TWO

THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Leviticus 19:28

וְשֶׂרֶט לָנֶפֶשׁ לֹא תִתְּנוּ בִּבְשַׂרְכֶם וּכְתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע לֹא תִתְּנוּ בָּכֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה׃

Today, one of the most accepted (Jewish) translations of the Tanakh is the Jewish Publications Society translation, most recently revised in 2005. The translation of Leviticus 19:28 states, "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise[1] any marks on yourselves: I am יהוה."

The bulk of the Torah is comprised of the laws by which Jews are expected to live in the world. However, the Hebrew word Torah does not strictly mean "law" and the book is not intended to be read as a law code[2] – much of the text is narrative and poetry and even the sections dealing with law are not laid out as a strict code. If you believe that the Torah was not transmitted orally from God to Moses and then transcribed by his hand, you can accept the theory that the Torah was compiled and edited from material that originated at difference stages

---

[1] "קַעֲקַע" – In many other translations, this is rendered as tattoo.

[2] Edward Greenstein, "B. Biblical Law," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry Holtz, 83-104 (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 84.

of ancient Israelite history.[3] From this, it easily follows that the laws laid out in different parts of Torah reflect varying sources and practices and may even contradict one another. However, rabbinic sources and even some orthodox rabbis today reject this theory and try to make sense of the Torah as if it was written in one sitting "*al pi Adonai, b'yad Moshe*" ("from the mouth of God, by the hand of Moses." In either case, it is still a challenge to make sense of such a diverse and circuitous document. The desire to reconcile seemingly contradictory passages, or determine the real intention of the document has led to the extensive collection of rabbinic interpretations and later commentaries that have followed since the first codification of Torah.

…

Rochelle Kamins

I offer my own translation and explication of Leviticus 19:28, with reverence for and in the style of all those commentators who came before me.

וְשֶׂרֶט לָנֶפֶשׁ לֹא תִתְּנוּ בִּבְשַׂרְכֶם וּכְתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע לֹא תִתְּנוּ בָּכֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה׃

And a cut[a] to the soul,[b] do not put into[c] your flesh; and this[d] written imprint[e] do not put on yourselves:[f] "I am יהוה[g]."

[a] *Seret* (שֶׂרֶט) is any kind of cut, gash, or wound. The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* gives the following translation: "to make gashes in oneself (a mourning ritual)". The word occurs only

---

[3] *ibid.*, 98.

four times, twice in Leviticus (19:28 and 21:5, usually referring to sideburns) and twice in Zechariah (12:3 in the infinitive absolute: שָׂרוֹט יִשָּׂרֵטוּ.) In the Zechariah case the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* notes the meaning as "to injure oneself grievously, badly." This dictionary makes very clear the connection between this act and mourning rituals. In addition, laceration as a mourning rite seems to have been universal in the ancient Near East.[4] The usual translation "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead" might work better if the Hebrew were arranged as such: וְשֶׂרֶט לֹא תִתְּנוּ בִּבְשַׂרְכֶם - "And a wound, don't put in your flesh." But there is still the question of what to do with לָנֶפֶשׁ (discussed below).

[b] *Nefesh* (נֶפֶשׁ) is translated in many ways. The *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* (BDB) translates it as "soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion, and passion." The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* translates it as "throat, breath, living being, people, personality, life, soul, and dead soul." According to the BDB, it appears 760 times in *Tanakh* (though the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* counts only 754 times). In the early chapters of Torah, *nefesh* is primarily rendered as life or used to refer to living beings, both human and non-human. (See Gen. 1 – the Creation Story – for examples of this rendering.) Later, in the Jacob/Esau episode (Gen. 27), *nefesh* is commonly translated as "innermost" (as in "innermost blessing"). As we move farther along in the text, *nefesh* is given deeper meaning. In Genesis 34 (the story of Dina), Shechem is described as "longing for" or "being drawn to" Dinah. The Hebrew states וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ, literally "and his *nefesh* clung". A proper translation of this line could easily be that his *soul* clung to her because he so loved her (which is the implication of the text). In

---

[4] Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17-22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1693.

