

# Jews and Tattoos

כח וְשָׂרֵט לְנַפְשׁוֹ, לֹא תַתְּנוּ  
בְּבִשְׂרֵיכֶם, וּכְתֹבֶת קַעֲקַע, לֹא  
תַתְּנוּ בְּכֶם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.  
Leviticus 19:28 Ye shall not make any  
cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor  
imprint any marks upon you: I am the  
LORD.

Parashat Ahare Mot- Kedoshim 5775

Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

## Tattoo snafu irks inked Apple Watch wearers

(Reuters, April 30 2015) - Early adopters of the Apple Watch, Apple Inc's first new product in five years,, are complaining that a number of its key functions are disrupted by their tattoos. Owners of Apple Watch have found that their inked skin confuses the sensors on the underside of the device.

Users of the watch, which went on sale last week, took to social media on Thursday under the hashtag #tattoogate to air their frustration with the flaw from Apple's renowned design house.

One anonymous user on Reddit, an entertainment, social networking, and user-generated news website, said the device's locking mechanism, which should disengage when the watch detects it is being worn, failed to work on decorated skin.

Home Print Edition News

## Son gets Dad's Auschwitz tattoo on own arm

Yeshayahu Folman was initially appalled by his son's 'act of solidarity,' but eventually cooperated.

By Yair Ettinger and Haaretz Correspondent | May 1, 2008 | 12:00 AM

Tweet 0 reddit this!

One day about eight years ago, Dr. Ron Folman walked into a tattoo studio on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street accompanied by his parents, Professor Yeshayahu and Dr. Ahuva Folman. He asked his father to bare his left forearm, and told the tattooist: "I want an exact copy of that tattoo."

The original inscription, B1367, was seared by a German soldier into the arm of the 10-year-old child Yeshayahu Folman in June 1944, on the day he was brought to Auschwitz. The boy had been sent alone from Piotrkow in Poland, and did not know what happened to his parents, whom he would find only after the war.

After surviving selections and three years in the Blizhin and Treblinka camps, Folman - who describes himself "a survivor, like a field mouse" - survived Auschwitz as well.

Since his arrival at the age of 13 at the Ben Shemen youth village - where he learned how to read and write - through his army service, academic studies, lecturing at the Hebrew University's agriculture department, serving as the Agriculture Ministry's chief scientist and volunteering for UN work in Africa, he has done all he could "not to convey personal trauma."

He did the same while he and his wife raised three children. He did not hide a thing from his family, but believes the Holocaust should be remembered "in a public and national, rather than personal, way."

Forty-six years after that day in Auschwitz, Yeshayahu Folman found himself in the tattoo studio with a strange man copying digit by digit from his arm to his son's, carefully duplicating the exact shade, size and spot. The act followed months of family debates.

Yeshayahu Folman was appalled by the idea and tried to prevent his son from doing it, but eventually cooperated.

"It was an act of solidarity with me," he says. "Of course I was moved, but I was not in favor of it. I still believe that he is burdening himself with a weight he will carry for life. That is unnecessary as far as he and his children are concerned. It pains me to feel that I'm transferring it to him."

He refuses to bare his arm for a joint photograph with his son. "I was a victim against my will. I don't have to display my coercion, especially since I was so young. You," he addresses his son, "since you chose it, don't convey wretchedness. Good or bad, it's your choice."

Two events in 2000 brought Ron Folman to decide to engrave the number on his flesh - his father was hospitalized with a disease, and Ron was preparing for a long trip to Germany for completing his post-doctorate studies. He had served as a fighter pilot in the air force, volunteered for Amnesty, and had a successful academic career. Everything was woven somehow in the Holocaust story, and the Zionist and humanist values he was raised on.

But the trip to Germany, he says, was about to close a circle. He was headed for the University of Heidelberg, the first university to kick out all its Jewish students and lecturers when Hitler rose to power.

"I was the first Jew to hold a position in the University of Heidelberg's physics department since 1933," he says. "But the tattoo wasn't because of Germany, at least not consciously. Nor was it done as a demonstration or public statement. It was about my relationship with my father, and the family members who survived and those who didn't. My father was sick at the time, and for the first time I felt in real danger of losing him. It was purely emotional. I didn't think of the meanings. It was the act of a man who sees his father in the hospital and suddenly all the years he absorbed, between the lines, the great pain, the tears - everything burst out. Until then I suppressed feelings associated with the Holocaust, but when I saw him lying there I felt I had to, wanted to, make a private statement about my feelings toward him and the Holocaust. It was a desire to tell him that his son understands what he had been through and shares his pain."

"As for the Holocaust, perhaps it was to tell myself I'd never forget."

