# Survivals and Revivals of the Menorah in Medieval and Early Modern European Synagogues

## Introduction

Beginning in the first century B.C.E., depictions of the menorah (biblical seven-branched candlestick) embellished Jewish objects and spaces. In the late antique and early Byzantine periods the menorah became “the most important Jewish symbol,” as Rachel Hachlili asserted in the title of her monograph on the subject. During the High and Late Middle Ages, the Jewish depictions of the biblical menorah were limited mainly to manuscript illuminations. Eventually, this motif spread again throughout the other media of Jewish religious art. With the emergence of Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel, the menorah reclaimed its prominent position, now as a Jewish national symbol.[[1]](#footnote-1) Inspired by the Hebrew Scripture, the seven-branched candelabrum is possibly the only symbol that was adopted by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic visual cultures, albeit to varying extents. The Jewish menorah imagery persists for more than two millennia, which is longer than the history of the cross and crescent, the fundamental symbols of the other Abrahamic religions. However, surprisingly little or no evidence of menorah images remained in medieval synagogues until the early sixteenth century. The current chapter examines this lapse and the following reappearance of menorahs in synagogues of pre-emancipated Jewish communities in Europe.

## Description to Depiction and Symbol

To explore the post-ancient evolution of the synagogue menorah from a historic perspective, I will first provide a brief and selective overview of the ancient menorahs. The earliest reference to the menorah is the divine instruction to furnish the Tabernacle of the Covenant with a seven-branched golden candlestick and to locate it “over against the table [of shewbread] on the side of the tabernacle toward the south”. The most detailed biblical account of the golden menorah in Ex. 25 elaborates on a candelabrum comprising the central stem and six lateral branches. The text uses botanical terms that hint to the lampstand’s plant-like structure. As with any ekphrasis, this one in the book of Exodus itemizes the menorah’s components in painstaking detail but is insufficient to reconstruct its spatial completeness. Thus, nothing is said about the menorah’s base; it is also unclear if the branches are straight or curved, and if they flank or surround the stem. Ancient and medieval Jewish and Christian exegetes, theologians, artists, and common minds conventionally associated the layout of the menorah in the Tabernacle with the ten candelabra in Solomon’s Temple, the menorah in Zechariah vision, and the menorahs in the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

An early non-verbal representation of the menorah appears on the obverse of the *prutah* (lepton) coins minted in Jerusalem in 40–37 B.C.E., during the reign of the King Mattathias Antigonus the Hasmonean. The menorah comprising a stem symmetrically flanked by rounded branches is believed to have documentary values, as the minter and some users of these coins could eyewitnesses one or several menorahs in the Temple in Jerusalem. [[2]](#footnote-2) The seven-branched lampstand coupled with the Table of Shewbread on the *prutah*’s reverse echoes the arrangement of the Temple’s *heikhal* (main chamber). Over and above their mimetic character, the image of Temple’s implements on royal coins implied Mattathias Antigonus’ claim for his priestly dignity and divinely invested rights to rule over Judea. Jews who could see the menorah in the Herodian Temple etched its outline on walls of their dwellings and on tombs.

## The Seven-Branched Menorah in Ancient Synagogues

Further introductory notes should be supplied on the menorah exposed at Jewish ritual spaces other than Jerusalem’s Temple. The menorah carved on a stone pedestal for a Torah scroll found within the synagogue in the Galilean town of Magdala (Migdal) provides an early example of the kind. Rina Talgam argues that the menorah and other ritual appurtenances carved on the stone exposed in Magdala while the Temple was standing, functioned as a Temple’s miniature architectural model. The representation emulated an ambiance of the Temple’s sanctity for those of the local Jews who were unable to pilgrim to Jerusalem due to its days-long-walk distance from Magdala.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After the original seven-armed lampstands were plundered from the Temple in 70 CE, they never again served as ritual devices in Jewish cult. Nevertheless, variable simulacra of the menorah increasingly permeated the Jewish visual milieu in course of time. The post-Temple menorah images referred to the history or eschatological future, or they conveyed timeless symbolism. Circa 81 CE, a looted golden menorah was meticulously portrayed in a relief of a triumphal procession on the Arch of Titus to commemorate the Roman victory over Judea. For the Jews who were said to have seen the menorah on public display in the *Templum Pacis* in Rome by the late second century and for the generations of Jews who saw the Arch of Titus, these objects were both an offensive reminder of defeat and an encouraging testimony to the glorious Jewish past.

Beginning in the third century, Jews regained the religious significance of the Temple’s menorah in its countless painted, mosaicked, ceramic, incised, stone carved, and metal cast[[4]](#footnote-4) images in ritual, sepulchral, and household spaces. This imagery reverberates the coeval rabbinical accounts that explored the memory of the past Sanctuaries for the sake of restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. After the fault of two revolts in the first and second centuries and alongside the unremitting pleading and persistent prayer for the reconstruction of the Temple, the Jewish restorative impetus shifted from operational to eschatological. Rabbis argued that repentance and moral improvement, rather than practical endeavours, would bring about the messianic Redemption, which would involve a supernatural miracle of the reconstruction of the Temple as predicted by Isaiah and Ezekiel. The third-century Amoraic Rabbi Samuel bar Isaac distinguished the sanctity of the Temple from a vicarious sacredness of synagogues, which he equated with the *mikdash me‘at* (“lesser sanctuary” or “small Temple”) mentioned by Ezekiel (11:16). Even earlier, Tannaitic sages forbad any immediate human effort for recreating the Temple’s structure, including replicating its seven-branched lampstand, for aspects of the Temple conveyed to the synagogue’s layout and design could contest the Temple’s unique, unsurpassed holiness.

