

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

---

**This parasha series is dedicated  
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.**  
\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT VAYIKRA  
The Salt of God's Covenant  
By Rabbanit Sharon Rimon**

*Parashat Vayikra* introduces the laws of sacrifices, with chapter 2 focusing on the meal offering. Towards the end of the chapter we find the following two laws: the prohibition of offering leaven and honey, and the command to season the sacrifices with salt.

Let us take a closer look at this latter command:

And your every meal offering you shall season with salt, nor shall you withhold the salt of the covenant of your God from your meal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.<sup>[1]</sup> (*Vayikra* 2:13)

The verse begins with the command to season the meal offerings, then adds a negative corollary ("you shall not withhold"), and concludes by including *all* sacrifices within this law: every sacrifice, not only meal offerings, must be salted.

Why does the Torah command us to put salt on the sacrifices?

Rambam, echoing a familiar theme in his approach to the laws of sacrifices, maintains that the law of salting is intended to create a distance between the worship of God by Bnei Yisrael and the customs of the idolaters:

Because the idolaters did not offer bread, but rather leaven, and they chose to offer sweet things and would make their offerings sticky with honey. None of their sacrifices included even a hint of salt. Therefore God forbade the offering of any leaven or any honey, and commanded instead that salt always be present... (*Moreh Nevukhim* III, 46)

A different explanation for salting the sacrifices is to be found in the commentary of Shadal:

To this day, the Arabian princes, when forging a covenant, bring a vessel of salt and they jointly eat bread dipped in salt. It was a well-known custom, in ancient times, in the lands

of the East, that a covenant would be forged with salt. And since every sacrifice is meant to arouse favor and to appease God, and to create a covenant between Him and us, therefore God commanded that salt be added to every sacrifice, and he calls that salt "the salt of the covenant of your God" – for by means of this you forge a covenant with your God.

According to Shadal's explanation, offering a sacrifice is like the forging of a covenant, and therefore salt must be added to it – just as it is customary to eat salt when a covenant is forged.

However, this merely serves to shift the question one stage backwards: why is it customary to eat salt as a covenant is sealed? Neither Rambam nor Shadal explain the significance of the act of salting; they merely justify it on the basis of prevailing custom.<sup>[2]</sup>

In this *shiur* we shall attempt to understand the significance of offering the salt, with the aid of the commentators and other verses in *Tanakh* that make mention of salt.

Most verses that mention salt involve a negative connotation. Salt appears in several textual descriptions of destruction:

\* "...and that all of its land is brimstone and salt and burning, that it is not sown, nor does it give forth vegetation, nor does any grass grow in it – like the overturning of Sedom and Amora..." (*Devarim* 29:22)

\* "For Moav shall be like Sedom, and the children of Amon like Amora: a breeding place for nettle, and a salt pit, and a desolation forever." (*Tzefanya* 2:9)

\* "... He shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land that is uninhabitable."<sup>[3]</sup> (*Yirmiyahu* 17:6)

These verses suggest that there is no possibility of anything growing in a salty place; it becomes desolate.

The same idea is reflected in the actions of Avimelekh towards the city of Shekhem:

Avimelekh waged battle against the city all of that day, and he captured the city and he put to death the people who were in it, and he destroyed the city and sowed it with salt.

Ralbag explains: "He destroyed the city and sowed it with salt" – he did this in order that it would not be usable for fields and vineyards.

In the overthrow of Sedom and Amora there is no explicit indication of the earth being sowed with salt, but there too we find mention of salt:

His wife looked behind her, and she became a pillar of salt. (*Bereishit* 19:26)

Why was Lot's wife punished specifically in this manner? According to the commentary of Ibn Ezra on this verse,<sup>[4]</sup> Sedom was destroyed with salt; Lot's wife was punished in the same manner as all the people of Sedom, and turned into salt.<sup>[5]</sup>

In view of the above, we may conclude that salt kills, prevents growth, and thus causes the place that has been salted to be desolate.

