

TATTOO HEBREW: AN ANALYSIS OF MIAMI INK'S PRESENTATION OF JEWISH
TATTOO THEMES

JOSEPH ROBERT NICOLA

Abstract

Tattoos are growing in popularity among people of the Jewish faith. The following rhetorical analysis examines the Jewish tattoo narratives presented in the first American television program about tattooing, *Miami Ink*. Narrative Paradigm Theory is utilized to explore specific Jewish tattoo themes communicated.

Keywords: Jewish, tattoo, television, stigma, narrative

The TLC network reality series, *Miami Ink*, follows four tattoo artists and the clientele they tattoo in South Beach, Florida. *Miami Ink* is the first American reality television series about a tattoo parlor, and the first show completely devoted to tattoos (Hibberd, 2005; Oldenburg, 2005). *Miami Ink* originally ran from 2005 to 2008 (Saraiya, 2014). The show continues to air in syndication worldwide in over 160 countries (Tattoodo, 2015, 2014; Thobocarlson & Chateaubriand, 2014).

Relevance for Studying the Topic

Research into the growing popularity of tattoos in America has attributed this rise of acceptance to open communication from the tattoo industry and positive media exposure of tattoos (DeMello, 2000; Wyatt, 2003; Yamada, 2009). With these media influences helping advance the popularity of tattoos, it is then relevant to look closely at the first television show dedicated specifically to tattooing. This analysis will examine the Jewish tattoo themes presented in the show and what they accomplish in terms of meaning.

The applications of results are to add greater understanding of how tattoos have increased in popularity. An analysis of Jewish tattoo narratives will be beneficial to scholars, media professionals, and religious leaders, studying tattooed individuals. Findings may also prove helpful to researchers looking at depictions of tattoos in television programming from a social science viewpoint. For the tattooing community, this analysis will be of benefit by presenting further dialog and understanding about some of the reasons why people get tattoos.

History

The oldest evidence for tattooing has been discoveries of 40,000 year old bone needles and hollow bone tubes, with traces of powdered pigments, believed to be used for tattooing (Levy, 2008). Historical functions of tattoos were to memorialize significant life experiences,

protect one from harm, and enhance the beauty of the human form (Sanders, 1988). Ancient societies used tattoos to serve several purposes. Reasons included religious devotion, a form of therapy or protection, to show one's status and affiliation with a particular tribe or group, to indicate bravery and frighten enemies in battle, and to indicate maturity for marriage (Gustafson, 2000; Levin, 2008; Levy, 2008; Porterfield, 2008; Sanders, 1990; Surles, 2008; Wyatt, 2003).

Countless celebrities are tattooed (Ritz, 2005) as well as over seventy percent of the National Basketball Association (Gottlieb, 2003). The Pew Research Center reported that of young Americans, ages 18-25, thirty-six percent had a tattoo (Pew Research Center, 2008). People from all walks of life are now getting tattoos (Org, 2003; Porterfield, 2008; Reardon, 2008; Roleff, 2007; Trebay, 2008; Victionary, 2007).

Tattooing is growing in popularity among young people of the Jewish faith (Hemingson, 2009). Despite the centuries long tradition against marking one's body, and the forced tattooing of Jews by the Nazis during the Holocaust, tattoos are starting to become more popular as some Jewish young adults are being tattooed. However distasteful Jewish leaders and elders may find this practice, there is a growing agreement that a tattoo is no basis for limiting one from religious participation or ritual (Dorff & Newman, 2008; Greene, 2011).

Narrative Paradigm Theory

This analysis will employ the Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT), developed by Walter Fisher as a framework for looking at stories. Fisher proposes that compelling stories provide a rationale for decisions and actions (Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1989). Understanding that life is experienced through narratives, a method for judging which stories to believe and which to disregard is essential. Fisher provides such a method through narrative rationality. Narrative rationality operates on the two principles of coherence and fidelity (West & Turner, 2000).

Coherence refers to the believability of a narrative; of whether or not the story told makes rational and coherent sense to the viewer (Fisher, 1985). When one is judging a story's logic, narrative coherence asks, "whether or not a story coheres or 'hangs together,' whether or not the story is free of contradictions" (Fisher, 1985, p. 349).

Fidelity is the reliability or the truthfulness of the story. When a narrative possesses fidelity, it provides good reasons for a person to hold a belief or to take a specific action. Narrative Paradigm affirms that when a story contains both coherence and fidelity, it will be believed and accepted by its listeners (West & Turner, 2000).

