FOR LIFE

STORY BY SHAUN RAVIV | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN DAWSON

When I told my cousin I'd gotten a tattoo, his response was, "You'll want another one soon. The pain is addictive." Hours earlier, when I'd been seated backwards on a beat-up wooden chair, facing a wall covered with bright colored dragons, leather-clad skeletons and tribal symbols, the last adjective that would have come to my mind was "addictive." As the tattoo artist—whose thick neck bore a perfect rendering of a crazed Jack Nicholson about to shout "Here's Johnny!"—slowly stabbed an ink-filled needle into my right shoulder blade, agonizing came to mind. When a buddy, watching from behind while blood trickled down my back, laughed as I grunted in reaction to the small jabs of the pointed brush, it's possible I thought embarrassing. But the pain itself was as far from addictive for me as Singapore is from Quito.

My cousin clearly has first-hand experience with pain addiction. Over the years, he has made his skeletal body into a canvas for Tel Aviv skin artists. On each of his calves is a wing-like tribal symbol. On each of his wrists, an artist tattooed a hollow equilateral triangle, one pointing to his elbow, the other his palm. His stomach is covered hip to hip with a gold crown. Four silver studs inserted into his abdomen act as the supporting crown jewels and his diamond-pierced belly button is the centerpiece. He has yet to tattoo his face, though his nose is bull-pierced and his earlobes are stretched with circular plastic inserts.

My cousin is part of a growing minority within a shrinking one, a tattooed person living in the Jewish world. His body art is a billboard for his individuality and a designation as a member of a clear community of the "other." While his tattoos aren't head to toe, he doesn't hide them beneath a suit and tie. Every single person who meets him knows he is tattooed from the second they lay eyes on him and this will never change unless he undergoes extensive laser surgery.

See him on an elevator and you'll know he can take a needle repeatedly piercing his skin and go back for seconds, and sevenths. You'll know he never believed the widespread tales that you can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery if you have a tattoo. You'll suspect he wouldn't care if he had. The tattoos are part of his exterior identity, a story told in a single glance: He's one of the many new tattooed Jews.

As the Holocaust generation ages and dies off, a new wave of tattooed Jews is swelling across the globe. Rather than being force-branded with marks meant to identify and categorize, these Jews have taken the tattoo back. Sketches in hand, they're getting butterflies on their bottoms, barbed wire around their biceps and tigers on their chests. Others are thinking bigger, infusing themes of God and the Bible, history and honor, war and religion, politics and power.

Like any other group, Jews seek out tattoos for a million reasons, ranging from aesthetics to love to social allegiance to "I was on a boring date and I drank too much and thought getting a tattoo might put some spice into the evening," as one tattooed Jew told me. You'll find no shortage of Jews with flowers and hearts and Mickey Mouse body art. But many have at least one tattoo with a Jewish theme.

Avi, a 23-year-old from New York, had her name tattooed in Hebrew on her lower back. The letters *aleph vet yod* are surrounded by blue flames, and a dove is "flying out of, but eternally in," the fire. Judith, a 21-year-old student from Oakland, got a *hamsa*, a Sephardic symbol of God's protection, tattooed between her shoulder blades. "The *hamsa* represents my feelings of Judaism," Judith said. "It's a recognizable Jewish symbol, and at the same time it's often not associated with traditional Judaism in the same way a Jewish star might be."

Matthew, a 29-year-old Maryland heating technician who served nine years with the U.S. Navy's Judge Advocates General Corps, has four tattoos and more in the works. The dragon on his right arm contains a hidden Star of David. His left arm bears a modified chai with a tribal twist. He likes to show he is "proud to be Jewish," though he had "a little feeling of guilt" when he got them. After all, his grandfather survived the Holocaust and was given a tattoo against his will.

