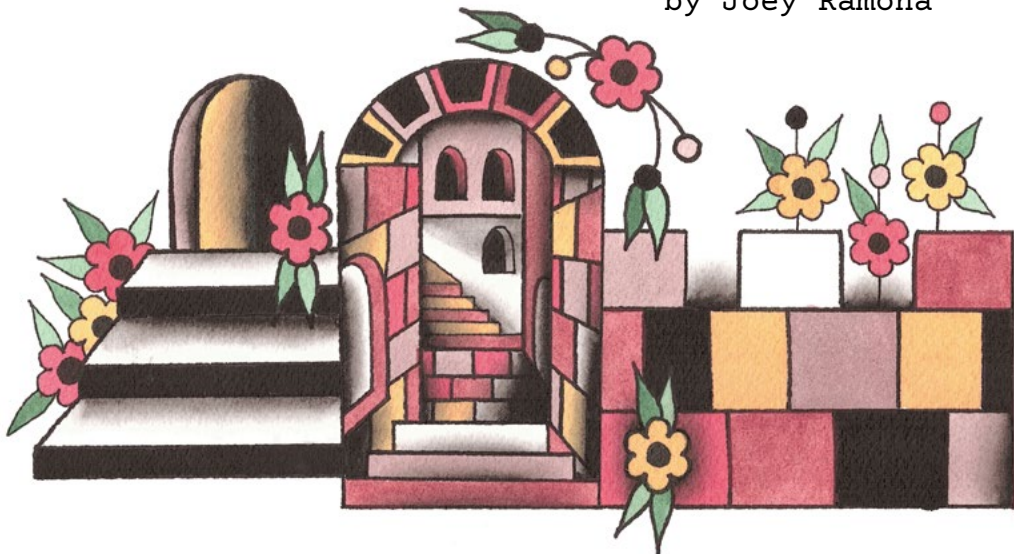




New Ways of Worship

Jewish Tattooing
by Joey Ramona



NEW WAYS OF WORSHIP:

JEWISH TATTOOING BY JOEY RAMONA

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MUSÉE du
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MUSEUM of
JEWISH MONTREAL

Avant-propos par Alyssa Stokvis-Hauer

Directrice artistique, Musée du Montréal juif

L'âme juive queer de l'œuvre de Joey Ramona proclame: *mir zaynen do* - nous sommes là ! Par son tatouage, une rencontre de style traditionnel américain avec des motifs et des symboles juifs, Joey a développé un langage visuel qui, bien qu'imprégné de tradition, constitue un acte de défi exubérant face aux conventions sociales. Ici, on met de côté la notion selon laquelle il y a interdiction d'enterrer les Juifs tatoués dans les cimetières juifs, ainsi que le débat sur le statut casher ou non-casher des tatouages. Plutôt, à travers son flash, ses objets de judaïca peints et sa poésie, Joey nous invite avec joie et détermination à accueillir et à réclamer le rituel et le culte juifs.

À travers la diaspora, le chant, la prière, les fables et la nourriture ont servi aux Juifs comme moyens de transmission de leurs histoires, leur foi et leurs traditions. *L'dor v'dor* - héritage du rituel, de la connaissance et de l'expérience du peuple juif transmis d'une génération à la prochaine - résonne au cœur de l'œuvre de Joey. Dans **Le culte: nouvelles approches**, on voit ce phénomène dans l'évolution de liens partagés, fondés sur et façonnés par les opinions, les besoins et les expériences d'innombrables juifs divers. Chaque flash juif dessiné par Joey, chaque tatouage juif qu'il crée avec ses clients, détient non seulement cet héritage du savoir juif, mais aussi son pouvoir d'approfondir la compréhension de soi, l'affirmation et la fierté.

L'œuvre de Joey perpétue la tradition juive sous une nouvelle forme, radicale et porteuse d'autonomie. La connaissance de la judaïcité et du sentiment d'appartenance est transformée en récit physique et visuel sous forme de tatouage que l'on emporte toujours avec soi. C'est aussi la raison pour laquelle les sections de ce zine sont présentées en fonction des choses auxquelles nous sommes attachés. Que vous soyez tatoué ou non, juif ou non, vous trouverez dans ces pages une résonance et une inspiration afin de créer et de faire progresser de nouvelles approches de culte.