The Tannaitic rabbis who forbad the replicas of the seven-branched menorah, sought a compromise between the Temple’s remembrance and the fear of emulating it. They reserved the right of artisans to construct lampstands with a different number of branches. Images of three-, five-, six-, eight- or nine-armed candelabra on various objects from different areas imply that the prohibition against seven branches was apparently not applied just to the functional lighting devices but related to any artistic rendering of the menorah.

The concern over the “templization” of synagogues in general and had a limited effect on ancient Jewish practice.[[5]](#footnote-5) Whereas the Jewish scholars in the Babylonian Diaspora repeated their dictum against precise copying of the Temple’s menorah in three Talmudic tractates, the compilers of the Jerusalem Talmud omitted it. The bulk of menorah depictions do feature seven branches and be variously accompanied by Temple-related objects.[[6]](#footnote-6) On their route into and across the synagogue, the attendees could observe a series of menorah images. The menorahs incorporated into the synagogue’s architectural body – on its lintels, cornices, capitals, floor, walls, chancel screens and the Torah ark – promulgated the Jewish identity of the edifice. In a way approximating repeated liturgical pronouncements and religious ceremonies, the recurrent visual signs inculcated doctrinal concepts and narratives.

A pair of small spirals resembling the Torah scrolls flank the menorah’s stem on marble plaques from ancient synagogues in Anatolia.[[7]](#footnote-7) In sculpted menorahs, broader scrolling tendrils flank the stem[[8]](#footnote-8) and vegetal ornaments fill in the spaces between the seven branches. The added branches and rinceaux emphasize the biblical connection between the menorah and a plant, pointing to the menorah’s symbolic identity of the menorah as the Tree of Life, which is linked to the Torah (Proverbs 3:18).

Excavations in Galilean and Judean synagogues of the Byzantine age suggest that sculpted menorahs were prominently displayed in niches on either side of the Torah ark. This architectural scheme was reproduced in numerous paintings and graffiti. A symmetrical or nearly symmetrical compositions of either a pair of candelabra flanking the shrine or a single candelabrum under it appeared in Jewish art wherever: from the golden glass designs and wall paintings in Jewish catacombs of Rome in the third and fourth centuries to the mosaic floors in Byzantine-period Galilean and Judean synagogues and miniatures in a Hebrew Pentateuch (929 CE) from Fatimid Egypt or Middle East.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Temple’s (or Tabernacle’s) utensils and curtains included in this iconography indicate that the view of a synagogue’s shrine (either aedicula-shaped or cabinet-like one[[10]](#footnote-10)) flanked by menorahs and lions[[11]](#footnote-11) represents the Ark of the Covenant behind an open *parokhet* (curtain) in the Holy of Holies. The hieratic arrangement of the repository of sacred Scripture flanked by large, free-standing or haut-relief, and presumably kindled[[12]](#footnote-12) menorahs contributed to the visual staging of a liturgical spectacle imbuing the prayer facing the synagogue ark with a sense of immediacy to divine presence like that experienced in the Temple.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## Medieval Menorahs

While being present in virtually every form of late-ancient Jewish visual culture, the medieval menorah representations were primarily confined to manuscript illuminations. A plan of the Temple in Maimonides’ commentary to the Mishnah in a twelfth-century manuscript from Spain or Egypt[[14]](#footnote-14) precisely locates the menorah at the southern side in the *heikhal* (main hall) but reveals a little interest of the illuminator in the menorah’s form: it is outlined in a very schematic style, with not all of its branches even depicted. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Hebrew manuscript illuminations rearticulated the old Jewish notion of maintaining as detailed as possible inventory of the divinely designed Sanctuary and its implements, prevalently the menorah. A certain Joshua bar Abraham of Soria fitted an overscaled menorah and ritual appurtenances into an outline the Temple’s building and courts, which he drew as a plan of the Temple that will be built “speedily in our days”.[[15]](#footnote-15) The term *Mikdashiyah* (Hebrew: the Temple of God) applied to Spanish Hebrew Pentateuch codices introduced these written records of divine Testament as a portable, temporary substitute for the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem and potentially a blueprint for the messianic Temple. The *Mikdashiyah*’s pictorial charts include a more itemised array of Temple objects than that in earlier Jewish iconography. The large menorah, which is shown on a whole page in some manuscripts, stands out among the pictured Temple’s items. In comparison to the abovementioned symmetrical depictions of Temple’s interior in ancient Jewish art and their echoes in Hebrew manuscript illustrations from the Fatimid Caliphate,[[16]](#footnote-16) the Spanish *Mikdashiyah* manuscripts neither reconstructed the objects’ respective placement in the Temple nor related to any actual synagogue settings.

