

# In Judaism - Be Square!

Category: Mishpatim, Shemos

*A Jewish symbol currently displayed in Jewish institutions worldwide was once used against the Jews. What is that symbol, and what is the correct course of action?*

## The Yellow Star

“The Yellow Star” is one of the most iconic symbols associated with the Holocaust.

Immediately following Kristallnacht, Heydrich (who organized the Kristallnacht pogrom) proposed the idea that all Jews wear a Star of David with the word “Jude” written in the language of that country. Initially, this law was enforced in Poland after the Germans occupied the country, and later in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

But what’s less known is that the idea to force Jews to wear a distinguishing mark, essentially a badge of shame to separate them from the local population, is not a German innovation. It can be traced back to one of the Muslim caliphates of the seventh or eighth century, and throughout the generations, there have been many forms of marking Jews.

What is interesting is that one of the most famous Jewish symbols, proudly displayed in our day on Shuls, schools and anything identified with Judaism, actually was used as these antisemitic tools meant to humiliate Jews: the image of the *Luchos*, the Tablets.

## The Image of the Tablets

If you asked any Jew to draw the Tablets, they’d likely draw them as rectangles, with a semi-circle on top.

Where does that image come from?

This week, at the end of the Torah portion, the Torah revisits the story of the

giving of the Torah. We read that G-d invites Moses onto the mountain, and gives him "the stone tablets." However, the Torah itself contains no description of how the Tablets actually looked.

Throughout the writings of the Tanach which describe the hundreds of years that the Ark of the Covenant accompanied the Jewish people, there's no mention of their shape. Only about 500 years after the Ark was hidden in the catacombs beneath the Temple Mount, the Talmud addresses this question, saying, "The tablets were six handbreadths long and six handbreadths wide" (Bava Batra 14a), meaning that the tablets were square.

So why do Jews always depict them as round? The Rebbe argued that the source of the semi-circular Tablets is taken from non-Jewish sources. There is nowhere to be found in Jewish writings even a hint that it was rounded. (Toras Menachem 5742 1:275).

In ancient times, Jews did not depict the Tablets. In ancient synagogues unearthed in Israel dating back close to two thousand years, no such depiction exists. In Beit Alfa (not far from Beit She'an), for example, a synagogue mosaic was found with Jewish motifs, including a depiction of a menorah, zodiac wheel, the Binding of Isaac, and more, but there's no depiction of the Tablets.

This is also true of other ancient synagogues discovered in archaeological excavations, like "Hammat Tiberias" on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It seems that Jews had no need to depict the Tablets; they of course remembered that they had received them at Sinai along with the entire Torah, and of course they lived by its dictates. But they felt no need to draw it; Judaism shied away from visual symbols.

The depiction comes from Christianity. As they adopted the Ten Commandments as a core tenet of their religion, they began to depict the Tablets. At first, they also depicted the Tablets as square, but around a thousand years ago, the depiction of a semi-circle began to solidify. Not only did it become a symbol of the Ten Commandments, it became a symbol by which Christians identified Jews.

In the thirteenth century, the English King Henry III issued a decree stating, "Every Jew must wear on his chest, on his upper garment wherever he goes or rides, both in the city and outside of it, a pair of white tablets made of cloth or parchment, rounded at the ends."

Over the years, it ceased to be an anti-Semitic symbol and slowly entered the Jewish world. Perhaps this was because they began to adorn synagogues, especially in Europe, with ornate religious motifs. What symbolizes Judaism more than the Tablets? In the last one hundred and fifty years, it became an utterly normal symbol of the Jewish religion—yet it originated from Christianity!!

## The Rebbe's Campaign

Over the years, the Rebbe mentioned this fact numerous times, both verbally and in writing, and he encouraged institutions and organizations that used the Tablets in their logo to replace the round tablets with square ones, as described in the Talmud.

The Rebbe added that from an educational perspective, this portrayal was harmful to young students. “When a child occasionally receives a diploma with a drawing of the Tablets in a semicircular shape at the top, he unquestionably perceives that this is the actual shape of the Tablets. Later, when he studies the aforementioned Talmud, he will discover that what was presented to him straightforwardly in school was, in fact, contrary to the straightforward teaching of the Talmud! As a result, he will lose all respect for his teachers—even when they teach him something true.”

Additionally, the Rebbe said, “The source of the depiction of the Tablets was taken from the gentiles, contrary to the Talmud. Therefore, when the Tablets are depicted in a semicircular shape, we are showing preference for the gentile version, over the Talmud itself!” (See “*Cheit Ha'igul*” by Rabbi Yechezkel Sofer).

Some may argue that whether it's round or square isn't too important. But images are important. In fact, there's another well-known misrepresentation which caused a lot of pain and suffering for many Jews—I'm referring to the sculpture of Moses by Michelangelo.

He sculpted a figure of a man meant to be the likeness of Moses, sitting with a square tablet representing the Tablets (interestingly, the Tablets here are square), and above his head, two small horns. This is due to the well-known misinterpretation of the verse “the skin of his face shone.”

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai on Yom Kippur with the second tablets,

his face radiated with a spiritual light. But in the translation, they mistakenly understood the word “*keren*” as a physical feature rather than a beam of light, so he depicted Moses with two horns.

Jews suffered greatly from this mistaken interpretation. Many people personally told me how, when they arrived at college, classmates who had never met a Jew before approached them and felt their heads to see if they had horns.

There’s another object from the Temple that the accepted depiction in the Jewish world comes from Christians, and that’s the Menorah. The familiar shape of the Menorah with rounded branches appears on the Arch of Titus and in many other places, whereas Maimonides and Rashi argue that the branches were straight. Therefore, the Rebbe instructed to make the Menorahs with straight branches as Maimonides depicted them.

## **The Lesson**

What’s interesting about these distinctions is that Christians try to round everything, whether it’s the Menorah or the Tablets. While in Judaism, the images were square.

Perhaps there is a lesson for us to learn here. In Judaism, we are square. A law is a law; Shabbos is Shabbos and Kosher is Kosher. That’s because our laws come from G-d; we don’t ‘round-out’ our religion to reflect the people; we make sure that we fit in to G-d’s mitzvot.

For a Jew, conforming to a Divine command is not a hindrance; it’s an honor. It’s a chance to connect with our ancestors before us, and our children after us. It’s a chance to connect with eternity.