

Parshat Miketz: Lights from the Depths

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The story of Joseph is a series of pitfalls literally and figuratively. Last week, his brothers literally put him in a pit.

And they took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. (Bereishit 37:24)

וַיִּקְרֹבּוּ וַיִּשְׁלַׁכוּ אֶתְנוֹ הַבָּرָה וַיְהִי רַקْ אֵין בָּו מִים: (בראשית ל"ז: כד)

Rashi cites the Gemara in Shabbat 22a which says, “and the pit was empty, there was no water in it — Since it states, “the pit was empty”, do I not know that “there was no water in it”? What then is the force of “there was no water in it”? Water, indeed it did not contain, but there were serpents and scorpions in it.

Strangely enough, this statement in the Talmud comes in the middle of a discussion on how and where and when to light Hanukkah candles. Specifically, the Talmud had just stated that a hanukkiya cannot be placed more than 20 amot (cubits) high because its light could not be seen from such a height, defeating the instruction to publicize the miracle. The juxtaposition could be a coincidence, perhaps it was just another statement of Rav Kahana.

The Torah Temimah (Bereshit 37:25) thought differently. He inferred that, similarly, the pit must have been 20 amot deep, or nearly 30 feet deep. As a result, the brothers could not see the bottom where the snakes and scorpions lay out of the heat of the sun. Although the brothers, specifically Shimon and Levi according to a later Rashi, conspired to kill Joseph, Reuven certainly did not want Joseph to die. The Torah Temima then connects our story to Hanukkah. The Hasmoneans, he reminds us, were from the tribe of Levi. Leading the Jews in the battle against the Greeks was the atonement for their ancestor’s intended fratricide. The dark of the deep pit was thereby illuminated by the light of the hanukkiya.

Joseph is taken out of the pit and sold into slavery. As we know, Joseph does not get to stay above ground for very long. After the incident with his master’s wife:

So Joseph’s master had him put in prison, where the king’s prisoners were confined. But even while he was there in prison, the LORD was with Joseph..
(Bereishit 39:20-21)

וַיַּקְרֹב אֱלֹהִים יוֹסֵף אֶתְנוֹ וַיִּתְהַגֵּד לוֹ אֶל־בֵּית הַסְּהָר מִקּוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָסָורי [אָסָרִי] הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲסֹורִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בְּבֵית הַסְּהָר: וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת־יְוֹסֵף וַיְטַחֵל חֲסָד... (בראשית לט: כ-כא)

Ramban says that the prison in which Joseph was confined was underground with only a small window like that of Noah’s ark, letting in light at midday and little at other times when the sun was not overhead. Later, Joseph remembers the prison as a *bor*, a pit, perhaps reliving his initial terror.

For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the pit.
(Bereishit 40:15)

כִּי־גָבֵב גָּנְבָתִי מִארֶץ הַעֲבָרִים וְגַם־פָּה לֹא־עָשָׂיתִי תָּאוֹתָה כִּי־שָׁמָוֹ אָתִי בְּבוֹרָה: (בראשית מ:טו)



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The one who dreamt of all the celestial lights gets thrown into darkness again and again. However, he knows the stars God showed Abraham are there even if he can't see them. He asks the butler to remember him. Two years go by in the dark. Then finally, Pharaoh, the son of the sun god summons him. Joseph steps into the light and shines so that all can see. He illuminates the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. He leads the way with his vision.

Joseph is clothed in gold and linen. And then he is hidden again, not in a physical pit, but a metaphorical one. He becomes Zaphenath-paneah, an Egyptian, with an Egyptian wife. He calls his first child, ‘Manasseh, meaning, ‘God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.’” (Gen 41:51) He can’t see where he has been or where he is from. But it is not only Joseph who cannot see himself clearly. His brother’s do not recognize him. The Torah emphasizes this by telling us the story and then repeating

For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. (Bereishit 42:8)

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶת־אָחִיו וְהֵם לֹא הַכְּרָה:
(בראשית מב:ח)

Rabbi Norman Lamm wrote that perhaps it was not only a lack facial recognition. Joseph had been in the pits and back. "But now the[brothers] were suffering, now they were caught in a terrible vise', torn by their fidelity to their father, their search for food and survival, their guilt over what they had done to Joseph, their worry over Benjamin ..." Joseph recognized his brothers" — having come through the same experience, he understood what they were going through, and he understood too that their difficulties were the prelude to their salvation." Joseph recognizes them and where they are, because he has been there and come out of the pit of despair. He has compassion and eventually they make peace.

Perhaps this lesson is why the reference to Joseph's pit is inserted into the sugiyot about Hanukkah. Every year when we come to celebrate the miracle of Hanukkah, Chazal remind us of the pit of Joseph. We are celebrating our salvation from external forces, both spiritual and physical from the Greeks. But we also need to remember the internal danger, from which we have been suffering since the beginning of our peoplehood, that of שנאת חינם, baseless hatred of our own people. Let's not contemplate fratricide. Let's make sure that when we say in *Al haNissim* "וַיָּשִׁבְעִים בַּיּוֹתְרֵךְ יִזְדִּים בַּיּוֹתְרֵךְ עֲזָזִים בַּיּוֹתְרֵךְ תָּרְפַּתְרֵךְ" the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those who occupy themselves with Your Torah." That we are talking about external enemies and not other Jews.

The only other time that the height of 20 amot is mentioned is in the first mishna in Masechet Sukkot. Twenty amot is the maximum height of a kosher sukkah.

This Hanukkah may we be lifted from the depths of twenty amot, from the darkness of the pit. May we shine our light where all can see and may we sit brothers and sisters, all Jews together, with compassion, in a sukkah of peace.



Rabba Claudia Marbach received semikha from Maharat in 2018. She runs a pop-up beit midrash for women in Boston, called One Night Shtender and co-runs a partnership minyan called Yedid Nefesh in Newton, MA. Rabba Claudia has served a middle school teacher at JCDS Boston, a pluralistic Jewish Day School, for fifteen years, where she developed the Rabbinics curriculum, taught tefillah and moral dilemmas. Rabba Claudia received her BA in English from Barnard College, and JD from Boston University. She studied at Michlala, Drisha and Pardes.