



The Observant Life Book Club

MODESTY, PIERCING, AND TATTOOS

(Source: “Public Appearance and Behavior”, Gordon Tucker, *The Observant Life*, Martin S. Cohen, Senior Editor, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012, pp. 373-390)

This may seem like a book club especially for the parents of teenagers but it is also appropriate for anyone who finds that styles of dress and other bodily adornments in the contemporary culture can be a source of embarrassment and even outrage whether in public, at parties or the dinner table or even in the synagogue.

TEXT

Be sure to read Rabbi Tucker’s chapter before the session since there are many different perspectives on these issues from the point of view of the halakhah. And it is also important to remember that one of the hallmarks of the Conservative Movement is its commitment to the tradition but also to the evolutionary character of Judaism and its capacity to adapt to change. So even though respect for the body in life and death is an important value in Jewish life the standards established in rabbinic times that lead the ultra-Orthodox communities to require long skirts and sleeves, high necks and head coverings, etc., don’t work for Conservative Jews who are fully part of modern life.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Modesty

1. Each member of the group should be invited to share a situation in which they found themselves distinctly uncomfortable because of the attire of someone in their family or friendship circle.
 - a. Did you feel an obligation to talk to the person about your discomfort? If you did raise the subject how did that interaction go? Did you regret your decision to bring it up?
 - b. Have you found yourself adjusting your idea of what is appropriate dress because of changing styles/values in society? Some examples would be interesting!
2. Rabbi Tucker states (p.377): “It is possible, without unnecessarily restricting the fashion options available to moderns, to condemn certain kinds of outfits as inconsonant with the dignity of human beings whom we hold to be created in the divine image.”
 - a. Do you agree? Could the group come up with a definition of outfits that are “inconsonant” with human dignity?
 - b. In your own families have you tried to establish such definitions? In your congregation? For yourself?
3. On the issue of head covering how do members of the group feel about *wearing kippot on the street (something that is not safely done in some parts of the world);

- a. Women wearing kippot on the street? Given that the wearing of kippot is a custom (a very strong custom!) and not halakhah how can we approach the issue of standards for the practice? Should we?

Body Piercing

1. In light of the responsa (rabbinic opinions on halakhic subjects) outlined on p. 384 that find both ear piercing and “plastic surgery for reasons that are not medically indicated” permissible, should all kinds of piercings be seen as permissible according to Jewish law?
2. For Rabbi Tucker, “convention” enters into the decision as to which type of piercings should be permissible. He suggests that in today’s milieu and “especially in the social settings in which Conservative Jews tend to live and congregate” it would be acceptable to permit the piercing of a range of body parts with two qualifications:
 - Piercing the sexual organs or other body parts “normally concealed from public display, should not be permitted” and
 - Since not all piercings are easily reversible, they should not be done “on a whim or for faddish reasons”.Have you had any experience discussing body piercings with family members or friends? Are these criteria for permitting piercings helpful? Have you found other arguments useful?
3. In general, do members of the group find these suggestions for dealing with complicated – and often conflict ridden – topics useful? Would you use halakhic material in guiding your thinking or would they also be helpful in your conversations around these topics?

Tattoos

1. Are you persuaded by Rabbi Tucker’s discussion (pp 385-6) that the prohibition in Leviticus 19:28 not to “incise any marks on yourselves” probably had nothing to do with tattoos as we know them but was related to some kind of pagan ritual? Have you had occasion to discuss the issue of tattoos with someone close to you? What position did you take and how did you defend your position? And would you change your approach based on what you have learned from Rabbi Tucker’s chapter?
2. In light of the information about the original meaning of Leviticus 19:28 – and considering how popular tattoos have become in our society – what do you think of Rabbi Tucker’s approach to the subject of tattoos for Conservative Jews (p.385): “Perhaps it can best be understood in our time as a commitment to be as careful as possible to preserve the integrity of the body with which each of us is gifted by God.... This will be, for many, sufficient reason for maintaining the age-old prohibition of tattooing, and for finding other avenues for self-expression.” Should this standard also apply to elective cosmetic surgery? How does the idea of our bodies being a gift of God resonate for someone who believes decorating that body is a sacred act? Have you had any conversations along these lines?
3. A question that most rabbis get asked quite often is “Can you be buried in a Jewish cemetery if you have tattoos?”. Has this chapter led you to think differently about that issue?