

The Water Scare At Super Bowl

A frightening cyber-attack took place on a water system in Tampa before the Super Bowl. What is the deeper meaning of water according to Jewish thought?

An Unwanted Intruder

This Sunday, the Super Bowl took place in Tampa, Florida. Two days earlier, a supervisor of the water system in Oldsmar, which is a suburb of Tampa, noticed strange activity on the system's screen. The mouse on the screen began moving on its own.

This itself wasn't a cause for alarm. Co-workers regularly accessed the system remotely, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. But the supervisor noticed that the intruder who took control of the mouse directed it to the software that controls water treatment and increased the amount of sodium hydroxide to dangerous levels — 100 times the proper amount.

Sodium hydroxide, which is also called lye, is used in small quantities to treat water. However, it is also used in cleaning supplies such as soaps and drain cleaners. In large quantities, it can cause irritation, burns and other health problems.

The supervisor immediately reversed the change and reported the infiltration to the FBI. This all took place in a city where the Super Bowl took place just two days later.

The mayor told the press that there was no immediate danger to the population. There were numerous other safeguards in place which would have caught the change before it reached the water supply. The system automatically reports any significant change.

Last April, a similar cyber-attack took place in Israel's water supply. An intruder gained control over the computer system and attempted to insert a high volume of chlorine into the water. In Israel too, they immediately made note of the change and neutralized the threat.

After a lengthy investigation, Israeli security experts came to the conclusion that it was Iran who had tried to attack Israel's water supply, using servers in Europe and the United States to hide their tracks. Currently, Israel and the United States are working together to identify the exact source of the attack.

Jewish Water Crisis

Jews have always had problems with water, but in a different form. In 2016, Abu Mazen spoke in the European Parliament and shamelessly claimed that rabbis in Israel call for their followers to poison the Palestinian water supply.

Naturally, his words caused a major uproar. They asked him to back up his statement, which he obviously could not do, and he was forced to issue an apology.

"After it has become evident," his office put out in a statement, "that the alleged statements by a rabbi on poisoning Palestinian wells, which were reported by various media outlets, are

baseless, President Mahmoud Abbas has affirmed that he didn't intend to do harm to Judaism or to offend Jewish people around the world."

His accusation wasn't a new one. When the Black Death spread throughout Europe around 1350 and killed a fourth—or more—of the population, the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells with the intent to destroy Christian civilization.

The Pope himself came out in defense of the Jews. He said the accusations were false and the pandemic was a punishment from G-d, but his words didn't help much. In Italy, in close proximity to the Pope, the Jews were saved, but in Germany, France and Sweden, hundreds of Jews were tortured and murdered because of the accusation. As a result of these persecution and expulsions, the Jewish population of Western Europe dropped drastically.

The Torah is Water

Chassidus teaches us that everything that exists in the physical world, is a reflection of the spiritual one. If there is physical water, then there must be 'spiritual water.'

The Prophet Isaiah says, "Oh, whoever is thirsty go to the water."

What exactly does he mean? Does a thirsty person need to be told to drink water? Even a young child would do so. It is the most natural reaction!

Our sages answer that the Torah is compared to water. The Prophet was saying, "If you are thirsty for spirituality, go to the

Torah.”

The comparison of Torah to water is expressed in one of the oldest Jewish customs: the Torah reading. The custom to read the Torah every Monday, Thursday and Shabbat dates back to the days of Moses, who enacted the custom to ensure that Jews do not go more than three days without Torah study.

The Talmud explains that the custom is hinted to in a verse that says, “The Israelites traveled for three days in the desert and did not find water.”

The verse means homiletically, the Talmud says, that since the Jews traveled for three days without hearing any Torah they became weary, and therefore the prophets among them arose and instituted a Torah reading each Shabbat, Monday and Thursday, so they would not tarry three days without hearing the Torah (Bava Kama 82a).

In other words, just as water gives life to the body, Torah gives life to the soul.