addition, when referring to God and the relationship between the Israelites and God, the text demands that the Israelites love God or seek out God with all their hearts and *souls* (this combination is common: בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשֶׁךָ). In these references the translations often render *nefesh* as soul (as opposed to body or flesh). Other support for the theory that *nefesh* has a more metaphysical meaning is in the relationship described between David and Jonathan. Using the JPS translation, 1 Samuel 18:1 says, "When David finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul (*nefesh*) became bound up with the soul (*nefesh*) of David; Jonathan loved David as himself (*nafsho*)." In many instances, *nefesh* is translated as soul when the context implies deep love or a powerful relational connection. If we are looking at a prohibition against imitating mourning rituals, then the translation here of a "cut to the soul" works perfectly – "cut to the soul" being the extreme pain of loss, and the prohibition then against taking that emotional pain and manifesting it physically in cutting or markings. According to *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, in Psalms 69:11, 1 Samuel 1:15, Isaiah 53:12 (and a small number of other instances) *nefesh* is used to describe extreme sorrow and longing, a sense of true loss and despair. It is not combined with *seret* in any other case, but in Job 24:12 it is combined with חלל meaning "soul of the wounded" (King James Version). *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* translates the Job combination (נֶפֶשׁ־חֲלָלִים) as "pierced ones".

I have also rendered the *lamed* as "to" for improved readability and to indicate the directionality of the verse – that a cut to the soul should not be conferred to the body; specifically, an emotional scar should not leave a physical scar. Because I have rearranged the entire structure of the sentence, and because most translations render *nefesh* in a physical sense, other translations are

less helpful in determining the most effective translation of the *lamed*. While it could work to translate the לְ (as most commentators have) as "in" (ie. "A cut in the soul, do not put into your flesh"), it is more expressive in the way that I have rendered it as "to." Within the text there is a stronger directionality implied, a more personal wounding. Both the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* and the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* support this rendering in that they offer multiple definitions for *lamed* ("to" being one of them).

[c] According to the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, *natan* (the infinitive form of תִּתְּנוּ) occurs almost 2000 times in *Tanakh* (1919 times precisely). The BDB, translates it as "give, put, or set." In the context of thinking about taking an emotional pain and assigning it to the physical, I found the translation "put into" best articulated that sense. There is, indeed, some precedent for this as well. As found in the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, in Deuteronomy 15:17 the verb *natan* is used literally as "put into." In the case where a slave determines that he desires to remain with his master, the master is instructed to take an awl and נָתַתָּה בְאָזְנוֹ ("thrust it into the ear") as a sign of the slave's devotion. Here it means physically piercing the ear.

[d] Emphasis placed on "*this*" (and added into the translation) to assert that there is a specific imprint we are commanded against putting on ourselves, namely "אֲנִי יְהוָה." This translation choice comes from the traditional commentators (found in Mishna Makkot 3:6, Talmud Bavli Makkot 21a, and the Rambam and discussed below) who suggested that the prohibition laid out in Leviticus 19:28 is specifically against tattooing names of deities (which *was* a practice of the pagans at the time) in the skin as a manifestation of idolatrous worship.

[e] The construct, *k'tovet ka'a'ka'* (כְּתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע) appears only once (namely, here) in all of the Tanakh. According to the BDB קַעֲקַע is defined as "incision, imprintment, or tattoo." כְּתֹבֶת (probably related to the root כתב (writing) is defined as "a writing (mark or sign) of imprintment, scriptio stigmatis.") Hebrew Strong's Dictionary defines קַעֲקַע as "an incision or gash" and adds "mark." The construct as it is, כְּתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע may explain why later commentators debated what constituted breaking the commandment – whether it was the writing, or the imprinting; the wounding or the inking (though ink is not mentioned in the Torah directly, it is assumed in later commentaries that the mark being prohibited was inked wounds – tattooing – similar to what idolaters were doing at the time). Interestingly, according to Geza Vermes in *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, a version of this verse existed in the Qumran text (11Q48:9).[5] There it states, "You shall not gash yourselves or shave your forelocks in mourning for the dead, nor shall you tattoo yourselves, for you are a holy people to YHWH, your God."