The abundance of menorah representations in late-Roman and Byzantine Jewish ritual spaces stands in contrast to the little evidence of sculpted menorahs in medieval synagogues. A menorah-like rendering characterizes two stone reliefs of a symmetrical palm tree with seven leaves from the medieval synagogue built in 1174/1175 in Worms on the Rhine. In a late-twelfth- or early-thirteenth century carved pillar dedicated to a certain *BLT* (Bellette?), a short triple leg and tall trunk with a circular knob in the centre resemble a segmented menorah stem on three legs.[[17]](#footnote-17) Supposedly a simplified imitation of this stem is the trunk with its ring-like projection and two legs, that bears seven petals of a plant on another stone fragment from the same synagogue. Both stone fragments display one more arboreal design on a side adjacent to the palm-tree relief: on Bellette’s pillar, it is a leafy Romanesque-style plant, which Michael Brocke identified as an olive tree; on the other stone, it is a sapling with round fruits and buds.

Later in the thirteenth century, a tree dominating the narrative scene of olive harvest and oil pressing on fol. 118v was depicted in a sequence of micrographic illuminations that follows the Book of Exodus in a Swiss Hebrew Pentateuch (1298; Bloch 1961, 65–66).[[18]](#footnote-18) A peculiar mechanical layout of this plant with its three legs and trunk that passes through three circular joints connecting pairs of branches without organically coalescing into the crown, foreshadows the Tabernacle’s menorah (drawn just overpage, on fol. 118r). The visual simile implicates (in the spirit of Zechariah 4:2–3), that the vital olive tree is a miraculous provider of oil for the menorah’s lights and a vigorous source of living powers.[[19]](#footnote-19) Decades before the creating of these illuminations, the seven-petalled palm-like likeness of the menorah’s structure next to the olive tree image round the corner could be introduced in the Worms synagogue to evoke in the worshippers contemplations about the intermingling symbolism of the Tree of Life, menorah, and Torah.

The seven-leaf trees from the Worms synagogue have the lowest pair of leaves curl in a manner reminiscent of the spiralling additional branches of ancient Anatolian menorahs,[[20]](#footnote-20) but we have no grounds for tracing the direct lineage of the synagogue decoration in medieval Rhineland back to early Byzantine Asia Minor. That the biblical accounts could imply an association of the menorah with a tree once and again is not inconceivable. If the interpretation of the arboreal reliefs in the Worms synagogue is correct, the question is, why did the stone carvers or their patrons so substantially disguise the menorah instead of merely enhancing its stem and branches with extra foliage? This modification obviously resumed Jewish obedience to the Talmudic prohibition against replicating the menorah. Seven Fine (2018, p. 88) related the medieval awakening of the previously dormant taboo to the dominance of the Babylonian Talmud in medieval Jewish scholarship in Italy, France, and Germany.

In his commentary on BT *Avodah Zarah* 43a, Rashi of Troyes (1040–1105) reaffirmed the prohibition on replicating the Temple’s seven-branched menorah in any metal in one of his numerous systematic glosses on the Babylonian Talmud. Rashi, an exponent and prominent innovator of Franco-German Jewish rabbinical thought and exegesis, studied in Worms in the late 1060s. His general involvement in the life and culture of the surrounding society and knowledge of Christian scholarship have been widely explicated. Although we find a mention that Rashi occurred in front of a church, we cannot state to what extent he was aware of what its inside looked like. Nevertheless, the emergence of full-size bronze-cast seven-branched candelabra in contemporary churches should be widely known; and for the Jews, the notable Christian adoption the Temple’s lights could make the old issue of menorah representations in ritual spaces palpitating.

The earliest known monumental Christian seven-armed candelabrum was created for the Essen Cathedral ca. 1000. In geographic terms, a seven-branched lampstand (now lost) erected between 1078 and 1090 at St. Severin Church in Cologne was the closest example to Worms. Occasionally the monumental lampstand was rendered in monumental painting. The visitors of St. Peter and Paul Church of Erfurt could marvel a seven-branched candelabrum (ca. 1250) painted on the wall from the floor level up to more than two meters in height (Fine 2020). The ecclesiastic seven-armed lampstand was variously associated with Christ as light of the universe, the cross as the Tree of Life, or the Tree of Jesse, and the construction of such candelabra continued in churches in the German lands and beyond until the Renaissance age. The ecclesiastical emulation of the biblical candelabrum asserted the Christian inheritance of the Tabernacle’s menorah, the Temple’s splendour, and the true divine light.

The synagogue stone carvings of a seven-branched tree reintroduced the biblical menorah to its Jewish contexts without infringing the Talmudic rule against the exact copying of the menorah’s original form and material. Regarding the menorah’s material, Rashi (commentary on BT Avodah Zarah 43a, referring to BT *Menaḥot* 28b) argued, that the menorahs *shel eẓ* (“wooden”) were not acceptable for the Temple’s service, hence – one may deduce – making them would not challenge the Temple’s uniqueness. As the Hebrew word *eẓ* denotes both “wood” and “tree,” one may even speculate that the permit of making the menorah “of *eẓ*” could fancifully instil its transformation into a tree. The stirring Jewish-Christian encounter around the menorah could also explain the contrast between the strict approach to its imitation and many simulations of other aspects of the Temple’s space configuration, liturgy, and purity regulations in early Ashkenazi synagogues.

