



Ask The Rabbi...

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Issue #73

This edition contains: 1. Tattoo Jew
2. Yiddle Riddle

A reader in England wrote:

Hi there!
I am a BT (newly observant). Before I became observant, I got a tattoo of "Snoopy" on my arm. It doesn't really bother me. That is, except for occasions such as going swimming or to the mikva where other frum people can see it. I occasionally consider having it removed, but I understand that it would be as wrong to have it removed as it was to have it put on in the first place, since in both cases you are damaging your body. Is this correct? Your guidance on this would be most helpful.

Name Withheld upon request

Dear Manny and Name Withheld,

The Torah forbids getting a tattoo — scratching your skin and filling it with ink. This prohibition applies only to **getting** a tattoo, but says nothing about having one **removed**, getting your ear pierced, or otherwise defacing your body.

There is, however, a **separate** Torah prohibition — "*Lo Yosif*" — not to inflict a wound upon yourself. Removing a tattoo involves "wounding" yourself, and often includes painful skin-grafting. Piercing your ear makes a hole in your body. Would this make it forbidden to remove a tattoo or to pierce your ear?

Someone once asked Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *zatzal*, about a young woman who wanted to increase her marriage prospects by undergoing cosmetic surgery. He permitted it, since the surgery is done with her will and is essentially for her good.

In support of this ruling, Rabbi Feinstein cites the Rambam: "A person is forbidden to inflict a wound, whether upon himself or upon others. And even without inflicting a wound, merely hitting someone in a **hostile or insulting** way — whether he hits a child or adult, a man or a woman — he has transgressed a Torah prohibition." From this it is clear that the prohibition applies only when "hitting someone **in a hostile or insulting way.**"

The Talmud relates an incident where one of the Sages lifted up his frock when walking through thorns. "Skin heals, clothes don't," said the Sage. Even though he was scratching his skin by walking through the thorns, it wasn't done in a **hostile** or **degrading** manner. Rabbi Feinstein cites this as corroboration for the Rambam's ruling.

Manny Saltiel <SALTIEL@csmc.edu> wrote:

In Ask the Rabbi column #56 you wrote that it was permitted for a man to wear earrings, provided that the earring had no forbidden symbolism in the society in which it was worn. Why doesn't the prohibition of not damaging one's body (e.g., tattoos) also apply to earrings? After all, a hole is formed where there was none before. And wouldn't this be a problem for women, too?

Furthermore, writes Rabbi Feinstein, the *mitzva* "*V'Ahavta L'Reyacha Kamocha*" (Love your neighbor as yourself) would allow you to wound someone with his consent and for his benefit. Since the cosmetic surgery is for the woman's good and is done with her consent, therefore it is permitted.

According to this, it seems pretty clear that it's O.K. to remove a tattoo and to pierce your ear. I consulted Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *shlita*, on the issue of removing a tattoo and he said yes, it is permitted to have the tattoo removed.

Speaking of changing appearances, I am reminded of the following encounter:

A: "Steve! You lost so much weight! You dyed your hair! And you got a nose job!"
B: "I'm sorry, but I'm not Steve."
A: "What! You changed your name, too?"

Sources:

- Leviticus 19:28, Tractate *Makkot* 21a.
- Deuteronomy 24:3.
- *Iggrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 2:66.
- Rambam, *Hilchot Chovel U'Mazik* 5:1.

Yiddle Riddle
In what situation is it a *mitzvah* to eat, but you may eat only foods that are *Parve*?

answer next week...

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