

# Shlom Bayyit

## Reminding Us of Our Jewishness



Consider the tallit, tefillin and mezuzah. There's the yarmulke and Chai – the charm that signifies “life.” Symbols and garb...they play a significant role in our ritual and in our Jewishness.

The Menorah, the seven branched candelabrum, served as our predominant symbol from biblical to post - Renaissance time. It has since been replaced by that most familiar reminder of our Jewishness - the one we see on everything from gravestones to jewelry – the **Magen David**. Literally translated to mean the “Shield of David” but more commonly referred to as the “Star of David,” its origins are unclear. Yet there is little evidence that, in fact, it is related to King David, the great biblical warrior and writer of Psalms.

### Magen David – a bit of history:

- In early rabbinic literature it is rarely mentioned and in art rarely observed... when it is, forgery is often suspected.
- It has been identified on a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century stone from a synagogue arch found in Galilee.
- A 1307 manuscript Tanakh from Toledo, Spain displays a **Magen David**.
- As a printers' mark on prayer books, it appeared in Prague, Italy and Holland during the 15<sup>th</sup> century
- In 17<sup>th</sup> century Vienna it was placed outside synagogues to identify Jewish houses of worship.
- After the French Revolution, emancipated French Jews chose to display this symbol to identify themselves.
- In 1897 the **Magen David** was adopted as the official emblem of the Zionist Movement.
- By decree in 1939, the Nazis demanded that all *Juden* above the age of 6 wear a yellow cloth with an imprinted **Magen David** as a form of Jewish identification (and humiliation).

- In 1948, the newly formed State of Israel included the **Magen David** on its flag.
- The Israeli Red Cross identifies itself as Magen David Adom (The Red Star of David)

### Magen David - the symbolism behind the symbol:

- Before it was adopted by the Jewish people, the hexagram was used among many cultures as a decorative design or as a magical symbol.
- In Hebrew **Magen David** is spelled with 2 *Dalet's*. In ancient times the D's were drawn as triangles (like the Greek, Delta). Perhaps the symbol, created for a family crest or ornament, was formed by flipping and juxtaposing these 2 letters.
- Although not mentioned in the Zohar, the Kabbalists began to attribute magical significance to the symbol. For Jewish mystics, the hexagram represented the 6 directions of space – up, down, north, south, east, west and a center that is influenced by all these spiritual forces.
- Franz Rosensweig, in 1912, in his seminal work Star of Redemption proposed deep theological significance to the **Magen David** as he framed his philosophy of Judaism. Some scholars interpret the upturned triangle to represent our striving toward the world of God – the spiritual and holy, and the down turned triangle as a representation of our connection with the real world – the secular and earthly. Both triangles are intertwined and inseparable in the **Magen David**– as is the striving of the Jewish people to bring these worlds together.

The Israeli flag is a proud symbol of our return to our homeland. When asked to describe the process of envisioning the flag, David Wolffsohn, who attended the First Zionist Congress of 1897, remarked, “When we see the Israeli flag, we remember the faith and the prayers of the many generations of Jews who longed for the return to their homeland.” That flag includes blue stripes on a white background, reminiscent of the tallit, and front and center...the **Magen David**.