



Educator's Guide

Can Jews Get Tattoos?

Are tattoos at odds with Judaism or can they express Jewish pride? Jason Kessler uncovers the myths, laws, and cultural shifts surrounding tattoos in Judaism. From biblical prohibitions to modern statements of pride, this journey explores how permanent marks intersect with faith and identity.

Through candid interviews and heartfelt stories, explore how these marks challenge tradition, celebrate identity, and reflect the evolving tapestry of Judaism today.

[Link to video](#)

Resources compiled by Doug Berkowitz

Big Ideas

1. Tattoos are forbidden by Jewish law.
2. Jews with tattoos are still able to be a part of the Jewish community.
3. In the modern world, Jews' views on tattoos have changed.

Essential Questions

1. Why are tattoos forbidden by Jewish law?
2. How does having a tattoo affect one's standing in the Jewish community?
3. Can tattoos bring a person closer to Judaism?

Review Questions

1. Tattoos are forbidden by Jewish law.
 - a. True
 - b. False
2. Jews with tattoos are forbidden from being buried in a Jewish cemetery.



- a. True
 - b. False**
- 3.** Maimonides said that tattoos were used by pagans to...
- a. Display marital status.
 - b. Highlight success in battle.
 - c. Worship their gods.**
 - d. Keep family records.
- 4.** Piercings are ok in Judaism because...
- a. They are fashionable.
 - b. Rebekah the matriarch had a piercing.
 - c. They aren't idolatrous.
 - d. They aren't permanent.**
- 5.** Tattoos are permitted by certain rabbis in which of the following situations?
- a. When they help with radiation cancer treatment.
 - b. When they allow a person to live with more dignity.
 - c. Both A and B**
 - d. None of the above
- 6.** Many Jews decided to get Jewish-themed tattoos following which event?
- a. The Holocaust
 - b. The declaration of the modern State of Israel
 - c. The Second Intifada
 - d. The October 7th attack**



Discussion Questions

1. Prohibition on tattoos

- Why are tattoos banned in Judaism (e.g., pagans used tattoos to worship their gods; tattoos defile the body; not tattooing ourselves separates Jews from other peoples)?
- Do the rationales for the prohibition on tattoos make sense to you? Which of them, if any, resonate with you as a reason for Jews not to get tattoos? What questions do these explanations raise for you?
- Are there any personal reasons, unrelated to Judaism, why you wouldn't get a tattoo?

2. Bodies on loan

One explanation for the prohibition on tattoos is that our bodies are not our own, but rather they are on loan from God.

- What do you think it means to have our bodies on loan from God? Does this idea resonate with you?
- Does this concept make you consider the way you treat your body? Why or why not? How might embracing this idea lead people to change their lifestyle?

3. Consequence or forgiveness?

Having a tattoo doesn't bar a Jew from being buried in a Jewish cemetery – that's just a myth. Judaism allows for a person to atone for their misdeeds and be forgiven by the Jewish community.

- Do you think that forgiveness is the proper response for all poor behavior choices? Or do you think that there should be consequences for major and permanent actions that go against Jewish law? Explain your answer.
- If you think consequences are in order, what actions should be punished (e.g. getting a tattoo; murder; etc.) and what are some examples of



punishments that fit the crime (e.g., excommunication; fasting; death; etc.)?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan

Use our ready made lesson plan on Jews and tattoos [HERE](#).

2. One minute debates

Split students into pairs to go head-to-head in debates on the subject of tattoos. Assign each pair a statement from the list below (or add one of your own!) and a position to take on their statement. One student in each pair will be arguing FOR the statement, the other will be arguing AGAINST the statement. Allow students five minutes to do research to support their side of the debate.

Ensure that students know they are engaging in [makhloket l'shem shamayim](#) - argument for the sake of heaven. Rather than putting down their opponent and arguing in order to win, students should be engaging in debate for the purpose of seeking truth.

To begin the debate, flip a coin to determine which student will present first. Allow each student 30-60 seconds to make their case. You may also allow a second round of arguments, giving each student an additional 15-30 seconds to respond to their opponent and make any final points. Poll the students in the audience to determine who won the debate.

Statements for debate:

1. Jewish-themed tattoos are a good way to show Jewish pride.
2. Tattoos are a form of idolatry.
3. Jews with tattoos should be allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.
4. Tattooing a Holocaust-surviving relative's concentration camp number on your arm is a good way to honor the relative.



5. Breaking the prohibition against getting a tattoo is the same as breaking any other commandment (e.g., eating pork; violating Shabbat; etc.).
6. Getting a tattoo and getting a body piercing are essentially the same action.
7. To non-Jews, getting Jewish-themed tattoos makes it look like Jews don't care about their religion and adherence to God's commandments.
8. Putting non-permanent tattoos (e.g., henna; washable tattoos; [ephemeral tattoos](#)) on your body breaks the prohibition against tattoos just the same as getting a permanent tattoo.
9. Tattoos are a great way for Jews to demonstrate self-expression and personal style.

3. Give your students our Kahoot on [Jews and tattoos](#)!

Reflection Questions

1. Tattoos, Judaism, and you

- What are your personal thoughts on tattoos? What influenced your attitude on this subject (e.g., Jewish law; parents; pop culture; friends; etc.)?
- How do you feel about tattoos with a Jewish theme? Do you think they can enhance Jewish pride for those who have them? How about for Jews who see them on their fellow Jew? Explain your answers.
- How do you think our Jewish ancestors would view Jewish-themed tattoos?

2. Burying the righteous and the wicked

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 47a) states that a wicked person should not be buried next to a righteous person. Furthermore, an extremely wicked man should not be buried next to a less wicked man. The passage continues to say that it is a tradition to have two graveyards – one for those executed by the court and one for others.



- What do you think about this ruling on burying Jews according to their level of righteousness or wickedness? What implications might this practice have?
- Are there any actions that a Jew could commit that you think would warrant burial in a separate area?
- Do you think there should be any guidelines or rules regarding where people are buried? If so, what should they be?

3. Missing the mark

- The word for sin in Hebrew is *cheyt*, which is understood as “missing the mark.” What does it mean to you to “miss the mark?” What are some things you have done that missed the mark? How can you atone for these actions?
- Do you think that getting a tattoo is an action that “misses the mark”, or does it fall into a different category as far as Judaism is concerned? Explain your answer.
- How do you react when you learn that a Jewish person has gotten a tattoo? How does it affect your relationship with that person, if at all?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [2nd commandment: Do not worship idols](#) (video)
- [Is Kabbalah just Jewish magic?](#) (video)
- ['Less Than Kosher': This new show is an authentic take on Jewish identity](#) (article)

2. My Jewish Learning, [The Tattoo Taboo in Judaism | My Jewish Learning](#) (article)

This article reviews Jewish views on tattoos including medical tattoos and burial in a Jewish cemetery.

3. My Jewish Learning, [Can A Jew Get Body Piercings?](#) (article)

This article discusses body piercing and Jewish views on the practice.



4. Moment Mag, [Marked for Life](#) (article)

This article explores the relationship between Jews and tattoos, including young Jews and Holocaust survivors who were forcibly tattooed.

5. The Jewish Independent, [Jews with tattoos: a post October 7 trend](#) (article)

This article explores the increase in popularity of Jewish-themed tattoos since October 7th, 2023.