

“Said Rabbi Shimon: When I went to Rome, There I saw the Menorah ...”

Some Personal Reflections on the YU Center for Israel
Studies’ Arch of Titus Digital Restoration Project

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Some 1850 years ago, the midrash tells us,⁵⁰ Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (*Rashbi*) —student of Rabbi Aqiva and compatriot of Rabbis Yehuda bar Ilai, Meir, Eleazar and Yose, set out for Rome on one of those periodic rabbinic excursions to the center of the Empire. While there, he may have visited the Temple of Peace on the Roman Forum and there seen the Menorah. This temple was a kind of museum dedicated to the greatness of Rome by the Emperor Vespasian to commemorate his victory in the Jewish War of 66-74 CE, culminating in the destruction of the Temple on Tisha be-Av in the year 70

CE. This is where the Menorah was put on public display at the conclusion of the war.

What did Rabbi Shimon see? Josephus, the Jewish historian, describes the triumphal parade celebrating Titus’s victory, emphasizing for his Roman audience the booty brought to Rome from Herod’s Temple:

The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood those captured in the temple at Jerusalem.

These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a lampstand, likewise made of gold, but constructed on a different pattern than those which we use in ordinary life. Affixed to a pedestal was a central shaft, from which there extended slender branches, arranged trident-fashion, a wrought lamp being attached to the extremity of each branch, of these there were seven, indicating the honor paid to that number among the Jews.

⁵⁰ *Sifre Zutta on Numbers* (ed. H. S. Horowitz, Jerusalem, 1966), *Be-haalotkha* 255. Many thanks to Leah Bierman Fine and to Yitzchak Schwartz and for their assistance in preparing this essay.

After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law [the Torah]. They followed a large party carrying images of victory, all made of ivory and gold. Behind them drove Vespasian, followed by Titus; while Domitian rode beside them, in magnificent apparel and mounted on a steed that was in itself a sight (Jewish War 7, 148ff).

This scene was immortalized by Titus' brother, Domitian, a decade later (81 CE) in the infamous Arch of Titus. There we see ten Roman soldiers—celebratory wreaths on their heads, carrying into Rome the Menorah and the *Shulkhan*, “the table of showbread,” as well as the *Hatsotsrot*, the horns once sounded in the Temple. The Menorah and the other vessels remained in the Temple of Peace until they were likely taken by the Vandals during the sack of Rome in the fifth century.

For centuries, Jews avoided the Arch of Titus, refusing to walk under it and thus to give honor to Titus. The Arch symbolized the debasement of Judaism and the beginning of our woes. This situation was reinforced by the Church, for which the Arch came to symbolize the transfer of Divine authority from Jerusalem to the Church of Rome, and with it, the Divine punishment imposed upon the Jews for rejecting Jesus. Things began to change in the modern world. From the nineteenth century on, Jews came to see the Arch's Menorah in a much more positive light, as a symbol for Judaism. For Jewish traditionalists and Zionists, its unique form symbolized a hope for national restoration in the Land of Israel. The only “archaeologically accurate” representation of the Temple vessels then known, the Arch was reimagined as a Jewish treasure and a link to a glorious past. Jews reproduced the Arch of Titus Menorah within synagogues and many other communal contexts. After long deliberation, in 1949, the Arch of Titus Menorah was chosen as the symbol for the new State of Israel. Bringing the Menorah “home,” at least figuratively, Israeli authors and artists saw the Menorah as a metaphor for the entire Jewish people, and its reappropriation as Israel's national symbol as part of the “ingathering of exiles” that the new State saw as its mission.⁵¹

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by the Torah's detailed description of the Menorah. Unlike more distant biblical objects, like the Ark of the Covenant or the Temple itself, the biblical Menorah was familiar—we, like most people, had a big bronze one in our synagogue! This fascination only grew with time. From middle school through my doctorate and ever since, I have written about the Menorah in one way or another—its form, its meaning, new discoveries, and representations of the Menorah in Jewish texts. A particularly fascinating liturgical poem (*piyyut*) imagines that the Menorah was cast in gold in three shades of color: red, white and green.⁵² Lecturing on the Menorah to Jews across the spectrum-- from Reform to



The author standing opposite the Arch of Titus' depiction of the Menorah.

⁵¹ This history is masterfully related by team member Alec Mishory in his *Lo and Behold: Zionist Icons and Visual Symbols in Israeli Culture* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2000), 138-96, in Hebrew. An abbreviated translation appears at: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/emblem.html>.

Chassidic—audience members told me with absolute surety that the Menorah is “hidden” at the Vatican. In fact, it isn’t. As a result, though, I began to wonder what Hazal and the *Rishonim* tell us about its whereabouts-- especially since no one before the 1950’s made this claim. I became fascinated with tracing the extent of this very modern urban myth, and why so many contemporary Jews want to believe it.

