

A Snapshot of Religious Symbolism in Israel

by  
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To Nick, who makes sure I smile every day.

To my mom, sister, grandma, and stepdad, for knowing I can achieve anything I dream  
before I knew it myself.

Thank you all for believing in me.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of my thesis is to showcase the different types of religious symbolism on display in Israel, a state founded on secular beliefs. I used my knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to seek out and photograph the use of religious symbolism in different areas of Israel. I began my thesis by hypothesizing that I would find an abundance of religious symbolism in Israel. While that was true in some cases, mostly in Judaism, I was surprised at the lack of symbolism in other cases, particularly Islam. After post-trip reflection, I began sorting through the photographs I took while on the trip and decided which photos would be best to use to support my discoveries about religious symbolism in Israel. I also used my travel journal to reflect upon the thoughts I had about the symbolism I encountered as well as the knowledge I gained while in Israel.

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## **Introduction**

Traveling abroad is supposed to be a life changing experience. However, in today's culture of mass media and "Instagram travel," many choose to travel to places that only interest them because of the amazing photographs they can take there. I decided I wanted to explore the more hidden depths of a location, somewhere unlike any other location I had previously traveled. I chose to travel to Israel because I was interested in exploring religion and learning more about the symbols that each religion uses as its own. I could not think of a better place in which to do so. Israel is an interesting mixture of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, particularly in Jerusalem, one of the holiest cities to all three religions. As an American, I had learned only what I had the most convenient access to in regard to the three religions and their activity within Israel. Constant conflict was the first thing that came to mind; however, I quickly learned that the religions within Israel represent much more than conflict, particularly through their use or lack of use of religious symbolism.

I studied Israeli politics on a two-week long study abroad program that began on July 16, 2019 and ended on July 29, 2019. Before leaving for Israel, I read several books by various authors about Israel, its founding, and the religions residing within. Before my departure, I was a little uncertain about what I may or may not find regarding symbolism while in Israel. My research did not reveal much to me, and I began to question whether or not I would be able to get the photos I needed to complete my thesis. However, once I was in Israel and began to photograph the different symbols I found, I quickly realized that I would have more than enough to complete my thesis.

I gathered around 120 photographs, mostly of Jewish symbols with a good mixture of Christian symbolism as well. Be that as it may, I only found three instances of Islamic symbolism while in Israel. The most important finding is that there is an abundance of Jewish religious symbolism in Israel, followed by Christian symbolism. While there was plenty to choose from regarding those religions' symbols, there was not much in regard to symbols of Islam. I reached out to a friend from Pakistan, Muneeb Makhdoom, and interviewed him about the lack of religious symbolism in Islam. The short interview I conducted with him, included in this thesis, revealed that many Muslims do not believe in the use of religious symbols. I also read an article titled "Crescent Moon: Symbol of Islam?" by Tracy Pearson. This article expressed the belief, or lack thereof, among Muslims regarding the crescent moon as a religiously important symbol.

In addition to educating others about the use of religious symbolism in Israel, I hope this thesis encourages other students to step out of the norm and travel to places that might intimidate them in order to become more educated about those who may have different beliefs and identities. I also hope it encourages travelers to take in the symbolism and iconography that they may not usually notice when traveling.



## **What is Religious Symbolism?**

Religious symbolism can be defined in many different ways. First, the term “symbol” has to be defined. “In the 20th century, the theological background to this conception of the “symbol” has led to polarized reactions between those who see its (the symbol’s) religiously charged history as a boon and those who wish to eradicate it from theoretical discourse for the very same reason” (Whistler, 2016, p. 731). Whistler goes on to state that religion should not be defined by its use, or lack thereof, of symbols and that symbols that are objects and symbols that are images must be distinct from one another. For example, a painting depicting Christ should be viewed with a higher level of reverence than a painting depicting a cross similar to the one Christ died upon. For the purposes of this thesis, I have deemed that a photo of Christ and a photo depicting the cross are both considered to be religious symbolism because of the importance both hold to Christians around the world as well as those visiting Israel and residing within Israel.

Religious symbolism is used to show the icons that are most important to a certain faith. A symbol is something iconic. People from all over the globe may see a symbol and immediately recognize to which religion that symbol belongs. For example, if someone in Europe sees a cross, they recognize it as a Christian symbol, just as a person in South America would also recognize a cross as a Christian symbol. Religious symbols are meant to be easily recognizable. Religious symbols and icons are important because they play a large part in spreading the “word” about a religion. Religions only thrive if there are people practicing them and a religion could die out if there are no followers. For example, during the Crusades, “The same symbol was later adopted by the Crusaders going to the Holy Land in the Middle Ages, and for this reason it is sometimes called the

‘Crusader’s Cross’” (Kosloski, 2017). The cross was used by the Crusaders, causing it to become more widely recognized as a symbol of the Christian faith.

