

Rav Machpud, *shlita*, Golan Shul Um el Kanatir, with a menorah depicted on the pillar behind him. The shul, from the Talmudic Era, was destroyed in an earthquake in 749 CE.

Has the **menorah** really been seen since the time the Romans destroyed the **Bais Hamikdash** and carted it off?

“When I Was in Rome, I Saw the Menorah.”

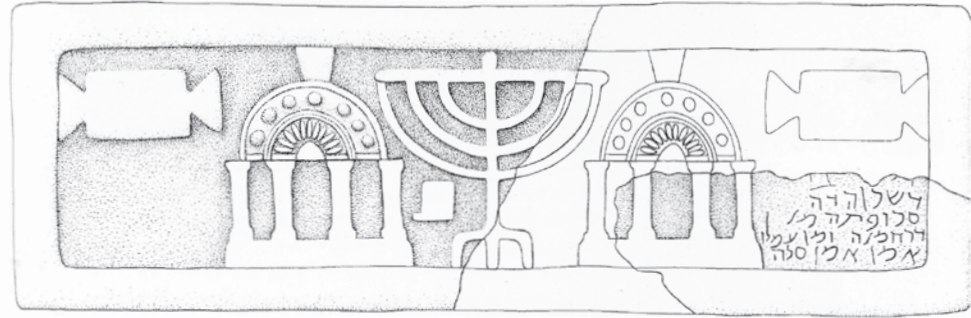
BY ARI GREENSPAN AND ARI ZIVOTOFSKY

SO SAID RABBI SHIMON, A MEMBER OF THE TANNA’IM, Sages of the Mishna, who saw the holy relics of the *Beis Hamikdash* displayed in Rome after the destruction of the Temple. Where is it today? Is it hidden, as some say, in the basement of the Vatican?

Awhile back, we visited the Vatican laboratories, not far from the famed “basement,” to research the identity of the *tekheles*, blue dye, used in *tzizis*. It is known that Popes of centuries past wore garments of *tekheles* and *argaman*, royal blue and purple made from the *chilazon* snail of the Mediterranean. The Ramban, in his commentary on Torah, relates that in his day *tekheles* was to be found only in the possession of “the king of the non-Jews,” i.e. the Pope. Our goal was to visit the Vatican labs that study, analyze, and preserve old dyed fabrics and other antiquities that might shed light on the precise identity of *tekhelet* and *argaman*. We were hoping that we might be shown ancient papal clothing that we could chemically analyze to validate one of the suggested sources of *tekheles*.

A lintel from a shul in Kochav Hayarden from 4-5th century





THE VATICAN CHEMISTRY LABS ARE quite sophisticated, and they have an extensive collection of antiques and treasures “requisitioned” over many centuries – it’s impressive what can be obtained when money is no object. Arrangements for us to visit the labs for our research purposes were made by the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Rabbi Dr. Riccardo Di Segni. His involvement assured that we had ready access to not only the scientists but areas usually closed off from the public. Security was tight, however, and we were checked and given ID badges before being escorted through back staircases down into the labs. The scientists whom we met were professional, interested and helpful; they later took us for a tour of the Vatican library.

What made the greatest impression on us, though, were the two requests the Chief Rabbi made of us before we headed to our Vatican meeting. “Wear a jacket and tie,” was the first. Rabbi Di Segni explained that the Vatican is a very formal place and it is important to look proper.

“Two,” he added, “Whatever you do, don’t ask them if they have the menorah.”

It turns out that untold number of visiting Jews have posed that question to Vatican officials, and it is one for which they no longer have great patience. Unfortunately for the State of Israel, not all of its representatives have received the good advice given us. In recent years, it seems, several high ranking Israeli officials have put the “menorah question” not only to Vatican counterparts but even to the Pope himself, yielding no menorah but considerable embarrassment for all.

Visiting the Vatican was certainly an experience that yielded mixed feelings. Halachic issues aside, simply entering Vatican City, the seat of the Catholic Church, brought up complicated and ambivalent emotions carrying the weight of centuries of per-

secution and suffering at the hands of Christians. Clearly we were not the first *frum* Jews to visit. The story is told that the Rebbe of Radzin, Rav Gershon Henoch Leiner, visited the Vatican in the late 1800s as part of his trip to find *tekheles* in Naples. Reportedly, he sufficiently impressed the Pope to inspire the latter to write a letter to the Czar to tell him to treat the Rebbe well. Chief Rabbi Yitchak Halevi Herzog’s visits to the Pope at the Vatican are well known. He visited at least twice: once before World War II and once after. Fluent in over a dozen languages, the *talmid chacham* is said to have addressed the Pope in Latin. After the War, Rabbi Herzog devoted tremendous efforts in locating and rescuing Jewish children who had been saved by Catholic families or institutions. He requested assistance from Pope Pius XII, asking that he issue a statement that Catholics should hand over orphaned Jewish children to Jewish organizations. The Pope refused.

