

# Symbolism in the Israel Defense Forces: A Brief Overview

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## Introduction

The Israeli Armed Forces (known as the IDF, or by its Hebrew acronym: ZAHAL) are a great “mixer” of the Israeli society. In this “mixer,” Israel’s different social, ethnic, and political strata are blended and ground together, into a specific Israeli culture. Unavoidably, the resulting mixture reflects important features of this culture, of which the unique Israeli symbolism is a part, both in the historical and religious profoundness of its meaning and in the eclecticism of its elements.

The eclectic nature of the IDF symbolism manifests itself in the fact that, just like the rest of the Israeli state and society, it employs three types of symbolic graphic devices that are only loosely related to each other outside the framework of modern Zionist ideology. This Zionist ideology remains, at least officially, a spiritual foundation and the *raison d’être* of the State of Israel; however, as is shown in this article, it is not the sole contributor of symbols in Israel in general, and only a relatively minor one in the Israel Defense Forces in particular.

The three types of symbols currently in use in the Israel Defense Forces are:

1. Symbols related to the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the five books of Moses called in Hebrew the Torah) and the millennia-old Hebrew and Jewish tradition, especially those associated with the Land of Israel and the period of ancient Hebrew independence.
2. Symbols that reflect Zionist ideology and represent the Zionist movement, especially those based on emblems of organizations and institutions which conducted the struggle for Israel’s independence before the establishment of the State of Israel in A.D. 1948.

3. Entirely new symbols which seem to have no particular historical or psychological link with the history of the Jewish people and have been “invented” by current military graphic designers without any national or religious substantiation. Regardless of this fact (or perhaps even on the contrary, thanks to it) these symbols should not be discarded as completely meaningless as they too convey an important message within the context of modern Israeli psyche and mentality.

As reliable data, especially illustrations, regarding symbols and flags of the Israel Defense Forces are not readily available to the interested public, the author has been receiving frequent inquiries as to their meaning and detailed design. This brief article is intended to shed additional light on the subject by answering some of the numerous questions of curious readers.

## **Symbols of the First Kind: Biblical**

Those military symbols mainly associated with images from the Hebrew Torah are of extreme importance because they reflect national and cultural ideas as well as historic events which have been ingrained into the collective memory of the Jewish people for thousands of years. Among these are the consolidation of the twelve Hebrew tribes into one People of Israel, their Exodus from Egypt under Moses and the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua ben-Nun, the Maccabean rebellion against the foreign national and religious oppression, the anti-Roman revolt and the Judean-Roman war at the beginning of the Common Era. These and many other ideas, events, their meaning and symbolism permeate today’s Israeli political culture and are, in essence, a link connecting the Jewish present and the Hebrew past through a concept of national independence in the Land of Israel. Moreover, these symbols serve as a link between today’s Israel and the Jewish Diaspora as well as between the religious (or traditional) and secular (or national) cultural and ideological trends within modern Jewry. The Jewish cultural and religious tradition (which includes most Torah-related symbols) has been continuous for thousands of years. With the establishment of the modern state and the subsequent development of the national culture, many Biblical events and ideas, as well as the symbols which represent them, have acquired a new, national (rather than purely religious) connotation. The adoption and frequent use of these symbols by the IDF should be seen as the confirmation of a modern, national (sometimes even nationalistic) message relevant for the sovereign Jewish State — as distinct from the Jewish Diaspora where the same symbols are still being viewed as primarily religious emblems.

The Jewish religious tradition (based on the Torah and, later, on the vast rabbinic and Talmudic literature) has been at the very core of the Jewish culture, the uniquely Jewish outlook at the world and the way the Jewish people have viewed their own place in it. This is the major reason as to why biblical emblems and symbols have been employed by the Jewish people for at least the last three millennia without losing their meaning and relevancy. The genesis, religious, national, and political use of these symbols and the explanations of their meaning within the ancient Jewish and modern Israeli traditions (not only in the military) are discussed in detail in a longer manuscript prepared by the author.<sup>1</sup> In this present article, it is only possible to illustrate a few brief examples.

Two such examples of “historically/religiously substantiated” symbols are shown in Figures 1a and 1b where the regimental colors of the Barak



Fig. 1. Two regimental colors of today’s Israel Defense Forces which belong to the first category. Fig. 1a. The color of the Barak regiment. Fig. 1b. The color of the Gideon regiment.

regiment and Gideon regiment of the IDF are illustrated. As is known from the Bible, Barak [Hebrew for “lightning”], the 12th century B.C. commander of the tribe of Naphtali, was chosen by prophetess Deborah to lead the Israelites against the Canaanite general Sisera.<sup>2</sup> So, the gold lightning device on the red field of the regimental color (Fig. 1a) could be easily traced to the Hebrew tradition and Jewish folklore. Similarly, the purple color of the Gideon regiment (Fig. 1b) bears the sword of the 12th century B.C. Hebrew judge and military commander from the tribe of Menasseh. The Hebrew motto below the device, which is also taken from the Biblical source,<sup>3</sup> means:

<sup>1</sup>Zvi Ruder, “The National Symbols of the People of Israel: In the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora,” a book currently in preparation.

<sup>2</sup>Judg. 4:5–14.

<sup>3</sup>Judg. 7:19–26.

“The sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” Both colors, red and especially purple (so-called “argeman”), are highly symbolic in the Hebrew and Jewish national tradition.

Historically, among the most important graphic Jewish symbols have been those of the twelve tribes of Israel, as taken from two Biblical passages: from Jacob’s blessing to his sons (each one, in fact, leader of a tribe) [Gen. 49:1–28] and Moses’ blessing to the twelve tribes before their entry into the Promised Land [Deut. 33:5–25]. Among these emblems, the first place is certainly occupied by the symbol of the tribe of Judah, a lion: “Judah is a lion’s whelp.”<sup>4</sup> The Lion of Judah has had an extremely rich symbolic history in Jewish tradition since very ancient times. As a symbol of military might, power and “heroic nobility,” it even entered the domain of Jewish religious mysticism where a special meaning was attributed to the fact that the numerical value of the summation of Hebrew letters of which the Hebrew word “ARIEH” (“LION”) is composed equals that of the Hebrew word “GEVURAH” (“MIGHT”, “POWER”): they both add up to 216.<sup>5</sup> As a result, “Gur-Arieh Yehudah” (The Lion of Judah) has been a prominent Hebrew and Jewish symbol from time immemorial: it was broadly used when the People of Israel lived an independent life in the Land of Israel, it was a familiar emblem throughout the entire Jewish Diaspora for approximately the past two thousand years while the Jews were exiled from their ancestral homeland, and it is being extensively employed at the present time as the Jewish people return home (Figs. 2a, 2d, and 2f). In the Israel Defense Forces, this emblem appears as a part of numerous symbols, as is shown in Figures 2b, 2c, 2e, and 2g.

