

Jews and Tattoos

Kosher Ink: The Emerging World of Tattooed Jews

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WHEN I was a boy, the only Jewish people I knew with tattoos were Holocaust survivors. The faded numbers inked on their arms, their immigrant accents, the Yiddish they spoke together—this left a mark on my identity as indelible as any tattoo. Those numbers were a reminder of a painful tragedy reflected in a symbol of hate and genocide. Seeing tattoos from the Holocaust was also a testament to survival and a poignant reminder of a history of persecution. Tattooed Jews of my grandparents' generation served as a deterrent against getting tattooed for me and many other contemporary Jews.

However, when I spotted my first Hebrew tattoo several years ago, it sparked my intense interest. I spent the last four years working on the film and book project *Tattoo Jew*. I have conducted interviews, compiled research, filmed, written, and lectured on this topic. This placed me in a unique position as a primary source on the emerging culture of tattooed Jews.

For a Jewish person, getting a Jewish tattoo is an act rooted in conflict. There is the disapproval of family and community, there are the religious prohibitions, and there is the powerful deterrent of the Holocaust as a cultural memory. Most of the people choosing to get tattoos, particularly tattoos with Jewish themes and images, are under the age of thirty-five. Most people over the age of fifty are profoundly resistant to the idea of Jews with tattoos, regardless of their level of religious observance. There is a rift about tattoos that is deeper and more dramatic than on any other issue. My work is dedicated to examining tattoos in a Jewish context. I also explore the desire to connect to Jewish identity through tattoo art that is unique and often beautiful, but still highly controversial in the Jewish community.

The Judaic view on this issue is simple: Jewish people are not allowed to have tattoos. It is forbidden. The Torah prohibits tattooing where it states, “You shall not mark your flesh for the dead, nor incise any marks on yourselves: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:28). In addition, it is written that “You shall not cut yourselves,” (Deuteronomy. 14:1), which many rabbis have interpreted to include tattooing. Aside from the general

prohibition, the subsequent commentaries and historical record offer conflicting viewpoints about the exact nature and specifics of the injunction against tattoos. An anonymous author says, “If a man writes on his skin, he is culpable, but only if it leaves a permanent mark” (Mishnah, Makkot 3:6); however, the very same source goes on to add a contrary view from Rabbi Simeon ben Judah, who says, “He is not culpable unless he writes the name of God, for it is written, ‘nor incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord.’” This demonstrates an existing debate about the interpretation of the accepted prohibition against tattooing in Leviticus. I argue that the reference in Leviticus is tied to the burial practices of various pagan societies, which concurs with the view stated by Maimonides, that “this was a custom among the pagans who marked themselves for idolatry” (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 12:11). However, there are clear examples of Judaic tattooing during biblical times. One reference says, “One shall say ‘I am the Lord’s,’ another shall use the name of Jacob, another shall mark his arm ‘of the Lord’s,’ and adopt the name of Israel” (Isaiah 44:5). Following, it says, “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:16).

The widely accepted viewpoint that tattoos are not for Jews is deeply entrenched but misguided. There was a history of tattooing in Judaism according to several biblical scholars, and the texts themselves are not as clear as many people believe. The prohibition is open to interpretation, and Judaism is not a stagnant thing. We change and evolve with the times.

I suggest, therefore, that the law be interpreted to allow tattoos within certain limits. For example, I believe in prohibiting negative tattoos such as those that depict violence or nudity. I think it is also reasonable to ban tattoos of God’s name. However, I feel strongly that we should allow tattoos that illustrate Jewish themes or other healthy images such as flowers, natural scenes, and animals.

If the religious prohibition itself is not enough to keep young Jews from getting inked, there is a very popular myth that is familiar to most people. It is said that a Jewish person with a tattoo may not be buried in a Jewish cemetery. In fact, this is not true at all, as any person familiar with Jewish law can tell you. However, it has been repeated so many times that many people believe it to be a fact that they will not be welcome in a Jewish cemetery with their ink. One unexpected outcome of my work has been to debunk this misconception.

Beyond the religious prohibition, and the mistaken fear of being banned from burial in a Jewish cemetery, it is the memory of the Holocaust that has exerted the most powerful influence on the decision of many young people who are considering a tattoo. Everyone has seen old black-and-white photographs of pale and emaciated survivors at the concentration camps. The image of numbers tattooed on the arms of Jews is imprinted in the minds of Jews everywhere. The Holocaust conjures familiar images of pain and suffering. People know the stories of death camps, and they have seen photographs of trains taking Jews to their slaughter. Just some sixty years ago the Nazis killed six million Jews. The survivors have told the tales of brutality, cruelty, and mass murder. At Auschwitz, they stood in the mud, naked under gray skies. Tattoo needles buzzed as they were robbed of their individuality, marked with numbers as if they were cattle being branded. They were tattooed with those numbers as a way of dehumanizing them.

Because Jews were forcibly marked with numbers, the idea of Jewish tattoos often causes controversy in the Jewish community. For many people it is a reminder of a past that is too painful. Moreover, many parents of Jews tattooed with Jewish symbols fear for the safety of their children, feeling that they are at risk by having tattoos that call attention to their Jewish identity.

Anti-Semitism is very real, and parents' concern for the safety of their children should not be taken lightly. Many of the interview subjects in *Tattoo Jew* articulated a response to this issue directly through their tattoos. All of the people I have interviewed who have tattoos with Jewish themes get those tattoos for similar reasons; each of them wants to wear their Jewishness proudly on their skin. It is a way for them to mark themselves as Jews in an act of pride. According to Orian Livnat, a tattooed Israeli-American who has lived in the United States for most of his life, "You have to stand up for yourself. This is a way for me to show the world I am not afraid. I'm proud to be Jewish."

