

The Curious History of The Six-Pointed Star (How The “Magen David” Became The Jewish Symbol)



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By
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The six-pointed Shield of David, now inscribed on the flag of Israel, is universally accepted as the Jewish symbol par excellence; and it is commonly assumed that the Magen David's special significance reaches back to remote antiquity, and enshrines some deep, traditionally hallowed, religious or historical meaning. Gershom Scholem, one of the great Jewish scholars of our time, here traces the obscure story of the Magen David through its long and curious career, and reveals that the true story of the symbol is quite different from that asserted by most accepted “authorities.”

THE SIX-POINTED STAR KNOWN AS THE MAGEN DAVID OR SHIELD OF DAVID, which is now emblazoned on the flag of the State of Israel, is from every point of view a cause for astonishment. Where did the symbol originate, and what is its true meaning? In the scholarly literature, as well as the popular, truth and fantasy are mingled. Writers on the subject confuse the authentic tradition of the symbol, which they do not understand very well, with their own speculations, some of which are very far-fetched indeed: in sum, each man interprets the Magen David as he pleases.

One commentator says: this is the symbol of Judaism, of the religious and intellectual universe of monotheism. Another says: it is the pure symbol of the Jewish national community. Some say: it is the symbol of the wars of the Kings of the House of David, while still others say: it is the symbol of eternal harmony and peace, the unification of opposites and their

subordination to the principle of unity. What is common to all these interpretations is that their daring is matched only by their ineptness.

The Shield of David is indeed a wondrous symbol, stimulating the intellect and arousing the passion for speculation. And whose heart is not stirred to illuminate the dark depths, each man according to the latest encyclopaedia at his disposal? Blessed be He Who succours the poor. Who has shown us wonders by His grace, and has not locked the gates of pious homiletics.

What Is the True History of This Shield of David in The Jewish Tradition?

Does it have its roots in the Jewish tradition at all? Has it always been accepted among wide or narrow circles as the symbol of Judaism, or at least as a specifically Jewish symbol? And if not, when did it begin to serve this function, and through what causes?

In trying to answer these questions, a distinction must be made between the appearance of the emblem itself—the two crossed triangles in the shape of a six-pointed star—and the history of the name, “Shield of David,” by which it is now known; for the name and the symbol were not originally linked together.

Actually the six-pointed star is not a Jewish symbol; a fortiori it could not be “the symbol of Judaism.” It has none of the criteria that mark the nature and development of the true symbol. It does not express any “idea,” it does not arouse ancient associations rooted in our experiences, and it is not a shorthand representation of an entire spiritual reality, understood immediately by the observer. It does not remind us of anything in Biblical or in rabbinic Judaism. Indeed, until the middle of the 19th century, it did not occur to any scholar or Cabalist to inquire into the secret of its Jewish meaning, and it is not mentioned in the books of the devout or in all of Hasidic literature. If it was once related to the emotions of the devout Jew, that relation was entirely founded on a sentiment of fear.

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The two-triangle star is to be found among many peoples, both as decoration and as a magical sign, although it seems to be younger than its companion, the pentagram or five-pointed star. Its occasional appearance as a decoration gives it no claim to be a “Jewish” symbol; and even as a simple decoration it is only rarely found among our antiquities.

It appears among the motifs that served to decorate ancient buildings, including the synagogue of Capernaum (2nd or 3rd century CE), but in the same synagogue the swastika is found side by side with it, and certainly no one will contend that this makes the swastika a Jewish symbol. The six-pointed star has been discovered on an ancient Hebrew (or Phoenician) seal, but together with other signs and figures, none of which can be considered a Jewish religious symbol.

It is not to be found at all in medieval synagogues or on medieval ceremonial objects, although it has been found in quite a number of medieval Christian churches—again, not as a Christian symbol but only as a decorative motif. The appearance of the symbol in Christian churches long before its appearance in our synagogues should warn the overzealous interpreters. We can easily understand Jacob Reifman, one of the great scholars of the Enlightenment, who seventy-five years ago cried out against the Shield of David as “‘slips of a stranger’ in Israel’s vineyard,” recalling the verse: “They mingled themselves with the nations and learned their works.”