Another ancient military symbol is that of the tribe of Asher — an olive tree: “And of Asher he [Moses] said: Let him be the favoured of his brethren / And let him dip his foot in oil.”<sup>6</sup> Currently, the green olive tree on the yellow field is widely used on badges, regimental colors, and other emblems of the famous Golani Brigade (Fig. 3). The Brigade is stationed in the North of the Land of Israel (in the Upper Galilee and the Golan Heights), i.e. on territories allocated to the tribe of Asher after the Hebrew conquest of the Promised Land.<sup>7</sup> As is suggested in contemporary literary sources

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<sup>4</sup>Gen. 49:9. All this and other Biblical quotations are according to “*The Holy Scriptures*” (TANAKH), according to Masoretic Text, a new translation with the aid of previous versions and with constant consultation with Jewish authorities (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955).

<sup>5</sup>G. Scholem, “Gematria” in *Kabbala* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974).

<sup>6</sup>Deut. 33:24.

<sup>7</sup>*Golani Sheli* — *Sipurah shel Hativah Mispar Ehad* [English translation: *My Golani* — *A*

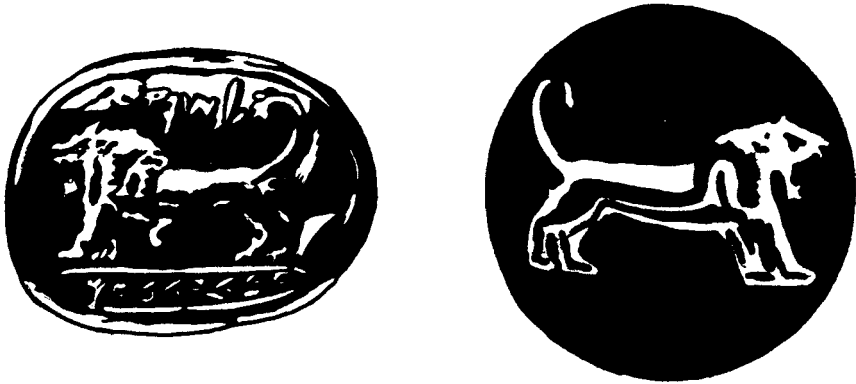


Fig. 2. The graphic image of the lion throughout the Jewish history. [Due to security reasons the author is not allowed to identify units of the IDF as symbolized by particular flags.] Fig. 2a. 8th century B.C. Hebrew seal (found at Megiddo, the Land of Israel) with an inscription: “[belonging] to Shema, servant of Jeroboam.” It is thought to refer to Jeroboam II, 13th King of Israel after the monarchy split, 783–743 B.C. Fig. 2b. The emblem of the IDF Central Military district which includes the area of Jerusalem and surroundings.

Asher’s land abounded with olive tree gardens,<sup>8</sup> a fact which is also reflected in his name.<sup>9</sup>

A snake was one of the traditional emblems of the tribe of Dan: “Dan shall be a serpent in the way / A horned snake in the path / that biteth the horse’s heels / so that his rider falleth backward.”<sup>10</sup> In our times, it has become a well recognized symbol of Israeli paratroopers, some of whom have been stationed in the “lot of Dan,” i.e. the heartland of modern Israel.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Israeli paratroopers’ best known emblem employs the snake symbol with the addition of wings to symbolize their airborne mission (Fig. 4). The image of the “flying serpent” is taken from Isa. 30:6<sup>12</sup> and, partially, from

*Story of the Number One Division*] (Tel Aviv: Avivim Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>Josh. 17:10; see also *Who’s Who in the Bible—the Old Testament and the Apocrypha* (Avenel, NJ: Random House, 1980), 57.

<sup>9</sup>The Hebrew name of the tribe “ASHER” means “a happy one,” which is concurrent with the spirit of the Biblical prophecies in Gen. 49:20 and Deut. 33:24–25.

<sup>10</sup>Gen. 49:17.

<sup>11</sup>Josh. 19:47, also see *Who’s Who in the Bible*, 80.

<sup>12</sup>“For out of the Serpent’s root shall come forth a basilisk, and his fruit will be a flying serpent and the first born of the poor shall feed and needy shall lie down in safety. And I will kill thy [i.e. Philistia, the enemy of Israel] root with famine and thy remnant shall be slain. . .”

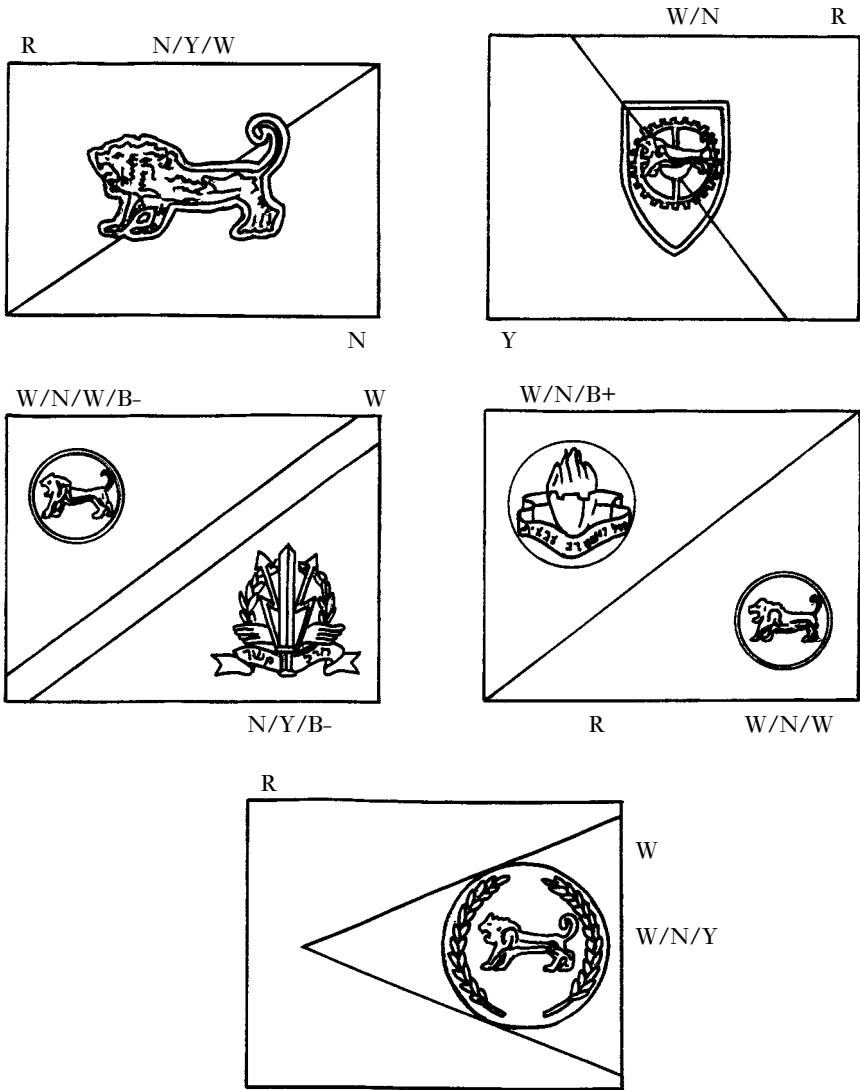


Fig. 2c. Modern military flags of IDF regiments with the “lion of Megiddo” as a centerpiece device.

