

The water overdraft

All water - sources
THE HEAVY RAINS that began to fall at the week-end have been extremely welcome, coming as they did after weeks of anxiety about the country's rainfall this season. There is still time until May for the rainfall to reach its annual average. In fact, in November, meteorologists forecast that we could expect to have an average year by the end of the season.

Yet, even if this optimistic prophecy comes true, the country's water problems will not be solved. The average Israeli is accustomed to manage his money by getting through the month by means of what is called in Hebrew slang an "over", i.e., an overdraft. We have been applying this principle to our water consumption.

The trouble is that nature is not like the friendly manager of the local branch of the bank. It is not just a matter of getting good rains in the next two or three months to repay our overdraft. The hydrologists tell us that we will need three or four consecutive years of very good rains to discharge the debt.

Israel consumes 1,800 million cubic metres of water annually, apart from what we get from rain. Three-quarters of this water for irrigation comes from wells, the rest from great irrigation projects, mainly the great Jordan River project. We have now overdrawn 1,600 cubic metres, i.e. 'a full year's rainfall.

To take the metaphor of a bank loan further, the interest demanded by nature when we overdraw is that wells can go saline. This has happened to several coastal wells in the Hadera area. This loss can never be recovered: once a well goes saline, even good rains can never restore it.

The question then arises whether we can augment existing sources or can use our limited available water better by improved husbandry. Israel has done a remarkable job developing almost every possible source and storing excess rainfall by using the underground water table as a reservoir: the only major wastage is effluent and sewage water. In regard to the use of effluent, the development has been far slower than was expected, because of conflicts of interests.

Some people recommend an austerity programme for the usage of water, analogous to what was done with the economy. Approximately 1,300 m. cubic metres go to agriculture, and the rest to industry and urban dwellers. Rationing in the private and industrial sectors would therefore achieve very little.

The real problem is agriculture. Vast quantities of irrigated water, for instance, are exported from Israel in the form of cotton. Yet the prices obtained are uneconomic, because of the competition: cotton farmers in the U.S. are heavily subsidized by their government. So it may be economically unwise to produce cotton on a very large scale next summer.

True, our farmers are already suffering from an economic crunch. Yet the government may have to add to their hardships temporarily by water rationing.

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