

The dream of the Dead Sea Canal

We fantasized about a Canal to connect the Dead Sea with the Red Sea. We envisioned desalination plants, lakes, hotels and thousands of jobs. And now, the only thing left is the real estate: how the Dead Sea Canal Project moved away from solutions for the Dead Sea and the Greens' holy fury

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We fantasized about a Canal to connect the Dead Sea with the Red Sea. We envisioned desalination plants, lakes, hotels, a fancy casino and thousands of jobs. Shimon Peres pulled the strings, Yitzhak Tshuva drew up plans, even the World Bank got into the act but the people still remain confused. If you missed it in the last episodes of the Dead Sea Canal Saga, here is a summary: there are no solutions for the drying of the Dead Sea, Tshuva retracted his statements about involvement in the project and now he is talking about a real estate project to populate the Arava regardless of the Dead Sea and its condition. Meanwhile only the World Bank is trying to provide possible solutions for the dry area with the help of an Israeli company.

The expected deadline for the Bank to issue the conclusions of its study is in two years. The target date for starting the Red Sea Dead Sea project is unknown. The nature of the project depends on the results of the study. Interim conclusion: Dead Sea Red Sea Canal, dream or reality?

A real estate project unrelated to the Dead Sea

For many years different alternatives have been checked to build a canal or water pipe through which water from the Mediterranean would be desalinated and conveyed to Jordan, the PA and Israel. Most of them were checked, ruled out, rechecked and ruled out again. Only a southern Canal, which would connect the Red Sea with the Dead Sea, is on the agenda now. With much fanfare businessman Yitzhak Tshuva a few months ago announced a grandiose plan to build a canal alongside a pipe connecting the two seas, with the goal of leading to the economic development of the region by building hotels and lakes. The plan, published in the media as a fait accompli and drawing loud reactions from the Green organizations this week took a different form than was so far presented. As part of the new plan presented to the Knesset last week by Erez Ron, a representative of the Tshuva group at the concluding session of the Dead Sea lobby, it looks like the fantasies about restoring the Dead Sea now have a real estate character; they are based on developing and populating the Arava through a master plan that will be presented to the government no earlier than a year from now.

"Demographically speaking," said Ron at the meeting, "in 50 years there will be no room in central Israel for the 7 million people who will be added to the population. Therefore the Tshuva group wishes to build for them a new infrastructure in the Arava with Jordanian cooperation to strengthen peace in the region." Ron stressed the project will go from Eilat to the southern Dead Sea and be based on desalinated water carried through the Arava, which will not ultimately flow into the Dead Sea. Therefore it now seems that this project, at least for now, is disconnected from the Dead Sea project, is merely economic and will not benefit the level or rehabilitation of the Dead Sea.

Do not take the name Green in vain

Loud reactions were heard in the room to Tshuva's representative's presentation about the project. Nir Papai, representative of the coalition of environmental organizations at the hearing, said furiously that the Tshuva group was busy cutting ribbons and doing public relations for the project at the expense of the people and the sea, and called on those present "not to take the name Green in vain." Papai said the Green coalition opposed the promotion and development of the project before beginning the studies in the area and added that existing settlements in Israel must be strengthened instead of running to build new ones. Papai also said that serious alternatives to the sea to sea canal should be checked, such as

the northern canal alternative, and that it should be done now, simultaneously with the World Bank study of the southern canal. This view is shared by Gidon Bromberg, CEO of Friends of the Earth, who said that the main source of the Dead Sea was always the water from the southern Jordan River and therefore the solution for its rehabilitation should be a northern canal as well as declaring the area a world heritage site.

MK Dov Hanin, who was also at the meeting, said "we cannot leave the issue of the Dead Sea in the hands of private project managers, with all due respect to them, and the government will at one point or another have to take the reins into its own hands."

World Bank begins studies to build canal

Now that it is clear to all that the Tshuva plan to rescue the Dead Sea by a canal is off the table, what remains is to understand what the World Bank's part in the issue is. The World Bank has for a few years been interested in a project to build the southern canal connecting the Red Sea with the Dead Sea, while building desalination facilities to provide water to the population of the region, especially on the Jordanian side, and fill the Dead Sea with the saline concentrate created by the desalination process (a concentrate not meant for drinking). For four years the World Bank raised donations from different countries to begin the feasibility study of the project before executing it. The study includes, among other things, estimates of the cost of the project and its ongoing operation, turning the Dead Sea into a world heritage site and examining the problems of the region along with the many environmental challenges it faces. The studies began a month ago led by the French company Coyne et Bellier alongside Dutch, Belgian and Jordanian companies.

Israeli industry is in, the government is not

Yodfat Engineers, an Israeli company for the planning and development of environmental projects, is also a partner in the project after winning a tender in June to check its technical and financial side. The British company ERM, which won the second tender in June, will examine the social-economic aspects of the project.

"It is a big project, one of the biggest in the world," said Danny Sherban, company owner and CEO. "Jordan wants a lot of the water that is supposed to be created by the project, not Israel, and as of today that is the state of affairs." Sherban explained that when that water does exist it will be too expensive for Israel, because of the need to transport it from the depth of 400 m below sea level to the highly populated areas. That is why he thinks the government has not taken an unequivocal position about the matter for the meantime. Sherban added that as of now there is a \$15 million budget for the studies to be done by his company and the British company, "but it has not yet all been raised by the World Bank and therefore it is too early to say that everything is going smoothly." Therefore the period of two years for the completion of the aforementioned studies by the bank is not exactly final either.