The Illustrated Jew:

A New Jewish Perspective on Tattoos

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

Over the past forty years tattooing, piercing and other forms of body modification have become more and more popular. These acts, once reserved for freaks and lowlifes, have become more mainstream and have infiltrated all levels of society. In the past five years news articles and sociological studies have started looking at tattooing in a new light, with less stigma and less judgment. Television documentary and primetime programming have done their part to help bring tattooing out of the shadows and into the public eye. Additionally, Judaism and the modern Jewish movements have recently begun responding to the phenomenon.

The topic is important in the Jewish context because until recently it has largely been ignored, brushed under the rug as a given, "don't do that" commandment. But the reality is that many people are doing it; many Jews are getting tattooed, joining the ranks of tattooed Jews and modified people. And this work serves to validate those Jews taking the art seriously. Many Jewish publishing companies have released works that offer textual resources and purport to take no stands about the acceptance of such acts. However, in this piece, I hope to show that the mitzvah that prohibits tattooing is not as clear-cut as it has seemed or been taken. For many it is easy to read the text and accept it as absolute. But the reality is that in almost every case, text is never absolute. There are nuances and undertones; accepted subtleties and implications. In fact, until the 16th

century most Jewish authorities accepted that the biblical prohibition stated in Leviticus 19:28 was specifically intended to prohibit *pagan* practices. Today, we would be hard pressed to define tattooing as merely a pagan practice. Especially in the face of the number of Jews using the art as a *Jewish* practice. Rather, tattooing is becoming just another art form with the body just another canvas.

Essentially, this work serves to trace the verse (Leviticus 19:28) through all the traditional texts and many modern commentaries. It follows the Jewish tradition of full engagement with the text. I felt that there was a lack of comprehensive writing on the subject from a Jewish perspective. There are many recent works that offer a discussion of tattoos and body modification. In most, if they mention Judaism and the Jewish relationship with tattooing at all, they do one of two things: either dismiss it outright by saying "according to Judaism, tattooing is prohibited," or they offer interpretations of bible that imply that tattooing was a practice of ancient Israelites (a subject I touch on in this study) but don't support their theories or delve much further into the idea. There have been no comprehensive studies done that deal specifically with the phenomenon of Jews getting *Jewish* tattoos, a phenomenon I first witnessed while working at a Jewish summer camp supervising a surprising number of college-age Jews with Jewish tattoos. I was struck by the number of such Jews and the stories they told about their decisions to get tattooed.

In this work, I begin with the biblical text itself, translating it and offering a selection of varied and prominent bible scholars' perspectives on the passage. I also offer

my own reading of the text as a modern voice. From there I return to the traditional *halakhic* sources to show what traditional Judaism has said about the text. This includes a discussion of the Mishna, Talmud, Maimonides, and the Shulkhan Arukh. The next section is a look at what modern Jewish authorities from the Reform and Conservative movements have to say about tattoos and how the issue is being handled in Jewish educational settings. Next I discuss tattoos and the tattoo renaissance in general including an interview with Fakir Musafar. And finally I move to a pointed discussion of Jews and tattoos today, where I offer the words of actual Jews sharing their thoughts on their own Jewish tattoos. Through this work I hope to shed new light on the topic, specifically by offering a definitive Reform perspective. As society changes and social norms change, so the Jewish relationship with tattooing and body modification is due for a revisit.

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 of ancient Israelite history.[3] From this, it easily follows that the laws laid out in different parts of Torah reflect varying sources and

[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.
[3] *ibid.*, 98.

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.

Samson Raphael Hirsch

In the mid 19th century Samson Raphael Hirsch (June 20, 1808 – December 31, 1888) wrote his own Torah translation. Hirsch was a prominent and learned Orthodox Jew who was determined to prove that the modern world posed no problem for orthodox practice. Faced with the growth of the Reform movement and living in a blatantly anti-Semitic culture, Hirsch was engaged in what he saw as a rescue mission: rescuing rabbinic or traditional Judaism from a burgeoning Reform Movement that in his mind denigrated rabbinic teachings for being primitive and unenlightened. He was also fighting the inclination to be a "Jew in the home and a man on the street"; he strongly believed that every Jew should be a Jew no matter where he was. His goals were to teach that Torah and secular life did not contradict each other. According to Oretz, Hirsch aimed to derive explanation from the text out of itself, to arrive at this explanation from the wording in all its nuances. He also aimed to determine the true meaning of the words

from what he saw as the treasure of linguistic explanations encompassed in the traditional literature; and, on the basis of these linguistic studies combined with the halakhic and Aggadic traditions, he hoped to draw and to present the truths which could then constitute the norms of Jewish life for all time.[4] In commenting on the prohibition against tattoos, Hirsch discusses it in relation to the surrounding verses, which, when combined, presents an admonition to keep ourselves conscious of the higher moral dignity which being human entails and the necessity to make Jewish lives holy so that any act should be done thoughtfully.[5] Hirsch's commentary provides a modern halakhic perspective that attempted to remind enlightened Jews to maintain their adherence to traditional law.

Hirsch translates Leviticus 19:28: "Ye shall not make a cut in your flesh for the dead, nor make any tattooing on yourselves: I am *God*"[6] and proceeds to define and discuss various components of the text. Hirsch defines *seret* ("cut") as any kind of wounding, and points out that it is prohibited *only* if done on account of a death. This idea is not picked up by any of the later modern commentators though seems to me of utmost importance. It leans on the earlier comments that the prohibition exists because it was part of the mourning practices of non-Jews. Along these same lines Hirsch also points out that self-mutilation was indeed a practice of pagans paying homage to their deities and this type of behavior is always frowned upon.[7] But Hirsch effectively opens the door to the possibility for allowing tattoos if they are not done as an act of mourning.

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[4] Samson Raphael Hirsch, *T'rumat Tzvi: The Pentateuch with a Tranlsation by Samso Raphael Hirsch with Excerpts from the Hirsch Commentary*, ed. Ephraim Oratz, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (Judaica Press, 1990), xxiii

[5] *ibid.*, 551.

[6] *ibid.*, 554.

[7] *ibid.*, 555.

He also connects *seret* with *nefesh* (in his translation, "the dead"), meaning that the cutting is connected to the *nefesh* for whom you are cutting (according to his translation). Hirsch's explanation of this prohibition describes exactly my own beliefs regarding the proper reading of this verse. That is, he states, "If the rent in our garment expresses our acknowledgment that the departure of the one who has died has made a 'rent' in the closest surroundings, the intimate world, of those left behind, then a cut into our flesh would express the thought that with the death of a relation our own bodily self has suffered a breach."[8] And this is what he says the prohibition is against – physical renting, not of clothing but of our own physical being. Hirsch then brings in the idea that our physical bodies belong not to us but to God and this is the reason we have no right to destroy or damage them. This theory is similar to that of Joseph H. Hertz who will be discussed more below. Hirsch also states that "self-wounding on account of the dead, throwing your life, or even only a particle of your life, after that which had died away, is no homage, it is a wanton offence against the Hand which led your brother to death."[9] Self-inflicted wounds as a sign of mourning indicate that the mourner does not accept that God's decisions are just and right.

Joseph H. Hertz

Using the 1917 JPS translation, Joseph H. Hertz (Sept. 25, 1872 – January 14, 1946) offered his own commentary on the Torah. Hertz was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary and served as Chief Rabbi of England from 1913-1948. The JPS

[8] Hirsch, 555.
[9] *ibid.*, 556.

translation rendered the verse in question, "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you: I am the Lord." Like Hirsch he saw the verse as part of a section combined with the verses surrounding it. He points out that the section includes "various mourning customs connected with the heathen worship of the dead [which] are forbidden" specifically because they are "unbecoming the dignity of God's people and incompatible with loyalty to a God of holiness."[10] This comment is interesting in its blatant judgment of the others' practices and the elevating of the Jews' position as 'holier than.' This falls right in line with the general goals of his commentary, namely that Judaism and the study of Torah were worthy intellectual pursuits. He wanted to show the beauty of the intellectual struggle with the text. He also had a more sublime goal of showing Christians that Jews love their religion and that it is worth loving. He wanted to broaden the scope of Torah from what he thought the common view was – that it was a book only of laws meant to stifle a person's free will and ability to enjoy life – and get people to see that Torah is beautiful and worthy of love. In a sense, his commentary can be read as a defense and glorification of biblical and Jewish civilization and more specifically as a reaction to the challenge of the perceived threat of Liberal Judaism as well as the threat of anti-Semitism.[11] Hertz did his best to try to find a balance between the belief that Moses wrote the Bible and the ideas of intellectual and enlightened scholarship of the time. According to Harvey Meirovich "one of the most striking features of the Hertz Commentary was its tenacious defense of the Mosaic

[10] Joseph H. Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, Second Edition (Soncino Press, 1978), 503.
[11] Harvey W. Meirovich, *A Vindication of Judaism: The Polemics of the Hertz Pentateuch*, (JTS, 1998), *xv*.

authorship of the Torah and the corollary belief in the historicity of the revelation at Sinai."[12] He genuinely tried to integrate both theories into his commentary.