Isaac, from Toronto, got his Hebrew tattoos for very different reasons. "I like the way they look," he tells me first. The tattoo on his lower back says "*tzedek tzedek tirdof*" meaning "Justice, Justice you shall pursue." The other is just above his right wrist and says "*sored*," the Hebrew word for "survivor." "Some things are so important to me that I want daily physical reminders of them," he tells me. "Obviously my tattoos are connected to my

Jewishness, in that they are both in Hebrew and one is a quote from the Torah. However, I didn't get them to make some kind of statement about the religion or *halacha*. I think they are a way of fusing my cultural and religious identity with my urban, often secular life. Although I am not currently able to make a commitment to observing Jewish law, I can make a commitment to *tikkun olam*, and these tattoos are a reminder of that obligation, like wearing a *kippa*."

Isaac has not always been welcomed by his Jewish community, being, as he puts it, a "queer, tattooed, politically radical Jew." He's been criticized for his choices as well as his tattoos. "I'm in a stage of life where I'm making many huge decisions, more so than the average 18-year-old. So in the big picture, this decision actually seems small. I'm also in a stage where I'm trying to return to the Jewish community and practice after a long absence. This is a struggle for me because so many parts of who I am and what I love aren't accepted in Jewish communities. So I'm building a personal relationship with God and Judaism first and foremost, because I can't always rely on having a community that welcomes someone like me." Isaac turns to God when the community turns on him. Getting tattooed, he says, "didn't feel rebellious. I joke about it being sacrilegious, but it actually feels like something very traditional, almost conservative. Even my father [a rabbi] likes what I have tattooed on me, if not the fact that it's tattooed."

PHOTO: JUSTIN DAWSON

Marvin Moskowitz's Long Island tattoo shop has white walls and clean floors like a hospital. His flash, the array of tattoo samples hanging on the walls, is typical: a dragon here, an eagle there. His mother comes in once a week to make sure the place is immaculate, and for a tattoo joint it has a sanitary feel. Marvin himself is another story. His whole demeanor is reminiscent of New York City's past. His speech lacks r's and his gritty unshaven face is intimidating, but he exudes a neighborhood nice guy vibe when he talks, like everyone's favorite gangster. Marvin might be the only third-generation Jewish tattooist in America. Certainly he is the most renowned.

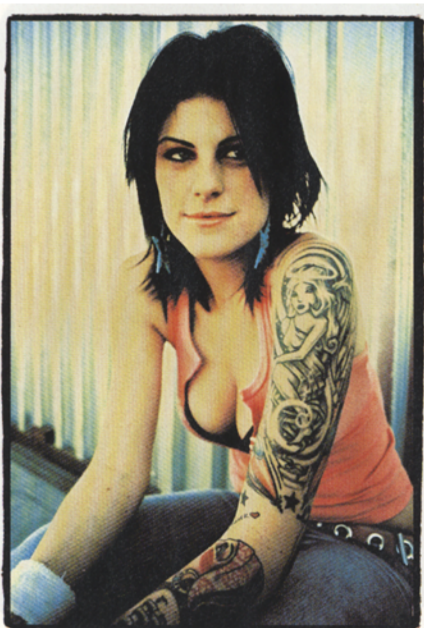
Marvin Moskowitz has given many Jews their first tattoos. Some of them are nervous, prepared to hide their tattoos from their parents and rabbis and anyone else connected to their Jewish lives. "They say, 'Oh, my mother will kill me if she finds out,'" Marvin tells me. "And I ask them why and they say, 'Well, I'm Jewish, and I won't be allowed to get buried in a Jewish cemetery,' and they really believe that. I'll pull them aside and say, 'Tell your mother a Jewish guy tattooed you. Maybe that'll help.'"

Nowadays, tattoo artists are skilled professionals, many with immense artistic talent and an ability to translate virtually any design from paper to the skin, sometimes charging hundreds or thousands of dollars for their work. But when Marvin's grandfather, the late Willie Moskowitz, launched the family tattooing dynasty, he was just a guy looking to earn a few extra bucks. "You didn't have to be an artist in those days," Marvin says. "The tattoo was just slapped on and that was it. Birds, hearts, roses, the basics. Willie got 25 cents for a haircut and 50 cents for a tattoo, so it was an easy decision."