Recently, while participating in a project based at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts on polychromy- the coloring of statues in the Greco-Roman world,⁵³ it occurred to me that it might just be possible to determine the original colors of the Menorah of the Arch of Titus. The study of color on ancient art is still a new discipline. We as a culture have become so used to imagining Roman art in bold white marble, that the idea that it was painted is sometimes shocking. Painted, though, it was; and through computer scanning techniques developed over the past decade, it is now possible to find flakes of ancient color.⁵⁴ If color is possible on other Roman statues and buildings, would it be possible to find it on the Arch of Titus? Perhaps studying the Arch for traces of its original coloring would allow us to reconstruct what the colors of the Temple vessels looked like, and bring us that much closer to the experience of “seeing” that ancients experienced when they saw the Arch of Titus and its Menorah!

Most scholars will tell you that behind their attempts at objective scholarship, we are animated by deep personal interest and curiosity. I often sense my own desire to “see” the Menorah as Josephus and Rabbi Shimon did as a spiritual pilgrimage, one that places me in a long line of pilgrims and seekers in search of our holy objects. The difference is, of course, that my search makes use of the most recent and advanced technology and the newest insights drawn from the field of art history for the interpretation of Roman art. For me, this is an exercise in *Torah u-Madda*—what I hope is a harmonious synergy of my own traditionalist piety and the best of contemporary



The Menorah and other holy vessels of the Second Temple carried by Roman soldiers into Rome.

⁵² See my *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 146-63.

⁵³ “Was This Roman Sculpture of Gaius Caligula Painted?” *Biblical History Digest*, 10/27/2011, posted at www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/was-this-roman-sculpture-of-gaius-caligula-painted/

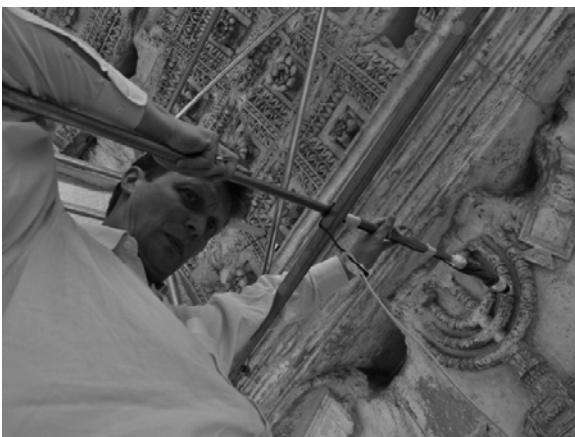
⁵⁴ To learn more about ancient polychromy, visit: www.ancientartpodcast.org/SCARABsolutions/Resources/Resources_files/Gods%20in%20Color%20Gallery%20Guide%20Arthur%20M%20Sackler%20Museum%20Harvard.pdf

culture. While the method and presentation of the results is strictly academic, and even my question derives and is framed in terms of contemporary studies of color in Roman art, deep, deep down my personal impetus is to “see” the Menorah.

It is hard to express my sense of excitement, almost awe, as I came to the Arch on Tuesday morning, June 8 and saw “my” scaffolding, a project of the YU Center for Israel Studies, going up in front of the reliefs. On that morning, our team of scholars and conservators—Italians, Germans and Americans, assembled at the Arch to begin our search for the original colors of the sculptural reliefs—a first step toward the total digital reconstruction of the Arch of Titus.

Climbing up the scaffolding to the level of the Menorah and the *Shulkhan* I could not take my eyes off the carving—which was less than two feet from me. Looking, staring, examining and photographing, I must have been up there a very long time, because the team that had come from Milan to scan the images at some point reminded me that they had to get to work! I hung the blue and white YU banner from the scaffolding, and one phrase kept ringing through my ears, one with roots in Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones and appears in the Israeli anthem *Hatiqva—od lo avda tiqvatenu*—“our hope is not yet lost.”

The world expert on the use of technology for the study of polychromy, Heinrich Piening, set to work. Within hours, the tentative results flashed across his laptop. Flakes of yellow ochre were found on the Menorah, in a number of locations. The Arch of Titus Menorah panel was painted, and the Menorah was the color of gold! When Jews, perhaps including Rabbi Shimon, visited in the second century they could see the real Menorah in the Temple of Peace. Coming to the nearby Arch of Titus, they could imagine the scene when it was taken “captive” by the “evil empire.” Commemorated in stone to express the greatness of Vespasian, Titus, and of Rome itself, our ancestors could “see” our national tragedy expressed in graphic detail. What they saw was a colorful array of images.



Heinrich Piening, a conservator from Munich, Germany, testing for evidence for ancient color on the Menorah. He found fragments of yellow ochre pigment.

We now know that the Arch of Titus Menorah was indeed painted a golden yellow. What, though, of the *Shulkhan*? What color were the Temple horns painted? In the next phases of this project, we will find out. Everyone will be able to see the Temple vessels as Rabbi Shimon might have; as the Jews of ancient Rome did, as they waited for the return of the sacred objects to the Holy Temple. These Jews mourned our Temple with visions of its gold before their eyes. May the Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days, and may we all experience the glow of the golden Menorah in Jerusalem restored—this time eternally.

To learn more about the YU Arch of Titus Digital Restoration Project, to view a slide show about our work and for regular updates, visit yu.edu/cis/activities/arch-of-titus/