

Blaumilch Canal 2008

"Transparency? Democracy? Ecological disaster? When private money speaks, everything is pushed aside and trampled by Moloch." The director of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel warns against the national warship of the Dead Sea Canal Project before its implications for the Dead Sea, the Gulf of Eilat and the Arava are clarified

Op-ed, Gershon Peleg, Ynet, June 22

In 1969 the movie "The Blaumilch Canal" came out, written and directed by the late Ephraim Kishon. The main character is a man named Blaumilch who escaped from an insane asylum, stole a pneumatic drill and began drilling in the middle of Mugrabi Square in Tel Aviv. A whole commotion develops around the digger, especially because of the noise and the disruption of traffic, but nobody tries to stop him. Nobody responsible wants to appear as if he does not know what is going on in his area of responsibility and everybody, including the personnel of City Hall and the police, pretend it is a planned project they know all about.

Now, 39 years after the original movie, comes the sequel, called "the Red Sea Dead Sea Canal." The script is by President Shimon Peres and the State of Israel, and the producer is businessman Itzhak Tshuva. Except instead of a canal on a Tel Aviv street we will get a major scale project -- a 166 km canal connecting the Gulf of Eilat and the Dead Sea. Instead of a single laborer with a pneumatic drill we will get the biggest construction and real estate project ever planned in Israel, including 200,000 hotel rooms, a series of artificial ponds, industrial buildings and more. And instead of a comedy -- a horror movie.

And just like in Kishon's movie, nobody dares ask the real questions: what are the consequences of the project and is it even necessary? The public, the environmental organizations, the experts and professionals were not given the opportunity to raise doubts, ask questions or doubt the plans. All that remains is to watch with astonishment the rush by the investors and their quick lining up for the ribbon cutting ceremonies.

In 1902, in his book *Altneuland*, Theodore Herzl suggested digging a canal to carry water from the Mediterranean through the Jezrael Valley to the southern part of the Jordan River towards the Dead Sea. Since then the Dead Sea Canal has reappeared in different shapes and routes, the last of them encouraged by the Jordanian Kingdom's need for desalinated water on the one hand and the dramatic drop in the Dead Sea's level on the other. In its current form, the canal construction project proposes to carry water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea through the Arava. International companies recently began a year-and-a-half engineering-environmental feasibility study to examine the overall implications of the project on the Gulf of Eilat, the Dead Sea and the Arava.

But before even checking the "horses" the "carriage" of the canal has already set out, ridden by Tshuva with the full support of President Peres. Tshuva announced that through his private enterprise, named "Las Vegas in the Arava," he wants to make the desert bloom. The fact that the Arava is not a desert that needs to be made to bloom but an important ecological system with many rare natural assets has escaped the view of this visionary. Meanwhile the president announced he would promote a special planning bypassing a law to promote the ambitious project.

Transparency? Democracy? Environmental protection? Again it turns out that when private money talks everything is pushed aside and trampled by Moloch. The decision-makers rush to chase after the mirage without considering the far-ranging consequences of the project which have not yet been clarified.

This week a coalition of the six biggest environmental organizations in Israel was created to lead a public campaign to stop moving the Dead Sea Canal project forward until all of its environmental consequences are understood and other alternatives are examined. Many grandiose projects in our region were launched with great fanfare and ended in disappointment or ecological disaster. The drying of the Hula in the 1960s and construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt are examples. We must not run forward with blinded eyes just in case in just a few years we grab our heads with both hands and cry: what, for God's sake, were we thinking?

The author is the director of the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel [SPNI]