Ron Folman, a quantum physics expert and lecturer at Ben-Gurion University, says "I've always had a strong need for hard facts. Beyond all the feelings around the Holocaust and the talks with my father, I had a need for something factual. The number on the arm was the only factual thing we had left from the Holocaust. I asked for an exact copy, but he blew it. He used different fonts. The Germans made the digit 3 with a round font, but this tattooist made a 3 with a flat top. The 3 irritated me."

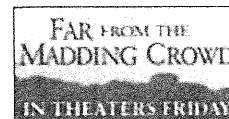
The tattoo evoked numerous responses on a daily basis both in Israel and overseas.

"When I'm asked about it I avoid the question," he says. "The number is only important to me as far as my daughters are concerned. I don't know how many stories they'll get to hear from their grandparents, so it's important to me that they see the number and maybe ask questions about it," he says.

Yeshayahu Folman says he has never thought of having the number removed.

"I've heard of people who do that; I don't believe in escaping, especially not from history. It happened, the people who lived through it have no choice, they must bear it as best they can, but why pass the personal emotional burden on to the next generation?"

2



July 17, 2008

SKIN DEEP

## For Some Jews, It Only Sounds Like ‘Taboo’

By KATE TORGOVNICK

ROBERTA KAPLAN, 71, has never been a fan of tattoos. “I’m a very Jewish person,” she said. “I was told from way, way back that you’re not supposed to desecrate your body.”

Ms. Kaplan ordered her five children to renounce tattoos. (What would neighbors at synagogue think?) Her children, in turn, did the same (every third teenager may have an ankle tattoo souvenir from spring break, but that doesn’t make it right by the Torah).

By the time Ms. Kaplan’s daughter Liz Carnes, 49, had teenage daughters who wanted body art, Ms. Carnes knew how to dissuade them. “I’d say, ‘If you get a tattoo, you can’t be buried in a Jewish cemetery,’” said Ms. Carnes, the owner of a video equipment company in Carlsbad, Calif. “For no real reason, just that’s what my parents told me.”

Nearly every Jew, from those who go to synagogue only on holidays to those who dutifully follow Jewish law, has heard that adage. It has deterred many from being inked, even as tattoos have become widespread among N.B.A. players and housewives alike.

According to a 2007 poll of 1,500 people conducted by the Pew Research Center, 36 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds and 40 percent of 26- to 40-year-olds have at least one tattoo. Still, even Larry David was so haunted by the cemetery edict that he wrote an episode of “Curb Your Enthusiasm” in which he pays off a gravedigger to have his mother reburied in a Jewish cemetery despite a small tattoo on her behind.

But the edict isn’t true. The eight rabbinical scholars interviewed for this article, from institutions like the Jewish Theological Seminary and Yeshiva University, said it’s an urban legend, most likely started because a specific cemetery had a policy against tattoos. Jewish parents and grandparents picked up on it and over time, their distaste for tattoos was presented as scriptural doctrine.

At first, Nicki Carnes, daughter of Liz and granddaughter of Roberta, listened to her elders. “I took what they said to heart,” said Nicki Carnes, 29, who works for her mother’s company. “Then as I got older, I started doing my own research. I asked different rabbis, and they each had their own take.”

By the time, three years ago, she had an abstract rendering of her cat tattooed on her wrist, she wasn’t sure she was in the wrong. After all, she had figured out on her own what has yet to become commonly known among Jews: that rabbis disagree about just how bad it is to get inked.

Still, you try confronting your grandmother. Instead, Nicki Carnes hid her abstract cat for months, until one

day her sleeve rode up. "My grandma grabbed my arm and just stared," she said. "She gave me that blank, 'You broke my heart' look."

Old myths die hard, and many tattooed Jews in their 20's and 30's say they often are criticized by other Jews, both relatives and strangers. Some, like Nicki Carnes and her sister, Rebecca, who now also has a tattoo, say that being permanently marked was just something they wanted. Others say they were tattooed to rebel or, surprisingly, that they wanted a Jewish tattoo as a way of connecting with their religious and cultural identity.

Andy Abrams, a filmmaker, has spent five years making a documentary called "Tattoo Jew." In his interviews with dozens of Jews with body art, he's noticed the prevalence of Jewish-themed tattoos — from Stars of David to elaborate Holocaust memorials, surprising since one reason Jewish culture opposes tattoos is that Jews were involuntarily marked in concentration camps.

Mr. Abrams has even seen tattoos that crack jokes, like the one on the back of Ari Bacharach's neck: the word "Kosher" above a pig, an ironic statement about identity. "The people I interviewed are trying to express their Judaism, or connect with God or their Jewish roots," said Mr. Abrams, 38, who lives in Los Angeles and calls himself a nonpracticing Orthodox Jew. "They're taking this prohibited act and using it to feel more Jewish."

Take Marshal Klaven, 29. While studying in Israel as a teenager, he decided to become a rabbi. For the first time, "it became not just the Jewish people, but my Jewish people," he said. This sense of belonging inspired him to get the first of his three tattoos, a Star of David and a dove.