Narrative Paradigm Theory holds that meaning is continually created by stories. For a story to be believable, it must meet the requirements of coherence and fidelity. Applying the strategies outlined in the theory of NPT, this study will look at the first season of *Miami Ink* for recurring Jewish tattoo themes addressed. The narratives within these instances will then be evaluated using Narrative Paradigm's principles of coherence and fidelity.

Research Question

The principle research question is; "What Jewish tattoo themes are communicated in *Miami Ink*, and could the narratives presenting these themes be considered rational by the principles of Narrative Paradigm Theory.

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

In order to effectively study this topic, conceptual and operational definitions must first be defined for the purposes of this discussion. Tattoo: a tattoo is a permanent design made on the skin using ink and a needle. This process is accomplished by hand or by using an electric tattoo machine. The needle places several ink pigments directly under the skin by penetrating the top outer layer of the skin (Reardon, 2008). With mastery of the art form, almost any image

can be fashioned into a tattoo. Tattoo studio: the actual building establishment where the tattoo artists tattoo their clients. A tattoo studio is synonymously called a tattoo shop. The tattoo studio presented in the show is located in the upscale tourist South Beach neighborhood of Miami, Florida.

Methodology

Miami Ink is in the format of a reality show in which actual customers come into the tattoo shop to be tattooed and share their story for getting a tattoo. The process for collecting data for the rhetorical analysis was to look at the client narratives from all 21 episodes from *Miami Ink's* first season available on DVD. Episodes are without commercials and approximately forty-two minutes in length.

All 21 episodes, from season one, were repeatedly viewed. Questions brought to these episodes were; what Jewish tattoo narratives are articulated, how are they presented, and what aspects function convincingly. Scenes containing Jewish tattoo themes were then transcribed and further examined. The narratives possessing such recurring themes were then assessed for coherence and fidelity by means of Narrative Paradigm Theory.

Of the 21 episodes of the first season examined, two episodes did display specific Jewish Tattoo themes. The episodes are titled, "More Money, More Problems," and "While Ami's Away." This paper will discuss these Jewish Tattoo themes found within the client narratives.

Synopsis of Episodes

Episode "*More Money, More Problems*" Denise

The first selection features the client Denise. She comes into the shop to get a Hebrew Hamsa design tattooed on the top of her right foot. The Hamsa design is in the shape of a hand,

with a human eye in the center of the palm. Underneath the Hamsa symbol, she wishes to get her young son's name in Hebrew.

Episode “*While Ami’s Away...*” John

The second selection is from the episode titled “*While Ami’s Away...*” The client is John, whose infant daughter is dying from the genetic disorder Tay-Sachs. John came into the shop to have a portrait of his two and a half year old daughter Elise tattooed on his chest.

Analysis of Text

Denise

Miami Ink’s depiction of Ami James, the tattoo artist, shop owner and the show’s narrator, is that he identifies as a Jew. He was born in Israel, grew up in New York, and went back to serve in the Israeli Army. He can speak and write Hebrew. He also has tattoos, and is a practitioner of putting tattoos on others.

The scene starts with Ami James speaking to the camera about Jewish people getting tattoos. He says,

“I was born in Israel. And ah, supposedly Jewish people are not supposed to get tattooed. I don’t know. You know I wasn’t raised religious. I’m more of a believer this past two years than I ever was in my life. You know I think what the bottom line is...it’s all about being a good person. Only God can judge me at the end.”

He then quips with a lighthearted grin, “Besides it’s the Jews...we’re chosen people, we’re going in anyway.”

The client, Denise, is then shown walking into the shop. A narration of Ami states, “Denise is looking for something to keep her safe. Kind of a spiritual security in the form of a tattoo.” Denise is dressed casually and appears to be in her late twenties. The tattoo Denise

wants to get is a Hebrew Hamsa design tattooed on the top of her right foot. The Hamsa design is the shape of a hand, with a human eye in the center of the palm.

Denise says to Ami James about the tattoo, “I figured if anybody knew how it would be drawn, it would be you.” Ami responds smiling, “Well, I mean...I’m not the *Orthodox* tattoo artist.” Starting to laugh, she jokingly implies the Jewish taboo of tattoos by quickly responding; “You being *Hassidic* and all!” Ami replies to her comment matter-of-factly; “I’ve been known to tattoo a couple of Hassidic guys. Yes actually. Yes.”

Denise explains her choice in the tattoo design to the camera,

“The tattoo that I’ll be getting today is a hand with an evil eye in it. I picked that because it wards off evil spirits. Being my background heritage is Israeli and Jewish I found that very interesting.”

Ami explains to the camera; “Basically, Hamsa is used by a lot of Jewish people. Most Jewish homes have a Hamsa hanging on the wall.”

