Yasher Koach, Helena. For that teaching and that reading and all the many ways in which you've made us proud this morning.

As you just taught us, Joseph is transformed over the course of this parsha. He grows up. We read toward the beginning of Vayeshev about the way in which he taunted his brothers: sharing a dream that thinly veils his own sense of superiority. But by the end of the reading, we see that he credits God for all of his accomplishments, a sign of newfound humility. In just a few short chapters, Joseph becomes more deferent and self-aware. And as you explain, Joseph's suffering becomes the crucible of his transformation. And indeed, he winds up being an exemplar of change.

As you become a bat mitzvah today, your words remind us that being a Jewish adult demands recognizing the eternal possibility of improvement and committing to repair the world. That notion is at the core of religious Jewish thought – that there is always something we can do to course correct, to change our lives, and maybe also to change the world.

But sometimes, it's hard to believe that that's actually possible. Sometimes we're so deep in the cycle of feeling bad, like the world has gotten out of control, that all is lost, and that there's no hope in trying. *That* feeling – which most of us have at some point in our lives – appears toward the beginning of the Joseph cycle in this parsha.

In Genesis 37, Joseph's brothers succumb to their jealousy of him. And they abandon him inside of a pit.

Vayika-chuhu, vayishlichu oto haborah. They took him and they threw him into the pit. *V'ha-bor reik, ain bo mayim*. And the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

At first glance, the verse seems redundant. If the pit was empty, we don't *also* need to read that there was no water in it. But as we know, every word in the Torah is laden with meaning, so Rashi explains, "Indeed that pit did not have water in it, but the pit was full of serpents and scorpions."

A pit filled with poisonous creatures would be far worse than a pit filled merely with water. And in this set of verses, Joseph's brothers were essentially condemning him to a painful death. A hole of darkness and destruction.

In that abyss, we can only imagine what Joseph might've thought. That perhaps he would die in that darkness. Unable to see the horizon or any light. Walls constricting around him, without the ability to climb out. The air itself becoming heavy.

This *bor*, this pit, is a physicalization of despair. That queasy feeling that things are just so awful that you can't imagine them getting any better.

And friends, as we've moved into these darker months of 2025, after a year of headlines that feel equally dark, I know that many of us right now are feeling something along those lines. If not outright despair, perhaps simply that the world is less expansive than it should be. As the country teeters ever closer to authoritarianism, and as we read of increasing antisemitism in our midst, it would be reasonable for us to come to the end of this secular year with little hope that 2026 will feel any lighter. And I also know that many of us come to this Shabbat with plenty of personal reasons for feeling especially low. In moments like these, it's natural to feel like we've been cast into a pit, with its attendant darkness, and little instruction for what to do about it.

That experience, some mix of exhaustion, fear and uncertainty, is how I imagine Joseph in the pit. Falling into a trough of despair. With no more room for dreaming.

We know that that's not how this story ends. But if we are to understand the transformation you described, Helena, when Joseph grows beyond the person he was at the beginning of Vayeshev, we have to start by understanding the *pit* itself.

Rashi told us that the pit was full of snakes and scorpions. But it *seemed* like it was empty. This follows a Talmudic discussion in tractate Shabbat about units of measurement by which something can be seen or not seen. The brothers who hurled Joseph into the pit believed it was empty because they couldn't see the bottom. The rabbis take this to mean that the pit was about 20 cubits, or 30ish feet deep.

We might wonder why the precise measurement matters at all. But in this section of the Talmud, the rabbis use that length to refer to the extent of average human visibility. Which has implications for commandments that are meant to be seen. Because of this standard for visibility, the roof of a sukkah, they say, cannot be more than 20 cubits high; an eruv – the symbolic boundary of the public domain – can also not be more than 20 cubits tall. And importantly, for this rabbinic discussion, a chanukiah, the menorah we light at Hanukkah, cannot be placed more than 20 cubits above ground. Rashi states the obvious: "this is because the eye will not notice things higher than 20 cubits, and there would be no publicization of the miracle of Hanukkah."

In this text, the Talmudic sages are not merely playing around with numbers. They are drawing a connection between a dark moment of human concealment – in the case of Joseph in the pit – to our most famous commandment of public light – the example of

the menorah. They transform the depth of the pit into part of the conceptual framework of Hanukkah. Darkness and light, despair and hope, are bound together in a story that doesn't ever actually end. A story that we ourselves re-enact when we light our chanukiyot during the darkest days of the year.

Before we take this lesson and think, "oh that's sweet and redemptive." Let's remember that even after Joseph leaves the original pit, he can't let go of its enduring trauma. Later on in this parsha, when Joseph is imprisoned in Egypt, he says: "*lo asiti m'umah ki samu oti ba-bor.*" "I didn't do anything that they should have put me in this dungeon." Again using the word "bor," connecting the dungeon in Egypt to that original pit into which he was thrown.

Though Joseph develops into a more adaptive adult, his trauma remains a part of him. The darkness never fully leaves his experience.

In this sense, the bor, the pit is transformed beyond the physical into something psychological. This pit is a reminder that there may always be some darkness in our lives. In every generation, we might expect challenges or moments when we feel the walls caving in on us. But at least for Joseph, within the experience of being held in darkness again and again, he begins to see himself and the world differently. Joseph's evolution, which you explored, Helena, does not begin *after* emerging out of darkness but *within* that darkness itself.

Returning to Hanukkah, which we will begin tomorrow night, we might now say that lighting the chanukiyah does not require us to eliminate the darkness by lighting lights. Rather, Hanukkah demands that we create light where it can be seen, despite the confines of darkness all around us. In so doing, publicizing this miracle is a way of insisting that something else is possible. Despair may be a natural human reaction to the vicissitudes of life, but we have a religious imperative to not let despair get the best of us.

Hanukkah invites us *not* to deny the obvious darkness of life but to insist that that darkness is not the end of the story. Or, coming back to your teaching about change, Helena, Hanukkah encourages us to believe that change is eternally possible.

As we light our chanukiyot tomorrow night and each night thereafter, we will say two blessings. The first is for the commandment to light lights. The second is to remember miracles. *She-asah nisim lavoteinu bayamim hahem bazman hazeh.* Who performed miracles for our ancestors at this time in days of old.

These words have been the exact phrasing of the second blessing since they were fixed in the 17th century by a commentary known as Turei Zahav. But before then, there was a slightly different blessing that many Jews said. So slight you could easily miss the difference, because it consisted only of a single letter. A vav.

In that earlier blessing, which we find in the 9th century Seder Rav Amram and elsewhere, the words are "*bayamim hahem **U**vazman hazeh*." This version doesn't imply merely a recognition of the past. In this iteration, the blessing thanks God for performing miracles for our ancestors AND for performing them in our own time.

I can only guess why 17th century Jews in Ashkenaz decided to change it, but as we move into Hanukkah this year, considering again your teaching, Helena, I want to encourage us all to remember the initial phrasing of the blessing – and to refuse the assumption that miracles only happened in the past. To remember that the transformation of Joseph begins inside of the pit – not after it. And if we are entering this Hanukkah feeling like things are just so dark, may we push ourselves to insist that light is possible *bayamim hahem Uvazman hazeh*. In those days and in our own.

Shabbat Shalom.