

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayikra
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayikra – Don’t forget the salt!

This week’s Parsha of Vayikra begins with Hashem calling to Moshe from the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting) and teaching Moshe the laws of the korbanot to be brought in the Mishkan. Our Parasha includes the halachot relating to various korbanot which were offered on the Mizbayach (alter), including the olah offering (which was offered completely to Hashem and not eaten at all by the Kohanim or the owner of the korban), five varieties of mincha (meal) offerings, the shelamim (peace offering), the chatat (sin offering) and the asham (guilt offering).

One of the details that we learn about korbanot relates to salt:

And you shall salt every one of your meal offering sacrifices with salt, and you shall not omit the salt of your G-d’s covenant from being placed on your meal offerings. You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices. (Vayikra 2:13)

Some of the commentators point out that all four levels of existence are brought together for korbanot: Human (the person that brings the korban); Animal (the offering itself, in the case of animal offerings); Vegetable (the meal offerings, the wine libations, the oil); and Mineral (salt).

Why is salt specifically chosen as the mineral component? Rashi explains that Hashem made a covenant with salt during the six days of creation. On the second day of creation Hashem separated the lower waters from the upper waters. The upper waters became the Heavens, which were close to Hashem, while the lower waters were relegated to the physical world and became the seas and lakes. As compensation to them, Hashem promised the lower waters that they would be offered on the mizbayach in the form of salt (which comes from seawater) and in the water libations that were performed on Sukkot.

These days we no longer have the mitzva of offering korbanot. It is well known that our tefillot replace korbanot. Instead of offering korbanot to Hashem, we offer him our words and our heart. But we also have another replacement for the service of the Mishkan and the Bet HaMikdash:

*R’ Yochanan and Raish Lakish both teach the following: When the Bet HaMikdash is standing, the Mizbayach atones for a person; now that the Bet Hamikdash has been destroyed, a person’s table atones for him.*¹

How does one’s table provide atonement? Rashi explains that we can use our table for the mitzva of hachnasat orchim – welcoming guests. By performing acts of kindness such as sharing our food with those that are in need, we can merit the atonement that was available through the offering of korbanot on the Mizbayach. And so just like salt played an important role on the Mizbayach, it should play an important role on our tables too.

Rabbeinu Bachya notes that there was a custom among pious people in France to make their coffins out of the wood of their dining-room tables.² The symbolism is powerful. We don’t take anything with us to the world to come except for our mitzvot and our Torah. If one used their dining room table to feed the poor and perform acts of kindness, then their table represents the mitzvot that they did using that table. And those mitzvot will accompany them to the eternal world of truth.

The Ramban³ explains that salt has two properties – it can be destructive (it is corrosive, it can prevent plants from growing and it can ruin food if too much is added) and it can be helpful (it preserves food). Similarly, our service on the Mizbayach, if done properly, can preserve us. But if it is neglected, it can lead to destruction and exile.⁴ Similarly, we can choose to use our table and our other resources properly, and this will preserve us. Or we can choose to do the opposite.

¹ Chagigah 27a.

² Seen in “The Ark of the Oral Law” by Rabbi Yissocher Frand (<https://aish.com/568123651/>).

³ In his commentary to Vayikra 2:13.

⁴ See Artscroll Vayikra, Stone edition, footnote to 2:13. This is similar to the commentary on the ‘coin of fire’ – see Rashi to Shmot 30:13. Money, like fire, can be used destructively or constructively.

The Shulchan Aruch⁵ rules that one should not cut the bread for a meal until he has salt. He writes that if the bread is already of good quality, or seasoned, then he does not have to wait for salt to be brought out. This suggests that the purpose of having salt is to ensure that the bread tastes good. But the Rama, in his glosses to the Shulchan Aruch, adds that it is a mitzvah to always have salt on the table, even if the bread is already seasoned. The Rama explains that the table is compared to a Mizbayach, and eating a meal is compared to offering a korban. The Rama then quotes the pasuk from our Parasha quoted above – “You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices” and he notes that adding salt to our food protects us from misfortune.