Even on ancient tombstones the six-pointed star is not to be found before the 17th century, and then only in Prague. An exception is one tombstone in Taranto, in the South of Italy, on which is engraved the six-pointed star near the name of the departed, “Leon son of David”; the figure is placed just before “David,” but we cannot say whether this is more than a mere coincidence.

It is assumed that the tombstone in question does not date from later than the 6th century. This symbol does not appear again on any other tombstone of that period, but the five-pointed star, the pentagram (which competes with the six-pointed star in the Practical Cabala too), is found

on another contemporary tombstone, from Spain. The suggestion advanced by the late hacham, Moses Gaster, that Rabbi Akiba introduced the six-pointed star as a messianic symbol in Bar Kochba's war, is entirely baseless.

And as it is with R. Akiba, so is it with the 13th-century author of the Book of Splendor ("Zohar") and with the 16th century Cabalist, R. Isaac Luria ("the Ari"). There is no reference at all to the Shield of David in their works, let alone as a symbol of Judaism. In all the vast literature commonly known as the Lurianic writings, the figure of the Shield, but not its name, is found only once, in the context of talismans and amulets; even here, there is some doubt whether the entire chapter may not be a later addition, since it is missing from many versions.

Nevertheless the common Jewish textbooks are full of nonsense about the presumed origin of the general use of the Shield of David in the Lurianic Cabala. According to this "theory," the diffusion of the symbol occurred in the 16th century. One author has written (and many have quoted him): "This international symbol was diffused as a peculiarly Jewish symbol only by R. Isaac Luria, who saw in it the image of the Primal Man and the world of Emanations."

Someone else has added that "the meaning of the Shield of David, as it was expounded in the Book of Splendour [which knows absolutely nothing of it!], had a very strong influence on the powerful imagination of R. Isaac Luria, who saw in this image a wonderful representation of his vision of the world."

Things like these are copied from one book to another, and it is astonishing that no one has thought it advisable to look into the Lurianic writings themselves and try to find the symbol and an explanation for it. He would discover that the idea that Luria gave the stimulus for the diffusion of the Shield of David as the symbol of Judaism is a figment of the imagination.

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It may be asked: How did it happen that these scholars confused their own interpretations with those of Luria? The answer is clear, simple, and slightly comical.

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These scholars write that Luria, in his Tree of Life, rules that at the Passover Seder we must arrange the plate in such a fashion that its various components should form a six-pointed star: one triangle being composed of the shankbone (zro'a), egg, and bitter herb, and the other of the horseradish, parsley, and harosset.

The fact of the matter is that the Lurianic writings say something entirely different about the arrangement of the Seder plate, and there is not the slightest reference to the Shield of David: “And as for the priest, thou shalt put to thy right the zro'a, representing the Emanation of Grace; and opposite it, to the left, the egg, representing Might; and between and under them the bitter herb, representing Glory. And the harosset shall be put beneath the zro'a, representing Everlastingness; and opposite it, under the egg, the parsley, representing Majesty; and the horseradish, which is later eaten between two matzot, under the bitter herb, representing Foundation.”

We see, therefore, that these six elements of the Seder are to be arranged on the plate to represent the six Cabalistic Emanations, in the form of two triangles, one under the other, and not crossed over each other; this arrangement does not even suggest the Shield of David.

But in the 19th century, when the six-pointed star began to be widely represented on nearly every religious object, “artistic” seder plates began to be made according to the modern taste, and the arrangement set down by Luria (and mentioned also in any number of Haggadas) was arbitrarily converted to the form of a six-pointed star.

On older seder plates, especially those dating from the 18th century, there are entirely different decorative elements (the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the twelve tribes, etc.). The confused historians of the Shield of David associated the Lurianic teachings with the modern seder-plate design that began to be so popular in the 19th century; they concluded without further inquiry that both the arrangement and the form of the sign itself were to be attributed to the Lurianic Cabala. Some modern scholars have even used the writings of 18th-century Christian alchemists and occultists to “reveal” the Shield of David as a symbol of harmony and peace. But

there is absolutely no relation, in this matter, between these sources and the Cabalists, or any other Jewish religious group. The Shield of David has neither a Jewish religious “genealogy” nor a Jewish religious significance, either exoterically or esoterically; and it certainly had no place in the mystical world of the devout men of Israel.