Willie Moskowitz turned to tattooing during the Great Depression, when everyone was looking for new ways to get by. A Russian Jew who immigrated to Manhattan in 1918, he ran a barbershop on the Bowery not far from 11 Chatham Square, the workplace of tattoo legend Charlie Wagner. At one point, finances were so tight that Willie's wife resorted to brewing homemade whiskey in the bathroom of the shop. Wagner, who became famous for tattooing body suits on over 50 circus sideshow attractions, set Willie up with a tattooing booth and one of his own patented electric tattooing machines. It consisted of a tube filled with ink, a (usually) sterile needle to inject the ink into the body, an electric motor to run the needle vertically and a foot pedal to control the frequency. From that day on, Willie tattooed Bowery tough guys for a living.

In the 1940s, when they were old enough, Willie's two boys, Walter and Stanley, apprenticed under their father. Their clientele consisted mainly of sailors, drunks and drug addicts, guys with attitudes and the muscle to back them up. The tattooists had to become every bit as tough in order to make a buck and keep their shop in order. "Crazy Joe Gallo, the Mafioso, used to hang out next door. He used to come in and help them out sometimes when there was trouble." Marvin picks up a stool and shows me the scratches on it. "He once hit a cop with a chair in the shop, and this is that chair right here."

Marvin tells such stories with pride, but he is equally proud that he and his family were able to make it out of the Bowery. He has a five-year lease on the shop, and then he's retiring. For better or worse, the Moskowitz tattoo dynasty will end with him. "Jews are always looking for something better for their children," he says. "I got a brother that's a doctor. My other brother's in the financial world. My daughter's got two masters in psychology and is six months away from another in social work. The reason the Italian gangsters lasted is because they brought their kids into the family business. But the Jewish gangsters faded out," much like the few Jewish tattooists, "because their kids became lawyers and doctors."



As I leave the shop, a drunk walks in, babbling about the type of tattoo he wants. Marvin kicks him out with words rather than fists. There's no need for violence any more. Tattoo parlors have been absorbed into mainstream American society, no longer the domain of roughnecks. But while Marvin will soon close his doors forever, he is not the sort of man who forgets the past. Etched into his arm, in bold letters above a flaming six-pointed star, are the words, "Never again."

For Jews in every corner of the world, the Holocaust is a memory that will never fade. Its impression is etched into the psyche of every living Jew along with images of torture, rape, gas chambers and emaciation. Many of those who spent time in the concentration camps have a physical reminder of all they suffered. Their tattoos also serve as universal proof that the Holocaust occurred. A denier who shouts "Jewish conspiracy!" need only to look at a survivor's forearm for silencing.

On June 7, 1961, the 68th session of the Adolph Eichmann trial began with the testimony of one such tattooed man, called to give a "general description" of life as a prisoner at Auschwitz. The mysterious witness, whose real name had been hidden from the public for 15 years, had spent nearly two years in the camps. The books he'd written about his time in Auschwitz were among the first ever penned on the subject. They were the definitive Holocaust literature for the Israeli postwar generation until more genteel works from Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel were published. His *Salamandra* described life in Auschwitz in gruesome detail and ended with its hero buried under a pile of corpses. *House of Dolls* told of the Jewish women who were forced to act as sex slaves for the Nazi guards, based upon the experiences of the author's own sister who had been killed in the gas chambers.

His books were so graphic that when they were banned from the classroom, they were compared to *stalag*, a type of porn common in Israel in the 1960s. But for Israelis, reading about the world he called "Planet Auschwitz" was like seeing it firsthand or, for those who'd survived, like returning to the fire. It was part abstract, part hard fact, and all shock. All his works were published under the name Ka-Tzetnik 135633. The author was a number.

Ka-Tzetnik, the German pronunciation of the letters K.Z., stood for *Konzentration Zenter*. All inmates who were tattooed at Auschwitz became known as Ka-Tzetnik, followed by a number. They lost their names and were given digits that could be used to track them until their likely deaths.

"What is your full name?" the attorney general asked the 52-year-old man.

"Yehiel Dinur."

"What was the reason that you hid your identity behind the pseudonym 'Ka-Tzetnik,' Mr. Dinur?"

