

Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

Parashat Lech Lecha – From ‘Valley of the Fields’ to the ‘Dead Sea’

I’m excited about the opportunity to accompany my husband to a medical conference at the Dead Sea during the week of *Parashat Lech Lecha* in which the Dead Sea is mentioned. Actually, the Torah never calls this healing lake ‘Dead.’ Its name in the Torah is הַמֶּלַח/ים/Yam HaMelach – the ‘Salt Sea.’ Whenever I go away with my husband, it is usually to the Dead Sea, as I love to soak up its healing minerals, both from the salty water, the slimy mud and the healing air. I know many people who soak in the mineral baths of the Dead Sea at the onset of every winter in order to strengthen their immune system against colds and flus. Salt has antiseptic properties, and the Dead Sea is eight times as salty as the oceans. The mineral baths of the Dead Sea are known from ancient times to be exceptionally healing. King Herod made the Dead Sea into one of the world’s first health resorts. Since then the Dead Sea has supplied a wide variety of health products, from balms for Egyptian mummification to minerals for various cosmetics. In *Parashat Lech Lecha* the Dead Sea is both called the ‘Salt Sea’ (*Bereishit* 14:3) and the עֵמֶק הַשְּׂדִימִים/Emek HaSidim – ‘Vale of the Fields’ (ibid. 3, 8, 10). Before the destruction of Sodom, this place was one of the most fertile planes in Israel. This is why Lot chose to move there as “he saw that that it was well watered everywhere, before Hashem destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the Garden of Hashem, like the land of Egypt, as you come to Zoar” (*Bereishit* 13:10). Lot had his eye on this fertile land, which he recognized would be excellent for pasture for his increasing flock as it was watered by the natural irrigation from the foot of the Jordan River. This plane was similar to both Egypt, watered by the Nile and the Garden of Eden, which was also naturally irrigated by the river (*Bereishit* 2:10), (Ramban, *Bereishit* 13:10). Yet, this same place is also described in this week’s *parasha* as “full of slime pits,” where the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah got stuck (*Bereishit* 14:10). Today, the Dead Sea has become a top destination for those seeking healing and peace of mind. It is a restorative therapeutic place for people from all over the planet. At the Dead Sea, I often chance upon groups of Danish people suffering from psoriasis and various other skin disorders, for whom the Danish health insurance subsidize healing treatments at the Dead Sea! I wonder what is the deeper secret of this mysterious lake with a surface and shores of 417.5 m (1369 ft) below sea level, the very deepest lowest land elevation on Earth! Why did the so-called ‘Dead Sea,’ become transformed into one of the greatest life-giving health resort areas in the world?

Emunah from the Slime

Parashat Lech Lecha describes the very the first World War ever, which took place at the Dead Sea. Nimrod who wanted to get back at Avraham for surviving the burning furnace (Targum Yonatan, *Bereishit* 14:1), mobilized the Four Evil Superpowers against the Five Kings who “set the battle in array against them in the Vale of Siddim (*Bereishit* 14:8). It is known that מַלְכוּת/Malchut – Kingdom is called יָד וְשֵׁם /Yad VaShem – a Hand and a Name (*Yesha’yahu* 55:5). Corresponding to it in the *klipah* (impure husk) is עֵמֶק הַשְּׂדִימִים/Emek HaShidim – The Vale of the Fields. Within this word are the letters of יָד וְשֵׁם /Yad Shem (*Agra d’Kalah*). Among the Five Kings, the kings of Sodom

and Gomorrah fled and fell into the slime pits in the Vale of Siddim (ibid. 10). Thereafter, the Four Evil Superpowers took Lot captive in order to drag Avraham into the war (ibid. 12). The evil kings were stuck in the mud of the Dead Sea, because they were engrossed in the muddy material of desires. As a *midah c'neged midah* – measure for measure they were punished through the muddy material of the slimy pits. In addition, they also descended from the builders of the Tower of Babylon who used clay as building material (*Agra d'Kala*). There were many pits [at the Dead Sea], from which they took earth as clay for building purposes. The clay was very sticky, so it was only by a miracle that the king of Sodom alone emerged from the slime pits (*Bereishit* 14:17). Hashem performed this miracle in order to teach *emunah* to those who did not believe that Avraham had been delivered from Ur-Kashdim – the fiery furnace. As soon as the King of Sodom escaped from the slime in Avraham's merit they corrected their past disbelief. (Rashi, ibid. 10). So from the impure slime of the Vale of Shiddim. *emunah* in Hashem is confirmed and strengthened.