The true history of the six-pointed star and its ascent to the rank of a symbol in Israel is bound up with what is called Practical Cabala, which is nothing more than Jewish magic, whose links with the theoretical doctrines of the Cabalists were always weak. Particularly, it is bound up with the use of amulets and talismans.

In this area a strong reciprocal influence was at work between the Jews and Gentiles, for nothing is more international than magic. Magic signs and designs pass from one people to another, just as “sacred” (i.e., incomprehensible) combinations of “names” wander back and forth, and frequently become corrupted in their wanderings.

In general, magic signs like these were called “seals” in our literature, not only because they were frequently engraved on rings—the production of magical rings of this kind was a well defined trade, and we have textbooks in this science—but also because of the common attitude that a man “seals himself” with these signs and protects himself against the assaults of evil spirits.

Two designs, both endowed with magical meaning and power, are frequently interchanged in the literature on talismans: the six-pointed star and the five-pointed star.

In practice, the transition from one to the other was very easy, and the investigator of amulets will frequently find that where one uses the five-pointed star, another uses the six-pointed star. In the beginning these designs had no special names or terms, and it is only in the Middle Ages that definite names began to be given to some of those most widely used. There is very little doubt that terms like these first became popular among the Arabs, who showed a tremendous interest in all the occult sciences,

arranging and ordering them systematically long before the Practical Cabalists thought of doing so.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that for a long time both the five-pointed and the six-pointed stars were called by one name, the “Seal of Solomon,” and that no distinction was made between them. This name is obviously related to the Jewish legend of Solomon’s dominion over the spirits, and of his ring with the Ineffable Name engraved on it.

These legends expanded and proliferated in a marked fashion during the Middle Ages, among Jews and Arabs alike, but the name, “Seal of Solomon,” apparently originated with the Arabs. This term they did not apply to any one design exclusively; they applied it to an entire series of seven seals to which they attributed extreme potency in putting to flight the forces of the Demon.

When the amulet of the seven seals was adopted by the Jews, its name was changed and other names were given to it (“the seven signs of Rab Huna,” and the like). “Seal of Solomon” was applied by Jews only to the five-and six-pointed stars. This became the usage among Christians as well, as least from approximately the 13th century. The medieval Cabalist, R. Abraham Abulafia, compares the shape of the segol (a triangularly pointed Hebrew vowel sign) to “the sign of half the Seal of King Solomon,” and the term is frequent in the Hebrew literature on amulets.

The virtue of this seal as a talisman was always to accomplish one thing and one thing alone: to serve as a shield against the evil spirits. Consequently we find it in many of the magical versions of the mezuzah, which were so widespread from the beginning of the Middle Ages till about the 14th century. Mezuzot and amulets served an identical function for the adepts of magic.

A German rabbi of the 12th century writes about the mezuzah that “it is a common practice, for the additional safety of the house, to inscribe seals and angelic names at the end of the mezuzah verses; and this is neither forbidden nor commanded, but only for additional safety.” Some of the

early rabbis actually ruled that the mezuzah “must be written” in magical style and with the additions. Maimonides denounced the extremists who went so far as to inscribe the names and seals not only in the margins and between the verses of the text comprising the mezuzah, but even between the lines within each group of verses; in his opinion, such men are “in the category of those who have no share in the world to come; for these fools were not content to nullify a commandment, but they took the great commandment of the unity of the Name, and His love and worship, and used it as though it were an amulet for their own profit.”

The seals in most of the versions of these magical mezuzot—of which some have come down to us—are nothing more than representations of the Shield of David (sometimes as many as twelve in one mezuzah; the late collector Elkan Adler once showed me such a one).

It was not, therefore, as a symbol of the monotheistic faith that the six-pointed star began its Jewish career, but as a magical talisman for protection against the evil spirits; and this remained its primary meaning among the masses of the people until about a hundred years ago. The magical mezuzah originated, without any doubt, in Babylonia or Palestine in the gaonic period (7th to 9th centuries CE, roughly), but we do not have enough evidence today to decide from which of these two countries it comes.

