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# Mysteries of the Menorah

*Meir Soloveichik*

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IN 2004, the two chief rabbis of Israel, Shlomo Amar and Yonah Metzger, traveled to the Vatican for a historic meeting with Pope John Paul II. An ambitious interfaith agenda had been planned for the encounter, but Rabbi Amar had more on his mind than religious dialogue. “I could not resist,” he told Israeli radio. “I asked them about the Temple vessels and the menorah.” In so doing, Rabbi Amar reflected a belief common among many Jews: that the solid-gold candelabrum taken by the Roman ravagers of ancient Jerusalem remains in the city that was once the heart of the empire.

There is, scholars have noted, no reason to think that the Vatican has been hiding the candelabrum these many centuries. All sources indicate that the seized Temple treasures were originally displayed by the Roman conquerors in an edifice called (in an antique instance of Orwellian usage) the “Temple of Peace.” The vessels were then taken from Rome when the city was plundered by the Goths in the 5th century C.E. The Vatican itself vehemently denies having any knowledge of the menorah’s whereabouts.

And yet “my heart tells me this is not the truth,” responds Rabbi Amar. Nor is he the only religious Jew whose heart dwells in longing memory both on the menorah and on the Temple from which its light

once radiated to the world. Today, the site where the menorah proudly stood is an area physically empty of Jews, a fact commemorated every year on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av: the day on which, according to tradition, the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and, half a millennium later, the even more magnificent Second Temple was sacked and burned by the Romans in 70 C.E.

To be sure, one might respond to the rabbi’s plea by noting that, although the physical object has indeed been lost to history, in another sense the menorah has indeed returned to the Jewish people. After all, the displacement of the menorah to Rome is inextricably associated with the most famous visual image of the Temple’s destruction: the still-standing arch of triumph erected by the victorious emperor Titus along the road to the Roman Forum. The original pagan inscription on this edifice, whose pediment depicts the victory parade of the Roman forces and their train of spoils, proclaims its dedication “to the divine Titus Vespasianus Augustus, son of the divine Vespasian.”

Nor was it only Rome’s emperor-worshipping pagans who saw a cosmic significance in the conquest of Jerusalem. To the Christian Church, the destruction of the Temple served as an ultimate sign that the Jews were no longer God’s chosen people, divine favor having now been transferred to a newer and better Israel. As recently as 1821, a plaque on the other side of the arch notes, Pope

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MEIR SOLOVEICHIK is associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York and a doctoral candidate in the philosophy of religion at Princeton. His “Why Beards?” appeared in the February COMMENTARY.

Pius VII ordered the rehabilitation of this monument, so “remarkable in terms of both religion and art.”

But today the Jews have returned to Jerusalem, and their sovereignty over the Holy Land has been restored. The work commemorated by the arch has, it would seem, been undone. Indeed, it was to underline this thrilling transformation that, in the late 1940’s, the nascent state of Israel chose the menorah depicted on the arch of Titus as *its* symbol. Alec Mishory, an Israeli art historian, explains the rationale:

The menorah is returned from the arch of Titus, where it symbolizes defeat, humiliation, and disgrace, and is installed in a place of honor on the emblem of the state, the establishment of which is testimony to the eternity of the Jewish people.

But if the menorah has indeed been returned, and if the defeat wrought by Titus has been reversed, why then do observant Jews continue to mourn what Titus brought about? Why does the ninth of Av, which embodies the twin ideas of exile and dispersion, need to be observed at all?

In answering this question we need to examine the enigmatic image of the menorah more closely, and revisit a mystery that has confounded many over the centuries.

**W**E KNOW a great deal about the configuration of the menorah from the biblical book of Exodus. Beaten out of solid gold, the ancient candelabrum boasted six branches emerging from a seventh, its central shaft. The menorah was adorned with golden buttons, cups, and flowers.

What goes unmentioned in the Bible is the menorah’s foundation: how it was supported. Halakhic tradition long insisted that it stood on a three-legged base, and this has been confirmed by archeological evidence. Throughout the land of Israel and the early Diaspora, painted and etched images of the menorah have been discovered dating to the first century C.E. and immediately thereafter; virtually everywhere the base is discernible, it is a tripod.

An exception, however, is the most famous image of all: the one on the arch of Titus. There, Rome’s triumphant soldiers are carrying a menorah mounted on a large stepped pedestal.