The Ramban and archeology

The menorah was one of the most prominent items taken by the Romans after they destroyed the Beit Hamikdash and burned Yerushalayim in the year 70 CE. Made of pure gold, it was worth a fortune, estimated at 2.5 million dollars at today’s gold prices. For the Romans, acquiring the menorah was symbolic of the crushing defeat they had visited upon their most stubborn of enemies, the Jews. A huge victory parade took place in Rome with Jewish captives and Roman soldiers hauling the loot through the streets as a testament to the greatness of the general Titus. Among the most prominent items was the menorah. Josephus, the Jewish historian describes the procession:

“The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood out those captured in the Temple at Jerusalem. These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a Menorah, likewise made of gold ... After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law” (Josephus, Jewish Wars 7.139–152).

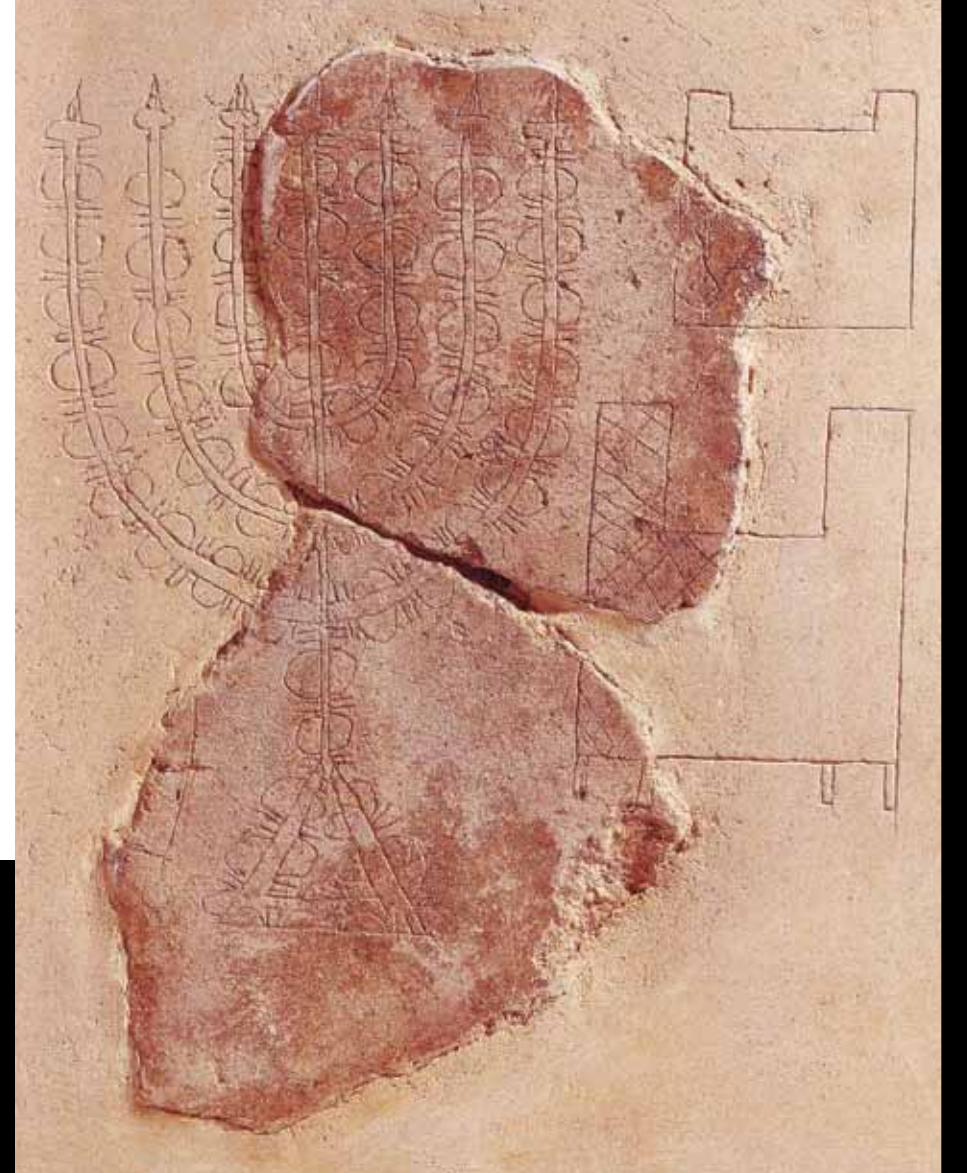
In approximately the year 82 CE, the triumphal Arch of Titus was erected in Rome. Depicted on it was the famous image of the Jewish captives bearing the menorah alongside a table and two *chatzotrot* (trumpets). The pairing of these items is not random, as they were among the most important items captured. Mattathias Antigonus, the last of the true

