



# In Search of the Holy Temple Vessels:

Reflections on a Recent Visit to Rome

RABBI SHIMSHON NADEL

## Where are the vessels from the Holy Temple today? Do they still even exist?

*Where are the vessels from the Holy Temple today? Hidden in the catacombs of Rome? Buried deep in the bowels beneath the Vatican? Do they still even exist?*

For centuries, these questions have captured the minds, hearts and imaginations of Jew and non-Jew alike. No wonder the search for the Holy Temple vessels is the subject of so many articles, books, and even Hollywood films!

The Talmud (*Gittin* 56b) records that when Titus conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE, he took the curtain from the Holy of Holies, "and made it into a sack and placed all of the Temple vessels in it, and sent it on a ship to be praised in his city."

Jewish-Roman historian Josephus describes the vessels being paraded around Rome in a triumphal march:

"The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood 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 [a Torah Scroll]. They followed a large party carrying images of victory, all made of ivory and gold. Behind them drove Vespasian, followed by Titus; while Domitian rode beside them, in magnificent apparel and mounted on a steed that was in itself a sight" (*The Jewish War*, Book 7).

Upon his return to Rome, Emperor Vespasian built the Templum Pacis, a Temple of Peace, in the Imperial Fora to display the plunder from Jerusalem. Josephus writes that the Temple of Peace, "was finished in so short a time, and in so glorious a manner, as was beyond all human expectation and opinion." According to Josephus, Vespasian's Temple contained "those golden vessels and instruments that were taken out of the Jewish temple, as ensigns of his glory" (*Ibid.*).



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When not on an expedition searching for the Holy Temple Vessels, Shimon HaKohen Nadel lives in Jerusalem where he teaches and serves as rabbi of Har Nof's Kehilat Zichron Yosef.

Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian, philosopher, and close friend to Vespasian, records that the Templum Pacis was "The largest and most beautiful of all the buildings in the city... since it was adorned with offerings of gold and silver that had been placed there because they were safe" (*Natural History* I, 14:2-3).

A detailed, massive marble map of Rome from the early 3rd Century, the *Forma Urbis Romae*, hung in Vespasian's Temple and illustrates its grand features, including gardens, pools, and statues.

Rabbinic tradition also records the vessels being held in Rome. *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, an early commentary on Tractate Avot states that the "Table, Menorah, Curtain, and the Frontlet [of the High Priest] are still in Rome" (Chap. 41). In fact, the Talmud relates that when the 2nd Century sage Rabbi Elazar ben Yose was in Rome, he saw the Curtain (*Yoma* 57a) as well as the Frontlet of the High Priest (*Sukkah* 5a). Rabbi Shimon reports that when in Rome, he saw the Menorah (*Sifre Zuta*, Chap. 8).

*Could these rabbis have seen these precious vessels in Vespasian's Temple of Peace? What else did they see in Rome?*

Much later in history, the 12th Century Spanish explorer Benjamin of Tudela, who travels to Europe, Asia and Africa visiting Jewish communities and recording their unique customs, records what he finds in Rome:

"In the church of St. John in the Lateran there are two bronze columns taken from the Temple, the handiwork of King Solomon, each column being engraved 'Solomon the son of David.' The Jews of Rome told me that every year upon the 9th of Av [the day on which the Holy Temple was destroyed] they found the columns exuding moisture like water. There also is the cave where Titus the son of Vespasian stored





the Temple vessels which he brought from Jerusalem" (The Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, Rome).

Benjamin of Tudela records having seen columns from the First Temple, destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th Century BCE! This would seem implausible, but Benjamin of Tudela is merely reporting what he is told. However, many questions remain: Could the cave he refers to be Vespasian's Temple of Peace? Was it still standing as late as the 12th Century? If so, are any of the vessels from Jerusalem still in Rome, today?

In February, I went to Rome to see for myself.

