Magen David - Star of David

The Magen David (Heb. מָגֵן דָּוִד; shield of David more commonly known as the Star of David), the symbol most commonly associated with Judaism today, is the hexagram or six-pointed star formed by two equilateral triangles which have the same center and are placed in opposite directions.

From as early as the Bronze Age it was used – possibly as an ornament and possibly as a magical sign – in many civilizations and in regions as far apart as Mesopotamia and Britain. Iron Age examples are known from India and from the Iberian peninsula prior to the Roman conquest. Occasionally it appears on Jewish artefacts, such as lamps and seals, but without having any special and recognizable significance. The oldest undisputed example is on a seal from the seventh century B.C.E. found in Sidon and belonging to one Joshua b. Asayahu. In the Second Temple period, the hexagram was often used by Jews and non-Jews alike alongside the pentagram (the five-pointed star), and in the synagogue of Capernaum (second or third century C.E.) it is found side by side with the pentagram and the swastika on a frieze. There is no reason to assume that it was used for any purposes other than decorative. Theories interpreting it as a planetary sign of Saturn and connecting it with the holy stone in the pre-Davidic sanctuary in Jerusalem (Hildegard Lewy, in *Archiv Orientální*, vol. 18, 1950, 330–65) are purely speculative. Neither in the magical papyri nor in the oldest sources of Jewish *magic does the hexagram appear, but it began to figure as a magical sign from the early Middle Ages. Among Jewish emblems from Hellenistic times (discussed in E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*), both hexagram and pentagram are missing.

The ornamental use of the hexagram continued in the Middle Ages, especially in Muslim and Christian countries. The kings of Navarre used it on their seals (10th and 11th centuries) and (like the pentagram) it was frequently employed on notarial signs in Spain, France, Denmark, and Germany, by Christian and Jewish notaries alike. Sometimes drawn with slightly curved lines, it appears in early Byzantine and many medieval European churches, as, for example, on a stone from an early church in Tiberias (preserved in the Municipal Museum) and on the entrance to the Cathedrals of Burgos, Valencia, and Lerida. Examples are also found on objects used in the church, sometimes in a slanted position; as on the marble bishop's throne (c. 1266) in the Cathedral of Anagni. Probably in imitation of church usage – and certainly not as a specifically Jewish symbol – the hexagram is found on some synagogues from the later Middle Ages, for example, in Hamelin (Germany, c. 1280) and Budweis (Bohemia, probably 14th century). In Arab sources the hexagram, along with other geometrical ornaments, was widely used under the designation "seal of Solomon," a term which was also taken over by many Jewish groups. This name connects the hexagram with early Christian, possibly Judeo-Christian magic, such as the Greek magical work *The Testament of Solomon*. It is not clear in which period the hexagram was engraved on the seal or ring of Solomon,

mentioned in the Talmud (Git. 68a–b) as a sign of his dominion over the demons, instead of the name of G-d, which originally appeared. However, this happened in Christian circles where Byzantine amulets of the sixth century already use the "seal of Solomon" as the name of the hexagram. In many medieval Hebrew manuscripts elaborate designs of the hexagram are to be found, without its being given any name. The origin of this use can be clearly traced to Bible manuscripts from Muslim countries (a specimen is shown in Gunzburg and Stassoff, *L'ornement hèbraïque* (1905), pl. 8, 15). From the 13th century onward it is found in Hebrew Bible manuscripts from Germany and Spain. Sometimes parts of the masorah are written in the form of a hexagram; sometimes it is simply used, in a more or less elaborate form, as an ornament. Richly adorned specimens from manuscripts in Oxford and Paris have been reproduced by C. Roth, *Sefarad*, 12, 1952, p. 356, pl. II, and in the catalog of the exhibition "Synagoga," Recklinghausen, 1960, pl. B. 4.