The Zionist movement adopted the Star of David for their first flag because they saw it as a symbol of the Jewish religion. “Some say that the six-pointed star was etched onto David’s shield in battle, but there’s no archaeology or literature to prove that; neither is this design found anywhere in Scripture” (King David’s Shield..., 2019). Often, a person’s religion is part of their cultural identity. Religious symbolism is important because it helps someone from a particular religion find others of the same religion, thus creating a bond with another human. Religious symbolism can be used in various ways, from the sacred, such as in holy places, to the capitalistic, such as on clothing and jewelry.

Religious symbolism is many things, but it is not static. Symbols take on new meanings, depending on the era and the state in which the religion is located. In Nazi Germany, the Star of David was used as a yellow piece of fabric on clothing to announce who was a Jew and who was not. “The tragic irony is that the Nazis also used the now popular Jewish symbol of the star to identify Jews for discrimination, persecution, and extermination by ordering them to wear a bright yellow star labeled ‘Jude’” (King David’s Shield..., 2019). While some might not wish to think about this type of use of religious symbolism, it is important to do so because the horrors of the Holocaust and other genocides are times in history we should never let ourselves forget. Religious symbolism is important as a bonding tool, as a way to show your pride for your religion, and most importantly as a symbol of cultural and religious identity.

## Jewish Religious Symbolism: Photos and Research



Figure 1: Israeli flags in Jerusalem

The Israeli flag is comprised of a white background with a blue Star of David in the center and two blue stripes along the top and bottom edges. The Star of David is a symbol within the Jewish community because it resembles the shield King David was rumored to have carried into battle; however, there is no evidence that this took place. The Star of David has been representative for the Jews during several different points in history, but the true origin is not known. The Star of David is seen in many locations across Israel, including in the architecture. The symbol was used in many instances in history, but the most notable is the Zionist movement of the late 1800s. Theodor Herzl

founded the Zionist movement and brought up the idea of creating a flag. He was quoted, writing in his journal, “With a flag one can lead men wherever one wants to, even into the Promised Land” (King David’s Shield..., quoting Theodor Herzl, 2019).



Figure 2: Star of David on a fence in Safed

There were many instances of the Star of David being used in architecture in Israel. In Safed, a center for Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, the Star of David was used in the architecture in many areas. The fencing along the walkways had Stars of David between the bars of the fence. The brick wall outside of a synagogue in Safed had a box for donations with Stars of David imprinted into the wall around the box. The imprints also included a candelabra (menorah), a hamsa, and a pomegranate, which are all symbols of the Jewish religion.





Figure 3: Jewish symbolism around a donation box in Safed





Figure 4: Star of David decorating a building in Safed





Figure 5: Star of David art at Malkiya Kibbutz

The Star of David was displayed prominently in many places throughout Israel, including this Star of David artwork at Malkiya Kibbutz. The kibbutz is located near an Israeli Defense Force base close to the Israeli/Lebanese border. The words are written in Hebrew and translate to Psalms 34: 12-15:

- 12 Whoever of you loves life  
and desires to see many good days,
- 13 keep your tongue from evil  
and your lips from telling lies.
- 14 Turn from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.
- 15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,  
and his ears are attentive to their cry.



Figure 6: Torah ark in Safed

The Torah ark is another symbol of Judaism because it contains the Torah scrolls. The scrolls are viewed as sacred texts within Judaism. Reading from the Torah involves a ceremony where the Torah is taken from the ark, walked among the congregation, and returned to the ark after reading. Jews treat the Torah as a reverent piece of scripture and show that reverence through the ceremonial reading. Specific prayers and blessings are read in Hebrew as the Torah is taken out of and placed back into the ark (Simon).





Figure 7: The seal of Israel in the Knesset

The menorah, sometimes referred to as a candelabra, is a Jewish symbol that is typically viewed as something used for Chanukah. While that is not incorrect, there is more to the menorah. A menorah was placed in the original Temple of Jerusalem that was destroyed by the Romans when they invaded Jerusalem around 60 BC. The menorah is seen as a symbol of hope that the Jews will one day return to the Temple that is so incredibly sacred to them, their religion, and their ancestry. While there are many temples and synagogues in the world, the original Temple of Jerusalem is a sign of strength and

hope among the Jews. “They [the Jews] renamed the synagogues “temples,” using the word that had always been reserved for the Temple of Jerusalem, and implying the abrogation of the age-old messianic dream that the Temple destroyed by Rome would one day be rebuilt for a newly reunited Jewish people” (Scheindlin, 1998, p. 169).



Figure 8: Menorah art in Safed





Figure 9: The Knesset Menorah

The Knesset is the home of Israel's legislative body. Located near the Knesset is a large menorah<sup>1</sup> made of bronze that is modeled after the menorah made of gold that once stood in the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem. There are engravings of different pieces of Jewish history, predominantly the struggles Jews have faced for centuries. "The main theme of the work depicts the spiritual struggles of the Jewish people and it is engraved with the passage 'Not by strength and not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord who rules over all' (Zechariah 4, 6)" (Rolef, 2018). Benno Elkan, a Jew originally from Germany, designed and created the piece at the behest of the British Parliament, from whom the menorah was given to the Israelis on the eighth anniversary of their independence (Rolef, 2018).

