

# THE HISTORY AND USE OF THE FLAG OF ISRAEL

John Hall

---

Since the Jewish people were expelled from Jerusalem and the city levelled to the ground by the troops of Titus in 70 AD, they have been scattered throughout the world, being minorities in the countries in which they settled. However they continued to stay together in groups and "ghettos", partly for political and partly for sociological reasons, often using ancient symbols to identify themselves.

One such example is the flag of the **Judenschaft** of Prague in 1356. The main emblem is the **Magen David**, often known as the star of David. This emblem had long been associated with King David and is used on the cloth that covers his tomb in Jerusalem.

In the nineteenth century the idea of returning to the Jewish Homeland began to spread amongst the better-off and intellectual Jews. In 1860 in the Protocol of the Elders of Zion a flag was envisaged for the Jews of the universe. It was to contain the tablets of Moses above a pair of clasped hands all set upon a globe. Unfortunately no colours are mentioned and nothing appears to have happened to the design.

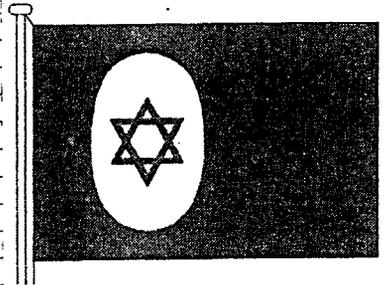
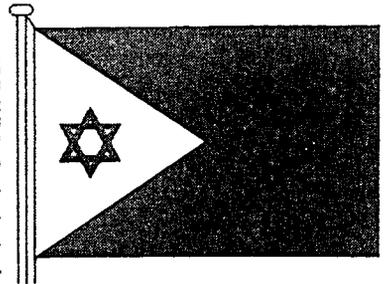
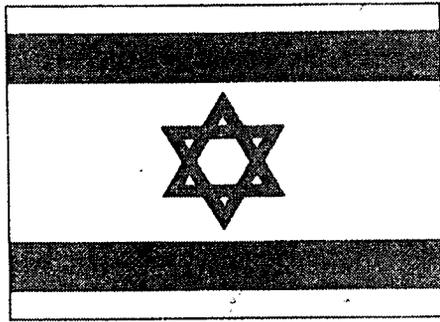
The real birth of the Israeli flag can be traced to July 1891 when at the Zion Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, Theodor Herzl introduced a flag very similar to that used by Israel today, the difference being that it contained seven gold Magen Davids between the stripes. Herzl introduced the flag saying:

*We have no flag, we need one. When one wishes to lead a great many men, a symbol must be raised above their heads.*

This flag was amended by probably the true father of the Israeli flag, David Wolfsohn, who removed the seven gold Magen Davids, replacing them with just one in blue. The design itself is a combination of the Magen David with the talith (prayer shawl) used by Jews to cover their head during prayer.

In 1897 Isaac Harris, the Boston delegate to the World Zionist Congress in Basel, proposed this design as a flag for Zionism. Other groups had come up with similar ideas. The flag was adopted and rapidly began to gain popularity amongst the Jewish community.

In 1944 the Jewish Brigade was formed as part of the British 8th Army, this being the first organised Jewish fighting force since 70 AD. The badge for the brigade was based very closely on the 1897 flag. It had a gold Magen David between two vertical blue stripes.

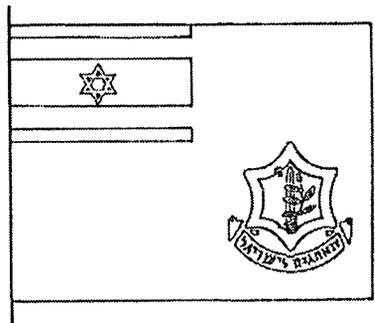


*Above and top: The emblem and flag of Israel.*

*Top and above: The naval and civil ensigns with the Star of David on a triangle and oval respectively.*



*Israel: President*



*Israel: Defence Force*

In 1948 the British withdrew from the then Palestine and on 14 May 1948 the Jewish state of Israel was proclaimed with the raising of the Zionist flag, which became the national flag of the new nation.