The mystery is still deeper. Studying the image on the arch, one can discern dragons or sea serpents adorning the steps of the pedestal—just the sort of pagan art that Jewish sages singled out as associated with idolatry. “If one finds vessels,” we are

told in the Talmud, “upon which are the forms of a sun, or a moon, or a dragon, let him throw them into the Dead Sea.” Pillars decorated with dragons virtually identical to those on the menorah’s pedestal have been discovered in the Roman temple at Didyma in southern Turkey. It beggars belief that the Temple candelabrum would have incorporated such a fundamentally pagan aesthetic.

Several answers have been offered to these conundrums. According to some, a stepped pedestal was in fact a more customary motif than has been thought. Others have speculated that, at some point after the Temple’s destruction, a pedestal was substituted for the original tripod. Thus, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, the first chief rabbi of Israel and an astute scholar in his own right, suggested that the base must have broken off during the return voyage from Judea, to be replaced with a pedestal of Roman design in preparation for the procession into the city.

But perhaps the most interesting theory has been put forward by the Israeli scholar Daniel Sperber, who has proposed that the menorah had *already* been altered from its authentically original design by the time of the Temple’s destruction. Noting the basic similarity of the dragons on the arch to those on the temple at Didyma, Sperber points to a significant difference: unlike the sea-dragons on the menorah, those at Didyma are ridden by naked nymphs. Perhaps, he suggests, the new pedestal was the brainchild of someone eager to introduce a pagan motif into the Temple while at the same time remaining nominally sensitive to Jewish concerns.

Who might that have been? The perfect culprit is the man who has served as a villain in both the Jewish and Christian traditions: King Herod, the Idumean dictator and client of Rome who ruled Jerusalem around the time of the birth of Jesus.

Herod’s relationship with the Temple was a complex one. On the one hand, all contemporary sources, including the rabbis of the Mishnah, agree that he oversaw a stupendous refurbishing of the Temple Mount, elevating its architectural status into an eighth wonder of the ancient world. On the other hand, the contemporaneous historian Josephus recorded the king’s efforts to Romanize the Temple, as well as the outrage this sparked among his subjects:

For the king had erected over the great gate of the Temple a large golden eagle, of great value, and had dedicated it to the Temple. Now the law forbids those that propose to live according to it to erect images or representations of

any living creature. So these wise men persuaded [their followers] to pull down the golden eagle; alleging that although they should incur any danger which might bring them to their deaths, the virtue of the action now proposed to them would appear much more advantageous to them than the pleasures of life.

In suggesting that the same Herod who could bring an eagle into the Temple might also have placed dragons on the menorah, Sperber observes that during the reign of an earlier king, Antigonus, the city of Jerusalem had been plundered by Parthians. There is no question, he writes, that the vessels of the Temple were damaged in the process. And so, “when Herod came to restore the Temple, and to fix its vessels, he was presented with the opportunity to create a new foundation [for the menorah] in the style of the temple of Didyma, with symbols taken from the altar of Apollo.”

If Sperber is right about this, it might explain the profusion of images of the authentic menorah—devoid of dragons, and with a clearly defined tripod base—drawn and scrawled over Jewish walls and floors in the Holy Land and the Diaspora in the days before and after the Temple’s destruction. As Sperber concludes, drawing such a menorah would have been an act of defiance against Rome and all it stood for, as well as a profound expression of longing for the day when Judaism, and Judaism alone, would dictate how the God of Israel was worshipped in Jerusalem.

WITH THIS in mind we can return to the emblem of the modern state of Israel, chosen in order to emphasize the restoration of Jewish sovereignty. As it happens, much debate surrounded the precise configuration of this artifact. Among the proposals submitted at the time, one leading candidate showed the traditional three-footed menorah flanked by two other ancient symbols: a palm frond (*lulav*) and a ram’s horn (*shofar*). Although the proposed emblem also incorporated seven stars, a symbol linked to the writings of Theodor Herzl, religious imagery clearly prevailed over political, and the proposal likewise included a Hebrew phrase, “peace over Israel,” taken from Scripture.

In the end, however, the committee overseeing the choice of symbol declined this proposal, rejecting the biblical phrase, the *shofar* and *lulav*, and the tripod menorah, and settling ultimately on the menorah of the arch of Titus flanked by two olive branches signaling Israel’s peaceful intentions. While granting that the pairing of a menorah with two olive branches nods to Israel’s religious history

by harking back to imagery from the book of the prophet Zechariah, Mishory writes that the emblem “clearly shows that in the struggle between the ‘secular camp,’ which wanted to emphasize the state’s socialist and democratic present and future, and the ‘religious camp,’ which wished to stress the grandeur of the past and its link to the God of Israel, the former won.”

