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THE MENORAH: CULT, HISTORY, AND MYTH EXHIBITING THE PAST AND FUTURE OF CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

Abstract

La Menorà: Culto, Storia E Mito, The Menorah: Worship, History and Myth was a monumental exhibition mounted by the Vatican Museums and the Jewish Museum of Rome in the Spring of 2017. Bringing together many of the most important artifacts relating to the history of the biblical lampstand in both Jewish and Christian traditions, this exhibition marks a milestone in Jewish-Catholic engagement, and was an active agent in that process. This article presents this act of museological diplomacy, describing many of its most significant artifacts as well as the historiographic challenges presented by this exhibition.

The large banner announcing *La menorà: culto, storia e mito (Menorah: Worship, Memory, and Myth)* on St. Peter's Square was striking (fig. 1).¹ Hanging to the left of the basilica, above Bernini's Braccio di Carlo Magno (Charlemagne), it showed a detail of the Arch of Titus relief of the Spoils of Jerusalem—Roman soldiers bearing the biblical lampstand into the Eternal City—in this case, into the depths of the Holy See. The menorah itself was golden, in contrast to the deep grays of the bearers as illustrated on the banner. This gold, known from the biblical text itself, reflects the discovery of the original yellow ochre pigment of the menorah by my Arch of Titus Project in 2012.²

Earlier generations would have stood in wonder at the sight of this menorah and the depth and conviviality of this exhibition. Truth is, I felt a bit of a lump and great excitement when I first saw the golden menorah—"my" golden menorah—from a distance across St. Peter's Square. I was tickled as I found myself humming the flippant and rather catchy Hebrew song

by Yitzhak Yitzhak, "All Roads Lead to Rome."³ This ditty was sung to soldiers of the Jewish Brigade of the British Army when they participated in the liberation of Rome in 1944—a kind of proto-Israeli USO show. According to this song, "a couple of sabras from Canaan, Ruth and Amnon from the Jezreel Valley, went on a trip that had never been done before" to Rome. There these sabra soldiers in love "made out" under the Arch of Titus at midnight. They visited Saint Peter's and "The pope and all the cardinals could never dream that we were here."

Written near the time of the fall of Mussolini, the lightheartedness of this song is still startling. For Roman Jews, the Vatican was most often a place of fear and oppression to be avoided.⁴ At that moment the local Jewish community was decimated; soon after the defeat of Italian Fascism, Jewish Holocaust refugees had begun streaming into Rome, many hoping to find their way to Eretz Israel, heal themselves, and create their own Ruths and Amnons. The wartime chief rabbi had secluded himself at the Vatican after converting to Catholicism. Generations had learned to fear the pope and the Church. Simple Jews (like my grandparents) had crossed the street rather than pass near a church, my father never forgetting that he had been beaten by ethnic Catholics in 1940s Boston for being a "Christ killer." With precious exceptions, Catholicism worldwide was seen as an oppressor. For our ancestors (meaning our parents and grandparents), the joint exhibition in Saint Peter's Square, with the golden menorah in full view, might have seemed a near messianic sight—or at least a subject for jaundiced curiosity.

* For Peg Olin, with much light.

¹ *La Menorà: Culto, Storia E Mito, The Menorah: Worship, History and Myth*, curated by Alessandra Di Castro, Francesco Leone, Arnold Nesselrath, Jewish Museum of Rome and Vatican Museums, May–July, 2017; Exhibition catalog: Francesco Leone, ed., Milan: Skira, 2017. 375 pp. + illus., €39.

² The first announcement of this work appeared in Elisabetta Povoledo, "Technology Identifies Lost Color at Roman Forum," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2012, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/arts/design/menorah-on-arch-of-titus-in-roman-forum-was-rich-yellow.html>. For the technical

report, see Heinrich Piening, "Examination Report: The Polychromy of the Arch of Titus Menorah Relief," *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* 6 (2013): 26–29.

³ I discuss this song in, "Titus You're Gone, But We're Still Here, Am Yisrael Chai: Jewish Pilgrimage to the Arch of Titus," *The Arch of Titus: From Rome to Jerusalem and Back*, eds. S. Fine and J. Wisse (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, forthcoming). It may be heard at: <http://www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=786>.

⁴ For a general overview, David I. Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).



Fig. 1. Steven Fine, *La menorà* in Saint Peter's Square, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.

