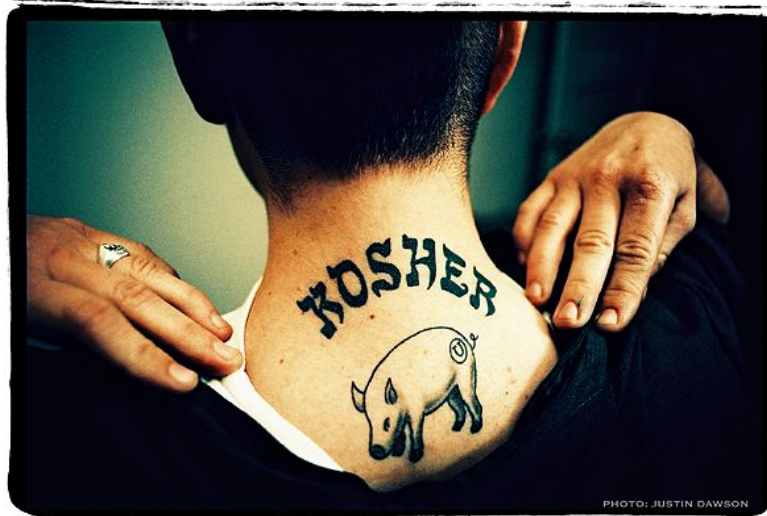


WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH TATTOOS?



The prohibition of tattooing is found in the Torah: ([Leviticus 19:28](#)).

וְשָׂרֵט לֹנֶה פֶּשׁ לֹא תִתְּנוּ בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם
וּכְתַבְתָּ קַעֲקָע לֹא תִתְּנוּ בְּכֶם אֲנִי ה'!

You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the LORD

**Which part of the verse do you think applies to tattoos?
What do you think that means?**

It is the second part of this verse from which we derive the general prohibition against tattooing. From the outset there is disagreement about what precisely makes tattooing a prohibited act. The Mishnah [Oral Law] states:

One who tattoos: If he writes without engraving, or he engraves without writing, he is not liable for lashes, until he writes and engraves with ink or pigment or anything that leaves an impression. Rebbi Shimon ben Yehudah said in the name of Rebbi Shimon [bar Yochai]: He is not liable until he writes a name [of idolatry] there. As it says (**Vayikra 19**): "Do not tattoo yourself, for I am G-d"

[Mishnah Makkot 3:6](#) מכותרת 3:6

הכותב כתובת קעקע. כתב ולא קעקע.
קעקע ולא כתב. אינו חייב. עד שיכתוב
ויקעקע. בדיו. ובכחול. ובכל דבר
שהוא רושם. רבי שמעון בן יהודה
משום רבי שמעון אומר אינו חייב עד
שיכתוב שם השם שנאמר (ויקרא יט,
כח) וכתובת קעקע לא תתנו
בכם אני ה'!

**What is the problem according to the Mishnah?
What other actions fall in this category?
What is Rabbi Simeon's issues with tattoos?**

Maimonides:

Rabbi Shimon says that one is not liable until he writes the name of idolatry on his flesh like it says “Do not join with me anything, do not bring yourself close to anything but me”. And that is his intent. The Halacha does not follow R’ Shimon.

הכותב כתובת קעקע כתב ולא כו': רבי שמעון אומר אינו חייב עד שיכתוב שם עבודת כוכבים על בשרו כאילו אמר לא תשתף עמי שום דבר ולא תקרב עצמך לזולתי וזו היא כוונתו ואין הלכה כר' שמעון

What does Maimonides says is the Jewish law?

Prohibition and its Rationale

Regardless of the exact limits of this prohibition, over time the rabbis clearly extended the prohibition to include all tattooing (Tosafot commentary to BT [Gittin 20b](#)).

בכתובת קעקע - מדאורייתא ליכא איסורא עד שיכתוב ויקעקע בדיו ובכחול כדתנן בפ"ג דמכות (דף כא.) ולר' שמעון אינו חייב אפי' כתב וקעקע עד שיכתוב את השם פי' שם דע"ז כדמפרש התם בגמרא ומיהו איסורא דרבנן איכא הכא דאפי' אפר מקלה אסור ליתן על גבי מכתו מפני שנראה ככתובת קעקע ואפי' הויא הכא איסורא דאורייתא מ"מ הוי גט כדאמר' לעיל כתבו על איסורי הנאה כשר אע"ג דאסור לכתוב דהא מיתהני באיסורי הנאה:

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 in a contemporary secular society that is constantly challenging the Jewish concept that we are created *b'tzelem Elokim* (in the image of G-d) and that our bodies are to be viewed as a precious gift on loan from G-d, to be entrusted into our care and [are] 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.

As tattoos become more popular in contemporary society, there is a need to reinforce the prohibition against tattooing in our communities and counterbalance it with education regarding the traditional concept that we are created *b'tzelem Elokim*. But, however distasteful we may find the practice there is no basis for restricting burial to Jews who violate this prohibition or even limiting their participation in synagogue ritual. The fact that someone may have violated the laws of *kashrut* [Keeping Kosher] at some point in his or her 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.

What if you have the tattoo in a place that no one else can see it?

Removing Tattoos

New laser technology has raised the possibility of removing what was once irremovable. To date, this procedure is painful, long, and very expensive. However, it will probably not be long before the process is refined to the point where it will not be painful, overly involved, or very expensive. At such a time it might be appropriate to consider whether removal of tattoos should become a requirement of *teshuvah* [repentance, or reversion to behavior according to Jewish norms], conversion, or burial.

Do you think that one should have their tattoo removed?

Only Voluntary, Permanent Tattooing is Forbidden

The prohibition of tattooing throughout the halakhic literature deals only with personal, voluntary tattooing. With respect to the reprehensible practice of the Nazis who marked the arms of Jews with tattooed numbers and letters during the Shoah [Holocaust], the *Shulhan Arukh* [the authoritative 16th-century code of Jewish law] makes it clear that those who bear these tattoos are blameless: “If it [the tattoo] was done in the flesh of another, the one to whom it was done is blameless” (*Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 180:2).

Tattoos which are used in cancer treatment or any similar medical procedure to permanently mark the body for necessary life saving treatment are also not included in the prohibition against tattooing (*Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 180:3).

The prohibition against tattoos applies only to permanent marks to the skin. Therefore hand stamps or other popular children’s decorations which mimic tattoos and paint the skin in a non-permanent manner cannot be included under the prohibition of tattooing. However, *l’shem hinukh* (for the purpose of education), it might be appropriate for parents to make the distinction clear to their children. These also present an excellent opportunity to introduce young children to the concept that we are created b’tzelem Elokim [in the image of G-d] and the implications of that concept.

Are there things that you have done to your skin that have not been permanent?

Tattoos: Prohibited, But Not Cause for Exclusion

Tattooing is an explicit prohibition from the Torah. However, those who violate this prohibition may be buried in a Jewish cemetery and participate fully in all synagogue ritual. While no sanctions are imposed, the practice should continue to be discouraged as a violation of the Torah. At all times a Jew should remember that we are created b’tzelem Elokim. We are called upon to incorporate this understanding into all our decisions.

So what does that leave us with?