

## Shabbat Parashat Emor May a Jew Get a Tattoo?

As a community that has children as its central focus, it is important for us as parents to be able to answer life's real and practical questions with as much information as possible, not with opinions alone. There is a variety of sources from which we can derive responses to our children's questions. However, as Jewish adults who have shown a deep commitment to the continuity of Judaism by sending our children to a Jewish day school, knowledge of the "Jewish" perspective on the issues is of critical importance. Even though Judaism is a religion with beliefs and laws that are thousands of years old, it has shown continued relevance as the tradition is consulted regarding issues that come up in each generation as well as the flexibility to be able to evolve and grow over time as new situations arise. This is the "magic" of Judaism, which keeps it alive and thriving and should inspire us all to continue to seek out new opportunities for our own learning as adults.

As I was walking to shul last week, one of the children on our walk asked her father about what Judaism says about getting a tattoo. This is not an uncommon question among Jewish adolescents. It has been asked of me many times in my brief career as a School Rabbi. Father gently (and happily) passed the question my way, being that I happen to be a Rabbi. Now, while the issue of the acceptability of tattoos seems to be more of a contemporary question, as the proliferation and status of "body art" has broadened in this generation, it is relevant to quote from this week's *parasha*, as I did last Shabbat. In the first section of this week's reading, we find the following:

"...and into their skin, they shall not inject ink." (Leviticus 21:5)

This law is indisputable in the text of the Torah. To have a tattoo placed on one's body is a direct violation of a Torah law, the most severe of the laws in all of Judaism. However, it is important to notice that the reason(s) for this law, as with many laws in the Torah, is not given. Scholars have researched the issue and been able to come up with three significant rationales. First, Torah and tradition teach us that a human body is beautiful and holy, given to each of us as a temporary gift from God, to be treated with utmost respect and sanctity. To "defile" the body with permanent markings such as tattoos does not live up to the standard that Judaism has set for us. Second, scholarship and research have shown that tattoos were a custom of several pagan religions in the ancient world. Many Torah laws exist as a means to separate and distinguish the Israelites/Jews from other nations, to make us unique and to remind us of our special relationship with the One God. To tattoo one's body, then, would make it as if one was practicing pagan religion. Finally, Judaism has humility as one of its primary values. Body art is rightfully considered not to be in the spirit of this value. To draw "unnatural" attention to one's body, whether it be a part that is expected to be exposed or not, violates Judaism's desire to keep the physicality of the body more subdued. Completely unrelated to the Torah's possible rationales for this law is the historical and emotional connection between tattoos and the Holocaust. If one is not moved to avoid tattoos as a result of a biblical prohibition, then the fact that the Nazis used tattoos on our brothers and sisters as a means of dehumanizing them and removing their identities is a contemporary reason used by many modern Rabbis to support the prohibition against tattoos. In combination with one another, the ancient and modern arguments against tattooing are quite compelling.

The issue of consequences is a very interesting one as it concerns tattoos and Judaism. One of the most common responses that I have heard among teens or that parents give to their children is: "If you get a tattoo, you can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery." While this may function as an adequate

dissuasion to getting a tattoo for some, it happens not to be true. There is no tangible “punishment” for this act given in the Torah. It is simply put out as a forbidden act. As it turns out, fear of punishment usually does not turn out to be a successful means for preventing a behavior from happening anyway. Therefore, we need other means to help our children see the light, if persuading them to keep their bodies “as is” is the direction of your choice. This other means is thoughtful and meaningful reasoning, discussion, and explanation. Therefore, when it comes to this or any other “controversial” subject in the upbringing of our children, be sure not only to inform them of the potential consequences and share an opinion, but also make an attempt to ground it in the depth of the Jewish perspective. That is what the experience of a Jewish day school education is all about, after all.

May all the members of our families grow in Jewish knowledge as a result of the questions that our children ask.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Matthew Bellas