The engravings on the menorah represent different parts of Jewish and Israeli history. The middle branch displays events and characters that are the most known within the history of Israel and the Jewish people. At the top, Moses is seen with his arms being held up by Aaron and Hur during the Israelites' battle against the Amalekites (Abelow, 2015). The passage from the Bible comes from the chapter Exodus 17: 8-14:

8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands."

10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. 12 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. 14 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven."

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information acquired about the Knesset Menorah was from lectures given by Ronny Simon, cited below in works cited.

Below Moses is an engraving of the Ten Commandments with flames behind them, representing the burning bush on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments have played an important role in Abrahamic religions, particularly in Christianity and Judaism. Below the Ten Commandments on the menorah, Ruth and Rachel are represented as women of the Jewish faith. In the Bible, Ruth and Rachel may not seem to have connection, but they both represent the power of Jewish women (Abelow, 2015). Rachel is weeping in the engraving, exhibiting a passage from the book of Jeremiah 31: 15-16:

15 This is what the Lord says:  
“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”  
16 This is what the Lord says:  
“Restrain your voice from weeping  
and your eyes from tears,  
for your work will be rewarded,”  
declares the Lord.  
“They will return from the land of the enemy.”

Next, a man wearing a flowing cloak is seen hovering over a field of skeletal-like people in agony below him. In the Book of Ezekiel, a valley of bones is mentioned where the “people” are returned to Israel:

1The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”  
I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

...

11 Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own

land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.””

Below the valley of bones engraving is an additional engraving showing many people in struggle with one another, representing the struggle the Jews endured at Nazi hands during the Holocaust. The person seen rising from the middle of the engraving symbolizes the Jewish resistance and Jews rising up to defend themselves against the Nazis during the Holocaust (Abelow, 2015). There is also a Torah scroll seen below the person rising up, representing the sacredness of the Torah to the Jewish people, even during an excruciating time such as the Holocaust. Below, there is an engraving of Hebrew words within a braided circle and what looks like flames or the sun. The Hebrew is translated into part of the Shema Prayer (“The Shema”, 2018):

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד

Hebrew pronunciation: Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

English: Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

The final engraving in the center of the Knesset Menorah is an engraving representing the rebuilding of the State of Israel. The Jewish people, after keeping their faith for centuries, finally had the opportunity to return to what they deemed as their home land- Israel. The engraving shows people holding each other up in an attempt to rebuild what was lost. The Jewish people still have faith that one day their messiah will return them to their true home, heaven, for keeping their faith and creating the State of Israel (Abelow, 2015).





Figure 10: Close up of the Knesset Menorah





Figure 11: Close up of the Knesset Menorah





Figure 12: Artwork in the Knesset by Marc Chagall

Marc Chagall, a Jewish artist from Russia, was asked to create artwork for the Knesset. “In his decorations for the Knesset, Chagall thus combines most of the levels of his awareness of Judaism – Biblical, artistic, historical, modern, religious and messianic, into a “message” that deals specifically with the State of Israel and its capital, Jerusalem” (Amishai, 1969, p. 170). He decided to create three tapestries to hang in what is now called “Chagall Hall.” The tapestries represent different biblical themes, particularly those that are important to Jewish history and the founding of Israel.

The tapestry pictured above shows two different periods within history, one being the time of King David, who is shown playing an instrument and dressed in red with dancers to his left. “David leads his procession straight into a group of rejoicing

Chassidim and Chalutzim who dance a combination of Chassidic dance and Hora” (Amishai, 1969, p. 165). The other time period is modern Israel. The top left side of the tapestry shows a bird, perhaps a dove, flying with Hebrew letters coming out of its mouth. The translation of the letters is “Israel.” Thus, the bird seems to be spreading the news that the land of Israel has been established. There is also the image of a soldier standing next to the Israeli flag in the bottom left. It seems as if the soldier is guarding the flag, with the flag representing Israel itself.



Figure 13: Pomegranate artwork in Safed

The pomegranate is a symbol within Judaism that came as a surprise to me. I was raised around Judaism and I did not hear about the importance of the pomegranate until I visited Israel. I learned that the pomegranate is a symbol for several reasons. “It is customary to eat pomegranates on the first night of Rosh Hashanah... because Jews are filled with kind deeds and good qualities, just as the seeds of a pomegranate” (Stern, 2016). Stern continues to explain that it can be hard to open a pomegranate and reach the “delicious seeds” inside, just as it may be hard for a Jew, who guards their inner thoughts, to open up to others. “On Rosh Hashanah, Jews want to be remembered for their kindness and good deeds, so they eat the pomegranate and represent it within their artwork and other symbolism” (Stern, 2016).