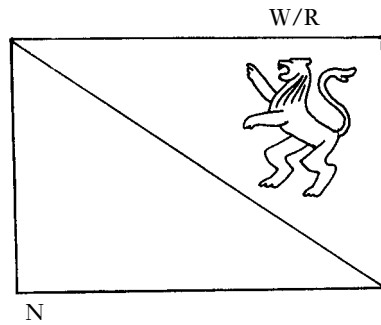


Fig. 2d. Lions supporting the crowned tablets of covenant has been a rather common graphic device in the interior of European synagogues in the Jewish Diaspora. Here, this motif is seen on the curtain of the Holy Ark in a synagogue in Lithuania. Fig. 2e. On this modern regimental color of the IDF, the “lion rampant” is seen to be closely resembling those shown in Fig. 2d.

Num. 21:6–9.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, such images as a deer, an emblem of the tribe of Naphtali (“Naphtali is a hind let loose”<sup>14</sup>), — its extensive territory stretched from the Jezreel valley and the Sea of Galilee to the Northern border of the Land of Israel<sup>15</sup>) — and “a fox of the Negev”<sup>16</sup> are prominently featured in the symbols of both the Northern and the Southern military commands, respectively; particularly the latter appears on the symbol of the Giv’ati paratrooper Brigade in the Southern Negev area (Fig. 5).

The emblems of the twelve tribes of Israel are extensively used as background for IDF parades and ceremonies.

Other symbols of historical significance as, for example, an elephant

<sup>13</sup>“And the Lord sent fiery serpents. . .”

<sup>14</sup>Gen. 49:21.

<sup>15</sup>*Who’s Who in the Bible*, 283.

<sup>16</sup>Foxes as one of the animals of the southern part of the Land of Israel are mentioned, for example, in Judg. 15:4–6.

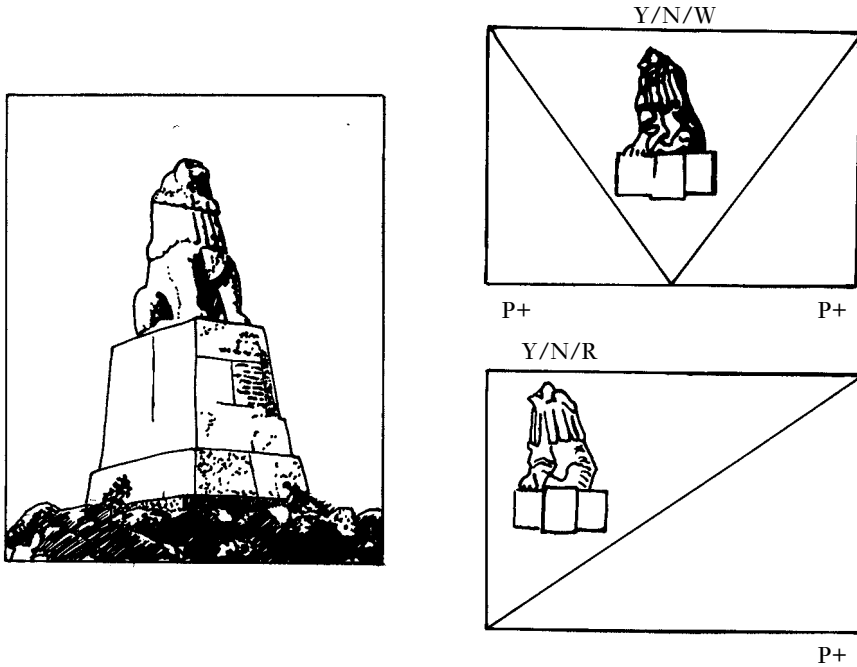


Fig. 2f. The monument of the “roaring lion” in Gallilee has been erected in Israel in memory of the defenders of Tel Khai. Fig. 2g. The same monument is shown as a centerpiece graphic device on several modern regimental flags of the IDF.

(widely used by the armies of Antiochus Epiphanes during the Maccabean rebellion and by the legions of Titus during the siege of Jerusalem) have become part of the IDF symbolism as well, the elephant particularly as symbol of logistic support regiments (Fig. 6).

Apart from these, some well-known traditional Jewish symbols (e.g. the olive branches) have also found their way, albeit much less extensively than one would expect, into the official symbolism of the IDF (Fig. 7).

Oddly enough, the adoption and extensive use of metallic standards as symbols of IDF major branches and divisions (so called “NESS HEILI” and “NESS UTZVATI”) closely resemble the ancient Roman practice of using legion vexilla. The oddness of their use in modern Israeli Armed Forces is especially noteworthy because both ancient Jewish tradition and today’s Israeli educational system (within and outside the IDF) stress the



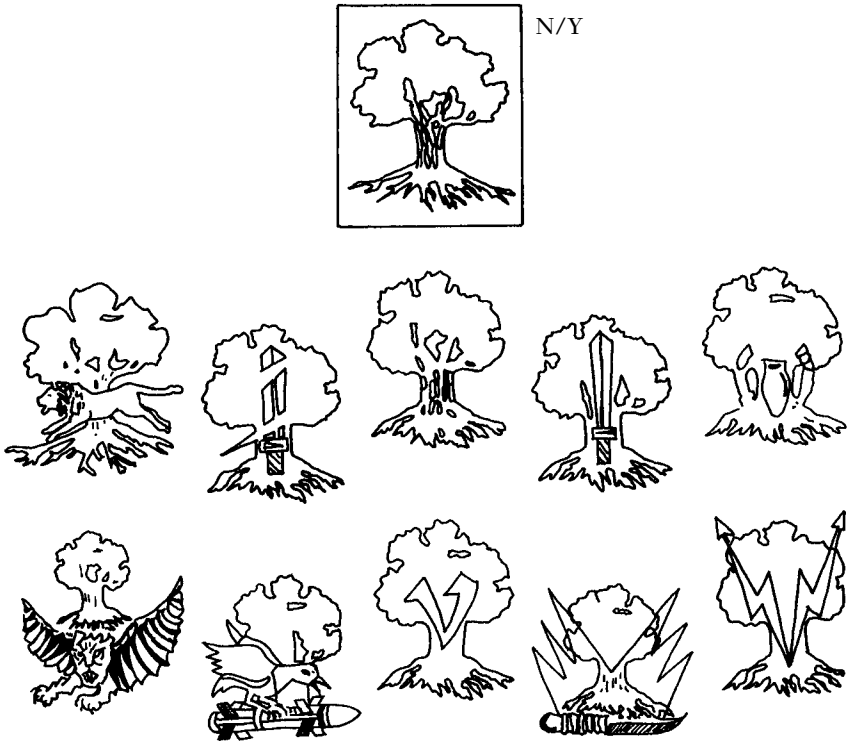


Fig. 3. An olive tree as a graphic device on the symbols of IDF and, especially, on the regimental and divisional flags of the Golani paratrooper brigade.

