



“What is Hanukkah?”

On a High Lamp, a Deep Pit, and Civil Wars

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In the second chapter of the Babylonian Talmud’s Massekhet Shabbat, which discusses Hanukkah—its story and its laws—Rav Kahana cites a teaching attributed to Rav Natan bar Minyumi in the name of Rav Tanḥum: “A Hanukkah lamp placed above 20 cubits is invalid, just like a *sukkah* and a *mavoi* (alley).” Immediately afterward, we find another teaching from the same chain of sages:

תלמוד בבלי שבת כב.

ואמר רב כהנא, דרש רב נתן בר מניומי משמיה דרב תנחום: מאי דכתיב “והבור רק אין בו מים”? ממשמע שנאמר “והבור רק” איני יודע שאין בו מים? אלא מה תלמוד לומר “אין בו מים” — מים אין בו, אבל נחשים ועקרבים יש בו.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 22a

And Rav Kahana said: Rav Natan bar Minyumi taught in the name of Rav Tanḥum, “What is the meaning of that which is written: ‘And the pit was empty; there was no water in it’ (Genesis 37:24)? From the phrase ‘the pit was empty,’ do I not already know that there was no water in it? Rather, what does the additional phrase ‘there was no water in it’ teach us? Indeed, there was no water in it, but there were snakes and scorpions in it.”



Scholars and commentators alike ask: What role does the teaching about the pit into which Joseph was thrown play within the discussion of Hanukkah? How does the story of Joseph connect to the discourse on the Hanukkah lamp?

A. The Chain of Tradition

One connection emerges from the structure of the discussion itself: both teachings come from the same chain of tradition, Rav Kahana teaching a saying of Rav Natan bar Minyumi in the name of Rav Tanhūm. It is possible that there is no intrinsic connection between the teachings apart from their attribution to the same (unusual) sequence of sages.

B. The Torah Portion

Another connection lies in the sequence of weekly Torah portions. The teaching is based on a verse from Parashat VaYeishev, which is typically read on the Shabbat preceding Hanukkah.

C. A Halakhic Explanation

The Torah Temimah¹ offers a halakhic-interpretive connection between the two passages, one that also mitigates the severity of the brothers' actions. He asserts that, although the pit contained snakes and scorpions, the brothers were unaware of this:

תורה תמימה בראשית לז:כד

וצריך לומר שראובן ואחיו לא ידעו שבבור יש נחשים ועקרבים... ולא יפלא אם לא ראו מה שבתוך הבור... וקיימא לן דלמעלה מעשרים אין עינו של אדם שולטת כמו דקיימא לן לענין נר חנוכה וסוכה.

Torah Temimah on Genesis 37:24

It must be said that Reuben and his brothers did not know there were snakes and scorpions in the pit.... For it is established that anything above 20 cubits is beyond the

¹ R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein (19th-20th c., Eastern Europe).



reach of human sight, as is taught regarding the Hanukkah lamp and the *sukkah*.... Since the act of throwing implies a distance greater than 20 cubits, and here it is written, "They cast him [into the pit]," it follows that the pit was more than 20 cubits deep.

He cites the opening discussion of Massekhet Sukkah, which explains the height limitation of a *sukkah*: anything above 20 cubits is beyond the range of human sight. Similarly, the depth of the pit prevented the brothers from seeing what lay at its bottom. This principle is also used to explain the height restriction for a Hanukkah lamp: above 20 cubits, the flames are no longer visible to the eye.

D. War

I want to propose a new interpretation of the connection between these teachings, one that emerges from their shared broader context of strife. The teaching about Joseph addresses the profound tension among Jacob's sons—a fraternal war. While the Talmud, in describing the background of Hanukkah, focuses on a conflict between Israel and external forces—the Greeks—the teaching about Joseph being thrown into the pit by his brothers highlights a conflict within Israel itself, a war among brothers.

Joseph's brothers viewed him as an existential threat to their future, which drove them to act against him—initially planning to kill him and ultimately selling him into slavery. Chillingly, the "enemy" they sought to eliminate was their own flesh and blood, their brother. This teaching about the brothers' behavior toward Joseph, embedded within the Hanukkah discussion, invites us to reflect deeply on the connection between internal tensions and struggles against external forces—between civil wars and external conflict.

Like the story of Joseph and his brothers, the Hanukkah narrative also contains elements of fraternal strife, as related in the Second Book of Maccabees:



2 Maccabees 3:1–4

The Holy City was inhabited in complete peace and the laws were observed optimally because of the high priest Onias' piety and hatred of evil... But one Simon of the tribe of Benjamin, who had been appointed overseer of the Temple, hated the high priest.

This internal hatred, repeatedly described in the Second Book of Maccabees, culminates in violence:

2 Maccabees 4:4

The hostility had gone so far that even murders were committed by one of Simon's partisans.

The parallels between the story of Joseph and the tensions within the Hanukkah narrative underscore the complex interplay of internal discord and external struggles in Jewish history.