With the creation of the State of Israel, the new state followed the British practice of having different ensigns and flags to supplement the national flag.

The first flag to be created by the new state was the merchant flag - blue with a white oval set towards the hoist and blue Magen David set therein.

The Israeli navy uses another blue flag but with a white triangle at the hoist containing a blue Magen David.

The Israeli air force uses a modified national flag, with a light blue field, the Air Force target in the centre between two stripes in dark blue and white. This flag appears to have developed out of the national flag and a combination of the British style air ensigns in light blue. The earlier version was much more like the national flag than the present flag which dates from 1956.

The Israeli Defence Force uses a light blue flag with the national flag in the canton and a badge in the lower fly. This badge is a sword with an olive leaf wrapped around it, and is seen frequently throughout Israel in place of the national arms. It is used in rank flags and on the Israeli ID card.

Often when official flags are being flown on government buildings the pole is painted with blue and white stripes. One example is the residence of the military governor of Jericho. Almost all official buildings appear to have two flagstaffs - one to fly the national flag and the other to fly the department or personal flag of the occupier.

This is not to say that the Magen David is the only emblem used by Israel. The other major one is the **Menorah** - the seven branched candlestick, the original of which stood in the Temple until its destruction. The national Menorah stands outside the Knesset (Parliament) in Jerusalem, a presentation to Israel by the British Government.

The **menorah** set between two olive branches and the word **Israel** in Hebrew, all in white reversed out of a blue background, serves as the national arms of Israel. This combination fulfils the prophecy of Zachariah (4,2-3)

*a lampstand made of gold; on the top, a bowl full of oil and seven wicks, and two olive trees beside the lamp, one on each side.*

This must be the first and probably only example of vexillological prophecy.

As with many small countries Israel seems to have made up for its small size by having a large number of official flags for use by the armed forces and government officials.

The President has three standards, one for civilian use, one for military use, and one for use at sea. The civilian presidential standard is a banner of the national arms surrounded by a white border on all four sides. It is flown from his residence in West Jerusalem. For military use, however, the white border along the hoist is omitted. As of IDF Order 33/0402 of 15 June 1985, at sea the presidential standard has a yellow border on all four sides, and seems to have replaced the standard that was previously used. As illustrated, this had been the naval ensign with a gold stripe at the top and the bottom and with a small gold anchor in the top fly.

Most of the other rank flags use one of three forms, either a blue flag, with the national flag in the canton, or the naval ensign or a red version of the naval ensign, all amended by adding a badge to the lower fly.

The Prime Minister uses the first version with the national flag in arms in gold in the fly.

The Minister of Defence uses a badge of the national arms on top of crossed swords and an olive branch.

The Chief of the General Staff uses the IDF flag emblem surrounded by a laurel wreath.

The Israeli police use a plain blue flag With a star and laurel leaf emblem reversed out in white. It is flown on all police stations along with the national flag. The badge itself is the cap badge of the police and the army.

Whilst I was in Israel, the only civic flag that I saw was that of Jerusalem, which has the city arms in yellow and blue between two blue strips, set out as on the national flag. One example of the arms can be seen on the Welcome to Jerusalem sign. The shield itself contains a blue lion rampant between two blue laurel branches.

Finally, for obvious reasons, the symbols of the Red Cross or Red Crescent are not appropriate in Israel. When Israel signed the Geneva Convention in 1948 it reserved the right to use a red Magen David, although this has not been recognised by the International Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, mainly because of pressure from the Arab States. Officially at least, Israel should use a red cross but the red Magen David reigns supreme. It is seen on all medical establishments although whilst in old Jerusalem I did see an ambulance using a cross and crescent design laid out as shown here.