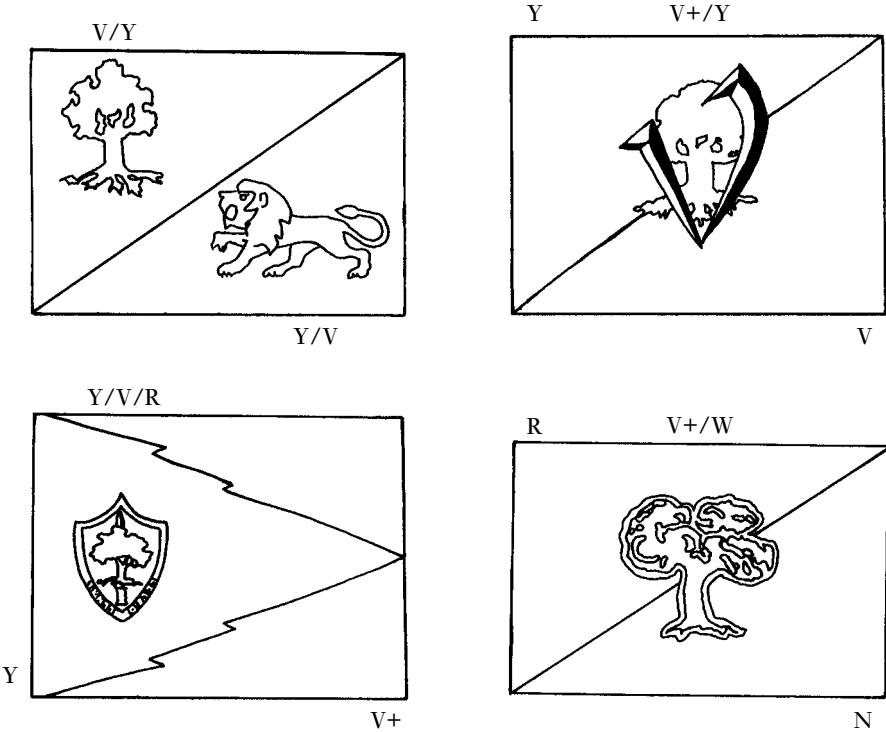
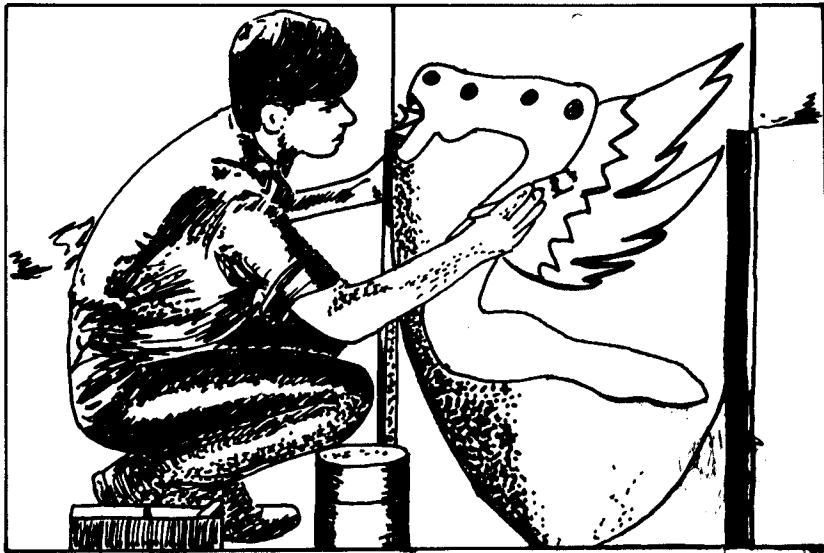


Fig. 3. [Continued.]



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Fig. 4. The winged snake of the tribe of Dan—a symbol of Israel’s paratroopers.

profound differences between Roman and Hebrew cultures.<sup>17</sup> Jewish moral codes, attitudes toward life and death, rules of military conduct, and other basic cultural values, as traditionally based on Prophet Zechariah’s spirit and compassion to the enemy, are all considered to be opposite in nature to Roman “brutal force and contempt to human life and suffering.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, for Israel to be one of those few nations (if not the only one) that adopted Roman vexilla as army standards seems to be ironic to the extreme.

## Symbols of the Second Kind: Zionist

Before the establishment of the State of Israel, there were three major military organizations which led the struggle for Jewish independence: the Hagganah (a military branch of the predominantly laborist Zionist Organization); the

<sup>17</sup>For further discussion and documentation, see Ruder manuscript cited in the first note.

<sup>18</sup>The profound difference between the brutal force (later symbolized by the might of the Roman Empire) and the elevated spirit of the Hebrew Biblical tradition, is poetically defined by Zech. 4:6. This message and numerous others are frequently cited by the Israeli educational system, both inside and outside of the IDF (on this subject, see, for example: “Rosh Hashana: Pointing the Way to World Peace,” in *The Jerusalem Post*, International Edition, the week ending 18 September 1993, p. 23).

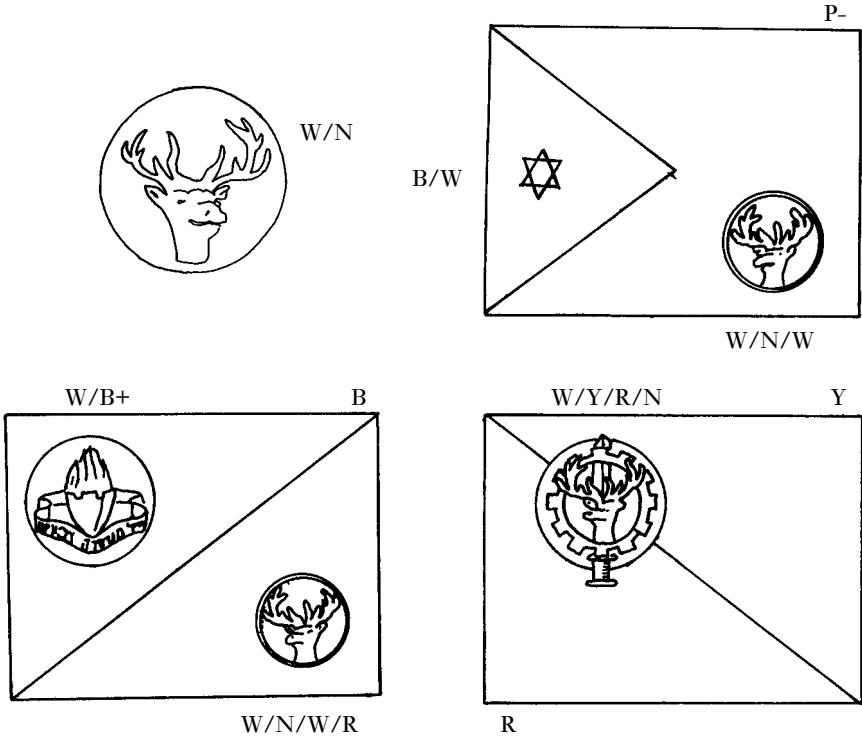


Fig. 5. A deer and a fox as symbols of today's IDF.