"It was not a pen name. I do not regard myself as a writer and a composer of literary material. This is a chronicle of the planet of Auschwitz.... The inhabitants of this planet had no names, they had no parents nor did they have children. There they did not dress in the way we dress here; they were not born there and they did not give birth.... They breathed according to different laws of nature. They did not live—nor did they die—according to the laws of this world. Their name was the number 'Ka-Tzetnik.'

"I believe with perfect faith that I have to continue to bear this name so long as the world has not been aroused after this crucifixion of a nation, to wipe out this evil, in the same way as humanity was aroused after the crucifixion of one man. I believe with perfect faith that, just as in astrology the stars influence our destiny, so does this planet of the ashes, Auschwitz, stand in opposition to our planet earth, and influences it."

"Perhaps you will allow me, Mr. Dinur, to put a number of questions to you, if you will agree?"

At this point, Dinur interrupted his questioner and said, "I remember..."

The judge jumped in and instructed Dinur, "Kindly listen to what the attorney general has to say."

The pressure overwhelmed Yehiel Dinur. After living as a number for 15 years, the shock of reclaiming his old identity was too much for him to bear. He stepped down from the witness stand, collapsed to the floor and was rushed to the hospital with his face contorted and half-paralyzed.

This was the first, and last, public appearance for Polish-born Yehiel Dinur, who had studied at yeshiva before World War II and published a book of poetry at age 22. But the man who went by Ka-Tzetnik 135633 could not get out from under his tattoo. After World War II, a new identity had congealed around his number. His experience had been so traumatic that it recast his very being. When he discovered that the only remaining copy of his poetry collection was in a Tel Aviv library, he checked it out and burned it.

PHOTO: JUSTIN DAWSON

In *Salamandra*, which, like his other works, blurred the boundary between fiction and memoir, he described the experience of getting a tattoo. "The scribe stabbed as he spoke: 'Get this, whoreson, Hymie Cohen isn't your name any longer. You're dead. Name's exactly what this number says on your arm. It's what they call you by when the furnace wants you.'"

Dinur held until his death that Ka-Tzetnik 135633 was not a pseudonym but rather an identity. "K. Tzetnik was born in Auschwitz in 1943," he wrote in his work *Curriculum Vitae*. In *Shivitti: A Vision*, he reiterated that Yehiel Dinur was not the author of *Salamandra*: "Those who went to the crematorium nameless, they wrote it. Numbers! For two years they passed through me on their way to the crematorium."

Ka-Tzetnik wrote that his tattoo still haunted him daily. "I had never learned to live with these six digits branded in my flesh and soul. To this day I cannot recall the digits by heart. To get my number right, I need to look at my arm. In fact, because of this trauma, my mind cannot retain numbers."

His recovery was incomplete when he succumbed to cancer at age 92 in July 2001. Shortly before his passing, he asked his children to keep his death a secret. His son, quoted in an obituary in *Ha'aretz*, tried to summarize his father's unusual mission. "Father thought there was no public interest in knowing that Yehiel Dinur was dead. What is important is that Ka-Tzetnik lives, and will live forever."

The numbers that branded Yehiel Dinur and thousands like him were part of a census system invented and administered by the American corporation IBM. Named for the inventor Herman Hollerith, they were employed as a post-Civil War system for counting and cataloging human beings. Punch cards with standardized holes stood for various human characteristics: A hole in one spot could represent male gender. A hole in another place might identify the man as being from Massachusetts. A third hole conveyed the Massachusetts man was of Irish extraction. A fourth revealed the Irishman from Massachusetts had seven children. And so on. With enough holes and the help of a patented sorting machine, a card could distinguish one person from millions of others.

At Auschwitz, the only camp at which inmates were tattooed, Nazis adopted the Hollerith system to distinguish Jews from non-Jews, homosexuals from heterosexuals, prisoners who had been beaten from prisoners who had been cooperative. Originally, the five or six digit numbers were sewn onto inmates' uniforms for easy identification. Though tattooing in Auschwitz occurred intermittently from 1941, starting in the spring of 1943, all non-German prisoners at Auschwitz were tattooed so after they died—whether by starvation, exhaustion or execution—their clothes could be removed and their bodies could still be identified.