There is a Tosefot⁶ that quotes a Rav that was extremely particular to bring salt to the table. This is based on the Midrash which says that when Jewish people are sitting at the table and waiting for the others to wash their hands for the meal, they are without mitzvot. The Satan takes advantage of the situation and seeks to prosecute them. But the covenant of salt can protect them. Salt is everlasting and it is used as a preservative, so it represents the covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael, which is also everlasting. Thus, salt is put on the table to serve as a reminder of this covenant and protect us during this dangerous time. When we see the salt on the table we should reflect on this eternal covenant between us and Hashem.

The Shibolai Haleket⁷ writes explicitly that we salt our bread because one’s table is compared to the Mizbayach. Just like salt was added to all korbanot, similarly we add salt to our bread.⁸

The Mishnah Berurah⁹ explains that eating is comparable to bringing a korban when one eats to strengthen themselves to ensure that they are healthy and have strength to serve Hashem. The Mishnah Berurah also adds that according to the kabbalists one should dip the bread into salt three times.¹⁰

There are a number of important lessons that can be distilled from the above:

Lesson 1: We can no longer receive atonement from korbanot, but we can still use our table to provide atonement through the mitzvot of hachnasat orchim and other acts of kindness. Do we share our resources with the less fortunate? Are we doing enough to provide for the poor? (Indeed, it is not just our dining-room table – all our resources can be used to help others. We can turn our car into a tool for mitzvot by giving people lifts or driving to visit the sick or dropping off a meal to a person in need. Is it possible to be buried with your car?)

Lesson 2: Do we eat in order to serve Hashem? For most of us, the main reasons that we eat is to gain energy and nutrition and for enjoyment (not necessarily in that order). But perhaps we can try to also introduce another motivation for eating, namely, enabling us to serve Hashem. Try pausing before you eat and think the following: “Please Hashem, help me to use the energy from this food to do Your will and to make You proud of me”.

Lesson 3: It is quite confronting to think that the Satan tries to take advantage of us even in the short time that we sit at the table waiting for everyone to wash their hands and are momentarily without mitzvot. This demonstrates that at *all* other times we should be involved in mitzvot, Torah or thinking holy thoughts. Indeed, the Mishnah Berurah¹¹ teaches us the secret of the righteous Tzaddikim – they would constantly imagine themselves as standing before Hashem. He notes that the Arizal would constantly have an image in his mind of Hashem’s four-letter name.¹² The Mishnah Berurah writes that this is the secret of fulfilling the verse “I place Hashem before me always”¹³ and excellent advice for achieving the trait of yirah (awe). We may not be on this exalted level, but how much time do we just allow our mind to wander aimlessly. Even when we are not actually performing a mitzva or learning Torah we can try to train our minds to think more holy thoughts – about Hashem or acts of kindness that we can do for others.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Before saying a bracha on food or drink, try to pause for a moment and think about why you are eating. Try to elevate the purpose slightly. Try to do this regularly, or at least once a day at a fixed time.
2. When you have some free time, try to divert your thoughts to holy matters. Remember, even thinking thoughts about Hashem and His Torah is valuable and can deter the Satan. Or think about which of the people that you know might need some assistance.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Orach Chaim 167:5.

⁶ Gemara Brachot, Daf 40a, dibbur hamatchil הבא.

⁷ Written by Tzidkiya ben Avraham HaRofeh in Italy in the 13th century.

⁸ Bread has always been the mainstay of the human diet (with apologies to those with Coeliacs).

⁹ Siman 167, seif katan 31.

¹⁰ The Mishnah Berurah does not provide us with a reason for this practice. Perhaps it is related to the idea that doing an action three times represents ‘chazaka’ which gives the action more significance.

¹¹ Siman 1, seif katan 4.

¹² The Arizal would picture the four letters of Hashem’s name with the vowels of the word ‘Yirah’ - ירא! (awe).

¹³ Tehillim 16:8.