E. The Neglect

Another version of the *midrash* in Massekhet Shabbat appears in Bereishit Rabbah. This version reveals a surprising source of the brothers' anger and tension, alongside a proposed solution to their strife:

בראשית רבה פד:טז

מִים לֹא הָיָה בּוֹ אֲבָל נְחָשִׁים וְעַקְרָבִים הָיוּ בּוֹ... אָמַר רַב אֶחָא וְהַבּוֹר רָק, נִתְרוֹקֵן בּוֹרוֹ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב. אֵין בּוֹ מִים, אֵין בּוֹ דְּבַרִי תוֹרָה שֶׁנִּמְשְׁלוּ בְּמִים, הִיךְ מָה דָּאֵת אָמַר (ישעיה נה, א): הוּא כָּל צֶמָא לְכוּ לְמִים, כְּתִיב (דברים כד, ז): כֵּתִיב כִּי יִמְצָא אִישׁ גִּיב נָפֶשׁ מֵאֲחִיו, וְאַתֶּם מוֹכְרִים אֶת אֲחֵיכֶם.

Bereishit Rabbah 84:16

"There was no water in it," but there were snakes and scorpions in it... Rav Aḥa said: "And the pit was empty"—Jacob's pit had been emptied. "There was no water in it"—there were



no words of Torah in it, which are compared to water, as it is said: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1). And it is written: "If anyone is found to have kidnapped—and then enslaved or sold—any of his brothers [that kidnapper shall be put to death]" (Deuteronomy 24:7)—and you [Joseph's brothers] are selling your brother?!

The teaching begins by describing the pit as empty of water but containing snakes and scorpions. The verse's emphasis on what is missing—"there was no water"—serves to highlight what **was** in the pit. In doing so, it amplifies the brothers' cruelty toward Joseph. In the second part of the teaching, then, a critical question arises: What allowed the brothers to act with such extraordinary cruelty toward their sibling?

Surprisingly, the *midrash* does not blame Joseph, his dreams, or his provocative behavior. Instead, it focuses entirely on the brothers. The *midrash* reframes the verse about the pit as a metaphor for the brothers' spiritual state: "And the pit was empty—Jacob's pit had been emptied." Jacob's "pit" here is understood to mean the spiritual state of his children, and its emptiness is interpreted as a lack of Torah, "There was no water in it—there were no words of Torah, which are compared to water."

The *midrash* places full responsibility for their actions on the brothers, completely ignoring Joseph's behavior, motivations, and the external context of their actions. Instead, it underscores the brothers' spiritual failure, rooted in their neglect and abandonment of the Torah of their forefathers—the moral and spiritual foundation meant to guide their actions. The teaching points directly to the specific law that Joseph's brothers had "emptied" from their minds:

דברים כד:ז

כִּי יִמְצָא אִישׁ גֹּבֶה נֶפֶשׁ יִמְאַחֲיוּ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִתְעַמְּרוּ בּוֹ וּמָכְרוּ וַיָּמָת הַגֹּבֶה הַהוּא וּבְעֵרָתוֹ הָרַע מִקֶּרְבָּךְ:



Deuteronomy 24:7

If anyone is found to have kidnapped—and then enslaved or sold—a fellow Israelite, that kidnapper shall die; thus you will sweep out evil from your midst.

This verse outlines the stages of the brothers' behavior toward Joseph: kidnapping, mistreatment—possibly symbolized by throwing him into a pit full of snakes and scorpions—and finally, selling him. Had the brothers remembered this commandment, had they heeded this verse, their actions would have been entirely different.

Again the words of the Second Book of Maccabees reverberate for us:

2 Maccabees 4:12, 14-16

They abandoned the laws of the Lord and replaced them with abominable practices....
Even the priests forsook the service of the altar and the sacrifices; they disdained the sacred and hurried to take part in the unlawful games, to compete with discus and javelin, and to engage in ball games.

These verses criticize recurring and widespread improper behavior, in their case: abandoning their duties in the Temple in order to engage in potentially idolatrous games.

The placement of this *midrash* about Joseph's brothers and their neglect of Torah in the middle of the Talmud's discussion of the Hanukkah lamp conveys a powerful message. Just as Joseph's brothers distanced themselves from their forefathers' teachings, emptied themselves of its values, and forgot a basic and essential commandment—in their case about how to treat one's brother—so, too, something similar occurred in the time of the Maccabees.

Internal conflict often serves as a backdrop and sometimes even as a catalyst for external war. The warning conveyed by the teaching is clear: internal strife not only weakens society from



within but also poses a significant risk when facing external threats. The *midrashim* emphasize the central role of the Torah as a safeguard against internal conflicts, teaching us to seek out the specific Torah that is missing—the one that has been forgotten, neglected, or ignored—and to let it illuminate our path.

These words were written in the middle of Kislev 5785. It is difficult to speak of pits without thinking of the hostages, who are trapped pits of darkness and suffering. We pray that this painful reality will soon become part of the past, and that the hostages will be returned to us quickly, whole in body and spirit. May we merit to light the Hanukkah lights this year without division or hatred, with mutual responsibility, in peace, and with a sincere aspiration to listen to the Torah of our ancestors and to discern what Torah is missing for us in these times.