Maccabean kings, had put both the menorah and the table on a coin he minted before being killed by the usurper Herod in 39 BCE. The menorah image on the minted coin, from over 2000 years ago, is one of the earliest images we have of it today.

Four years before the *churban*, a shekel coin was minted during the great revolt against the Romans. Look carefully at the table with the *chatzotrot* next to the menorah and you will see a cup. What is the cup? Why would the conquerors choose a cup, even if it was gold, to memorialize for all posterity their victory over the Jews? Clearly it was an important artifact. The Ramban moved to Eretz Yisrael in 1267, and when he arrived in Acco he described finding ancient Jewish coins which he says were shekels and half shekels. He weighed them and, based upon this archeological evidence, ruled on the weight with regard to certain *halachos*. Since he could not read the ancient Hebrew script, *Ksav Ivri* (as opposed to the *Ksav Ashuri* in use today and in the Ramban’s time), he had it translated by the *Shomronim*, who still used the language. He described the fruit on one side as the staff of Aharon and the cup on the other side as the “chalice that held the manna.” That allows us to understand why the cup was of great significance and inscribed on the arch. Parenthetically, it is important to note that the Chazon Ish as well as other *poskim* hold that present-day archaeological finds can have no bearings on halachic discussions and rulings.

The location of the menorah today

Josephus tells us that the relics themselves were moved to the newly built “Temple of Peace” in Rome where they were put on public display. One can imagine throngs of tourists coming through the Roman temple to view the spectacular items of the Temple of Jerusalem, surely impressed by the grandeur of the Jewish relics and the extent of Roman power.



Top: Graffito incised in the plaster of a private house of a wealthy kohen in Yerushalayim in the first century CE. Bottom: The depiction of the plundered menorah on the Arch of Titus.

Among such visitors were certainly Jews who lamented such a display. We know that *Chaza”l* did visit: “Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Yossi said, “I saw it [the *paroches* (curtain of the Ark)] in Rome and there were drops of blood on it. And they told me ‘These are from the drops of blood of the Day of Atonement’” (*Tosefta Kippurim*). Why would a curtain be on display amid all the gold and silver of the Temple? Aside from its inherent symbolic value – it hung before the Holy of Holies – it was made in part from *tekheles*, which Aristotle wrote was worth 10-20 times its weight in gold. Rabbi Elazar also attests to having seen the *tzitz*, the golden headband of the *kohen*



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Top: Proposed reconstruction of the missing pieces of the lintel. The shaded parts are the existing pieces. Bottom: Coins, ancient and modern, depicting the menorah.

What Exactly Did the Menorah Look Like?

The design of the menorah is provided in great detail in the Torah. There was one central branch with six arms extending from it, three on each side. There were knobs, cups, and flowers along the branches; the entire vessel was supported by a base. So intricate and complex was the menorah that God showed it to Moshe when he was on Har Sinai to guarantee that he fully understood its construction. (Shmos 25:40). Midrashim take the issue even further. One Midrash (Bemidbar Raba Ch. 15:10) says that Moshe could not understand or remember how to make the menorah until Betzalel finally constructed it. Another midrash (Tanchuma, Shemini, Ch. 8) says that even after Hashem explained it, Moshe still could not make it, so Hashem instructed him to throw the gold into fire and the menorah emerged by itself.

There are two different opinions regarding the arms of the menorah. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, zt"l, echoing what Rashi seems to say (and the drawing included by the Rambam in his explanation of the menorah, although it may have just been intended as a schematic illustration), held that the arms, ram-rod straight, extended from the spine of the menorah at 45 degrees. Ibn Ezra describes semicircular arms.

The most famous depiction of the menorah is that of the Arch of Titus in Rome, in which the arms are clearly semicircular. That Roman artist would likely have been sculpting the menorah to be seen by others who had seen it. Deriving anything about the original menorah from the Arch depiction, however, assumes that it was the actual menorah that was taken to Rome, which is not necessarily the case.

