

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayikra

This week we commence Leviticus, the third of the Chumash's five books, with the reading of Parshat Vayikra. Our sages often referred to Leviticus as *Torat Kohanim* – the Torah of the priests—in recognition that the vast majority of the commandments in the book concern the priestly service of the Kohanim.

Among the laws surrounding animal sacrifices conducted by the Kohanim, one of the more intriguing is the commandment to bring salt upon the Altar.

And you shall salt every one of your meal offering sacrifices with salt, and you shall not omit the salt of your God's covenant from [being placed] upon your meal offerings. You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices. All sacrifices are meant to be brought with salt.

[Lev: 2:13]

A close examination of this Mitzvah reveals multiple layers of meaning at its core.

Sefer haChinuch explains the putative purpose of the mitzvah:

At the root of the religious duty of the [sacrificial] offering lies the purpose of making the spirit of the person who brings it worthy and upright. Therefore, in order to best arouse the spirit of the person offering it, he/she was commanded to bring good, savory things, which are beloved to him/her. The salt in it is also for this root reason – so that if this act will be complete, lacking nothing according to the norms of human behavior in this matter; then his/her heart will be more aroused by it. For anything without salt will not be pleasing to a person, neither in its taste or aroma.

[Mitzvah 119]

Sefer haChinuch recognizes that salt brings out both taste and smell, thus enhancing one's eating experience. A sacrifice is meant to be meaningful and deep; the message of the offering is supposed to resonate with the bearer [of the offering]. We are meant to offer up that which is most pleasant and pleasing to us; in this way we symbolically offer up the best parts of our own selves. Salting the sacrificial offering symbolizes this idea.

But even beyond taste, there is another aspect of salt that is relevant to the act of sacrifice. Again, from *Sefer haChinuch*:

And apart from this there is another matter implicit in salt: salt makes everything endure and prevents spoilage and rot. So too with the act of the offering, a man is saved from becoming spoiled; his spirit will be protected and it will remain in existence forever. [ibid.]



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One of the more important commentaries on the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Mishna Berurah* [authored by Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, the Chofetz Chaim] explains that at the time the temple was extant, the Altar functioned as a mechanism through which people could atone for their sins. In essence, through the ritual sacrifice I offer up the animal in place of me. In return for my continued life—protection of my spirit—I commit myself to changing my ways.

Thus salt has been a potent symbol in Jewish life from antiquity and, so it remains today. Many of us are familiar with the widespread custom of dipping one's *challah* into a bit of salt at the festive Shabbat meals. This too recalls the role of salt in the priestly sacrifice. The source for this practice is a law quoted in the *Shulchan Aruch* [Code of Jewish Law] that states simply:

One should have salt on the table while eating bread.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles explains this law by observing that one's table is like the Altar of the Temple. He posits that eating food is the equivalent to eating a sacrifice. Just as offering sacrifices on the Altar provides the potential for atonement, so does utilizing food properly, and thus just as the sacrifices on the Altar were "served" with salt, so too should the bread on one's own table.

What does it mean to "utilize" food properly?

Quite simply, we utilize food properly when share what we have with others; to provide others with that most basic of needs, the need for physical sustenance.

The parallel now becomes somewhat clearer. Bringing a *korbon* to the Altar is to offer something valuable to the service of G-d. By doing so, I accept G-d's dictums and commit to leading a life reflective of His wants and commandments. Similarly, using my food, and by extension, any of my resources, not to further my own selfish goals or to enhance my own personal banquet, but rather to invite the children of G-d, namely, those who cannot provide for themselves, so that they too can be sustained, is indeed focusing myself on the service of G-d.

To summarize, the Book of Leviticus presents us with numerous seemingly obscure mitzvot relating to the Temple and the Kohanim. Yet, by studying these mitzvot one can glean a deeper understanding, and learn important and practical life lessons. In this article we have learned that salt must accompany the *korbon*, for one's sacrifice is meant to bring the most appealing and powerful aspect of one's self and dedicate it to G-d. We hearken back to this ancient ritual by having salt on our own tables and inviting those less fortunate to partake of our largesse. Our meals therefore become a constant reminder to live our lives in the service of G-d.

Shabbat Shalom!