A *menorat ḥanukkah* (“lamp of Hanukkah”) provided one more symbolic reference to the Temple menorah in synagogues.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Hanukkah candles lit in the synagogue in the south “in remembrance of the [Temple] menorah” are mentioned in the compendium of established and conventionally prescribed Jewish customs, *Arba‘a turim* (*Oraḥ ḥayim*, no. 671), by Jacob ben Asher (ca. 1269–ca. 1343) who was born in Cologne and moved to Castile.[[22]](#footnote-22) His definition of the Hanukkah lights as *nerot*, which he described as candles or oil lamps with wicks, and instruction to keep their flames detached from each other may refer to either a group of separate candles or a row of lights on a lampstand of whatever shape. Therefore, the parallelism between the Hanukkah lights in the synagogue prayer room and the menorah in the *heikhal* (central hall) of the Temple premised on their same positioning rather than similar shape. None of the known medieval Hanukkah lamps can be positively identified as coming from a synagogue, presumably because many of them were temporary installations and not lampstands designed on purpose.

The material evidence of the menorah in Spanish synagogues is also scant or dubious. Two identical spirals flanking what looks like a stem with six diagonal branches, and more curved lines are discernible on a small broken stone slab (18 🞨16.5 cm; the Museo Paleontológico of Sobrarbe in Lamata) that was found in an unknown location in Sobrarbe county (Aragon). Jesús Cardiel Lalueza (2014) connected the menorah-like pattern on this stone to the Anatolian synagogue plagues with a menorah having a pair of scrolls under its branches. He dated the purported menorah circumstantially to the period of Jewish presence in the town of Morillo de Monclús in Sobrarbe from the twelfth century to 1320. However, the extant piece is too fragmentary to reconstruct the complete image and slab’s original function with certainty. An iron seven-branched lampstand from the collection of the Museu d’història dels Jueus in Girona cannot be reliably dated and identified as Jewish owing to the lack of documented provenance and technical examination.

A wall painting of the seven-branched menorah was revealed during the exploration of remains of the synagogue in the Hermitage of San Antonio Abbot in the Aragonese town of Híjar in 2017–2019. The painted layer is dated to the period between the royal permission to renew the synagogue in 1410 to the expulsion of the Jews from the kingdoms of Aragón and Castile in 1492. Antonio Hernández and Miguel Ángel Motis (2021, 312–316) persuasively linked the pattern of segmented branches and their leafy finials in the synagogue mural to the menorah illuminations in medieval Hebrew manuscripts in Spain, specifically the type presented in the Duke of Succex’s Hebrew Bible produced in Catalonia in 1350–1374.[[23]](#footnote-23) The menorah painting on the synagogue’s southern wall, to the right of the Torah ark, occupies the location reserved by Jacob ben Asher of Castile and other Jewish legislators for the Hanukkah candles to be placed there in remembrance of the Temple menorah.[[24]](#footnote-24) Distinct from the varying number of lights burning in the synagogue yearly during the eight Hanukkah evenings, the mural displayed the menorah constantly and undisguised. The Híjar menorah painting is an exceptionally early example of the post-ancient Jewish revival of the explicitly portrayed biblical seven-branched candelabrum and its correspondence to the placement of the Temple menorah.

## Italian Revival

The Jewish exiles from Spain in Rome may be credited for post-medieval redefining the role of the menorah within the synagogue. The first known reapparition of the three-dimensional menorah in synagogues after a centuries-long absence occurred on the Torah ark (bearing the date of 1522/1523) in the synagogue of Catalonian immigrants, established near the prayer room of the native Jews in the papal capital in 1518. Three decades after the expulsion, while maintaining their immigrant identity and liturgical rites, the Jews born in Catalonia and their children became sufficiently integrated in Italian culture to adopt an authentic Renaissance work, classical marble aedicula, as the Torah ark in their synagogue.

The Latin and Italian name for the aedicula-shaped Marian altarpieces and Sacrament houses, *tabernaculum*, implied that Christ, whether related to Mary in altarpieces or transubstantiated in the Eucharistic bread in the Sacrament houses, typologically substituted for the contents of the Tabernacle and Holy Ark in God’s true Sanctuary. The Hebrew inscription above the synagogue ark’s doors assigns the *tabernaculum* to Jewish history and generosity: “And [they] brought it [–the tribute of gold] into the Tabernacle of the congregation, for a memorial for the children of Israel before God”.

Lucca della Robbia’s Sacrament house (1443) in St. Maria Church in Peretola exemplifies the Renaissance interpretation of a pedimented aedicula as a backdrop for a Neo-Platonic vision of the Logos’ emanation from the unreachable divine realm to the temporal presence. The marble aedicula’s pediment houses God the Father displaying the open book with the Christ’s alpha-and-omega symbol. Beneath, there are cherubs dividing between the empyrean and the mundane world. Further below, within the columned frame, the communicants’ sight moved from Christ’s body down to the Holy Spirit (a dove in the medallion hold by angels) and reached the door concealing the sacramental bread, which they bodily perceived during the Eucharist ceremony.

