

MITZVAS TEFILLIN: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

According to the Talmud,[1] Avraham's firm refusal to share in the spoils of war with the King of Sodom, and his proud, righteous proclamation that Hashem alone is his benefactor, had far-reaching results. In the merit of his statement, If so much as a thread to a shoe strap, Hashem rewarded his descendants with the mitzvah of retzuah shel tefillin (tefillin straps). The term "retzuah shel tefillin" signifies that aside from the tefillin themselves, there is a special significance to the retzuos, the straps, of the tefillin. Some relevant information:

Question: What is the correct length for the retzuos?

Discussion: The minimum length of the strap of the tefillin shel yad must be at least long enough to encircle one's upper arm, form the kesher and tighten it, extend downwards to the middle finger and encircle it three times. It is preferable and customary, however, to have a retzuah long enough so that it can be wrapped around the arm seven times[2]. The retzuah for the tefillin shel rosh must be at least long enough to encircle one's head with an additional two tefachim [approximately 7-8 inches] on each side[3]. It is preferable and customary to have longer retzuos, extending to the midsection of the body, with the right one longer than the left one[4].

Question: How wide must the retzuos be?

Discussion: While contemporary retzuos are usually fifteen millimeters wide, the minimum width of the retzuah is eleven[5] millimeters. Under extenuating circumstances, one may put on tefillin (and recite the blessings) even if the retzuah is only nine millimeters wide[6]. It is important to be aware that from wear and tear, a retzuah will frequently narrow at the point where it is tightened and fall short of the required width[7].

Question: How black must be the retzuos be?

Discussion: The outside[8] of the retzuos (i.e., the side that faces up, away from the skin) must be painted black, "black as a raven," l'chatchilah[9]. To obtain this intense shade of black, the retzuos must be blackened, allowed to dry, and blackened a second and third time. B'diavad, the retzuos are kosher as long as they can be considered black. Even if they appear to be closer to dark blue or gray, they are still kosher[10]. When the retzuos age and the blackening peels off, they should be blackened again. [Special care must be taken at the point of tightening, since frequently, the paint peels off just at that spot[11].] L'chatchilah, the retzuos should be reblackened so that not even a speck of white appears. But the retzuos are still kosher as long as they appear black to the naked

eye[12], even though they have tiny white flecks or cracks, especially if the white spots are on the part of the retzuos which are longer than the minimum length and width described earlier[13].

Question: May the retzuos be blackened by a woman or a minor?

Discussion: The blackening must be done l'shem mitzvas tefillin[14]. One who forgot to state explicitly or to bear in mind that he is blackening them lishmah, must repaint the retzuos with the proper concentration[15]. A woman may blacken the retzuos. A minor may do so only if an adult is supervising him while instructing him to blacken them l'shem mitzvas tefillin[16]. [The retzuos may be blackened at night[17].]

Question: Is one required to remove his wristwatch before binding the tefillin straps around his arm?

Discussion: Tefillin must be placed directly on the arm and head without any interference or barrier (chatzitzah). Although the Rama rules that this applies only to the tefillin (boxes) themselves, but not to the straps which are bound around the head or the arm, others are more stringent[18]. Most poskim hold that any part of the straps which is related to the knotting of the tefillin, both shel rosh and shel yad, must be put directly on the body without any interference. It follows, therefore, that one is not required to remove his wristwatch before binding the straps around his lower arm, since that area is not at all related to the knotting of the tefillin[19]. Still many people are accustomed to remove their wristwatch before putting on tefillin[20], and it is proper that they continue doing so, since there are some poskim who are more stringent and recommend that there be no obstruction on any part of the arm or head where the tefillin retzuos are bound[21].

Question: Is long hair considered a chatzitzah between the head and the tefillin shel rosh?

Discussion: Some poskim[22] are very strict on this issue. They rule that long hair is not a natural outgrowth of the body and it constitutes a chatzitzah. Other poskim[23] consider hair to be an extension of the body no matter what its length. The Aruch ha-Shulchan[24] rules that hair in its natural place of growth is not considered a chatzitzah, and that it has become customary to allow tefillin to be placed on top of hair of any length. He adds, however, that hair which is combed over to the area where the tefillin box is placed does constitute a chatzitzah, since that hair is not in its natural place of growth. One who wears a toupee and is embarrassed to remove it in shul may put tefillin over it, but the blessing over the tefillin shel rosh may not be recited. When he comes home, he should remove the toupee, put his tefillin directly on his head, and recite the blessing. [If a toupee is attached to his head, then tefillin may be put over it with a blessing[25].]

Question: Is one obligated to fast if his tefillin fall to the ground?