Foreword by Alyssa Stokvis-Hauer

Artistic Director, Museum of Jewish Montreal

The queer Jewish soul of Joey Ramona's work declares: *mir zaynen do* - we are here. Combining American Traditional style tattooing with motifs and symbols from Jewish life, Joey has developed a visual language that is as steeped in tradition as much as it jubilantly bucks convention. Here, we set aside the long-standing common misconception regarding Jews with tattoos being blocked from burial in Jewish cemeteries, and even put aside the debate over whether tattoos are kosher. Instead, Joey's flash, painted Judaica, and poetry centres a joyful, determined call to embrace and reclaim Jewish ritual and worship.

Through the diaspora, Jews have carried their stories, faith, and traditions with them through song, prayer, fables, and food. This passage of Jewish ritual, experience, and knowledge between generations - known in Jewish tradition as *l'dor v'dor* - resonates throughout Joey's work. In **New Ways of Worship** we see this reflected in a progression of shared connections, built upon and shaped by the views, needs, and experiences of countless diverse Jews. Each piece of Jewish flash Joey draws, or each Jewish tattoo they create with their clients holds not only this passage of Jewish knowledge, but its power to further self-understanding, affirmation, and pride.

In Joey's work, Jewish tradition is carried on in a new, radically empowered way: the knowledge of one's own Jewishness and sense of belonging is transformed into a physical, visual narrative, carried in tattoo form wherever one might go. It is for this reason the sections of this zine are arranged according to the things we carry close. As you read, whether tattooed or not, Jewish or not, there is resonance in what is carried in these pages, and inspiration to create and carry forward new ways of worship.



**Dedicated to my Bubbie Frances, and Zeide Al,
whose memory is always a blessing.**

Before speaking about my work, it's imperative that I acknowledge where Western tattooing practices come from. Practices of tattooing have been colonized and stolen from Black and Indigenous cultures, and brought to Western Europe and subsequently North America. Many of these cultures were then forbidden from practicing their tattoo rituals, in an attempt to erase Indigenous cultural identity.

It is a tremendous privilege for me as a white person to make a career from tattooing. Moving forward with my work means that I must never be silent about colonization and the violence of white supremacy. Redistributing some of my resources to Black and Indigenous peoples, groups, and orgs will always be part of my tattooing practice.

- Joey Ramona



Chapter 1: What you carry with you

Doikayt, which means 'hereness' in Yiddish, on me, by me, and done at Under My Thumb Tattoo in Toronto, where I currently work. '*Doikayt*' is the declaration that the Jewish Homeland is wherever we live, wherever we land. This queer, non-binary Jewish body is my home, and this home will always be able to find community. Whether I'm locked down at home or tattooing in another country, my ancestors will always be with me in this home, this body. This tattoo is for all of the queer and trans Jews, and our ancestors, to whom I owe everything.



The concept of *Doikayt* explains that wherever Jews are, that is their home. I wanted to apply *Doykait* to the practice of faith: since places of worship are not available to us right now, can we feel validation in the idea our Jewishness is always with us? Can we use *Doikayt* to consider that traditional spaces of worship aren't accessible to a lot of people, and how to move away from traditional, oppressive power structures within our communities? Can we use *Doikayt* to remind us that our community needs to reach beyond physical spaces, and emphasize the validity of those who observe differently?

This painting was inspired by Hugo Steiner-Prag's illustration in the book *Der Golem: Prager Phantasien* (1915), by Gustav Meyrink. It depicts Schemajah Hillel, a gentle, Jewish character of the story, learned in the Torah and Talmud. To me, he represents an unconventional leader, who is soft yet powerful.



If He had split the sea for us
and had not taken us through it on dry land,
it would have been enough for us,
Dayeinu!



Dayeinu, Hebrew for 'it would have been enough,' on Dave.



These Tattoos were done at Time Being in Chicago,
on siblings Gabe (the Chai) and Molly (florals and
Bracha). Both Molly and Gabe are my friends now and I
am so grateful to have them in my life.



Chai, Hebrew for 'life,' on Gabe.



Bracha, Hebrew for 'blessing,' on Molly.



Eishet Chayil means 'Woman of Valour' in Hebrew, done for Margaret from Germany, in Toronto at Lost Boys Tattoo. *Eishet Chayil* is a poem written by King Solomon as part of Proverbs. Each verse begins with a different Hebrew letter – according to Solomon, the letters of the Hebrew *alephbet* are the foundation of creation, and so too is the Jewish Woman.

It's really beautiful to celebrate this matriarchal power with Jewish clients – it feels as though we are acknowledging a powerful ancestral force that lies within us.

