Signs and Symbols

The Zodiac

A frequently heard congratulatory expression, *mazal tov* literally means “good luck” or “good zodiac sign,” the Hebrew term *mazal* signifying both “luck” and “zodiac sign.” Decorated Jewish marriage contracts often include the saying, as do Torah binders fashioned from the swaddling cloth used at a male infant’s circumcision. The boy’s name, followed by the phrase “born under a good sign” and his zodiac symbol, is also painted or embroidered on the binder.

In the Bible, Israelites are forbidden to practice divination and soothsaying. The Talmud recounts that, when aged Abraham learned that he was going to have a son, he said: “I looked at my astrological [map] and I am not fit to have a son.” To this God replied “there is no constellation for Israel,” implying that Jews should not look to the stars to know their fates. In medieval Spain, where Christianity, Islam, and Judaism converged for a time, astronomical works were translated, studied, and authored by Jews who were also versed in astrology. Yet the great rabbinical authority Moses Maimonides repudiated astrology, which he viewed as falsehood and star worship.

So how do we explain the popularity of the theme of the zodiac in Jewish art? Jews adopted and adapted local practices early on. Ancient synagogue mosaics featuring the zodiac were allowed as long as they were not venerated. Divested of human representations, the cycle appeared in painted interiors of Polish wooden synagogues, which were later destroyed during the Holocaust. Depictions of the signs both display distinctive traits and emulate other traditions. The zodiac was incorporated into richly decorated works, as seen in this gallery, used to safeguard the Torah or emphasize its majesty, and to mark life-cycle events and holidays.

Benzion Sokiranski

Polish, born in 1887, died in 1953

Blessing of the New Moon, 1911

Oil on canvas

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 5148

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 1 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Arthur (Asher) Berlinger

German, born in 1899, died in 1944

Wilhelm Toch, binder

Czech, born in 1879, died in 1944

Jewish calendar for the year 5704 (1943/44), 1943

Theresienstadt (Terezín), Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic)

Printed paper with leather binding

Jewish Museum, New York, X1986-329

This Jewish calendar was created by Arthur Berlinger, one of the many Jewish artists the Nazis deported to the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto. Despite horrific conditions, many prisoners tried to keep their faith in secret. Decorated with the zodiac on its cover, the calendar also includes two full-page illustrations. One of them shows a man praying at a synagogue with walls that are decorated with stars—a depiction of the hidden prayer room at Theresienstadt, whose interior Berlinger painted.

Calendar illustration by Arthur (Asher) Berlinger showing the hidden synagogue in Theresienstadt

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 2 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Sefer Evronot (Book of Intercalations),
seventeenth century

Germany

Ink and gouache on paper

Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York

The *Sefer Evronot* includes tables and wheel charts that are used to calculate the Hebrew calendar and ensure that the holidays are celebrated on the right dates and in the correct seasons. Here Issachar, the father of one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, holds a sand clock, ascending a ladder to receive the secrets of the calendar directly from God.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 3 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Passover mahzor (festival prayer book), c. 1300

Germany

Ink and paint on parchment

Courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

The prayer for dew, recited on the first day of Passover, is accompanied by a poem that mentions the months and signs of the zodiac. Within each roundel is a depiction of a labor typically performed during the month and often its corresponding astrological symbol. These pairings come from Christian prayer books of the Middle Ages. On view are Sagittarius and two labors for winter months—feasting and warming oneself by the fire.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 8 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Prayer for the new month, 1827–28

Poland

Oil on canvas

Jewish Museum, New York, The Rose and Benjamin Mintz Collection, M 344

Gemini is rendered here as two men rowing a boat, a rare depiction that may relate to ancient illustrations of Castor and Pollux. They were the original Greco-Roman Gemini pair and the patrons of sailors. Virgo is shown as a mermaid, and Sagittarius is represented by a hunting scene. This prayer once hung in the Great Synagogue of Maków Mazowiecki in Poland, which was destroyed during the Holocaust.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 13 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Passover plate, eighteenth century

