

Waters of Life and Giving

Category: Pekudei, Shemos

The nature of the Jewish people, for the good and for the bad.

The Shrinking Line

Good Shabbos!

Since Israel is frequently the subject of our talk, I'd like to return to the Land of Israel this week—specifically, one of the most popular geographic features of the Land of Israel: The Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is not only one of the most unique geographical features of Israel, but also of the entire world. Needless to say, it's one of Israel's top tourist destinations—over 50 percent of tourists visiting Israel also visit the Dead Sea. However, in recent years, the state of the Dead Sea has been increasingly concerning.

From the 1960s of the last century until today, the Dead Sea has shrunk by a third. Each year the water level is declining. Most recently, it's dropping one meter per year. For example, in 1976, it was 398 meters below sea level. Today, it's about 435 meters below sea level—and it is getting worse year by year.

In addition, there are sinkholes appearing. As a result of the seabed drying, deep sinkholes are popping up, with anything built above them falling in. It looks like an earthquake.

So what's the cause of this situation?

The waters flowing into the Dead Sea for the most part come from Jordan and Syria. But in recent years, those countries built new dams and drew the water away elsewhere, and the Dead Sea is continually left with less and less water.

In fairness, it should be noted that Israel built the first dam and diverted some of the water that was supposed to reach the Dead Sea to other places. Experts say that if there isn't a drastic change over the next 20-30 years, we may need to search for a missing Dead Sea.

There are a lot of ideas on how to change situation—like building a waterway connecting the water from the Mediterranean or Red Sea to the Dead Sea. But in the meantime, it's all on paper, and as everyone knows, sometimes doing something only makes things worse.

In Jewish History

But why is the Dead Sea so important? For starters, it provides medical cures, or at least relief to many people suffering from various diseases.

It is also a part of the history and geography of the Torah. There are several stories of the Torah that occurred in this region. The Book of Bereishis (Genesis) tells of the war between the Four Kings and the Five Kings near the Dead Sea: "All these joined at the Siddim Valley, which is the Dead Sea" (Bereishis 14:3). In the course of that war, Avraham's nephew Lot was captured, and Avraham went to pursue his captors and bring Lot home.

Many years later, David Ben Yishai, who at the time was the King of Israel, fled there from King Shaul: "And David rose up from there and dwelt in the castles of Ein Gedi" (Samuel I:23:29). There is also the incident of the cave. Shaul went into a cave to rest his feet—the same cave that David and his men were hiding in. Then, under cover of darkness, David cut off the corner of Shaul's upper robe without Saul feeling it. David then ran after Shaul to prove to him that had no intention to hurt him.

Eliyahu HaNavi also ascended to heaven in the Dead Sea area, and so on.

But Israel also has another famous sea: the Kinneret. This body of water, also known as the Sea of Galilee, is likewise a cause of great concern to Israel.

Besides the fact that the Rebbe once said that Kinneret water can treat Tzoraas, the Biblical disease ("Dollars," 27 Sivan, 5751), Kinneret water is drinkable and they have the same problem: the water level is falling, and it's approaching a red line beyond which they will no longer allow taking drinking water from the Kinneret.

But the Kinneret is also causing some religious disputes. There are rabbis who believe that on Passover, it's forbidden to drink water coming from the Kinneret,

as there are a lot of fishermen throwing bread to the fish in the Kinneret. Also, there are many hikers at the Kinneret during Passover, and not necessarily Jews—and since any chametz food item is not allowed on Passover in any amount, these rabbis maintain that even a tiny amount of bread in the Kinneret renders the entire body of water chametz! So they are strict on themselves not to use Kinneret water every day of Passover, whether for drinking or for cooking. Instead, they stock up on bottled water from elsewhere. (However, the halachic consensus is that you're allowed to drink Kinneret water without concern for chametz for several reasons.)

At times, religious representatives from Jerusalem asked that Jerusalem be disconnected from the Kinneret water supply at Passover so that those who are concerned about Kinneret water will not have to stock up on water before Passover, as well as to save the rest of Jewish Jerusalem from halachic problems.

At some point, this annual Kinneret disconnect slowly expanded across the country, such that the majority of the country did not get water from Kinneret during Passover. (Not that they have no water—they just get it elsewhere.)

The Real Difference

Now, the Kinneret and the Dead Sea both get their water from the same source—but there are marked and significant difference.

The Kinneret features drinkable water and live fish. Many forms of greenery decorate the banks. Trees extend their branches over the shore and send forth their roots to draw water. People have built their houses near the waterfront, birds build their nests in the trees, and they're all happy to live there. The Kinneret is fed by the Jordan River.

But the same Jordan River continues to flow south and pour into the Dead Sea, where there is no sign of fish, no birds chirping, no children's laughter, and vegetation—not decorating the shores—does now draw from the water.

So now the question is: What causes such a big difference between the two seas that are not so far apart? It's not the Jordan's fault—the same water flows into both places.

So here's the difference.

The Kinneret gets the waters of the Jordan, but does not keep them to herself. She not only gets but also gives. For every drop that flows in, another drop flows out a bit differently. But the Dead Sea does not give back. It does not put out a single drop.

The Kinneret takes and gives—so it's a "Sea of Life." The other sea only takes in but doesn't give out—and so it's called the Dead Sea, a veritable "Sea of Death"! And just as there are two kinds of seas, there are two kinds of people...

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Who Are the Jewish People

In the Parshah of Pekudei, we read about the building of the Mishkan. We learn about the multitude of major contributions that that Jewish Nation contributed to the establishment of the Mishkan, to the point that Moshe had to declare that people should not bring any more donations.

But just two weeks ago we read about the Golden Calf, when Aaron tried to buy time until Moshe came back, suggesting that the people donate golden earrings and jewelry. He was sure it would take time because people often have a hard time parting with their jewelry. But, to his amazement, we are told in the Torah, "All the people took off the golden earrings in their ears and brought them to Aaron" (Shmos 32:3)—and the Talmud (Tractate Shekalim 2b) basically tells us that you can't figure the Jewish Nation out—they gladly contribute to the Golden Calf, but they also gladly contribute to the building of the Mishkan.

And the truth is, that really is the character of the Jewish People—the Jews are a giving people. Sometimes the "giving" is in the wrong places, but one thing is for sure—it's in the DNA of our people. We realize that to live is to give, and those who do not give are part of the "Sea of Death," the Dead Sea. But if you want to live the Kinneret life, you have to give.

At the end of the day, the ultimate proof that you're alive and truly living life is when you give—and when you give, you become sweet, too.