



*Reprinted from Moment Magazine, July/August 2009, "Ask the Rabbis" column*

## ***Are Tattoos and Body Piercings Taboo?***

***Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer***

Secular and cultural Jews embrace the idea that *mitzvot* are self-imposed commandments or obligations that we place upon ourselves as individuals and collectively as a community. While we are guided by our heritage, we recognize that Judaism is ever-evolving. We have the freedom to break from tradition and make decisions that are compatible with our modern convictions and sensibilities.

On occasion, however, cultural Jews who have otherwise rejected rabbinic edicts will nonetheless fall back on traditional teachings to argue a position that may, in fact, be counter to contemporary choices and personal freedoms which they normally defend. A case in point is the issue of tattoos. Ironically, while countless rabbis have punctured the misconception that burial in a Jewish cemetery with a tattoo is prohibited, it is not uncommon for secular Jews, who are uncomfortable with piercings and body art, to misquote the rabbis in objection to these practices. Commonly put, they resort to an old-time defense, namely, "Jews don't do these things."

But many Jews do choose to do these practices, and not just young people, but older ones too. They do so for all sorts of reasons, including marking a significant birthday, commemorating a rite of passage, asserting pride in identity, or simply using the body as a canvas for art. If Jewish teachings enter the picture at all, they are not as prohibitions to overcome, but are, instead, welcomed lessons that promote personal expression. In the end, whether or not one views tattoos and body piercings as taboo is entirely an individual matter.