The synagogue ark reemploys the aedicula’s semantics to affirm the Jewish doctrine of God’s Covenant. The pediment designating the heavenly realm contains the attributes of the Sinaitic revelation: the crowned Tablets of the Law flanked by a shofar and trumpet, all projecting from the sky-blue background. A non-figurative version of the cherubs’ winged heads as those in della Robbia’s work, the two pairs of wings under the pediment allude to the cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant that contained the Tablets of the Mosaic Law in the sacred Tabernacle. When viewed in the open synagogue ark and removed for devotion and reading, the Torah scrolls submitted the divinely endowed scripture in tangible and readable manner to the worshippers.

In the ark of the Catalonian synagogue, a menorah is placed in the centre of the frieze, on the imaginary vector of divine wisdom’s descent. At the same time, the gilt menorah flanked by a pair of cherubs, a priestly censer, and a vase with fruit offerings, belongs to the Tabernacle’s locus. Rather than recreating the placement of the menorah aside of the axis of the Tabernacle and Temple, the relocation of the menorah image to the centre emphasizes its symbolic significance. In Renaissance art, the centrality of menorah in the Temple’s Holy of the Holies in was introduced by Raphael Santi in his fresco “The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple” [[25]](#footnote-25) at the Apostolic Palace in Vatican. A sketch of the same scene, attributed to Raphael’s circle, showcases the conventional medieval Christian iconography: the seven-branched lampstand with the pairs of branches rising to various levels stands to the right of the Ark of the Covenant. Raphael’s candelabrum is different: it has a three-legged base and branches composed of alternating smooth segments and balls and end at the same height. The design is a refined painted interpretation of the woodcut illustration in Sebastian Brant’s edition of the Bible with Nicolaus de Lyra’s Postilla, with a massive bulb on the stem and elegantly rounded branches that are reminiscent of those on the Arch of Titus. Raphael set the candelabrum beneath the Ark and its cherubs, in front of the high priest of Jerusalem kneeling at the altar covered with a *tallit*. The priest, whose metal censer of a church type suspends from an altar’s horn, conveys a biblical typology of Catholic priesthood. In this context, the placement of the seven lights above his altar may correspond to the seven candles lit on the altar during the Pontifical Mass.[[26]](#footnote-26) Raphael’s historicist contrivance in his reconstruction of the Temple’s relic as a prototype of the pontifical altar candles could serve the counter-Reformation ideology of defending the Catholic liturgy by grounding it in the hallowed past. Such creative use of Roman artefacts for the historical reconstructions of the Jerusalem Temple’s inner view persisted after Raphael’s death. In the early 1520s, around the time the Catalonian ark was constructed, Raphael’s former assistant at the Vatican *Stanze* Giuluo Romano depicted in his “Circumcision of Jesus”[[27]](#footnote-27) the bead-like structure of the menorah’s branches, like that on the Arch, as well as the helical columns believed to be relics from Solomon’s Temple in St. Peter’s of Rome.[[28]](#footnote-28)

On the synagogue ark, the menorah with its rounded beaded branches and short, wide base reveals an even closer resemblance to the relief on the Arch of Titus. Jews of Rome embraced the Renaissance archaeological enthusiasm to reclaim the biblical narrative and to assert their adherence to God’s Covenant and direct descent from the ancient Israel. In antithesis to the message of commemorating the Jewish defeat on the triumphal arch, the menorah on the synagogue ark retrieves its sense as a symbol of living Judaism. Later in the sixteenth century, this notion was rehearsed in the Italian Jewish chronicle *Shalshelet ha-kabbalah* (The Chain of Tradition) by Gedaliah ibn Yahya (ca. 1515–1587), who praised the Arch of Titus as a “sign and eternal memory” for the glory of the Temple in Jerusalem. Placed between the cherubs – the location from which, according to the Torah, divine presence communicated to the people (Exodus 25:22), the seven-branched menorah also revived the menorah’s association with Torah’s light emanating into the world (e.g., Proverbs 6:23).

In the Catalonian synagogue of Rome, the medieval strategy of reversing the Christian appropriation of the Temple’s menorah by altering its structure was replaced by the acculturated and adapted Christian visual expression of the concepts of luminous divine emanation and biblical historicism. Even notwithstanding its complex overtones, the golden seven-branched lampstand parading on the synagogue ark re-established the menorah’s function as a symbol of Judaism and Jewish identity. From then on, carved, sculpted, and metal-forged or cast menorahs became a standard ornament for synagogue arks throughout Italy and far beyond.