In the medieval literary sources that describe the method of preparing the magical mezuzah, we find no mention of the name of the seal, whether “Seal of Solomon” or “Shield of David.” In articles and textbooks we read the erroneous hypothesis to the effect that the Karaite scholar Judah Hadassi, in the middle of the 12th century, was the first to call this sign the Shield of David (in his book. *The Cluster of Camphor*); actually, this was only an addition by the 19th-century printer.

In the course of the years the magical mezuzah was forgotten, but the two forms of the “Seal of Solomon” are preserved in the magical literature of all three religions. Anyone who looks into the Renaissance books on magical practices, like *Solomon’s Key* or the literature ascribed to the legendary magician Dr. Faustus, will find them used in many connec-

tions. Though the magical mezuzah went out of use after the Middle Ages, the figures served as a talisman in other amulets, some of which attained great popularity—like the famous amulet for putting out fires, on which was written the verse—“And the people cried unto Moses; and Moses prayed unto the Lord, and the fire abated”—around the Shield of David, in the center of which was written the formula *AGLA*, the initial Hebrew letters of the verse “Thou art mighty forever, O Lord.”

Where does this title, the “Shield of David,” come from, and what does it mean? It is known that among the medieval mystics some legends were current about King David’s shield and its magical powers. The earliest source is the *Book of Desire*, which is an interpretation of the seventy magical names of Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence.

The book was composed in Germany in the 13th century, in the circle of the German Hasidim, by Eleazar of Worms or one of his disciples. In it we read how King David had a golden shield, upon which was engraved the Great Name of seventy-two names (a combination of holy names by whose virtue, the Midrash tells us, Israel was redeemed from Egypt); and beneath was engraved the “name” of Taphtephajah, one of the names of the Prince of the Presence. “And when a man is at war and his enemies attack him, let him remember it and he will be saved,” for the same book tells us that the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of Taphtephajah is the same as that of the letters of “upon the shield.”

As early as the 13th century, the design of the Seal of Solomon, already found in magical mezuzot, was substituted for the Great Name of seventy-two names.

Why this substitution occurred, I do not know, although it is possible that the seventy-two names had been written out in an arrangement like the shape of the Seal of Solomon and that afterwards, as the writing of the names became stylized, lines finally took the place of the names. In the 17th century, in certain instances, we find instructions that the Shield of David is not to be drawn in simple lines, but is to be composed of certain holy names and combinations of names.

In any event, we may say with certainty that from some such legend as this or from statements similar to that which I have quoted, the term, “Shield of David,” was developed. This is clearly proved by the place in which its first appearance is known to us. In the early years of the 14th century there was composed in Spain the Book of the Boundary, by David ben Judah the Pious, a grandson of Nachmanides.

In this book, which has been preserved only in manuscript, we twice find the design of the two crossed triangles, both times called the Shield of David, once the “Macrocosmic Shield of David” and once the “Microcosmic Shield of David.” Beneath the pictures of the Shield is written the “name,” Taphtephajah, which proves its intimate connection with the tradition concerning King David’s Shield in the Book of Desire.

In some of the manuscripts I have examined, the design has become corrupted and has been replaced by a single triangle or by the five-pointed star; but in a number of old manuscript compendia of the Practical Cabala, we find protective amulets with the picture of the Shield of David, and at its centre or by its side the same name, Taphtephajah. One of these is the book entitled The Roots of the Names, by R. Moses Zakutt, a famous encyclopaedia of the Practical Cabala, dating from the 17th century.

An altogether different tradition concerning the emblem on King David’s shield exists from the 15th century on. It was first mentioned in The Sacrifice of Isaac, by the noted Spanish preacher, R. Isaac Arama, and it taught that the emblem on King David’s shield was not the image that we know by this name, but Psalm 67 in the shape of the menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum.