[f] I chose to use a colon here to specify the statement that is prohibited. See comment (d).

[g] I have chosen not to translate יהוה into YHWH or some other English rendition of the construct. If the prohibition was against marking one's skin with the name of a deity, and I am asserting that the specific prohibition is actually in the text, then even (or especially) in my translation, the prohibition is specifically against marking one's skin with יהוה.

My desire, through this independent translation of the text, is to take the stigma off of tattoos *in general* and refocus the prohibition on what I believe the original intent of the text was;

---

[5] Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Alan Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997), 207.

to follow in the Reform tradition of engaging with and personalizing the Jewish experience. As will be discussed below in the traditional *halakha*, many agree that the prohibition in Leviticus is specific to tattoos of a certain and definitive type (i.e. names of pagan gods); this work intends to remind (or inform) readers of this fact and enable people to begin to look at today's tattoos with new, less judgmental, eyes. But first, I will return to the traditional sources to see where this stigma all began.

SIX

JEWS AND TATTOOS

As tattooing has become more popular within the general culture, it has also gained popularity within the Jewish community. Numerous articles and news stories have been written in recent years trying to understand and explain why young Jews are going against the "norm" and against Jewish law in such high numbers to join the multitude of people getting tattooed.[6] These articles fail to properly illustrate the number of people using the art of tattooing for religious self-expression. Jews of all ages are relating to the aforementioned modern primitive ideal and using the act of body modification as a way to physically reconnect to their own Jewish spirituality. As will be shown below, "for many, the voluntary and literal self-identification through branding represents a reclamation of the chastened body and enforced identity of the Jew by and as the Other."[7] That is, whereas in the past external forces have negatively branded the Jew as "other", a "Jewish" tattoo today is a way for the individual to take back the label of "other" and reform it in a positive light.

---

[6] See Kate Torgovnick, "Skin Deep: For Some Jews, It Only Sounds Like 'Tabboo'," *The New York Times, Fashion & Style section*, July 17, 2008; Anath Hartmann, "Burning Pride Tattoos Mark Identity, Yet Raise Questions," *Washington Jewish Week*, August 10, 2005; Rachel Freedenberg, "Tattoo Taboo: Getting Inked is a Personal Choice," *j.*, August 29, 2008.; Shoshana Hebshi, "Tattooed Jews," *j.*, January 16, 2004.

[7] Dora Apel, "The Tattooed Jew," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, 300-320 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 302.

In talking about tattoos, it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the pink elephant in the room: the Holocaust. Barring the erroneous prohibition against being buried in a Jewish cemetery, Holocaust memory becomes one of the major deterrents to a Jew thinking about choosing to get a tattoo.[8] Images of Jews branded like cattle, forcibly tattooed, makes the idea of Jews with intentional tattoos extremely problematic for many Jews. Some can not fathom why one would choose to tattoo oneself given the horrible experience of so many who were forced to endure this experience. And yet, for a large number of tattooed Jews, choosing to get a tattoo is specifically in reaction to the Holocaust. In my own experience, I knew a man with a Holocaust memorial tattoo on his forearm. Being a gay Jew, he chose to tattoo *zachor* (remember), flanked by a bright pink triangle and bright yellow Star of David on his left inner forearm. He told me he once came across a man who said to him, "Nice tattoo. Let me show you mine." He then rolled up his sleeves and showed the numbers that had been tattooed on his arm at a concentration camp during the Holocaust. The man told my friend he was honored and touched that young people were taking it upon themselves to remember the horrors he had personally experienced. He was especially touched by the manner by which my friend chose to show his solidarity. This is not as uncommon as it may sound, despite seeming somewhat counter-intuitive. Most notable is photographer Marina Vainshtein who has dedicated her skin to be a Holocaust memorial. Her entire back and much of her body is covered with Holocaust imagery: train transports, prisoners in striped pajamas, smoke billowing above ovens, swastikas, ashes, and biblical phrases are only a few of the images she displays on her skin. For her, the tattoos represent a form of explicit

---

[8] Dorff and Newman, 18.

personal commemoration and a continuation of historical memory.[9] While Vainshtein's tattoos represent the extreme in Holocaust memorial tattoos, many share her sentiment when it comes to reclaiming the act of tattooing as a snub in the face of the Holocaust experience. During WWII Jews were tattooed against their will in a way that went against the *mitzvot*. How powerful then for Jews to reclaim the art as an act of defiance to those who tried to use these laws against them.

