

HOW THE JEWISH RITE OF HANDLING/KISSING TZITZIS DURING SHMA CHANGED OVER THE CENTURIES

Overview

Standard practice is to hold all 4 tsitsis tassels throughout the entire recitation of Shma between the little and ring fingers. When reaching the tsitsis paragraph, we start holding the tsitsis also with the right hand. And each time we say the word “tsitsis”, we kiss them. We release the tsitsis after saying “vnechemadim lo’ad”. This custom is universally accepted and mentioned in our Artscroll Siddur.

I researched the halachic history of this custom. The first rabbis to address it were two Iraqi chief rabbis (**Natronai Gaon** and **Moshe Gaon**) in the year 850, who reported that they are starting to see men holding their tsitsis during Shma. These chief rabbis said that since there is no basis in halacha for doing it, whoever does it is just showing off, and should definitely stop doing it. They explained that holding tsitsis during Shma is as ridiculous as, say, holding tefillin when reciting the phrases relating to tefillin (Little did they know that 1100 years later, Jews would be doing just that.) But 100 years later, about the year 950, another rabbi (Medrash Socher Tov) wrote that one SHOULD HOLD tsitsis during entire Shma. 200 years later, in 1150, **Ba’al Ha’itur** reported people starting to even TOUCH TSITZIS TO THEIR EYES WHEN SAYING “ur’eesem oso”. Another 400 year later, in 1550, rabbis (**Yosef Caro**, **Moshe Isserles**, **Arizal**) reported Jews JUST STARTING to do most of what we do now, which is holding tsitsis particularly with the LEFT hand and LOOKING at tsitsis during the ENTIRE tsitsis paragraph, and with BOTH hands during the tsitsis paragraph, and “a few people” even KISSING tsitsis (when saying “ur’eesem oso” but NOT when saying “tsitsis” as we do), and releasing and kissing them after saying “vnechemadim lo’ad”. Interestingly, no rabbinical authority has ever suggested kissing the tsitsis when saying the word “tsitsis” as we do.

Background Notes

The first rabbis to address it were two gaonim. **Natronai Gaon**¹ in 830 wrote that he is starting to see men holding their tsitsis in their hand during Shma, and that since there is no basis in halacha for doing it and most people don’t do it, whoever does it is just showing off (“yohara” “yehirusa”). **Moshe Gaon**², also in 830, said whoever holds his tsitsis during Shma is showing off and should stop it and even stop others from doing it, and explained that holding tsitsis during Shma is as ridiculous as holding tefillin when reciting the phrases relating to tefillin (Little did he know that 1000 years later, Jews would be doing just that.) and holding a mezuzah when reciting the phrase relating to mezuzah. I think I remember some book quoting **Hai Gaon**³ in 950 as agreeing, but I can’t find it now. **Medrash Socher Tov**⁴ in 900s? was the first to write that it is **good** to hold tsitsis during Shma. **Ba’al Ha’itur**⁵ in 1150 noted that some people hold (“v’osam shem’kabtzim”) tsitsis during Shma and touch the tsitsis to the eyes when saying “ur’eesem oso”. **Yehuda Hachasid**⁶ in 1200 said

¹ **Natronai Gaon**; quoted in Avudraham who is quoted in Beis Yosef 24:1, and also quoted by Archos Chaim quoted in Beis Yosef 24:1. I guess this is either:

Natronai ben Nehemiah (of Pumbedita 719-730, son-in-law of the exilarch Hasedai I. Vain, was so arrogant with the students that many of them left the academy, returning only after his death according to Letter of Sherira Gaon)

or

Natronai ben Hilai of Sura in 850 who succeeded Sar Shalom. His father occupied the position ~30 years before. always employed the language which his correspondents were most conversant. the first Geon to use Arabic for scholastic correspondence. Violently opposed Karaites;

² **Moshe Gaon** (yr 830 in Sura) (quoted by Archos Chaim quoted in Beis Yosef 24:4)

³ **Hai Gaon** (chief rabbi of Babylonia in the year 950; I think I remember cited in Igras Moshe)

⁴ **Medrash Socher Tov** (quoted by Haga’ot Maimoni quoted by Darkai Moshe Ha’aruch 24:4 which is in appendix of Tur and is I understand by Rama). **Medrash Socher Tov** aka Agadat Tehillim and aka Haggadat Tehillim is known since 1000s when it was quoted by Nathan of Rome in his Aruk and later by Rashi.

⁵ **Ba’al Ha’itur** in 1100s?, wrote Sefer Ha’itur (quoted by Tur 24:4)

⁶ Rabbi Yehudah Hachasid, aka Yehuda ben Shmuel of Regensburg, Germany ~1200 (initiated Chassidei Ashkenaz, a movement of mysticism in Germany emphasising specific prayer and moral conduct. moved to Regensburg in 1195. wrote Sefer Hasidim and Sefer Hakavod. his most prominent students were Elazar Rokeach and Moses ben Jacob of Coucy); quoted by Archos Chaim quoted by Beis Yosef 24:4, altho Hagaos Vhe’eros on the same page says his dfus of Archos Chaim omits this part about RI Hachasid).