Another reason Stern gives for the importance of the pomegranate comes from the Talmud, a text used in order to teach Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish theology. The Talmud says that Jews are full of mitvahs, or good deeds. The commandments within Judaism are written in the Torah. There are 613 commandments in the Torah. Kaballah, Jewish mysticism, says there are 613 seeds in a pomegranate; thus, they find pomegranates to be a sacred fruit because the numbers align. While that may seem far fetched to some, the symbol of the pomegranate is one that has persevered for many years in Jewish communities, particularly in those that practice Kaballah.





Figure 14: Hamsa artwork for sale in the market in Tel Aviv

The hamsa seemed to be the most commercialized Jewish symbol in Israel. “It’s hard not to notice the abundance of hamsas on display when walking through the markets in Israel. The ancient hand-shaped symbol appears on pendants, tableware, clothing and religious items, and on metal and wooden objects of all kinds” (Amir, 2018). The hamsa is used in multiple religions, including Judaism and Islam, to ward off evil forces and is occasionally referred to as the “hand of God.” While conducting research on the hamsa

and its meaning to Jews and Arabs, I came across this quote, “The power associated with the hamsa comes from the many mystical and religious meanings associated with the hand and the number five in Judaism and Islam, making it a symbol and a talisman in both religions” (Amir, 2018).



Figure 15: The Western Wall, Jerusalem, Israel

The Western Wall is the most significant site in the world to the Jewish people. It is important to Jews because it is the closest they can legally get in order to pray near the site of what was once the second holy Temple, built by King Herod. “He [King Herod] hired many workers who toiled to make the Temple more magnificent and to widen the area of the Temple Mount by flattening the mountain peak and building four support walls around it. The Western Wall we know of, is one of these four support walls” (What is the Western Wall?, 2019).

Mount Moriah, the location of the Temple Mount today, has been the site to many important events to Judaism. The most notable event is the preparing of Abraham’s son,

Isaac, for sacrifice upon the mount. Today many Jews come to the Western Wall to pray and to leave notes and prayers in the wall itself.

### **Jewish Symbolism Conclusion**

Israel has an abundance of Jewish religious symbolism. This makes sense because, although founded as a secular state, Israel is the “promised land” to many Jews. Jews are one of the most persecuted people in history and along with that persecution came the Jewish diaspora. Jews have resided in many different places around the world, from the Middle East, to Europe, to North and South America. The State of Israel allows Jews to have a homeland for the first time in hundreds of years. The religious symbolism within Israel represents many different things to the Jewish people.

The Star of David, menorah, pomegranate, and other instances of Jewish symbolism through art, clothing, and other items are prevalent in any area of the state of Israel. Whether visiting a religious site, a market, or the Knesset, Jewish symbolism could be found in the smallest of places. The people of Israel are proud of their country and their heritage and that is something that is easy to see within the use of religious symbolism throughout the country. I was expecting to encounter a multitude of symbolism and iconography when visiting Jewish sites and I was not disappointed. I captured many photos showcasing Jewish symbolism. I believe I chose the photos that best display the iconography of the Jewish faith and the importance of that iconography to the Jews who reside within Israel.

## Christian Religious Symbolism: Photos and Research



Figure 16: Sign at the entrance to Capernaum

The symbol of the cross is one of the most widely recognized symbols throughout religion. In Israel, the cross is used in many different locations to recognize the Christian faith. The cross is important in Christianity because Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who Christians believe to be the Son of God and the messiah, was nailed to a cross in order to provide the ultimate sacrifice, leading to forgiveness of sin.



The town of Capernaum is mentioned in all four gospels in the Bible- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew 4:13 states:

<sup>13</sup>Leaving Nazareth, he [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali.

The cross is seen throughout Capernaum because it is said to be the town of Jesus and is known to be the town of Saint Peter. Two synagogues, one built on top of another, were found in Capernaum by archaeologists. There is also a home in Capernaum that has been excavated and is thought to have been the home of Peter, although there is no solid evidence to support or refute this claim.



Figure 17: Jerusalem cross in Capernaum





Figure 18: Jerusalem cross on the doors to a cemetery entrance in Jerusalem

Throughout Israel, the Jerusalem cross is used as a symbol denoting important areas within the Christian faith. The Jerusalem cross features a cross in the middle with four smaller crosses along the four outside corners. The Jerusalem cross was first used as a symbol for the Jerusalem Kingdom, later being adopted by the Crusaders as an icon to be used in battle. The Jerusalem cross is sometimes called the Crusaders cross for this

reason (Kosloski, 2017). In regard to the cross being used as a Christian symbol, there are several probable answers as to “why?”



Figure 19: Jerusalem cross in Jerusalem

The first theory behind the Jerusalem cross being used a Christian symbol is that the large cross represents Jesus and the four smaller crosses represent the evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The second theory is that the five crosses represent Jesus's wounds from being nailed to the cross- the largest cross being the wound to Jesus's side, and the smaller crosses being the wounds on his hands and feet (Kosloski, 2017). The symbol is widely used across Israel, from the northern Galilee region, to Jerusalem, to the southern Red Sea region.