Throughout this study, I had a theory that, to a higher degree than many people might want to admit, young Jews are using the art of tattooing as a way to embrace their Jewish identity. I decided to test my theory by creating a survey that I circulated around the internet.[10] In it I asked self-identifying Jews to discuss their feelings about tattoos – whether they had them or not. It started out with links posted on Facebook, Tribe.net, and via an email sent to the Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles campus listserv. Within a short time the survey made it to Twitter, Flickr, Hebrew College and various other sites with respondents reposting and forwarding it to their friends. I wanted to learn if I was right in my theory that Jews today are using tattoos as a mode of self-expression and religious solidarity. I also wanted to find out how much Judaism and the *halakha* influenced individuals' thinking about the subject. Mainly, I wanted to hear from real people about their Jewish tattoo experiences. While the survey certainly has its limitations – I am not a demographer, it was clearly a self-selecting group of respondents, and this is certainly not a comprehensive analysis – the findings do shed some light on the issues I hoped they would. After only two months, almost five hundred people responded

---

[9] Apel, 306.

[10] See appendix A.

to the survey. Of the 491 responses, 147 people had tattoos. Of these, 59, or 40% percent, of those with tattoos identified their tattoos as Jewish in some way. So, as I suspected, a high percentage of Jews who take the time to decide to get a tattoo (a decision that is almost never taken lightly given the permanence of the act) choose to get a tattoo with some personal Jewish meaning. Interestingly, every respondent over the age of 38 who had a tattoo (11 people) had a "Jewish" tattoo. While it was never asked explicitly, one question that this survey answers is "why do Jews get tattooed?"

In general the responses to the survey were incredibly varied but those tattoos identified as Jewish fall into four main categories: 1) Jewish symbols (i.e. Star of David, chamsa, chai); 2) Hebrew writing (in the form of names, single words, or whole Jewish texts); 3) memorial tattoos; and 4) tattoos with symbolic Jewish meaning that don't at first glance look "Jewish" to an outsider (that is, the tattoo needs explaining – only the wearer knows what makes the tattoo "Jewish"). As with most tattoos, an overarching theme was a desire for the image or words to indicate some aspect of a person's identity (usually their Jewishness, but sometimes something more). For instance, one respondent has a scroll and pen because he is a writer. (Figure 1) In the wearer's mind this tattoo is also identified as loosely linked to Scriptures. It is a tattoo that captures a component of his identity that overlaps his secular life and religious identity.

Figure 1

The following is a selection of actual answers to the survey, where respondents explain, in their own words, the tattoos they have and what gives them their "Jewish" meaning. It is organized along the same categories described above. Many of the responses reflect issues discussed in this work in general – a desire to express their identity and connection with Jews and Judaism, rather than simply an act of rebellion; Holocaust as well as personal memorials; even the idea of *betzelem Elohim* is vaguely reflected in one answer: "[My tattoo] is a seahorse/ dragon/unicorn/bat creature with a banner underneath it that says '*kadosh*' in Hebrew to represent being created in one's own image and the holiness of self-creation."

Jewish Symbols:

Star of David

> A 3D design of the Star of David. I was leaving my hometown and primary Jewish community for college and wanted to commemorate the transition. Obvious symbolic meaning for Judaism because for me being Jewish is obvious but the tattoo is in a very concealed location because my faith identity does not need to be an outwardly obvious part of who I am.

It is a Star of David surrounded by flames. I wanted the tattoo to be visible. It expresses my pride in who I am. My tattoos express my Jewish identity and my willingness to publicly identify as a Jew…my tattoos are visible. One of my Jewish tattoos is on my forearm and the other on my bicep. My "Jewishness" is engraved in my skin...there is no quick fix to hide, change or alter it.