Edwin Black's book *IBM and the Holocaust* explains that tattoos "quickly evolved at Auschwitz. Soon, they bore no further relation to Hollerith compatibility for one reason: the Hollerith number was designed to track a working inmate—not a dead one. Once the daily death rate at Auschwitz climbed, Hollerith-based numbering simply became outmoded." As corpses piled high, chests could be obscured. The forearm thus became the canvas of choice, and established numbering systems soon gave way to improvisation. New series were started for late arrivals: Soviet POWs, Hungarian Jews and the first female inmates. There was an "A" series and a "B" series, a "Z" series and a triangle series, all inked onto the prisoners' skin. "Various number ranges, often with letters attached, were assigned

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to prisoners in ascending sequence. Dr. Josef Mengele, who performed bizarre medical experiments, tattooed his own distinct number series on patients. Tattoo numbering ultimately took on a chaotic incongruity all its own as an internal Auschwitz-specific identification system."

Tattooing methods changed as well. Originally, the tattoos were administered with a one-shot metal stamp holding dozens of short needles that formed interchangeable numbers. Ink was then poured into the open wound and the scab would heal into a tattoo just above the heart. Soon after, a more legible, single-needle method replaced the stamp and the tattooing process became longer and more personal. Instead of being quickly stamped, inmates sat down with designated tattooists, many of whom were Jewish themselves, and received their new identities.

"The young women tattooing us were also prisoners," recalls former inmate Anna Ornstein. "I believe they were Czech. They were not artists but young Jewish girls whose job it was to tattoo. I hope they survived."

Ornstein was 17 when she was delivered to Auschwitz with a transport of Hungarian Jews in June of 1944. She was tattooed shortly thereafter. "We were not told the reason for the tattoo," says Ornstein, now a lecturer at Harvard Medical School. She remembers the branding process as an encouraging experience. "I was very happy… thinking it meant the Germans intended to keep us alive and send us to a labor camp." Her tattoo initially read B20071. Later the B was crossed out and replaced with an A. "I have been proud of my neat numbers placed inside rather than on the outside of my arm. I was never ashamed of it."

Although they were intended to degrade and quantify, Holocaust tattoos became personal emblems for many inmates. Professor Gilah Naveh of the University of Cincinnati interviewed over a hundred female survivors for her upcoming book *Unpacking the Heart with Words* and found that many saw something positive in getting tattooed at Auschwitz. "The Nazis made sure to take away their names even while they were living," Naveh tells me, "but having a number like B11276 meant they were unique. There was no other B11276. In fact they would show the tattoos to each other. There was almost a feminine relationship to the tattoo. 'See I'm special, I'm somebody, I have this unique number.'… At one level they were just showing the inscription as a signifying element that they will live. At the other level they were showing it as an ornament. Remember, they were deprived of clothing and jewelry, and since they did not know what the tattoo meant, they gave it their own meaning."

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Szlamach Radoszynski, a Jew from Warsaw, believes he survived because of his tattoo. After spending three years in a ghetto, watching his entire family either die of starvation or get forcibly deported to Treblinka, he was sent to Auschwitz, where his job was to "shovel dirt over discarded, still-smoldering ashes of cremated victims." Recounting his experience, he says, "I kept wondering whether I, too, would end up the same. But I was sustained by the fact that the number tattooed on my arm—128232—added up to 18, the Jewish mystical symbol for life." In 1945, during a forced march, Radoszynski was liberated by U.S. forces.

Ornstein and Radoszynski were two of an estimated 70,000 survivors of Auschwitz, many of whom left with tattoos to show the world. In contrast to the countless photos of human skeletons there are also photos of proud, young survivors who were liberated soon after arriving in Auschwitz. Even then they wore their tattoos much as Superman wore his "S." The tattoo became an important, if not the most important, part of their physical identity. They could not shed the camp memories that haunted them, any more than they could shed the numbers on their skin.

