



When Yosa Meshita Took the Temple Menorah A Rabbinic Legend

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Fragment of a synagogue screen, Ashkelon, fifth–seventh centuries. Photograph by Steven Fine.

The rabbis of late antiquity were well aware that after the destruction of the Second Temple the most precious “sacred vessels” had been taken to Rome.¹ Classical rabbinic literature records numerous legends of the destruction including discussions of the fate of the sacred vessels, including “a golden menorah.” At times preserving distant memories of the war, these stories are most significant for the ways that later generations lived with and interpreted the continuing meaning of this national trauma. In this essay I will employ anthropological/folklore approaches better to understand rabbinic texts. That is, I examine the human characters who wrote, performed, heard, and read these traditions in late antiquity (Hasan-Rokem 2003; Fine in press). I focus on the authorship and reception of rabbinic tradition by late antique audiences by undertaking a “thick description” of a story preserved in *Genesis Rabbah*, a collection of homiletical midrashim assembled in the Galilee near the turn of the fifth century CE. I focus on the treason of a certain Yosa Meshita, suggesting contexts in which this tale “lived,” situating it within the world in which it was authored, performed, and achieved its literary form.

The story of Yosa Meshita explains how the menorah was carted off to Rome with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the summer of 70 CE, an event memorialized on the Arch of Titus in Rome (figs. 1–2). In doing so, this text plays

an important role in rabbinic legends of the destruction, drawing out the theme of Jewish culpability and connecting Jerusalem and Rome. Within the world of the storyteller, it serves as a warning against complicity with the empire, using this tale as a lesson of continuing significance in his own world. The story appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 65:27:²

1. Another interpretation: “And he smelled the smell of his garments (*begadav*; root: *b-g-d*)” (*Gen* 27:27).
2. “The smell of His traitors (*bogdav*; root: *b-g-d*).”
3. For example, [the case of] Yosa Meshita and Yaqim man of Tserurot:
4. Yosa Meshita:
5. When the haters (*sonim*) desired to enter the Temple Mount,
6. They [the enemies] said: “Let one of them [the Jews] enter first.”
7. They [the enemies] said to him [Yosa]: “Enter and whatever you bring out is yours.”
8. So he went in and brought out a golden menorah.
9. They said: “It is not fitting for an ordinary person to use this. Go again and whatever you bring out will be yours.”
10. He did not accept.
11. Rabbi Pinhas said: They offered him three years of tax [collection].
12. He did not accept.
13. He [Yosa] said: “Is it not enough that I angered my God once, that I should anger Him again?”
14. What did they do to him?

