

# Atifah Be-Tallit: Just for the Rabbi?

## I. Introduction

I grew up, and I am sure many others did, with a perception of covering one's head with a *tallit* during the *tefillah* as a measure of extreme piety, perhaps only reserved for the rabbi or other very devout community members. Later, as I began wearing a *tallit* myself, I discovered that the matter was more complex than I had originally realized. I noticed that there are those who cover their head with the *tallit* for the entire *tefillah*, others who don't cover their heads for the entire *tefillah* but do when they initially put on the *tallit*, and those who don't cover their heads at all with the *tallit*.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the practice of covering one's head with a *tallit* and evaluate: Where does this ritual come from? Is it mandatory? If so, is it required for the entire *tefillah* or just when originally making the *berakhah*? If it is not mandatory, should we still consider it to be a commendable practice? We will begin with the discussion in the *Tur* and the *Shulchan Arukh*, and then examine the perspectives of contemporary *poskim*.

## II. Background

The *Tur* (O.C. 8) says that immediately after washing one's hands "*yitatef be-tzitzit me'umad*" – "one should wrap oneself in a *tallit* while standing." He then proceeds to cite a dispute between the *Ge'onim* and the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* as to the proper procedure for doing so. The *Ge'onim* define *atifah* as "*atifat Yishmaelim*," which is understood to refer to a wrapping of part or all of the face including the mouth (see below and note for further discussion as to the precise definition of "*atifat Yishmaelim*"<sup>141</sup>), while the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* (*Sha'ar 2, Chelek 3*) states that one only needs *atifah* in the manner that people wrap themselves when they go about their normal activities – sometimes with the head covered and sometimes with the head uncovered.

What are the bases for their respective opinions? The *Beit Yosef* explains that the opinion of the *Ge'onim* is based on a *Tosefta* in *Masekhet Berakhot* (6:16) which states that the correct *berakhah* when one dons a *tallit* is "*Le-Hitateif Be-Tzitzit*" – a phrase which mentions *atifah* (wrapping oneself). The connotation of *atifah* is derived from a different statement of *Chazal* – one in *Masekhet Mo'ed Katan* (24a). There, Shmuel says: Any *atifah* that is not like the *atifah* of *Yishmaelim* is not considered to be an *atifah*. R. Nachman, it is said, would cover himself until the "*gubei dikna*," which Rashi explains to mean "below his mouth."

However, the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* takes issue with this derivation and claims that *atifah* is only defined as "*atifat Yishmaelim*" locally, within the context of the laws of mourning (*Yechezkel 24:17*, which is the source of *atifah* for a mourner, specifically mentions covering one's mouth) and is not necessarily universal. He cites many other contexts where the *Gemara* mentions *atifah* and shows that it is not reasonable to interpret those sources as requiring covering one's mouth as well. He therefore concludes that the language of *atifah* does not necessarily mandate covering one's head at all and is a general term which in this case can be interpreted as *kisui*, covering, as per *Devarim 22:12*, in which *tzitzit* are referred to as "*asher tekhasseh bah*" – "that which you shall be covered with."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup>. There is much dispute amongst the *Acharonim* as to the precise definition of "*atifat Yishmaelim*." The language of the *Perishah* (8:2) is "*yoreid tallito ad ha-peh*," which implies that the entire face is being covered including the eyes (this is also the implication of *Mishnah Berurah* 8:4). Others, however, contend that it is unreasonable to assume that the *Yishmaelim* wrapped themselves in this way and therefore they argue that "*atifat Yishmaelim*" involves wrapping one's neck as well as the lower part of one's face (see the custom of the Arizal quoted in *Kaf Ha-Chaim* 8:7 of taking the two corners of the *tallit* that hang from the right side and placing them over the left shoulder and then taking the two from the left side and also placing them there). This is also the implication of the *Tur* in *Yoreh De'ah* 386. See the journal *Hakira*, vol. 7, pp. 177–204, for a more complete discussion of the precise definition of "*atifat Yishmaelim*."

<sup>142</sup>. The *Beit Yosef* originally suggested that the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* was following the opinion of Rav in *Masekhet Mo'ed Katan* who does not require "*atifat Yishmaelim*" for *atifah*, but then wrote that after receiving a copy of the *Sefer Ha-Itur* he realized that the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* himself explains his reasoning as per the above.

In summary, there is a dispute between the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* and the *Ge'onim* as to whether a person has to do "*atifat Yishmaelim*" – which would entail enwrapping his head and face – when he dons his *tallit* in the morning. The *Ge'onim* require it while the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* does not. This dispute is based on their respective understandings of *atifah* regarding mourning, i.e., is the definition of *atifah* in the context of mourning universal or local in nature?