A woman praying over Shabbat candles for Kate, done at Tattoo Union in Vancouver. The role of the household matriarch is to light the Shabbat candles and bless them. Many of my Jewish clients who aren't men have drawn strength and power from Jewish rituals that have historically been performed by women (or by people of other genders that aren't men).



Shabbat candles and challah loaf for a queer Jew named Jordan at Otherside Tattoos in Ottawa. Jordan and I bonded over queer Jewish life and the balance between honouring our cultural traditions, and making space for new ways of worship and new ways to exist as Jews.

This mezuzah, done at 8 of Swords Tattoo in New York City, is loosely based on Hope's grandmother's mezuzah, complete with cute little pomegranates. Hope was one of the first queer and trans Jewish clients I had in New York City, and I was and still am so grateful to have met them. They came into my life at a dark time of introspection; it was very grounding for me, as a queer and trans Jew who was still very unsure of themselves and also very lonely, to meet someone I could look up to.



Hamsa with a pomegranate for Leo, done in Toronto at Lost Boys Tattoo. The hamsa is a protection symbol used historically by Jews and Muslims to ward off the evil eye. The word 'hamsa' comes from the Arabic word for 'five.' For Jews, it is said to symbolize the hand of God, though it is also referred to as the Hand of Miriam, who was Moses' sister, and the Hand of Fatima, who was Muhammed's daughter. Pomegranates also hold special symbolism within Judaism; they supposedly contain 613 seeds, which correspond to the 613 commandments of the Torah.



L'Shana Tova! Happy New Year!

Let us celebrate the harvest, the changing seasons,
the cyclical nature of life and love.

Let us come together and bring light to the darkest
corners of human existence.

Let us move through pain with support and love for
each other.

Let us centre the voices of the vulnerable, and amplify
their light.

Let us mourn fully and passionately, and acknowledge
the transformative power of death.

Let us share our abundance by inviting others to our
table, to join us not as guests but as comrades.

Let us feel at home wherever we are, as our strength is
not derived from the ground we stand on, but instead
from the fire in our hearts and minds.

Let us carry the legacies of our ancestors, however
heavy they may be, for they will protect us in our
marches, our actions, and our solidarity movements.

Let us enjoy the sweetness of love, in all of its forms.

And finally, Let us grow with the earth and the moon,
for they have raised us and liberated us and held us.

L'Shana Tova!

*This poem, entitled "New Year's Resolutions," was written with the
intention of encouraging others to bring their passion, chutzpah,
and solidarity with other marginalized communities into the New Year.*

Chapter 2:

The ones we carry with us



The Circus Lady, or *Di Tsirkus Dame* in Yiddish, for Robin. Robin's grandmother was the late Yiddish feminist poet Celia Dropkin. Born in Russian in 1887, Celia's work was way ahead of its time. She wrote about themes of love with explicit sexuality, and frequently infused even nature-themed poems with erotica. What an honour to do this tattoo! I love how this tattoo honours Celia's memory in such a playful way.

Mezuzah and barbed wire flowers done at Saved Tattoo in New York City for Andrea, a Jewish-Cuban queer somatic healer. Andrea and I had instant friend-chemistry. I felt as though we had met before, even though we hadn't. Andrea brought photos of her grandparents to watch over us during the tattooing process. This felt very powerful; bringing your ancestors to your tattoo appointment is a beautiful way to engage with their memories.



These two images represent the contrast between softness and strength, between tradition and self-discovery. The mezuzah and the barbed wire flowers are two facets of a multi-faceted identity; Jewishness, queerness, softness, power, and pain.



Esther



Miriam

Esther, Miriam, and Judith, all paintings done during Covid Lockdown. Many tattooers were feeling pretty lost, myself included. Suddenly my community connections were cut, my personal Jewish practices restricted. Not being able to do Jewish tattoos felt like losing a piece of my spirituality. Painting Jewish women, specifically the 'movers and shakers' of women appearing in the Torah, helped me to hang on to hope.



Judith



This is a portrait of my Bubbie and Zeida, done on my mom's upper back. Losing my Zeida several years ago has had a drastic affect on my family; his absence never goes unnoticed. I remember doing this tattoo several days before Passover, and heading to visit my Bubbie shortly after the tattoo was done. **I was worried about what she would think, but when she saw it she cried, and I knew from those tears that she approved.**

Chapter 3:

Those you carry in your heart



The hamsa and the word *ahava* were some of the first Jewish tattoos I did on my friend Lel (they had plenty of tattoos already though!) They were one of the first queer/trans radical Jews in my life, and I had a feeling we would become friends. We went from being strangers to going out for wine and blintzes (which happened after my first Big Queer Breakup). They taught me a lot about platonic queer intimacy, and how special it is to connect with someone whose experiences overlap your own.



