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Menorah

One of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith is the menorah, a seven-branched candelabrum used in the [Temple](#). The [kohanim](#) lit the menorah in the Sanctuary every evening and cleaned it out every morning, replacing the wicks and putting fresh olive oil into the cups. The illustration at left is based on instructions for construction of the menorah found in Ex. 25:31-40.

It has been said that the menorah is a symbol of the [nation](#) of Israel and our mission to be "a light unto the nations." (Isaiah 42:6). The sages emphasize that light is not a violent force; Israel is to accomplish its mission by setting an example, not by using force. This idea is highlighted in the vision in Zechariah 4:1-6. Zechariah sees a menorah, and [G-d](#) explains: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit."

The lamp stand in today's synagogues, called the ner tamid (lit. the continual light, usually translated as the eternal flame), symbolizes the menorah.

The nine-branched menorah used on [Chanukkah](#) is commonly patterned after this menorah, because Chanukkah commemorates the miracle that a day's worth of oil for this menorah lasted eight days.



Magen David

The Magen David (shield of David, or as it is more commonly known, the Star of David) is the symbol most commonly associated with Judaism today, but it is actually a relatively new Jewish symbol. It is supposed to represent the shape of King David's shield (or perhaps the emblem on it), but there is really no support for that claim in any early rabbinic literature. In fact, the symbol is so rare in early Jewish literature and artwork that art dealers suspect forgery if they find the symbol in early works.

Scholars such as Franz Rosenzweig have attributed deep theological significance to the symbol. For example, some note that the top triangle strives upward, toward G-d, while the lower triangle strives downward, toward the real world. Some note that the intertwining makes the triangles inseparable, like the [Jewish people](#). Some say that the three sides represent the three types of Jews: [Kohanim](#), [Levites](#) and Israel. Some note that there are actually 12 sides (3 exterior and 3 interior on each triangle), representing the 12 tribes. While these theories are theologically interesting, they have little basis in historical fact.

The symbol of intertwined equilateral triangles is a common one in the Middle East and North Africa, and is thought to bring good luck. It appears occasionally in early Jewish artwork, but never as an exclusively Jewish symbol. The nearest thing to an "official" Jewish symbol at the time was the [menorah](#).

In the middle ages, Jews often were required to wear badges to identify themselves as Jews, much as they were in Nazi Germany, but these Jewish badges were not always the familiar Magen David. For example, a fifteenth century painting by Nuno Goncalves features a [rabbi](#) wearing a six-pointed badge that looks more or less like an asterisk.

In the 17th century, it became a popular practice to put Magen Davids on the outside of [synagogues](#), to identify them as Jewish houses of worship in much the same way that a cross identified a Christian house of worship; however, I have never seen any explanation of why this symbol was chosen, rather than some other symbol.



The Magen David gained popularity as a symbol of Judaism when it was adopted as the emblem of the [Zionist](#) movement in 1897, but the symbol continued to be controversial for many years afterward. When the modern state of [Israel](#) was founded, there was much debate over whether this symbol should be used on the flag.

Today, the Magen David is a universally recognized symbol of Jewry. It appears on the flag of the state of Israel, and the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross is known as the Red Magen David.



Chai

This symbol, commonly seen on necklaces and other jewelry and ornaments, is simply the Hebrew word Chai (living), with the two Hebrew letters Chet and Yod attached to each other. Some say it refers to the Living [G-d](#). Judaism as a religion is very focused on life, and the word chai has great significance. The typical Jewish toast is l'chayim (to life). Gifts to charity are routinely given in multiples of 18 (the numeric value of the word Chai).