In one dramatic case, a woman named Marina Vainshtein has dedicated her entire body to be tattooed with images of the Holocaust. "They were humiliated, treated like animals, and then they were killed—six million Jews dead," Marina said. She has made it her mission in life to make sure that the world never forgets the atrocity of the Holocaust, a topic about which she feels passionate. "They removed all humanity from them. Jews became a number instead of being a person," she said. "They degraded them with tattoos, and dehumanized them as individuals." What she

wears on her skin is a memorial to all of the lives that were lost under the fascist regime of the Third Reich. “For me it is a way to reclaim something,” Marina told me, “It is a political act and it is a bold statement to have these tattoos. I want people to remember what happened there. It’s something so important to me that I’ve made my skin a canvas dedicated to remembering the Holocaust.”

Marina’s tattoos are not for the faint of heart. Her tattoo art is compromised of black ink and shading work only, and includes an elaborate back piece that features a skeletal angel sitting on a coffin weeping, a train driving to Auschwitz, the open doors to an oven like the ones the Nazis used to burn Jews, a field of gravestones, and a scene of a death camp being liberated. Marina has words in Hebrew across her shoulders that translate into English as “The Earth Hide Not My Blood,” taken from a book of art by Holocaust survivors. On her lower back is a Star of David in flames under which are the words in Hebrew, *lo tishkah*, meaning “never forget.” She has a number surrounded by flames tattooed on her forearm. On her stomach there is a synagogue on fire and an image of a lamp made from human skin. Across Marina’s chest, in English, are the words “Never Again” in stylized script.

Although the tattooed Jewish community is in its infancy, there is a developing synthesis of Judaic concepts, Hebrew, and Jewish-centric symbols with some of the more traditional iconography of tattooing. I have been photographing and interviewing unique people who are starting to blend traditional tattoo images with concepts from their Jewish identity. All of Orian Livnat’s tattoos use familiar tattoo images and at the same time they relate to his Jewishness. The words in his tattoos are done in Hebrew. “On my left arm there is a background of Japanese-style clouds and cherry blossoms interwoven with the image of the world on fire in blue flames, and *chai*, the Hebrew word “life,” is written in the center of the world,” Orian told me. On his right arm there is a rose with six drops of blood. “One drop of blood for every million Jews killed in the Holocaust,” he said. Under the rose is a gravestone with a Star of David sitting above a flaming skull and crossbones and the Hebrew word *zakhor*, which means “remember.” Next to the tombstone is a dove designed in the traditional style of a tattooed bluebird; it is stabbed through with a long dagger; a banner next to it reads “Tragedy.” On his elaborate chest piece, with cherubic angels and the words *imma* and *abba*, meaning “mother” and “father,” written on a banner in Hebrew, there is a Star of

David designed like a nautical star (a five-pointed star historically tattooed on sailors, characterized by each point being divided half in black and half in color). Orian has found a creative way to join the worlds of traditional Judaism and tattoo culture seamlessly.

Times are changing, and Judaism will, I hope, adapt to this emerging trend. Even though tattoos are forbidden under religious law, there are many Jewish people who are beginning to make connections between their tattoo work and their spirituality. In some ways it appears that Jewish people are choosing Jewish tattoos as a new form of ritual identification, a new way to embrace and cement their identity and spirituality. While it may not be popular among religious traditionalists, what interview subjects say is that their Jewish tattoos are as important to them as any Jewish rituals in their lives. I am not suggesting that tattoos will replace the *bris* or the bar mitzvah, but there is a significant movement to use tattoos as a supplemental, personal ritual. I often explain the prevalence of Jewish-themed tattoos as being a unique combination of a bar mitzvah and wearing a yarmulke; it serves to deepen a personal connection with Jewish identity while marking oneself publicly as a Jew. According to Dylan Weiswasser, “My tattoos do not keep me from connecting with God—it’s the opposite. I pray every day because if I don’t, I feel vexed inside. I say a prayer for protection, and I ask the Lord to be my strength and shield as he was with King David. My ink is my covenant with myself, and I think God would approve. Plus, the Star of David on my elbow always reminds me that the world is judging me for being Jewish.”

Tattoos demonstrate an identity that is permanently etched in ink. The interview subjects in *Tattoo Jew* are finding new ways of expressing their Jewish pride. They are using their tattoos to reinforce their Judaism and are deeply connected to their Jewish roots. Although they may see themselves as outsiders in parts of the Jewish community, their tattoos express a desire for belonging. It is a statement for a Jewish person to get inked with words and symbols expressing Jewish heritage. This is a profound metaphorical act with deep resonance. These tattoos are dramatic, often purposefully so. They carry the heavy weight of Jewish culture, history, and religion in ways that even tattooed Jews themselves find surprising. This new and growing expression of Jewishness is an act of defiance and yet also an act of pride.

There is a growing trend of Jewish people, one that explores a new Jewish identity, written or expressed as artistic and symbolic pieces

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drawn directly on the body. We are known as the People of the Book, a fact taken literally by tattooed Jews. They are wearing their Judaism on their skin in visually stunning tattoo art. They are writing the modern history of their Judaic selves on their own skin. By examining seemingly extreme behavior on the margins of Jewish culture, we stand to learn a great deal about what it means to be Jewish. Through *Tattoo Jew* I am exposing an emerging expression of Jewishness, which speaks directly to the culture and experience of a younger generation. This is a study of the complexities of the individual in relation to religious law, the struggle against assimilation, and the desire to maintain a strong Jewish self. The Jewish community can benefit as a whole by seeing this trend as one of the many ways we define who we are and how we choose to express our identity to the world.