In Arabic magic the "seal of Solomon" was widely used, but at first its use in Jewish circles was restricted to relatively rare cases. Even then, the hexagram and pentagram were easily interchangeable and the name was applied to both figures. As a talisman, it was common in many of the magical versions of the *mezuzah* which were widespread between the tenth and 14th centuries. Frequently, the magical additions to the traditional text of the *mezuzah* contained samples of the hexagram, sometimes as many as 12. In magical Hebrew manuscripts of the later Middle Ages, the hexagram was used for certain amulets, among which one for putting out fires attained great popularity (see Heinrich Loewe, *Juedischer Feuersegen*, 1930).

The notion of a shield of David with magical powers was originally unconnected with the sign. It is difficult to say whether the notion arose in Islam, where the Koran sees David as the first to make protective arms, or from inner traditions of Jewish magic. From earlier times there is only one instance connecting the hexagram with the name David on a sixth-century tombstone from Taranto, southern Italy. There seems to have been some special reason for putting the hexagram before the name of the deceased. The oldest text mentioning a shield of David is contained in an explanation of a magical "alphabet of the angel *Metatron" which stems from the geonic period and was current among the *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz of the 12th century. But here it was the holy Name of 72 names which was said to have been engraved on this protective shield, together with the name MKBY, which the tradition of the magicians connected with Judah Maccabee. In cognate sources this tradition was much embellished. The name of the angel Taftafiyyah, one of the names of Metatron, was added to the 72 holy names, and indeed an amulet in the form of a hexagram with this one name became one of the most widespread protective charms in many medieval and later manuscripts. (From c. 1500 onward the name *Shaddai* was often substituted for the purely magical one.) This must have provided the transition to the use of the term "*magen David*" for the sign. What caused the substitution of the figure instead of the "great name of 72 names" is not clear, but in the 16th century instructions can still be found stating that the shield of David should not be drawn in simple lines but must be composed of certain holy names and their combinations, after the pattern of those biblical manuscripts where the lines were composed of the text of the masorah. The oldest known witness to the usage of the term is the kabbalistic *Sefer ha-Gevul*, written by a grandson of Naḥmanides in the early 14th century. The hexagram occurs there twice, both times called "*magen David*" and containing the same magical name as in the aforementioned amulet, demonstrating its direct connection with the magical tradition. According to other traditions, mentioned

in Isaac Arama's *akedah Yiẓḥak*, the emblem of David's shield was not the image known by this name today, but Psalm 67 in the shape of the *menorah*. This became a widespread custom and the "*menorah* Psalm" was considered a talisman of great power. A booklet from the 16th century says: "King David used to bear this psalm inscribed, pictured, and engraved on his shield, in the shape of the *menorah*, when he went forth to battle, and he would meditate on its mystery and conquer."

Between 1300 and 1700 the two terms, shield of David and seal of Solomon, are used indiscriminately, predominantly in magical texts, but slowly the former gained ascendancy. It was also used, from 1492, as a printers' sign, especially in books printed in Prague in the first half of the 16th century and in the books printed by the Foa family in Italy and Holland, who incorporated it in their coat of arms. Several Italian Jewish families followed their example between 1660 and 1770. All these usages had as yet no general Jewish connotation. The official use of the shield of David can be traced to Prague, from where it spread in the 17th and 18th centuries through Moravia and Austria and later to southern Germany and Holland. In 1354, Charles IV granted the Prague community the privilege of bearing its own flag – later called in documents "King David's flag" – on which the hexagram was depicted. It therefore became an official emblem, probably chosen because of its significance as a symbol of the days of old when King David, as it were, wore it on his shield. This explains its wide use in Prague, in synagogues, on the official seal of the community, on printed books, and on other objects. Here it was always called *magen David*. Its use on the tombstone (1613) of David Gans, the astronomer and historian, was still exceptional, obviously in reference to the title of his last work *Magen David*. Except for one tombstone in Bordeaux (c. 1726), no other example of its being used on tombstones is known before the end of the 18th century. A curious parallel to the development in Prague is the one case of a representation of the Synagogue as an allegorical figure, holding a flag bearing the *magen David* in a 14th-century Catalan manuscript of the *Breviar d'amor* by Matfre d'Ermengaud (Ms. of Yates Thompson 31 in the British Museum).

