

Case Study: Radiation Tattoos

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A fifty-seven-year-old Hareidi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish woman was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her doctors recommended a bilateral mastectomy followed by radiation. The patient opted for reconstruction following her mastectomy, so her surgeon left skin flaps during the procedure. Once she had healed from her surgery, the patient had her radiotherapy planning appointment, at which point she learned that her radiographer would make 5 permanent tattoo marks on her skin to outline the treatment field.

The patient became quite concerned about the tattoos and said she needed to consult her Rabbi before proceeding. The radiographer then shared that tattooing is also a common technique during nipple reconstruction post-mastectomy. The patient ended the appointment in order to gather more information.

Reflection:

- What is the Jewish approach to tattoos?
- What is the Jewish approach to conflicts between health care and other Jewish halachot (laws and rules)?
- Is there a difference from the healthcare perspective between radiology tattoos and reconstruction tattoos? Is there a difference from the patient's perspective? From the perspective of Jewish law and ritual?
- What are some of the cultural and historical issues that may emerge around tattoos amongst the Jewish community?
- Is the concern around tattoos specific to Hareidi Jews?

Additional Resources:

Bleich, J. David, "Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature: Medical and Cosmetic Tattooing," *Tradition* Winter 2009, no. 42.4 (n.d.): 58–96.

Lucas, Rabbi Alan, "Tattooing in Jewish Law," *My Jewish Learning* (blog), accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tattooing-in-jewish-law/>.

Zimmerman, Deena and England-Schaffer, Naomi, "Halakhic Issues Presented by Breast Cancer," *Tradition* Winter 2008, no. 41.4 (n.d.): 33–54.