

Kol Ha-Rav

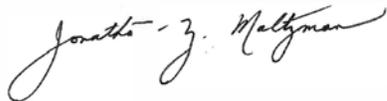
We are first introduced to the menorah with these words. "You shall make a lampstand of pure gold... Six branches shall issue from its sides; three branches from one side of the lampstand and three branches from the other side of the lampstand." The central shaft where the branches are joined together forms the seventh branch. (Exodus 25:31ff)

According to the Book of Maccabees, which we read this time of year, this menorah was removed in 169 BCE by the archenemy of the Hanukkah story, Antiochus, until our hero Judah Maccabee replaced the stolen one after he cleansed and rededicated the Temple.

We know from the corroborated testimony of the Jewish historian Josephus and the Arch of Titus itself, that the menorah was brought to Rome and displayed as part of the triumph of Vespasian and Titus. Dedicated by the Senate and the Roman people in honor of Titus, the Arch conveys the might of the Romans.

In the 16th century it was at the Arch of Titus that Jews were forced to swear an oath of submission. For Jews, the Arch of Titus came to represent a world that wasn't, a world of Jewish sovereignty.

That is pretty much how things stood for just shy of two thousand years, until February 1949, nine months after the establishment of the State of Israel. The new state was in need of an emblem – a national emblem that would represent a sovereign Jewish nation, an emblem that symbolized the continuity and fulfillment of the Zionist dream. After looking at hundreds of sketches, the appointed committee understood the historic weightiness of the decision at hand and used the menorah as depicted on the Arch of Titus. The message would be clear to the world; the menorah of Titus's triumphal procession had, for thousands of years, symbolized Jewish defeat, powerlessness and exile. The rebirth of the Jewish state would be represented by the return and display of that very menorah. In place of humiliation would come honor, pride and sovereignty. As goes the menorah, so goes Jewish identity. From the desert wanderings, to the Temple, from the Arch of Titus to the modern State of Israel, to where we put menorot in suburban Washington D.C. – the placement of the menorah is as good a litmus test as any for the Jewish condition.



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