Another depiction of the menorah is easily accessible in the Old City of Yerushalayim. During the 1970s, excavations of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City (in the Herodian Quarter) uncovered the remains of large, exquisite homes, including the large "Palatial Mansion," from the aristocratic Upper City of the Second Temple period (the remains are preserved in the basement level of Yeshivat Hakotel. This site holds great interest to anyone who wants to understand numerous Talmudic, Halachic, and historical references to the Beis Hamikdash). All evidence points to these remains originating from the residences of important and wealthy kohanim, possibly even the kohen gadol, during the waning years of the Second Temple. These houses were destroyed in 70 CE when the city was burned. On the wall of one of these buildings was a drawing of the menorah, the original of which can be seen in The Israel Museum. The image, engraved in plaster, is from the time when the Beit Hamikdash stood and may have been made by someone who saw it in the Beis Hamikdash, and rendered to decorate the residence of a kohen. While it is not completely detailed, it clearly shows curved, although not semi-circular, arms extending from the menorah's spine.

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Left: Depiction of the menorah as it was found in editions of the Rambam's Mishnah Torah.



gadol, and describes how the words "Holy to Hashem" were written on it. This, too, had both symbolic and monetary value. This eyewitness account resolved a debate on how the two words should be engraved on the tzitz. The Rambam rules not like the account of the tzitz seen in Rome, but rather in accord with the other Tannaic position.

In more recent times, Jews have come to embrace the belief that the menorah of the Beis Hamikdash lays hidden in the basement of the Vatican. Assorted stories of it being seen by various Jews over the years helped the tale grow. These reports are not new; they date back at least 700 years. There is reason, though, to discount the belief. For one thing, in the 19th century, the Vatican displayed what it claimed were Yochin and Boaz, the two pillars that stood in front of the Beis Hamikdash. They were simple pillars. Had the Vatican truly had a more significant Temple relic such as the menorah, why not show it? At the time, the Vatican was still exceedingly powerful and had no fear of pressure being brought to bear for its return to Jews. If anything, putting the menorah on view, from their perspective, would have been a boon to the Church's theology that Christianity had superseded Judaism.

Secondly, even today, why would the Vatican not display the menorah as it has showcased many priceless Jewish manuscripts? There is, after all, no Beis Hamikdash that could sue for its return.

Even if the menorah is not presently in the possession of the Vatican, we are fairly certain that it was exiled to Rome. When did it disappear, and where might it be? The period between when the menorah was brought to Rome and when Christianity became the state religion in the 4th century was a complex and violent one. It is plausible that a relic such as the menorah could have remained for many years in the Temple of Peace but it is unlikely

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to have survived the sacking of the city by the Visigoths in 410 CE. This was the first time in almost 800 years that Rome had fallen to an enemy. And if it somehow survived that episode, it is unlikely to have remained in Rome after the city was looted by the Vandals in the year 455 CE. Rome was next emptied of its treasures when it was defeated by the Byzantine army in 533 CE. Any of these attacking nations may have taken the menorah for either its symbolic value or simply its gold. There are several contradictory reports of these armies returning with the menorah to their home countries.

Though the menorah was brought to Rome, it could not have been taken at that time to the Vatican, as it did not yet exist. There are no credible reports of its whereabouts after Rome was defeated and it is highly probable that it was taken away by one of any number of attackers, perhaps to be melted for its gold. There are, though, two other, albeit remote, possibilities. It may indeed still be hidden somewhere in Rome. Or it may be that it was never taken to Rome in the first place,

and was hidden somewhere in Yerushalayim. Just as Shlomo made extra menorahs for the first Beis Hamikdash, it is likely there were multiple menorahs for the second. It may be that the menorah depicted as having been taken to Rome was not the actual menorah that had been used in the Beis Hamikdash.

Whatever menorah was looted from the Beis Hamikdash almost 2000 years ago, there is little credible evidence regarding its current location. But that has not prevented Jews from studying and speculating about it. The Gemara (Shabbos 22b) states about the menorah "Does G-d need a menorah for light? All forty years the Jews were in the desert they traveled following His light. Rather, its presence in the Temple is a sign to the whole world that God's presence rests on the Jewish people. This testimony is via a miracle that occurred daily with the lights of the menorah." Jews dream about the menorah and we know that in the not too distant future, a menorah will again be lit by a descendant of Aharon in the rebuilt Temple. Exactly where it will come from or what it will look like is still not now known. But it will be.



Above: One of multiple menorahs found in the huge basement stones of the Diocletian Palace circa 300 CE in Split, Croatia. This menorah has 5 arms in accordance with Chazal's prohibition of drawing an exact replica