Figure 20: Cross on top of building in Jerusalem



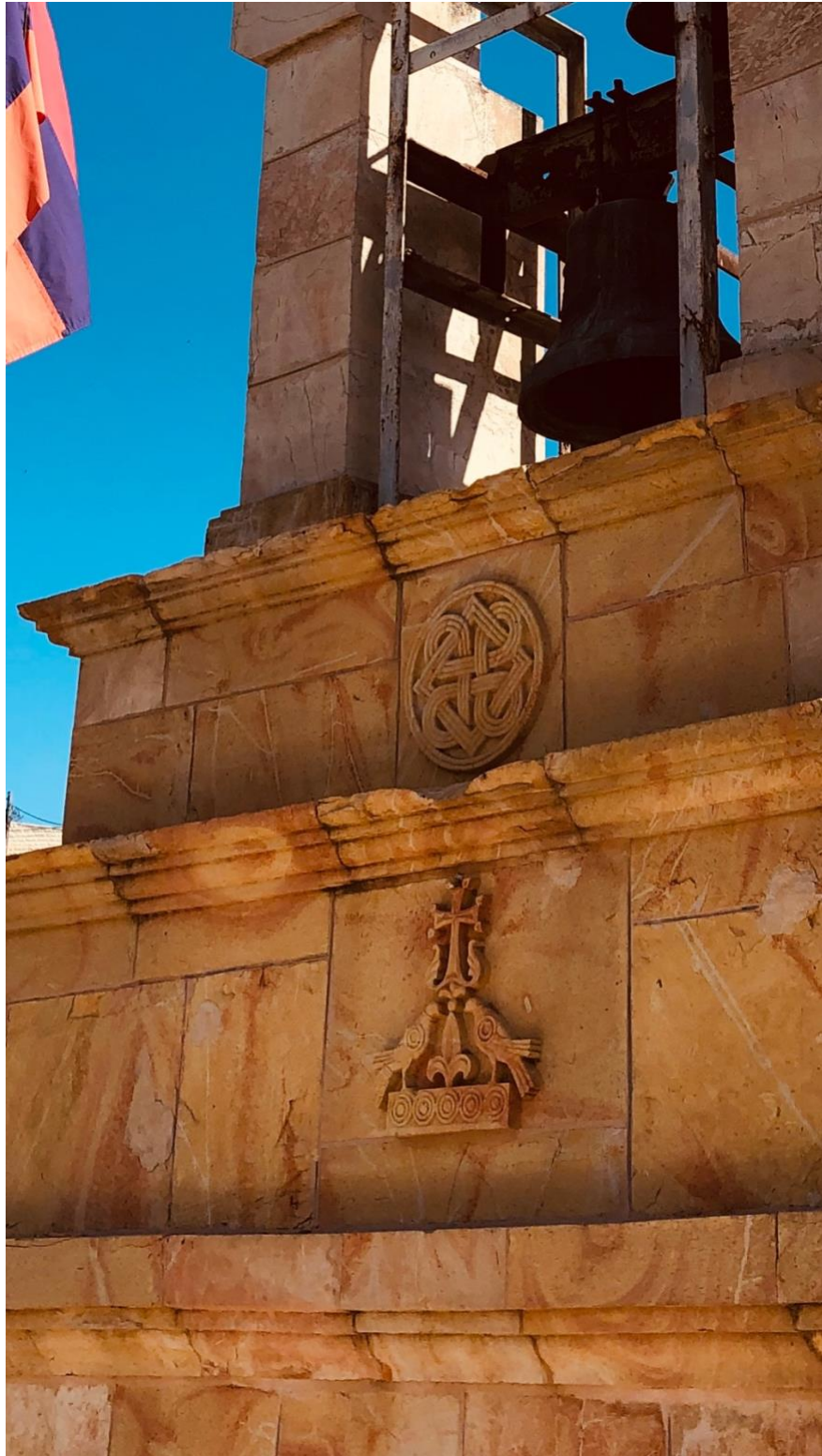


Figure 21: Cross and doves in Jerusalem

In many instances, the dove represents peace and hope, especially in Christianity. In Genesis, Noah continuously sends a dove to seek dry land during the great flood. Eventually, a dove returns with an olive branch, offering Noah hope that the flood will soon end. Genesis 8:8-11 states:

<sup>8</sup>Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. <sup>9</sup>But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. <sup>10</sup>He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. <sup>11</sup>When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth.

In Jerusalem, in one of two places thought to be the possible burial site of Mary, mother of Jesus, there are doves shown with a cross, displaying the use of Christian symbolism.



