

DROUGHT CONDITIONS IN NEGEV DESCRIBED

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[Article by Mordekhay Artzi'eli: "A Land Without Water"]

[Text] Drought is not an unusual phenomenon in the Negev, and farmers are aware of the possibility that it will occur. Statistics show that over the last 60 years there have been more years of drought than years of rain. But, there are different levels of drought. There is partial drought which results in sparse, poor crops; and then there is the cruel, devastating drought like that of this year, the likes of which has not been experienced in the Negev since 1963.

From the beginning of the season to mid-February, only 76 millimeters of rain have fallen in the Be'er Sheva area, whereas the annual average is 200 millimeters. South of Be'er Sheva, the amount is even smaller. On many farms, the sprinklers are running as if it were mid-summer. In the Bedouin camps, the death rate among young sheep is high. The ewes have no milk to nurse their young.

Even if rain were to fall soon -- and no one in the Negev believes in miracles -- the crops would not be saved. The tragedy is already a "fait accompli." Even if a miracle were to take place, as happened in 1953 when suddenly in March 100 millimeters of rain fell in the Be'er Sheva area, the wheat would not be saved. Soon, the Ministry of Agriculture will formally declare an emergency drought situation and compensation for the farmers will be determined.

Compensatory payments, which will probably amount to hundreds of millions of shekels, will only cover part of the loss. The damage caused by the drought is far greater. Auxiliary (artificial) watering systems this winter used 35 million cubic meters of water, of which 20 million went to field crops and 15 million to orchard crops and irrigation. In monetary terms, this amounts to more than 300 million shekels. The firm of "Mekorot" is now supplying 80 percent of the amount of water it normally supplies in the summer, from the North to the Negev. The remaining 20 percent is being pumped from wells and other water sources in the Negev. The impact this will have on Israel's water supply has not yet been calculated. The lack of rain and the parched earth will mean that summer crops cannot be planted and grains will have to be imported from the United States. It is estimated that grain imports may cost as much as \$30 million.

From the beginning of November until mid-December 1983, farmers in Jewish sectors of the Negev planted more than 600,000 dunams, mostly with wheat. The Bedouins planted more than 250,000 dunams. The tragedy that is about to occur was predicted back at the beginning of December when farmers had measured only 9 millimeters of water fall in the Be'er Sheva area. Of the 600,000 dunams planted in Jewish areas, 150,000 are being watered with auxiliary systems. The remaining 450,000 dunams, where thousands of tons of wheat were planted, are lost. The fields are still green, but the stalks are straggly and even if the grain does grow, it will not be suitable for harvesting. Instead of a yield of 250 kilograms or more to the dunam, the yield is expected to be 50-60 kilograms to the dunam in Jewish sectors, around 20 kilograms to the dunam in Bedouin sectors. These figures represent severe drought conditions.

Compensation will be paid only to those farmers who planted north of the "drought line." That line was determined by the Ministry of Agriculture 23 years ago. It starts in the area of Kibbutz Nirim, crosses Kibbutz Orim and Kibbutz Mishmar Hanegev, and ends at Kibbutz Lahav. Anyone below that line who plants crops -- the Ministry proclaimed at the time -- does so at his own risk and is not eligible for drought compensation. Around one third of the crops planted in the Jewish sector this winter was below that line. But of the 250,000 dunams planted by Bedouins, less than 60,000 were north of the line.

The Bedouins have about 150,000 head of sheep; 80,000 registered and 70,000 unregistered -- "partisan" sheep as they are called. For these latter, the Ministry of Agriculture is not obligated to provide pasture during a drought year. The wells in the Bedouin sector are dry, without even a drop of water. Now it is birthing season. The ewes need food to produce milk to nurse their young. But there is no pasture. The average weight of newborn lambs is dropping -- less than 2 kilograms instead of more than 3.5. The result: a high mortality rate, almost 70 percent.

As part of their supplications for the skies to open, the more traditional Bedouins last week began a fast. The women did not fast. They went out to the fields with tin pots and enamel pans and sprayed drops of water on the tent walls, singing: "Umm el-rit irtina" (mother of blessing, wet our tents). After that marched a line of young virgins, shouting: "With this blessing, give us grain from our fields." But the blessings did not work and the skies did not respond to the elders' fast.

Just this week, around 150 shaykhs and tribal dignities arrived at the Ministry of Agriculture in Be'er Sheva asking for permission to move their flocks to pasture in the north. The Ministry was only willing -- they were told -- to help out with the 80,000 head of sheep officially registered, to provide pasture on kibbutzim in the northern Negev. But Bedouins who had traveled through the area said that the land in question was arid and that there was no pasture.

In the next few days, farmers throughout the Negev will meet to discuss the situation. Even before the drought, they were not well off, and they do not

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Kawhawing they will be asked
They will undoubtedly go under*