It is therefore surprising to encounter the following story involving Elisha:

The people of the city said to Elisha: Behold, I pray you – the city is well situated, as my lord sees, but the water is bad and the land causes miscarriages.

He said: Bring me a new flask, and place salt in it. So they brought it to him.

Then he went out to the spring of the water and he cast salt there, and he said: So says the Lord – I have healed this water; there shall be no more death or miscarriage.

And the water was healed to this day, according to the word of Elisha which he spoke. (II *Melakhim* 2:19-22)

In this account, the same salt which had the power to destroy, now heals the water. The Midrash explains this incident as follows:

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: See how different God's ways are from the ways of mortals! Mortals use something sweet to cure that which is bitter, but the Holy One, blessed be He, cures the bitter with something else that is bitter. How is this so? He puts something that is destructive into the thing that is destroyed in order to perform a miracle through it... Similarly, "Then he went out to the spring of the water and he cast salt there, and he said: So says the Lord..." What was its healing? If salt is added to sweet water, does it not immediately become foul? So how could this be? He placed something destructive in the substance that was already spoiled in order to perform a miracle through it.<sup>[6]</sup> (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach*)

According to this Midrash,<sup>[7]</sup> salt usually spoils water, but here it was chosen for healing – not because of its inherent healing properties, but rather the opposite. It is specifically because salt does not sweeten water, that it was chosen here to show that the healing of the water was miraculous.

Thus, this narrative joins the other negative descriptions of salt.

In light of the above, the command to add salt to the sacrifices is most puzzling. For what reason does God command Bnei Yisrael to add salt to the sacrifices, if this substance so strongly connotes the opposite of life and growth?

Ramban offers the following explanation for the sacrifices in general (*Vayikra* 1:9):

God commanded that when a person sins, he brings a sacrifice; he places his hands upon it, corresponding to the sinful act, and confesses verbally, corresponding to his sinful speech, and then burns with fire the inner parts and the kidneys, which are the organs of thought and of desire, and the legs – corresponding to the person's arms and legs, which perform all of his labor, and he sprinkles the blood upon the altar, corresponding to his own blood. All of this is so that a person will be conscious, in performing all of this, that

he has sinned to God in his body and in his essence, and he is deserving of having his blood spilled and his body burned, were it not for the kindness of the Creator, Who accepts a replacement for him, and this sacrifice atones such that its blood takes the place of his blood; its life takes the place of his life....

The person who offers the sacrifice must feel that were it not for the offering, he himself would be deserving of death.

Perhaps this perspective may also be extended to the matter of the salt. The salt that is added to the sacrifice is likewise associated in the mind of the sinner with extinction and the prevention of life. It reinforces the consciousness that he, in the wake of his sin, is likewise deserving of having his life cease.[\[8\]](#)

A review of some other sources reveals that salt also has some positive characteristics:

1. "... and as for your birth – on the day that you were born, your cord was not cut nor were you washed for cleansing, nor were you salted at all, nor swaddled at all." (*Yechezkel* 16:4)

"Salting" appears here as one of the actions performed on a newborn baby,[\[9\]](#) as Radak explains[\[10\]](#):

"Salted" – for salt strengthens the child's flesh and makes it harder.

This explanation attributes to salt the role of strengthening the skin.

The laws of Shabbat testify to the fact that animal hides were processed using salt:

One who hunts a deer, one who slaughters it, and one who skins it, and one who salts it and processes its skin. (*Mishna Shabbat* 7:2)

And where [the Mishna] says, "who salts it and processes its skin" – this does not refer to two separate actions, since the salting of the skin is one of the ways of processing. It is mentioned to tell you that salting is itself processing. (*Rambam's Commentary on the Mishnayot*)

2. In *Sefer Iyov*, salt is mentioned in the context of its known function of enhancing the taste of food:

Can that which is bland be eaten without salt? (*Iyov* 6:6)

Salt is not just another spice that gives flavor to food; it is the most basic spice, an essential addition.

