From the time of the Talmud on, customs (minhagim) have played an essential role in Jewish personal and communal life, second in importance only to law (halakhah). Community customs—particularly in monetary matters such as taxes, but also generally—have the force of law. However, in addition to these, simple customs evolved, possibly even from family to family until they became fixed practices in each community. These were also fiercely upheld, and as long as an individual remained in a particular community he or she was also bound to observe these customs. The difference is that, of course, they did not have the force of law and violators could not be punished. Yet peer pressure, particularly in the very small towns where Jews lived in Spain, served as an effective control.

This article discusses customs as such, not customs connected with, or are themselves, law. Several books were written on legal customs such as Abraham b. Natan of Luenl and Toledo (ca. 1155–1215), whose Sefer ha-manhig is an important source for legal practices that he observed on his travels. With regard to common customs, there is much that yet needs to be investigated, particularly relating to holiday customs and practices.

1 Ibn Adret, in discussing the different customs with respect to eating bread baked by Gentiles, cites what his “teacher” (probably Nahmanides) wrote about this, and concludes: “and the custom of Jews is Torah” (Ibn Adret, Torat ha-bayit ha-arokh [Warsaw, 1882; photo rpt. Benei Berak, 1977 in Sifre ha-Rashba], Part 1:86 (f. 93b); cf. Part 2, 66, in his commentary “Mishmeret ha-bayit.”); also: “The custom of Jews is [like] Torah” (Solomon Ibn Adret, She’elot u-tehsuvot (Vilnius, 1881; photo rpt. Jerusalem, 1976), vol. 3, 4, no. 296; on monetary customs see ibid. 3: no. 392 (Livorno, 1778; photo rpt. Jerusalem, 1976), and cf. 5: no. 263 (Livorno, 1825; photo rpt. Jerusalem, 1976), vol. 3; however, see 3: no. 394 which further expands the application of community custom; 2, no. 268 (Livorno, 1657; photo rpt. Jerusalem, 1976), vol. 2 gives his general rules for community customs. Bezalel Ashkenazi cited a responsum of Nahmanides that every custom which is “simply observed” in a community (that is, not part of official enactments) is considered as established that so their early rabbis, or leaders, agreed and therefore legal judgments may be made in accord with such customs (Shitah mekubeset ... Ketuvot 2: f. 146b, col. b) (New York: Feldheim, 1953).

2 See Norman Roth, Dictionary of Iberian and Jewish Converso Authors (Madrid and Salamanca: Aben Ezra Ediciones and Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 2007), 88–89.
1 Religious Life

Adult males are required to wear a *talit* (prayer shawl) at morning prayers. “Adult,” of course, means the age of 13 and above in Jewish law. While the current custom of most Ashkenazic Jews is that only adult married males wear the *talit*, it appears that this was not necessarily the case in medieval Spain. Some manuscript illuminations, at least, show boys wearing the *talit*. When the great sage Asher b. Yehiel (ca. 1250–1327) came from Germany to Spain, he found that people were accustomed to wear a *talit* made of linen, which was not permitted by the Jews of Germany or France; nevertheless, he decided to allow this, first because shawls made of wool were not readily found in Spain and also because they depended on the ruling of Isaac al-Fāsī (1013–1108, he spent the last years of his life in al-Andalus) who permitted it.3

Solomon Ibn Adret (Barcelona, ca.1233–1310) was asked about the custom of those who walk to the synagogue on the Sabbath with the *talit* wrapped around their necks and resting on the shoulders, and whether this is not a violation of carrying since there is neither a collar nor loops by which the shawl is attached to the wearer. He replied that this is the custom of all Spain (*kal ereẓ Sefarad*), but because of a Talmudic ruling one should be careful not to fold up the sides of the *talit* so that they rest doubled up on the shoulders.4

A related question concerned the fact that since we no longer have the dye with which the central cord was dyed (*tekhelet*) the *talit* might be considered as not properly fringed and therefore it is forbidden to wear it in the streets on the Sabbath, to which he rightly replied that the first question should be if there is no *tekhelet* the *talit* is not fit to be blessed and worn even on weekdays; however, al-Fāsī had already ruled that the lack of *tekhelet* does not nullify the *talit*.5 He was also asked about “a garment called *g-v-n-y-l-h*” (Catalan *gonella*, a kind of tunic) which is divided into two separate sections, front and back, thus having four corners and whether it therefore requires *ẓiẓit* (fringes; Numbers 15:38). His reply was that such garments, also (Catalan) *cot* (an outer garment) are not really divided into four separate parts.6

Concerning *tefillin* (phylacteries), there are various issues in legal sources, some of which reveal customs. Jonah b. Abraham Gerundi (d. 1263), a renowned

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3 Isaac al-Fāsī, *She’elot u-teshuvot* (Venice, 1607) 2, 8; Y. Yudlov ed. (Jerusalem, 1994), 10–11. The statement that woolen shawls were not readily found is peculiar, since wool was common for clothing at least in northern Spain; perhaps the real explanation is that linen was cooler in the hotter climates, including even Toledo in the summer.


5 Ibn Adret, *She’elot u-teshuvot* (Vilnius, 1881; photo rpt., Jerusalem, 1976), vol. 3, 4 no. 249.

6 Ibn Adret, *She’elot u-teshuvot* (Vienna, 1812; photo rpt., Jerusalem, 1976), vol. 1, 1 no. 434.