Continuing the discussion of prohibitions against practices of the "heathen," Hertz notes that "cuttings ... for the dead" should be compared to the law in Deuteronomy 14:1 which states that one may not *teet'god'edu* oneself. This word (used only once in Torah but six more times in the books of the Prophets) is usually translated as "gash," and Hertz's comment on that verse notes that it was a sign of mourning. Following Hirsch's sentiments, "Israelites were not to gash themselves in their grief: firstly, because any deliberate disfigurement of the body was forbidden; and secondly, because as 'children of God' they were to regard a bereavement as His decree, and, therefore, something to be accepted with resignation."[13] Additionally, in his comment on the verse in question, Hertz points out that this was indeed a practice of "eastern peoples" who would gash themselves for the dead. He states that there was also a sacrificial element to the shedding of blood – one that the Israelites were forbidden to emulate. Hertz carries forward Hirsch's earlier point, an issue that modern *responsa* literature has fervently picked up – the idea that our bodies are only on loan to us; that "the Torah inculcates reverence for the human body, as the work of God"[14] and by extension we should not mutilate it. Finally, Hertz's comments on "imprint any marks" is in line with the earlier halakhic works and is copied in later commentaries. He specifies that what is actually forbidden is the custom of tattooing a part of the body because "often this was a

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[12] Meirovich, 6.
[13] Hertz, 808.
[14] *ibid.*, 503.

representation of the deity worshiped by the bearer of that mark."[15] This interpretation also lends itself to my own translation of the verse, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Richard Elliot Friedman

In 2001 Richard Elliot Friedman, a prominent bible scholar, offered his own translation and commentary to the Torah. Friedman's goal was to translate as closely to the Hebrew as possible. He then used his commentary to explain Hebrew phrases and constructs that were more difficult to render smoothly into English. Friedman's commentary begins with a statement that sums up his entire philosophy – "the Torah is not to be read."[16] What he means is that the Torah is a book with which to struggle. Friedman's translation and commentary is offered not just as a book to read, but it is also intended as a study guide. He desires the reader to go back to the roots of Rashi-style commentary; that is, presenting a problem in the text and trying to work it out in order to get to the *peshat* of the text – the straightforward meaning.[17] Friedman takes special care to note that his commentary is in line with and conforms to contemporary scholarship. At the same time, though, he states that his purpose in the commentary is "to make comments that reflect the conclusions [he has] reached in the light of the state of the field of biblical studies and in light of [his] own research."[18] For this reason, he does not believe in a need for citations or footnotes and prefers to just state his view and leave it at

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[15] Hertz, 503.
[16] Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation* (Harper San Francisco, 2001), *vii*.
[17] *ibid., xi.*
[18] *ibid., x.*

that. In this way, his work is reminiscent of Maimonides self-aggrandizing style of exposition. Another goal of his commentary was to make Bible study accessible to all – not just "Bible scholars". In his work, he wanted to make the commentary and translation "useful to everyone who wants to study – and not just read – the Torah."[19] Finally, his commentary is used to explain Hebrew idioms that are difficult to render into English. He uses the comments section to do his best to explain these difficult Hebrew constructs and why he has chosen to deviate in rare instances from the literal translation of the text.

As you will see below, Friedman's translation is very close to some of the intention of my own translation, though interestingly his comments serve only to move it away from my intent. His version reads, "You shall not put a cut in your flesh for a person, and you shall not put an inscription of a tattoo in you. I am YHWH." His rendering of the first half of verse 28 follows that of many other renderings. He explains that "for a person" means "for a dead person" and continues by explaining the word *nefesh* as "soul, person or life."[20] He then notes that *nefesh* also has to do with respiration but says nothing more about it or why he thinks that is important. It is interesting how Friedman handles the construct, *k'tovet ka'a'ka'*. The challenge for any translator is figuring out how to deal with the two words. Many commentators translate each word as versions of "write" or "imprint" and then explain the meaning as "tattoo" in the comments; some translate the whole phrase as simply tattoo. Friedman finds a way to do both – he translates the construct as "inscribing a tattoo" and then further explains

[19] Friedman, *xii.*
[20] *ibid.*

"tattoo" as "writing in the skin."[21] He makes no further comments on the verse or the implications of this prohibition.

Trying to understand the Torah is an activity that will never get old. As each generation struggles with the text and tries to make it relevant to their lives, there will always be new interpretations. To me, this is the beauty of our tradition – for the modern, liberal Jew there continues to be room for new interpretations and perspectives.

Rochelle Kamins

I now 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.

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* 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 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

[21] Friedman, *xii*.

ancient Near East.[22] The usual translation "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead" might work better if the Hebrew were arranged as such: לֹא תִתְּנוּ בִּבְשַׂרְכֶם וְשֶׂרֶט - "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* 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 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

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

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* 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, "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 Stong'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).[23] 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; 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.

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

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.

THREE

THE TRADITIONAL *HALAKHA*

Mishna

The first collected commentary on the Torah is the Mishna. The Mishna is the earliest teaching-text, the oldest curriculum of Jewish learning in the world today.[24] It represents possibly the first attempt to reduce the Oral Torah (commentaries and holy texts that came after the Torah was completed) to an official compilation, most likely intended to prepare some authoritative statement of the minimal amount of learning a disciple had to acquire for admittance to advanced rank in the rabbinic movement.[25] However, the Mishna is a mysterious document having no title page, no copyright or stated author. Not even a named cataloger. The Mishna covers a carefully defined program of topics but there is no predicting how a topic will be treated, why some aspects are explored in detail and others are ignored completely.[26] It is unclear even what type of document the Mishna is – whether it is intended as a law code or as a textbook for training purposes.

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[24] Robert Goldenberg, "Talmud," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry Holtz, 129-176 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 131.
[25] *ibid.*
[26] Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (Yale University, 1988), *xiv*.

The Mishna is a six-part code of descriptive rules that was formulated toward the end of the second century A.D. by a collection of rabbis and sages. It was put forth as the constitution of Judaism under the sponsorship of Judah the Patriarch, the head of the Jewish community of Palestine at that time.[27] The sections are called Orders (in Hebrew, singular *Seder*), which are broken down to smaller topical sections called Tractates (*Massekhtot*). There are sixty-three tractates, all varying in length and organized based on general themes. Essentially, the Mishna describes Utopia for the rabbis who contributed to it. It describes and explains a world where Jews were allowed to practice however they wanted and the Temple was open for business. What the sages included is what they deemed essential, what they omitted they thought was unimportant.[28] The commandment prohibiting marks on the skin was important enough to merit inclusion. This is a clear indication that enough Jews were engaging in the practice that the rabbis felt the need to say something on the matter.

The section that talks about the verse in question is Makkot, which is fifth in the order of Nezikin, meaning "damages". Makkot itself is divided into three parts, the third dealing with offenses that warrant lashings as punishment for transgressions.

Mishna Makkot 3:6 states,

הַכּוֹתֵב כְּתוֹבֶת קַעֲקַע כָּתַב וְלֹא קִיעְקַע קִיעְקַע וְלֹא כָתַב אֵינוֹ חַיָּיב עַד שֶׁיִּכְתּוֹב
וְיַקְעֲקַע וּבְכוֹחַל וּבְכָל דָּבָר שֶׁהוּא רוֹשֵׁם ר׳ שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יְהוּדָה אוֹ׳ מִשֵּׁם ר׳ שִׁמְעוֹן
אֵינוֹ חַיָּיב בַּדְיוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּכְתּוֹב שֵׁם הַשֵּׁם שֶׁנ׳ וּכְתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע לֹא תִתְּנוּ בָּכֶם אֲנִי יְיי׃

[27] Neusner, *The Mishna*, *xv*
[28] *ibid.*, *xli*

> One who tattoos: If he wrote but did not etch, or etched but did not write, he is not liable, until he writes and etches with ink or eye-paint, or anything that leaves a mark. R. Shimon: He is not liable unless he writes the name there, as it is said (Lev. 19:28): "You shall not imprint any marks on you: I am the Lord."[29]

Here the prohibition itself as written in the Torah is not in question but rather, defining what specific act goes against the commandment. The anonymous view of the Mishna attempts to define what a tattoo is by explaining that a mark only becomes a tattoo (and therefore is prohibited) if it is marked in the skin and *also* filled in with ink so that it is permanent and lasts. So writing a reminder on your hand with a pen is okay because it washes off. The Mishna also introduces the question of whether the nature of the tattoo makes a difference to its being prohibited or not. That is, according to Rabbi Simeon, who disagrees with the anonymous voice in the Mishna, the person is only liable (for punishment for having transgressed the law) if he writes the name of God (the God of Israel) on him. This would imply that any other tattoo would be acceptable. However, the reality of that time is probably that the only tattoos that people were getting were tattoos of loyalty – slaves' loyalty to their masters and individuals' loyalty to their various gods.[30]

Talmud

Jewish commentary tradition continues with the Talmud, which is actually a reference to two separate but contemporary compilations of Jewish law, known as the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. These two halakhic works, which

[29] Rabbi Pinhas Kehati, trans., *Mishna: Seder Nezikin, Vol. 3, Makkot*, trans. Rabbi Pinhas Kehati (Jerusalem: Torah Education Department of the W.Z.O, 1988).
[30] This is discussed more below.

constitute the basis for all later halakhic literature, were created during the three or four centuries following the redaction of the Mishna.[31] Talmud includes the Mishna text and then carries the discussion further. Whereas the form of the Mishna is that of a rather organized collection of rules, the form of the Talmud (both of them) is that of a discursive scholarly commentary on the Mishna.[32] From the third to the sixth centuries the two great centers of Jewish life were Babylonia (Mesopotamia) and the Land of Israel (Palestine) and each created its own commentary on the Mishna text. While the two are contemporary and similar, they answer certain questions differently. Just like the Mishna, the authors and editors are rarely named and their aims and guiding principles are rarely (if ever) enunciated.[33] The Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud dates from the first half or the fifth century and appears to many scholars as never quite completed. It shows signs of insufficient editing: transitions are weak, parallel discussions appear separately and with no reference to one another, and often appear to duplicate or contradict the others.[34] It is a massive text but pales in comparison to the Babylonian Talmud, which dates from about a century later. This volume is clearly more refined, showing evidence of more leisurely and more skillful preparation.[35] This Talmud is the one most often studied and referred to. The Palestinian Talmud is more obscure and less useful for understanding specific instructions for life.

