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The Star of David may be the Jewish symbol par excellence, but it cannot conjure the glorified Jewish past as the menorah can, for only in modernity did it come to be associated exclusively with Judaism. The menorah’s seven-branched version, on the other hand, illuminated the holy temple in Jerusalem and was understood by some to symbolize God’s providential presence there, and it would continue to adorn sacred Jewish space in late antiquity. In modernity it assumed a new place in the Jewish imagination as a key component in Zionist visual iconography. The richness of its history and its potency as a Jewish icon are the subjects of Steven Fine’s *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel*. Fine uses antiquity’s most famous representation of the menorah, the Arch of Titus relief menorah in Rome, as a touchstone throughout the book, tracing its evolution from a symbol of Jewish defeat to one of Jewish triumph. In the book’s seven chapters—one for each branch of the menorah—he explores themes such as the menorah’s presence in classicizing traditions of Jewish visual culture, its adoption as an Israeli national symbol, and its role in folklore on the fate of the holy vessels after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Chapter 1 covers the menorah from the Iron Age through the early Roman period. The instructions provided in Exod 25 on how the tabernacle menorah was to be crafted are confusing and open to interpretation, but they clearly call for globules, lilies, and
pomegranates, none of which appears on the Arch of Titus menorah. Fine reminds us that there were likely several menorahs within Herod’s Temple, each with differences in branch and base form and none likely predating the Hasmonean period. The nonfigural trends in early Jewish art were by no means universal, as recent archaeological discoveries from the Herodian milieu have demonstrated. We should therefore reject the notion that the mythical animals on the base of the Arch menorah proves its inauthenticity—a common argument in early modern Jewish scholarship. That menorah is carried by Roman soldiers and shown alongside a showbread table and other temple implements, all of which served as cultic symbols in place of a statue of the deity. The menorah as symbolic of God’s presence is a viewpoint reflected in the book of Zechariah and the writings of Philo. For reasons that remain unclear, Fine is dismissive of the notion that its form derives from arboreal and sacred “tree of life” motifs in Near Eastern art.

Chapter 2 looks at the menorah’s evolution in late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modernity. As a branding symbol, it was placed on late Roman and Byzantine synagogue floors, wall paintings, lintels, as well as household goods, jewelry, and tombs. There is a multiple redundancy in this communication process, its prominent display in religious rituals, and its repetition in other media, helping to forge an emotional attachment to community and to demarcate Jewish space. Nevertheless, b. Menahot 28b forbids the reproduction of the seven-branched menorah in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of the temple icon. As the Talmud’s authority became widely established in Jewish communities of the Middle Ages, the seven-branched menorah fell out of use in synagogues until the rise of Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century. To Jewish reformers, the menorah was key to the molding of a new kind of temple—one emancipated from the strictures of rabbinic Judaism.

Interestingly, menorahs show up occasionally in these periods in Christian contexts, too, where according to Fine they were meant to demonstrate continuity with biblical Israel. In a story recounted by the Byzantine historian Procopius, Justinian restores the temple vessels to Jerusalem after they had been pillaged from Rome and taken to Constantinople via North Africa. According to Fine, the tale is meant to underscore imperial piety while reflecting the potency of Jerusalem in the Byzantine Christian imagination.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the menorah in Zionist and Israeli visual culture, where it was harnessed as a metaphor for national rebirth. Some early twentieth-century representations of the Arch of Titus menorah have Jewish rather than Roman soldiers carrying it, an interesting twist that underscores the menorah’s newfound meaning as a hopeful and even triumphal symbol. Its representational power lay in its ability to connect the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, and as such it was a key component in the formation of the Israeli national consciousness.
Chapters 5 and 6 look at myths involving the whereabouts of the menorah that stood in the temple in Jerusalem, as well as other temple implements such as the ark of the covenant. Fine situates these myths against the backdrop of Jewish-Christian debates over the inheritance of biblical religion and also of an awakening spirit of curiosity about ancient treasures and the Holy Land. The popularity of the myth that the temple vessels are located in the Vatican is correlated in Fine’s analysis with a resistance among certain traditionalist circles in the Jewish community to a full rapprochement with the Catholic Church and a suspicion in those circles that the Vatican is still hiding something from the Jews.

Chapter 7 examines the appropriation of the menorah by Jewish extremists who seek to replace the Dome of the Rock with a Jewish temple. Here Fine focuses on the Temple Institute in Jerusalem, an organization largely bankrolled by fundamentalist Christians and endeavoring to re-create the full panoply of Jewish ritual objects for use someday in the temple they hope to rebuild. Indeed, symbols such as the menorah can stand at the heart of counternarratives and even fuel oppositional structures.

Due to a certain terminological complexity surrounding the term menorah, some readers may find the title misleading. The book is not, by and large, about the eight-branched Hanukkah menorah, referred to in modern Hebrew as a hanukkiah. That object, of course, commemorates the eight days of the miracle of Hanukkah, a tradition first recounted in the Talmud. The Hanukkah menorah helped in Jewish boundary formation in the diasporic context, particularly in America, as a response to the ubiquitous Christmas tree. It calls to mind images of children reciting blessings and singing songs with their parents in a joyous holiday celebration at home and thus can be seen as a material expression of domestic religiosity or family religion. These are not the topics of this book, which focuses instead on the national story of the seven-branched temple menorah as an icon of a people and how the Arch of Titus menorah in particular came to be the emblem of the State of Israel.

The structuring of the book around the Arch menorah reminds us that monuments as signifiers can vary widely in their interpretation. To some liberalizing Jews the Arch menorah, with its refined elegance and handsomeness of form, symbolized Jewish participation in the classical tradition. But to some the Arch menorah was a symbol of Jewish failure, and not only in a devastating ancient war with Rome. In a fascinating section on the menorah of the Chabad movement of Jewish orthodoxy, Fine discusses Menachem Schneerson, founder of the movement, who saw the Arch menorah as an illegitimate and misleading rendering of a sacred object. Schneerson preferred straight branches to curved ones, perhaps in a rejection of Zionist iconography, though a Maimonidean tradition served as his exegetical basis. In America nowadays oversize
straight-branched Hanukkah menorahs are regularly put up by Chabad in high-traffic areas such as college campuses during the holiday season.

Readers will be impressed by the trove of archival sources that Fine draws upon and his ability to connect the menorah to such a wide array of historical moments, both in the Jewish experience and beyond. For scholars of antiquity, this is a model of how to bring the past into the present and how to chart the impact of ancient artifacts, monuments, and images on contemporary society. Fine brings to bear deep knowledge of antiquity and Jewish history in this exemplary demonstration of what an object-oriented history can offer.