opportunity to teach about the 4 parchments inside the *tefillin* and what they signify. See the book, *Tefillin* by Martin Sandberg for good basic information on the parchments and how to tie the knots, too.
- **Learn how to tie tzitzit:** teach about the significance of the number of knots, and tie it to its origins in the Shema.
- **Paper dolls exercise:** For each participant, create a male and female doll and a variety of Jewish objects that they can attach, (either with glue or with tabs. Ask them to create a doll that represents what they think is the ideal for their community. You can also ask them to change it in a variety of ways over the course of the exercise: How might this doll look different in 30 years? How might it have looked different 30 years ago? What would make this doll look “wrong”? Have them explain their dolls within small intergenerational groups of 8-10 people.

- **Use this program as a way to kickstart a “Design your own *tallit*” program.** This is usually a multi-session program with students bringing fabric of their own choosing. They could use this first session to look at different examples of *tallitot* that are representative of their own personalities. Explore what they might want on their own *tallit*. If this is a family program, how might parents/siblings/grandparents help out? (Parents may choose to design the *atarah*, for example). Consider also learning how to tie the *tzitzit*. Enlist your clergy members for help in this program.