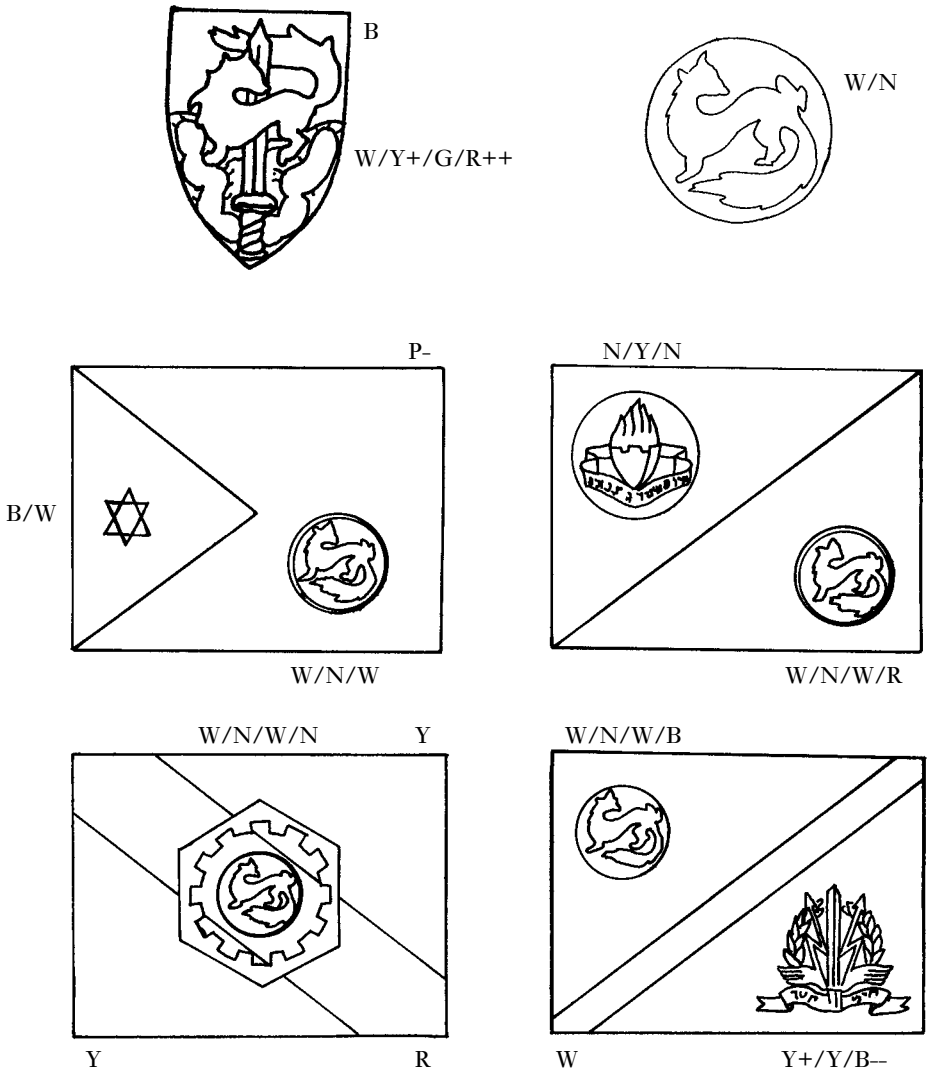


Fig. 5. [Continued.]

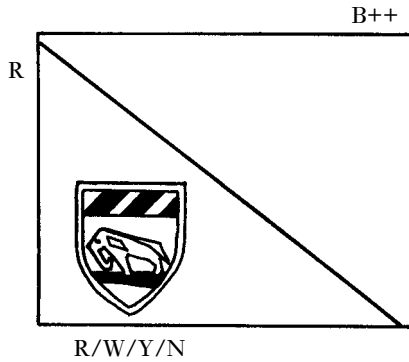


Fig. 6. A modern IDF flag depicting an elephant.

National Military Organization, known in its Hebrew abbreviation as “ETZEL” (an offshoot of the right-wing Revisionist Zionist Organization); and a relatively small group called The Fighters for the Freedom in Israel, or in its Hebrew abbreviation, “LEKHI” (or “the Stern Gang” which itself had split from the ETZEL). All three groups used their symbols extensively; the first two had ceremonial standards. After the establishment of the State, all military formations, previously split along ideological lines, were united within the single IDF structure. Therefore most of their symbols ceased to exist as military emblems. However, they continued to be used by respective political and ideological movements. The IDF’s present use of pre-State military symbols is very limited, perhaps partly intentionally — the purpose being to



Fig. 7. Olive branches are broadly used by the IDF today as an important symbol.

avoid ideological and political differences they still reflect. Otherwise their use would have unavoidably brought undesirable political in-fighting into the active armed forces.

Nevertheless, several regiments do make use of the Hagganah's former symbols of its so-called "striking battalions" (The Hebrew abbreviation: "PALMACH"), as shown in Figure 8.

## **Symbols of the Third Kind: New**

The third, or "ultramodern" kind of symbols of the IDF are first and foremost represented by the ceremonial banners of its main branches, which do not seem to carry any particularly significant national, religious, or other message (Fig. 9).

Among the largest pools of the modern symbols in the IDF are those of the Israel Air Force (IAF) almost all of whose units (wings, squadrons, etc.) use the same standard pattern of the IAF flag with the center roundel superseded by an emblem of the particular unit (Fig. 10). One exception in this pattern is shown in Figure 11 where the flag of the IAF military museum in the Negev, under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, employs the color "Jaffa Orange" — the truly new, popular national color of the People of Israel broadly found in modern civic as well as other symbols of the Jewish State.

The Israeli Navy employs a combination of modern and historic symbolic designs, with a clear slant towards the former (Fig. 12).

## **Conclusions**

One of the conclusions to be drawn from reviewing these examples is that the IDF appears to entirely ignore important Hebrew and Jewish symbols in spite of the fact that some of them have meaningful historic, military, and even "heroic" associations. One such symbol is obviously the Menorah which, one could have expected, would be broadly used within the IDF symbolism if only because of its profound association with the Maccabean revolt and resulting military victory. However, as discussed in detail in the author's other work, the Menorah has been, and still remains, an emblem which represents the authority predominantly of the Israeli State rather than a part of logos or graphic emblems of its various branches. Similarly, relatively rarely does the IDF employ the Magen David, this traditional Jewish emblem which is so broadly used in both Israel and the Diaspora.