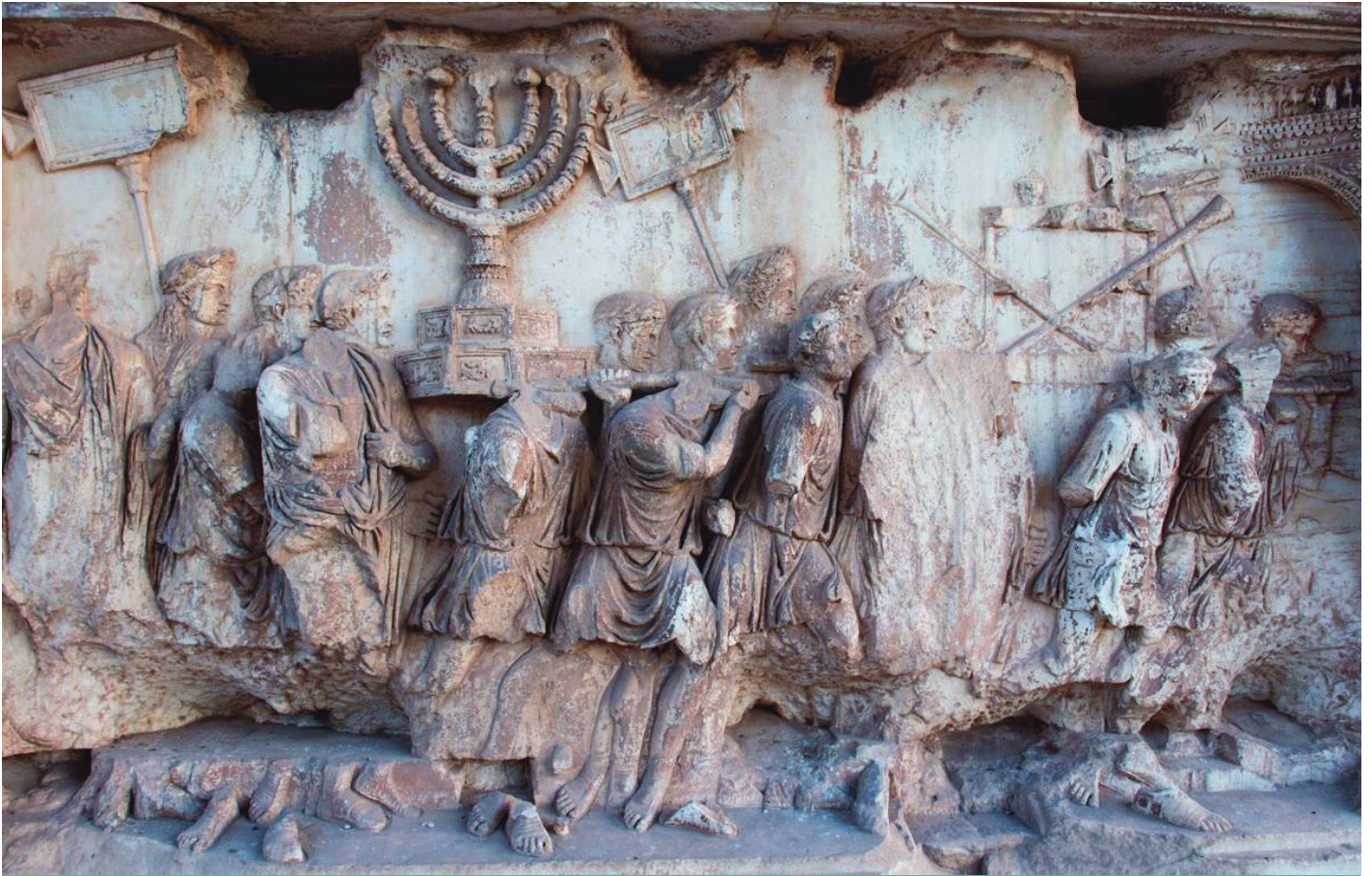


Figure 1. The spoils of the Jerusalem panel, Arch of Titus, Rome, ca. 81 CE. Photograph courtesy of The Yeshiva University Arch of Titus Project.



Figure 2. Hypothetical reconstruction and colorization of the spoils of the Jerusalem panel, Arch of Titus, Rome, ca. 81 CE. VIZIN: The Center for the Visualization of History and the Yeshiva University Arch of Titus Project.



Figure 3. Lintel with image of a menorah, polychrome, Eshtemoa, fifth century CE. Photograph by Steven Fine.



Figure 4. Mosaic pavement with image of a lighted menorah, Study House (or perhaps small Synagogue), Beth Shean, fifth–sixth centuries CE. Photograph by Steven Fine.

15. They put him on a donkey for boards and sawed him.
16. He screamed out: “Woe, woe that I have angered my Creator!”

Crafting a Traitor: Yosa Meshita

The tale of Yosa Meshita is divided into four parts: an introduction (lines 1–4); the “haters,” Yosa, and the Temple treasures (lines 5–10); Rabbi Pinhas and the Romans’ second offer (lines 11–13); and the torture of Yosa (lines 14–16). It dramatically switches between languages, with the narrator and Rabbi Pinhas speaking Hebrew, while Yosa and “the haters” in both Hebrew and Aramaic. In its literary frame in *Genesis Rabbah*, this story is paired with a far better known tale of Yaqim man of Tserurot and anchored as an expansion of Gen 27:27 (lines 1–4)—where Jacob secures the family birthright by tricking Isaac with



Figure 5. Ivory with image of a menorah, Beth Shean, fifth century CE. Photograph by Steven Fine.



Figure 6. Tombstone with image of a menorah, 472 K, Collection of Shlomo Moussaieff. Photograph courtesy of Shlomo Moussaieff.



Figure 7. Ein Gedi Synagogue, sixth century CE, general view. Photograph by Steven Fine.

garments that smell like those of his brother Esau. The rabbis craftily revocalize *begadav* (*b-g-d*; “his garments”) in Gen 27:27 as *bog-dav*—transforming “his garments” to “his traitors,” thereby identifying Yosa and Yaqim as bearing the “scent” of Esau’s traitors. Esau is a standard cipher in rabbinic literature for Rome (Cohen 1967). The pairing of Yosa and Yaqim is occasioned by the grammatical need for at least two referents to “his traitors.”

