

Jews and Tattoos

Source Sheet compiled by Adira Rosen

December 2025

Leviticus 19:28	ויקרא י"ט:כ"ח
You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves...	ושרט לגפש לא תתנו בבשרכם וכתבת קעקע לא תתנו בכם

Rashi* on Leviticus 19:28	רש"י על ויקרא י"ט:כ"ח
וכתבת קעקע [Meaning] a writing engraved (more lit., dug into) and sunk into the flesh and which can never be erased because it is pricked in with a needle and remains black forever. <small>*One of the most famous commentators on the Torah</small>	וכתבת קעקע. כתב מחקה ושקוע שאינו נמחק לעולם שמקעקעו במחט והוא משחיר לעולם:

- Why do you think the Torah is concerned with mentioning this matter?
- What is your reaction to the Torah talking about tattoos? (At least how Rashi interprets it.)

From Sinai to Ethiopia, Shulhan haOrit; The Halakhah of Ethiopian Jewry, Then and Now, 6 Foundations of the Jewish Home 9:3
From the fact that the Torah expressly forbids tattooing, we may assume that this was a common practice among the Canaanite peoples, and biblical commentators have remarked on this. The Rambam notes that the gentiles tattooed themselves to indicate loyalty to their gods. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra writes that non-Jews tattooed themselves in memory of the dead, and this is why the prohibition against tattoos appears in the same verse with the prohibition against cutting oneself to honor the dead. Jewish law forbids making a tattoo on the body. This prohibition is one of the 613 mitzvot.

- How do you think tattoos and their symbolism have changed over time, if at all?

Jews and Tattoos: 'Rooted in Conflict' By Stefany Truesdell published in the Havard Divinity Bulletin
After centuries and centuries of this prohibition on tattooing, the Nazis forcibly tattooed the Jews held at Auschwitz. The Nazi regime used tattooing (primarily at the Auschwitz camp complex) because the previous method of assigning numbers and stitching them onto clothing that was later recycled upon the prisoners' deaths left the Nazis with no way to identify dead bodies. The Nazis, in their typical horrific, methodical fashion, created a complex system of numbering to streamline their records. It is estimated that "more than 400,000 prisoner serial numbers" were assigned and tattooed. The numbers were meant to

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demonstrate to the recipients that they were nothing more than numbers and were subject to a bureaucratic system that attempted to control every aspect of their lives. This deplorable history has led many to question whether it is morally or ethically acceptable for modern Jews to choose to tattoo themselves. In addition to the Levitical law, the tattoo has come to stand for this deeply painful past. This resistance to tattoos is linked to a cultural memory of forced conversion. The Nazis forced the Jews they tattooed to join the ranks of the “others” from whom Levitical law had set them apart. The Nazis at Auschwitz also caused their prisoners to become other from observant Jews without tattoos, other from Holocaust survivors not imprisoned at Auschwitz, and other from those who tattoo themselves by choice.

- How does the history of forced tattooing during the Holocaust shape Jewish cultural attitudes toward tattoos today?
- How does this painful history shape your opinion of Jews getting tattoos?

The Tattoo Taboo in Judaism from My Jewish Learning

Is having a tattoo grounds for exclusion [from Jewish community]? [For example, being buried in a Jewish cemetery?]

Rabbi Alan Lucas, the author of the 1997 Conservative movement opinion on tattooing, asserts that those who violate the prohibition on tattooing should still be permitted to participate fully in synagogue life. As a rule, transgressing a particular commandment does not result in one’s exclusion from synagogue life. While some traditional communities might find it unseemly for a member with a visible tattoo to lead services or read from the Torah, there is nothing in Jewish law that requires someone be excluded. “It’s not different than a person who’s in violation of any prohibition in the Torah,” Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, tells MJL.

- How do you think Jewish communities today should navigate the tension between upholding traditional prohibitions and fostering a sense of belonging for all members, regardless of personal choices?

Jews and Tattoos: ‘Rooted in Conflict’ By Stefany Truesdell published in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin

Those who engage in tattooing point out that the history of the Jewish people has included prohibitions on many practices that are no longer forbidden or denied to modern Jews; the historical prohibition against permanent alteration of the skin should also be part of this critical reevaluation of Jewish law. Of course, Orthodox Jews still follow the strictest interpretations of halakhah, but Reform Jews no longer follow many of those laws. Moreover, since tattoos are used by members of many of the world’s religious communities,

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the presence or absence of tattoos can no longer reliably be used to identify one's religion. For these reasons, [Andy Abrams, author of "Kosher Ink: The Emerging World of Tattooed Jews,"]...hopes that the law might "be interpreted to allow tattoos within certain limits." He notes: "The prohibition is open to interpretation, and Judaism is not a stagnant thing. We change and evolve with the times."¹⁰ In the religiously pluralistic United States, many people choose to express their religious, cultural, and ethnic identities through tattoos. It is understandable, then, that some Jewish people would want to proudly wear their own statements of identity without having to worry that this will be threatening to others either outside or inside their faith community.

- What might it mean for Jewish communities to "critically reevaluate" long-standing prohibitions like tattooing?