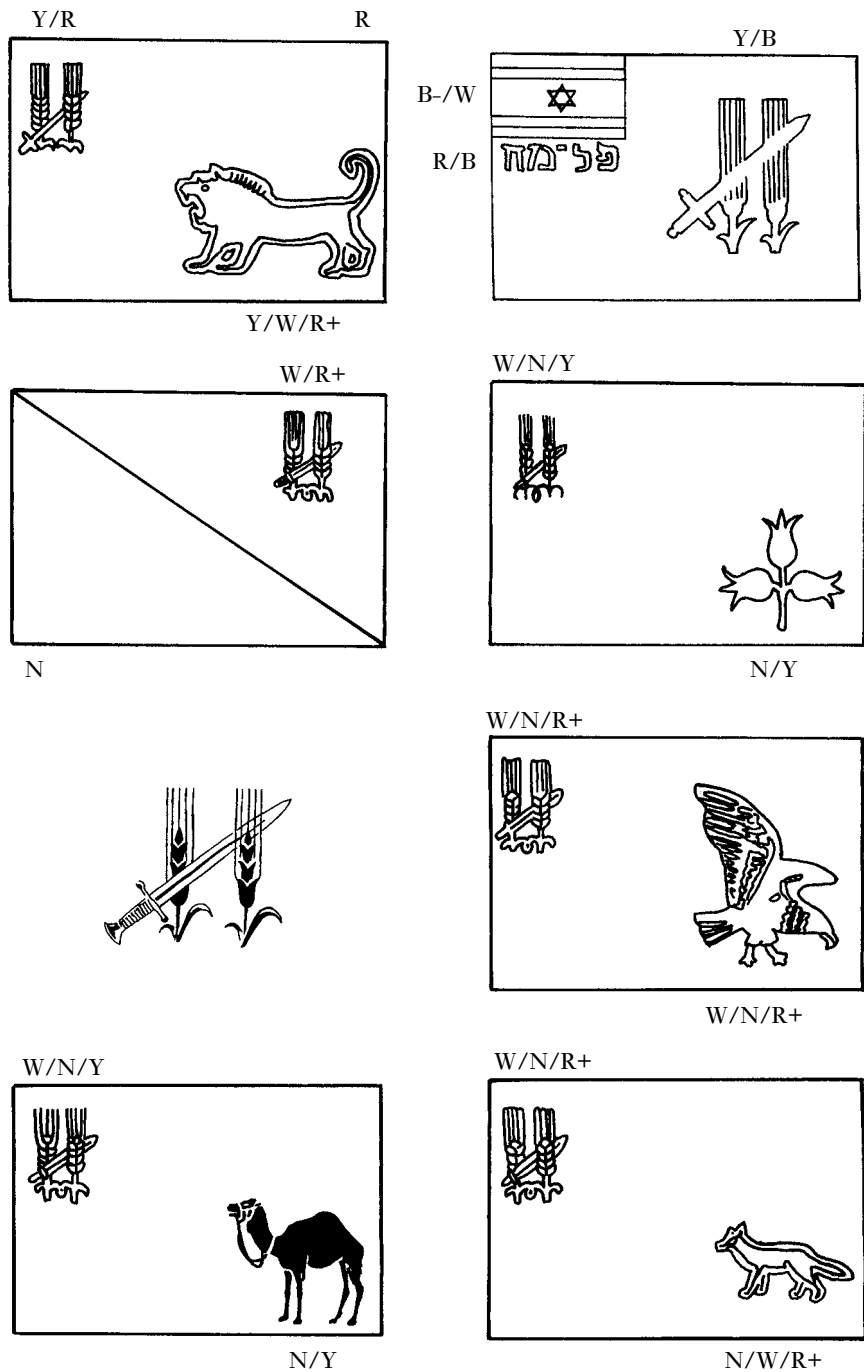
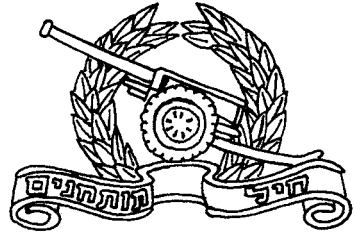
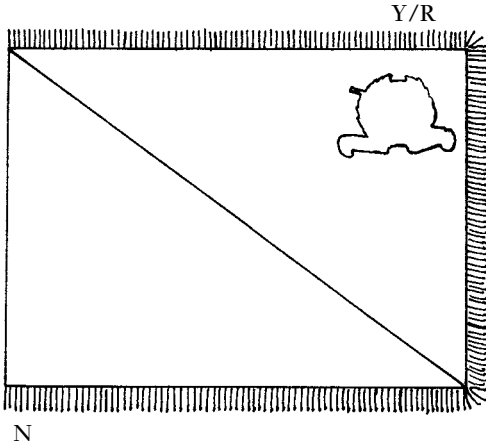


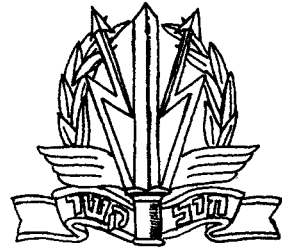
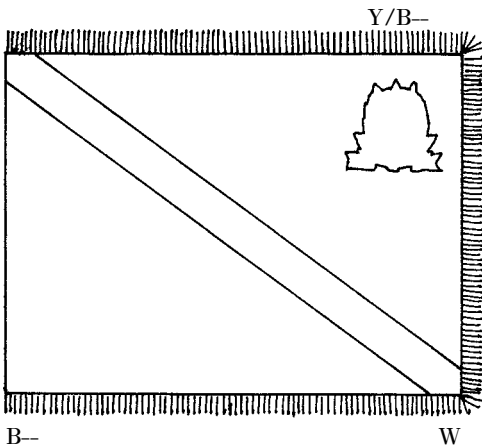
Fig. 8. The symbols of the Haganah's striking units on today's IDF regimental flags.





Badge and Finial

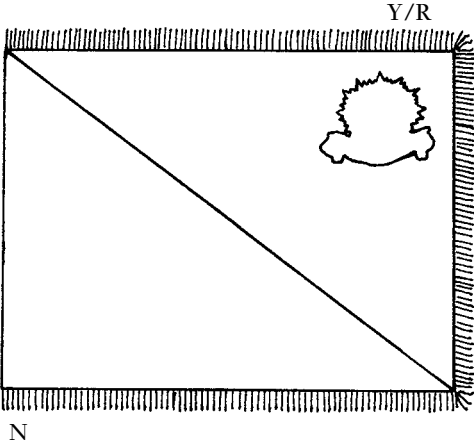
Fig. 9. The modern military symbolism in Israel: flags of IDF main services. Fig. 9a. Artillery Corps.



