

## Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

# Salt of the Earth

My snacking habits seem to coincide with Divine predilections. Without trying to trivialize our holy system of Temple offerings, God forbid, there's an unexpected demand in the process reminiscent of eating tendencies. Many of us love salty treats, especially Americans. Although this can be traced occasionally to sodium deficiency, usually these cravings are connected to our psychological state. Often, we eat as much to calm our psyches as to sustain our bodies. It's estimated that the salty snack industry will soon be worth about \$30 billion annually in the US alone. That's a lot of chips. But the curiosity is that we're also commanded to include salt in our Temple offerings. When it comes to the altar, salt is definitely in.

Towards the beginning of this week's Torah reading we find: 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 (Vayikra 2:13). That's an unusual way to express this mitzva: season your grain offerings with salt, don't ever forget the salt, and, by the way,

salt is required with every offering, not just grain. There's a lot to unpack.

Maimonides, as is his wont, gives an historical explanation for the strict demand that we add salt to our offerings: 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 (Guide for the Perplexed III. 46).

In the Jewish legal world, the double statement of 'add salt, and make sure you don't neglect salting' means that there's both a positive and negative mitzva connected to the process. This implies that if one leaves out the salt on purpose, lashes could, theoretically, be administered. Ergo, we are being informed that this precept is very important. Which brings us, I believe, to the central idea: BRIT MELACH, Covenant of Salt.

This expression actually appears three times in Tanach. Besides here, we have it in Parshat Korach, as God separates the kohanim from the rest of Israel, it states: All the gifts of the holy offerings which are set aside by the children of Israel for the Lord I have given to you, and to your sons



and daughters with you, as an eternal portion; it is like an eternal covenant of salt before the Lord, for you and your descendants with you (Bamidbar 18:19). And in the book of Chronicles, the nation is informed, 'Should you not know that the Lord, the God of Israel, gave the kingdom to David over Israel forever, to him and to his sons, with a covenant of salt? (Divrei Hayamim II 13:5).' It seems that the message of BRIT MELACH goes far beyond the rote ritual of the Temple offerings.

There's a fascinating comment found in the collection of comments on Torah called Da'at Z'keinim M'Ba'alei Tosfot. This work contains the explanations of many European scholars from the late Middle Ages. Here's their suggestion on the verse in Vayikra: Because salt is a preservative, this requirement informs us that the eternal covenant of offerings is for granting atonement. It is not for the sake of God, before Whom there is no eating or drinking. Rather, this is for the merit of Israel. When a Jew sins, an offering can bestow atonement, which will prevent the sinner repeating the crime. It can be compared to a person who has become filthy. As long as the filth is on the garments there's no concern for adding dirt. However, if the garments are cleaned, then the individual will be concerned to keep them clean.

So, our Sages have taught us that the Omnipresent (HAMAKOM) desired to grant merit to Israel. So, God added to the Torah and mitzvot in order to remove from the Jews the filth of sin. Many mitzvot preserve the Jew from the stain of sin. This surfeit of mitzvot increases the merit of Israel (Vayikra 2:13).

It's clear that the rabbis understood the preservative character of salt for food, and transferred this quality to the use of salt in the Holy Temple. Beyond that, of course, they saw that the phrase BRIT MELACH meant an eternal covenant. But the great Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin, the Netziv saw a fly in that ointment. He points out that salt is magnificent as a food preservative, however too much can be disastrous. In large quantities, salt can destroy as well as preserve (Ha'Emek Davar, Bamidbar 18:19). The Romans salted the fields of destroyed enemies so that they could never grow crops there again. Salt is wonderful in the right proportions.

So, too, in our spiritual lives there must be balance and proportion. Yes, guilt offerings can undo the damage of sin and return us to a pure state. However, we shouldn't take advantage of this escape clause to assume that we can sin at will with impunity. And the Netziv points out that the kohanim should never take advantage of their privilege in



society to oppress others. I believe, that we can extend that to the promise given to the House of King David. Power, like salt, must be applied judiciously.

There is also the custom of eating bread with salt, reminding us of the Altar. However, the connection to bread is deeper. Many societies have the custom of greeting guests with bread and salt. In Hebrew the two words are twins. LECHEM and MELECH have the same letters, just jumbled. They also contain the basic letters of MILCHAMA, war. Nations have gone to war for both.

It's good to be the 'salt of the earth'. But only in the correct proportions. We can season our society, or ruin it. Please, pass the chips. 🍟

