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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.”