The menorah pictured on the Shield of David—here is a most curious combination of the two motifs. This tradition knows nothing of the Magen David, in our sense. It must be admitted that the menorah would seem to have a better right to serve as the symbol of Judaism than the Shield of David, in its present accepted form. The writing of Psalm 67 in the shape of the menorah became very widespread after the 15th century. It was the custom to read this psalm during the seven weeks between

Passover and Shavuot, and in all the special prayer books for this period it was so written. Hence arose the custom of using this image in synagogues and other places, and the Cabalists gave its talismanic virtue unlimited praise. At the end of a booklet entitled *The Golden Menorah*, printed in Prague in the 16th century, we read:

“This psalm, together with the menorah, is an allusion to great things— And King David used to bear this psalm inscribed, pictured, and engraved on his shield, on a sheet of gold, in the shape of the menorah, when he went forth to battle, and he would meditate on its mystery, and conquer”; and similarly in many other books.

It would seem, however, that the talismanic power of the star representation of the Shield of David was more “tried and true,” so that it has won out over its representation in the form of the menorah even on the modern battlefield of Jewish symbolism.

Until the 17th century, the two terms, Shield of David and Seal of Solomon, are used indiscriminately, but slowly (perhaps under the influence of Christian usage) the second term becomes applicable only to the five-pointed star. It was at the beginning of the 18th century that the term “Shield of David” assumed the fixed meaning it bears today.

The Christians began to use this term, and we have a number of booklets from that period, in Latin and German, containing explanations of the Star of David and allegorical sermons on it, in the spirit of the alchemists. Homilies like these were entirely foreign to the spirit of the Jewish preachers of that generation.

Nonetheless, even among them there was one who began to interpret it as the symbol of the Kingdom of the House of David. Abraham Hayyim ha-Cohen, of Nikolsburg, wrote in his commentary on Psalms, which was first printed in 1750: “For there was a difference between the shields of the kings of Israel and those of the Kingdom of the House of David, in that the kings of Israel had a shield with three sides [i.e., triangular] to show that the House of David had a valid claim to the quality of king-

ship.” We have here, then, an interpretation of the symbol, not as a talisman, but as representing kingship—the Emanation of Kingship, which is the Congregation of Israel above and the Kingdom of the House of David below.

Indeed, we find a similar interpretation again in a very striking context, in which the magical career of the Shield of David reached its zenith. Here the symbol casts off its swaddling clothes of magic to rise to the vision of approaching redemption as proclaimed by the “false Messiah” of the 17th century, Sabbatai Zevi.

This critical turning point is concealed in the celebrated amulets of R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz. All his amulets include the Shield of David (the only image to be found in them), in which are inscribed formulas like “Seal” alone, or “Seal of MBD,” or “Seal of MBID,” or even “Seal of the God of Israel.”

In his defence of these amulets, R. Jonathan took refuge behind the magical meaning of the image, and he denied any symbolic value to this sign from a Jewish point of view. It was not so with those who sought to decipher his amulets. They explained his predilection for this image by its Sabbatian significance: their interpretation was that for R. Jonathan the Shield of David had become a messianic symbol.

They compared the inscriptions within the images in many of his amulets, and they discovered in them a Sabbatian reference: MBD stood for Messiah ben David, and so on. They were certainly not arbitrary in interpreting the matter in this fashion, though we must not be astonished that R. Jonathan did not admit their charges.

We find ourselves before these alternatives: if R. Jonathan was not secretly a Sabbatian, then his amulets have no symbolic meaning at all, and are nothing but magical mumbo-jumbo; if he was a Sabbatian, then we are compelled to admit that the character of the symbol in his amulets is a great innovation, and that R. Jonathan was the first to see in the Shield of David a highly meaningful symbol (although a very “private” and esoteric symbol) of a mystic vision of redemption. This was not only the Shield of David, but the Shield of the Son of David as well!

We must confess that all this is enormously stimulating to us of this generation: the modern interpretation of the Shield of David as the symbol of redemption, which even determined the name of Franz Rosenzweig's profound book. The Star of Redemption (Der Stern der Erlösung), actually first emerged from the Sabbatian prattlings of messianic redemption which was mystically alluded to in the combinations of letters in amulets!

