

PROMOTED CONTENT

Tribal identity: the meaning of the Jewish flag

Controversial flag? Learn more about the unusual and surprising history of the modern flag of Israel

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Israel Celebrates 67

Israel celebrates 67 (photo: Courtesy)

Today, while a flag is merely a piece of cloth used to identify and distinguish countries and nations, the unique choice of colors, design and symbols actually make it a work of art embedded with deep cultural significance.

In fact, the Jewish people had multiple flags for thousands of years. The Torah (Num. 2:2) describes how the Israelites encamped in the wilderness, “each man by his banner, according to the insignia of his ancestor’s house....” (Numbers 2:2).

According to the Midrash Rabbah (Numbers 2:7), this meant that each tribe had a flag adorned with its tribe’s unique color and symbol. Some referred to historical occurrences (Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Joseph) while others reflected Jacob’s blessings (Judah, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher and Benjamin). Each one, however, represented that tribe’s particular journey, the specific energy which he was to manifest in this world. In fact, our Sages teach that the Red sea split into twelve paths, providing a separate path for each of the twelve tribes, a reality which was manifest until about 70 CE and the exile from the Land.

Many years later, with the rise of modern Zionism, a **new flag** was necessary, one symbolic of the re-building and re-unification of the Jewish people in their Land. On November 29, 1947, when the Jews of Israel poured into the streets to celebrate the United Nations partition resolution, the blue hexagram (Star of David) on a white background, between two blue horizontal stripes was held as this unifying symbol, becoming the official state flag the following year. Why?

Colors

White: Peace, purity and innocence

Blue: Vigilance, perseverance, justice, prosperity and freedom

Symbols

Star of David

The choice of the Star of David stems from the late 18th century, when it began to emerge as a widespread symbol of Jewish identity. However, long before then, the various interpretations of two interlocked triangles made it the perfect choice, including the cycles of nature, harmonization of the spiritual and physical, and the symbiotic relationship between G-d and man, while its 12 sides represent the 12 tribes of Israel, whose ingathering into their ancestral homeland allows the ultimate expression of all the rest.

Blue Stripes

Meanwhile, the stripes on the Zionist flag were inspired by those on the traditional prayer shawl, while the blue color is a reference to the techelet of the fringes, the sky-blue dye extracted from the sea dwelling chilazon. Techelet is considered to have great spiritual power, as Rabbi Meir said: "Whoever observes the mitzvah of tzitzit is considered as if he greeted the Divine Presence, for techelet resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles God's holy throne."

Today, with its blue stripes, reflecting Jewish spirituality and independence in the Land of Israel, together with the Star of David, the symbol of re-birth, harmony, relationship and unity, the flag of Israel represents the continuation of the unique journey and destiny of the Jewish people in their Land, the splitting of the sea into one path (as seen on the flag), to be a true light unto the nations.