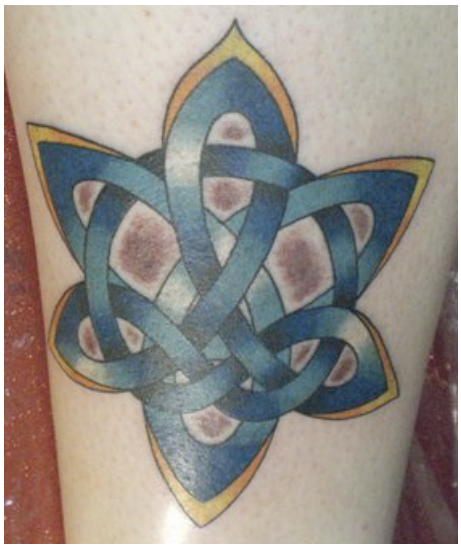


Figure 2

It is a Star of David but the lines intersect in the middle to create a celtic knot. My name, Rebecca, means knotted, tied, or bound in Hebrew (at least according to baby name books). So I knew I wanted a Star of David to symbolize my Judaism and the Hebrew root of the word as well as a knot of some sort. (Figure 2)

The tattoo is the Jason Voorhees [of Hollywood's "Halloween" movie fame] hockey mask with two machetes crossed in front. In the forehead of the mask is a Star of David. My name is Jason and I am Jewish. The tattoo clearly captures these two components of my identity.

Star of David on my chest. Looks like it's cut out of the chest with a heart and smoke revealed. I wanted something to show how important being Jewish is to me. That if you removed my "Jewishness" you would remove my heart and soul.

Chai

For me it represents the struggle I had with my life during my 18th year, where chai represents 18 and it reminds me the importance of life and the struggles that come with it.

The tattoo is a women's symbol (venus's mirror) with a chai in the middle of it. It expresses my identity as a Jewish feminist.

Hamsa

I have a chamsa tattoo on my shoulder, and it has a heart, a star of david, olive branches, and an eye inside. When I moved to college, I found it difficult to hold on to all the Jewishness I had once embraced myself in. Growing up, I taught religious school for 4 years of high school, was on the board of my synagogue's youth group, and was

confirmed. I was heavily involved in the traditions and practices of Judaism. I found it hard to be as involved at the college level, and the tattoo signifies a constant bind to Gd and to my faith as well as a sense of knowing Judaism will never turn its back on me.

Hamsa tattoo with flames. The hamsa has personal meaning in that who picked it out, its traditional meaning of warding away the evil eye and the flame behind it which represents some challenges I faced in my life. (Figure 3, left)

It was a necklace charm given to me for my high school graduation. I passed the charm along to a friend traveling abroad to teach English. The hamsa has a small heart at its enter. This tat symbolizes protection. It is a symbol I have always been fond of, partly because it is rooted in middle eastern culture, not just specifically Jewish. I have always liked the notion that the hand of the hamsa helps to ward of the evil eye. I collect hamsot, including the one on my ankle.

Hebrew Writing:

Text

Four lines or writing on their side on my left shoulder blade. The first line is my Hebrew name and gentile name. The 2nd is my torah portion from my Bat *Mitzvah* in English and Hebrew. The 3rd is the date of my Bat *Mitzvah* in English and Hebrew. The 4th is in loving memory of my grandparents and has their names. The tattoo expresses my commitment to Judaism through my Bat *Mitzvah* and honors my grandparents.

On the inside of my right arm I have "*Lo yisa goy el goy cherev. Lo yil m'du od milchama*" done in modern, Hebrew type. I have been a pacifist my whole life, and this is a song that's always been important to me. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they ever prepare for war. It reminds me that we all have the capacity to be peaceful, and to spread peace, love, and joy through out the world. Perhaps the most important message in Judaism.

I have a tattoo of part of the *v'ahavta* on my back. With all my heart, and all my soul and with all my might (abundance). It means so many things – love, faith, and more. It reminds me of how to live. (Figure 4)

Figure 4

Single Words

The word *shema* (in Hebrew). Sh'ma feels like the cornerstone of my verbal Jewish identity. I have said it every night since I was about 7yo -- though with periods of stopping due to not feeling connected to G-d. I figured that if I were to have a tattoo for the rest of my life, it had to be something that I knew would be true for me always. My identity has shifted in many ways, but I have always been, and will always be Jewish.