The symbol early moved to other communities. Its use in Budweis has been mentioned above, and the Vienna community used it on its seal in 1655. In the following year it is found on a stone marking the boundary between the Jewish and the Christian quarters of Vienna (according to P. Diamant) or between the Jewish quarter and the Carmelite monastery (according to Max Grunwald). Apparently it was an officially recognized symbol. When the Viennese Jews were expelled in 1670 they took the symbol to many of their new habitats, especially in Moravia, but also to the Ashkenazi community of Amsterdam, where it was used from 1671, first on a medallion permitting entrance to the graveyard. Later it became part of the community's seal. Curiously enough, its migration eastward was much slower. It never occurs on official seals, but here and there during the 17th and 18th centuries it appears as an ornament on objects for use in synagogues and on wood carvings over the Torah shrine (first in Volpa, near Grodno, 1643).

The use of the hexagram as an alchemical symbol denoting the harmony between the antagonistic elements of water and fire became current in the later 17th century, but this had no influence in Jewish circles. Many alchemists, too, began calling it the shield of David (traceable since 1724). But another symbolism sprang up in kabbalistic circles, where the "shield of David" became the "shield of the son of David," the Messiah. Whether this usage was current in Orthodox circles too is not certain, though not impossible. The two kabbalists who testify to it, Isaiah the son of Joel Ba'al Shem (Jacob Emden, *Torat ha-Kena'ot*, p. 128) and Abraham Ḥayyim Kohenfrom Nikolsburg, combine the two interpretations. But there

is no doubt that this messianic interpretation of the sign was current among the followers of Shabbetai Ẓevi. The famous amulets given by Jonathan Eybeschuetz in Metz and Hamburg, which have no convincing interpretation other than a Shabbatean one, have throughout a shield of David designated as "seal of MBD" (Messiah b. David), "seal of the G-d of Israel," etc. The shield of David was transformed into a secret symbol of the Shabbatean vision of redemption, although this interpretation remained an esoteric one, not to be published.

The prime motive behind the wide diffusion of the sign in the 19th century was the desire to imitate Christianity. The Jews looked for a striking and simple sign which would "symbolize" Judaism in the same way as the cross symbolizes Christianity. This led to the ascendancy of the *magen David* in official use, on ritual objects and in many other ways. From central and Western Europe it made its way to Eastern Europe and to Oriental Jewry. Almost every synagogue bore it; innumerable communities, and private and charitable organizations stamped it on their seals and letterheads. Whereas during the 18th century its use on ritual objects was still very restricted – a good specimen is a plate for *maẓẓot* (1770), reproduced on the title page of *Monumenta Judaica*, catalog of a Jewish exposition in Cologne, 1963 – it now became most popular. By 1799 it had already appeared as a specific Jewish sign in a satirical antisemitic engraving (A. Rubens, *Jewish Iconography,* no. 1611); in 1822 it was used on the Rothschild family coat of arms when they were raised to the nobility by the Austrian emperor; and from 1840 Heinrich Heine signed his correspondence from Paris in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* with a *magen David* instead of his name, a remarkable indication of his Jewish identification in spite of his conversion. From such general use it was taken over by the Zionist movement. The very first issue of *Die Welt*, Herzl's Zionist journal, bore it as its emblem. The *magen David* became the symbol of new hopes and a new future for the Jewish people, and Franz Rosenzweig also interpreted it in *Der Stern der Erloesung* (1921) as summing up his philosophical ideas about the meaning of Judaism and the relationships between G-d, men, and the world. When the Nazis used it as a badge of shame which was to accompany millions on their way to death it took on a new dimension of depth, uniting suffering and hope. While the State of Israel, in its search for Jewish authenticity, chose as its emblem the *menorah*, a much older Jewish symbol, the *Magen David* was maintained on the national (formerly Zionist) flag, and is widely used in Jewish life.