

2017

# Book Review: The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel

David B. Levy  
*Touro College*, david.levy@touro.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://touro scholar.touro.edu/tcl\\_pubs](https://touro scholar.touro.edu/tcl_pubs)



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Levy, D. B. (2017). [Review of the book *The menorah: From the Bible to modern Israel*, by S. Fine]. *Shofar*, 35(4), 138-140.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Touro College Libraries at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Touro College Libraries Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Touro Scholar. For more information, please contact [carrie.levinson2@touro.edu](mailto:carrie.levinson2@touro.edu).

exercise in religio-ethnic acceptance in the European Enlightenment. Thus, the Jewish Jesus historical quest in the era of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* shows that Jews can do academic research and scholarship and this assuredly beckons their acceptance in Western civilization. Chapter 3 delves into reception histories related to Jesus to assess his *Wirkengeschichte* (influence) in real and in realistic terms. Chapter 4 highlights teachings extracted from reception history which reject Jewish stereotypes and in Homolko's view offer a proper depiction of Judaism in the molding of the scriptural Jesus.

Homolka's "challenge to Christology today" echoes Garber's "challenge to the church": more academic Jesus (history, myth, tradition), less believer's Christ (theology, creed) rids supersessionist theory and practice. Insisting that Christian Scriptures is not anti-Semitic nor anti-Judaic enables Homolko to scrutinize Roman Catholic teaching that the Last Supper is not a Passover Seder but a Eucharist; reinstituting a Christian conversion of the Jews ("Let us pray for the Jews: That our God and Lord may illuminate their hearts, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ is the Savior of all men") in Good Friday prayer on February 6, 2008, and more. At its core, Homolko's Jewish Jesus research unveils the ultimate reception twist: bringing Gentiles to Cavalry Torah/Jesus.

Zev Garber

Los Angeles Valley College

#### THE MENORAH: FROM THE BIBLE TO MODERN ISRAEL

By Steven Fine. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 304 pp.

Steven Fine, an art and cultural historian, Jewish studies professor, archeologist, and rabbinics scholar, has written an outstanding new book, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel*, that is a well-researched, vitally important contribution. It employs Fine's method of marshalling diverse sources with a broad chronological visionary scope toward a diachronic, object- and text-centered comparativist and international approach to interpreting the Jewish past with implications for the future. Fine, a master writer and storyteller, reveals the story of a living and transforming object of memory from antiquity through the medieval world to the present politics in Israel, "in the belief that all of these contexts are necessary for understanding each context individually as well as the whole picture." This book is a welcome, refreshing, and erudite piece of work that coherently and creatively integrates many diverse genres of primary and

secondary texts from piyyutim, midrash, and the whole corpus of the rabbinic treasury of wisdom to modern Israeli newspapers, classic literary works such as those by Agnon and Coynan Doyle, to pulp fiction and postmodern social media tweets, emails, interviews, and youtube videos. It is carefully illustrated with many important archeological finds and artistic and archival factoids that speak a million words in the concise representation that art can give.

The book is written in a collegiate and inviting manner, avoiding technical academic jargon. Fine reveals his inner thoughts when standing in the presence of the Arch of Titus depicting the menorah, for instance, when personably noting, "It was as if the Romans marching forward, carrying the menorah and the other Temple vessels were actually moving as the field of the relief moved deeper and deeper in the white marble—and the vessels of the Jerusalem Temple disappeared forever into the stone. How much more vivid—and ghastly—would this scene have been in full color, I thought." Fine in his conclusion confesses, "This has been a personal history—the history of my own search to understand the menorah, and my attempt at using the tools of my discipline to make sense of my beloved lampstand for our own complicated times. It began as early in my life as I can remember, and reached its heights—quite literally—standing on scaffolding within the Arch of Titus, within centimeters of its grey stone. It has been a place of discovery—not just of the polychromy of the arch menorah, but also of the many paths and palimpsest that are the menorah. Having brought to bear primary sources from across the human experience, from biblical Israel to ancient Rome, medieval Europe to North Africa, America, and even Indonesia and Brazil, I conclude this exploration with an explicit primary source, of my own making, drawn from my own Facebook posts of a research trip I took with my then thirteen year old son, Koby, to Rome and Israel in May 2014." In this post Fine asserts, "You see, the Menorah IS at the Vatican—just not the one brought to Rome by Vespasian!" with the post climaxing in the tag, "we write this from the plane to Israel! Maybe the menorah is there after all! Shalom, the Menorah men."

While Fine is a cultural historian, specializing in Jewish history in the Greco-Roman period, there is nothing truncated, narrow, or myopic about this book. Its scope is broad, multifaceted, diverse, and weaves a fascinating story that needs to be told, exploring the journey of how a Temple religious almost theurgic object, lit by the high priest, became over the course of 3000 years of Jewish history a unique symbol and indeed an icon signifying and speaking of Jews, Judaism, God of Israel, Torah, Jewish locals, and the modern Jewish state.

There are many scholars that know a lot about a little. Fine knows a lot about a lot. His work focuses mainly upon the literature of ancient Judaism, art, and archaeology and the ways that modern scholars have interpreted Jewish antiquity. In this book Fine shines with visionary capability to relay to the Jewish and non-Jewish reader the nuanced complexity of the symbolism of the menorah, yet not losing the reader in a Borgean labyrinthian maze of details, because always does the master craftsman author visionarily see the forest for the trees, to give a perspective with interdisciplinary connections that offer the reader innumerable insights and enlighten the mind with expanded consciousness. This book is highly recommended and includes notes, bibliographic essays, and an index.

David B. Levy  
Touro College

HOMELESS TONGUES. POETRY AND LANGUAGES  
OF THE SEPHARDIC DIASPORA

By Monique Balbuena. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016. 253 pp.

In 2008, which coincidentally also was the "International Year of Languages," the Catalan government sponsored an exhibit, *The Sea of Languages: Speaking in the Mediterranean*. A short catalogue that accompanied the exhibit lists the "languages of the Mediterranean," a total of 24, detailing the family of specific languages, the number of its speakers, where it is spoken, and its legal status.

When it comes to Judeo-Spanish (also labeled Ladino, Sephardic, and Djudeo-espanyol), the catalogue lists 110,000 speakers, that it is spoken in Israel, Salonika, and Turkey and, with regards to its legal status, that "it is not recognized anywhere." Ladino shares this lack of legal recognition with Coptic (deemed a dead language) Aramaic, Corsican, and Romani. It is important to point out that this Mediterranean framework only partially works for the corpus Monique Balbuena discusses in *Homeless Tongues*, as neither do all the authors she discusses write in Judeo-Spanish, nor do all of them have a Mediterranean origin. Moreover, Balbuena's book shows that Ladino is as intimately and inescapably connected with Sephardic identity as it is with exile and Diaspora. In spite of Ladino's lack of official status, in the Mediterranean or anywhere in the world, literature in Ladino not only exists, it also needs to be taken as seriously as any literary production in languages that have "official status." Indeed, paying attention to literature written in languages that