It says "*b'sheret*," the Yiddish word for "it was destined." It's just Hebrew letters with no vowels on the inside of my left wrist. My twin sister and I got matching tattoos because our parents only wanted one child, but they got identical twins, so we felt that it was "destined". My parents mostly approved of the idea because the word was used a lot in their (inter-faith) wedding. I guess, to my whole family, it suggests that "God" brings certain pairs of people together for a reason.

The female, singular form of love in Hebrew "*ahava*" intertwined with the masculine, singular form of love in Arabic "*hube*". It is not a political tattoo. Rather, it is a hope that these are more connected than separate. It is my own idea of "one love" and emphasizes unity. My sister has a matching tattoo on her foot. She decided to get it because she both liked the message but also because it connected us. Currently, my

father and I share a tree of life tattoo. My sister and I share another. My mother refuses to join the club.

Figure 5

It's three Hebrew letters with an apostrophe. The Hebrew letters of *bet*, *samech*, apostrophe *daled* – which is the abbreviation of the Aramaic words "*B'Siyata D'Shmaya*" which means "With G-d's help." I was raised Orthodox and currently identify as Modern Orthodox and I'm gay – so I always struggled with my relationship with G-d and Leviticus – these 3 letters were written on every paper I wrote on during my 16 years in yeshiva – they were close to me and it bonds my connection to Hashem. I have it on my bicep where I would normally lay my tefillin. (Figure 5)

Names

The tattoo is my name, in Hebrew, on my upper arm. Throughout my life I have felt more and less "Jewish" depending on where I am and my current connection to the religion, but my Hebrew name reminds me of my deeper familial and cultural connection to Judaism that is there regardless of my current beliefs/practices. I knew that getting a tattoo to celebrate my Judaism was somewhat of an oxymoron to most people, but I am not that concerned with following rules for rules' sake. I think Judaism and one's connection to it spiritually is a very complex and personal thing, and the ways that I celebrate and memorialize things on my body is much the same. For me, my tattoo represents an important and lasting part of me and it feels fitting that it is permanently marked on me.

My name: "Kohen," surrounded by four leaves representing each one of my grandparents that has passed away. I am very proud to be Jewish and I definitely wanted a tattoo to show it. I am also very proud to be a Kohen and wanted to show that as well. I knew I wanted to incorporate a memorial for my grandparents. Judaism is about remembering our past. I feel that with my tattoo, I can remember not only my grandparents but all those who have come before me. It's a visual to all that I am proud to be Jewish and I'm not afraid to show it. (Figure 6)

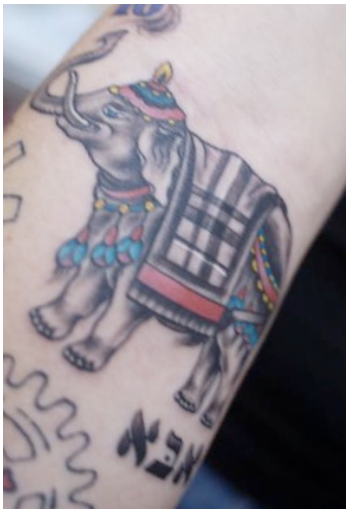
Figure 6

The "Jewish" tattoo is my Hebrew name and the reason I

got it is because my grandma gave it to me and she passed away. It's on my right wrist so I can put it over my heart.

It's my Hebrew name, *Yisraela* (written in script) curving over a chai. I had my teacher who was with me on birthright help design it. Every part of it is Jewish. My Hebrew name and a *chai* (the symbol for life) are important to me.

Memorial Tattoos:



I have a memorial tattoo for my dad. He collected elephants so I have a beautiful elephant with the Hebrew word for dad incorporated in it. As a memorial tattoo I chose something that was significant and representational of my dad. It is Jewish because it represent my family, my roots. (Figure 7, left)

The tattoo is on my left shoulder and is the word Tarzan in the logo classically depicted on the cover of Tarzan and the Golden Lion. This tattoo is essentially a link to my dad and my grandfather, because all three of us read the first-edition printing of the book Tarzan of the Apes when we were respectively around ten years old. As avid outdoorsmen, my Dad and I both loved Tarzan's jungle ethics, and I think we both viewed Tarzan as the ultimate (and maybe the first) superhero. I think of my Dad and my Grandpa every time I see my tattoo, which is all the time! Remembering the ones who came before us is a fundamental of Judaism.

