

# Israel challenges US handover of First Temple-era artifacts to Palestinian Authority

**Artifact from First Temple-era Judea seized from Jewish philanthropist's collection declared 'example of Palestinian cultural patrimony.'**

[David Rosenberg](#)



The 2,700-year-old cosmetic spoon

Manhattan District Attorney's Office

Israel's new government is challenging the transfer by American authorities of a rare artifact from ancient Israel to the Palestinian Authority, after the item was seized from the collection of a prominent American Jewish philanthropist.

In 2017, a multinational investigation was launched into the collection of billionaire hedge funder and Birthright Israel cofounder Michael Steinhardt, amid allegations he had illegally acquired numerous artifacts and works of art.

Authorities in New York began [seizing items](#) from Steinhardt's collection in January, 2018.

In December 2021, Steinhardt reached an agreement with prosecutors to relinquish control of 187 artifacts out of his collection of over 1,000 items.

The artifacts, which Steinhardt is said to have acquired illegally – [including from sites in Israel](#) – were returned to their respective countries of origin.

One item's return, however, has sparked a dispute between American officials and the new Netanyahu government.

An ivory spoon from Steinhardt's collection, dating back to between 800 and 700 BCE, during the First Temple period, was transferred to the Palestinian Authority on January 5th, "the first event of such repatriation," the United States State Department said. *Arutz Sheva* wrote about it [here](#).

George Noll, who heads the State Departments' Office of Palestinian Affairs, said in January that the US "is proud to facilitate the return of this rare antiquity, an example of Palestinian cultural patrimony."

"This is a historic moment between the American and Palestinian people and a demonstration of our belief in the power of cultural exchanges in building mutual understanding, respect, and partnership."

The ivory artifact, categorized as a "cosmetic spoon" used to place incense onto fires for ritual purposes, was acquired by Steinhardt in 2003 from Israeli antiquities dealer Gil Chaya.

Chaya has been in the past been accused of dealing in looted artifacts, at least 28 of which were sold to Steinhardt.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin L. Bragg, Jr., whose office oversaw the spoon's transfer, said the spoon was handed over to Palestinian Authority officials in Bethlehem, where the item was first unearthed.

But the precedent-setting handover has drawn criticism from the Israeli government, with the Heritage Ministry examining legal action against the transfer.

Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu (Otzma Yehudit) said in a statement last week that the legality of the transfer "is being examined by the archaeology staff officer with the legal counsel, which will examine all aspects of the matter, including the Oslo Accords that the U.S. has signed."

On Sunday, Eliyahu vowed his ministry would protect Jewish heritage sites and artifacts in Jude and Samaria.

"All heritage on both sides of the green line will earn full protection, at an international and scientific standard," the minister wrote on Facebook, pledging the Heritage Ministry will "act in a uniform and professional manner from the sea to the Jordan."

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