Indeed, when the state’s seal was officially announced, Rabbi Herzog, an ardent Zionist, protested on both religious and archeological grounds:

It is not good what our government does today. Just when we have merited once again the light of Zion that is symbolized by the menorah, [the state] chose specifically the image of the menorah that is on the arch of Titus, which, it appears, was altered by foreigners. . . . And not only this, but an expert in the science of antiquities has testified to me that the menorahs that are formed on the graves in [Jewish] catacombs in Rome . . . are all with three legs, as are all those formed on the mosaics in the remains of ancient synagogues that are in the land of Israel.

“How right are the words of Rabbi Herzog,” exclaims Sperber, for whom Israel’s choice of emblem was a tragic error. In seeking to restore Jewish political honor, the Jewish state ended up insulting the Jewish faith; in seeking to emphasize Jewish political independence, it ended up selecting a symbol of Judaism’s spiritual servitude.

THUS DOES a late-1940’s debate over a state seal raise the deeper question of the ultimate purpose of the Jewish return to the Holy Land—a question that in modern Jewish thought long predates the birth of Israel itself. Was that purpose to enable the Jews to be a people like all others? Or was it to enable the Jewish people to forge a stronger relationship with their faith, with their God, and with their destiny?

For Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), the foremost exponent of Orthodoxy in Germany, the first approach reflected the worldview of many a modern Jew for whom “the Jewish state, both of the past and of the future, is to be regarded as belonging to the same class as all other political phenomena.” But this view, wrote Rabbi Hirsch, “is not the old Jewish view. It is in fact un-Jewish and untrue.” And he continued, invoking the language of Isaiah:

O, long not for the mighty state, for the state of deep diplomatic speech, for tongues which pur-

posely stammer and speak unintelligibly. Look upon Zion, the city of our future. Let thine eyes see Jerusalem, a home of peace, a tent that shall never more be removed, the stakes whereof shall never more be plucked up, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. For when the Lord shall be there with us in majesty, there in a place of broad rivers and streams no ship of war shall cruise, no vessel pass by. But God, our Judge, God our Lawgiver, God our King, He it is Who will then help us.

A Jewish commonwealth, in other words, embodies the idea that Jews are not merely one people among others, but have been chosen for an unparalleled relationship with the God Who dwells in Jerusalem. In the Bible, as Norman Podhoretz has observed (“Jerusalem: The Scandal of Particularity,” COMMENTARY, July-August 2007), Jerusalem is both a political capital and a religious one; it is the capital both of Judea and of Judaism. This is the reason that, of all the fast days in the Jewish calendar, the ninth of Av is the saddest. Three weeks earlier, on another annual fast day, Jews mark the date on which the Romans broke through the walls of Jerusalem, the locus of the Jewish polity. On the ninth of Av, they bewail the ultimate defeat: the destruction of the Temple, the locus of the Jewish faith.

NO ONE understood this better, I would argue, than Titus himself. He did not see his victory over Judea as a purely political phenomenon, and he knew that undoing the deep damage he had successfully wrought would require much more than the restoration of Jewish power.

That brings us to still another mystery involving the images on the arch.

It is often assumed that the centerpiece of the Roman victory parade was the menorah. This is understandable enough: during the Second Temple period, the menorah served as the symbol of Jewish sovereignty on coins minted by Jewish kings. It is also logical, given the way the relief on the arch prominently positions the captured menorah to highlight the political subjugation of the Jews. But Josephus, who was an eyewitness of the triumphal procession, insists in his *Wars of the Jews* that the menorah (the appearance of which, he notes in passing, had been “changed from that which we made use of”) was *not* the most salient object on display. In exhibiting what he had acquired from Jerusalem, Titus saved what he believed to be the most important artifact for last:

[T]here followed those pageants [of captives] a great number of ships; and for the other spoils, they were carried in great plenty. But for those that were taken in the Temple of Jerusalem, they made the greatest figure of them all; that is, the golden table, of the weight of many talents; the candlestick also, that was made of gold, . . . and the last of all the spoils was carried the Law of the Jews. [emphasis added]

It seems, then, that for Titus the most significant of all the spoils taken from Jerusalem was a scroll of the Torah, the book of Jewish law. This statement by Josephus caught the attention of William Whiston, the historian’s 18th-century translator, who remarks correctly that “the Law or Pentateuch does not appear on that arch at all”—a fact, he says, that deserves “the consideration of the inquisitive reader.”