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[31] Berachyahu Lifshitz, "The Age of the Talmud," in *An Introduction to the History and Sources of Jewish Law*, ed. N. S. Hecht, et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 169.
[32] *ibid.*
[33] *ibid.*, 175.
[34] Goldenberg, 136.
[35] *ibid.*

The Talmud[36] picks up the discussion of Leviticus 19:28 in Talmud Bavli Makkot 21a where it states,

> *He who tattoos his skin – [If] he made a mark but did not tattoo it in, tattooed it in but did not make a mark, he is not liable – unless he makes a mark and tattoos with ink or with eye paint or with anything that makes a permanent mark. R. Simeon b. Judah says in the name of R. Simeon, "He is liable only if he will write the name [of a god], as it is written, 'Nor will you tattoo any marks on you, I am the Lord' (Lev. 19:28)."*[37]
>
> [He is liable only if he will write the name of a god:] said R. Aha b. Raba to R. Ashi, "Does that mean, 'he will actually write, "I am the Lord"'?!" He said to him, "Not at all. It is in accord with that which Bar Qappara repeated as a Tannaite statement: 'He is liable to a flogging only if he has inscribed the name of some other god, in line with this verse: "Nor put on you any written imprint, I am the Lord,"[38] that is, "I am the Lord," there is no other.'"
>
> Said R. Malkiah said R. Ada bar Ahbah, "It is forbidden for someone to put wood ash on a wound, because it appears to be a tattoo."[39]

The Talmud first restates the Mishna text and then continues with its own perspective. The discussion here is also an attempt to define what a tattoo is and how exactly one transgresses the law. The rabbis maintain what is explained in the Mishna, namely that the prohibition against tattooing is specifically a prohibition against a person tattooing the name of a god (other than the God of Israel) on his body. The text explains that a prohibited tattoo is understood to be a tattoo of the name of a god (not the declaration that the tattooed is God himself). The text also indicates that only the tattoo of a god NOT the God of Israel is prohibited. In this text the Talmud adds the prohibition against adding ash (dark dying material) to a wound for fear that it would end up looking like a tattoo. This may be the beginnings of the general prohibition against all tattoos.

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[36] The Palestinian Talmud merely restates the Mishna, it does not add any additional commentary. The following excerpt is from the Babylonian Talmud.

[37] The italics indicates the Mishna text, which is restated in the Talmud and then commented upon.

[38] Leviticus 19:28.

[39] Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: XXIV, Tractate Makkot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

Accepting that Rabbi Simeon's reading is right, and following Bar Qappara's interpretation, one might even infer that a tattoo with God's name (the God of Israel) is indeed allowed. Though this would clearly be paralleling the pagan practice of marking your skin with the name of your god. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry on "Writing" suggests that non-idolatrous acts of tattooing were not only acceptable but even alluded to in Torah.[40] The entry cites Isaiah 44:5 which states, "One shall say, 'I am the Lord's,' and another shall use the name of Jacob, and another shall mark his arm 'of the Lord' and adopt the name of Israel." It also points to Isaiah 49:16, which states, "See, I have engraved You on the palms of my hands" and implies that both texts have been read this way. Following these interpretations, one might even read the Deuteronomy text read at every prayer service and central to the Jewish faith as saying something similar – Deuteronomy 6:8 (the Shema) says, "Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead."[41] Today the verse serves as the basis for *tefillin* and is read figuratively, but it could perhaps have been meant literally – '**mark** yourselves with a sign on your hands and between your eyes'. There is evidence that some cultures would tattoo the names of their gods on their skin as a sign of allegiance – as Hebrew slaves were tattooed with their masters' names, some pagan cultures would tattoo gods' names on their skin indicating that those gods were their masters.[42] This lends credence to the idea that the prohibition written down in Torah is specific to emulating the acts of non-Israelites, a theory picked up by Maimonides and discussed below.

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[40] Louis Rabinowitz, "Writing (Scripts, Materials, and Inscriptions)," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 663.
[41] JPS translation.
[42] Louis Rabinowitz, "Writing (Scripts, Materials, and Inscriptions)," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 663.

Despite the fact that the early commentaries interpreting the prohibition seem to indicate that it is a law specifically against tattooing the name of a god, in the Talmud we can see the rabbis begin to build a fence around the mitzvah and extend the prohibition to other forms of marking. This fence is called a *gezerah* or *seyag la'Torah* and it is a legal restriction added to the text by the sages in order to safeguard the observance of the biblical laws.[43] From the time the Talmud was completed in the sixth century through the medieval period, rabbis and sages were engaged in the act of further attempting to create codes of Jewish law to live by. The rabbis developed elaborate tools to understand the biblical text, incorporate it with the halakhic works already in existence and finally worked to find ways to practically apply the laws to their times. During this time the method of *responsa* developed whereby legal decisions would come from specific questions on the biblical text or existing traditions. Through these *responsa* we see the continuation of the *gezerah* tradition. The *gezerah* ironically originates from the commandment that one is not permitted to add or subtract from what is written in Torah.[44] The rabbis believed that the commandment was specifically intended to prevent each individual mitzvah from being enhanced or refined. They did not, however, hesitate to add new legislation or new laws to ensure proper adherence to the laws. In his discussion of the verse prohibiting eating a kid in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19, 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21) Maimonides explains

> Now it was learned from an oral tradition that this prohibition ...does not include the flesh of fowl. ...But if the Bet Din declares that the flesh of fowl is permitted by the Torah but we forbid it, and the people are told that

[43] Mendell Lewittes, *Principles and Development of Jewish Law: Concepts and History of Rabbinic Jurisprudence from Its Inception to Modern Times* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1987), 93.
[44] Deuteronomy 4:2 and 13:1.

> this is an added restriction (gezerah) ...this is not adding to the *mitzvah* but making a fence around the Torah.[45]

We can learn here that the sages and *halakhists* took clear liberties to change the nature of the laws based on their own desires to ensure what they believed to be proper adherence to the *mitzvot*. At times, the *gezerah* laws of sages became so important as to override commandments from the Torah itself.[46] During the rabbinic period *gezerah* laws came to define correct Jewish practice. Once a *gezerah* was adopted by the proper authorities and accepted and observed, the belief was that it could never be rescinded because "One Bet Din cannot annul the decree of another Bet Din unless it is greater in both wisdom and numbers," presumed impossible since every later court is inferior to an earlier one.[47] This certainly complicates things today when modern Jewish movements or individuals attempt to determine their own interpretations of the biblical laws without adhering to the additional *gezerot* of medieval times.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides

After the Talmud, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), possibly the most influential single contributor to Jewish thought and *halakha*, added his voice. His monumental code of law, the Mishneh Torah, stands out as preeminent because of both its comprehensiveness and its systematic arrangement, in addition to its readability.[48] In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides begins with a philosophical introduction in which the rudiments of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics are turned into the foundation of

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[45] Lewittes, 93.
[46] *ibid.*, 94.
[47] *ibid.*, 95.
[48] *ibid.*, 132.

Jewish law.[49] Maimonides adds his perspective to the biblical prohibition and effectively closes the door to interpreting the text loosely. His commentary and decision on tattoos completes the fence around the law and is only expanded upon in the Shulkhan Arukh discussed below.

As translated by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, in the section of Mishneh Torah dealing with laws regarding the acts of idolaters, Maimonides states

> The tattooing which the Torah forbids involves making a cut in one's flesh and filling the slit with eye-color, ink, or with any other dye that leaves an imprint. This was the custom of the idolaters, who would make marks on their bodies for the sake of their idols, as if to say that they are like servants sold to the idol and designated for its service.
>
> When a person makes a mark with one of the substances that leave an imprint after making a slit in any place on his body, he is [punished by] lashes. [This prohibition is binding on] both men and women.]
>
> If a person wrote and did not dye, or dyed without writing by cutting [into his flesh], he is not liable. [Punishment is administered] only when he writes and dyes, as [Lev. 19:28] states: "[Do not make] a dyed inscription [on yourselves]."
>
> To whom does this apply? To the person doing the tattooing. A person who is tattooed [by others], however, is not liable unless he assisted the tattooer to the extent that it is considered that he performed a deed. If he did not perform a deed, he is not lashed. [50]

Here, Maimonides explains why (in his opinion) the prohibition exists: specifically because tattooing was a practice of the pagans and we (Jews) don't act like them (non-Jews). He also explains the pagan practice a little more thoroughly. He points out that the custom was to make marks for the sake of their idols to equate themselves as slaves to the pagan gods, a notion mentioned briefly above. He states that "pagans would gouge

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[49] Goldenberg, 161.