one must scrutinize (“ayain”) tsitsis when reaching the phrase “ur’eesem oso”. **Avudraham**⁷ in 1300 wrote that now that a few (“ktzat”) people hold tsitsis during Shma, it is no longer considered showing off. **Ribash**⁸ in 1375 wrote that looking at the tsitsis during the phrase “ur’eesem oso” is a nice practice, and in fact his teacher, Rabbi Peretz, did it, although **Ribash** himself apparently didn’t. **Yosef Caro**⁹ in 1540 in **Shulchan Aruch**¹⁰, siman 61, advises **touching** the **front** 2 tsitsis when saying “ur’eesem oso” (along with touching the arm tefillin and head tefillin when reaching their respective phrases), but in siman 24 Yosef Caro goes further by saying it is a nice idea to do during Shma what he sees some people doing of holding the tzitzis (not mentioning just **front** 2 tsitsis) in the left hand during entire Shma and **looking** at the tzitzis when saying the tsitsis paragraph and touching tsitsis to eyes when saying “ur’eesem oso”. **Moshe Isserlis**¹¹ in 1560 wrote in **Darkai Moshe**¹² that “I have seen people putting tsitsis on their eyes when saying “ur’eesem oso”. Later, in his book **Rama**¹³, **Moshe Isserlis** noted seeing a “few” people **kissing** the tsitsis after touching them to the eyes. This passage of the **Rama** is the first report of anyone KISSING tsitsis -- and even then he mentioned only a “few” people doing it, and not at the words “tsitsis” where we kiss but instead at the phrase phrase “ur’eesem oso”. Finally, **Arizal**¹⁴ in 1560 was the first, and perhaps only, authority to recommend what Artscroll siddur says to do: of holding tsitsis between the little finger and ring finger of the left hand during entire Shma, and when reaching the tzitzis paragraph to also grab them with right hand, and then releasing the tsitsis after saying “vnechemadim lo’ad”. But even he (**Arizal**) doesn’t mention **kissing** tsitsis during Shma (but only long after Shma is over at “lo’ad). **Shulchan Aruch Harav**¹⁵ in 1800 mentions doing everything EXCEPT kissing tsitsis during Shma itself. **Chayai Adam**¹⁶ in 1805 and **Mishna Brura**¹⁷ 1880 quote other authorities without adding anything new. **Kitzur Shulchan Aruch**¹⁸ in 1850 does mention kissing tsitsis each time “tsitsis” is said, but I don’t count that as a psak but only reporting on local custom.

⁷ **Avudraham** yr1300 Spain (quoted in Beis Yosef 24:1)

⁸ **Ribash** 1326-1408; quoted by Bes Yosef 24:4

⁹ **Yosef Caro** 1488-1575, wrote **Bes Yosef** and **Shulchan Aruch**

¹⁰ **Yosef Caro** in **Shulchan Aruch** 24:2-5)

¹¹ **Moshe Isserlis** 1520-1572, Cracow, Poland, wrote Rama, Karkai Moshe, Mapah, taught Maharshal

¹² **Moshe Isserlis**, in **Darkai Moshe** under Tur 24:4

¹³ **Moshe Isserlis**, in **Rama** at 24:2 in 1550

¹⁴ **Arizal**, Yitzchak Luria 1534-1572 Tzfat (as quoted by **B’er Haitaiv** 24:sk1 quoting **Magen Avraham** (Abraham Abele Gombiner.1633- 1683 Poland) 24:sk1, and also as quoted by **Taz** (David ben Samuel HaLevi Segal 1586-1667 Volhynia) at 61” soflatam? pr 24:sk?, and as quoted by Mishna Brura 24:sifkatan4)

¹⁵ **Shulchan Aruch Harav**, by Shneur Zalman of Liadi, (1745-1812) Lithuania, aka Shneur Zalman Baruchovitch, RaZaSh, Baal HaTanya, the Alter Rebbe, Rabbeinu HaZokein, Rabbeinu HaGodol, GRaZ. wrote Shulchan Aruch HaRav and Tanya

¹⁶ **Chayai Adam** 11:1; by Avraham ben Yechiel Danzig 1748-1820

¹⁷ **Mishna Brura** chapter 24, by Yisrael Meir (HaCohen) Kagan 1838-1933 aka Chofetz Chaim, Belarus,

¹⁸ **Kitzur Shulchan Aruch** by Shlomo ben Yosef Ganzfried, Hungary, 1804-1886

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by Mitchell Rose, Cleveland, Ohio (216)381-5566 mitchrose51@gmail.com www.mitchellrose.us **PAGE 3 of 3**

The following table lists each custom and shows who said it and when.

hold tsitsis throughout Shma	touch tsitsis to eyes at "ur'eesem oso"	view tsitsis at "ur'eesem oso"	w/left hand	front 2 tassles only	view them during entire tsitsis paragraph	kiss tsitsis at "ur'eesem oso"	between left hand's ring and little fingers	hold w/right hand also, during entire tsitsis paragraph	release & kiss them after "vnechemadim lo'ad"
Medrash Socher Tov in 900s?									
Ba'al Ha'itur in 1150	Ba'al Ha'itur in 1150								
		Yehuda Hachasid in 1200 said should do it							
Avudraham in 1300 said "some" do it									
		Ribash in 1375 said his teacher did it & it's a nice thing to do, though Ribash himself apparently didn't							
Yosef Caro in 1540	Yosef Caro in 1540		Yosef Caro in 1540	Yosef Caro in 1540	Yosef Caro in 1540				
	Moshe Isserlis in 1560					Moshe Isserlis in 1560			
Shulchan Aruch Harav in 1800			Shulchan Aruch Harav in 1800				Shulchan Aruch Harav in 1800	Shulchan Aruch Harav in 1800	Shulchan Aruch Harav in 1800
Arizal in 1560			Arizal in 1560				Arizal in 1560	Arizal in 1560	Arizal in 1560
Artscroll Siddur		Artscroll Siddur	Artscroll Siddur				Artscroll Siddur	Artscroll Siddur	Artscroll Siddur