Germany

Engraved pewter

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 520

Inscribed in Hebrew on the plate's rim is the order of the ritual meal, or seder, held on the first night of Passover. The cycle of the zodiac is depicted within twelve roundels, with a thirteenth, its decoration partly erased, added by mistake. The central scene of Adam and Eve may tie their creation to the beginning of the Jewish calendar.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 14 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Taqi Pashutan

Active in Isfahan, Iran, early twentieth century

Tray, early twentieth century

Isfahan, Iran

Repoussé, engraved, traced, punched, and hammered tinned copper

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry F. Friedman, F 4297

The concentric Hebrew inscription, which runs along the plate's rim, is devoted to the zodiac. The verses are taken from "The Kingly Crown," a Hebrew poem by the medieval Spanish poet Solomon ibn Gabirol.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 15 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Redemption of the first born (pidyon ha-ben) plate, 1825

Lwów (Lviv, Ukraine)

Repoussé and engraved silver

Jewish Museum, New York, The Rose and Benjamin Mintz Collection , M 249

A month after birth, the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*—during which a firstborn son is redeemed from serving in the Temple—traditionally takes place. Originally a duty of every firstborn male, the sacred service was later restricted to members of the tribe of Levi and is redeemed with five shekels. These coins are sometimes presented on decorated plates. Larger trays are frequently used to present the baby during the ceremony.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 16 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Casket for circumcision implements, fifteenth or sixteenth century, additions 1737–38

Germany

Carved and painted fruitwood

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Zeiler in memory of Mrs. Nan Zeiler, JM 35-66a

Originally a secular medieval object, this box was probably later offered as a gift for the Jewish New Year, when the signs of the zodiac were added. From the front, the order of the signs on the casket follows the Jewish calendar, beginning with Libra in the month of Tishrei (September) and running from right to left. Later it was transformed yet again into a container for circumcision implements.

Bing and Grøndahl

Founded in Copenhagen, 1853

Presentation urn with a symbol of Virgo, 1853–94

Copenhagen

Painted ceramic

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Asher Rosenberg and Felix Gruen, 1983-231

This urn was a wedding gift and features the symbol of Virgo, under which the marriage took place. To the left of the reclining woman is a field of wheat. This symbol may relate to early depictions of Virgo as Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 18 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Ilya Schor

American, born in Galicia (now Poland/Ukraine), 1904, died in 1961

Marriage scene: Blessing of the bride and groom, 1958–59

New York

Gouache, cut paper, and gold leaf on board

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Mira Schor, 2004-63

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 19 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Georg Wilhelm Schedel

German, born in 1698, became a master 1722, died in 1762

Beaker for the Starkenburg Burial Society, 1747

Frankfurt

Engraved and parcel-gilt silver

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 3297

A burial society (*hevra kaddisha*) prepares the deceased for burial, sparing the family from this and other difficult tasks. Special beakers were often used by these societies at their banquets. Here, each medallion contains the name of a member of the Starkenburg Burial Society and his zodiac sign. Those who were Levites—from the Hebrew tribe of Levi, traditionally tasked with assisting the priests in the Temple of Jerusalem—opted instead for their traditional ewer symbol. The beaker was in use for many years, so every available space at the bottom has been filled with the names of new members.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 20 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Marriage contract (ketubbah), 1793

Bride: Simhah, daughter of Ephraim Prato

Groom: Jacob Solomon, son of Shabbetai Hayyim Matirini

Ancona, Italy

Ink and paint on cut-out parchment

Jewish Museum, New York, The Elkan N. Adler Collection, S 604

Instead of following the order of the calendar, each zodiac symbol is matched with one of a similar motif on the opposite side of the text. In this way, animal goes with animal, human with human; the exception is Pisces, which corresponds to Libra, since both signs feature pairs. The blank shield above was meant for the coats of arms of the bride and groom. (Wealthy Italian Jews frequently adopted unofficial emblems to imitate the local nobility.) Prepared in advance by the artist, the frame was later acquired by a couple that had no family crests, so it remains empty.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 21 11/14/19 11:48 AM