### III. *Shulchan Arukh*

The *Shulchan Arukh* (8:2) codifies the opinion of the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* that "*atifat Yishmaelim*" is not necessary when one is donning the *tallit*; however, he concludes "*ve-nakhon she-yekhaseh et rosho be-tallit*" – "it is appropriate that one covers one's head with the *tallit*." The source of this statement is a later statement of the *Tur*: "*u-mekhaseh rosho, shelo yehei be-gilui rosh*" – "he shall cover his head so it won't be uncovered." Although one would be tempted to take this as a recommendation to follow the *Ge'onim* and do "*atifat Yishmaelim*" (*Peri Megadim*, *Mishbetzot Zahav* 8:3 implies that the *Taz* understood the *Shulchan Arukh* this way), both the language of *kisui ha-rosh* as opposed to *atifat ha-rosh* as well as its location both in the *Tur* (after a seemingly unrelated *halakhah* of keeping two *tzitziyot* in front and two in the back) as well as its location in the *Sefer Ha-Itur* (before his dispute with the *Ge'onim*) imply that he is not referring to the opinion of the *Ge'onim*.

So, what is the *Shulchan Arukh* advocating by encouraging *kisui ha-rosh* for *tallit*? The *Beit Yosef* himself offers two interpretations for this statement. The first is that despite the fact that one's head is covered anyways, i.e., with a *kippah* (as per the recommendation of the *Tur* in *siman* 2), it is more appropriate to use a double covering because this is "*derekh tzenu'im*" – "the way of the modest," and leads to humility and fear of Heaven. It would seem like this is a recommendation of how a person should dress at least during the *tefillah*, perhaps at all times, and has nothing to do with the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* per se. The second interpretation in the *Beit Yosef* is that covering one's head with the *tallit* is part of the complete fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*. The *Maharalnach* (cited in *Chidushei Hagahot* on the *Tur*) elaborates on this second answer, explaining that even though the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* doesn't require full-fledged "*atifat Yishmaelim*," like the *Ge'onim* do, one should at least cover his head with the *tallit* when he first puts on the *tallit* in fulfillment of the word "*le-hitateif*" in the *berakhah* which he makes before he puts the *tallit* on.<sup>143</sup>

What emerges from the *Beit Yosef's* second interpretation of the *Tur* is that there is a third level of *atifah* with respect to putting on one's *tallit* in the morning. In addition to the opinion of the *Ge'onim* requiring "*atifat Yishmaelim*," and the opinion of the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* requiring wrapping the body, there is also a middle possibility of there being a *mitzvah* to cover one's head with the *tallit* when putting it on even though there is no *mitzvah* to do "*atifat Yishmaelim*." Which of these two interpretations does the *Shulchan Arukh* codify? The fact that the *Shulchan Arukh* mentions the *halakhah* immediately after his discussion of how *atifah* should be done (as opposed to the *Tur* who brings this *halakhah* later, after he mentions putting two *tzitzit* in the front and in the back), as well as the fact that he doesn't include the clause "*shelo yehei be-gilui rosh*" which appears both in the *Tur* and in the *Sefer Ha-Itur*, implies that he is following his second interpretation of the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* and the *Tur*, namely, that covering the head is part of the *mitzvah* of putting on the *tallit*.<sup>144</sup> The *Taz* (8:3) interprets the *Shulchan Arukh* this way as well.

In summary, the *Shulchan Arukh* does not require "*atifat Yishmaelim*," though he does recommend that one covers one's head with the *tallit*, at least when reciting the *berakhah* and putting it on.

### IV. Later *Poskim*

Although the *Shulchan Arukh* accepts the opinion of the *Ge'onim* and states that covering one's head is only a commendable practice, his contemporaries and later *Acharonim* seem to take covering one's head with a *tallit* as more of an obligation. The *Radvaz* in *Responsum* 1:343 was asked about putting on the *tallit* in a way that only covers one's shoulders (and body, but not one's head). Amongst other arguments, he invokes the opinion of the *Ge'onim* that "*atifat Yishmaelim*" is necessary, as well as the *Tur's* recommendation of *kisui*, and concludes that covering one's head (presumably when originally placing the *tallit* on) is an essential part of the *mitzvah*. And, he notes, this was the accepted practice in all Jewish communities in his day. The *Sefer Ma'aseh Rav* records that although the *Vilna Ga'on*

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<sup>143</sup>. The *Darkhei Moshe* (8:4) says that one should follow the opinion of the *Beit Yosef*; however, he does not understand this to be the correct interpretation of the *Tur*. He understands the *Tur* a third way, namely, that since covering one's head in general (i.e., with a *kippah*) is not compulsory, the *Ba'al Ha-Itur* has to write that when one is putting on the *tallit* one should make sure that his head is covered. (The *Hagahot* and *He'arot* in the *Makhon Yerushalayim* edition of the *Tur* attribute this to not wanting to make a *berakhah* with one's head uncovered.)