3. A Midrash suggests additional significance to the wife of Lot being transformed specifically into a pillar of salt:

"He has made a remembrance of His wonders" (*Tehillim* 111:4) – when [God] overturned Sodom, too, He left a memorial: "And his wife looked behind her, and she became a pillar of salt", and to this time that pillar of salt is still standing...(*Sifrei de-Aggadeta al Ester – Midrash Panim Acherim nusach 2 parasha 5*)

According to this Midrash, the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt was not part of the general destruction of Sodom, but rather a special act with its own special purpose: to serve as a monument of memorial to the overturning. Salt exists forever, and therefore the "pillar of salt" will remain forever, as testimony to the overturning of Sodom.

This Midrash points to a most positive characteristic of salt:

It exists forever. Moreover, it also has the power to preserve other things such that they, too, exist forever. Vegetables, meat and fish, which would spoil quickly if left in their natural state, can be pickled with salt and thereby preserved for long periods of time.

Thus, one of the positive qualities of salt is that it causes things to continue to exist.

Perhaps, then, the commandment to salt the sacrifices is related to these positive qualities of this substance:

a. Some commentators suggest that the reason for salting the sacrifices is because salt enhances the flavor of foods:

"The covenant of your God" – I have brought you into the covenant and caused you to swear that you will not offer up bland [offerings] not fit to be eaten, for this shows lack of respect. (Ibn Ezra on *Vayikra* 2:13)

...and on the literal level: the reason for salt with the sacrifices is because it would not be respectful, for an offering to God, to be bland and without salt. The Torah is teaching the proper manner for giving honor to the Heavenly King, similar to the manner of giving honor to a mortal king... (*Rabbeinu Bachye*)

At first glance, this seems very odd: surely God does not actually "eat" the sacrifices, such that it is necessary that they be tasty?!

Obviously, this is not what the commentators are suggesting.

Rabbeinu Bachye is teaching us an important principle: "The kingdom of God is similar to mortal kingdom." How is a person to give honor to God's kingship? In the same way that he gives honor to a mortal king. This is the way in which people usually express honor, and therefore it is appropriate that we show the same honor towards God. Therefore, salt must be added to the sacrifice, since it enhances the flavor – even though God does not eat of the sacrifice and has no need for it to be "tasty."

Sefer ha-Chinukh, too, explains that salting is meant to enhance flavor, but the significance of this is treated slightly differently:

One of the roots of the commandment of sacrifice is to repair and straighten the soul of the person who offers it. Therefore, to arouse the soul of the person who brings the sacrifice, he is commanded to offer things that are good and tasty and enjoyed by him, and the [requirement of] salt with it is likewise from this root – in order that the action should be complete, within nothing lacking from it in the manner of human custom. This causes the person to be more strongly drawn to it, for anything that is without salt will not be pleasing to a person – neither in taste nor in aroma.

According to Sefer Ha-Chinukh, the salting is meant not to honor God, but rather in order that the person himself will feel that he has offered up something worthy, and therefore he will feel more closely bound to his sacrifice and its significance.

b. Another positive characteristic of salt is its preservative power. According to Sefer ha-Chinukh, this quality is most appropriate in the context of the sacrifices:

...And furthermore, there is another matter alluded to in salt, for salt preserves everything, saving it from being lost and rotten. Likewise, through his sacrifice, a person is saved from being lost, and his life is preserved, and remains forever.[\[11\]](#)

The sacrifice makes atonement for the person, thereby facilitating his continued existence. From this perspective, offering the salt symbolizes the significance of the sacrifice: just as salt allows things to continue to remain intact, so too the sacrifice allows the person to continue to exist. Moreover, it facilitates the eternal existence of his soul.[\[12\]](#)

The review of different verses showed us some of the inherent qualities of salt – some negative, some positive. On the one hand, salt destroys and does not allow growth; on the other hand, it exists forever and also preserves other things, and it gives flavor to food.

On the basis of these qualities we have attempted to explain why God commanded that the sacrifices be salted, and several explanations have been offered, each relating to a different quality of salt.