La Menorà: Culto, Storia e Mito was an exhibition organized jointly by the Vatican Museums and the Jewish Museum of Rome from May to July 2017, and there were galleries on both campuses. The larger part was displayed, of course, at the Vatican, and a smaller assemblage of masterpieces was exhibited at the Jewish Museum, which is located within the Great Synagogue complex in the historic Rome Ghetto. The two lobes were unified through careful design decisions that also solved spatial issues caused by the exhibition's venues: at the Vatican a long ascending and majestic hallway and at the Jewish Museum a small gallery for temporary exhibitions. These complexities were resolved by dividing the galleries in two using meandering dividers. These evoked a long scroll reminiscent of an early modern Esther scroll (fig. 2). The two venues were reunified in the beautifully produced full color bilingual catalog.

Both sites opened with a citation from Exodus 25: 31–40 in a modern Hebrew script. The Jewish Museum exhibition consisted of two galleries, the first focusing on the menorah in Jewish history, including discoveries from the Jewish catacombs in Rome and the Lisbon Bible (1482), with its iconic carpet page showing the menorah of Zechariah 9, which influenced the design of the Israel State symbol in 1949. There were ancillary but significant artifacts that are important for Jewish history at both sites. For example, the Jewish Museum display featured a gladiator's helmet decorated with a date palm, the standard Roman icon for Judaea during the first century (fig. 3). At the Vatican, a Torah scroll set out on a reading table, a Kabbalistic Tree manuscript, and an exquisite Torah curtain reflected a secondary goal of introducing Judaism to a broad audience. Quite intelligently, the curators at the Jewish Museum added labels throughout the permanent exhibition that identified many more menorahs, and thus integrated the temporary exhibition into the larger context of the museum.

The second gallery at the Jewish Museum contained European painting, including the Israel Museum's version of Poussin's *The Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem* (1625–1628). At the transition between the galleries was a facsimile of a thirteenth-century mosaic wall inscription from St. John of the Lateran, which describes the presence of the biblical menorah and the Ark of the Covenant within the Papal sanctuary. Medieval

literary sources place the Ark and “candelabrum” in the Sanctum Sanctorum, the pope's chapel at the Lateran. In all, the Jewish Museum exhibition was a kind of summary statement for the larger project at the Vatican. Jewish and Christian artifacts were generally exhibited in separate galleries, reflecting a message of parallel but friendly development and cautiously maintaining the distinction between the two. These arrangements reflected an identity decision consistent with modernist yet traditionalist attitudes toward general culture held by the Orthodox rabbinate of Rome, and thus by the communal museum. It is an approach expressed by the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni in his preface to the splendidly produced catalog, where he describes “two parallel paths, Jewish and Christian, which meet around this symbol, at times a sign of affinity and respect, at times a signal of conflict...”⁵

Stretching from the Exodus to the present, continuities were a central theme of *La Menorà*—from Moses to modern Israel and from Judaism to Christianity, and the continuity of myths regarding the current location of the Second Temple menorah from the Arch of Titus to the modern world. Each of the eight galleries of the Vatican exhibition was separated by a string veil, and each of the eight galleries was painted a different color. Continuity between the galleries was maintained by gold stripes at the top and bottom edges of a temporary wall used to divide the long corridor and by careful concern for chronology, which was presented according to both the Christian and Jewish dating systems. This decision, as far as I know, unique to this exhibition, reflected the sensitivity of the curators to things theological, including dating systems.

The first gallery served as an introduction to the Jewish content of the exhibition. Called “Visualizing the Menorah: Iconography and Symbols in the Temple and Jewish Art,” this gallery contained synagogue textiles; the Magdala ashlar (which wisely was not overinterpreted, as has been the case in recent articles); fourth-century gold glass from the Roman Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellus bearing the image of the Tabernacle (called the “House of Peace” in a Latin inscription), which is generally thought to be Jewish; and even a modern Israeli comic book *Uri-On*, an Israeli Superman with a menorah emblazoned on his chest.

The remainder of the exhibition was divided into seven chronological sections. The second gallery focused on “The Menorah in Ancient Art: From

⁵ Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, *La Menorà* exhibition Catalog, Unpaginated page Front matter 5, 2017.



Fig. 2. Steven Fine, Entrance to the exhibition at the Jewish Museum, 2017, Rome, Photograph.