Rome is a city rich in Jewish History. Ancient and modern. Old and new. Positive and painful. Everywhere you walk you find traces of our people woven into the fabric and the very fibre of the city. Catacombs where Jews buried their dead in antiquity. A square where the Talmud was publicly burnt on Rosh Hashanah in 1553, today a fruit and vegetable market. Signs of Jewish life like synagogues and Jewish homes. Churches where Jews were forced to listen to sermons, aimed at converting them. The site where Jews were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz on 16 October 1943, when the Ghetto was liquidated.

In the Imperial Fora today, you can still see remnants of Vespasian's Temple of Peace. Portions of columns from the impressive structure are still intact along with the original floor made of pink and white marble, only uncovered by Italian archaeologists in 2005. I was fortunate to have been granted special access to see the floor up close.

One can only imagine what it might have looked like with the vessels from the Holy Temple displayed inside.

It was painful. But nothing was as painful as seeing the Arch of Titus up close.

Built ca. 81 CE by Domitian to commemorate the victories of his brother, Titus, including his conquest of Jerusalem, the Arch of Titus is a living monument to the destruction of our Holy Temple and exile from the Land of Israel. The south panel depicts a victory march, Roman soldiers with celebratory wreaths upon their heads, carrying vessels taken from the Holy Temple: The Menorah, the Table of the Showbread, Temple trumpets, and fire pans. This infamous image is forever seared into our collective consciousness.

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The Arch of Titus is a triumphal arch - a model for triumphal arches around the world - which triumphs and tramples on the greatest tragedy in Jewish History. It is the symbol of Jewish defeat. It's no wonder Pope Paul IV, the same Pope who forced the Jews into the Ghetto in 1555, would force Jews to swear an 'Oath of Submission' to the Church every year at the Arch of Titus.

And according to local tradition, no Jew would ever pass under the arch.

But on the 30th of November, just one day after the United Nations adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine, which led to the eventual establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish community of Rome gathered together at the Arch of Titus, and marched through. This time, they walked in the opposite direction, walking in the direction of Jerusalem, as if leaving Rome and returning victorious

to the Land of Israel after two thousand years of exile.

Standing below the arch, I was reminded of a story about Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Kahaneman, the beloved head of the Ponovezh Yeshiva, who committed himself to rebuilding Torah study in Israel post-Holocaust. Once, when visiting Rome to raise funds, Rabbi Kahaneman asked his driver to take him to the Arch of Titus. He stood in front of the Arch and cried out defiantly in Yiddish, "Titus, Titus! Vu bist du?! Where are you?!"

I decided to sing "Am Yisrael Chai - the Nation of Israel Lives" at the top of my lungs. A security guard quickly ran over, yelling at me in Italian. I feigned ignorance and continued. This was my small act of defiance. It almost got me arrested - but it was worth it!

Just a short walk down the Via Sacra, or 'Sacred Way,' is the Colosseum, one of the most impressive remnants of ancient Rome. Construction began on the Colosseum under Emperor Vespasian in around 70-72 CE, and was completed in 80 CE under his successor and heir, Titus. The Colosseum could hold between 50,000 to 80,000 spectators and hosted plays, re-enactments of military battles, animal hunts, public executions and bloodsport, where gladiators would fight to the death. With so much violence, it's no wonder the rabbis of the Talmud were not big fans.

But what many don't know - and what I learned when visiting Rome - is that the Colosseum was built with the wealth stolen from Jerusalem!

In the Colosseum today there is a small marble stone, easy to miss if you are not paying attention. You can almost trip over it. The stone was originally found during excavations in 1813. But over one hundred years later - in 1995 - a German scholar would make an amazing revelation. Finding small holes



The Vatican, Rome

over the inscription, he concluded that those small holes were where bronze letters were placed, in a much earlier inscription. Studying the position and orientation of these holes, he was able to reconstruct this 'ghost' inscription. It was a dedication stone, which celebrated the inauguration of the Colosseum. The initial inscription would have read: "Imp. T. Caes. Vespasianus Aug. Amphitheatrum Novum Ex Manubis Fieri iussit - The Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus had this new amphitheatre erected with the spoils of war," a clear reference to conquest of Jerusalem.