Tattoos With No Obvious-at-First-Glance Jewish Meaning

The tattoo is a tree meant to represent the Tree of Life. The *etz chaim* is a central symbol in Judaism. The themes that emerge from the symbol are all relevant to my decision to choosing this tattoo. I combined a few different tree designs into one that I liked. The tree has great meaning to me. I am drawn to the rootedness needed in order for growth to happen. I am also very intrigued by Torah as a tree of life.

On my chest it reads, "Never Again" Both in remembrance of the Holocaust and that this moment will "Never Again" be here and I should enjoy it while it lasts. Judaism is about remembering our past.

I have a Buddha tattoo on my right arm that has the Buddha with the chakras symbols displayed. The heart chakra is a Mogen David. A symbol of what is in my heart.

It is a sun on the inside of my ankle, with sunset colors and a braid going around my ankle. The braid is the Shabbat challah or Havdalah candle. The sun is the seasons in my life path. (Figure 8, right)

Here are some interesting general findings about the people who responded to the survey.

Of the 147 respondents with tattoos that were not necessarily "Jewish":

- 77% were born Jewish
- 15% were between the ages of 18 and 22
- 48% identify themselves as Reform or Liberal
- 30% have a graduate degree or higher
- 71% had a Bar or Bat *Mitzvah*
- 42% claimed to have learned their Judaism from Jewish camp
- Almost 29% waited more than a year before getting the tattoo they decided on
- Only 36% considered Jewish law important to some degree when considering the tattoos – the most important factor was friends' opinions.

Of the 59 who have "Jewish" tattoos:

- 91% were born Jewish
- 27% were between the ages of 18 and 22
- 57% identify themselves as Reform or Liberal (though there were respondents who identified as every different type of Jew)
- 32% have a graduate degree or higher
- 86% had a Bar or Bat *Mitzvah*
- 60% claimed to have learned their Judaism from Jewish camp
- Over 40% waited more than a year before getting the tattoo they decided on
- Almost 60% considered Jewish law important to some degree when considering the tattoos – more important than any other single factor

Ultimately, these responses show that for many Jews, getting a tattoo is truly a religious experience. The mark they choose to put on their body binds them to their Judaism in a permanent and very visible way. Many choose to put their tattoos in obvious locations because of pride and a desire for everyone to know who they are; others choose to keep their tattoos

concealed because it is more a personal statement for them, not something they want to shove in everyone's face. Many find ways to intertwine Jewish symbology with images that hold personal meaning. The survey serves to underscore the fact that tattooing is not, as previously judged, a purely hedonistic act; it is one being done thoughtfully and intentionally. Just as the modern primitives use tattooing to include them in a tribe of people who practice extreme body arts, or gang members use certain styles of ink to brand them as part of the gang, so too are Jews using tattooing to express their place in the "tribe" of Jews.

SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Throughout this work, I have discussed traditional text, traditional *halakha*, modern *halakha*, a look at the rising tattooing phenomenon in general and finally a pointed look at Jews and tattoos. This study is specific to the American Jewish experience and mainstream responses to tattooing. The results would likely be varied when looking at other global communities. However, my inclination is that, as the world community shrinks, the phenomenon may extend in similar fashion to other Jewish communities around the world. As with any Jewish text the biblical verse is never the last word; there is commentary on the text and then commentary on the commentary to seemingly no end. As I noted earlier, for me this is the beauty of Judaism: it is a living tradition, open to ever changing interpretations and always hoping to find a way to work in concert with society at large.