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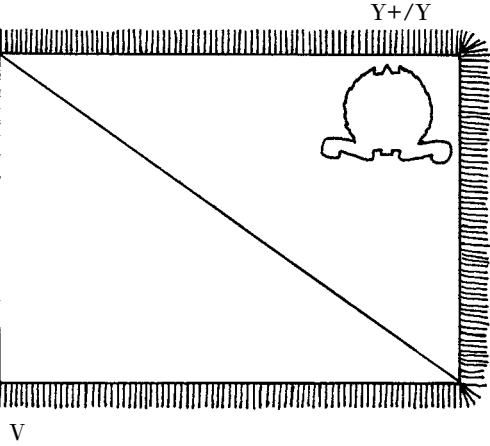
Fig. 9b. Signal and Electronics Corps.

In fact, the new symbols adopted by Israel's military raise an interesting question: after the establishment of the State of Israel, when the millennia-old Jewish prayers for the restoration of Hebrew sovereignty in the Land of Israel had been finally answered with the realization of the Zionist dream, has the link with the past been broken as far as Israeli symbolism is concerned? Considering that symbols used by every nation are reflections of its vision of history, culture, and political development, this question is not unimportant, although it is too complicated to be answered in this brief article. Never-



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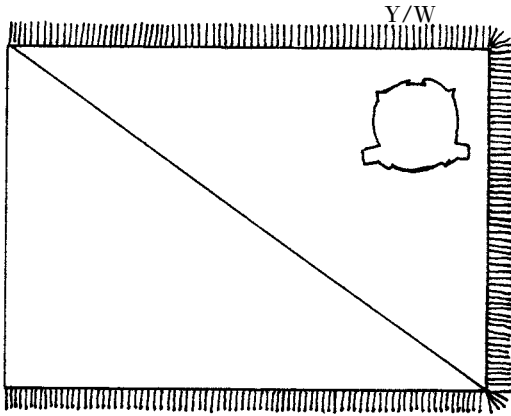
Fig. 9c. Engineer Corps.



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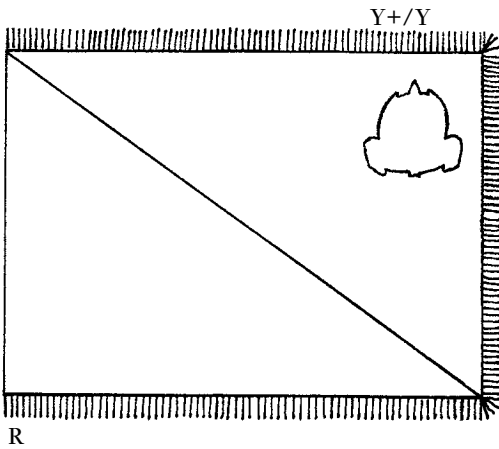
Fig. 9d. Infantry Corps.

theless, one fact seems to be obvious: a new Hebrew — with his/her new, uniquely Israeli “psyche,” culture, and symbols — has been created. The symbolism of the Israel Defense Forces serves as one confirmation of this.



Badge and Finial

Fig. 9e. General Service Corps.



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Fig. 9f. Ordnance Corps.

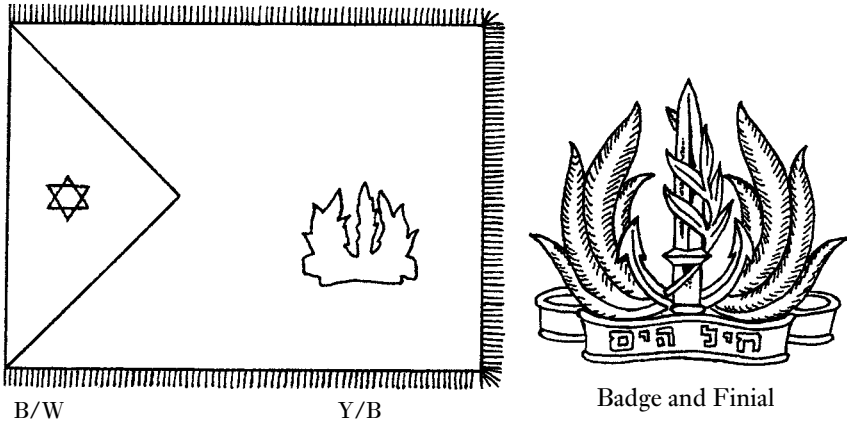


Fig. 9g. Navy.

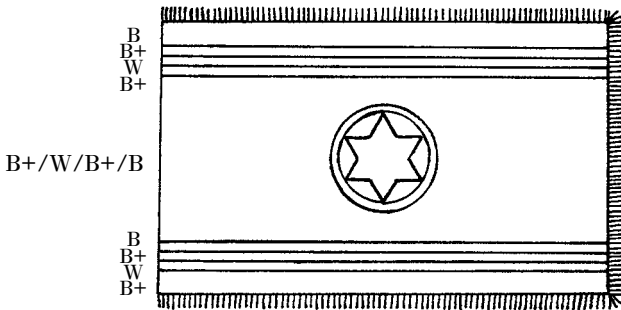
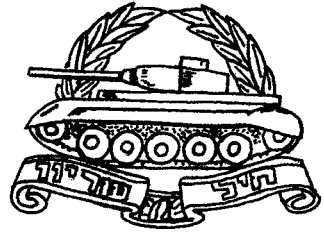
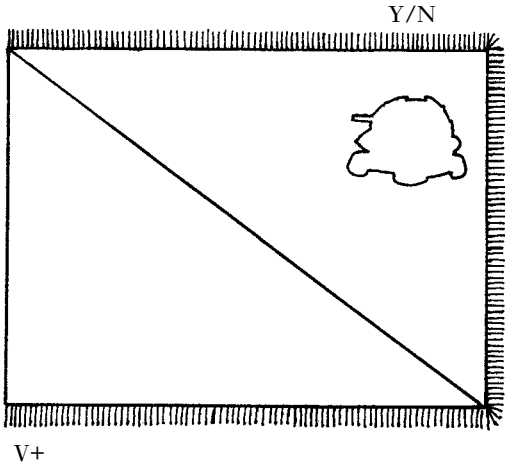
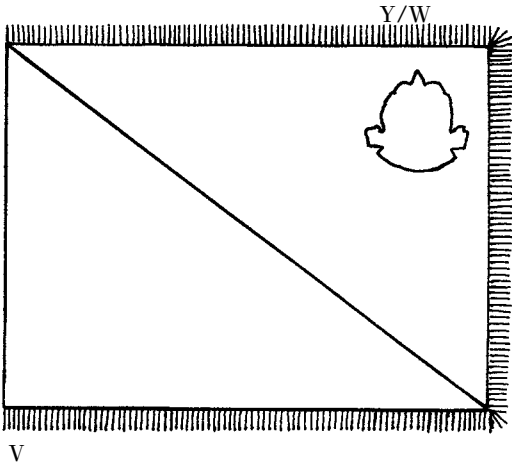


Fig. 9h. Air Force.