Fig. 3. Steven Fine, Exhibition at the Jewish Museum, 2017, Rome, Photograph.

Jerusalem to Rome.” The centerpiece was a full-scale model based on a cast of the Arch of Titus spoils panel that was created for Mussolini’s Museum of Roman Civilization. It is flanked on the left by a bust of Titus and a capital from a fourth-century Caesarea Maritima synagogue. This gallery contained a wealth of objects from Israeli collections, including the earliest menorah image, a coin of Mattathias Antigonus (39 BCE), the Jewish Quarter graffito (pre-66 CE), the bronze Reifenberg oil lamp, and a Roman gold glass from the Jewish catacombs (which also appears on the cover of the catalog). Seeing the “Peace upon Israel” basin from Spain was a real treat, as it seldom leaves Toledo.

The magnificent fourteenth-century Mentorella Church candelabrum that stood directly opposite the Arch of Titus menorah was exhibited here for the first time ever (fig. 4). This beautiful piece, which was brought from a secluded church in the mountains outside Rome, was apparently placed in this

gallery because its base was modeled on the base of the menorah pictured on the Arch of Titus. The exhibition catalog represented this lampstand as “of Jewish origin,”⁶ but there is no warrant for such an identification. Also worthy of note was Pietro Santi Bartoli’s splendid, often correct and highly influential reconstruction drawing of the Spoils panel (late seventeenth century) and a model of the Arch of Titus made for Mussolini’s Museum of Roman Civilization; the arch was reconstructed in 1821 by Pius VII. This rebuilding was part of Pius’s reassertion of Papal authority after the departure of Napoleon and the renewed enclosure of Rome’s Jews to the ghetto.

Passing through the string veil, visitors entered the medieval gallery, “From Late Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century.” Beginning with funerary inscriptions from the Jewish catacombs of Rome, this hall also held the recently discovered gold medallion uncovered near the southern wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem

⁶ *La Menorà*, fig. II.10, 312.



Fig. 4. Steven Fine, “The Menorah in Ancient Art: From Jerusalem to Rome,” *La menora* exhibition, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.

(ca. seventh century) and a large Christian candelabrum from the cathedral in Paderborn (ca. 1300). This hall contained both Christian and Jewish manuscript images of the biblical lampstand, which were placed side by side, visually asserting continuity between the Jewish and Christian pieces. Of particular interest were the manuscripts of Procopius’s sixth-century *History of the Gothic War*, which describe the transfers of artifacts from Solomon’s and Herod’s temples from Rome to France and North Africa. Modern scholars and mythologists have associated such transfers with Justinian’s construction of his Nea Church in Jerusalem, although this last notion is a modern construct.

“The Menorah during the Renaissance” was next and featured a magnificent “First Sketch for *The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple*” (second half of the sixteenth century), a brilliantly colored Torah shrine curtain (*parokhet*) from Padova (mid-sixteenth century) and two massive—and until recently, barely noticed—candelabras by Maso di Bartolomeo from the Cathedral of Saint Stefano in Prato (fig. 5). After

the ascent to the end of the gallery, the exhibition continued on to the second side of the dividing wall.

However, before viewers made the turn, they came upon a large screen on which Rabbi Di Segni offered an explicit narrative in Italian with English subtitles of the Jewish themes of the exhibition, drawing a continuous line from Moses to modern Israel. Perhaps even more significant than his very accessible discourse was the accompanying music, which provided ambiance for the entire gallery. Selections included Italian Jewish liturgical melodies, which resonated with Catholic liturgical music and made sense in Bernini’s edifice. More startling, though, was Naomi Shemer’s iconic anthem of Israeli civil religion, “Jerusalem of Gold.” It is surprising that there was no parallel “Christian discourse” video, whose inclusion might have balanced this element of the presentation, giving an explicit celebratory voice to the complexities of the project.

The exhibition continued with “The Seventeenth Century and the Baroque World” (fig. 6). Here one was confronted with two dazzling silver Christian cande-



Fig. 5. Steven Fine, “The Menorah during the Renaissance,” *La menora* exhibition, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.