As a study written by a soon-to-be Reform Rabbi, this work clearly reflects my liberal and Reform roots. Having been raised with the mantra that the *mitzvot* are guidelines rather than absolutes and that the ideal is for every Jew to make an informed choice about the way he or she practices Judaism, I have attempted to shed this particular light on the specific *mitzvah* prohibiting tattooing. Because of the Holocaust and general societal discomfort with the art, tattoos have, until recently, been blanketly dismissed as antisocial, deviant, or pathological acts.

What is true today, though, is that many Jews are choosing this form of art to express their distinct Jewish identity. In my view it is not enough for the modern *responsa* to simply dismiss tattooing because 'tradition says it's wrong' or because 'that's not what Jews do.' The reality is that for many, tattooing is becoming a positive *Jewish* act, a new Jewish art form. In fact, photographer Eric Schwartz is currently working on an exhibition documenting this specific topic – Jews who are using the art of tattooing to express their Judaism.

Norms change over time. And in every age the biblical rules are subject to reassessment and realignment with cultural norms. Jewish values need to always take into account the social realities. For example, consider what happened to the prohibition laid out in Deuteronomy 22:5. There it states, "A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD your God."[11] This prohibition is often referred to as "*beged ish*" (literally men's clothes). Up until modern times it was expected that women would not wear pants and men would not wear dresses. This expectation is no longer the case – it is completely acceptable for women to wear "men's clothes" (i.e. pants) and men are more and more accepted in traditionally viewed "women's clothes."[12] Over time, a commonly accepted prohibition from Torah was overturned because it just didn't fit with the broader societal norms.[13]

---

[11] JPS Translation.

[12] Consider men in drag, or to a less extreme degree, consider the number of men (gay and straight) who wear make-up, nail polish, etc. Just look at Hollywood.

[13] It should be noted that within the Orthodox and more traditional communities, there are certainly still remnants of rules that have been thrown out by the more liberal movements.

She may not know it, but in the introduction to her *Guide to Getting a Tattoo*, Teresa Green enunciated one of Reform Judaism's key ideals. She states, "When people have the information for an informed choice, there's no excuse for a bad one, and the likelihood of a bad choice is much diminished."[14] Wonderfully, this is how many modern Jews are approaching the issue of tattooing. They see the rise in popularity, feel the pressure from their peers, and yet have figured out how to make the art of tattoo a Jewish art – make it an act that is authentically Jewish and truly a piece of their tribal culture. Of course there are people who get tattoos on a dare or under the misguided influence of drugs or alcohol; but I have found that more and more people are thinking seriously about using this art form, taking time and energy to make the right decision for them.

Ultimately, what I have tried to do here is show that the *mitzvah* against tattooing is a *mitzvah* no more powerful or more binding than any other *mitzvah*. According to Jewish tradition every *mitzvah* is equal, none more important than another. And yet, tattooing is so stigmatized that people don't even want to talk about it. Older generations want to sweep the phenomenon under the rug as a passing fad; young people are afraid to look into it because of the myth of burial. But tattooing is like eating pork – something Jews are commanded not to do but many do nonetheless. What makes tattooing different is that it is permanent and visible. If I choose not to follow the rules of *kashrut*, only those people who eat with me will know. If I get a tattoo on my arm, anyone who sees me in a t-shirt will know. It leaves the door open for blatant judgment and condescension. And yet, to their credit, many Jews are getting tattooed

---

[14] Teresa Green, *Ink: The Not-Just-Skin-Deep Guide to Getting a Tattoo* (New York: New American Library, 2005), *v*.

even in the face of this judgment. They are choosing to willingly put themselves out there as transgressors of a commandment. Because they have studied the texts, come to a place of understanding, considered their own situations, and chosen to use this form of art to express their Jewish identity.

Certainly I am not suggesting that all Jews should get tattooed. I am merely attempting to open a more serious dialog with the text, open the possibility for each individual to feel free to engage comfortably with Judaism and find connections that work for him or her. It is important for each individual Jew to always affirm his or her personal connections to Judaism. As norms change and society changes people's entry points into Judaism also change. Individuals who aren't interested in attending services are nonetheless interested in finding connections to other Jews. Those Jews who may have felt on the margins because of their social circles are still yearning for spiritual and religious relationships. Getting a tattoo is a powerful experience. Getting a *Jewish* tattoo is a powerful statement.