Sam's Hebrew name (translates to Abigail). This tattoo was done at Time Being Tattoo in Chicago. I am so grateful to have since visited the shop several times, and have gotten to know some other radical Jewish folks from the Chicago community. Several months after this tattoo was done, I was honoured to donate a painting to a raffle for Sam's top surgery fund!

The connections I have made from tattooing Jewish things on queer/trans Jews have created a deeper meaning in my life, much like Judaism provides me with spiritual richness.

What I do is for them primarily;
to honour our bodies
and our Jewishness with special ritual.

Typically, we only see men and boys wearing kippot, but they are not exclusively for men! Covering one's head is a sign of reverence to God, and therefore many conservative and reform Jewish people of all genders wear them. In fact, the synagogue I attended as a kid in Toronto required that ALL worshipers wear head coverings, as the Shul stated that we are all the same in the eyes of Hashem.



Two Jewish queers kissing, on Hadar, done at 8 of Swords



Ellis is another person who I tattooed and ended up becoming friends with. When I first met them, they offered to be a person I could reach out to for community. Recently, my partner and I met Ellis and their partner in the park for a socially-distanced hang to celebrate Rosh Hashanah by eating apples and smoking weed.

A femme wearing a kippah for fellow trans-nonbinary Jew Ellis.



Beshsert is a Yiddish word meaning 'destiny,' but it typically refers to a person who is your sweetheart. My Bubbe taught me this word, and for that reason it's one of my favourite Yiddish words. I thought it would be extra beautiful in the context of queer Jewish love.

Prayer of Protection for my Trans siblings

When a cloak of darkness protects your enemies,
keineinehora.

When the weight of expectations
makes grooves in your shoulders,
keineinehora.

When you feel invisible yet hyper-visible,
keineinehora.

When strong winds make the light of your candle flicker,
keineinehora.

When your lovers touch is out of reach,
keineinehora.

When your community isn't letting you speak.
keineinehora.

When your beauty is reduced to binary boxes,
keineinehora.

When living your life is risking your life,
keineinehora.

May you go forth with protection and blessings.



Keineinehora means 'protection from the evil eye' in Yiddish. There are many different ways of saying it, but the meaning is always the same.

Chapter 4: The way we carry ourselves and each other

The word *feygele* means 'homosexual' in Yiddish. The black and grey version was done on Hadar in New York City at Saved Tattoo, and the version with the little bird was done in Toronto on Adra. Feygele literally means 'little bird,' and, typically, was not a term of endearment and had very negative connotations. I thought it was a cool way to subvert the term by pairing it with a literal little bird. Taking back this term is similar to the way the term 'queer' has been appropriated.



We have taken a word that was used to harm us, and re-claimed it as ours, as something we can draw power from.



Fun fact: Adra is part of a queer *Rosh Chodesh* circle that I once participated in pre-COVID. *Rosh Chodesh* means 'the head of the moon', and marks a day of celebration and reflection at the beginning of each month. I long to return to the circle, but my shyness keeps getting the best of me!





This painting is an ode to Jewish beauty, specifically Jewish noses. The first time someone pointed out my nose, I was in grade 7, and my best friend told me my nose was too big. I'm sure I'm not alone in this experience, as anyone who doesn't fit into extremely narrow, Western-European beauty standards has probably had some kind of similar experience. I looked up the word 'shnoz,' and was dismayed to learn that, not only is it not actually a Yiddish word (noz is Yiddish for 'nose') but one theory is that the goyim made this word up to make fun of us! Antisemitism is so quietly woven into every day culture that so many people don't even catch it. To embrace Jewish noses is to defy the white supremacist notion that only one kind of face is beautiful. The Yiddish on this sheet says *Shayna Punim*, which translates to 'beautiful face.' **Jews are hot, looking 'Jewish' is hot, and loving our noses is an act of resistance!**

This piece is about Jewish bodies. Occupying a Jewish body means criticism from both the *goyim* (we are told we have bad hair, bad noses, too much body hair) and from our own community (your period is 'dirty,' you're supposed to be 'modest,' you have to be a mother) and for me this has resulted in a lot of shame. I'm at a point in my life now where I'm embracing all these parts and subverting that shame. I'm a hairy Jew with a big nose, and I love those things about myself. *Simcha* means 'joy'; in this context, the joy of a Jewish body. *Shabbat shalom* my pretties.