[50] Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, *Maimonides Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Avodat Kochavim V'Chukkoteihem* (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990), 228.

their flesh in grief over their dead, [and] they would mutilate themselves for their idols."[51] Returning to the description of tattooing, he clarifies the act. However, a loose interpretation might lead someone to read the sentence "if a person wrote [meaning etched the skin] and did not dye" as saying that scarification is permissible (though when we consider other prohibitions against causing injury to one's body in the absence of sufficient reason, I don't believe this is what Maimonides intended). On this note, Maimonides quotes Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra as saying that when people mutilate their bodies for the dead it is an affront to God in that it implies that they do not accept God's decisions.[52] Maimonides does, however, clarify to whom the prohibition applies, a point that is picked up later in the Shulkhan Arukh. While he explains that this is a prohibition that is binding on both men and women, he states that only the person who actually does the tattooing is transgressing the *mitzvah* and liable for flogging (the punishment for this commandment). Only when a person getting a tattoo has helped the tattooer to a significant extent is he liable for breaking the commandment. This point was especially helpful after World War II in determining liability (or lack thereof) of Holocaust victims for transgressing the commandment.

Shulkhan Arukh

Ultimately the Shulkhan Arukh lays down the final traditional *halakhic* perspective on the matter. Written by Joseph Caro (1488-1575) as a digest of his own earlier and more elaborate code the Tur, the Shulkhan Arukh is the most influential

[51] Touger, 230.
[52] Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel, trans., *The Commandments: Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth of Maimonides*, Vol. 2, (London: The Soncino Press, 1967), 44.

collection of Jewish laws in Jewish life even today.[53] What this text does to our commandment specifically is to extend the prohibition to encompass any tattooing, not just those tattoos that seem to emulate pagan practices. The text states,

> It is written in the Torah, "You shall not imprint marks upon yourself." What is meant by "imprint marks"? A mark which is absorbed and sunken into the skin, so that it can never be erased. He who makes an incision on the dyed area, is guilty of transgressing a negative command. Nevertheless, it is permitted to put ashes and other things on a wound for medical purposes, even if a mark will remain; for (in such cases) the wound will also leave a mark, and it will be apparent that you did not do it for the purpose of tattooing.[54]

The Shulkhan Arukh does not repeat all the commentaries that came before. Rather it states the bare details in order to be as clear as possible. "Imprint marks" (כְּתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע) is defined as a mark, absorbed and sunken into the skin. According to the text, any mark in the skin (with or without ink) that cannot be erased is a transgression of the commandment laid out in Torah. Even if the tattoo is not idolatrous in nature, it is forbidden. It is possible to assume that, as in our day, even in Talmudic and medieval times, people tattooed themselves, not to imitate pagan ritual but merely for personal adornment. The rabbis responded by forbidding the act outright, but compromised by saying that only tattoos with idolatrous intent would warrant lashings (the punishment for transgressing the Torah law) even if all tattoos are prohibited.[55] What the text also does is determine that for medical purposes, ash or dying materials may be put in wounds – because in such a case no one would think that it was for a tattoo. This is effectively the last *halakhic* word on the matter. As stated above, in most Jewish legal circles, all later

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[53] Goldenberg, 162.
[54] Rabbi Avrohom Davis, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, Vol. II (New Jersey: Metzudah Publications, 1996), 1103.
[55] Elliot Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 269.

commentaries and codes are seen as less binding and less authoritative than those leading to and including the Shulkhan Arukh.

FOUR

THE MODERN *HALAKHA*

Since the Shulkhan Arukh was completed there have continued to be commentaries and prominent voices adding their perspectives on Jewish law and biblical commandments. In the modern period, writing commentaries and personal translations of the Torah have become something of a sport. In relation to the subject at hand, the modern period has brought a blossoming of responses to what in earlier days would clearly be seen as non-Jewish questions.[56]

In recent years tattooing has begun to infiltrate mainstream society to such a degree that the major modern Jewish movements have felt it necessary to respond. In 1997 the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly answered the question, "Is body piercing (nose, navel, etc.) and tattooing permitted? Does it preclude taking part in synagogue rituals or being buried in a Jewish cemetery?"[57] The *responsum* cites all the earlier halakhic works described above in support of the fact that the Torah prohibits tattooing. The bulk of the Conservative answer leans on the theory that we are all created *betzelem Elohim* (in God's image) and that our bodies are on loan to us during our lives but are really God's property. The Conservative *responsum* states,

[56] This is playing on the idea that "nice Jewish boys/girls" don't get tattoos, so why bother talking about it.
[57] Rabbi Alan Lucas, "Tattooing and Body Piercing," *Responsa 1991-2000: The Committee of Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement*, ed. Rabbi Kassel Abelson and David Fine (United Synagogue Book Service, 2002), 115.

> In our day, the prohibition against all forms of tattooing, regardless of their intent, should be maintained. In addition to the fact that Judaism has a long history of distaste for tattoos, tattooing becomes even more distasteful when confronted with a contemporary secular society that is constantly challenging the Jewish concept that we are created "In the Image of God," and that our bodies are to be viewed as a precious gift on loan from God, to be entrusted into our care and not our personal property to do with as we choose. Voluntary tattooing even if not done for idolatrous purposes expresses a negation of this fundamental Jewish perspective.[58]

There are really two components to this position: 1) the idea that we are created in God's image and 2) that our bodies are not really ours but rather on loan from God and we are merely entrusted with them for a short time. The first idea is relatively new, while the second concept is cited in traditional literature.

The idea that we are created *betzelem Elohim* most likely comes from Genesis 1:27 where it states, "God created man in God's image," and Genesis 9:6 which states, "In God's image man was created." This concept is often cited in modern commentaries when arguing that we should be careful how we treat our bodies. However, the argument is rarely developed, it is merely stated outright and left alone. This is true in the Conservative *responsum* where it states, "As tattoos become more popular in contemporary society, there is a need to reenforce the prohibition against tattooing in our communities and counterbalance it with education regarding the traditional concept that we are created *betzelem Elohim*, 'In the Image of God."[59] It continues by saying that while temporary tattoos are acceptable, in the name of education they should be discouraged, noting that this could "present an excellent opportunity to introduce young children to the concept that we are created *betzelem Elohim*, 'In God's Image,' and the

[58] Lucas, 117.
[59] *ibid.*

implications of that concept."[60] It does not at any point expand upon the actual meaning of *betzelem Elohim* or the "implications" to which it refers. The Reform *responsum*, written in 1999, adds the following point: "Torah prohibits us from engaging in *chavalah*, from subjecting our bodies to needless physical damage, because to do so is to violate the dignity and sanctity that we, created in the divine image, have been endowed."[61] This argument clearly implies that *betzelem Elohim* is intended to mean physical attributes. This is extremely problematic on many levels. In the Conservative *responsum* there is no definition of what God's image is, and in the Reform *responsum* God's image is physical. However, based on accepted overarching Jewish beliefs, God, in fact, has no physical attributes for us to be made in the image of. God may be described in physical form but this is only to help us to understand God metaphorically.[62] In fact Elliot Dorff states it most clearly:

> Exactly which feature of the human being reflects this divine image is a matter of debate within the tradition. The Torah itself seems to tie it to humanity's ability to make moral judgments, that is, to distinguish good from bad and right from wrong, to behave accordingly, and to judge one's own actions and those of others on the basis of this moral knowledge. Another human faculty connected by the Torah and by the later tradition to divinity is the ability to speak. Maimonides claims that the divine image resides in our capacity to think, especially discursively. Locating the divine image within us may also be the Torah's way of acknowledging that we can love, just as God does, or that we are at least partially spiritual and thus share God's spiritual nature.[63]

Put in a simple if/then theory: If we are created in God's image, and the only thing we know for sure about God's nature is that God is unique, then each of us is unique (and this is what makes us God-like). Indeed, the blessing we say when we come across a

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[60] Lucas, 118.
[61] Rabbi Bonnie Steinberg, "Tattoo, Body-Piercing, and Jewish Tradition," *CCAR Responsa, NYP no. 5759.4*, http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=4&year=5759 (accessed January 2009).
[62] See Maimonides' theories of God's non-corporeality.
[63] Dorff, 19.

person deformed or incapacitated thanks God for creating each of us different, in God's image. Being created *betzelem Elohim* is not meant to refer to our physical features. Therefore, this is a faulty argument in determining what we do to our bodies, namely pierce or tattoo them. If the piercings and tattoos are put on with good intention, based on decisions made with thought and moral guidance, there is nothing inherently un-Godly about them.

On the other hand, the argument against tattooing which states that we should not alter our bodies because they are merely on loan to us from God holds a little more water and is worth exploring more fully. This idea is comes from the interpretation of a few biblical verses, most notably Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 10:14, which state, respectively, "Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine," and "Mark, the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the LORD your God, the earth and all that is on it!" The traditional literature interpreted these verses quite literally, understanding that our bodies are merely on loan to us during our lives, and that after we die they go back to God. In Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Hovel u-Mazik* 5:1, it states that no one is permitted to injure himself or another because a person's body is not considered his own possession but rather it is God's.[64] To accentuate the point, a famous midrashic story tells of the deaths of Rabbi Meir's sons. The moral of the midrash is that the children were merely on loan from God. (At the end of the midrash, Rabbi Meir, in acknowledging his understanding, recites a line from Job 1:21, "The Lord has given, and

[64] Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, *Maimonides Mishneh Torah: Sefer Nezikin* (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1997), 456.

the Lord has taken away."[65]) According to an interpretation offered by Torah Aura's instant lesson (described below), "God gives a person his or her body for safekeeping. Therefore self-mutilation or any form of attack upon the body is viewed as a breach of that trust."[66] It is incumbent upon us, then, to take reasonable care of our bodies. Rules of good hygiene, sleep, exercise, and diet are not merely suggestions; they are essentially commanded acts.[67] The idea that we have ownership over our bodies is, indeed, a modern concept. Autonomy of self is a modern phenomenon. But actually believing that we own our bodies can be problematic considering that it is generally expected that "something over which we have complete ownership implies that it is something over which we have complete control. [And clearly] this is something that everyone knows is not completely true when it comes to the body."[68] We do not have the power of will to change our hair color, eye color, or the fundamental shapes of our bodies. Only through the uses of external devices (dyes, contacts, surgery) can these changes be achieved. In this way, it could be argued that our bodies are not ours precisely because we do not have such control over them. Ultimately, the argument is that these and other texts prove that our bodies do not belong to us. The implied then, is that they must belong to God.

