

**Yam Hamelach, Dead Sea- Southeast Border of Eretz Yisroel to be Made Fresh Again**  
**By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh**

In Bamidbar 34:1-15 we are told the borders of the Eastern Side of Eretz Yisroel. Rashi explains since many Mitzvos can only be done in Eretz Yisroel it was necessary for the Torah to delineate its borders. In verse 3 we read that the southern border begins by Midbar Tzin and from the Salt Sea eastwards.

This Yam Hamelach, Salt Sea or Dead Sea that forms one of the borders of Eretz Yisroel is one of the most intriguing wonders Hashem created. The sea is approximately seventy miles long and twenty miles wide at its widest point and about four miles at its narrowest point. The name in Hebrew, Yam Hamelach, comes from the fact that the water has extremely high salt content. The English name, the Dead Sea, is derived from the fact that no fish or plants live in this body of water. Indeed, though the Jordan River flows into it, the fish from the Jordan River die immediately upon contact with these saline waters. What is the cause of this unique phenomenon?

Many geologists explain that the Dead Sea is in a true rift zone which begins in the Taurus Mountains in Turkey and extends to the Zambezi Valley in the southern part of the African continent. Many inner movements of the earth have made rifts and this is one of the many such rifts found throughout the world. Geologists also believe that many years ago, water from the Mediterranean Sea formed a narrow crooked bay which ran through that valley of Yezreel and emptied into the rift. The land eventually rose to the point that Waters could no longer flow in from the Mediterranean Sea but the salt deposits remained. Interestingly, despite the lowness of the Dead Sea area, it never overflows. Some scientists suggest that there may be some subterranean water outlets connecting it with the Mediterranean or Red Seas.

What do our Torah sources say about the formation of Yam Hamelach? In Berishis 14:4 we are told that the war that took place between the four kings and the five kings in Emek Hasidim which is Yam Hamelach. Rashi explains that it was at a later time that Emek Hasidim, then land, became the Yam Hamelach. At this point it was a valley. He then quotes the Midrash Rabbah 45:2 that rocks split and caused waters to flow into the opening. Targum Yonasson also alludes to the fact that this area was once teeming with life as his mesorah was to translate *Siddim* as *pardeisim*, gardens or orchards.

We find in Bamidbar that this sea is an established reality as part of the border of Eretz Yisroel. So we see that there was a change from fertile valley to the Dead Sea. If so, what happened between Avraham's time and the time of Am Yisroel entering Eretz Yisroel?

We know that in Avraham's time, Sodom and its sister cities which were in this area were destroyed. We are told in Bereishis 19:24-26 that Hashem caused fire and sulfur to rain on Sodom and Amorah and then overturned the cities of the area as well as all inhabitants the vegetation. Rabbeinu Bachaya on Bereishis 14:10 quotes the Midrash that Emek Hasidim can be read as *Shadayim* to mean giving life to a newborn baby as it states in Tehillim 107: 33-34 'He [Hashem] makes the rivers into desert, water outlets into thirst, fruitful land to saline, from the evil of its inhabitants.' Interestingly, till this day the sea is full of salt and emits sulfurous vapors into the morning mist daily. Indeed, at the time of the destruction, of Sodom all types of toxic substances that Hashem normally protects us from were released.

Because of the saltiness of the area, it has been a desolate place. It was primarily inhabited by those mining for its natural resources. Sodomite salt from this area was used for the *ketores*, incense in the Bais Hamikdash. Nearby Ein Gedi is home to a number of unique plants. One such unique plant product is oil of afirsimon which Rav Adin Steinzaltz believes to be the *commiphora apobalsam*, oil made from a small shrub native of this area and was prized highly enough to get its own bracha, *Borei Shmen Arev*. THE Greeks knew this sea as the Sea of Asphalt which was obtained here. The ancient Egyptians used this asphalt as well for their mummies. In addition, Queen Cleopatra was known to obtain the raw materials for her cosmetics from this area. Till this day, mud from this area has a number of cosmetic and dermatological uses. Clearly, Hashem gave Am Yisroel certain Brachos even when he punished other nations as this sea provides a number of raw materials that the rest of the world needs.

Because of the remoteness of the area, it has also long been a haven for those seeking solitude from general society. The Essenes, who wanted to be away from the major centers of population, had their communities in this area. King Hordus, also known as Herod, built the well-known Masada fortress nearby. Since Am Yisroel stopped living in Eretz Yisroel in large numbers, a number of Greek Orthodox monasteries have been built here. Today, nomadic Bedouins also inhabit the area.

The Yam Hamelach, will not always remain this way. In Sefer Yechezkel 47:7 we are given a vision of fresh, running and life-giving water going to the Aravah and the Yam. Rashi, on this verse, quotes the Midrash that Hashem will make the salty Sea of Sodom fresh again. Perhaps the intent is much deeper than the miraculous event. This vision is towards the end of Sefer Yechezkel, shortly after the visions of the Third Bais Hamikdash are given to us. The vision of saltwater turning fresh is perhaps a microcosm of Techiyas Hameisim, the Final Resurrection. When we look at the Dead Sea today, it seems impossible that it will ever be full of life again. Similarly, it seems to us that the state of affairs today will not change. Yet Hashem will make things change for us. Hakadosh Baruch Hu WILL bring all of the dead back to life and all ends the earth will know Hashem as the real king. May we all merit this speedily in our days. Amen.