



**ARTSPACE AT MASKIT: FOR GROWNUPS**  
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ArtSpace is a MASKIT program that teaches students foundational Jewish knowledge through arts-based projects. The current unit focuses on ancestral Torah stories, prehistory, and history, starting from early Jewish ancestors (~15th century BCE) up through the story of Purim (~5th century BCE).

## **LESSON: SHIVTEI YISRAEL & SALT DOUGH SYMBOLS**

**Overview:** This lesson teaches the history of the twelve shevatim (tribes) of Israel, their symbols, and continues on the theme of ancestry.

**Create:** Make salt dough (knead two cups of flour, one cup of salt, and one cup of water; add flour as needed) to sculpt or etch the symbols of the tribes.


**Key Terms:** Shevet שֵׁבֶט [Shin-Vet-Tet] | Shevatim | Shivtei Yisrael

**Background:** Yisrael is another name for Ya'akov, one of our ancestors. His descendents (that's us!) are called "B'nei Yisrael," which means children of Yisrael. The descendents of the sons of Ya'akov and his wives Leah and Rachel, and maids Bilha and Zilpah, became the Shevatim: the twelve tribes of Yisrael. Our Jewish ancestors were part of Shevatim, which are like big families. Each שֵׁבֶט camped together and lived on a specific portion of land in Eretz Yisrael. In ancient Jewish times, we knew which שֵׁבֶט people belonged to, but we don't anymore. The Beit Hamikdash was constructed in Yerushalayim, which was in the tribal land of Yehudah. Since Yerushalayim is the Jewish capital of our story and our people, we now identify most strongly with שֵׁבֶט Yehudah. Although some Jewish communities descend from other shevatim, we all call ourselves Yehudim. This is where the word "Jewish" comes from!

## The Shevatim and their Symbols:

NAME OF THE שבט	SYMBOL
Re'uvén [Reh - oo - <u>vein</u> ]	Mandrake, plant, sun
Shimon [Shee- <u>moan</u> ]	Wall, tower, town
Levi [Lay- <u>vee</u> ]	Breastplate, water pitcher, menorah
Yehudah [Yeh-hoo- <u>dah</u> ]	Lion, harp, crown
Yissaschar [Yee-sah- <u>char</u> ]	Donkey, man with heavy sack, star + sun + moon,
Z'vulun [Zeh-voo- <u>loon</u> ]	Ship, sea
Gad [God]	Tents, camp
Asher [Ah- <u>Sher</u> (like <i>Cher</i> )]	Olive tree
Dan [Don]	Scales of justice, snake
Naftali [Nahf-tah- <u>lee</u> ]	Gazelle, deer, fruits
Yosef [Yo- <u>seif</u> ]	Wheat, palm tree
Binyamin [Been-ya- <u>meen</u> ]	Wolf

Note: Although the twelve sons of Israel are generally used in Jewish imagery and symbolism, the twelve tribes were actually slightly different. Levi was not a tribe but instead became the class of ritual leaders, and neither was Yosef the name of a tribe. Instead, his two sons, Ephraim and Menasheh, replaced Yosef and Levi as the tribal names.

**ART RESOURCE:** Visual Chart of the symbols  [TribeHebrew.jpg](#)

Also explore: [Marc Chagall Windows](#), [Shevatim Stamps](#), [Mosaics](#).

**DISCUSSION TOPICS:** ∟ Why do Shivtei Yisrael have symbols? ∟ What important symbols do you have in your life? ∟ Which, if any, of these symbols are specifically Jewish? ∟ What makes a symbol unique? ∟ Which is your favorite שבט name? ∟ Which symbol do you think tells a story? ∟ Which symbol would you want to write a midrash about?