

# Dimensions in Chumash

## Parshas Vayikra

### Salt on korbanos

#### Background

This week's parsha introduces us to the world of korbanos. A most interesting feature of korbanos is presented in verse 13 of chapter 2, namely, the requirement that they are to have salt put on them before they are offered up. This is commanded by the verse both in the form of a positive commandment – to offer salt together with each korban – and a negative one – not to offer a korban without salt. This mitzvah finds resonance in the widespread custom of dipping bread in salt at mealtimes, echoing the theme that the table of a Jewish home represents the mizbeyach (altar).<sup>1</sup>

It is fascinating to consider the various reasons advanced throughout the ages for this mitzvah, each one adding a different perspective.

#### In the Rishonim

A classic reason for this mitzvah, offered by a number of early commentators,<sup>2</sup> is that salt provides taste to food to which it is added, and it would thus be considered disgraceful to offer a korban on the mizbeyach in a tasteless form.

The Rambam writes in the Moreh Nevuchim<sup>3</sup> that this mitzvah is contrary to the practice among pagan nations who, when offering animal sacrifices, would ensure that salt was nowhere near the offering. To this end, the Torah commands that salt must be put on every korban. This explanation is part of the Rambam's general approach in the Moreh Nevuchim to the Torah's program of korbanos,

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<sup>1</sup> In principle, this practice is applicable whenever one eats bread, even during the week, although popular practice seems to emphasize it during the Shabbos meals. Interestingly, it is recorded that the Chasam Sofer's custom was to dip his bread in salt during at every meal with the exception of Friday night, since that was the only time during the week when korbanos were actually not offered on the mizbeyach (On other nights, the korbanos offered that day which had not yet been burned were put on the mizbeyach. However, the korbanos of a weekday may not be burned on Shabbos, hence, no korbanos were put on the mizbeyach on Friday night).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Ramban, citing Ibn Ezra. See also Abarbanel.

<sup>3</sup> Sec. 3 chap. 46.

namely, as a means to distance the Jewish people from pagan sacrifices and their practices.

The Rambam does not elaborate on the background to the pagan practice of having no salt present near their offerings. However, Rabbeinu Bachye to our verse cites this explanation and adds that it was done in order to ensure that as much blood from the offering as possible could be collected, as this was the focal point of their offerings. However, if this is so, it would seem difficult to understand why the mitzvah of having salt applies to non-animal korbanos as well, such as menachos (meal-offerings). Indeed, not only does this requirement *extend* to such offerings, they are actually the *primary focus* of the mitzvah, as the verse begins by saying: “וְכֹל קֹרְבַן מִנְחָתְךָ בַמֶּלַח תִּמְלַח – You shall salt your every meal-offering with salt,” and then concludes by saying: “עַל כָּל קֹרְבָנְךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח – with all your offerings you shall bring salt.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Salt of the Covenant**

Further insight into this mitzvah can be gleaned from the fact that the verse commands: “וְלֹא תִשְׁבֹּת מֶלַח בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיךָ – do not discontinue the salt of the covenant of your God.” Apparently, bringing salt together with every korban is not “just” a mitzvah, it is also the basis of covenant with Hashem. What is the nature of this covenant?<sup>5</sup>

Tosafos explain<sup>6</sup> that the Covenant of Salt relates to the question of the very purpose of korbanos. Salt is the quintessential preserving agent, and thus represents something which endures. The korbanos that we bring are not for Hashem’s sake, but for ours, in order to allow us to endure. This is Hashem’s covenant with us through the korbanos, and awareness of this basic principle is represented by the requirement to offer salt along with every korban.

An additional element pertaining to this covenant is found in the Commentary of Rabbeinu Bachye to our verse. He prefaces by referring to the Mishnah in the

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in Sefer Hamitzvos (negative mitzvah 99), the Rambam formulates the prohibition as “not offering food as a korban in a state that is תפל (tasteless), which seems more in line with the explanation offered by the other Rishonim.

<sup>5</sup> See Rashi who cites the Midrash that the covenant is with the “lower waters,” which were initially distanced from Hashem at the time of Creation, but whom He appeased by assuring them that they would be offered on the mizbeyach in the daily form of salt and the annual mitzvah of the water libations on Succos. [See Gur Aryeh and Maskil le’David who discuss why the “appeasement” of the waters needed to take the dual form of salt and water.]

<sup>6</sup> *Daas Zekeinim mi’Baalei HaTosafos* to our pasuk (see also commentary of Bechor Shor).

beginning of Pirkei Avos, which states that Avodah (Divine service) is one of the three things upon which the world stands. Rashi<sup>7</sup> informs us that although the world was originally intended to be run strictly in accordance with the Attribute of Justice, Hashem saw that it could not endure in that way, and therefore He combined the Attribute of Mercy with that of Justice.

Two elements that represent the Attributes of Justice and Mercy are fire and water respectively. The combination of these two forces is embodied by salt, for it represents the result of the sun acting on sea-water. As such, salt is offered with every korban, reminding us that the continued running of the world, enabled by our Avodah, happens through the combination of Justice and Mercy.

### **Elevation and Preservation**

In concluding our discussion, let us offer the following suggestion regarding this mitzvah. The experience of coming to the Beis Hamikdash and offering a korban is undoubtedly an awesome and inspiring one. All the themes that accompany a korban – from the nullification of one’s existence to the elevation of all of existence – will surely raise a person to great heights. However, as we know, elevating experiences can be temporal in nature. A person cannot spend his whole life in the Beis Hamikdash. At the same time, we do not wish for his inspiration to remain behind there when he leaves. The bringing of a korban is not to be viewed as an *event*, but as the beginning of a *process*. To this end, the Torah command that every korban be accompanied by salt, which has the property of preserving things. As if to say: See to it that you preserve this experience and that it impacts on your way of being as you return to your normal activities, for only then will the offering be truly worthwhile.

It is most appropriate to cite in this regard the explanation of the commentary *Maaseh Hashem* to a phrase which features frequently in the context of korbanos: “רִיחַ נִיחַח” – a pleasing aroma.” Why is this aspect of the korban repeatedly emphasized? He explains that an aroma of something is not yet the thing itself, but it serves as an indication that it is coming. So, too, the offering of a korban should serve as an “aroma” of things to come – a more elevated spiritual and moral trajectory for the way one leads one’s life.

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<sup>7</sup> Bereishis 1:1.