The Redeeming Qualities of the Muddy Slime

The victory of the war took place in the Vale of Siddim, the connecting point between the pure and impure wells. Our Fathers would dig wells and wellsprings of holiness from which the rivers and lakes of holiness would derive. Corresponding to these, the mud pits of the Dead Sea represented the impure wells of the nations. These wells where one sinks deep into the material away from the spiritual are the antithesis to the holy wells of Avraham. The Plishtim took dirt to block Avraham's wells. The salt of the Dead Sea, which derives from these, symbolizes suffering. The purpose of suffering is to preserve the meat, and to attain a good final goal – the conquest of the Evil Kingdoms. Even within the negative muddy, unholy impurity there is the redeeming quality of the challenge that slime and darkness poses in order to activate the hidden holiness. This is why the *yetzar hara* (evil impulse) is called “very good” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 9:7). The word ‘*sid*’ (from *Emek HaSiddim*) can also mean plaster, which is necessary for building and strengthening of a home. (Rav Tzaddok of Lublin, *Kometz HaMincha* 2:36). After conquering the boundaries of evil, Israel merits the boundaries of the Salt Sea. For the Dead Sea is described in the Bible numerous times as forming a boundary of the land of Israel (see *Bamidbar* 34:3,12, *Yehoshua* 15:2, 5, 18:19). The boundary of the Sea corresponds to the upper world, and salt symbolizes perseverance (*Noam Elimelech*).

Transforming the Mud

Even when we are sunken in the material, we can find the innerness of Hashem hidden within it. This is the meaning of *וְעֵמֶק הַשְּׂדִימִים בְּצִרְתָּ בְּצִרְתָּ הַמָּר* / *v'Emek HaSidim be'erot be'erot chemar* – “the Vale of the Fields were pits and pits of muddy clay” (*Bereishit* 14:10). Avraham our Father was able to enlighten even the muddy material, this is why it follows that the Vale of the Fields became “the Vale of *Shaveh* (Straight/equal) – it is the King's Vale” (ibid 17). This was the special transformative work of our Fathers (*Imrei Emet*). It is also possible that the repetition of the word ‘pit’ comes to teach us that there are pits in which one sinks perpetually, yet there are other kinds of pits from which it is possible to rise (*Siftei Tzedek*). The word used for pits in this context is *בְּצִרְתָּ/be'erot*, which also can mean wells. (It is the latter meaning I intended when naming my Midrasha). Perhaps the word ‘*be'erot*’ is mentioned twice to allude to the fact that the pits can have two

opposing qualities. There are the kinds of *'be'erot'* through which one sinks and falls, and the other kinds, which one can use to build up. Once the *be'er* is completely transformed and all the sinking slime becomes purposeful, then the Dead Sea will be healed and once again become one of the most fruitful places in the world. Already in our time people have begun to make the slime and mud of the Dead Sea purposeful. People from all over the world come to take mud baths and receive healing from various ailments. The Dead Sea Ahavah products are exported to most of the Western World.

