

Dear Rabbi Fried,

I was studying this week's Torah portion, and was bothered by a question. The Torah says, when relating the story of Joseph and his brothers, that they threw him into a pit, "...the pit was empty, no water was in it" (Genesis ch. 37 verse 24). I have always been taught that the Torah doesn't use extra words; if the pit was empty, obviously there's no water in it. Isn't this statement redundant?

Joseph P.

Dear Joseph,

Congratulations! You have asked the precise question asked by the Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 22a). The Talmud answers the redundancy that the Torah is hinting that water was not in it, but snakes and scorpions were in it!

Besides the obviously elusive comment of the Talmud to explain the verse, there's a further question. This discussion in the Talmud falls right smack in the middle of the Talmud's discussion of the laws of lighting the Chanukah candles. The rabbis of the Talmud depart their Chanukah discussion for a moment, discuss this verse, then resume their discussion. Very strange! Furthermore, this verse appears in the Torah portion always read the Shabbat of the week Chanukah falls out in. Does this seem to be a hidden link to Chanukah?

The explanation is the very crux of the Chanukah holiday. Many years ago I heard the explanation of the above verse from my mentor, the late Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik ob'm. There's a concept in physics, "nature abhors a vacuum". No space in the physical world really remains empty. This is true in the spiritual realm as well. One cannot be bereft of spirituality and remain wholesome. If one does not fill himself with positive spiritual energy, the opposite will take its place.

This is the meaning of the cryptic statement of the rabbis, inferred by the verse: "water was not there, but snakes and scorpions were there". Water refers to the Torah, which is the water we drink, quenches our thirst and slakes our tired souls. If we do not fill "the pit" with the "water", then other, negative influences will creep in, the "snakes and scorpions" of foreign cultures.

The battle fought by the Maccabees was a spiritual one. The Greeks were attempting, successfully, to inculcate Greek culture, values and wisdom into the Jewish people. One of their most vehemently enforced decrees was the complete cessation of Torah study. They realized that as long as the Jews were filled with the wellsprings of Torah, there was no room to force in their "snakes and scorpions". The Maccabees fought valiantly to preserve the holiness of the Torah and the Jewish minds and souls.

The Maccabees were rewarded by finding one remaining flask of pure oil amongst the many flasks contaminated by the Greeks. That pure oil lit the Menorah, whose light signifies the light of the Torah which illuminates the Jewish people. That was the greatest miracle of all, that despite the decrees of the world's mightiest power, the Jews were able to preserve the holiness of the Torah, its teachings and messages intact.

This is the hint of the verse you mentioned. This lesson was taught in the Talmud in the middle of the laws of Chanukah, to teach the message of those laws. It is in the portion read before Chanukah to get the Jewish people ready for what Chanukah represents throughout the generations, the preservation of the teachings of Torah in the face of foreign, often hostile, cultures.

Best wishes to you and all the readers for a joyous, meaningful Chanukah!