

Blackstrap

November 2, 2023

Q The black color of my tfillin *retzuos* (straps) is fading. At what point must I blacken them? Is special tfillin dye required, or may black shoe polish be used? May a woman or child do it?



A A halacha leMoshe miSinai dictates that the *retzuos* must be black (Menachos 35a, Shulchan Aruch O.C. 33:3). If they lose their blackness, the tfillin may not be worn (Biur Halacha ibid. s.v. Halacha). They are to be “black as a raven” (Mishnah Brurah ibid. 19), but the Biur Halacha (ibid. s.v. *Haretzuos*) rules that *bedi’eved* they are kosher even if faded, so long as they look black, but *lechat’chilah* they should be blackened.

If the black has faded or flaked off from parts of the *retzuah* while the majority of the *retzuah* remains black, some permit it *bedi’eved* (Salmas Chaim 40), but others don’t (Teshuvos Vehanhagos 2:22). But even the stringent view allows insignificantly small faded spots (ibid.). If the loss of color is in a part of the *retzuah* beyond its required length, the Biur Halacha (ibid.) is unsure, but R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo Tfillin note 41) rules leniently.

Some *poskim* require the dye to be made *lishmah* (with intent for the mitzvah), so it is preferable to use specially manufactured dye to accommodate their view. (It is sold in sfarim stores). If dye made *lishmah* isn’t available, any black ink or polish that doesn’t contain nonkosher animal products may be used (Mishnah Brurah 32:8).

The making of tfillin and the writing of the parshiyos must be done by someone obligated in the mitzvah, so women and children are excluded (O.C. 39:1), but they are eligible to blacken the *batim* and *retzuos* (Mishnah Brurah 33:23). The blackening must be done *lishmah*, so a child must be directed by an adult.