In relating this theory to the issue of tattooing, modern *responsa* have argued that because our bodies are not ours it would be an affront to God (the owner) to "deface" our bodies with excessive piercings and tattoos. According to the Reform perspective,

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[65] *Midrash Mishle*, chapter 31.
[66] Joel Grishaver, "Randy's Navel Piercing" (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1999), 2.
[67] Dorff, 15.
[68] Elliot Dorff and Louis Newman, eds., *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Body*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 2008), 40.

> It is our duty to honor our bodies, to keep them healthy, safe and whole to the best of our ability. When we practice tattooing, body-piercing, or any other act of permanent physical alteration, we do not honor our bodies. Instead, we engage in an act of hubris and manipulation that most surely runs counter to the letter and spirit of our tradition. ... The fact that our sages have to cite arguments to justify *chavalah* in the name of healing suggests that they do not extend that permit to acts of disfigurement undertaken for the sake of adornment or self-expression.[69]

This perspective implies that any form of body modification is an act of hubris, a slap in the face of God, to assume to know a better form for our bodies than God. This argument is weakened by the fact that, while cosmetic surgery merely for purposes of "beautification" may be frowned upon, according to the *responsum* it is not forbidden. Tattooing and body piercing, however, are. This seems to me blatantly contradictory. Based on various Jewish concepts, we are not required to accept whatever physical lot we have been given in life.[70] We are allowed, with thought and proper attention to safety and health, to change our bodies or our appearances. In fact, it is incumbent upon us to make things in our lives more beautiful.[71] Hence the practice of *hiddur mitzvah*, the idea that when performing a *mitzvah*, we should go above and beyond the mere letter of the law, to literally "beautify" the *mitzvah*. Most people who choose to tattoo their bodies believe that they are beautifying themselves, not disfiguring or mutilating themselves. The same is true of those engaging in extreme plastic surgeries, though in many of these procedures the medical risks are much greater than any tattoo or piercing.

Another issue that is discussed in the modern *responsa* (both Reform and Conservative) is the attempt to justify the arguments as more than just a "smokescreen

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[69] Steinberg.
[70] Dorff, 271.
[71] Dorff and Newman, 44.

behind which one generation or group within a society seeks to impose its own standards of beauty, decorum, and taste upon those who do not share them."[72] This is a huge challenge for the writers of the *responsa* precisely because it is clearly only the permanent and visible nature of tattoos that makes them so problematic. Admittedly, people transgress Jewish law all the time. Even the Conservative *responsum* states that the violation itself is no worse than any other violation of Jewish law. At some point in recent history, a rumor began circulating among young Jews that swiftly became "true" despite the fact that it has absolutely no basis in reality and is, in fact, completely false – the myth that a Jewish person with a tattoo is not allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. In responding to the question of whether someone with a tattoo would be prevented from being buried in a Jewish cemetery the answer has to be no. The Conservative *responsum* states,

> However distasteful we may find the practice there is no basis for restricting burial to a Jew who violates this prohibition or even limiting their participation in synagogue ritual. The fact that someone may have violated the laws of kashrut at some point in their life or violated the laws of Shabbat would not merit such sanctions, the prohibition against tattooing is certainly no worse. It is only because of the permanent nature of the tattoo that the transgression is still visible.[73]

And it is mainly this overt, visible nature of the transgression that makes it so problematic for many. A one-time act of transgression is forever memorialized on the skin and visible to all for scrutiny and judgment. This issue will be developed more fully when looking at the "Modern Primitive" movement and the modern phenomena of tattooing and body modification as spiritual acts in general. Essentially though, this seems to be the crux of the problem – the great tension between older and younger generations in determining

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[72] Steinberg.
[73] Dorff and Newman, 44.

values and proper ways of "doing" Jewish. What one generation deems mutilation, another deems beautification. And it cannot be denied that Judaism believes that people may seek to make themselves beautiful as a way of contributing to their deeper self image; feeling beautiful on the outside helps to make one feel beautiful on the inside and ultimately contributes to one's mental health.[74] The key is finding a balance between enhancing one's appearance and maintaining Jewish values.

In addition to the official party line answer that each movement has put forward, there have been a number of educational materials published recently set to help teachers deal with the rising numbers of adolescents coming to Confirmation classes saying, "I want a tattoo." In 1997, Torah Aura Productions published "Randy's Navel Piercing" as a resource for teachers dealing with the rising popularity of body piercings. It offers over thirty Jewish sources with insights into the piercing issue within the framework of the following four main questions: 1) Is it (the piercing) safe?; 2) Is it about beauty and not pain?; 3) Is it modest or will it be handled modestly?; and, 4) Is it pagan? Does it lead to paganism?[75] According to the teachers' guide, if the first three questions are answered in the positive and the fourth question is answered in the negative then piercings are acceptable. It should be noted that the lesson deals specifically with piercings in the flesh (not cartilage) and only briefly touches on the question of tattooing. In relation to tattooing the Torah Aura resource offers the Mishna text (included in this study above), an excerpt from the Conservative *responsum*, and a couple contemporary advice column style responses. The goal of the instant lesson is to provide a framework for a

[74] Dorff, 267.
[75] Grishaver, 7.

conversation with teenagers dealing with body image issues, sexuality, and pressures to "fit in".

Another recent book that attempts to help teachers face the question they dread their teenagers asking in class was published in 2008: *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Body*, edited by Elliot Dorff and Louis Newman. In addition to being a valuable resource for the purposes of this study, the book discusses a number of questions young Jews face these days regarding what to do with their bodies. It offers texts and sample responses, in addition to personal accounts. In relation to the issue of tattoos the book includes an article written by Andy Abrams, an independent filmmaker and researcher in the process of creating a documentary dealing with the same topic as this work. *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices* offers no conclusions, simply resources, similar to the Torah Aura instant lesson. In addition to the instant lesson described above and the body book, many Jewish resource websites have responded to the subject with online articles and their own perspectives.[76] It seems that every Jewish entity is finding it necessary to take the time to respond to the rising trend of tattoos and body modification.

[76] See Hillel's responses posted January 2007:
http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2007/jan/tattoos_19Jan07.htm and
http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2007/jan/tattooed_22Jan2007.htm and BabagaNewz's answer posted February 2008:
http://www.babaganewz.com/teachers/archive/article.cfm?ID=579&STEP=resultsByTitle&requestXY=T

FIVE

THE MODERN PRIMITIVE MOVEMENT

In the past forty years the phenomenon of tattooing has truly exploded. Before the 1970s those few who sported tattoos were mostly sailors, circus performers, convicts, criminal gangs, and some eccentric types. Moreover, tattooing reflected the cultural ethos of Christian iconography and ostensibly defied the metaphysical monotheism of Judaism.[77] Nowadays tattooing is so widespread it is at times harder to find someone without a tattoo than someone with one. And it is no longer possible to generalize who the "typical" tattooed person is. Why tattooing, a marginal fashion with a negative image, has become a mass phenomenon within such a short time is an intriguing sociological question, one that has only in recent years begun to be seriously studied.[78] Some might say that today's disconnected, individualized society causes a yearning for a return to more "primitive" modes of spiritual connection. Religion is, for some, a dirty word and spirituality is seen as somehow separate. People yearn for a romanticized conception of spirituality where body and soul come together. This movement has been referred to as the "modern primitive" movement. Within the world of the modern primitive movement, body modification is the norm and tattooing is one of the more tame forms of connecting to the spiritual.

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[77] Oz Almog, "The Tattoo Trend in the Sabra Culture," *Anashim Yisrael*, ed. Translated by: Donna Bossin, October 20, 2008, http://www.peopleil.org/DetailsEn.aspx?itemID=7803 (accessed February 2009).

[78] Many early sociological studies on the subject show tattooing as antisocial or pathological behavior, a view that is only recently being reassessed. For a comprehensive review of these studies, see Michael Atkinson's article in *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*.

The first major shift in the attitude of European and American society to tattooing took place in the 1970s. Pop and rock culture became an institution and raised the banner of freedom, including the freedom to do anything to one's body. Punk culture, with its emphasis on eccentric and provocative appearance – weird hairstyles, eye-catching jewelry, leather clothes, shiny motorcycles and tattoos – had an impact.[79] In recent years tattooing has become more and more mainstream. Through the 1980s tattooing was still considered the most effective means of symbolically thumbing one's nose at conventional society. Once the domain of people at the fringe of society, the tattoo is "slowly becoming as accepted as lipstick and face-lifts."[80] Nowadays, the tattoo's ability to shock, inflame, or upset more conventional members of society has decreased as more people receive tattoos, the artistic quality of the work available has improved, and heavily tattooed people have become increasingly visible.[81] Now, the real or would-be outsider marks himself or herself as a sign and proof of being a rebel, of not conforming to the standardized supermarket humanity promoted by mainstream media and society at large. Individual choice is what makes today's renaissance of tribal practices a totally different matter.[82] Though realistically, as tattooing becomes more and more popular, the act has lost its power as a mark of disaffiliation forcing those who want to prove their marginality to find other modes of such expression.[83]

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[79] Almog.
[80] Rufus Camphausen, *Return of the Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1997), 2
[81] Clinton Sanders and D. Angus Vail, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 176.
[82] Camphausen, 33.
[83] Sanders and Vail, 165.