The Hebrew *boged* is attested in Second Temple-period documents, used especially in the Dead Sea Scrolls to denote “traitors” to the sect.³ It appears rarely in rabbinic sources, and is not applied to other named individuals. *Boged* is not applied to Yosa or Yaqim in the stories themselves, but only in the initial exegetical frame (lines 1–2). Yosa was a common Jew who somehow had access to Temple knowledge, but betrayed the Temple and his God.

Genesis Rabbah inserts a comment by the third-century sage Rabbi Pinhas (lines 11–13), suggesting that the story existed by this time (Albeck 1987). Yosa’s name is characteristic of the Greco-Roman period, suggesting this narrative is set on the eve of the Second Temple’s destruction by the Romans in 70 CE.⁴ *Sonim* or “haters” often refers to colonizing gentiles, and is used in Amoraic texts to refer to sixth-century BCE Babylonian armies, second-century CE Roman soldiers, or fifth-century CE Romans, among others.⁵ In our story, I suggest that the *sonim* represent Roman officials in Titus’s entourage. The “haters” are determined to find “one of them” (i.e., a Jew) to enter and scout out the “Temple Mount,” which the rabbis use to refer to the entire Temple esplanade after the destruction of the shrine itself, like “Capitol Hill” without the Capitol. Yosa does not, it seems, enter the temple itself, as elsewhere Genesis Rabbah (10:7) ascribes this specifically to Titus himself.⁶

It is unclear why the Romans did not enter the “Temple Mount.” Perhaps the intent is to depict Yosa with specialized knowledge or the Romans’ fear of angering the divine and violating their own standards of sacrilege (Robinson 1983). Rabbis, and likely their audience, were well aware that Temple holiness was expressed through decreasing access—especially for gentiles (Bickerman 1947: 389). The phrase “one of them” is likely a statement of scorn, presenting Yosa as a turncoat recruited by the “haters” (Frankel 1992: 140). Yosa never speaks in this sequence, reinforcing his role as an instrument of the “haters.”

Yosa is also taken for greedy by his Roman handlers, as he takes a “golden menorah” for himself. Reading Yosa’s character sympathetically, I could imagine him seeing his actions not as heinous greed, but rather as heroically “saving” the lampstand, while absorbing the costs of trespassing sacred barriers and colluding with enemies. My sense, though, is that this is not what the rabbinic authors had in mind. It is also possible that Yosa took some other “golden lampstand” short of the menorah,



Figure 8. Ein Gedi Synagogue, sixth century, western side aisle with inscriptions. Photograph by Steven Fine.

though this would certainly blunt the effect of the narrative and dampen its connection to other stories of Titus's victory. Modern scholars have rightly associated our story with an apparent parallel in Josephus:

During those same days, one of the priests named Jesus, son of Thebuthi, after obtaining a sworn pledge of protection from Caesar, on condition of his delivering up some of the sacred treasures, came out and handed over from the wall of the sanctuary two lampstands similar to those deposited in the sanctuary, along with tables, bowls, and platters, all of solid gold and very massive; he further delivered up the veils, the high-priests' vestments, including the precious stones, and many other articles used in public worship. Furthermore, the treasurer of the temple, by name Phineas, being taken prisoner, disclosed the tunics and the girdles worn by the priests, an abundance of purple and scarlet kept for necessary repairs to the veil of the temple, along with a mass of cinnamon and cassia and a multitude of other spices, which they mixed and burnt daily as incense to God. Many other treasures also were delivered up to him, with numerous sacred ointments; those services procured for him,

although a prisoner of war, the pardon accorded to refugees (Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.387–91; trans. Thackeray, LCL).

In Josephus's telling and in our midrash, well-informed Jews hand over apparently hidden temple vessels to Titus's *bursar*. The vessels, including "lampstands," were transferred to Rome as a result of complicit Jews, though Josephus (himself caught between Jewish and Flavian loyalties) avoids judgement. Jesus son of Thebuthi (like Josephus) received explicit promises of security. I see no reason to suggest continuity of historical knowledge between these stories, except as pillage narratives known from Jewish and classical sources (e.g., Suetonius, *Iulius* 54). Unfortunately for Yosa, the "haters" fancied the lampstand for themselves.