However, attention should be paid to the fact that these qualities are not only different from one another, but in fact mutually contradictory. Existence and destruction are opposites. Hence, their mutual identification with salt is quite curious, and must certainly have some significance.

Perhaps it is precisely the fact that salt has these two opposite aspects – positive and negative, preserving and destroying – that is the reason for God's requirement that it be offered upon the altar:

... For salt is (sea)water which, through the power of the sun upon it, becomes salt. Water, in its original form, gives life to the land and causes things to grow, but after it

becomes salt, it destroys every place and burns it, such that nothing can be sown or grown.<sup>[13]</sup> And behold – the covenant is made up of all the attributes... like salt, which gives flavor to all foods, and can either preserve or kill with its saltiness... Therefore it says, concerning the sacrifices (*Bamidbar*, ad loc.), "It is an eternal covenant of salt" (literally – "A covenant of salt for the world") – for the covenant is the salt of the world, by means of which it is either preserved or cut off... (Ramban, *Vayikra* 2:13)

Rabbeinu Bachye elaborates on this Ramban, as follows:

Salt possesses two contrary, contradictory powers, and they are water and fire, which correspond to the two qualities by virtue of which the world exists – the attribute of mercy and the attribute of strict justice. For this reason, God says "the salt of the covenant of your God": the covenant of God is compared to salt, because through this the world is either preserved or destroyed, as our Rabbis taught: [God] saw that [the world] could not exist through strict justice [alone]; therefore He added to it the attribute of mercy. Similarly, salt can preserve or kill off. It preserves meat for a long time, and gives flavor to all foods, but it also kills, for a place that has been salted will not give forth any vegetation....

According to Ramban, salt possesses two contradictory qualities: it preserves, but also kills. In this sense, salt is similar to the covenant. God's covenant preserves and gives life (if its conditions are upheld), but it can also destroy (if it is violated). Thus we may say that the covenant is the (spiritual) "salt" of this world.

Salt is eaten at the forging of a covenant because of the conceptual similarity between salt and covenant. Salt is also offered with the sacrifices, because the sacrifices themselves are an important covenant. If the commandments of the sacrifices are fulfilled properly, the person continues to exist, and the world continues to exist. If the sacrifices are not performed properly, heaven forefend, then there is no life.

The sacrifice expresses the covenant between God and man, and it expresses the combination of the attribute of strict justice and the attribute of mercy. On one hand, there is justice – the person is guilty for his sin; perhaps he is even deserving of death, and the sacrifice takes his place. On the other hand, there is mercy: there is the possibility of atoning for the sin, thereby allowing continued existence.

In addition, Rabbeinu Bachye clarifies the fundamental issue of the combination of two opposite poles – the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy. The world exists by virtue of this combination.

Salt, too, embodies the combination of two opposites: continued life, and the end of life. We ask ourselves, how can this combination be possible? Let us consider the action of salt. Organic substances undergo change: they decay and rot. Salt preserves them by preventing the change and rotting of the substance. At the same time, the rotting of organic substances is what gives rise to new growth. In order for a plant to grow, many changes must take place. The seed must undergo a process of rotting in the earth in order to sprout a new plant. "Organic compost"

rots and decomposes and is absorbed into the ground; this fertilizes the ground and facilitates new growth.

Salt prevents matter from undergoing change and thereby prevents its rotting, but by the same token it prevents the possibility of growth.

Thus, just as growth necessarily involves a process of disintegration, so the salt's property of drying up all life is closely bound up with its property of extending and preserving.[\[14\]](#)

Salt, then, represents the idea that existence and extinction, which appear to be opposites, are actually connected at their root. Both flow from the same source. The essence of a person's life, too, is a combination of existence (a living body, and – particularly – the soul, which enjoys eternal existence), and extinction (the body which eventually decays).

The attributes of justice and mercy are likewise two manifestations of God's rule of the world. Their source is one and the same, although in our reality they are expressed as opposites.[\[15\]](#)

The sacrifice is not only "atonement for sin,"[\[16\]](#) but also acknowledgement of God's Kingship over the whole world, with all its seeming contrasts and contradictions. When the sacrifice is offered, salt must also be offered, so as to express the idea that everything that happens in reality is connected to the same Source – to God.