The last three decades have shown a return of many people to values, practices, and ways of thinking that were born in shamanic societies of old.[84] This has manifested in the so-called modern primitive movement. The modern primitivist movement self-consciously rejects the deeply ethnocentric tradition of the West, and instead extends nostalgic views of indigenous cultures as more authentic, natural, and communal.[85] This movement idealizes the non-Western cultures it attempts to emulate. Following a long historical tradition of longing for non-Western cultures, modern primitives valorize tribal societies as more spiritual, communal, and environmentally sensitive than their own.[86] Those who affiliate themselves deeply in the movement see their actions as a continuation of the tribal world from which, in many ways, they wish they came. All body modifications originally started out as way of dealing with body and spirit - combining or getting a union of body and spirit.[87] The movement presents tribal body practices as accessible resources for individual self-invention or reinvention, and political and artistic expression.

One of the most well-known and well-respected personalities of the modern primitive movement is Fakir Musafar, known as a shaman, artist, master piercer and body modifier. He has played a significant role in the revival of body piercing, body sculpting, branding and other body related practices for personal expression, spiritual exploration, rites of passage, healing and reclaiming. In an interview I conducted in his home, Fakir discussed with me the modern primitive movement as well as those people today who

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[84] Camphausen, 5.
[85] Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 124.
[86] *ibid.*, 126.
[87] Fakir Musafar, interview by Rochelle Kamins, Menlo Park, California (January 17, 2009).

have begun to use tattooing and other "primitive" forms of bodywork to express their spirituality. He said that in many ways the modern primitive movement really originated with Westerners who came into contact with the so-called "primitive" cultures who practiced extensive tattooing and piercing. These Westerners were intrigued by what Fakir referred to as the "magic marks" of the tribal people they encountered. According to Fakir, "the making of magic marks on your physical body will change the way your life runs – it will change your attitude; it will change what happens to you in your life."[88] Unfortunately, the

> Sailors [who encountered the marks] brought back the way to make the marks, but didn't bring back the magic or understand the power of the marks. [They didn't understand that] the marks had specific meanings. There were no pictures, no words, just geometric shapes. ... So [the sailors] added words and pictures, which takes away the magic.[89]

Tattoo and piercing shops popped up all around the west; but these early shops (as well as most that are around today) lacked the shamanistic and spiritual backing that the acts were supposed to carry. It seems as though this trend is still apparent. One scholar has noted that most of those pierced today, as well as many professional piercers, have forgotten that tribal people have reasons for piercings and wearing jewelry beyond the obvious desire for adornment.[90] In response to this phenomenon and the growing desire to reconnect with the spiritual side of body modification, Fakir and others began the modern primitive movement, a phrase used as a way to describe non-tribal people who were responding to "primal urges" and manipulating their bodies in some way. Many people who participate in the modern primitive movement are also involved in the world

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[88] Musafar.
[89] *ibid.*
[90] Camphausen, 39.

of BD/SM as well as extreme body play.[91] A large part of the modern primitive movement in which Fakir lives revolves around pain and the spirituality of managing pain.

Throughout the interview, Fakir talked at great length about the disconnect in today's society between what people are doing to their bodies and why they are doing them. He talked about how many people want tattoos and piercings but purely for the aesthetic, not for any spiritual reasons, a fact that he finds troubling. On the other hand, in his time as one of the gurus of this modern primitive world, he has also seen a huge surge in people who are genuinely interested in using the body arts for spiritual uplifting.[92] He said that he is definitely seeing a large number of people interested in finding spiritual connection in bodywork and taking seriously the magic marks they choose to put on their bodies. In his work he has noticed that, "more and more people are coming in and wanting something that they think as special. So in a way unconsciously they are reflecting the true nature of tattoo."[93] In response to its emergence, the modern primitive movement has faced challenges, with some observers criticizing it as inauthentic and a romanticism of "real" tribal cultures. Some critics argue that modern primitivism is an insincere way of making life in the social margins seem more attractive by appropriating non-Western cultural rites.[94] Nevertheless, Fakir and others choose to perform native rituals for their own spiritual growth as well as to awaken people's interest in tribal practices and to make them aware of the transformative value of

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[91] Sanders and Vail, 177.
[92] Musafar.
[93] *ibid.*
[94] Pitts, 128.

feeling.[95] And it is true that many people today are choosing to modify their bodies through tattooing and piercing for spiritual rather than purely aesthetic reasons.

Modern body modification has become an obsession in North America with accepted forms being breast augmentation, face and jaw alterations, liposuction, and cosmetic dentistry to name a few. These acts are, for the most part, readily accepted by a public fascinated with ego, acceptance, and a culturally contrived concept of beauty. Somehow these procedures are considered different from tattooing, scarification, and certain types of piercing. Since perhaps the beginning of time, people have sought to make themselves look and feel good through both accomplishments as well as clothing and sometimes through ways in which they change their bodies.[96] One Orthodox website responded to the question of whether or not plastic surgery is permissible by stating,

> The Rambam writes: "A person is forbidden to inflict a wound, whether upon himself or upon others. And even...hitting someone in a hostile or insulting way...transgresses a Torah prohibition." From here we learn that the prohibition applies only when intended to damage a person, but not when it's for his benefit. Similarly, the Talmud relates how one of the Sages lifted up his cloak when walking through thorns. "Skin heals, clothes don't," explained the Sage. Even though he was scratching his skin, it wasn't done in a hostile or degrading manner, but rather in order to protect his belongings.[97]

The article concludes that, "since the cosmetic surgery is for the woman's benefit and is done with her consent, it's permitted." Interestingly, this same logic is applied to *removing* a tattoo but not applying one. Breast augmentation, nose jobs, face tightening, tummy tucks, and so on are movements toward a cultural concept of beauty and a

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[95] Camphausen, 92.
[96] Dorff, 267.
[97] Ask the Rabbi section of Ohr Torah website Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman, "Ohr Somayach :: Ask The Rabbi :: Tattoos," *Ohr.edu*, February 14, 2004, http://ohr.edu/yhiy/article.php/1474 (accessed January 2009).

standard of youth; while individual-directed mutilation, scarring, or tattooing point in another direction – that is, toward self or individualism.[98] It is interesting to compare this with the discussion above about being made in God's image and taking care of the body we are merely borrowing from God. As seen in tribal cultures that practice body modification for religious and spiritual reasons, it is clear that there are many paths to the spiritual. More and more modern "Western" people are attempting to connect to this spiritual side through tattooing. However, not everyone has a spiritual experience when they get a tattoo or piercing, namely because, according to one scholar, they do not understand these painful paths as corridors leading to a side of our mind that connects to that "other," that energy source that informs all, understood as God.[99] But for many today, the ultimate, personal goal of tattooing and piercing is to find a spiritual connection. Tattooing, for the most part, is an individual experience representing a transition point in the person's life.[100] The modern primitive movement, as well as general social trends of recent years, shows that there is a yearning for spiritual connection that is found through the physical realm of the body.

Aside from the modern primitive movement, mainstream society has embraced the so-called counter-culture of tattooing with a huge influx of tattooing television programs, magazines, and through other multi-media. *Miami Ink*, which aired on TLC from 2005-2008 and spawned two spin-offs (*LA Ink* and *Tattoo Wars*) and *Inked*, which aired on A&E from 2005-2006, brought the subculture of tattooing into the public eye

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[98] John Rush, *Spiritual Tattoo: A Cultural History of Tattooing, Piercing, Scarification, Branding and Implants* (Berkeley: Frog, Ltd., 2005), 55.
[99] *ibid.*, vii.
[100] *ibid.*, 59.

with flashy opening scenes and just enough reality show drama to keep them interesting. The two shows, at once competing for viewership, documented every aspect of people's tattoo experiences, complete with pre-, mid-, and post-tattoo interviews. In addition, in 2003 PBS first aired its documentary *Skin Stories* about the origins and sudden popularity of tattoos. It has since aired countless times on PBS affiliates around the country. In addition to television programming, many tattoo magazines can now be found at news stands everywhere. *Tattoo*, *Flash*, *Skin & Ink*, and *Inked Magazine* are just a few. Not to mention Outlaw Biker Enterprises, the publishers of *Outlaw Biker* magazine, also publish *Skin Art*, *Tattoos for Men*, and *Tattoos for Women.* These magazines provide images and articles that serve to push tattooing further into the mainstream. Most major cities around the world also host tattooing conventions regularly, sometimes more than once a year. In the past forty years tattooing has shot into the public eye and has become more and more accepted by mainstream society. As has already been discussed, the effect has not been lost on the Jewish community.

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.[101] 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."[102] 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.

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[101] 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.

[102] 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.[103] 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 personal

[103] Dorff and Newman, 18.

commemoration and a continuation of historical memory.[104] 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.[105] 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

[104] Apel, 306.
[105] See appendix A.

responded 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.

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)

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.

Figure 3

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)

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.

