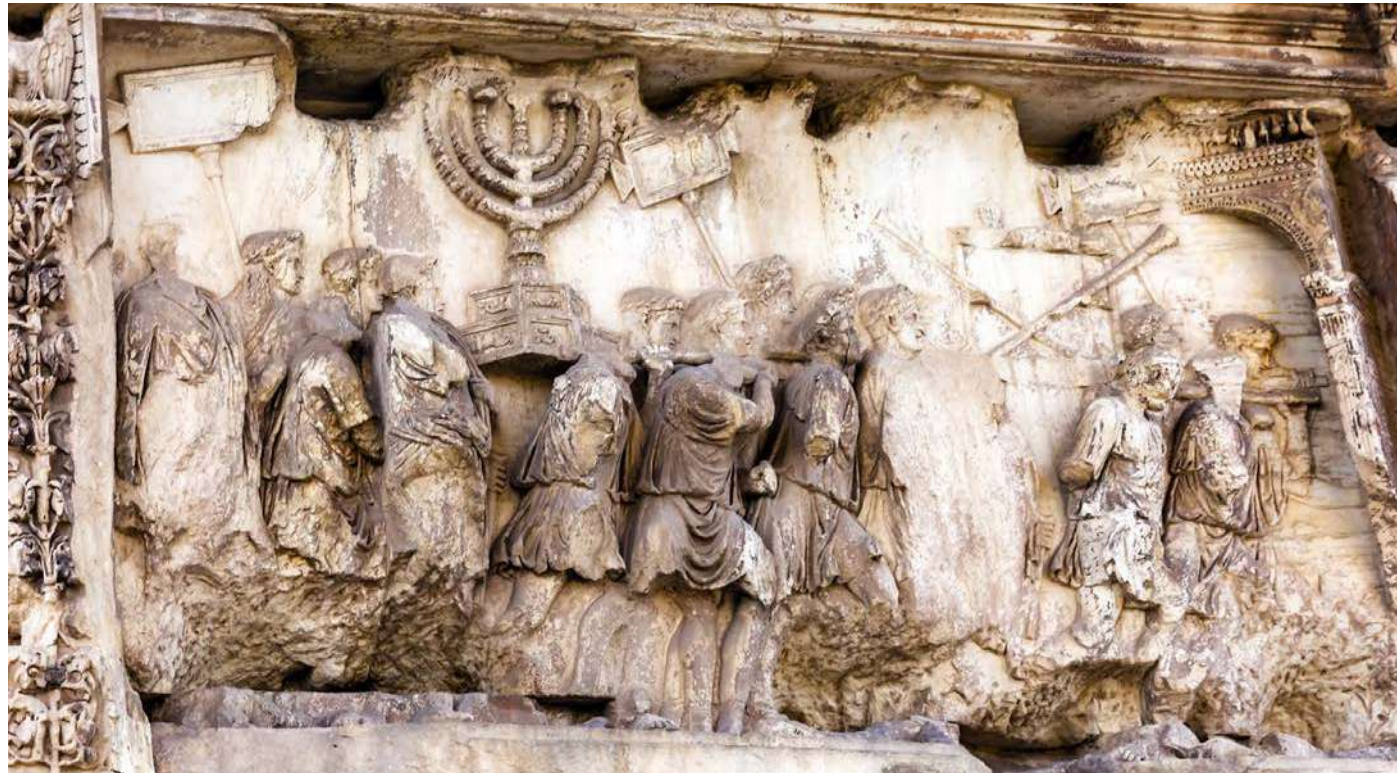


# The Myth of Vatican Treasures, Once Again

Despite recent reports, keilim from the Bayis Sheini aren't held in Rome



Depiction on the Arch of Titus showing the Romans carrying away keilim from the Beis Hamikdash

**T**here is a saying that old myths never die. This has certainly been the case with the persistent myth that the Vatican is holding the treasures of the *Bayis Sheini*, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, including the menorah from the *Beis Hamikdash*. This myth got a new boost when an unnamed Italian parliamentarian supposedly told Amichai Eliyahu, Israel's minister of heritage, that

"Rome" had possession of the Temple vessels and was prepared to return them.

According to the accounts, the parliamentarian went on to offer tremendous praise of Israel and the Jewish people.

Although it is always nice to hear good things about the Jewish people these days, what is really amazing is that this parliamentary representative somehow found out about the widespread false belief that the Vatican possesses the menorah and other treasures of the *Beis Hamikdash* and that he came to believe it—to the extent

that he apparently proposed their return to Minister Eliyahu. We note, by the way, that Amichai Eliyahu himself has not made any statements about this report.

It is too bad that even if all of those involved in passing on this report are telling what they think is the truth, the notion of Vatican possession of treasures from the *Beis Hamikdash* remains a myth. It would be wonderful if the Vatican had them, because then they could give them back. But, in fact, it is impossible that the Vatican holds any remnants of the treasures.

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We do know, both from the artistic representation on the Arch of Titus and from the written sources of *Chazal* and Josephus, that many of the treasures of the *Beis Hamikdash* were taken to Rome. We also know that some of them were exhibited in one of the main temples in Rome. But how they would have been transferred into the possession of the Vatican is simply impossible to understand.

This is because the Vatican did not exist in the first century CE, and it was not the successor of the Roman Empire. The Vatican only came into being around the year 700. Rome was sacked by the Gauls in 387, the Visigoths in 410, the Vandals in 455, and the Ostrogoths in 476—all before the Vatican came into existence. So whatever vessels might have been there were destroyed or stolen by the invaders.

Also, it must be emphasized that in recent years, the Vatican has made available an enormous amount of material in

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its possession that is related to the Jews and Judaism. This process started in 2005, when the Vatican allowed its 15th-century illuminated copy of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* and several other exceedingly valuable manuscripts to be exhibited at the Israel Museum in Yerushalayim.

Even before this, the Vatican had invited experts from the Jewish National Li-

brary, Israel's equivalent of the Library of Congress, to re-catalog its Hebrew manuscripts, and in the process, the number of available manuscripts went from 550 or so to over 800. This catalog was completed in 2005 and is available online.

More recently, in 2020, after considerable foot-dragging, the Vatican opened up its archives on the Holocaust period, an invaluable resource for Holocaust studies and grist for the mill in the ongoing debate about the actions of Pope Pius XII and the Catholic Church during the Holocaust. Further, in reply to inquiries about releasing these treasures, Vatican officials have stated that if only they had them, they would be happy to open them to the public.

The myth that the menorah and other vessels are held by the Vatican is believed by a very large number of people, but that doesn't make it true! The history of the circulation of this myth can itself be documented and its origins pinpointed.

But what is totally astounding about this recent report is not just that elements of the Israeli press would publish it without making any attempt to verify it, but that this Jewish urban legend has spread to a member of the Italian Parliament who actually believes it. Let us hope that the people governing Italy have more sense than this particular gentleman, who proffered these treasures without realizing that he did not have them.

While we continue to *daven* for the *geulah shleimah* at this difficult time for Israel and the Jewish people around the world, let us hope and pray that we speedily see concrete progress towards true peace in Eretz Yisrael. ●

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Bas-relief of a menorah at a joint exhibition of the Vatican and the Jewish Museum in Rome