Fig. 6. Steven Fine, “The Seventeenth Century and the Baroque World,” *La menora* exhibition, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.

labras from the cathedral in Mallorca, and Poussin’s 1638 version of *The Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem* (in Vienna). A wide selection of Jewish liturgical artifacts that referenced the menorah, mainly Italian, followed in “The Menorah in Jewish Decorative Art and Ceremonial Ornaments: From the Ghetto Period to Emancipation” (fig. 7). The path continued to “The Nineteenth Century,” which highlighted the Visigoth sack of Rome. This was splendidly represented in a painting by Karl Pavlovich Bryullov’s *Sack of Rome by Genseric in 455* (1833–1835), now in St. Petersburg (fig. 8). Perhaps most fascinating was a large stone discovered in the garden of the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1994. This nineteenth-century fake relates that three brothers executed under Emperor Honorius “found the relics of Jerusalem, the candelabrum and the Ark, in the Tiber,” and like a treasure map tells how to find them. This hoax was clearly part of an attempt to support plans to dredge the Tiber in search of the lampstand during the nineteenth century. The notion that the menorah was dumped in the Tiber was then



Fig. 7. Steven Fine, "From the Ghetto Period to Emancipation," *La menora* exhibition, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.



Fig. 8. Karl Pavlovich Bryullov, *Sack of Rome by Genseric in 455*, 1833–1835, Vatican. Photograph by Steven Fine in 2017.



Fig. 9. Internet meme based upon a photograph of Benjamin Netanyahu and Pope Francis, December 2, 2013. <https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-zky97PTyb-c/WGj2ICWOMAI/AAAAAAAAABu88/cqPIJPwOomsSMcimxcocQLxDDAexeWLjwCLcB/s1600/Netanyahu%2Band%2BPope%2BFrancis.jpg>

widespread, and one nineteenth-century opinion, not mentioned in the exhibition or the catalog, has it that Constantine dumped the menorah into the river from the Milvian Bridge, a piece with his conversion to Christianity. The legends associated with the Visigoths are the only literary traditions—beyond the Bible itself—to find expression in *La Menorà*. This point is worthy of reflection.

The Procopius stories served here as stand-ins for the contemporary urban myth that the Second Temple menorah is somehow hidden at the Vatican. This is a new fable, built upon older traditions, and is alive and quite well—as I detailed in my recent monograph.⁷ The myth of the menorah at the Vatican—that somewhere in its deepest basement the Vatican is hiding the menorah and other Temple vessels took flight particularly in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1964). Who could believe that the Church could change so profoundly? Developing among the New York based

Orthodox survivor community and spreading across all sections of world Jewry, this urban myth hovered over the entire exhibition and much of the press coverage. In fact, mentioning that I was reviewing this show, one of my Facebook viewers immediately asked, “Did you find the menorah?” I am reminded of a meme that made the rounds a few years ago when Benjamin Netanyahu visited the Vatican and presented Francis with a silver menorah. The meme added a caption in which Netanyahu says: “It’s like this one, only bigger” (fig. 9). The menorah myth was clearly the elephant in the room throughout this show, although it was only mentioned explicitly, and refuted, in the audio guide. Otherwise, it was present in its very omission, silently refuted through the vast goodwill that this exhibition and its prize location expressed at every turn.

The display in the last hall focused on the menorah “From the First World War Period to the Twenty-First Century.” This being the Vatican, this section

⁷ *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 185–207.



Fig. 10. Steven Fine, "From the First World War Period to the Twenty-First Century," *La menora* exhibition, 2017, Vatican, Photograph.

opened with an image of particular significance to Pope Francis, Chagall's *Le Christ et le peintre* (1951, fig. 10). Although (alas) lacking a menorah, it does illustrate a Sabbath lamp. The highpoint in this hall was the exhibit showing the establishment of the State of Israel and the choice of the Arch of Titus menorah as its national symbol. The Jewish content of this exhibition followed closely *By the Light of the Menorah: Story of a Symbol*, an exhibition at the Israel Museum marking the fiftieth anniversary of the State of Israel in 1998. This was a fine statement/anthology of mostly Israeli scholarship of its age, and of Israeli civil religion. It leads, I would suggest, naively from the Bible, to the cultural koine of the Diaspora, to modern Israeli culture. A small exhibition mounted by the much lamented Daniella Di Castro at the Jewish Museum in Rome, *From Jerusalem to Rome, and Back: The Journey of the Menorah from Fact to Myth* (2008) was the immediate model for the Italian and some of the Jewish elements of the *La Menorà* exhibition. The

exquisite bilingual catalog is replete with introductory essays, making extensive use of both *By the Light of the Menorah* and even my own *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Harvard, 2016). From a scholarly standpoint the essays on Christian art are the most significant contribution of this volume, as they focus attention on many of the most significant Christian portrayals of the biblical lampstand for English and Italian readers.