In a Midrash, our sages give another comparison between water and Torah. “Just as the sea is endless, so too, Torah is endless.” No matter how much you study, you will always have more to learn. The Midrash says another interesting comparison: “Just as an adult is not embarrassed to tell a child, ‘pour me water,’ an adult should not be ashamed to ask a young person, ‘teach me Torah.’” (Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:19)

Yalkut Shimoni (Ekev) has more comparisons: “Just as water can purify the impure, so too, Torah purifies the impure. And just as

water is free, so too, Torah is free for all to study.”

The two most famous comparisons between water and Torah are found in stories of Rabbi Akiva.

When he decided to study Torah as a young man, he found it to be very difficult. But one day he noticed drops of water falling on a stone. The water had dripped for so long that it had engraved an impression in the stone. Seeing the phenomenon, he said to himself, “If the water can make a hole in the stone by sheer persistence, how much more so, I could become a Torah scholar with the power of my persistence.” (Toras Menachem vol. 2 pg. 148).

Later in life, when he was already the famous Rabbi Akiva, the Romans decreed that anyone caught teaching Torah in public would be executed, but Rabbi Akiva taught Torah anyway. Papus asked him why he was ready to risk his life, and Rabbi Akiva answered with the analogy of the fox and the fish. His message was that a Jew without Torah is like a fish without water, who cannot survive even one hour (Brachos 61b).

The Inner Dimension

Chassidism teaches us that there is more to Torah. The comparison of Torah to water refers to the revealed dimension of Torah, the laws of the Torah which we study and fulfill. The inner dimension of Torah—Kabbalah and Chassidism—is compared to wine.

Water doesn't have a unique taste; we drink it because we are thirsty. Wine, on the other hand, gives a unique flavor.

Likewise, we study Jewish law because it tells us G-d's will. We study it even if we are not excited to study it, and even if we don't always understand it. Wine, Chassidism, is what gives flavor to that study and makes it pleasurable. And just as wine is concealed within grapes and needs to be extracted, so too, Chasidism is not out in the open. You need to search and dig deeper to understand the inner dimension of the Torah.

I'll share one example from this week's Torah portion:

In the beginning of the reading, the Torah tells us about the laws of a Hebrew slave.

First of all, let's make a disclaimer. It's important to note that Torah does not approve of slavery in the context of the enslavement of Africans in the United States. Torah does not allow us to kidnap innocent people and sell them into slavery against their will. In fact, this very Torah portion states clearly, "One who kidnaps a person and sells him, should die."

The Hebrew slave refers to a person who sold himself into slavery as a form of adoption. He was looking for a home that would take him in.

Now, even if it's not regular slavery, we can still ask ourselves, "How is this law relevant to me?" In our day, slavery is nonexistent. You can't sell and you can't buy; the entire beginning of the Torah portion seems irrelevant.

Being G-d's Servant

Chassidism teaches us the inner dimension of this law. The servant in the Torah portion refers to me and you. When G-d

took the people of Israel out of Egypt, He took them out so that they could serve Him. As the Torah says, “The People of Israel are servants to me. They are my servants, whom I took out of the land of Egypt.” (Behar 25:55).

Chassidism explains that a servant doesn't have his own agenda. His entire existence revolves around that of his master. Each day, he asks his boss what he needs to do. A Jew too, needs to ask himself every day: “What does G-d want me to accomplish in the world?”

Occasionally, someone tells me that they planned to take a cruise when they realized that Passover somehow fell into their vacation time. “These holidays always get stuck in the wrong place. They are either too early or too late; never where we want them.”

But when you live with the knowledge that you are G-d's servant, the first thing you do when planning a vacation is ensure that it won't get stuck onto Yom Kippur. If you see that your vacation time coincides with the holiday, you give precedence to G-d's schedule and plan your own vacation accordingly.

This is the deeper meaning of Torah's teachings about servitude. When you study the Torah with the Chasidic commentary, it becomes relevant, it becomes tasteful—it becomes like a sweet wine.

Our sages tell us in Ethics of Our Fathers: “Make G-d's will into your own will, so he will adopt your will as His own.” When we plan our lives according to G-d's will and adopt G-d's will as our

very own, he too, will adopt our will as his own. When we will request something of him, he will provide it for us even when we do not necessarily deserve it.