

Harry Moskoff and the Vatican

By Neville Teller

THE BOOK *The Vatican and Me* is an account of a work in progress – a work of enormous cultural significance which has already yielded great benefits but has the potential to provide the world with a great deal more.

Author Harry Hirschel Moskoff is a man of many parts – lawyer, academic, rabbi, lecturer, media mogul and TV show host, journalist, and member of the White House Press Pool. Into this mix of occupations and activities must be added his intense interest in biblical archaeology. His involvement in this field has led him to become an internationally acclaimed expert on sacred Jewish artifacts, especially of the Roman and Byzantine periods.

It was a meeting in Jerusalem's King David Hotel in 2021 that gave birth to the project that is the subject of Moskoff's new book, the enterprise now named The Museum Exchange – Jewish Heritage Project. It operates from Vatican City, and Moskoff is its director.

A French government lawyer named Michel Calvo had read Moskoff's earlier book about the lost artifacts of the Second Temple. During the course of some research in the National Library of France, Calvo had stumbled upon the work of a Byzantine historian named Procopius of Caesarea. He asked to meet Moskoff and a few colleagues about the idea of a project aimed at tracking down the treasure of the first Latin emperor, Baldwin I, which might include some of these priceless objects. Moskoff, thinking way out of the box, conceived the idea of uniting the Jewish and the Catholic interests in such an enterprise by approaching the Vatican with the idea of making it a joint project.

What followed was month after month of delicate negotiations. Moskoff traveled to Rome on several occasions to meet the Vatican Museum director and the officials in charge of the Scavi excavations underneath the tomb of St. Peter's Basilica. He spoke with the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See about obtaining permission to examine the manifests that listed what items various popes had received as

gifts during certain periods in the history of the Vatican. And, since his project could turn into a bilateral agreement between Israel and the Vatican Church, he met people involved with Jewish-Catholic relations.

Eventually the project developed into a possible museum exchange in which the Vatican Museum governors would agree to loan to selected Israeli museums, for a limited period, a selection of sacred ancient vessels. The artifacts in question would be pieces like ancient makhta (incense shovels) and khatzotroth (silver trumpets), as well as other items used

for sacrificial rites – precious objects that had found their way to the Vatican through inheritance and by way of gifts from various Byzantine emperors. Some were much more recent, acquired through modern excavations in Israel.

An exchange like this has never been done, and the whole enterprise still hangs in the balance. The Papal Nuncio to Israel, His Excellency Archbishop Yllana, told Moskoff that if he succeeded, he would be acting as an ambassador for humanity, as it were because all mankind has the right to view and admire these godly items. Yllana gave him his blessing for what he termed "this noble cause."

The project that Moskoff heads, The Museum Exchange – Jewish Heritage Project, has widened its scope during this development period. Its purpose is now described as "a unique initiative that aims to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding between the Jewish and Christian communities through facilitating the exchange of ritual artifacts between museums."

The project, located in Vatican City, acts in collaboration with the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). It is

dedicated to preserving and promoting Jewish heritage and culture. Its mission is to create a platform for the exchange of religious objects, knowledge, and ideas, between museums, with a focus on filming and displaying ancient Jewish and Christian items, specifically from the Byzantine period.

Slim though the volume is, it contains at the rear a series of color photographs, including six of the ancient Jewish artifacts currently held in the Vatican that might one day be on view in an Israeli museum.

The Vatican and Me is an object lesson in perseverance in the face of seemingly intractable indifference. Moskoff, sustained by a powerful vision, battled tirelessly against obfuscation and procrastination – and in a sense continues to do so. He has some way to go to achieve his cherished museum loan plan, but his work has undoubtedly contributed to improving Catholic-Jewish relations. *The Vatican and Me* is an absorbing account of his voyage so far. It is an inspiring tale. ■

Those who would like to purchase limited edition, autographed copies can sign up by sending a message to the author via his website (www.harryhmoskoff.net/contact) for any custom or group sale orders.



Harry Moskoff in Rome.



Byzantine glass fragment.



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