This idea is alluded to in the words of Keli Yakar:

In order to declare God's Kingship over all the seeming opposites in the world... and behold, salt contains within itself two opposites. It has the power of fire and heat, and the quality of water, such that the Kabbalistic masters taught that it corresponds to the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy. Therefore it is called "the covenant of your God," for by offering it we forge a covenant with God, declaring His rulership over all opposites.

According to Keli Yakar, the sacrifice comes to show that we are actively acknowledging God as King over the entire world. This means that we acknowledge God's rule over all the forces in the world. He rules over even those things that are opposite to one another and appear to be separate, independent forces. He rules over water and over fire, over good and evil, the attribute of strict justice and the attribute of mercy.

Salt symbolizes the profound, existential connection between the attribute of justice (expressed in extermination) and the attribute of mercy (expressed in existence), and therefore it is appropriate that salt be offered upon the altar, to show that God rules over all the various forces in the world.[\[17\]](#)

In summary, when the Torah commands us to offer salt, it does not tell us only that "with all your offerings you shall offer salt," but also emphasizes this requirement, formulated both in positive terms ("With all your offerings you shall offer salt") and in negative terms ("You shall



not withhold the salt of the covenant of your God"). This highlights the importance of this command.

In addition, the Torah makes use of a special expression: "the salt of the covenant of your God." Salt is not merely one of the details of the sacrificial ceremony; it is "the covenant of your God." It symbolizes eternal existence, just as the "covenant of your God" is eternal.<sup>[18]</sup>

The sacrifice is an expression of the eternal covenant between God and Israel, and therefore it is appropriate that it include salt, which symbolizes eternity.

Salt is a symbol not only of eternal existence, but also of extermination. As we have seen, the element of extermination and the element of decay are the basis for new growth. Decay and growth, which seem to be opposites, actually arise from the same Divine source. The offering of salt strengthens our awareness that all of reality, with all of its seeming contradictions, arises from the same Divine Source, from the same God Who rules over the world with His attribute of justice and His attribute of mercy.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

---

[1] The salting of the offerings is also mentioned in *Yechezkel* 43:24, in the description of the future Temple: "And you shall offer sacrifice before God, and the *kohanim* will sprinkle salt over them, and offer them up as a burnt offering to God." In *Sefer Ezra* (6:9, 7:22) salt is mentioned as one of the donations made by King Darius to the House of God.

[2] Although in opposite senses: according to Rambam, we offer salt in order to distance ourselves from the customs of the other nations. According to Shadal, the offering of salt reflects an adoption of the prevailing custom.

[3] See also *Iyov* 39:6: "I have made the wilderness his house, and the salt lands his dwelling places"; *Tehillim* 107:33-34 – "He turns rivers into wilderness... a land of fruit into a salt land, because of the evil of those who inhabit it."

[4] See also Ramban on verse 17.

[5] A different explanation is offered by Rashi (commenting on 19:26): "She sinned with salt and was therefore punished with salt. (Lot) said to her: 'Give these guests a little salt.' She said to him: 'Do you want to introduce this evil custom here, too?'" Below we shall discuss another explanation, given by the Midrash.

[6] Other examples cited in the Midrash include the healing of the boils using a cake of figs (*Yishayahu* 38:21) and the sweetening of the water using bitter wood (*Shemot* 15:23).

[7] Similar interpretations are offered by most of the commentators: Rashi, Radak, Metzudot, Abravanel, and Ralbag. The following is Ralbag's elaboration (on II *Melakhim* 2:22), explaining how all of Elisha's actions here are clearly contrary to nature and therefore serve to emphasize the miraculous dimension of the healing of the water: "Elisha healed those waters in a wondrous way by casting into the source of the water some of the salt which had been placed in a new flask. I imagine that Elisha wanted the flask to be new so that they would not think that something had been boiled in it such that the salt would absorb some of it, and this would actively affect the manner of healing. Rather, he chose to sweeten it with something that had no positive effect – for we see that salty water is undrinkable. It was impossible for a bit of salt to have any effect on the spring of the water without ruining the water other than in a wondrous manner."