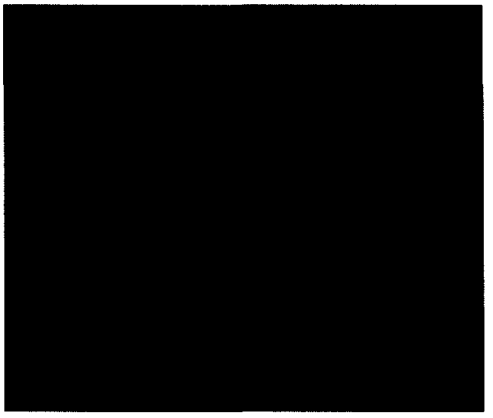

Figure 5

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:

Figure 7

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)

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)

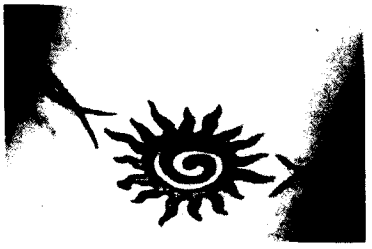

Figure 8

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."[106] 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."[107] Over time, a commonly accepted prohibition from Torah was overturned because it just didn't fit with the broader societal norms.[108]

She may not know it, but in the introduction to her *Guide to Getting a Tattoo*,

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[106] JPS Translation.
[107] 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.
[108] 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.

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."[109] 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 meaningful 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 even in the face

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

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.

APPENDIX A

"Jews with (Jewish) Tattoos" Survey

1. Basic Demographics

1. Age

- ○ < 18
- ○ 18 - 22
- ○ 23 - 28
- ○ 29 - 38
- ○ > 38

2. Gender

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Page 1

2. Basic Demographics continued...

1. Marital Status

- ○ Single/Never married
- ○ Currently Married/Partnered
- ○ Separated/Divorced/Widowed

2. What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

- ○ Currently in High School
- ○ High School diploma or equivalent
- ○ Some college
- ○ AA Degree
- ○ BA Degree
- ○ Some graduate school
- ○ Graduate Degree
- ○ PhD

Other (please specify)

3. Religious Identification

1. How do you identify your religion?

- ○ Born Jewish (religion Jewish)
- ○ Jew by choice (formal conversion)
- ○ Jew by choice (no formal conversion)
- ○ No religion ("just Jewish")
- ○ Eastern or New Age religion
- ○ Christian Jew

2. Further describe your religious identity

- ○ Orthodox-Traditional
- ○ Conservative
- ○ Reform or Liberal
- ○ Reconstructionist
- ○ Ethno-cultural or non-practicing secular
- ○ Jewish Renewal
- ○ No denomination

Other Religion (please explain)

4. Jewish Education and Involvement

1. How would you describe your Jewish education growing up? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Attended Jewish preschool
- ☐ Attended Jewish Day School
- ☐ Attended Jewish supplementary school (aka "Religious school") through a synagogue
- ☐ Had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- ☐ Had a Confirmation
- ☐ Attended educational programming (ie. conferences, classes with Jewish themes or organizational sponsorship)
- ☐ Graduated with or in the process of pursuing a degree in Judaic Studies, Israeli Studies or other Jewish cultural based studies
- ☐ Learned from family, friends
- ☐ Learned from camp
- ☐ No formal Jewish education

Other (or if you would like to add to/explain anything above)

2. In the past five years have you participated in any of the following Jewish activities or organizations? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Local Jewish Community Center
- ☐ College group other than Hillel
- ☐ Hillel
- ☐ Jewish Greek life
- ☐ Educational programming (ie. conferences, classes with Jewish themes or organizational sponsorship)
- ☐ Bureau of Jewish Education
- ☐ National Federation of Temple Youth
- ☐ B'nai B'rith Youth Organization
- ☐ Attended or worked at a Jewish Camp
- ☐ None of the above (please explain below)

Other (or if you would like to add to/explain anything above)

5. Tattoos - Do you?

1. Do you have tattoo(s)?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

6. Will you?

1. How likely is it that you will get a tattoo sometime in the future?

- ○ Not at all likely
- ○ Not likely
- ○ Somewhat likely
- ○ Very likely

7. If yes...

1. If you were to get a tattoo would it have a Jewish theme or significance?

- ○ Definitely
- ○ Probably
- ○ Maybe
- ○ Not sure
- ○ Probably not
- ○ Definitely not
- ○ I haven't thought about it

8. Thinking about it?

1. Have you discussed getting a tattoo with anyone? (Who?)

- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Rabbi, Mentor
- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Counselor
- ☐ Parent
- ☐ Spouse, Boyfriend, Girlfriend (significant other)
- ☐ Stranger
- ☐ Tattoo artist

Other (please specify)

2. Are any of the following important to you in considering getting a tattoo?

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important at All	N/A
Parents' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Other family members' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, significant other	○	○	○	○	○
Friends' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Jewish law	○	○	○	○	○
Boss or supervisor	○	○	○	○	○
Teacher, Mentor, Rabbi	○	○	○	○	○
Strangers' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Occupational regulations	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

3. Please describe the tattoo you've thought about/talked about and what would make it "Jewish" to you.

9. Some questions about the process...

1. Before getting it done, did you discuss getting a tattoo with anyone? (Who?)

- [ ] Friend
- [ ] Rabbi, Mentor
- [ ] Teacher
- [ ] Counselor
- [ ] Parent
- [ ] Other family member
- [ ] Spouse, Boyfriend, Girlfriend (significant other)
- [ ] Stranger
- [ ] Tattoo artist

Other (please specify)

2. How much time passed between when you decided to get the tattoo and when you actually got it done?

- ( ) Less than one day
- ( ) Less than one week
- ( ) 1 - 2 weeks
- ( ) 2 - 4 weeks
- ( ) more than 1 month
- ( ) more than 6 months
- ( ) more than 1 year

What accounts for the time lapse (if there was one)?

3. Were any of the following considerations important to you before getting the tattoo?

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important at All	N/A
Parents' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Other family members' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, significant other	○	○	○	○	○
Friends' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Jewish law	○	○	○	○	○
Boss or supervisor	○	○	○	○	○
Teacher, Mentor, Rabbi	○	○	○	○	○
Strangers' opinions	○	○	○	○	○
Occupational regulations	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

10. The specifics...

1. How many tattoos do you have?

- ○ 1
- ○ 2
- ○ 3
- ○ 4
- ○ 5

If more than 5, how many?

2. Do any of your tattoos have a personal "Jewish" meaning for you?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

11. Please discuss the process of coming up with your "Jewish" tattoo

Please discuss the process of coming up with your "Jewish" tattoo. If you have more than one "Jewish" tattoo, please pick one for now. You will be able to describe up to three "Jewish" tattoos in total.

Please be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful responses to these questions.

1. Briefly describe your tattoo. (What does it look like/what is it of?)

2. How did you decide on this design? Where did you find it? Who created it?

3. How were you personally involved in the design process?

4. What does the tattoo express? What is the story behind your "Jewish" tattoo? (What makes it Jewish to you?)

12. Please discuss the specifics of the tattoo itself

1. Where is your "Jewish" tattoo? (If you have multiple "Jewish" tattoos, please check all that apply.)

- ☐ Upper arm
- ☐ Forearm
- ☐ Wrist
- ☐ Hand
- ☐ Shoulder
- ☐ Shoulder blade
- ☐ Upper back
- ☐ Lower back
- ☐ Entire back
- ☐ Back of neck
- ☐ Side of neck
- ☐ Chest
- ☐ Stomach
- ☐ Hip
- ☐ Ribs
- ☐ Thigh
- ☐ Calf
- ☐ Ankle
- ☐ Foot

Other (please specify)

2. Why did you choose that (those) locations?

3. Where and by whom did you have the tattoo done? Why did you choose that artist/shop?

13. Got some time on your hands?!

1. Would you like to discuss another "Jewish" tattoo?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

14. Describe another tattoo

Please describe another "Jewish" tattoo.

1. Briefly describe your tattoo

2. How did you decide on this design? Where did you get it? Who created it?

3. How were you personally involved in the design process?

4. What does the tattoo express? What is the story behind your "Jewish" tattoo? (What makes it Jewish to you?)

15. Got some more time on your hands?!

1. Would you like to discuss another "Jewish" tattoo?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

16. Describe another tattoo

Please describe another "Jewish" tattoo.

1. Briefly describe your tattoo

2. How did you decide on this design? Where did you get it? Who created it?

3. How were you personally involved in the design process?

4. What does the tattoo express? What is the story behind your "Jewish" tattoo? (What makes it Jewish to you?)

17. One final question!

1. Please complete this sentence:
In most people's opinions, people who have tattoos are:

If you have a pic (or pics) of your "Jewish" tattoo(s) and are willing to share, **please** email me at r_kamins@yahoo.com with the subject "Tattoo Survey Pic".*

Or, if you would like to contact me for any other reason related to this project, please email me at the above address. Thanks again for your participation.

2. How did you hear about this survey?

- [ ] Friend
- [ ] Facebook
- [ ] Tribe.net

Other (please specify)

* By sending my your picture(s) you are granting me permission to use it as part of my thesis and any future printed works that may come from it.