## Polish Survival

The introduction of the menorah to early-modern Polish synagogues continued the path of mediaeval Hebrew book art and mysticism. This trajectory is traced back to the medieval lore that King David disclosed the magical power of the menorah by writing one of the consecutive verses of Psalm 67:2–9 along each branch. The flames on the sides incline towards the menorah’s central branch,[[29]](#footnote-29) which contain the Psalm’s fifth verse that begins with the letter *yod* and ends with *hey* combining an acronym of the ineffable divine name. The tale was referred in Italian prayer books () and the homiletic exegesis *Akedat Iẓḥak* (1522, chapter 67:4) by Isaac Arama of Aragon and Naples (ca. 1420–1494). In the sixteenth century, Arama’s book reached Poland: it was quoted by Talmudist and rabbinical legislator Solomon Luria of Lublin (1510–1573) in hisbrief treatise *The Menorah of Pure Gold*. He contended that the psalmic inscription sustained the symbolism of menorah as a representation of divine light. Luria suggested that observing the menorah-like inscription of the psalm has an apotropaic effect and if such menorah is affixed to the Torah ark, the protection extends over the entire community.

Numerous prints and reprints of Luria’s book containing a depiction of the menorah with the verses of Psalm 67 served as a guide and sample for Jewish believers and artisans. Menachem Mendel Krokhmal (ca. 1600–1661), a Cracow-born rabbi in Moravia, testified that synagogue congregants pinned a piece of paper or parchment with the psalmic menorah to the inside of a Torah ark’s door or painted it directly on the door. Jewish craftsmen in Poland transmuted a flat apotropaic drawing into a prominent arks’ design and imparted it with additional meaning. In the mid-seventeenth century, a tin-cast replica of the illustration from the 1581 Prague edition of Luria’s book on a tall door of the Torah ark in the Isserls’s synagogue in Kazimierz near Cracow reconnected the apotropaic menorah to two old concepts. The first is the collection of Temple-related objects in tall panels as seen in Catalonian *Mikdashiyah* manuscripts. The second is the imitation of the Sanctuary’s layout with the menorah at the southern side. In Isserls’s synagogue, the menorah on the inside of the door was not visible while the ark was closed. The opening of the ark during the service enacted a majestic spectacle presenting the interior of the biblical Sanctuary, with the menorah on the right, southern side, and the table of shewbread on the left, northern side. The actual Torah scroll in the centre, in the ark’s niche, accomplished the representation of Sanctuary’s contents by substituting a depiction of the Tablets of the Law in the *Mikdashiyah* illustrations.

The design of the menorah and the table of shewbread was repeated on the interior of doors in numerous arks in Poland, Germany, and Italy. In the examples without the psalmic inscriptions, the reconstructionist desire to represent the Tabernacle’s menorah took precedence above the aspiration for the magic protection of King David’s psalmic menorah. The menorah’s stem issuing leaves and a cluster of grapes imply the tree of life on the mid-seventeenth century doors on the Torah ark in the High Synagogue in Kazimierz. On the painted doors from another, unidentified synagogue in Kazimierz, the yellow strips crossing the menorah’s branches and ending with sparkling flames above accentuate the vision of a resplendent golden lamp of divine light.

From around the late seventeenth century onward, it became common practice in synagogues across eastern Europe to create mural-sized depictions of the menorah and table with the purpose of relating the entire prayer room and its furnishings to the Tabernacle. For example, the menorah of Solomon Luria’s type was sculpted in stucco on the south side of the synagogue of Szczebrzeszyn in southeastern Poland by 1679/1680, and the menorah with the psalm verses was painted on the south wall of the synagogue of Yabluniv (then Jabłonów) in Ukrainian Ciscarpathia around the same time or shortly after. In these and many other synagogues, the menorah and the table of showbread on the opposite lateral wall intensified the associations of the bimah in the centre with the Tabernacle’s altar and the Torah ark in the depth of the hall with the Ark of the Covenant. The life-size simulacrum of the sacred original enhanced a dramatic sense of heterotopia, an imaginary presence of synagogue-goers at the legendary Sanctuary.

## Menorah’s Ramifications

The evolution of menorah imagery in early modern Ashkenazi ritual places is as branching as the menorah’s arms. In the synagogue of the Moravian town of Boskovice, the menorah and the table of showbread are depicted (in 1705) on the synagogue’s western wall and not in the south and the north, respectively, as predetermined by the Bible (Ex. 26:35). Tamar Shadmi proposed that this relocation was inspired by the kabbalistic teachings of Isaac Luria of Safed (1534–1572) and his circle on Ashkenazi liturgy. According to the accounts of Lurianic Sabbath customs in the halakhic compilation *Ḥemdat yamim,* the Shabbat candles and festive table derive their sanctity from the menorah and the table of shewbread.

The Kabbalistic prelude to the synagogue service on Friday evening include the ritual turn of the congregants back, towards the west, to welcome the Sabbath the Queen who arrives while the skies are dusking. When turning around, the Boskovice synagogue congregation faced the menorah painted between the table of shewbread and the four acronymic inscriptions “Shabbat,”[[30]](#footnote-30) as a token of the mystical and homiletic contents of the ceremony. Another example, dated from 1714 or later, of the psalmic menorah associated with Shabbat lights was found in the synagogue of Khodoriv (Chodorów) in western Ukraine. The worshippers looking west at the Sabbat eve, saw a large menorah mural dominating the wall near an inscription prompting to them the lyrics of the sabbatical hymn *Lekha dodi* (“Let us go” [to welcome Sabbath the Bride]; Shadmi 2011, 114–115). During the day, the image remained a potent emblem of divine light: placed above the exit, the menorah met the sight of everybody leaving the synagogue. Natural light entering the synagogue through an oculus flanked by gryphons produced a magnificent halo directly above the painted lights of the menorah.