Denise continues,

“I wanted to get my son’s name in Hebrew underneath it. Pretty much just to symbolize that I want protection for my son. I live my life through him now. Everything he sees, he’s learning everything new and I’m learning right along with him. So, that has made me a lot more spiritual because I feel very grateful to God for giving him to me.”

As Ami James is setting up for the tattoo, Denise says, “My mom said it was actually disrespectful to put it on the top of the foot.” Ami responds, “It’s kind of ironic, but it’s to ward away somebody’s evil eye. So...to kick them in the ass with it would be the right place.”

As Ami sits sketching the design on a piece of paper, a narration explains, “Hamsa means 5 in Hebrew and in Arabic. And it refers to the digits of the hand. It’s a popular symbol for good luck and it means to ‘ward off the evil eye.’”

As Ami is tattooing Denise, he asks her, “What does your mom think of all the tattoos? A nice Jewish Lady.” Images of Denise’s three other small tattoos are then briefly displayed. She responds, “Well, at first she kind of was... she didn’t like it. But you know, now she knows how I am.” Ami agrees by saying that his mom “used to hate my tattoos.”

Soliloquies explaining to the camera their choices to tattoo in light of the traditional taboo of the Jewish culture are then given. Ami states, “Jews are not really supposed to get tattooed. We’re not supposed to desecrate our bodies. You know, on the day that I go up...and if God judged me badly because I got tattooed then a...that’s not the god I want to follow.”

Denise explains, “I respect that the Jewish faith doesn’t, you know, want people to have tattoos. But I think of it as a beautiful form of expression and a beautiful form of art.”

After her tattoo is complete, she is shown saying to Ami, “Best tattoo I ever got...It’s really nice...It’s beautiful.” Walking out she states, “I love it. It’s my favorite.”

Afterwards, Ami says that he also appreciates the Hamsa symbol as a tattoo.

“So I think I’m actually probably going to get a Hamsa, small one, on me. Just so all the player-haters, and everybody that hates you for no reason, they can all wear off.”

Ami James was taught that Jewish people are not to desecrate their bodies with tattoos. His response to this tradition is that he personally believes being a good person is more important to God than the ink he puts in his skin. He would rather not follow a god that casts judgment based on his tattoos. His response to Denise that he has tattooed a few Hassidic Jews gives light to the fact that there are Jewish people from all faith groups that have tattoos.

For Denise and Ami James, tattoos do not separate them from the Jewish culture. Tattoos for them are an expression of themselves. Denise understands the taboo of Jews having tattoos, but views them as a beautiful art form and an expression of her spiritual beliefs. She is proud of her Jewish heritage and takes pride in the tattoo designs she has chosen. The Hamsa's symbolism of protection from evil spirits connects with her motherly desire to protect her young son.

The point that both Ami and Denise discuss their Jewish mothers appears clichéd. Ami asks what Denise's nice Jewish Mother thinks of her tattoos. She explains, "Well, at first she kind of was... she didn't like it. But you know, now she knows how I am." Ami agrees by affirming that his mother also used to hate his tattoos but is now accepting of them. Their narrative confirms that both their Jewish mothers found their tattoos distasteful at first, but eventually came to accept their tattoos.

This narrative does not discuss what degree of religious participation Ami or Denise is involved in. If not specifically spiritual, the understanding that both share Israeli-Jewish ethnicity does present them as culturally Jewish. The explanation that Ami has tattooed Orthodox Jews communicates that a tattoo does not hinder an observing Jew from religious devotion and ritual.

John

The episode "*While Ami's Away...*" observed the story of John, a father whose infant daughter is dying from the genetic disorder Tay-Sachs, a rare degenerative disease that attacks the nervous system and slowly shuts down the body. John, is a soft-spoken husband and father appearing to be in his mid-thirties. John came into the shop to have a portrait of his two and a

half year old daughter Elise tattooed on his chest by the artist, Kat Von D. Elise has Tay-Sachs disease, a genetic disorder that is terminal.

John explains further;

She is two and a half years old now. Most children don't usually survive past around the age of five. So I need something for myself that when she's gone I'll always have a piece of her with me...It's absolutely every parent's nightmare. You can't tell someone that your child is going to die before you. There is no way to describe that emotion...Every day you wake up in the morning and you don't know what to expect. And you want to spend every minute you can with Elise because you don't know how long you have left...Having a child is supposed to be a great part of your life. And watching them grow up and we're not going to have that. And that bothers me.

John very softly conveys his reason for getting a tattoo to the camera,

I'm here to get a tattoo of my daughter from Kat [Von D]. The tattoo is going to be a portrait and the reason is because my daughter has Tay-Sachs disease. It's a terminal illness and I don't know how much longer I'm going to have with her so I want to have something to always remember her by.