[8] It should be emphasized that Ramban does not develop his idea in this way; he suggests a different reason for the salt, which we will examine below.

[9] The prophet is describing a newborn that was **not** treated in the proper way. Therefore, although the verses are formulated in the negative, they indicate what actions should, in fact, be taken.

[10] Rashi offers the same explanation.

[11] The same idea is echoed by Rabbi Naftali Hertz Weisel:

"The covenant of your God' is the eternal covenant of the six days of Creation, for it was then that God set down the law of every thing... the 'covenant of salt' is that it will remain intact, neither rotting nor becoming wormy, and it will also be used to preserve all kinds of foods from rotting. There is nothing comparable to it in this regard, out of all the foods under the sun. And God's decree is some of it should be added to all the sacrifices that are offered upon the altar, to indicate their remaining intact...."

[12] The first explanation for the seasoning with salt was that, as a substance that kills, the salt reminds a person that without his sacrifice, he has no life. Both explanations emphasize the fact that the sacrifice facilitates existence, but according to the first explanation, salt expresses the negative aspect – i.e., what would happen to the person were it not for the sacrifice. The second explanation expresses the idea of the sacrifice directly, in a positive manner: just as salt preserves, so the sacrifice preserves (in the sense of "keeping alive").

[13] Ramban describes the two qualities of salt in a slightly different manner: salt is naturally found in the sea, dissolved in the water. In this form it is part of the water which gives life and causes growth. When the water is heated with fire (the sun), the water evaporates and what remains is the salt itself. In this form it negates life.

[14] See also the commentary of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who adopts this natural explanation but attaches a different significance to it.

[15] In light of this we may perhaps understand Elisha's action in healing the water specifically by use of salt. Salt would appear to be something that can only worsen the state of the water, but God – as the Midrash explains – is capable of sweetening the water specifically through something that would appear to spoil it, because He is the source of all things, and He is able to use them through "justice" or through "mercy" – in a manner that "kills off and spoils" or in a manner that "preserves and gives life." The story of Elisha emphasizes the special quality of salt, which in its essence combines existence and extinction.

[16] There are some sacrifices that are not sin or guilt offerings – such as burnt offerings or peace offerings, which are not meant to express atonement for sin, but other ideas: acknowledgement of God's Kingship, thanksgiving, closeness to God.

[17] A similar idea is proposed by Rabbi Mordechai Recanati:

"... Since the sacrifices come to find favor before God, to complete all the attributes towards us, therefore we do not bring of those things that are associated with God's strong arm, such as leaven – hinting at the attribute of justice, which is sour and hard. Likewise we do not bring things that are completely sweet, such as honey. Rather, we bring things that are a combination, as it is written at the Creation of the world (*Bereishit Rabba* 12,15)... And behold, salt includes all of the attributes, with water at the end and fire at the beginning..." (Recanati, *Vayikra* 2:11-13)

Rabbi Recanati explains both the prohibition of offering leaven and honey, and the command to offer salt. He suggests that a sacrifice must comprise specifically foods that combine the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy (such as salt), rather than foods that express only one aspect – either only justice (such as leaven) or only mercy (such as honey).

[18] In two places the expression "covenant of salt" appears as a description of an eternal covenant:

"All the heave offerings of the holy things which Bnei Yisrael offer to God, I have given to you and to your sons and to your daughters with you, as an eternal statute; it is an eternal covenant of salt before God for you and for your descendants with you." (*Bamidbar* 18:19)

"Are you not meant to know that the Lord God of Israel has given kingdom over Israel to David forever, to him and to his sons, as a covenant of salt?" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 13:5)

The priesthood and the kingdom of David are eternal, and therefore each is described as a "covenant of salt" – meaning, a covenant that is preserved forever.