Figure 22: Crosses carved into the wall of the Via Dolorosa

The Via Dolorosa, translated to mean The Way of Sorrows, is thought to be the path Jesus Christ took as he walked to the site of his crucifixion (Beck, 2017, p. 80). The Via Dolorosa is a place where many Christians go on pilgrimage to witness the steps Jesus took on the way to his death. The Stations of the Cross are along the Via Dolorosa, five of them being inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the church, there is a wall that is said to be along Jesus's walking path where people have carved crosses in order to remember the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for humanity. The carved crosses are a symbol of pilgrimage and thankfulness for the sacrifice of Jesus.





Figure 23: Cross stenciled on wall at Beit She'an

Beit She'an, once called Scythopolis, is an archeological site that once housed Roman citizens and was used by other civilizations before the Romans. Beit She'an is interesting because you are able to walk through the ruins, exploring the area and viewing structures that are still mostly left standing, even after hundreds of years. "Equally striking in Scythopolis is what has been left unreconstructed, the parts of the city where

we have evidence of a horrific earthquake in AD 749 (Beck, 2017, p. 183). After the earthquake, Beit She'an was left abandoned and in ruins. Beit She'an was later excavated and is now one of the most well-preserved Roman towns in existence today. The cross photographed above was found on the backside of the Roman bath house.



Figure 24: Jesus on the cross at Mount of Beatitudes



The Christian symbolism I found in Israel align with the symbols I have grown up learning about in church. The only symbol I had to research more thoroughly is the Jerusalem cross. The standalone cross and the dove are both symbols I knew about before visiting Israel; however, what I found interesting about these symbols was how they were displayed throughout Israel. Sometimes, it seemed like the cross was used more as an afterthought or decoration than as a true symbol of the Christian faith. For example, the cross I noticed in Beit She'an or the cross decorating the sign of Capernaum seemed more decorative in nature than the crosses I saw carved into the wall along the Via Dolorosa.

### **Christian Symbolism Conclusion**

The cross is the most well-known symbol within Christianity. While the cross was prevalent in Israel, the use of the Jerusalem cross was even more widespread. I saw the Jerusalem cross multiple times in every region we visited in Israel, from the northern region to the southern region. Besides the cross, the dove was the only other symbol I noticed that represented Christianity. Christian religious symbolism was not as visible as Jewish symbolism; however, that was something I expected in a Jewish state.