"For me, it's about cultural pride and connecting in this very tangible, very visible way to a part of our lives that isn't so tangible," said Mr. Klaven, who is now a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and is writing his thesis on tattooing in the Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Mark Washofsky, one of his thesis advisers, said Mr. Klaven's work opens up a Pandora's box of mixed feelings. "A lot of Jews of my generation are confused about tattoos," said Rabbi Washofsky, 55. "We don't think it's a very 'Jewish' thing to do, but we're not really sure why. Many of us are baby boomers who remember being condemned for our modes of dress and expression." He added: "We swore we'd never do this to our kids. Now we are."

Jewish law on tattooing is slippery. Leviticus 19:28 states, "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead nor incise any marks on yourself: I am the Lord." For Rabbi Washofsky, it's unclear whether the passage strictly outlaws tattoos that refer to a god, or whether it generally condemns any personal adornment. Ear piercing, he added, is not controversial.

For Mr. Klaven, historical context is key. When Leviticus was written, tattooing was largely a pagan practice, done to mark slaves or to show devotion to a pharaoh, Mr. Klaven said. Since tattooing has evolved, he thinks the rule may be outdated.

Not all scholars agree. Rabbi Alan Bright, a spokesman for the Jewish Funeral Directors of America, dismissed the cemetery adage as "a load of rubbish," but he said that tattooing was a no-no. He quotes

Deuteronomy 4:15, which commands Jews to take care of their bodies, as evidence.

But he noted that Jewish law prohibits many things that secular Jews do without a second thought. "The Torah prohibits anything negative that affects the body," he said. "Smoking is more of a violation of Jewish law." As are drinking alcohol in excess and overeating.

IT'S difficult to know exactly how many young Jews are being tattooed, because no organization tracks these numbers. But a pro-tattoo community is emerging online. Christopher Stedman, a 23-year-old student in Rohnert Park, Calif., started a MySpace group called "Jews with Tattoos" in 2004, after noticing more Jewish friends being tattooed. The group now has 839 members.

Mr. Stedman was raised Christian. When he converted to Judaism at 19, he already had a tattoo of a Norwegian knight, so he wasn't too worried about getting another. He had the Hebrew words for "love" and "hate" inscribed on his feet.

Daniel Koffler, a graduate student, draws lots of attention with the Star of David on his muscular bicep. Growing up in a culturally Jewish (but not terribly religious) family, he was told that nice Jewish boys don't get body art.

"It's both prohibited but also a permanent identification with the community," said Mr. Koffler, 24, who lives in New York City.

When he got this tattoo four years ago, Mr. Koffler thought he couldn't be buried in a Jewish cemetery. When strangers would belabor the point, his reply was, "I don't care what happens to my body when I die." And now that he knows his ink won't bar him from Jewish cemeteries? "I can say, 'That's just wrong,'" he said.

Nearly every day fellow Jews take it upon themselves to harangue Ami James, a tattoo artist on "Miami Ink," the TLC reality TV series. It doesn't help that he is heavily tattooed and lives in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. "I'll be buying groceries, and I get asked, 'How could you do that to yourself?'" Mr. James said.

Still, he is often asked to do Jewish-themed tattoos in the Miami Beach shop where he is one of the owners, the Love Hate Tattoo Studio.

Todd Weinberger, the creative director of Inked Magazine, grew up in a family that kept kosher, and recently got his first tattoo with his girlfriend, Jennifer Goldstein, an editor at CosmoGirl magazine. Their matching Hebrew ones read, "Forever and ever." "We're not into marriage, so we wanted to get commitment tattoos," said Mr. Weinberger, 37, who lives in Brooklyn. "We were hesitant because we knew it was against the religion, but Judaism has got to evolve with the times."

Last weekend, Mr. Weinberger's family saw their adornments for the first time. "It went over a lot better than I thought," he said. "They were more upset that it was a commitment to us not getting married."

## The Body

### Tattooing in Jewish Law

**Though a biblical ban on tattooing remains in force, a contemporary rabbi probes the prohibition's limits and explores the rationale behind it.**

By Rabbi Alan Lucas

*This responsum (a formal response by a rabbi to a question about proper Jewish practice) by a contemporary Conservative rabbi reviews relevant precedents and arrives at a conclusion very much like those reached by Reform and Orthodox authorities as well. One additional point raised by others is that tattoos are often desired by young people whose parents object, making it a possible violation of the precept to honor one's parents. The practical question to which Rabbi Lucas is responding has three parts: Is tattooing permitted? Would having a tattoo prevent a person from taking part in synagogue rituals? Would it preclude burial in a Jewish cemetery? Reprinted with permission of the Rabbinical Assembly.*

The prohibition of tattooing is found in the Torah: "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:28).