It is greatly to be doubted whether the fathers of Zionism, when they accepted the Shield of David as the symbol of the movement for the revival of Israel, knew that perhaps in this respect also they were in tune with the secret thought of the greatest among the Sabbatian believer

Entirely different from the first, magical, root, is the second root from which the general and broader use of the Shield of David grew; that is, its official use in the seals of several Jewish communities. The "official" use of the Shield of David began in Prague and spread out from that city, in the 17th and 18th centuries, through Moravia and Austria. We do not know whether the Jews freely chose this emblem for the sign on their "flags," or whether it was thrust upon them by the Christian authorities. But even though it may have come about through compulsion and the orders of superiors, constraint became custom, and the sign came to be cherished by the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia.

In surviving notes on the contents of ancient documents concerning the Jewish community of Prague, which were destroyed by fire more than two centuries ago, it is said that the Emperor Charles IV in 1354 gave the Jews the "freedom" (privilege) "to bear a flag" as a special token of his grace to the Jews of the city.

This is no mere legend, since we later find the flag mentioned in the chronicles of Prague Jewry as a well known thing. In 1527 the authorities ordered the Jews of Prague to greet Emperor Ferdinand I, on his entry into the city, "with their flag." On this flag was a large Shield of David (not in the form of a five-pointed star, as some books would have it). If in that early period the Jews of Prague already saw in this symbol King

David's shield, according to the tradition of the German Hasidim that I have cited, we must suppose that they chose it themselves and bore it proudly on their banner. If, on the other hand, the authorities chose it for the Jews, we cannot say whether this was because of its widespread magical use or because of its decorative quality.

In the light of the unbroken tradition of this symbol among the Jews of Prague, however, there is cause for the belief that this was a deliberately chosen symbol of Jewish pride and a memento, as it were, of the days of old.

The original flag was not preserved, but a new one was made in the days of Emperor Ferdinand, and when it was damaged in the course of the years, still another was made in 1716, which is kept to this very day in the Altneuschul synagogue. Apparently the authorities of the state had no less respect for the flag than the Jews, since in 1716 they fined the elders of the community for not taking proper care of it and allowing it to be damaged!

In contradiction, we have the testimony of Hungarian historians that on the flag with which the Jews of Ofen greeted King Matthias of Hungary in 1476 there were two five-pointed stars, but not the six-pointed Shield of David. Here certainly was no recognition of the unique quality of the six-pointed Shield of David as a representation of the Congregation of Israel before the world.

Even until the beginning of the 17th century, the two stars were still vying with each other in Prague, though by this time the use of the term, "Shield of David," had become current among the Jews of Prague. When the emperor, in 1622, granted a coat-of-arms to Jacob Bassevi, alias von Treuenfeld, the first Jew in Prague and all the Empire to be ennobled, his escutcheon bore three five-pointed stars, one beneath the other in a diagonal line, for the apparent purpose of serving as a clue to his Jewishness.

On the other hand, on the tombstone of the historian David Cans, who died in 1613, there is a six-pointed Shield of David, just as his last book,

published a year before his death, is called by this name. From the old banner, the six-pointed star seems to have been taken over into the seal of the Jewish community.

We find it as the main ornament on the title page of the first Hebrew book printed in Prague, on Hannukah in 1512; in another book printed in Prague in 1522, it is found together with the city's coat of arms, thereby indicating its quasiofficial status. When, in 1627, Emperor Ferdinand II approved again the old seal of the Prague community, outside the six sides of the star was spelled out, M-a-G-e-N D-a-V-i-D, with one consonant in each of the six spaces.

From then on the six-pointed Shield of David is used communally in a number of different places in Prague: on the seals of societies and individuals, on tombstones, on synagogue structures and the ironwork of the synagogue bimah, on the tower of the Jewish council's building.

From Prague this official use of the symbol spread out. In 1655 it is found on the seal of the Viennese community, and in 1690 on the seal of the community of Kremsier, in Moravia. On the wall of the old synagogue of the community of Budweis (Southern Bohemia), which was abandoned by the Jews in 1641, there are representations of Shields of David alternating with roses; apparently this is the oldest synagogue outside of Prague on which this symbol is to be found. In his youth, R. Jonathan Eybeschuetz might have been able to see it on the seal of the community of Eybeschuetz.