Why is the ostensible centerpiece of the spoils missing from Titus’s arch? And what *was* this scroll that was displayed along with the Temple treasures?

In a series of lectures published in the 19th century, William Knight, then a lecturer at the University of Bristol, offered a theory as to the first of these puzzles. A review published at the time summarizes Knight’s argument:

Mr. Knight corroborates the account of Josephus by a passage, apparently overlooked by modern writers, from the work of Biondo, the earliest authority on the antiquities of Rome, who wrote in the first half of the 15th century, and who ends his description of the objects carried in the procession and sculptured on the arch with these words: “*Postea portabatur Lex Judaeorum marmoreal item extans.*” (“After this was carried the Law of the Jews, which also is extant in the marble.”) This passage, which appears in the edition of 1511, is omitted in those printed in 1531 and 1559. May we not hence, with some probability, infer that between the years 1511 and 1531, the Book of the Law ceased to be visible in the bas-relief?

IN SHORT, according to Knight, the arch when built did contain an image depicting the parading of the Torah through the streets of Rome, but the image had become effaced over the centuries. Perhaps; as we shall see, there may be another explanation. But whatever the case may be, what exactly was the “Law of the Jews” that Titus brought back from Jerusalem?

It was unlikely to have been merely a scroll stolen randomly from some synagogue in Jerusalem. Rather, like all the other objects in the procession,

it must have been a copy of the Law taken from the Temple itself. And indeed the Mishnah and the Talmud refer to a very valuable copy of the Torah that was kept in the Temple courtyard. Some versions call this the “*sefer Azarah*,” the courtyard scroll, while others use a slightly different word with a similar spelling: “*sefer Ezra*,” that is, the scroll written by Ezra, the leader who oversaw the initial building of the Second Temple after the Jews’ return from exile in Babylonia.

The latter name signifies that the scroll was considered quite old and authoritative—hence, the source to be consulted in addressing any textual questions that might arise about the Law. And this copy of the Torah also served as a reminder of national priorities. Deuteronomy informs us that a Jewish king is obligated to write a Torah for himself and keep it with him at all times. Citing the discussion of this law in the Jerusalem Talmud, Maimonides in the 12th century adds an interesting detail:

The king is commanded to write a Torah as a king, aside from the one he had as a commoner. . . . And [this Torah] is checked [against] the *Sefer ha-Azarah* according to the instruction of the High Court. That which he had as a commoner he places in storage, and the one he wrote after becoming king must be with him always. And if he goes out to war the Torah must be with him.

Maimonides here is recapitulating the ancient idea that while sovereignty was supremely important, and while Jews had to be prepared to defend themselves by means of military force when necessary, power could not be allowed to become an end in itself. Jews, especially those ruling in Jerusalem, could never forget that their ultimate obligation was to serve the God who dwelled in the Temple of Jerusalem.

No wonder, then, that Titus placed such a high value on the most important Torah in the possession of the Jewish people, the oldest and most authoritative version of the Mosaic Law, the one kept in the Temple as a symbol of Jewish chosenness. As if to emphasize the point, Josephus tells us that although the menorah and the other golden vessels were displayed in the Temple of Peace, the most valued objects seized by Titus, including the Law and the “purple veils of the holy place,” were kept not there but in the royal palace.\* Titus knew that his greatest victory was the capture not of Judea but of the Temple, and that his legacy lay first and foremost in the blow he had dealt to the Jewish

faith by bringing about the exile of the Torah itself.

What Titus knew, the Jews knew as well, though they refused to accept it. Throughout the centuries of dispersion, the Jewish dream of redemption was always two-part: first, that Jewish sovereignty be restored over the land of Israel, and second, that the Torah return to the Temple of God and its supreme significance be recognized by all humanity. As the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed centuries earlier:

And it shall come to pass in the end of days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

HAVE, THEN, the triumph of Titus and the message of the arch been undone? Or does there remain something to be mourned?