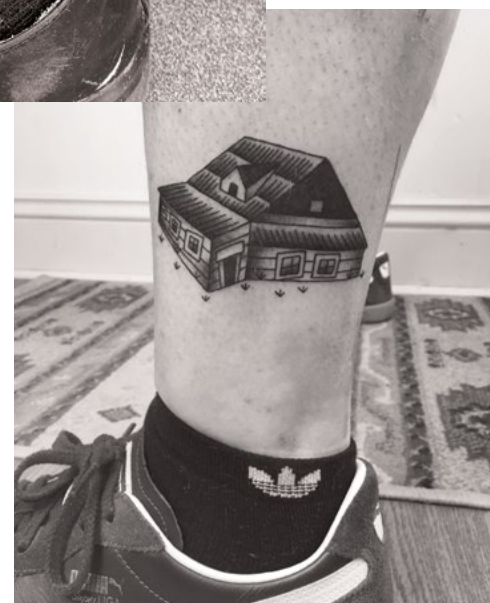
Shtetlach tattoos are the renewal of a lost place, and a vessel to hold the memories of our ancestors. They allow us to bring our homes wherever we go; they are a symbol of our ‘hereness.’



Two structures based on old photographs of *shtetlach*.



Daydreaming of these now-extinct villages is one of my favorite things to do; I've made many images inspired by the *shtetlach* (the plural of *shtetl*). I am glad that these images resonate with other Jews in a similar way.



Houses from the *shtetl*. They are symbols of ancestral power and magic.



The *shtetl* tattoo cannot be taken away, torn down, or burned. It is with us until we meet God again.



The word *shtetl* in Yiddish.

Welcoming people into your home is one of the oldest Jewish traditions. The host would say "*Mach zich heimish*," which means "make yourself at home!". The Yiddish word at the top is *heimish*, which refers to the feelings of welcome and comfort in being at home.



New Ways of Worship was produced as a part of the Museum of Jewish Montreal's 2020-2021 contemporary art cycle *Permanence*. Though its relation to this theme could be straightforward - the permanence of the tattoo work Joey creates on the bodies of their clients - nuanced connections can be found in more resonant ways.

The creation of this zine itself is an artefact of a moment during which our collective understanding of permanence has been shaken: the Museum's original plans for a physical exhibition exploring Joey's work in Fall 2020 no longer became possible in the face of the 2020 COVID-19 crisis. *New Ways of Worship* is therefore a physical emblem of the innovation of artists and cultural workers as traditional and seemingly lasting ways of gathering around art and ideas have been adapted and reinvented - two actions which are arguably themselves at the heart of all artistic practice.



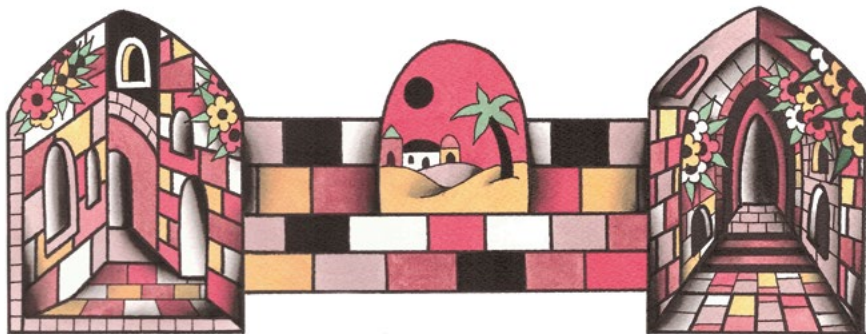
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‘If tattooing and Judaism can’t go together, then I can’t exist. I know this is what I’m supposed to do, I know it’s my purpose. Bringing other queer Jews together in community to share stories and share in a permanent marking ceremony feels like radical Jewish worship. I do this to honour my ancestors; this ritual honours Jewish bodies, Jewish cultural bonds, and Jewish history!’



Joey Ramona is a multi-disciplinary artist from Toronto, Ontario, specializing in tattooing. They have been tattooing professionally for 13 years, and graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2011 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. As well as tattooing, Joey maintains a steady painting practice, and has recently ventured

into making Judaica, like kippot and mezuzah covers. They also make zines and other DIY literature, and their work has been featured in Jewish Currents, Hey Alma, and Inside Out. @joeyramonatattooer

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