The carved seven-branched candelabrum that formed the doors of the lost ark (built in 1801) in the Pakruojis synagogue in Lithuania exemplifies the diversity of the menorah’s connotations. On the sole surviving photograph of these doors, one can see a bird instead of a candle atop the menorah’s stem. I can only speculate as to whether the bird with its wings spread represents divine presence over the menorah, whether it is a phoenix alluding to an eschatological restoration of the Torah’s sovereignty, or something else.[[31]](#footnote-31) Whatever it was, the case suggests that the resonances of the menorah’s mystical and probably cosmic symbolism evolved up to the nineteenth century.

## Conclusions: Menorah as a Phoenix

From the perspective of the *longue durée*, the phenomenon of menorah depictions in synagogues spans from antiquity to the present day. According to the available evidence, this continuity was interrupted in medieval synagogues. After the period of its sporadic and disguised appearances, the menorah re-emerged in synagogues in the early modern times. The medieval downturn indicates a disparity between the transmission of ideas and the history of images.

The Hebrew Bible constitutes available and enduring reference for those who have created paintings, reliefs, and models of the menorah. The sacred narrative lays the groundwork for the menorah’s evolution into a recognisable symbol with manifold connotations: the lampstand’s peculiar seven-branched layout makes it an easily identifiable sign, and the biblical discourse associates it with divine light and cosmic luminaries, vital plant, and the Sanctuary service. Jewish artisans and patrons of synagogue decoration could learn more about the menorah’s structure, material, size, initial location in the Sanctuary, as well as about the objections to reproducing the menorah’s seven-branched pattern, from the Talmud and post-Talmudic rabbinical teachings. However, due to its inherent incapacity to convey a volumetric object’s spatial continuity, specific texture, and unique hues, the verbal medium alone cannot guarantee the production of identical visuals.

There was no discernible continuity between the ancient and medieval menorah images. We have no proof that medieval European Jews observed menorahs in ancient synagogues or Roman catacombs.[[32]](#footnote-32) Although the historical portrayal of the Second Temple’s menorah on the Arch of Titus was never concealed, it could be viewed only by those medieval spectators, who attended the site, and there are no known replicas of its distinct design in medieval art.

In summary, the history of the menorah representations in medieval and early modern synagogues comprises a series of local conjunctures as distinct from a single, uninterrupted tradition. The process may be described as a “discontinuing continuity,” a concept metaphorized by the phoenix’s mythological regeneration from its shattered remains. The Biblical concept of the Tabernacle’s or Temple’s menorah and its exegetical elaborations recurrently inspired its representations in synagogues. The medieval artists implemented the written narratives selectively, focusing on aspects that could respond to contemporary issues. In medieval European synagogues, the Talmudic prohibition on recreating the Temple menorah might be enforced in response to Christian reconstructions of the seven-branched candelabrum. The Renaissance cult of antiquities could draw the attention of sixteenth-century Italian Jews to the Roman rendering of the menorah on the Arch of Titus and influence them to reintroduce the menorah in synagogues. In Poland, the menorah image made its way to synagogue decoration from medieval kabbalistic charts and illuminated Hebrew manuscripts. In Ashkenazi synagogues, depictions of the menorah often combined the imitation of biblical Sanctuary settings with the expression of mystical contents. Since their restoration in early modern times, the emblematic, symbolic, and historicist representations of the menorah evolve in modern and contemporary synagogues.