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 anonymous author of a mishnah [an individual statement in the compilation known as the Mishnah] states that it is the lasting and permanent nature of tattooing which makes it a culpable act: "If a man wrote [on his skin] pricked-in writing, he is not culpable unless he writes it and pricks it in with ink or eye-paint or anything that leaves a lasting mark" (Mishnah Makkot 3:6).

But Rabbi Simeon ben Judah disagrees and says that it is the inclusion of God's name which makes it a culpable act: "Rabbi Simeon ben Judah says in the name of Rabbi Simeon: He is not culpable unless he writes there the name [of a god], for it is written, 'Or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord'" (ibid.).

The Gemarah [i.e., the Babylonian Talmud (BT)] goes on to debate whether it is the inclusion of God's name or a pagan deity that makes it a culpable act.

Maimonides clearly sees the origin of this prohibition as an act of idolatry. He includes it in his section concerning idolatry and then explicitly states: "This was a custom among the pagans who marked themselves for idolatry...." But, [Maimonides] concludes that regardless of intent, the act of tattooing is prohibited (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry 12:11*).

### Biblical Israelites May Have Had Tattoos

Professor Aaron Demsky of Bar-Ilan University, in an article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* ("Writing"), goes even further to suggest that non-idolatrous tattooing may have been permitted in biblical times. He cites the following biblical references: "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" (Isaiah 44:5), "See, I have engraved You on the palms of my hands..." (Isaiah 49:16), and

"...is a sign on every man's hand that all men may know His doings" (Job 37:7).

While these verses may be purely metaphoric, Demsky suggests they could be taken literally as instances of tattooing that were acceptable in biblical times. He goes on to add that A. Cowley (in his 1923 book *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*) showed that in Elephantine [a city in Hellenistic Egypt], slaves of Jews were marked with the names of their owners as was the general practice.

## 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).

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 God) and that our bodies are to be viewed as a precious gift on loan from God, 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* 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.

## 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 for the [Conservative movement's] law committee to consider whether removal of tattoos should become a requirement of *teshuvah* [repentance, or reversion to behavior according to Jewish norms], conversion, or burial.

## 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 and the implications of that concept.

## Conclusion

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.

*Alan B. Lucas is Rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom in Roslyn Heights, New York.*

*Reprinted with permission from Responsa 1991-2000: The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, pp. 115-120, edited by Rabbis Kassel Abelson and David J. Fine, teshuvah entitled, "Tattooing and Body Piercing" by Rabbi Alan Lucas. Copyright the Rabbinical Assembly, 2002. Copies of the book may be ordered from the United Synagogue Book Service, [www.uscj.org](http://www.uscj.org), [booksvc@uscj.org](mailto:booksvc@uscj.org).*



## Tattoos: Hip. Cool. Artsy. Permanent. Kosher?

[http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2007/jan/tattoos\\_19Jan07.htm](http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2007/jan/tattoos_19Jan07.htm)

Tattoos, once considered off-limits for Jews, are becoming increasingly popular, for some as a form of rebellion, while for others as a prideful marker of Jewish identity. Tattooing and body art are classic forms of religious expression among people of some faiths, yet have been historically viewed unfavorably by the Jewish tradition.

As more young hip Jews make the choice to emblazon inky Jewish stars, Hebrew lettering, and kabbalistic imagery across their skin, it begs us to ask the question: What does Jewish tradition actually have to say about tattoos?

The biblical verse, "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:28) is the foundational text upon which later Rabbinic scholars developed the prohibitions against tattooing. Rabbinic law clarifies the biblical statute and states that only tattoos of a permanent nature are considered impermissible.

Maimonides, a leading 12th century scholar of Jewish law and thought, explains that the prohibition against tattoos originates as a Jewish response to paganism. Since it was common practice for ancient pagan worshippers to tattoo themselves with religious iconography and names of gods, Judaism prohibited tattoos entirely in order to disassociate from other religions.

A later developed and commonly heard explanation for the prohibition against tattoos connects to the Jewish concept that all humans were created *B'Tzelem Elokin* (in the image of God). The mystical interpretation of this prohibition is that the human body is a holy vessel and a gift from God and as such, we are expected to care for our bodies and treat them preciously, which forbids certain actions including tattooing.

It is a popular myth that a Jewish person who has a tattoo is not permitted to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Despite the prohibition, there is absolutely no legal justification to prevent a person with a tattoo from receiving a Jewish burial. Interestingly, tattoos are unique in the sense that evidence of the transgression remains on the body after death.

In a post-Holocaust era it is important to clarify that the prohibition against tattoos applies only to cases of voluntary tattooing. The *Shulchan Aruch* (16th century book of codified Jewish law) explains that when a person is tattooed involuntarily or against his will, he is not accountable for the act. This statute is particularly relevant to many Jews who received number tattoos on their arms during the Holocaust