Our story continues (lines 11–13) with a later interjection from outside the narrative ascribed to Rabbi Pinhas. This sequence intensifies the interaction with a second Roman offer, perhaps one closer to home for the late antique audience. It suggests that in exchange for his compliance, Yosa was offered riches through the right to collect taxes for three years. Tax collectors were highly unpopular figures in Jewish society throughout Roman antiquity, as they were seen as complicit with the imperial regime and unworthy of honors (Donahue 1971: 39–61). In a sense, they too were traitors—and so tax farming is a fitting profession for Yosa. Similarly, Jews who took on this profession are compared with Yosa as a warning. Quoting this sequence in the name of a noted rabbi further intensifies this message.

Although Yosa was offered a far better deal than Josephus's traitors, he rejected it. During his torture, he attempts to repent for his collusion. Choosing "his God" over their generous offer, Yosa angered his Roman masters. Yosa's double entry parallels the multiple referents of *bogdav*. Yosa thus had two opportunities to behave as a traitor, will be cut in two by his persecutors, and will scream out twice (lines 15–16). In an act of theological symmetry, Yosa forms a dyad with God that removes him from his initial pairing with Yaqim and towards repentance. This biblicalized referent is not an artificial frame for our story, but rather a driving force in its formulation. As I have framed it, the entire story is divided into four sections as the tale is structured by the theme of multiples of two.

At line 14, the narrator turns to the Roman response, "What did they do to him?" Alas, Yosa was tortured to death—cut in two. Death by sawing was considered a particularly gruesome form of torture. Caligula, for example, is said to have watched as his victims were sawn in half, while the Jewish rebels sawing Romans is cited by Cassius Dio as an act of unfathomable cruelty.⁷ Numerous early Christian martyrs were also tortured in this fashion. The "donkey for/of boards" (line 15) upon which Yosa was tortured again plays on the theme of multiples and was likely known to the rabbis' audience as an effective form of torture indicative of the Roman era.⁸

In pain, Yosa screams out in Aramaic, the vernacular of his audience. I am reminded of the last words of another first century Jew who, when tortured by Romans, screamed out in Aramaic—Jesus of Nazareth.⁹ Yosa, like Jesus, did not ascribe his pain to the Romans, but to divine punishment, a standard trope in Jewish legends of the destruction. The Romans—like the Babylonians



Figure 9. Ein Gedi Synagogue, sixth century, one of three lighted menorahs before the screen of the bema. Photograph by Steven Fine.

before them—were perceived as agents of divine will. Yosa repents, trying to (re)pair in a dyad with the divine. He called out from the saw horse, pointedly to “my God” as Jesus did from his cross. At this point, I imagine the voice of the story teller rising with pathos, before falling silent. I am not suggesting a direct relationship between these characters (as many might), but rather a parallel between literary portrayals of two Aramaic-speaking Jews who found themselves on the wrong side of Rome.¹⁰ The gory sequence leading to Yosa’s dramatic cry increases the drama. Was our tale imagined to evoke a public execution, from which we are forced not to avert our eyes? We cannot know. In the end, our story gives no sense that Yosa’s contrition was accepted, as the question is left open at the point of deepest pathos.

Yosa Meshita in the Synagogues and Study Houses

Beyond its setting in the last days of the Temple, this cautionary tale speaks to the harsh realities of rule by Rome and “New Rome” (Byzantium; Jacobs 2004; Fine 2012). The story of Yosa Meshita is a rabbinic reflection on their own times through the

prism of the Jewish War. Whatever glimmer of memory may lurk within this tale, its purpose is cautionary—to assert Jewish culpability for the transfer of the “golden lampstand” to the Romans. It is a product of and intended for those gathered in late antique synagogues and study houses, warning against collusion with the colonial powers. The focus on the lampstand (instead of other vessels) relates, it seems, to the preponderance of menorahs and other lighting fixtures that illuminated late antique synagogues and decorated walls, mosaics, oil lamps, jewelry, tombstones, and more (figs. 3–7, 9; Hachlili 2001). The menorah was everywhere, serving as a referent—a prop—for a storyteller in late antique Jewish public contexts. Our story is another example of how furnishings in synagogues and study houses were used as props—whether by design or not—by homilists in rabbinic sources (Bregman 1982; Fine 2006: 199–217; 2013: 140–59).