The idea that mourning for Zion has indeed become irrelevant is another notion that predates the founding of the state of Israel, and that in some places and times has even been acted upon. In describing a 19th-century instance of this, Rabbi Hirsch recalled how “one evening on the ninth of Av, the rabbi of a small town in South Germany had his synagogue brilliantly lit up and invited the members of his congregation to attend in their best clothes.” Given the civil rights that German Jews had recently won, petitioning God for a return to Holy Land had evidently become an anachronism to this rabbi. “Jerusalem, he said, was here. Palestine was now situated on German soil.”

In hindsight, such sentiments seem laughable or tragically deluded. But even at the time, Rabbi Hirsch found them radically deficient. On the ninth of Av, he wrote, Jews grieved for much more than their historic loss of political rights, and they still had much to mourn even after having been offered equal status as citizens:

In the darkest centuries of the exile, when the Roman sword rent the curtain of the Temple . . . the majesty of God and the holiness of the Torah found refuge in Jewish family life, the Jewish home. . . . The barriers are [now] falling, the

\* This may suggest a simpler solution to the puzzle of the arch’s missing Torah—namely, that it was never there because Titus’s sculptors relied only on the objects displayed in the Temple of Peace.

chains are being struck off. . . . Will Israel be able to carry over its intimacy with God from the ghetto into the court, from the hovels into the mansions, from the *beder* into the salon, from the corner shop into the office, from the shul into the “temple”? Is Israel equipped to take over with it into the new civic life the old allegiance to God, the old sanctity of the Torah? Or do the divine presence, the kingship of God, the Torah, face the last and sternest stage of their exile?

Today there still seems reason from a religious perspective to affirm the accuracy of Rabbi Hirsch’s concerns. In both Israel and America, Jews have experienced unparalleled freedoms, achieved great economic success, and exercised appropriate degrees of political power. At the same time, unprecedented numbers in the United States have rejected Jewish particularity by intermarrying and assimilating, while post-Zionism has made analogous inroads into the core identity of many secular Jews in Israel. The exile of the Jews has to a palpable extent come to its end; but does not the exile of the Torah, boldly proclaimed by Titus, continue?

There have been, admittedly, moments of transcendent and redemptive significance that have infused even the most secular Jews with intimations of what it means to be a chosen people. Pondering the famous photograph of Israeli soldiers gazing in wonder at the just-captured Western Wall on the day Jerusalem was won in 1967, the writer Yossi Klein Halevi observes:

Many of the paratroopers identified themselves as Israelis first, Jews only a distant second; some weren’t quite sure whether they identified as Jews at all. And yet it is at the Wall of all places, symbol of the quietism of exile, where secular Israelis become reconciled with their Jewishness. As one paratrooper put it, “At the Wall I discovered that I’m a Jew.” History had yielded the moment of consolation that generations of believing Jews had insisted, against all logic, must come. “We received the Torah at Mount Sinai,” wrote the

Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein, “and in [the Holocaust] we gave it back.” In Jerusalem, at the Wall, if only for a moment, we considered accepting it again.

“If only for a moment.” And then the moment passed. Living in Jerusalem after Israel’s failed 2006 campaign in Lebanon, in a season “in which the disappointments that have marred much of Israeli life in the last 25 years have culminated in . . . political shame and military defeat,” Klein Halevi confesses that most of the time he does not feel he is in any place unusual. Even so, however, there continue to be those moments—moments in which

I suddenly remember where I am. I feel myself, then, like one of those barefoot and wide-eyed Ethiopian immigrants, silently stepping off the plane at Ben-Gurion airport into Zion. I recall, too, my father’s wonder at the Wall, whose fragile and improbable endurance he saw as a metaphor for the Jewish people. Like him, I ask myself what it is about this strange little people that continually finds itself at the center of international attention, repeatedly on the front lines against totalitarian forces of evil—Nazism, Soviet Communism, now jihadism—all of which [have] marked the Jews as their primary obstacle to achieving world domination. At those moments, I feel gratitude for having found my place in this story.

We live in an age when one might think that the chosenness of the Jews had become impossible to doubt. Yet, consciously or not, many Jews, in Israel and the Diaspora, doubt it all the same. In this sense, the menorah that has come to symbolize the Jewish state, the menorah of Titus, perfectly embodies the unredeemed condition of the world, a world in which there is both much to be joyously celebrated and much that remains to be mourned, and to be longed for. Not for nothing do religious Jews continue every morning to pray, in words recited for millennia,

May You cause a new light to shine over Zion,  
and may we all soon be worthy of its light.