La Menorà was a fusion of these models with interests specific to Rome, the history of Roman Jewry, and, most of all, the Jewish-Catholic relationship. There is no engagement, for example, with Samaritan menorahs, Karaite menorahs, medieval precursors of the Chabad menorah, or with Byzantine/Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, or Masonic candelabras. The wealth of medieval and early modern Christian candelabras and of Western paintings exhibited is nonetheless astonishing, and this is the really new element of this show. Though it used rather sparse labeling and few

literary sources, the exhibition asserted a commonality that stretches far beyond the formal use of the biblical lampstand by each community. It elided the supersession of Judaism and Christianity's absorption of its most essential symbols that this use of Tabernacle/Temple imagery in Church contexts clearly expressed through the ages. We err by calling the Christian candelabras "menorahs," Judaizing the Christian, and in some ways Christianizing the Jewish.

La Menorà was not the first exhibition to highlight both Jewish menorahs and Christian candelabras. The first was *Monumenta Judaica: 2000 Jahre Geschichte und Kultur der Juden am Rhein*, a show mounted at the Stadtmuseum in Cologne in 1963–1964, which was a heroic attempt to create a shared past—and thus a shared future—for Jews and Christians in the “new Germany.”⁸ *La Menorà* had a similar goal. It was part of a larger, anti-lachrymose tradition in scholarship that asserts a happier past than actually existed—one that was also keenly expressed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2016 *Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven*, and in many of its predecessors.⁹ Similar to the Stadtmuseum in Cologne 1963–1964 exhibition and its post-Holocaust agenda, our show was an assertion of the new relationship between the Church and Judaism, attempting to heal nearly 2000 years of explicit theological supersessionism and abuse. The comments of Cardinal Karl Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews well express this goal: “In the cultural field there are wide opportunities for collaboration between Jews and Christians, above all in relation to Jewish roots of the Christian faith.... The exhibition on the menorah will therefore

provide a further boost to the knowledge of our shared patrimony....”¹⁰ As we have seen, Rabbi Di Segni is far less theological in his approach, and carefully avoided the very sense of Judaism as Christian precursor and “shared patrimony” that motivated Cardinal Koch. Rather, his narrative was one of Jewish continuity from the Bible to modern Israel. The two goals are intertwined in this exhibition, the sparse labeling allowing each community to tell its own story—but to do it together.

Above all, *La Menorà* was a strong, public, and welcome statement by Francis's Vatican of a fundamentally changed and developing relationship with Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel in an age when anti-Israel attitudes and more traditional anti-Semitism are rife, even in Italy, and even within the church. Beyond the magnificent artifacts assembled, the fine exhibition design, and the impressive catalog, the most significant single object in *La Menorà* was the huge banner with the golden Arch of Titus menorah fluttering in St. Peter's Square. Today, “the pope and all the cardinals” know, indeed, “that we are here.”

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⁸ Garding, Maria, Kurt Hackenberg, and Konrad Schilling. *Monumenta Judaica: 2000 Jahre Geschichte Und Kultur Der Juden Am Rhein*; [eine Ausstellung Im Kölnischen Stadtmuseum, 15. Oktober 1963, 15. März 1964]; (Köln: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1965).

⁹ Barbara D. Boehm and Melanie Holcomb. *Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); See also Edward Rothstein, *Jerusalem Syndrome at the Met*, *Tablet Magazine*, February 6, 2016, [https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2017/02/jerusalem-syndrome-](https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2017/02/jerusalem-syndrome-at-the-met/)

[at-the-met/](https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2017/02/jerusalem-syndrome-at-the-met/) Larry Silver, review of *Jerusalem, 1000–1400: Every People under Heaven*, edited by Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb, *IMAGES*, 10, 126–134 (2017), DOI:10.1163/18718000-12340067 and Steven Fine, “How Modern Museums Make Use of Jewish Culture,” *Tablet Magazine*, February 20, 2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2017/02/how-modern-museums-make-use-of-jewish-culture/>.

¹⁰ *La Menorà* exhibition Catalog, Unpaginated page, front matter, 7, 2017.