This tale contributes to a wider rhetoric that cautions colonized Jews against collusion with the empire. The term *boged* is used in late antique liturgical poetry. Likewise, an inscription from the sixth-century synagogue at Ein Gedi also warns against



Figure 10. Temple of Peace, Rome, first century CE. Photograph by Steven Fine.

treachery (figs. 7–9). Jewish fears of attacks on synagogues and study houses give real life to rabbinic narratives on the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

The story of Yosa Meshita plays an important role in rabbinic legends about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Leviticus Rabbah 22:3 has it that Titus “assembled all the Temple vessels and put them in one woven reed container and went down to the sea.” Tannaitic and Palestinian Amoraic sources remember sages who flourished following the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 CE), “seeing” various temple vessels. Thus, in one tradition, Shimon bar Yohai “saw” the menorah.¹¹ I have argued elsewhere that such sightings in Rome were quite plausible (Fine 2013). By the end of “late antiquity,” an obscure apocalyptic text, *Otot ha-Meshiah* (“Signs of the Messiah”), suggests that the menorah was in the palace of one “Julianus Caesar.”¹² Babylonian Talmud Meilah 17a–b places the vessels in the “treasury of Caesar” and Avot of Rabbi Nathan asserts that the vessels are “still” in Rome—setting the stage for speculation and hopes that motivate the pious to this day.¹³ Thus, the transfer of the “golden lampstand” to the Romans, its presentation in Titus’s triumphal parade of 71 (*JW* 7.148–152), and its display in Vespasian’s *Templum Pacis* near the Roman Forum (fig. 10), is explained through inwardly directed reflection. It is the result of treachery and greed. Our story fills the space between the destruction of the Temple and Titus’s triumphal return to Rome, both events described by the rabbis.¹⁴ The theme of Jewish culpability is a leitmotif of rabbinic “legends of the destruction.” Our tale bridges Jerusalem and Rome, similar to the way that Yohanan ben Zakkai connects Jerusalem and Yavne in rabbinic lore.

Conclusion

The admonition, then, is clear. Do not be a traitor, your garments smelling with the stench of Esau. Such behavior, our story suggests, led to the loss of the menorah in the first place and its transfer to Rome. Beyond this damage to the nation, this traitorous act causes great pain—psychological, spiritual, and physical—for the traitor. Do not cross over to the Romans, our story argues, at the expense of your community. Yosa’s repentance closes the story, he turning back from his heinous act and accepting his punishment. While the Romans tortured Yosa, they were agents of the Divine.

The story of Yosa Meshita is part of this larger genre of legends of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. It is a reflection on that event, a palimpsest overlaid on the memory of the temple, told on the public stage of synagogues and study houses. The story is illuminated by the richness of the menorah and lighting imagery. These include numerous lighting fixtures, including actual lighted seven branched menorahs that permeated Jewish life and particularly Jewish ritual space. In turn, the power of the story may have been enhanced by its performance in proximity to these “props.” Our tale is etiological, setting out how the menorah, and by implication other temple vessels, was transferred from the temple to the officers of Titus and on to Rome. All of these layers of meaning are embedded in this short tale, which I have used to exemplify my multidisciplinary approach to the texts, artifacts, and the history of Judaism in Roman antiquity.

Notes

1. Many thanks to my friends and colleagues for their valuable comments on this manuscript at various stages, including Gregg Gardner, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Samuele Rocca. The full version will appear shortly (Fine in press).
2. Edited in Theodor and Albeck 1965, 2: 741–42, following MS Vatican 60.
3. E.g., Ben Sira 16:6; 4Q, 469, col. 1, line 7; Community Rule, col. 7, lines 18, 22; Damascus Covenant col. 1, line 39; 8, 163; 19, 17, 34; Peshar Habakkuk, 2: 1, 3, 5; 8: 10.
4. On rabbinic “legends of the destruction,” see Yisraeli-Taran 1997.
5. y. Rosh Hashanah 4:4, 59c and Genesis Rabbah 71:31; Lamentations Rabbah 30; y. Taanit 4:5, 69a.
6. Genesis Rabbah 10:7, Leviticus Rabbah 20:5, Pesiqta de Rab Kahana 36:5.
7. Suetonius, *Caligula*, 27:3; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 68, 32:2; see also The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 5:1–4.
8. Genesis Rabbah 70:17; see Krauss 1911, 2: 267.
9. Mark 15:34 and parallels.
10. I discuss this methodological point in considerable detail in Fine, 2009, 2012, and in the fuller version of this essay. See especially Goshen-Gottstein 2009: 17–21.
11. Sifre Zutta, Be-ha’alotkha to Numbers 8:2; Sifre D’Be Rab and Sifre Zutta on Numbers. See Fine 2013: 63–86.
12. Otot ha-Meshiah (Mantua, 1546), 5b; Fine 2016: 49–50.
13. Avot of Rabbi Nathan, A, ch. 41.
14. On Titus’s triumphal return to Rome, see Leviticus Rabbah 22:3.

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