

# Parsha Ponders

Vayeishev / Chanukah | November 25, 2021 | 21 Kislev 5782

## *Snakes, Scorpions, and Chanukah Celebrations<sup>1</sup>*

ויאמר אלהם ראובן אל-תשפכו-דם השליכו אתו אל-הבור וגו' למען הציל אתו מידם וגו' ויקחהו וישלכו אתו  
הברה והבור רק אין בו מים

Reuven said to [his brothers]: Don't spill blood. [Instead,] throw him into the pit...[this was] in order to save [Yosef] from their hands...They took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty; it didn't have water<sup>2</sup>

After sensing their brother Yosef as a threat to their family's wellbeing and Divine mission, the sons of Yaakov sentenced him to death. They intended to kill him and hide his death from their father. Reuven, the firstborn, knew this was the wrong move. Instead, he insisted that they throw Yosef in a pit. The Torah testifies that Reuven's intent was to save Yosef. He seemingly wanted to stall for time, with the hope that the brothers would calm down and not act rashly. Unfortunately, while he was momentarily away from his brothers, they sold Yosef as a slave to Egypt, and the rest is history.

The *gemarra* brings<sup>3</sup> two seemingly unrelated teachings of Rav Kahana. One, is that Rav Kahana teaches that if a person places their Chanukah Menorah above twenty *amos*, approximately 36 feet, they have not fulfilled their obligation. A Menorah has to be below twenty *amos*. The next teaching is regarding a seemingly redundant verse about the pit which the brothers threw Yosef into. The Torah says that the pit was empty, that it didn't have water in it. The obvious question is: if it's empty, it obviously doesn't have water in it! Rav Kahana teaches that although it was empty of water, it was filled with snakes and scorpions<sup>4</sup>.

Is there any connection between these two teachings? Are they simply two unrelated teachings from Rav Kahana? Furthermore, the second teaching of Rav Kahana presents a difficulty with our *parsha*. The commentaries struggle to understand how Reuven could have intended to save Yosef. The mere suggestion of throwing him into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions doesn't sound very noble. Instead of killing him with their own hands, they'll subject him to a painful death from poisonous arachnids and reptiles<sup>5</sup>?! And yet, the Torah testifies that Reuven's intent was to save Yosef from death. What was he thinking?

The word *וישלכו*, they threw him, has certain connotations. We are taught<sup>6</sup> that *אין השלכה פחות מכ'* אמר, that this word for throwing connotes throwing a distance larger than twenty *amos*. That means

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Torah Temimah to Genesis 37:24 § 20 and Pardes Yosef ad. loc. (in Pardes Yosef HaShalem, it's § 26). I believe this idea is said by other commentators as well

<sup>2</sup> Ibid v. 22, 24

<sup>3</sup> Shabbos 22a

<sup>4</sup> There are various suggestions where the *gemarra* came up with this interpretation. Riva, Ba'al HaTurim, and Bartenura ad. loc. suggest it's derived from the verse נחש שרף ועקרב וצמאון אשר אין בו מים (Deuteronomy 2:15)

<sup>5</sup> This question is actually asked by the Zohar I parshas Vayeishev p. 185a. It answers that Reuven knew that if Yosef was innocent of their charges, a miracle would happen and he would be saved from the snakes and scorpions. This wouldn't be so if they themselves killed him, as Hashem wouldn't interfere with their free will. Thus, Reuven intended to settle the matter of Yosef's innocence without their direct involvement. This idea is brought by the Ohr HaChaim to v. 21

<sup>6</sup> Tamid 28b with the commentary of the Mefarsh; Tosafos to Meilah 11b s.v. דושון (according to Tzon Kodoshim ad. loc., brought by Mesoras HaShas ad. loc.; Cf. Shita Mekubetzes ad. loc. who emends Tosafos to say אמות)

that since we are told that they *threw* Yosef in a pit, that tells us that the pit was twenty *amos* deep<sup>7</sup>. What's the significance of this? This measurement of twenty *amos* keeps coming up. Rav Kahana taught us that a Menorah higher than twenty *amos* is invalid. Why is this so? He compares it to a *sukkah*<sup>8</sup>, which is also invalid above twenty *amos*. There's an opinion<sup>9</sup> that says a person's peripheral vision precludes seeing objects beyond twenty *amos*. With a *sukkah*, the person won't notice the *sechach*. The same is true with a Menorah. The whole point of the *mitzvah* is to publicize the miracle of Chanukah<sup>10</sup>. If it's above twenty *amos*, no one will notice it.

Putting all of this together, we can understand what Reuven was thinking, and what these two teachings of Rav Kahana have to do with each other. Reuven's plan was to put Yosef in a pit in order to stall for time. The pit was twenty *amos* deep, so objects inside it were deeper than a person's vision can be expected to grasp. He couldn't have noticed that there were snakes and scorpions inside the pit<sup>11</sup>. A miracle happened, and Yosef was spared. At the same time, Reuven can't be held accountable for putting Yosef in the pit. Quite the contrary, he is credited with trying to save Yosef. This interpretation of Reuven's intentions is evident from the juxtaposition of the two teachings of Rav Kahana. He teaches us that a Menorah above twenty *amos* is disqualified, since it is beyond a person's perception. He also says that the pit which they threw Yosef in had snakes and scorpions. They didn't know, since it was also beyond their perception.

Good Shabbos and have a *Lichtege* Chanukah

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<sup>7</sup> What requires clarification is why didn't throwing Yosef into such a deep pit kill him. We are taught that a pit even ten *tefachim* deep has the potential to kill (Bava Kamma 3a)

<sup>8</sup> And the *lechi* of a *mavui*

<sup>9</sup> Sukkah 2a

<sup>10</sup> See Shabbos 23b

<sup>11</sup> Someone could ask, that it's clear from Sukkah 2b that the opinion who says that beyond twenty *amos*, לֹא עֵינָא בֵּה שְׁלִטָא, a person won't notice the *sechach*, only says that it if the walls don't reach the *sechach*. However, if the walls go all the way up, a person will follow the walls with their eyes and notice it. We could then say the same thing with Reuven and the pit. The walls of the pit surely went to the bottom, so he should have noticed the snakes and scorpions. This can be answered with Tosafos ad. loc. s.v. וכיון דדפנות, who says that this distinction is only true with a *sukkah*, which has a large *sechach*. He says a Menorah above twenty, even if the walls reach it, is still hard to notice, since it is relatively small. The same can be said with the snakes and scorpions