18. Thank You Page

Thank you for participating in my survey and helping me with my thesis! :-)

APPENDIX B

Survey Responses to Final Question:

Please complete this sentence: In most people's opinions, people who have tattoos are:

unique.
normal.
people who have tattoos.
tattooed.
everyone has tattoos now- no big deal
punks.
tattooed
expressing themselves
outlaws, bikers, law breakers, "bad" people overall
crazy
imprudent
people.
eccentric.
trying to express themselves.
not at all different than people with tattoos.
rebellious
trying to express themselves.
rabble rousers
typically of strong character.
expressing themselves.
breaking a rule
Sexy
Fucking rad (joking). people are indifferent.
very common
normal
trendy, and becoming the norm
just like anybody else, but with a tattoo
different...
cool
tacky.
outside society, scary.
in a subculture where it is "cool"
a little edgy.
edgy
normal
rebellious, artsy or trashy.
not observant Jews.
people

not original

young

on the edge

young, sometimes cool, sometimes trashy

foolish.

rebellious.

trashy

are the same as everyone else.

edgy and rebellious

daring.

not classy

people

rebellious.

insecure, impulsive, artistic

awesome

creative

willing to make that commitment

edgy, sure of themselves, sometimes scary (although I think this stems more from racism and sexism...a white woman with tattoos is just weird, a black or latino man with tattoos is scary).

punkish, artistic, or eccentric

interesting

very into them have a story for each one or sorry they got so drunk

its hard to answer in some cases they may be scum but others just like to decorate their bodies as a way of expressing themselves. It depends how many and to what extent

disrespectful toward Jewish holocaust survivors

not religious.

badass

rebels

eccentric.

cool.

not definable in a sentence.

rebellious

unconventional

trying to express themselves in certain ways. Some agree, some don't. I believe that God, the universe, the divine gave me this body to use as my vehicle this time around...God entrusted me with it, and I feel would trust me and respect my decisions to decorate it however I feel is beautiful. I do not get tattoos to spite God and religion, I get tattoos to celebrate them.

eccentric

trendy or rebellious

free spirited.

going to regret having them at some time in the future.

weird

Extreme.
rebels.
weird
do so in poor taste
young
not smart, rebels, white trash
creative independent types
rebels.
edgy
wild
low class, edgy, uneducated, bikers
unique
human. As such, we all deserve a place at G-d's table.
trashy
strange, and low-lifes.
depends on what kind of tattoos and how tasteful
silly
bikers
Decisive
different
people who can and do come from all walks of life.
not thinking
daring
people with tattoos
young
artistic.
if they are Jewish, they are somewhat unusual
unique individuals.
pretty normal people
cool, rebellious, artistic, musicians (me), badass, dangerous...
young and going to regret it when they get older.
people too
branded.
trying to be different.
trendy
artistic
rebellious
interested in adorning their bodies permanently.
comfortable with themselves
a bit rough and on the edge
normal?
are tatted out.
tattooed
counter-culture.
working class or young and hip

alternative
rebels
just like anyone else, it doesn't matter.
marked for life
hooligans
decisive; a bit radical; and tolerant of pain
making a mistake
dangerous.
are expressing themselves by decorating their bodies.
white trash or artistic
either socially progressive or trashy.
trying to be rebels.
wild
edgy, making a statement and calling attention to themselves.
normal
Younger than 50.
different in some way
no different than those who do not have tattoos.
do not fit one category
young and don't think of the long term effect on their skin and appearance.
trashy
disregarding their body.
not like me.
young or trying to be young.
hip.
Not perfect conformists.
hardcore
west coast
rough around the edges, risk takers, passion people.
punks.
bad asses
getting them only because they found one they wanted that has meaning to them.
tattooed
young/impulsive
slaves to trends in fashion
acceptable
seeking ways to express art on their bodies.
expressing something very personal without words
wanting to express themselves with ink on their bodies.
people who make their own choices and this is fine.
deviant
rebellious.
intimidating or rebellious.
naive
not looked at seriously

people who have tattoos
anyone interested in displaying art on their bodies.
people who feel the obligation to decorate their pure, god given bodies.
not afraid of what others think of them.
similar only in so much as they have chosen to have tattoos
cool, youth identified.
daring
rebels
people who want to have tattoos
eccentric
younger than me.
misguided
strange.
different
trendy hipsters or antisocial criminals
edgy or not professional
just like anyone else.
trying to express themselves
looking for attention.
no different than people without
cool
creative
usually having put serious creative, imaginative and substantive thought into their ink before getting it.
inked
rebels, strong willed, interesting.
normal.
tattooed
rebellious
making a statement through their tattoos.
enhanced visually
In the past I would have said that those with tattoos were rebelling against the dominant culture or part of a counter-culture sub-group. I think tattooing has become much more accepted and mainstream among the 20-something generation. More likely to be viewed as an art form or personal expression on the part of these young people.
willing to think outside the box
Less risk averse
young!
trashy
people. (That's my opinion - I can't speak for other people.)
uneducated
free spirits
following a trend to conform
expressing something artistic or significant about themselves

rebels
individualists
Willing to commit to having something on their bodies forever.
interested in body art
like pain
people with tats have more fun.
eccentric
rebellious
trendy
a little bit trendy
every day people
unclear, most people I deal with or the general pop?
rebellious.
rebellious
trashy (according to my Jewish mother!)
pretty common these days, I usually consider them creative
looking for attention
taboo
not that unusual anymore
artsy
rebellious
average people.
under the age of 40
creative
of a younger generation than myself
uninhibited and want a unique mode of expression
full of permanent shlocky art work.
young
a little wild.
not thinking long term
Independent
independent, free thinking, not commitment phobic
not thinking ahead
low class
alternative though this has changed and it's more mainstream now
dirty
mainstream
misusing acupuncture points
free-spirited
low class (but that's not what i personally believe)
young, not thinking of the future
silly
people with ink imbedded in their skin
Edgy and creative
sexy:)

rebellious.

interesting and perhaps a little scary.

icky

either young and cool or "biker" types

looking to express themselves in another way

expressing some form of rebellion.

rebels

rebels, artistic, free thinking, unconventional.

rebels

trendy

trying to express themselves

Mostly pretty cool. Obviously it is a diverse group though....

cannot be summed up in one sentence

weird, although it's much more common now, especially on younger people (under 40).

very different from who they were 35 years ago

art

participating in a fad.

not thinking about whether they will still want to have tattoos in ten or twenty years.

criminals

Strange

a very heterogeneous group of people.

strange

Non-Conformists

Not mainstream.

tattooed

individuals have different reasons

rebellious

like everyone else

hot

just like other people, except that they have tattoos

commonplace these days.

Don't you think this survey is nonsense? Aren't there important questions to ask?

free spirited

trying to be counter cultural

creative

have an edge to them.

impulsive....but i don't agree with that. I think that most people who have tattoos are simply sure they want some image on their body in that moment.

not thinking

in tune with who they are

Hip

either trashy or trendy

expressing themselves

young
wild
expressing an aspect of who they are in a permanent way on their bodies
a little edgy or daring.
diverse, creative, expressive
in SF, people who have tattoos are the norm
artistic
people
artistic and passionate
Artistic and creative in personal expressions
blue collar/servicemen/hippies/sailors
cool
fucking awesome and should rule the world from a throne of justice!!!
liberal
risk-takers.
risk takers.
Want to express themselves in a unique way.
artistic and creative
odd.
Trashy
creative
free-spirited.
liberal
expressing themselves.
daring
trying to be cool.
adventurous
rebellious
Proud of who they are
artsy
wanting to express themselves
alternative
young, hip,
wild
interested in art
expressive
No single answer. People my age are tend to be negative but are increasingly becoming more accepting. Young people tend to be very accepting. I would imagine that a large proportion of youth have tattoos--though most in more private places.
awesome
young
marking their bodies
drek (trash)
as varied as the tattoos

curious.
edgy, artsy, rebellious,
quite different from how they are in reality
rebellious
trying to prove something/free spirited/rebellious/naughty
scary.
rebellious/rash/stupid/idealistic
quite expressive.
looking for attention.
not religious
everyday people
expressing themselves or times in their lives through body art
trying to be different by conforming to a stereotype.
rebellious and dangerous
just like everyone else
bold to decide on such a permanent thing
creative but perhaps not aware of Halachic rulings on the issue
under 40
sketchy and live an alternative lifestyle.
seen as being taboo.
normal.
lower class
don't respect themselves
not any one type of person.
rebellious or "white trash"
counter culture
rebellious.
interested in expressing themselves openly and permanently to the people surrounding them.
unique
reckless
young
odd.
defacing their body.
Those who like to express themselves through body art
have a need of self-expression and need to find a different outlet for something that is lacking for them to permanently do this to themselves.
young.
irreligious
white trash
somewhat trashy and/or crazy and/or violent and/or hip
irresponsible
artistic
weird
impulsive and ill-advised.

are thinking of the present
artistic
decorated.
wild in some way.
cool.
sketchy.
grotty
trashy. But in San Francisco it shows that you're artistic.
shortsighted
non traditional religiously but similar to many of their peers
looking to distinguish themselves from everyone else.
going to regret it later in their life.
just people who have tattoos.
interesting.
lower class, different, using their bodies to express themselves perhaps because they have trouble expressing in other more traditional ways, making a statement.
rebellious
Young or sailors.
disrespectful of their body's temple
normal.
people who wanted tattoos. I wouldn't judge someone on the basis of their tattoos.
creative
scary or tough
a little bit crazy or slightly unsavory.
marking their bodies.
misbehaved
edgy
permanently marking up their bodies.
fine by me.
young.
being themselves.
young, frivolous, immature
expressive
more likely to contract an STD from having unprotected sex.
making a decision they might regret
rebels
rebels
Usually young adults who want control over their own bodies and images.
trendy.
creative mavericks
trashy
interesting
creative
freaks

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