

A Symbol of Peace

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The Arch of Titus in Rome is simultaneously one of the saddest and most exciting places for a Jew to stand. It is but a short distance from the Colosseum, the stadium made famous by its cruel sports, built with money plundered from the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Titus's Arch celebrates the destruction of our Temple, a building designated by Isaiah to be a house of prayer for all nations. A bas-relief sculpture on the arch's inner walls depicts a sickening scene: the triumphant display of the Temple's sacred objects, the Menorah most prominent among them, along with a pathetic procession of enslaved Jews.

I once visited this spot with a group of Christian clergy and found myself suddenly weeping over this ancient tragedy. A Catholic deacon named Mark asked that we all embrace and pray together in order to repair some of the hatred and violence of that scene with our friendship and respect. I appreciated his instinct, and it helped. And yet, the image of the Menorah above our heads reminded me of the destruction of our Temple and the two millennia of exile and oppression which followed the sack of Jerusalem.

Sad as the sight of this arch is, I must admit that it is also fascinating. After all, this is the closest that we can get to an eyewitness account of the design of the ancient Menorah, at least as it appeared in the Second Temple. The Torah's description of the seven-branched lamp stand in our portion ([Exod. 25: 31-40](#)) is extremely detailed. It is to be fashioned of beaten gold, with a central shaft and six branches, three on each

side. There are almond blossoms and lily cups, all made of pure gold. How radiant it must have been when its lamplight played off the blossoms of beaten gold!

For all of this detail, important dimensions are absent. How large should the Menorah be? Are its branches curved or straight? Are its seven lamps of identical height or not? It would be impossible from the Torah text alone to recreate the Menorah built by Moses. This led to the idea that the Torah is not providing details to build from scratch, but only an allusion to a prior model of Menorah. But where would that have been found?

Ancient Jews imagined that not only the Menorah but indeed the entire Tabernacle was already created in heaven, and that the terrestrial one was meant to be a copy. So for example, a work written shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple, but set before the destruction of the First Temple, reads:

[The true temple] is not this building that is in your midst now; it is that which will be revealed, with Me, that was already prepared from the moment I decided to create paradise. I showed it...to Moses on Mount Sinai when I showed him the likeness of the tabernacle and all its vessels. (2 Baruch 4:3,5, as in James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*, 420)

According to the Midrash, Moses struggled greatly to discern how to make this brilliant object. In the [Talmud \(BT Menahot 29a\)](#), Rabbi Yosi b. Rabbi Yehudah is quoted saying that a menorah made of fire descended

from the sky to illustrate the design, which Moses faithfully copied. While this Midrash sounds fanciful, it relates to a close reading of the text which emphasizes that Moses built according to the image shown him on Mount Sinai ([Exod. 25:9](#), 40 and [26:30](#)).

The medieval rabbis confirmed this account, with Rashi stating that a menorah of fire was shown to Moses—although Rashbam prefers a less spectacular reading, that Moses was able to see it “from himself,” apparently through inspired imagination. The consensus of ancient and medieval interpreters seems to be that the Menorah, and indeed all of the Temple vessels, were not originals but rather copies of the celestial Temple and its objects. This reading is suggested by the Torah’s emphasis that Moses “was shown” models on Mount Sinai.

Although the image of a heavenly hologram is quite appealing, perhaps the Menorah made by Moses is not the first to take solid form. After all, the Menorah is basically an illuminated tree. It alludes back to the Tree of Knowledge described in [Genesis 2](#), and perhaps also to the burning bush described in [Exodus 3](#). The burning bush, too, is a tree that is on fire, yet it is not consumed, just as the golden Menorah is on fire and is not consumed. These images of burning trees are rich and resistant to simple interpretation. They seem to be associated with a special form of intelligence—the flow of secret knowledge from heaven to earth.

When the Tabernacle—and then the Temple—stood, golden trees in their sacred precincts symbolized the possibility of enlightenment. The eroded marble sculpture of a menorah on the Arch of Titus symbolizes the extinguishing of that light, which was a tragedy not only for the Jews, but for the world. And yet, just as the Menorah was not an original but a copy of the divine model, so too are we able to recapture the experience of enlightenment through our own efforts.

We live in a time of division and hatred and violence. The vulgar parade of Titus, intent on replacing a house of peace (symbolized by the Menorah) with cruel entertainment (symbolized by the Colosseum) is a reminder of how far humanity can fall. It is our responsibility to look clearly and discern our ideals so that we too can build an enlightened religious culture.

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