

# Are Tattoos Forbidden by the Torah Today? A Halachic Analysis

## **The Pasuk**

The Torah in Vayikra 19:28 states:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם, וּכְתָבָת קַעֲקָע לֹא תַחֲתֶנּוּ בְּכֶם, אֲנִי ה'.

*“You shall not make cuts in your flesh for the dead, and you shall not place a tattoo upon yourselves. I am Hashem.”*

This verse appears to prohibit tattoos outright — but Chazal and the Rishonim explain this in a more specific context.

## **Mishnah & Talmud: Not Every Tattoo Is Prohibited**

The Mishnah in Makkot 3:6 teaches that one is only liable if both writing and imprinting the ink are done:

"הַכּוֹתֵב כְּתָבַת קַעֲקָע ... עַד שֶׁיִּכְתֹּב וַיִּקַּעֲקַע בְּדָיו וּבְכַחַל וּבְכָל דָּבָר שֶׁהוּא רוֹשֵׁם"

And in the Gemara (Makkot 21a), it is clarified that the biblical prohibition is limited to idolatrous markings:

"אינו חייב עד שיכתוב שם עבודה זרה... אני ה' — ולא אחר"

That is, the prohibition was specific to tattoos expressing devotion to another deity.

**The Gemara** also rules that if the ink is placed into an existing wound, one is not liable, because:

"מכתו מוכיח עליו" — the wound itself proves that this act wasn't part of idolatrous ritual.

### **Rambam:** Historical Context of the Prohibition

The Rambam (Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 12:11) provides the background:

"וזה היה מנהג העכו"ם — שרושמין עצמן לעבודת כוכבים, כלומר שהוא עבד מכור לה ומורשם לעבודתה."

*"This was the custom of idolaters — to tattoo themselves for idol worship, as if to declare themselves sold slaves to that deity."*

This shows clearly that the Torah's concern was not with body art, but with symbolic subjugation to foreign gods.

### **Shulchan Aruch** and Shach: Practical Halacha

The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 180:1) codifies the halacha:

"ואם היתה לו מכה ונתן בה דיו או כחול — פטור, שמכתו מוכחת עליו"

Even if ink is placed in a wound, it is permitted, since the wound proves it is not for idolatry.

He even adds:

"מותר ליתן האפר מקלה על מכתו."

*"It is permitted to place burned plant ash (used for pigmentation) on a wound."*

**The Shach** comments:

"על מכתו — דמכתו מוכיח עליו שאינו עושה משום חקות העובדי כוכבים אלא לרפואת המכה."

*"His wound testifies that it's not for the customs of idolaters, but for healing."*

### **Modern Application**

In the modern Western world, tattoos are not used for idol worship. People get tattoos for art, memory, expression, or fashion — not to declare servitude to a deity.

Based on the Gemara's rule of "מכתו מוכיח עליו", and the Rambam's context, it is reasonable to say:

A modern tattoo — without any religious context — is akin to placing ink into a wound. The act itself testifies that it is not for idolatry.

Thus, while tattoos for idol worship remain prohibited, ordinary tattoos — by today's standards — do not fall under the biblical prohibition.