Discussion: It is customary to fast if one accidentally or negligently dropped his tefillin shel yad or shel rosh and it fell to the ground or the floor[26]. [If the retzuah alone hit the floor, or if the tefillin fell onto a table or a chair, fasting is not required.] Preferably, the fast should take place on the day that the tefillin fell to the ground[27]. There are some cases of dropped tefillin where the poskim did not

require fasting but advised that charity be given instead[28]. In certain, limited cases, the poskim recommend a ta'anis dibbur instead of fasting, or additional hours of Torah study, especially in hilchos tefillin. One should consult his rav for the appropriate atonement required of him[29]. Some of the cases discussed by the poskim include the following:

- If one was not involved in the episode but merely observed as his or another person's tefillin fell to the ground[30].
- If the tefillin fell to the ground while enclosed in a tefillin bag[31] or in their protective cases (boxes)[32].
- Some hold that one need not fast if the tefillin fell from a height of less than three tefachim (approximately 10-12 inches)[33].
- Some poskim hold that fasting is required only if the tefillin fell due to negligence but not if it was accidental[34].
- If fasting will pose a hardship and make it difficult for one to fulfill his duties, the following men may be lenient about fasting and give charity instead: a physically weak person, a Torah scholar, a Torah teacher or a communal activist (askan)[35].

1. *Chulin 89a*.

2. O.C. 27:8; Mishnah Berurah 27:44.

3. Mishnah Berurah 27:44.

4. Mishnah Berurah 27:41.

5. According to the measurements of Chazon Ish. According to the measurements of Rav A.C. Naeh, the l'chatchilah minimum is 10 millimeters; See Shiurei Torah 3:37. If the retzuah shrinks to less than 9 millimeters wide and no other tefillin are available, a rav should be consulted.

6. O.C. 27:11 and Mishnah Berurah 42, 44; Aruch ha-Shulchan 27:22; Chazon Ish, O.C. 4:1; Shiurei Torah 3:37.

7. Mishnah Berurah 27:42.

8. The inside of the retzuos (the side that faced down and towards the skin), including the edges, need not be painted at all; Mishnah Berurah 33:21. See Shevet ha-Levi 9:16 for a full discussion.

9. Mishnah Berurah 33:19.

10. Beir Halachah 33:3, s.v. ha-retzuos. See Halichos Yisrael 1:16, quoting Rav Y.Z. Gustman.

11. Mishnah Berurah 33:19.

12. Salmas Chayim 3:23; Teshuvos Maharshag 1:7; Halichos Shelomo 1:4-28; Teshuvos v'Hanhagos

2:22; Yashiv Moshe pg. 87, quoting Rav S. Wosner.

13. Rav M. Feinstein was asked: How much whiteness on the tefillin straps renders them invalid? He is quoted (Guide to Practical Halachah, vol. 1, pg. 158) as answering: "For what is needed for the shiur, we are stringent—even if a tiny drop is not black, the area must be repainted. Beyond that, the amount does not matter unless it is really noticeable." See also Zichron Eliyahu (based on the rulings of Rav Y.S. Elyashiv) 20:7.

14. L'chatchilah, the l'shem mitzvas tefillin must be stated aloud; see Mishnah Berurah 11:4; 32:24.

15. Beur Halachah 33:4, s.v. pasul.

16. Mishnah Berurah 33:23.

17. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv and Rav C.P. Scheinberg, quoted in Mevakshei Torah, vol. 4, pg. 415.

18. Mishnah Berurah 27:16.

19. Although Doveiv Meisharim 2:37 rules that one should remove his wristwatch, he retracted that ruling in later years (Yechaveh Da'as 3:2).

20. Emes l'Yaakov, O.C. 27, note 31.

21. See Peri Megadim (Mishbetzos) 27:4; Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:26; Rav. C. Kanievsky (Doleh u'Mashkeh, pg. 31).

22. Machatzis ha-Shekel 27:4; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 10:6; Mishnah Berurah 27:15.

23. See Keren l'David 10; Eretz Tzvi 1:6; Halichos Shelomo 1:4-6 and Devar Halachah 6.

24. 27:14.

25. Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:40-18.

26. Mishnah Berurah 40:3; Igros Moshe, O.C. 3:3.

27. Be'er Heitev, O.C. 571:1; Kaf ha-Chayim 40:6.

28. Some recommend that the amount should be the sum total one spends on food for a single day; see Shevet ha-Levi 5:5.

29. See Rivevos Efrayim 6:14 quoting Rav Y.Y. Kanievsky; Az Nidberu 8:20.

30. Sha'arei Teshuvah 40:1; Igros Moshe, O.C. 3:3; Halichos Shelomo 1:12-39, Devar Halachah 50.

31. Mishnah Berurah 40:3; Aruch ha-Shulchan 44:3.

32. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (oral ruling, quoted in Avnei Yashfei 2:1). See Shevet ha-Kehasi 4:26 for a dissenting opinion.

33. Kaf ha-Chayim 40:7.

34. See Da'as Torah 44:1.

35. Chida (Chayim Sho'al 12); Da'as Torah 44:1; Ben Ish Chai (Chayei Sarah 18); Yabia Omer 2:28. See also O.C. 571:1 and Mishnah Berurah.

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