A number of communities in Moravia used as a seal the Shield of David alone, with the addition of the name of the community. Others had on their seals a lion holding the Shield of David, like the community of Weiskirchen at the beginning of the 18th century. In very isolated instances the figure of the Shield of David was used in southern Germany also, doubtless under the influence of the Prague community.

In other countries, we do not generally find the Shield of David in use before the beginning of the 19th century, either on community seals, or on the curtains of the Ark, or on Torah mantles. In books printed outside

of Prague, it was used as a printer's mark only by the printers of the Foa family, and appears in their books from 1551 to the beginning of the 19th century. Their family coat-of-arms has a palm-tree, among the leaves of which a Shield of David is fixed, grasped by two lions. No other printer used it and it is clear that the emblem had no "Jewish" meaning. Printers who imitated the Foa mark at the beginning of the 18th century omitted the Shield of David and retained only the palm-tree and the two lions.

Apparently the prime motive for the remarkably wide diffusion of the Shield of David in the 19th century was the desire to imitate Christianity: the Jews of the era of Emancipation, seeing the "symbol of Christianity" everywhere, sought a "symbol of Judaism." If Judaism is the "Mosaic religion," why should it not properly have a striking and simple sign of recognition, like the other religions?

The new emancipated Jews desired to erect above the walls of the synagogue something resembling the symbol of the cross, and this is what led to the ascendancy of the Shield of David in the 19th century, and helped it to become widely used on ceremonial objects as well. It was from the enlightened West that the symbol of Jewishness passed to Poland and Russia.

The use of amulets was still very widespread, especially in the East, and the devout did not trouble themselves with complex thoughts; the mimicry of Christianity inherent in the choice of the symbol was confused with its talismanic and magical properties, to which they had become accustomed—especially the simple folk—from countless amulets. Thenceforth the Shield of David began to be introduced everywhere—on the walls, on the windows and roofs of synagogues, on tombstones and medals—as though it were from Sinai.

In their pursuit of a useful symbol and in their impulse toward mimicry, it did not occur to the builders of the new synagogues that intrinsically the symbol did not stand for anything, or for very little, of the world of Judaism, and consequently that it did not have the deep roots, drenched in meaning, of the cross in the religious world of Christianity. As late as

1854, G. Wolf wrote in Vienna that he was very well acquainted with the spirit of the Jews of Moravia, and that the whole of the pious Jew's belief in the Shield of David was that it would protect him against any malevolent assault by his enemies; he did not say that it had a value as a symbol of that pious Jew's Judaism, in the sense that the cross had religious meaning for the Christian.

The upshot of the matter is this: in the very days of its greatest popularity the Shield of David was a meaningless symbol of Judaism; and the Judaism of those days, in turn, tended to be meaningless. It required more than preachers' sermons, however admirable in intent, to breathe life into a symbol. The successful and empty career of the Shield of David during the 19th century is in some measure a token of the Jewish decadence of that century.

Then the Zionists came, seeking to restore the ancient glories—or more correctly, to change the face of their people. When they chose it as a symbol for Zionism at the Basle Congress of 1897, the Shield of David was possessed of two virtues that met the requirements of men in quest of a symbol: on the one hand, its wide diffusion during the previous century—its appearance on every new synagogue, on the stationery of many charitable organizations, etc.—had made it known to everybody; and on the other, it was not explicitly identified with a religious association in the consciousness of their contemporaries. This lack became its virtue. The symbol did not arouse memories of the past: it could be filled with hope for the future.

But even Zionism did not do so much to confer the sacredness of a true symbol on the Shield of David as did that mad dictator who made of it a badge of shame for millions of our people, who compelled them to wear it publicly on their clothing as the badge of exclusion and of eventual extermination.

Under this sign they moved along the road of horror and degradation, struggle and heroism. If there be such a thing as a soil that grows meaning for symbols, this is it. Some have said: the sign under which they went to destruction and to the gas chambers deserves to be discarded for a sign

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that will signify life. But it is also possible to think in the opposite fashion: the sign that in our days was sanctified by suffering and torture has won its right to be the sign that will light up the road of construction and life. “The going down is the prelude to the raising up”; where it was humbled, there will you find it exalted.

1 “God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us”



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