

AN EVERLASTING IMPRESSION: INSIGHTS ON TATTOOS AND JUDAISM

Rebecca Tabaroki

Modern society heavily emphasizes individuality and the need for self-expression. People often define themselves by what differentiates them from others. While some individuals turn to specific types of clothing for self-portrayal, women often express themselves through the style of their makeup and hair. Although personal style is a common approach for self-expression, a more permanent and modern method of self-rendition occurs through the art of tattooing.

Often, when one thinks of tattoos, she imagines an individual with exaggerated and creative illustrations on her skin. Interestingly, however, tattoos have become common in the medical field, specifically in plastic surgery and cosmetics. Women with breast cancer who have had their breasts removed may opt for reconstructive surgery to regain their femininity. During such procedures, medical tattooing is sometimes done around the chest area to promote acceptance of self and closure on the breast cancer experience. Medical tattooing is also common for scar camouflaging, cleft lips, stretch marks, and patients with severe burns [1]. Another cosmetic procedure called micropigmentation, which is “sometimes referred to as permanent make-up, is a technique in which minute, metabolically inert pigment granules are implanted below the epidermis for cosmetic or corrective enhancement” [2]. These uses of tattooing allow individuals to portray themselves in the image that they desire.

Research has been done to investigate the chemicals found in tattoo inks. Many types of ink revealed toxic metals, endocrine disruptors, and a compound that has been called “one of the most potent skin carcinogens” [3]. According to the Environmental Health News, both the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and a number of researchers have noted that colored inks often contain lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, titanium and other heavy metals. Black tattoo inks are often made of soot, so they contain known carcinogens called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) [3]. It is evident that the toxins found in such inks can be detrimental to the genetics of the skin, resulting in melanoma or other forms of skin cancer. In spite of these dangerous reagents, many people continue to insert such chemicals into their skin for personal satisfaction.

With a growing amount of people getting tattoos each day, a question arises in the Jewish community about the ramifications for Jewish men and women who “mark” their bodies with such tattoos. It says in Leviticus 19:28 on the topic of *ketovet ka’aka*, “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks on you; I am the L-rd.” As modern society progressed, the literal meaning of “imprint” has been challenged. The Mishnah understood *ketovet ka’aka* to mean tattooing. It specified “*kochal*,” a blue-colored eye paint, and other colors, as the pigments used by gentiles for their tattoos (*Makot* 3:6). *Rashi* explained *ketovet ka’aka* to mean “a scratch or incision that is embedded deeply [in the skin], can never be erased, is done with a needle, and darkens [the skin] forever” (*Makot* 21a) [4].

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Although in today’s society tattooing is a personal choice, during World War II, Jewish prisoners in concentration camps were inked against their will with identification numbers. A serious conflict arose when dealing with the burial of a Jew who had a tattoo. Both the *Rambam* and the *Shulchan Aruch* maintained that the one being tattooed is not responsible for the sin; the tattoo artist is. This applies to the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. However, if the person being tattooed assists in the tattooing process and welcomes the tattoo, he is guilty of the sin and is responsible for his actions (*Rambam; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 180:2).

While tattoos are not permitted, a Jew that has a tattoo may still be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The only Jews excluded from a Jewish burial are those who have committed suicide (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 345:2). This account applies to the Holocaust survivors who were marked with tattoos on their forearms. These

Jews are, in fact, permitted for a Jewish burial. Additionally, there is another misconception that Jewish people who violated various laws will be denied a Jewish burial; therefore they opt for cremation, which is strictly against Jewish law. This misunderstanding has created unfortunate circumstances, since almost no one should be excluded from burial in a Jewish cemetery. However, when cremated, the individual is denied a Jewish burial [5]. Fortunately, with the act of *teshuvah* one may repent and receive forgiveness for his sins. Thus burial in a Jewish cemetery is allowed.

Although the *halacha* strictly forbids the act of tattooing

(Leviticus 19:28), the number of individuals inking their skin continues to rise. In today's society, tattoos are becoming more common, even in the medical field, yet research has identified the toxic reagents in inks that may have detrimental health effects. Despite the lack of *halachic* basis, the misconception about tattoos and Jewish burial continues to prevail. Among other factors, Hashem may have forbid tattooing in light of its harmful effects on the body. However, it wasn't until recently that scientific experimentation showed the potential health risks of the chemicals used in tattoo inks. ■

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