<sup>144</sup>. The phrase "*she-lo yehei be-gilui rosh*" implies that the covering of one's head with a *tallit* is coming to resolve some issue regarding having one's head uncovered. Therefore, it fits much better with the *Beit Yosef's* first interpretation, that the *tallit* is coming to solve the issue of having the head exposed and not having a double covering, or the *Darkhei Moshe's* interpretation that the *tallit* is coming to resolve the issue of not having the head covered at all. The *Shulchan Arukh's* choice to omit this phrase would point in the direction of his second interpretation in the *Beit Yosef* – that the *tallit* is coming to enhance the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*.

would not do “*atifat Yishmaelim*” he would still cover his head when he put on his *tallit*. This was also the practice of R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Halikhot Shlomo, Tefillah*, ch. 3 fn. 33) and the *Chazon Ish* (*Orchot Rabbenu* vol. 1, p. 17). The *Kaf Ha-Chaim* (8:9) quotes those who even go so far as to say that if one does not cover his head with the *tallit* when putting it on, the *berakhah* which he made would be in vain (*le-vatalah*). The *Mishnah Berurah* goes further and recommends covering one’s face until his mouth (a full-fledged “*atifat Yishmaelim*”) to fulfill all opinions. The Arizal (cited in *Magen Avraham* [8:2]) was also of the opinion that one should do “*atifat Yishmaelim*,” and the *Kaf Ha-Chaim* (8:9) says that one should follow this opinion to make sure that his *berakhah* is not a *berakhah le-vatalah*.

## V. Covering One’s Head with the *Tallit* during the *Tefillah*

Regarding covering one’s head with the *tallit* during the *tefillah*, we already mentioned the first interpretation of the *Beit Yosef* which seems to advocate keeping the *tallit* on one’s head as long as he is wearing it. (This is the *Bach’s* interpretation of the *Tur* as well. Their interpretation is based on a *gemara* in *Kiddushin* (8a) and Rashi’s interpretation of that *gemara*. See their comments there.) The *Kaf Ha-Chaim* (8:10) quotes this opinion and quotes the *Eliyah Rabbah* who specifies that one should cover his head from the beginning of the *tefillah* until the end. The *Mishnah Berurah* (8:4) also cites opinions that one should keep his head covered with the *tallit* for the entire *tefillah*, but if one is not able to, one should at least keep his head covered for a short period (the time it takes to walk four *amot* [cubits] – about two to three seconds) when he puts it on. It is interesting to note that although these two *halakhot*, i.e., covering one’s head when one puts on the *tallit* as part of the fulfillment of *atifah be-tallit* as well as this second custom of keeping one’s head covered throughout the *tefillah*, seem to be alternative explanations of the *Tur* and in turn of the *Ba’al Ha-Itur* (see *Beit Yosef’s* two interpretations of the *Tur* discussed above), nevertheless, both the *Mishnah Berurah* and *Kaf Ha-Chaim* seem to advocate both.

R. Hershel Schachter in *Nefesh Ha-Rav* (pp. 104–105) records the practice that one should do *atifah* (covering one’s head) for the *Amidah* prayer based on the *pasuk* “*tefillah le-ani ki ya’atof*” (*Tehillim* 102:1). He also quotes the practice of R. Chaim Soloveitchik, who would cover his head before *Kaddish* and *Barkhu*, and uncover his head for the recitation of *Keriyat Shema* until the *Amidah*. This custom was based on the *midrash* which learns from the *pasuk* “*u-ve-lekhtekha va-derekh*” – “and [you shall recite the *Keriyat Shema*] when you are on the road” (*Devarim* 6:7) that one can read the *Keriyat Shema* either with *atifah* or with his head uncovered – the way a person travels on the road. Since, in our times people do *atifah* as a sign of special preparation, the normal way of comporting oneself would be without *atifah* and therefore our fulfillment of this *midrash* is through reciting the *Keriyat Shema* without *atifah*.

## VI. Limitations

The *Mishnah Berurah* (*ibid.*) notes that the *Gemara* implies that a non-married individual would not cover his head with a *tallit*. Interestingly, the source of the *Mishnah Berurah’s* statement, the *Magen Avraham* (8:3), cites an additional *gemara* which implies that a non-*talmid chakham* should not cover his head even if he is married. The *Mishnah Berurah* seems to accept that first half of the *Magen Avraham*, but not the second. The *Kaf Ha-Chaim* (8:12) cites those who argue with both limitations of the *Magen Avraham*.

## VII. Summary

In summary, the matter of “*atifat Yishmaelim*” is subject to dispute amongst the *Rishonim*. Although the *Shulchan Arukh* doesn’t require “*atifat Yishmaelim*,” he seems to advocate at least covering one’s head with the *tallit* when putting it on. Others go further and recommend doing “*atifat Yishmaelim*” to fulfill the opinion of the *Ge’onim* who require it. Regarding covering one’s head during the *tefillah*, although it is not required, many *poskim* recommend it, as it leads to humility and fear of God. However, there may be those who limit this custom to married individuals and/or Torah scholars.