1. Of the vast literature on the menorah through the ages, I mention only a few selected publications: a pioneering survey of the archaeological finds and ancient written sources in Goodenough ; and two recent monumental contributions: Hachlili 2011 and an amended edition, Hachlili 2018, including up-to-date catalogue raisonné of ancient and early Byzantine menorah renderings; and Fine 2016. Steven Fine also provides an immense commented bibliography of research in the field. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here and hereafter, the Talmudic and other rabbinical texts are referred according to the digital *Bar Ilan’s Judaic Library*, version 30, 2023, unless otherwise specified. On several menorahs in the Second Temple and their observation by priests and public, see also. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am grateful to Rina Talgam, who kindly allowed me to read the manuscript or her book (in progress) on the Magdala stone. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bronze menorah have been found in synagogues of Sardis (Rautman 2020, 281–282) and Eyn Gedi (Barag, Porat, and Netzer 1982, 117), see also Fine 2012, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Joan R. Branham (1998) described the competitive relationships between the post-Temple synagogues and the Temple’s legacy as “cognitive drama”. On the multileveled experience in which the real synagogue space and liturgy intermingled with the virtual space and cult of the lost Temple, see also. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rachel Hachlili has compiled and classified voluminous evidence pertaining to the objects accompanying the menorah in ancient Jewish art: *lulav* (palm branch), *etrog* (citron), or a bundle of these and other two species used for a ceremony that was performed during the Sukkot holiday in the Temple ; a shofar (ram’s horn), an incense shovel; tongs; and jugs, jars, or amphorae. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g., in **Andriake**, Sardis, and an unidentified location in Asia Minor. The identical spirals on the plaque from Priene more closely resemble the Torah scrolls. In contrast, on a stone pillar from an unknown Jewish building in Iznik (ancient Nicaea), the symmetrical spirals are designed as oversized handles of an amphora incorporated into the menorah’s stem. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the menorahs revealed in Ḥorvat Koshet near Kiryat Tivon. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here I consider the synagogue aediculae and free-standing cabinets for the Torah scrolls as the same iconographic unit, unlike Rachel Hachlili (2000) who discussed them as separate groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Absent from the accounts of the Tabernacle and Temple, leonine reliefs were discovered on ancient Torah arks in Nabratein, Eyn Neshut, and Ostia. Basing on a small damaged lion figure found among the fragments of a marble menorah from Ma‘on (Amit 1990, 60), the reconstruction of this menorah in ibid., 59 and IMJ includes lions flanking the stem. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On these and more sculpted menorahs from ancient synagogues, see Hachlili. Hachlili proposed that the sockets along the top of a fourth- or fifth-century stone menorah from Ḥammat Tiberias contained glass oil lamps and proposed that the kindling and lighting of synagogue menorahs symbolized the former Temple’s rite Presumably, oil lights were strung from the branches of carved menorahs in some synagogues (Hachlili 2011, 227–229). A bronze menorah atop a hook for an oil lamp (third or fourth century CE) from Khirbet Wadi Hamam and the menorahs on numerous clay oil lamps from Jewish households elsewhere indicate that the combination of an image of the seven-branched candelabrum with real illuminators was a common practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On the scenarios of the human-divine encounter that passed from the Temple to synagogues and the synagogue rituals recreating dramatic empathy with witnessing the reflection of the divine presence in the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Pococke 295, fol. 295r. Cf. a simplified, geometric drawing of the menorah in the mentioned manuscript, fol. 184v. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Two disconnected portions of the map with Joshua’s colophon and the date of 1306 have been bound in the Second Kennicott Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See above, note 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Michael Brocke suggested to identify the name on the pillar with Bellette, the daughter of Eleazar ben Judah Rokeaḥ of Worms (ca. 1176–ca. 1230), a prominent scholar of the Pious of Ashkenaz circle. It appears likely that Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, who lamented his young daughter killed before his eyes during the Crusade in 1196 in a heartfelt poem, was vehement to commemorate her memory also at the synagogue of his native community. If so, the dedicatory inscription and image can be dated between the murder of Bellette in 1196 and Eleazar’s death ca. 1230. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. the intricate allegoric interpretations of an olive tree and oil in Exodus *Rabbah*. Dov Noy (1966, 186–192) dated this midrash to the eleventh or twelfth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See above, note 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. During eight days of the Hannukah Festival, Jews set light to nine lamps or candles (eight ritual and one auxiliary) in their homes to commemorate the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees, the rekindling of the seven-branched menorah and its miraculous burning of over the course of eight days (I Maccabees 4:26–59). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mordechai Narkiss (1939, 71–79) pioneered the studies of the Hanukkah lamps (including the medieval ones, ibid., 71–72) in the context of rabbinical rulings and historical backgrounds. Mann (2004, 346) first proposed that the medieval Jews aware of the church seven-branched candelabra placed large Hanukkah lamps in the south in synagogues to reappropriate the menorah as a primarily Jewish symbol. On the medieval and modern Hanukkah lamps in synagogues, see also. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See above, note 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The painting illustrates an episode of God’s intervention that prevented seizing the treasure in the Temple in Jerusalem, as described in 2 Maccabees 3:21–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Giacomo Gaetani Stefaneschi (ca. 1270–1343) recorded the observance of this custom in the Roman liturgy in his *Liber ceremoniarum Curiæ Romanæ* published in *Musei Italici* 1689, 98, 136, 171, 184, 280. Raphael portrays the bearded high priest looking like the Pontific, Julius the Second, who is also present in the fresco, seen on the left, on a palanquin carried by Raphael himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Paris, Louvre, Inv. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In 1537, Giulio Romano expressed his fascination of the historical menorah once again depicting it at the avant-garde of the triumphal procession of Titus and Vespasian passing the Titus arch (sic!) for Federigo II Gonzaga’s *Camerino dei Cesari* in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua (now in Paris, Louvre, Inv. 423). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The concept of orientation of the side lamps towards the central one that alludes to God’s light is traced back to BT *Megillah* 21b. On this and other rabbinical sources, see Zangenberg 2017, 122–124. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the acronyms SH-B-T conveying moralistic dicta, see. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. There are no indications for associating this bird with a peacock that occasionally appears as a form of contemporary Hanukkah lamps, e.g., Jonathan Adler’s porcelain Peacock Menorah. No evidence is provided for the identification of a cast brass peacock-shaped stand for seven lamps (attributed to twelfth- to fourteenth-century Persia) from Nourollah Elganian’s collection (New York) as a menorah (sold at Sands of Time Ancient Art gallery, Washington DC. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On the discrepancy between the ancient iconography of the Sanctuary’s implements and the medieval *Mikdashiyah* imagery, see Kogman-Appel. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)