

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayeishev

And the pit was empty; there was no water in it. (Genesis 37:24).

If “the pit was empty,” isn't it clear there was no water in it? What, then, do we learn from “there was no water in it”? There was no water in it, but there were snakes and scorpions in it. -Rashi, quoting tractate Shabbat 22a.

Joseph's brothers, at odds with him over the dreams that seem to portend his rise to power and their subjugation, are out pasturing the sheep in Shechem when Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. They see Joseph approaching from afar and decide to kill him, blame his death on a wild animal, and cast him into “one of the pits.” In a bid to save Joseph's life, Reuben suggests they “spill no blood” and cast him into a pit in a desolate area instead. It is at this point that we reach our verse. The brothers accept Reuben's suggestion and cast Joseph into “the pit,” which is both “empty” and “has no water.” To explain the seemingly unnecessary second descriptor, Rashi quotes the passage in Shabbat.

Other commentaries have dealt with the redundancy within *peshuto shel mikra*, the plain meaning of the verse. Both Rashbam and Ramban ad loc. explain the emphasis with reference to Reuben's suggestion. Reuben did not ask of the brothers that they spare Joseph's life (that would not have been accepted) but that they do no active killing. Throwing Joseph into a pit full of water, i.e. drowning him, would have been no different than killing him by the sword; the verse therefore clarifies that the pit was empty and Joseph was left there to die on his own, presumably of starvation or exposure.

If so, the passage in Shabbat that Rashi quotes is not only midrashic—it seems not to fit into the verse at all! If the pit contained an abundance of snakes and scorpions, would this be killing Joseph any more “passively” than throwing him into a pit full of water? Ramban notes the difficulty and writes that in the midrashic account, the brothers must not have seen the snakes and scorpions, either because the pit was too deep to see to the bottom or because they were hiding in holes. He further notes that had they been able to see the snakes and scorpions, they would certainly have taken Joseph's miraculous survival as an indication of Divine favor and changed their positions.

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A closer examination of the passage in Shabbat will support Ramban's approach to this question. There, starting at the bottom of Shabbat 21b, we read:

Rav Cahana said: Rav Natan bar Minyumi expounded [Heb. *darash*] in the name of Rabbi Tanchum: Chanukkah candles placed higher than twenty ells above the ground are disqualified from fulfilling the mitzvah, just as in the case of a Sukkah or alleyway.

And Rav Cahana said: Rav Natan bar Minyumi expounded in the name of Rabbi Tanchum: what is this that the verse says, “and the pit was empty, there was no water in it”? If “the pit was empty,” isn't it clear that “there was no water in it”? What, then, do we learn from “there was no water in it”? There was no water in it, but there were snakes and scorpions in it.

The juxtaposition of these two *derashot* of Rav Natan bar Minyumi is not incidental. In the first, he disqualifies Chanukkah candles that are placed too high. The precedent is taken from the laws of a sukkah and a beam at the top of an alleyway (for *eruv* purposes), both of which halacha requires be sufficiently visible, and both of which are disqualified when above twenty ells as outside of one's range of peripheral vision. Chanukkah candles, whose function is to commemorate and specifically to publicize the miracles of Chanukkah (*pirsumei nisa* in Aramaic), are then similarly disqualified when placed above twenty ells as being insufficiently visible.

On the subject of objects outside of one's range of vision, Rav Natan bar Minyumi segues into our parsha, which always falls out during or immediately before Chanukkah, and explains the redundancy in our verse using similar reasoning. When the brothers cast Joseph in the pit, they only made sure that it was empty with respect to water—our verse means to say that it was “empty” only insofar as “there was no water in it.” The pit was deep enough that whatever else it might have held, such as snakes and scorpions, would have been outside of one's range of peripheral vision.

As we have seen, the Chanukkah candles appear in Jewish law as a means of publicizing miracles. And yet, it is not primarily the miracle of the eight days for which the candles burned in the Temple that our candles are publicizing, but the miraculous victory of the Maccabees and subsequent rededication of the Temple altar. The victory of a small, untrained volunteer army over a large professional standing army might be dismissed as an infrequent but non-miraculous occurrence; the Chanukkah candles urge us to see otherwise, acknowledging the Providential hand in the war's outcome.

Shabbat Shalom!