## Muslim Religious Symbolism: Photos and Research

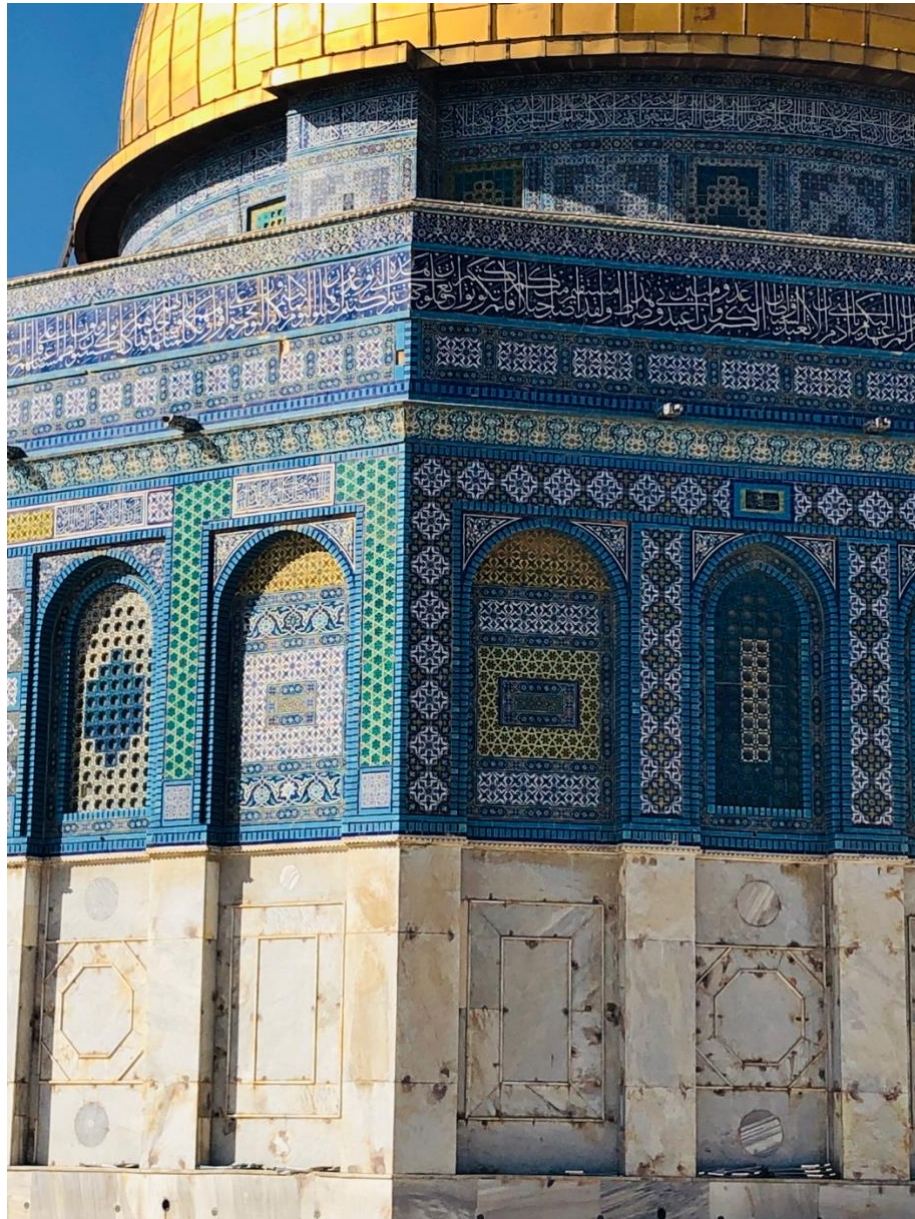


Figure 25: Qur'an scripture on the Dome of the Rock

There were not many instances of Islamic religious symbolism in Israel. The Dome of the Rock is located on top of Temple Mount in Jerusalem. "...entrance to the Dome of the Rock shrine, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Islamic Museum has been restricted to Muslims since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000" (Gross, 2015).

The Dome of the Rock can be considered to be a religious symbol because of the religious meaning it holds for Muslims. Along the top perimeter of the building, passages from the Qur'an are written in Arabic. Muslims believe that the prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam, ascended into heaven from the site where the Dome of the Rock stands.

The Dome of the Rock is a controversial place within Jerusalem because it is also a sacred space to Jews. The Jews believe that Abraham prepared his son Isaac for sacrifice in the spot where the Dome is located. This has led to much contention between the people of both religions and causes many fights to break out on this holy spot (Gross, 2015).



Figure 26: The Dome of the Rock, Temple Mount, Jerusalem





Figure 27: Entrance of the Mosque of Omar with crescent moon

The crescent moon and star are widely recognized to be a symbol of Islam; however, many Muslims do not accept the crescent and star as an icon because they do not accept any icon or symbol as part of their religion. Through my research, I came across this quote, “...many Muslims reject using the crescent moon as a symbol of Islam. The faith of Islam has historically had no symbol, and many refuse to accept what

is essentially an ancient pagan icon. It is certainly not in uniform use among Muslims” (Pearson, 2012).

The crescent moon and star started as a symbol in Central Asia and Siberia, was later adopted by the Christian Byzantine Empire, and finally the Ottoman Empire. It was during the Ottoman Empire that the crescent and star became a symbol of Islam, and a precarious symbol at that. It was not until recently, in a time of commercialism, that the crescent and star became a more popular symbol, being used on clothing, jewelry, and other goods (Pearson, 2012). However, many of the Islam faith still refuse to use the crescent and star as a revered symbol because, “...many Muslims consider it un-Islamic and even blasphemous” (Pearson, 2012).



Figure 28: Sign located near the Dome of the Rock with crescent moon



When a mosque is built, it often features a tall tower extending high above the rest of the mosque. This tower is called a minaret. The significance of a minaret is that it is used to perform the call to prayer. (Richard, 1910, p. 138-139). The minaret has become a recognizable icon of Islam because it signifies to all within the faith that the building below is a mosque, thus a place where they can worship freely.



Figure 29: Minaret





Figure 30: Minaret in Tel Aviv

## **Interview with Muneeb Makhdoom**

**Q: If you could pick one thing about Islam, what would you say is one thing that draws you into the faith the most?**

A: One of the most important aspects of Islam throughout its teaching is peace, from the greeting “salaam” which means “peace and blessings,” to the teaching of the prophets in the Qur'an about how to show mercy and compassion to those around you.

**Q: What does Israel mean to you, if anything?**

A: Israel is another country where people of multiple faiths live. I went on vacation there last summer, it was a great place. I wish there could be peace in Israel.

**Q: Some might believe the crescent moon and star to be an important, if not the most important, symbol to Islam. Do you think there are other important iconic symbols to Islam, maybe some symbols that are even more important?**

A: In Islam, symbols are not really a big thing, including with the crescent. If one symbol were to be seen as important... a lot of Muslims put up their pointer finger to indicate there is only one God. This belief is very important to us. The khabah is also an important symbol, but I do not think there are any iconic symbols that are very important.

## **Islam Symbolism Conclusion**

I was very surprised at the lack of Islamic symbolism within Israel because it is in the Middle East. Before visiting Israel, I assumed that every country in the Middle East would have a multitude of Islamic symbolism due to the dominance of Islamic culture within the region for the past several hundreds of years. Through the few photos I took of Islamic symbolism and the interview I conducted, I came to realize that the crescent and star that we often use in Western culture to associate with Islam was not as prevalent as I previously thought. I only captured two uses of the crescent moon around important Islamic sites and neither of them included the star. The other symbolism I captured was in relation to buildings, such as the Dome of the Rock or mosques. Mosques are important to the Muslim faith because they are the Muslim place of worship. It is obvious why mosques would feature a small amount of Islamic symbolism, whether that be from Qur'an inscriptions or a minaret.