The Colosseum was built with the plunder from Jerusalem. Some even suggest that the Colosseum was built on the backs of Jewish slaves taken to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem.

With all of this evidence, it is easy to understand why so many people believe that the Vatican is still in possession of vessels from the Holy Temple.

In 2013, Yonatan Shtencel, a rabbi from Jerusalem penned a letter to the Vatican, asking them to return the vessels from the Temple. And he actually received a response! In a letter dated 15 November 2013, Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzaratto wrote to Rabbi Shtencel and respectfully refuted

the rabbi's suggestion that the Vatican is in possession of Temple vessels. The archbishop argued that if indeed the Vatican was in possession of vessels from Jerusalem, "This would suggest that, for some unspecified reasons, the Vatican would maintain a negative attitude and hostile feelings towards the Jewish People. I think you would agree with me that this is against all the evidence of at least the last fifty years of dialogue and friendly relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People." He concluded his letter by saying that if Rabbi Shtencel could provide some proof, he would be happy to forward the request on to the Pope himself!

True, the Vatican maintains a positive relationship today with the State of Israel and the Jewish People. And the Vatican has been forthcoming with materials in their possession, allowing Jewish scholars access to the important Jewish manuscripts in their library. But when visiting the Vatican Museum in Rome, exploring its many halls and vast collections of art and artefacts from ancient civilisations - Egypt, Babylonia, Persia - it was curious that their collection of artefacts from ancient Israel is absent. Certainly they must have something from ancient Israel. Why wouldn't it be on display?







Other traditions exist as to the possible location of Temple vessels in Rome. One suggestion is the Tiber River, which runs through Rome. According to some, it was the Jews themselves who tossed the Menorah and other vessels into the river, rather than have them defiled at the hands of their Roman captors. But it is hard to imagine these priceless gold-laden vessels being dumped in the Tiber.

Another tradition maintains that the vessels were buried underneath the glorious Great Synagogue in the Jewish Ghetto. This too is hard to accept, as the Jewish Community of Rome was only forced into the Ghetto in the mid-16th Century, and the Great Synagogue was only built between 1901-1904, centuries after the destruction of the Holy Temple. And then there are the stories. Stories full of drama, suspense, mystery, and intrigue. Rabbis travelling to Rome to find the Temple vessels. Rabbis who befriended the King or the Pope, or someone else with power and influence who admits that Rome is in possession of the vessels. Stories of rabbis seeing the Menorah or other vessels. Stories of rabbis in possession of treasure maps. These stories all share the same ending: The plan is somehow foiled, almost supernaturally, as if to say that the time is not yet ripe for the location of these vessels to be revealed.



The Colosseum, Rome

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Today, Rome is a beautiful city with its piazzas, fountains, statues, and museums, but until the Renaissance, Rome was laid in ruin. Roman statesman and historian, Cassius Dio, records that Vespasian's Temple of Peace was destroyed by fire in the 2nd Century. While it was rebuilt, most likely by Emperor Severus, it was once again destroyed by a series of earthquakes in the early 5th Century. According to Procopius of Caesarea, writing in the 6th Century, the Temple had long since been destroyed by "lightning," although there were still many works of art on display nearby.

*Could Procopius be referring to the Temple Vessels, or were they already destroyed by the fire and earthquakes?*

Rome was sacked and looted multiple times. First by the Visigoths in 410 CE, and then by the Vandals in 455 CE. It is very likely that if Rome was still in possession of the Temple Vessels, they were carried off by the Visigoths or Vandals and lost forever.

We just don't know.

But the search for the Temple vessels represents the longing and yearning of the Jewish People to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Holy Temple. May it be speedily in our days. Amen.

In the meantime, the search continues.



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