

INKING FOR ISRAEL

Following the attacks of 7 October, some Jews are showing pride in their heritage and solidarity with Israel by tattooing Jewish symbols on their bodies. Alex Galbinski reports. Photography Rob Greig

Leviticus 19:28 reads: “You shall not etch a tattoo on yourselves.” But, since 7 October, Jews of all ages are getting themselves tattooed as a permanent reminder of the horrific atrocities committed by Hamas and to show solidarity with Israel and their faith.

Instagram and Facebook are awash with images of people in Israel and around the world sporting freshly-inked tattoos marking the attacks in the south of Israel in which around 1,200 people were killed and 240 taken hostage. Israelis are shown with tattoos featuring the date of the massacre or with images such as a broken heart, while Jews in the UK are inking a ‘chai’ (Hebrew for ‘life’), a Star of David or other Hebrew expressions or prayers.

Blake Ezra, a 40-year-old photojournalist from London, got tattooed, along with his wife Yamit, a few days after the attacks. “I was distraught after the attacks,” says Ezra, who has lived and worked in Israel.

“We described what we wanted when we arrived at The Circle London, a tattoo parlour in Soho – a ‘chai’ for Blake and a ‘chai’, Star of David, and yin yang symbol for Yamit. The tattooist, Nick Rose, overheard us and asked: ‘You’re Jewish too? Are you struggling?’ We hugged for a long time and talked before Nick etched our tattoos,” said Ezra.

“I wanted a ‘chai’ because I never want to forget this week. It’s going to be life-changing for many of us,” says Ezra, who already has tattoos of the Birkat Kohanim (a Hebrew priestly blessing) and a hamsa (the good luck symbol of a hand) with a Star of David inside.

“I was brought up to believe that we shouldn’t have tattoos because they’re banned in Orthodox Judaism. Traditionally, if you have one it means you can’t be buried in a Jewish cemetery. There’s also the idea that we shouldn’t have them because it was forced upon our people during the Holocaust.

I fully understand all of those things. I’m involved in Holocaust education organisations – I’ve been to Auschwitz around 50 times – but it’s empowering to reclaim something that has been done to [oppress] your people. My tattoo is a reminder of the fragility of being a Jew in the wider world,” he says.

From top: Yamit (L); Hanna with her ‘chai’; Blake’s ‘chai’. Right, clockwise from top left: Nick in his studio; Yamit and Blake; one of Nick’s stencils (shown back to front); Penny’s tattoo; stencils with Jewish symbols



Ezra posted online about his positive tattoo experience, describing Rose as a “mensch” – and the tattooist has now inked more than 120 Jewish customers. The most popular tattoo he has been doing for Jews since the attacks has been the ‘chai’, then the expression ‘Am Yisrael chai’ (‘the nation of Israel lives’), followed by a Star of David. There have also been requests for hamsas and spiritual or inspirational Hebrew quotes.

Jews aren’t as “loud and proud” about being Jewish as they are in the United States, says Rose, 33, who is from San Francisco, but that has made him more open about being Jewish in the UK. On his social media, he experienced an initial wave of negativity about Israel after the attacks. “A lot of people unfollowed me, but then it skyrocketed in the other direction.

“Jews are showing they are proud they are Jewish. Some are getting tattoos done as big and as visible as they can. At the tattoo studio, I hope to create a sanctuary where Jews can relax, be themselves and overcome the anxieties of previous generations by affirming their identity.”

Hanna Hornstein, 35, a property manager from Hertfordshire, is one recent customer to be inked by Rose. The ‘chai’, marked near her wrist, is her first tattoo. “I had always wanted to have a tattoo with a Jewish symbol, but was unsure about getting it done,” says Hornstein. “After 7 October, my best friend said, ‘I think now is the right time.’

“To be Jewish is an honour and a religion and a way of life that I adore,” she says. “My family were absolutely shocked [about the tattoo] – but they understand my reason: to show something that cannot be taken away. My friends love it. Non-Jewish colleagues ask what it means and think it’s lovely.”

Penny Low, 57, from London’s Golders Green, is another of Rose’s recent customers. She chose the phrase ‘Am Yisrael chai’ to be inked on her arm to “show solidarity with and support for Israel”, she explains. “I have family on a kibbutz in Rosh Pinah [northern Israel] and friends in various Israeli towns. Whenever I visit, I feel like I’ve come home.

“The tattoo is something I’d been considering, but this was the right time. This conflict has left so many people trying to make sense of the horrific atrocities carried out on citizens. World Jewry, as well as many others, feel their pain.” ■

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