Israel is not as important to Muslims as other locations, such as Mecca or Medina. Although Muslims believe the site of the Dome of the Rock was where Muhammed ascended into heaven, that is somewhat speculative. "The verse is somewhat vague as it refers only to "signs" that Allah would show him. What is important, however, is the fact that the verse refers purely to the "journey by night," from Mecca to Jerusalem, and makes no mention of the ascent through the heavens at all. Indeed, the Qur'an nowhere directly refers to nor outlines the supposed ascent- a striking omission if it was a genuine experience. Some Muslim commentators have sought allusions to it elsewhere in the Qur'an, but the passages quoted are too weak to be relied on with any certainty"



(Gilchrist). The lack of Islamic symbolism could be attributed to Jerusalem being the least important of the Muslim holy sites in the Qur'an.

## **Conclusion**

While studying abroad in Israel, I collected photographs of what I thought of as religious symbolism. I learned a lot while in Israel, including the history of several of the symbols, such as the Star of David, the pomegranate, and others. I went into the trip with high expectations about what I might find in Israel in regard to the amount of iconography and symbolism I would witness. I was not disappointed. I collected hundreds of photos, many of those focusing on religion and how religion impacts Israel, even though it is a secular state. I had the chance to meet and speak to people who grew up in Israel. This allowed me to feel as if I had a true first-hand glimpse into how religious symbolism may have impacted them instead of only reading about it in a book.

As I stated, I collected many photos and it was very hard to choose the ones I thought best represented the three most prominent religions in Israel: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; however, I believe I did a good job in choosing the photos that capture the way that I, a tourist, viewed the religious symbolism and iconography. Sometimes, the symbols would not have been at all obvious had I not been on the lookout or if Ronny, our guide, did not point them out. Before I left for Israel, I created a small list of questions that I planned to ask myself at the conclusion of the trip. Those questions are:

1. Did I find the symbols that I hypothesized I would find while in Israel?
2. What symbols did I find that surprised me?
3. What symbols did I not find that I expected to find?
4. Is religious symbolism as important in Israel as I thought it would be?

After reflecting upon the photos I took and the travel journal entries I wrote, I have been able to answer these questions.

Before leaving, I did research on the different cities where we would be staying. I wrote short hypotheses in my travel journal regarding each place and what I thought I might see in the locations we were going to visit. When we returned to the hotel in the evenings, I reviewed the notes I had taken during the day and reflected upon the symbols I saw each day and how those compared to my initial thoughts and predictions. This helped me to remember details about the iconography and symbols I saw and the history of the places we visited. For the most part, my predictions tended to be correct. From the architecture within Israel, to the art and jewelry being sold, almost everywhere I turned I saw a form of religious symbolism. Most of the symbols I saw were Jewish symbols, but I did find many instances of Christian symbols as well.

One finding that surprised me was the abundant use of symbolism through the Jerusalem cross. I had not heard of the Jerusalem cross before the trip to Israel, so I was surprised at how many times I saw it being used throughout all of Israel. I was expecting to find many uses of the stand-alone cross, which I did find, but I was surprised to learn of a different example of the cross I am used to seeing in America. I expected to find a lot more use of Islamic symbolism since Israel is located in the Middle East. While that may be because of my own unconscious biases, I was still surprised at the lack of photographable icons and symbols to represent Islam. It was very interesting to learn that the crescent moon and star are not as widely recognized as an Islamic symbol to those who are Muslims as it is to those of other religions.



Religious symbolism seems to be an everyday part of Israeli life. I would not say it is as important to daily life as it is to national and religious identity. The use of the Star of David on the Israeli flag shows the importance a religious belief system can play upon the creation of a country. The menorah, pomegranate, and the cross are all important symbols to *certain* people of the Jewish and Christian faiths. I learned that symbols are used within religion, but they are also not as important to some within that religion as to others. I have grown up around Jews and I have never heard of the significance of the pomegranate until visiting Israel; thus, this shows me that not every piece of symbolism or iconography is taken seriously or even known about across an entire religion, thanks to different denominations and other factors such as location.

Thanks to my time in Israel, my eyes have been opened to the things I might be missing out on by not closely examining my surroundings. I often had to be on the lookout for symbols or I might miss them. They were not always as obvious as a giant menorah in the middle of a garden; they were often a small cross carved into a wall or a tiny pomegranate carved into a donation box. There is one thing I am sure of in regard to symbolism in Israel and that is that Israelis are extremely proud of their heritage and they show that in large and small ways. I am honored to have had that chance to examine the different areas of Israel and its uses of religious symbolism, even for a short time.

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