As the artist is setting up her tattoo station, John explains his reasons for the specific tattoo he came for.

There's one photo of Elise sleeping on my shoulder and it just hit me as soon as I saw it that would be a photo that I would love to have a tattoo of on the spot where she sleeps. Because that's something then, no matter where she is, it will always be where she's sleeping on my shoulder.

The artist begins to apply the tattoo and John continues;

Everyone always kind of feels like you're never supposed to watch your child fade away before you. It's really hard to hold it all together all the time. And I have my own kind of moments where I can't. There's a lot of pain involved. Every minute [starts to choke up]...yep, every minute.

As the tattoo is nearing completion, the scene shows John speaking off camera,

The tattoo is going to give me a little more peace. Because I always have this feeling that once she's gone...she's going to be gone. And although you'll have pictures and you'll have your memories and once the tattoo's on it's on. I want something...permanent.

Once the tattoo is completed, John admires his new tattoo in the mirror. The sight of his daughter's life-like image on his chest causes him to tear up and say, "that's her" and then hug the tattoo artist. The scene closes with the artist Kat Von D sharing her thoughts on the experience of doing John's portrait tattoo of his daughter,

I definitely feel honored to have done John's tattoo today. In the end when he looked in the mirror and then gave me this hug and just totally didn't let go...it was just one of those things where it was just like...I'm glad I totally made his day.

John's young daughter is going to die and he wants something to remember her by. He has put time and effort into his decision to be tattooed. John's narrative depicts him as a loving and caring father who is doing the only thing he believes will immortalize the memory of his daughter. "It's absolutely every parent's nightmare. You can't tell someone that your child is going to die before you. There is no way to describe that emotion." Through the emotional appeal of a father who knows he will outlive his own child, the act of getting a tattoo to memorialize her memory and immortalize her bond with her father is presented as acceptable and poses no direct challenge to coherence and fidelity.

Tay-Sachs is a genetic disease that is predominantly common among the Ashkenazi Jewish population (Sheth, 2010). The conception of an afterlife is not integral to the Jewish faith (Steinberg, 1947). Viewing John as coming from a Jewish background gives clarity for his belief that he will never see his daughter again once she dies. The paradigm of a father who knows his child will die before him, added to the belief that the present life is all they have together provides clarification to John's earlier statement, "The tattoo is going to give me a little more peace. Because I always have this feeling that once she's gone...she's going to be gone."

For John, a tattoo is a way to preserve the memory of his child. It is the only permanence he can get. To receive a realistic portrait tattoo of his daughter will allow him to look at her face even after she passes away. With the tattoo, she will always be sleeping on his shoulder; forever preserving their bond as a father and daughter.

John's tattoo speaks to the stigma of tattoos being worn by those of the Jewish faith. The traditional practice of abstaining from tattoos is changing as many within the faith are choosing to tattoo themselves for religious and secular reasons. John choosing to tattoo serves to support this changing mentality.

Both the tattoo clients Denise and John are parents of young children. Denise wants protection for her son as he grows up, and chooses to tattoo a Hamsa symbol on her body. John wants to forever preserve the bond he has with his daughter, even after she dies. Both narratives communicate reasonable motives for their choice to tattoo.

Conclusion

Evidence collected has uncovered examples of Jewish Tattoo narratives in two episodes of *Miami Ink's* first season. By applying Narrative Paradigm Theory to the episodes titled "More Money, More Problems" and "While Ami's Away," stories were shown that tattoo narratives

provide rationality towards the changing Jewish views on tattoos. Within the study parameters, the narratives appeared free of contradictions and provide believable reasons for their actions. Through the principles of Narrative Paradigm Theory these narratives would then appear acceptable to the viewer.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this analysis are that the first season of the show was exclusively studied. The first season of *Miami Ink* contains twenty-one episodes each averaging forty-two minutes in length. Inquiry into other seasons of *Miami Ink*, as well as other tattoo-genre programs, would be beneficial in determining what further instances of Jewish Tattoo narratives occur.

Areas of Future Research

This study has contributed to the body of knowledge by conducting a rhetorical analysis through Narrative Paradigm Theory. As tattoos have now come to a worldwide audience, some Jewish people are choosing to tattoo themselves. This analysis has looked at what Jewish Tattoo themes were addressed in the first American media television series about tattoos. Inquiry into how spin-off tattoo programs communicate Jewish Tattoo narratives could prove valuable, for media scholars and religious leaders, towards understanding this growing cultural acceptance of tattoos.

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