The last time I saw Grandpa Dave, he was in a hospice, wearing a light turquoise robe as many do in their last hours. I didn't have much time to spend with him; the nurses and doctors had tests to perform. He was breathing through a tube and could not speak. His face was wrinkled and pale from age and sickness. There was a catheter in his left arm, the arm I liked to stare at. His tattoo had faded. Far from the dark navy blue of his youth, when he served in an armored division in World War II, the shadowy bird was now a spotty green, lying flightless over his weakened muscles and sagging skin. I never saw his tattoo again.

Grandpa Dave was buried on a cold February day at King Solomon Memorial Park in Clifton, New Jersey. When we visit him, we place rocks on the gravestone to mark our presence as Jewish tradition dictates.

At no time did anyone suggest to my family that Grandpa Dave did not deserve his plot. Never did a rabbi hang his head and say, "I'm sorry, but Dave did have a tattoo on his arm. I hear there are some lovely spaces in the secular graveyard down the street."

Grandpa Dave was not exempted because of his lifetime of dedication to Judaism or because he was president of his synagogue. He didn't earn any extra points for playing Lazar the butcher in *Fiddler on the Roof* nor did he win a "get buried as a Jew" card at a JCC auction. No Jew, no matter how secular, can be prohibited from burial in a Jewish cemetery simply because of a tattoo.

That's not to say Jewish mothers haven't been warning their kids against getting tattooed for thousands of years. "Not only did the rabbis say it's wrong to get tattooed, it's explicitly forbidden in the Torah," says Orthodox Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman who teaches at the world-famous Ohr Somayach yeshiva in Jerusalem. The ban on tattoos can be found in Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not make cuts in your flesh for a person who died. You shall not etch a tattoo on yourselves. I am the Lord."

It is unknown if tattooing was ever prevalent among Jews in ancient times, as there are no written or drawn records. Isaiah 49:16 suggests Jews did in fact practice some sort of tattooing: "Behold on My hands have I engraved you; your walls are before Me always." Even the prohibition against tattooing suggests that individual Jews, if not entire Jewish societies, practiced it at one time. As Steve Gilbert, author of the book *Tattoo History*, puts it, "There's no point in passing a law against something that doesn't exist, and therefore the most convincing evidence that tattooing was practiced by the ancient Hebrews is the fact that it was prohibited in Leviticus."

So many ancient cultures included tattooing in their customs and identity that the influence could have come from almost anywhere in the world. A 5,000-year-old body was discovered in the mountains of northern Italy with patterned markings on his lower back, inner thigh and calves. Similar figures 3,500 years old have been found in the Arctic. Female Egyptian mummies over 4,000 years old have been uncovered with marks of fertility on their bodies. Japanese figurines with tattoo-like markings date to the Neolithic Era. In the South Pacific, Maori men carved tattoos into their flesh through a painful process involving mallets and sharpened bones. By old age, many were covered from head to toe with these emblems of endurance and tribal identity.

Even the Nazi practice of tattooing prisoners had its precedents. The Greeks in Plato's time marked their slaves so they could be recognized if they escaped. Samoans tattooed the noses of criminals. In 18th century Japan, criminals were forcibly marked with a dog pictograph on their foreheads. The ancient Romans tattooed mercenary members of their army to prevent desertion. Sixteenth century Mayans tattooed thieves from chin to forehead before enslaving them.

Alan Lucas, a Conservative rabbi at Temple Beth Shalom in Roslyn Heights, New York, points out that the Leviticus prohibition does not apply to the numbers and letters stained into the skin of Auschwitz inmates. He has written a responsum on the tattoo question, in which he quotes the definitive *halachic* compilation *Shulchan Aruch*: "If [the tattoo] was done in the flesh of another, the one to whom it was done is blameless."

When it comes to voluntary tattoos, however, the prohibition still stands, although rabbis have always disagreed on the reasoning behind it. According to one Talmudic author, tattoos are forbidden because they are permanent: "If a man wrote [on his skin], he is not culpable unless he writes it and pricks it in with

ink or eye-paint or anything that leaves a lasting mark." Another ancient rabbi, Simeon ben Judah, argued that the second half of the Leviticus verse—"I am the Lord"—pointed specifically to tattoos that included God's name. Maimonides followed this line of thinking in his Mishneh Torah, including tattoos in his chapter on idol worship. "This was a custom among the pagans who marked themselves for idolatry," he wrote. But he concluded, "Regardless of intent, the act of tattooing is prohibited."

