



Center for Israel Studies

July 3, 2014

President Shimon Peres
Jerusalem

Dear President Peres:

Rabbi Yonatan Shtencel has received considerable press with his claims that the menorah of the Second Temple is being concealed by the Vatican. Rabbi Shtencel received a most appropriate response to his claims from the Papal Nuncio (dated 15 November 2013), who requested proofs of the rabbis claims, and offered to facilitate the transmission of his claims to the highest levels of the Vatican, including to the Pope himself. On 29 May 2014 Rabbi Shtencel wrote to you with a list of “proofs” supporting his claim.

In the context of an undergraduate course at Yeshiva University that focused upon *The Arch of Titus: Between Rome and Jerusalem*, our group has worked through Rabbi Shentcel’s claims with considerable diligence, and our investigation does not support his assumptions.

1. The letter claims that the Arch of Titus reliefs depict *Jewish prisoners* carrying the Menorah and other Temple vessels to Rome, and that the Temple vessels were eventually transferred to the Vatican.

The Arch of Titus does indeed depict the Menorah, along with other vessels from the Temple being carried in a procession in honor of Titus’ victory over Judaea. This procession took place in 71 CE. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the Revolt, describes this event in detail in *The Jewish War* (Book 7, lines 118–57).

While Jewish legend has for centuries claimed that the menorah bearers were Jews, no academic scholar of Roman or Jewish History accepts this identification. The wreathed menorah bearers depicted in the Arch of Titus reliefs are Roman soldiers.

Josephus relates that subsequently the Menorah was prominently showcased in Emperor Vespasian's Temple of Peace, located near the Arch on the Roman Forum.

Christian legend of the 13th century places the menorah in a small box at the Church of the Lateran in Rome. No one before the latter twentieth century ever claimed that these vessels are housed at the Vatican.

2. The letter cites two rabbinic sources (*Avot de'Rabbi Natan*, 41; *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate *Me'ilah* 17a) that indicate that the vessels were in Rome.

These are just two of the rabbinic sources to make this claim, which in general terms is historically accurate.

The assumption that these sources prove that the Temple vessels were transferred to the Vatican IS NOT, however, correct. Christian legend from antiquity suggests that the menorah was transferred from Rome by the Vandals in the 5th century, and Jewish legend in Rome has it that the menorah was dropped in the Tiber River by the Vandals, where it remains. These legends are of questionable historical usefulness.

3. The letter cites Professor Shimon Sheetret, former Minister of Religion of the State of Israel, claiming that Sheetret had heard of a firsthand account of someone who had personally seen the Menorah in the Vatican.

Prof. Sheetret responded to our query by email, explaining that "There is no documented evidence on this matter.... I do not remember the conversation with Rabbi Shtencel, he may be referring to the oral stories on the menorah which are mentioned."

4 The letter relates that the father of Rabbi Yisrael Miller of Jerusalem, Rabbi Baruch Miller, saw the Menorah in the Vatican before the Holocaust while disguising his Jewish identity.

Rabbi Baruch Miller is deceased. In a recent conversation, Rabbi Yisrael Miller told us that in truth it was his father's friend who saw the Menorah, but he could not remember the name of the friend. The friend too, he tells us, has since passed away.

5. Finally, Rabbi Shtencel cites two books, *Ma'amar Esther* (Djerba, 1946) and *Lev Yamim* (Jerusalem, 1975) in which Rabbi Yitzchak Chai Bukavza of Libya met king of Italy, who brought him into the Vatican storerooms to see the Temple vessels.

We located versions of this story in each of these volumes. In *Maamar Esther* Rabbi Bukavsa is described visiting Rome and meeting an unidentified King, but there is no mention of his gaining access to the Temple vessels. In *Lev Yamim*, Rabbi Bukavsa does enter the Vatican, but in fact sees nothing (which the authors ascribe to a level of modesty, but can be otherwise interpreted).

Our research suggests that the evidence cited in this letter in support of claims against the Vatican is not supported by the facts.

It is not our goal to destroy the sense that the Menorah is a tangible artifact-- just outside of our grasp. This proximity of the Temple vessels has helped our people to maintain our messianic hopes throughout the generations.

The modern claim that the menorah is “hidden” at the Vatican, however, is unfounded.

Sincerely,

Joey Krombach,
Jonathan Loffman,
Ari Rosenberg,
Yitzy Rothenberg,
David Silber