

Educational Resource Guide The Menorah: A Jewish Symbol

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TOPICS:

- Identity
- Religion
- Culture

FRAMING OVERVIEW:

Menorahs are everywhere: on chocolate coin wrappers, official Israeli documents and synagogue architecture, to name just a few. What makes the menorah such an omnipresent symbol of Judaism?

The first menorah was built for the tabernacle in the desert, and is described in Exodus 37:17-18 and Numbers 8:1-2. A menorah was placed in the Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 7 [First Temple] and Zechariah 4:2-4 [Second Temple]) and is depicted on the Arch of Titus being carried away by Roman soldiers.

After the destruction of the Temple, the menorah figured prominently in Jewish art. It appeared in architecture as well as on artifacts. The endurance of the menorah as a symbol of the Jewish people even in the Diaspora demonstrates that Jews identified with the Temple in Jerusalem and all it represented – a direct connection to God, sovereignty in the Land of Israel, and Jerusalem as the spiritual and political center of the Jewish nation.

In the late nineteenth century, the menorah became a symbol of the Zionist movement, and since 1948, has been the official emblem of the State of Israel.

The Israel Museum's menorah virtual exhibit displays various depictions of the menorah throughout Jewish history. (The exhibit “In the Light of the Menorah, Story of a Symbol” has been removed from the Israel Museum website – November 2010) . It can be used to examine the significance of the menorah for the Jewish people at different times and in different places. It can also serve as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the centrality of the Land of Israel and the Temple in Jewish thought and culture. Alternatively, it can serve as a lesson about the celebration of Chanukah.

ADDITIONAL FACTS:

- The Talmud prohibits making an exact replica of the menorah which stood in the Temple. In Jewish art there are hardly any depictions of three dimensional seven-branched menorahs, but many two dimensional ones.
- In the second century BCE, Jews in Rome buried their dead in catacombs which were decorated only with pictures of Torah arks and menorahs. At the same time, Christians drew elaborate biblical scenes in their tombs. See this video clip: http://cojs.info/ardonvideo/Fine_Bite_9.html
- The last few American presidents have made a point of lighting a Chanukah menorah each year. President George W. Bush even lit a menorah inside the

White House. This fact demonstrates that the American Government views the menorah as an important symbol of the Jewish people. See:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/holiday/2002/hanukkah/index.html>

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION:

- Why has the menorah endured as a symbol of the Jewish people? What does the menorah symbolize to you?
- How would Jews have related to the symbol of the menorah during hard times? During celebrations?
- What are some other Jewish symbols? What do they symbolize?
- The menorah has seven branches. List other "sevens" in Judaism. Is there a connection between them and the menorah?
- How is the symbolism of the *chanukiya* different from that of the menorah? How is it similar?

RELATED ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS:

- Each student, or group of students, creates a menorah from recycled materials (matchbooks, toilet paper rolls, cereal boxes, Styrofoam, etc.). The students present their menorahs orally or in writing, with an explanation of the symbolism behind the design.
- Show this video clip: http://cojs.info/ardonvideo/Fine_Bite_6.html. Discuss why the Zionist Movement chose the menorah for its symbol.
- Students search the internet for images of interesting menorahs and print them out for the class to compare. They can be divided into different categories: traditional, modern, etc. A group of more artistic students can be assigned to create a collage which will decorate the classroom wall.
- Students bring Chanukah menorahs from home. Each student is asked to write a short essay on the history of the menorah (who bought it, where), its unique features, and what it symbolizes to the student. The menorahs are displayed in an area of the classroom for a few days.
- Students research the use of the menorah in Jewish art during one of these time periods: the Bar Kokhba Revolt, the Byzantine period, the Zionist Movement, the Holocaust.
- Students write about 3 other ways in which yearning for the rebuilding of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem are expressed in Jewish life.
- Students create flags or emblems which represent one of these: Judaism, American Jewry, their school or their congregation. Students can draw them or create them using the computer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Primary Sources (Visual):

- Modern menorah designs from the Bezalel Institute of Art:
<http://www.jhom.com/arts/gallery/menorot.htm>
- Hanukkah Lamps 18-20th Centuries (this site offers enlarged images along with details about each *chanukiya*):
<http://www.jhom.com/arts/gallery/hanukkiot.htm>

Secondary Sources:

- Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah, The Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum*, Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.146-164.
- Steven Fine, "The Menorah – Where Is It?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 31:4, Jul/Aug 2005.

Web-based Resources:

- The Seven-Branched Menorah: An Evolving Jewish Symbol:
<http://www.jhom.com/topics/seven/menorah.html>
- The Menorah:
<http://www.hagshama.org.il/doingzionism/resources/view.asp?id=48>
- The Flag and the Emblem:
<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern%20History/Israel%20at%2050/The%20Flag%20and%20the%20Emblem>
- A Depiction of the Temple Menorah:
http://cojs.org/cojswiki/A_Depiction_of_the_Temple_Menorah,_70_CE
- Next Year in Jerusalem:
http://jewishhistory.com/jh.php?id=AdditionalReadings&content=content/seg_al_ch12 (not active November 2010)
- Flag Proposals 1948-1949 (Israel):
<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/il!1948.html>