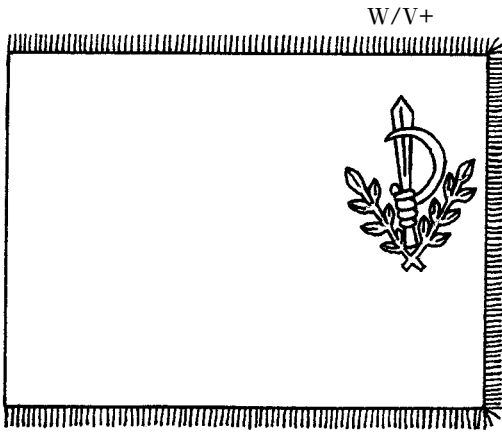
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Fig. 9i. Armored Corps.



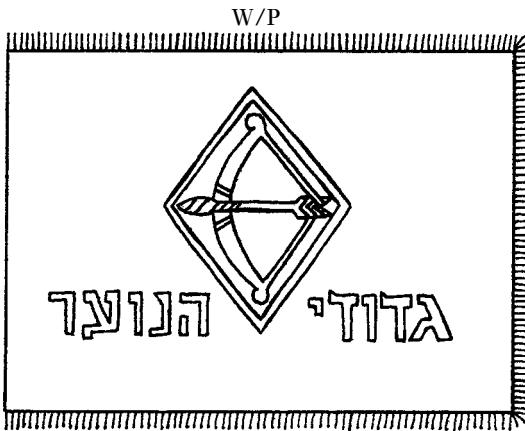
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Fig. 9j. Intelligence Corps.



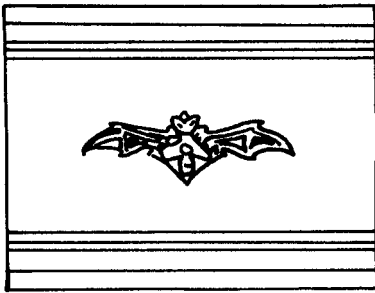
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Fig. 9k. NAKHAL.

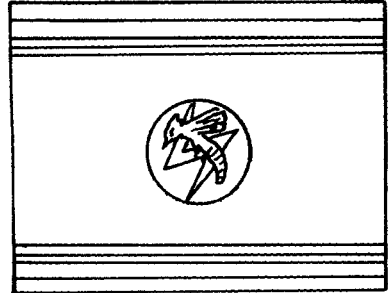


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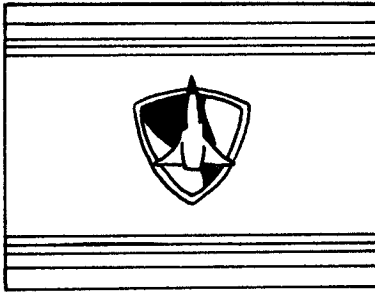
Fig. 9l. GADNA.



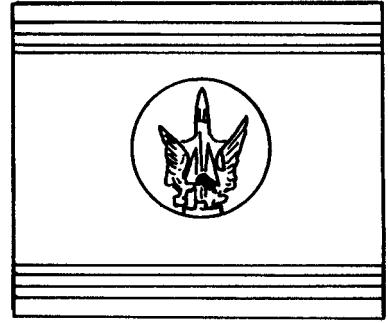
R/W/B+



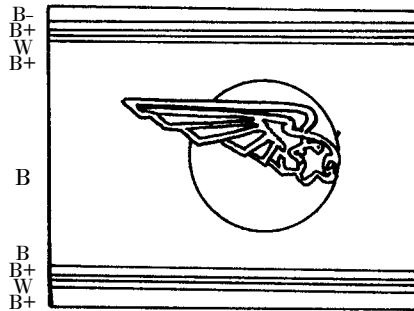
Y/N/W/R



W/N/Y/W



W/N/R



N/W/Or

Fig. 10. The modern military symbolism in Israel: flags of some of today's Israel's Air Force (IAF) wings and units.

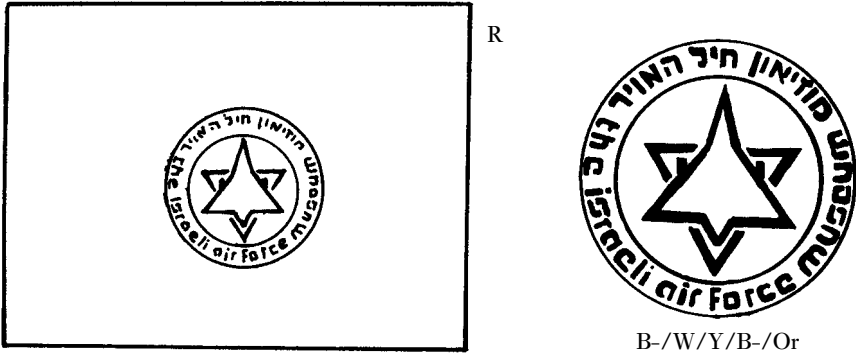


Fig. 11. Today's “true color” of the People of Israel: an orange flag with the rare Magen David device — the flag of the IAF Museum.

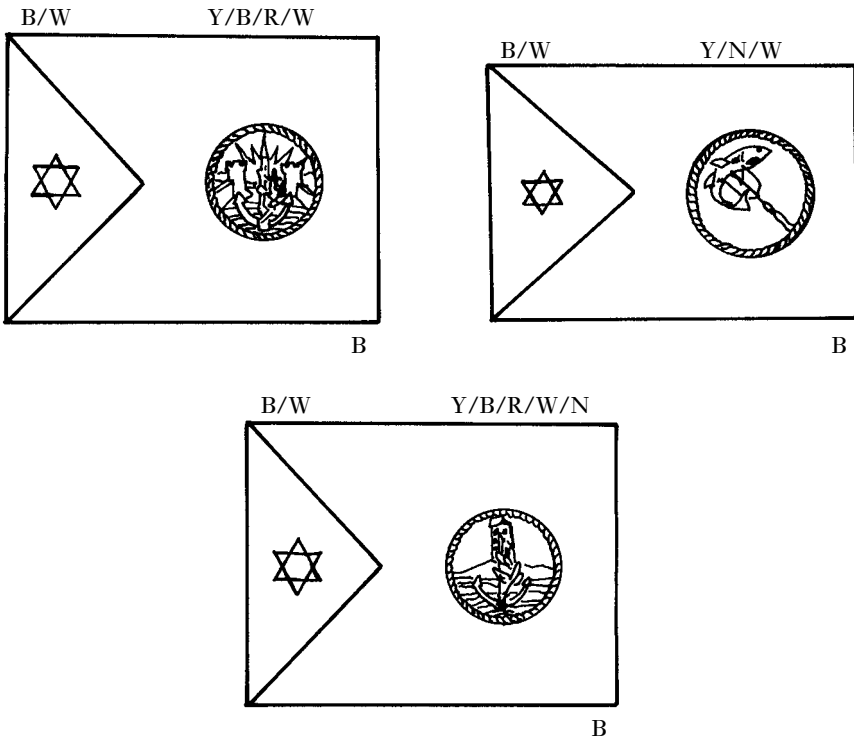


Fig. 12. The modern military symbolism in Israel: some flags of the Israeli Navy.