The Secret Salt Sea Connection

The first time the Dead Sea is mentioned in the Torah is when describing how the Five Kings became connected together in this place, "All these became allies in the Vale of Siddim – this is the Salt Sea" (*Bereishit* 14:3). They used to be enemies but they made peace between them at the Vale of Siddim, because from there they made plaster for building. It is only after the destruction of Sodom that it turned into a lake, which today is called the Dead Sea (Malbim). The double nature of the Dead Sea is,, furthermore, highlighted by the fact that the very same place where these kingdoms made peace became turned into a battlefield (Abarbanel). We always eat our bread with salt because Kingdom is called *Yam HaMelach* (the Salt Sea). Salt has rectifying qualities. Without salt many foods would be inedible. It is interesting to note that both *לֶחֶם/lechem* – bread and *מֶלַח/melach* – salt consist of the same letters, which have the numerical value of 78, exactly three times 26, the numerical value of Hashem's four-lettered name (*Arizal, Sefer Halikutim, Tehillim* 36).

The Holy Salt Covenant

Salt represents loyalty and friendship. Hashem commands us to include salt in each sacrifice, "You shall season your every offering with salt; you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with G-d; with all your offerings you must offer salt" (*Vayikra* 2:13). On the second day of Creation G-d separated between the 'Upper Waters' and the 'Lower Waters.' The Midrash tells us that when this occurred, the Lower Waters wept, "We, too, want to be in the King's presence." Therefore, a covenant was made with the salt from the Six Days of Creation. The lower waters was promised to receive an elevation when it would be offered on the altar in the form of salt [derived from the ocean], and during the water sacrifices of Sukkot (Rashi, *Vayikra* 2:13). Since salt is a preservative, it is naturally a symbolic of an enduring covenant. For example, "Hashem gave kingship over Israel forever – to David and his sons – by the covenant of salt (II *Divrei Hayamim* 13:4). The sky-blue color of the *techelet* that reflects the throne of glory corresponds to the Salt Sea. The salt is the holy covenant, and the sea are the different levels that emerge from it, salted with the pure and holy salt (*Ma'amarei Rashbi*). I remember visiting the *techelet* factory located in Ma'aleh Adumim on the way to the Dead Sea. There are different opinions in the Talmud about the habitat of the *Chilazon* snail-fish. According to Rambam the *Chilazon* is actually found in *Yam HaMelach* (*Laws of Tzitzit* 2:2).

Healing the Waters of the Dead Sea

The Dead Sea is a meeting place between good and evil. It is the place of transformation from fertile fields (*Emek HaSiddim*) to a barren deadly place of void. However, the prophet testifies that this most barren land will one day be completely healed and most fertile of all. “...The waters shall be healed, every living creature that swarms will be able to live wherever this stream goes. The fish will be very abundant once these waters have reached there. Everything will be healed and live wherever this stream goes. Fishermen shall stand beside it all the way from Ein Gedi to Ein Eglayim; it shall be a place for drying nets; and the fish will be of various kinds and most plentiful like the fish of the Great Sea. Yet, its swamps and marshes shall not be healed; they will serve to supply salt. All kinds of trees for food will grow on both banks of the stream. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail; they will yield new fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the Temple. Their fruit will serve for food, and their leaves for healing” (*Yechezkiel* 47:8-12). Water symbolize pleasure. There are both physical and spiritual pleasures represented respectively by the ‘Lower Waters’ and the ‘Upper Waters.’ When the ‘Lower Waters’ were separated from the ‘Upper Waters’ during the Second day of Creation, they wept bitterly. These bitter tears became the saltiest of waters – the waters of the Dead Sea. Ultimately, it is our purpose in this world to sweeten and heal the ‘Lower Waters,’ through converting this lowly realm of earthly mundane pleasures into a dwelling place for Hashem. When we complete this mission we will reach the Final *Geulah* (redemption). Then there no longer will be a dichotomy between the ‘Upper’ and ‘Lower’ Waters. Physical and spiritual pleasures will merge, all the evil kingdoms will be overcome and humanity will rise to a higher level of spiritual sensitivity, which we will be able to infuse within the physical reality. This is the final rectification for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which caused the original split between Good and Evil, Physical and Spiritual. The healing and sweetening of the salty waters of the Dead Sea is a reflection of the final rectification of all Creation.