RIGHT TO LEFT

Torah binders with the signs of Scorpio, Sagittarius, and Capricorn, eighteenth century

Germany

Paint and ink on linen; ink on linen; linen embroidered with silk thread

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 2025, F 5036; Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community, D 262

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 22 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Torah binder with the sign of Scorpio, 1786

Germany

Paint and ink on linen

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 2025

Torah binder with the sign of Sagittarius, 1752

Germany

Ink on linen

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 5036

Torah binder with the sign of Capricorn, 1737

Germany

Linen embroidered with silk thread

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community, D 262

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 23 11/14/19 11:48 AM

IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM

Torah ark curtain, 1739–40

Probably Saarlouis, Lorraine (now Germany)

Silk embroidered with metallic and silk thread

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 5210

The lampstand with seven lamps and flanked by two olive trees at the center of this Torah ark curtain indicates that it was probably used during Hanukkah. These symbols are linked to the story of Zechariah's messianic vision, which is read on the Sabbath before the holiday. Sagittarius stands for the Hebrew month of Kislev, when Hanukkah is celebrated, and Aries for the month of Nissan, when it is believed the Temple will be reconstructed. Usually a ram, Aries is depicted as a lamb, or *taleh*, the Hebrew name for the sign.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 24 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Meir Schwartz

Nationality unknown, birth and death dates unknown

Purim wall decoration, 1927

Vienna

Paint and ink on paper mounted on cardboard

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 4308

The customary Hebrew expression “When Adar arrives all should be exceedingly joyful” appears atop this wall decoration. Fish representing the Purim month of Adar, whose symbol is Pisces, are flanked by related inscriptions; a traditional celebratory meal is pictured at center. The decoration was dedicated by the artist, Meir Schwartz, to Rabbi Jacob (Julius) Solomon Steinfeld of Vienna.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 26 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Purim plate with the symbol of Pisces, 1816–17

Germany

Engraved pewter

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 577

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 27 11/14/19 11:48 AM

RIGHT TO LEFT

Torah binder with the symbol of Gemini, 1811

Germany or Denmark

Paint on linen

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Miriam Schaar-Schloessinger, JM 1-53

Torah binder with the symbol of Virgo, 1813

Germany

Linen embroidered with silk thread

Jewish Museum, New York, The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 131

Influenced by Christian depictions of the sign, Virgo is represented by a woman wearing a feather hat and holding a cornucopia filled with flowers.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 28 11/14/19 4:30 PM

Probably Ze’ev Raban, designer

Israeli, born in Poland, 1890, died in 1970

Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts

Founded in Jerusalem, 1906

Torah crown, 1912–17

Repoussé, filigree, and pierced silver, semiprecious stones, and carved bone

Jewish Museum, New York, The Rose and Benjamin Mintz Collection, M 260

The work exemplifies the stylistic blend of East and West in the art created at the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts. Aquarius, Gemini, and Virgo are depicted in a classical style yet “orientalized.” The woman pouring water from a jar represents Aquarius and resembles depictions of the biblical story of Rachel meeting Jacob at the well.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 29 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Torah crown, between 1764–65 and 1773

Lwów (Lviv, Ukraine)

Repoussé, cast, pierced, engraved, and parcel-gilt silver, semiprecious stones, and glass

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 2585

Depicted in the middle circlet of this Torah crown, the zodiac cycle begins traditionally with Aries. The crown was created in two phases and is inscribed with the date that it was rededicated. The lower portion includes a number of inscriptions, from a couple in honor of their sons and in memory of their parents. Aquarius—*dli*, or pail, in Hebrew—is depicted here as a figure drawing water from a well.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 30 11/14/19 11:48 AM

Torah shield, 1800–1801, with later repairs

Lwów (Lviv, Ukraine)

Repoussé and parcel-gilt silver, semiprecious stones, and gold inlay

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 2280

In this Torah shield Scorpio is rendered as a lizard, since scorpions were not well-known creatures in Europe. The sign was also known to take the shape of a turtle or a dragon.

Zodiac_Labels_7p.indd 31 11/14/19 11:48 AM