Like Maimonides, Lucas believes recreational tattoos of all kinds should be discouraged. "In addition to the fact that Judaism has a long history of distaste for tattoos," he writes, "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."

Even so, Lucas acknowledges, "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."

Ullman, the Orthodox rabbi, takes this idea even further. "Even though getting a 'decorative' tattoo is considered a sin for a Jew," he says, "it doesn't disqualify one from being buried in a Jewish cemetery." To his mind, having tattoos removed is not necessary, even for an individual who wants to start a new, observant Jewish life. "It is just part of who that person is," he acknowledges, "and we each have to make the best of what we've got. Ultimately, these types of experiences, while not ideal, contribute to every person's individual service of God. To whatever extent possible, the person should view the tattoo as a badge of honor, signifying where he's been compared to where he is now."

Professor Naveh puts the subject in perspective: "So many dead are without a grave, without a name on a stone or anywhere. We don't have anything with which to commemorate all the individuals who didn't survive the Holocaust." It is only fitting, then, that a plot at King Solomon Memorial Park was reserved for my grandfather, a tattooed Jew fortunate enough to be buried and remembered.

Walk through downtown Tel Aviv and you will notice the astounding number of young people with tattoos. There are dozens of tattoo parlors in that city alone and men and women alike flaunt every conceivable type of design. Dr. Diana Luzatto, an anthropologist from Tel Aviv University and author of *Israeli Youth Body Adornments: Between Protest and Conformity*, has researched the rise in Israeli tattoo popularity over the past 20 years. "A nonverbal language," she concludes, "as a complex of status symbols, constitutes a very important tool for communicating group membership. In Israel—as in tribal societies—body adornments provide, amongst the rest, a means of establishing or enhancing status. However, in tribal societies," Luzatto adds, "symbolic meanings of body adornments are collectively shared, while in Israel they pertain almost exclusively to the young generation."

Like Americans, Israelis see tattoos as attractive body markings, but they also wear them for deeper reasons. A tattoo offers a means of protesting against one part of society while conforming to another, establishing membership while maintaining a hint of individuality. A young Israeli put it perfectly when he said, "I want a different tattoo, like everybody else."

We Jews are proud of all we've been able to endure. We've endured pain, like the Maori warriors. We've lived through slavery, much like those tattooed by the Greeks. We've even survived attempted extermination. But all of these episodes have left indelible imprints on our collective identity, and it's not clear whether even time will fully wash those away.

"When a guy has his entire sleeve covered and there's no open skin left and he's starting to do stuff over again, that's the pain," Marvin tells me. "When a guy comes in who can barely last through the first tattoo, and then he comes and gets another one, that's the pain." Some people just need to translate inner agony into outer pain, and tattooing is a harmless way to fulfill this need. Rather than cutting themselves, they ask someone else to do it for them.

I've never asked my cousin if he is one of those people. I've never asked him why he had the two equilateral triangles tattooed on his wrists. It may be he just liked the design. It may be he had a conscious or unconscious desire to feel the cutting of his skin in that area. It may be when he clasps his hands together, the triangles touch and form a Star of David. It may be he has his own relationship with God but keeps it to himself, hiding his Star of David always.

In this world of delete buttons, a tattoo is a statement that cannot be erased; even today's laser technology leaves a faint scar. It becomes a part of a person, like a birthmark. Gilah Naveh puts it well: "The impossibility of erasure is parallel with the impossibility of forgetting what happened."

My cousin told me when I got my tattoo that I'd immediately want another one. But for me, the pain was not addictive. For me, the tattoo itself was the thing, a permanent reminder of where I'd come from and what I had hoped to be. I sat down in that wooden chair holding a photograph from my family album. The bird that rests on my shoulder, like the bird that perched on Grandpa Dave's arm, will stay with me until I am buried in the ground. Ⓜ