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Confronting the hidden Jewish history of Rome

By Carol Goodman Kaufman
Advocate correspondent



Arch of Titus detail depicting spoils from Jerusalem.

We had been in Rome before and had seen all the major, must-see sites on the tourist route. This time, we decided to focus on the area surrounding our hotel, and roaming through the neighborhood, we first hit a couple churches. Of course in Rome churches are as plentiful as Dunkin Donuts shops are here. However, the Basilica Sacro Cuore was particularly interesting for a painting that hung inside. On one wall of the church, there was a picture featuring Mary and Joseph with a young Jesus learning his basic Torah, including the Fifth Commandment and the first line of Genesis – and it was all in Hebrew.

After the churches, we happened upon a wrought iron fence on which hung a sign indicating that we were at the National Museum of Rome. This treasure was inexplicably not pictured – or even listed -- on our walking map. Inexplicably, because this institution, housed in multiple buildings in the eastern part of the city, has an outstanding, and enormous, collection.

As we passed through the lush entry garden at the Baths of Diocletian venue, admiring the central fountain, statues, and other decorative pieces, we noticed that virtually every gravestone lining the perimeter featured a water pitcher engraved on it. Was this a Roman idea, or was it borrowed from the Jewish custom of putting a ewer on Levite headstones to commemorate their hand-washing for the Kohanim? After all, Jews have been in Rome since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; some intermingling of practices must have occurred. Inside the museum itself, we were practically hypnotized by the sheer number of amphoras, busts, bracelets, and oil lamps, so we almost missed one tiny artifact. Tucked in among scores of other items in a glass display case was a signet carved with the name Theodora -- and a menorah. The woman must have been of the upper classes if she had documents important enough to need a seal signifying ownership. Was she a wealthy Jew, or a Roman matron glorifying the devastation of the Jews?



Roman seal with menorah

We of the Tribe have a long memory, and the Romans feature strongly in it. One of the most powerful stops on our meanderings had to be the Arch

Poll

With Israel's Golan Heights so close to Syria, should Israel be included in discussions about Syria's fate?:

- Yes, because Israel's proximity to Syria makes it a necessary participant.
- No, because Israel has a serious conflict of its own to deal with.

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of Titus and its "Spoils of Jerusalem" relief. Although I've seen it before, standing before the tremendous triumphal arch once again sent shivers up my spine. Back in the year 82 CE, the Emperor Domitian had the Arch built to honor his older brother Titus' sack of Jerusalem, during which the Romans murdered more than a half-million Jewish civilians. The survivors were marched to Rome to be sold as slaves, and the Arch glorifies the Roman victory by depicting the victorious legions and their captives carrying the menorah and other Temple artifacts on their backs.

I learned only recently that there was at one time a ban on walking under the Arch – a ban imposed on Jews by Jews. The decree was so severe that one who defied it was considered to no longer be a Jew. However, as writer Morton Satin reported, when members of Britain's Jewish Brigade entered Rome during World War II, they formed ranks and marched straight under the arch while giving the traditional Roman salute, symbolically thumbing their noses in the face of repression, and defiance of history's repeated attempts to annihilate the Jews.

And, when in 1947 the State of Israel was declared, the entire Roman Jewish community marched backwards under the arch to symbolize the beginning of the long prayed-for redemption from exile. As an embodiment of the adage that living well is the best revenge, the menorah engraved on the Arch served as the model for the menorah used on the seal of the modern State of Israel.

Then, on Erev Hanukkah of 1997, in a ceremony in the Forum attended by the entire Jewish community of Rome, politicians, and dignitaries, the Chief Rabbi formally lifted the 2,000-year-old ban. There are those who still refuse to walk under the arch, but for most it is a sign that we survived and the Romans didn't.

In a side note to the story, Satin reported on his personal involvement with the Arch. In 1996, he was serving as a division director at the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In honor of the FAO's upcoming fiftieth anniversary, the Italian government offered the agency, along with several other works of art, a full-size replica of the "Spoils of Jerusalem" relief. Satin was appalled, given the horrible past that it represented. He petitioned the head of the agency to refuse the offer of the relief and, after some back and forth, succeeded in getting the FAO to refuse the gift. Even to this day it remains covered by ugly orange tarps.

Satin said that the city's then-mayor, Francesco Rutelli, declared, "When many people look at the sculpture under the arch, they only see the misery inflicted upon a conquered race. But look again. I see not a conquered race, but a monument to one of the greatest modern nations on earth. The conquering Romans are a footnote of history, but the Jewish nation continues to thrive, within and outside the State of Israel. That is what the arch represents to me."

And an ironic grace note: In a Judaica shop in the Jewish quarter, we saw a hanukkah fashioned from the very same relief. Living well, indeed.

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