

“Salt of the Covenant of Your God”

What is the significance of salt?

Why must all sacrifices be salted?

A. The Commandment to Salt the Sacrifices

Three Commandments regarding Salting

Parashat Vayikra begins with the laws of sacrifices. Chapter one discusses animal sacrifices, while chapter two deals with grain and fruit offerings. Towards the end of chapter two, two commandments are listed: the prohibition against bringing leaven and honey as an offering (Lev. 2:11-12) and the obligation to salt the sacrifices (Lev. 2:13).

The commandment to salt the sacrifices consists of three parts:

וְכָל קָרְבַּן מִנְסַחֶה בְּמֶלַח תִּמְלַח,
וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵית מֶלַח בְּרִית אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ מֵעַל מִנְסַחֶה,
עַל כָּל קָרְבָּנְךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח.

ויקרא ב', יג

And every **sacrifice of meal-offering of yours** you shall season with salt,

and you shall not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of **your meal-offering**;

on all of your sacrifices you shall offer salt. (Lev. 2:13)

First, the Torah states a positive commandment to salt the offerings, and then it adds a negative precept warning the nation not to disobey this commandment. Finally, an additional commandment extends the obligation to salting all sacrifices, not only grain offerings.¹

Why does the Torah command us to salt sacrifices?

A Contrast to Idolatry

Following his usual line of reasoning,² Rambam explains that salting creates a distinction between the act of bringing sacrifices to God and the manner in which idolaters would offer sacrifices to their gods:³

¹ The obligation to salt grain offerings has a different status than the requirement to salt the other types of sacrifices, which is reflected by the laws derived from these verses: an unsalted grain offering is not valid even after the fact, while other sacrifices are deemed valid after the fact if they were brought unsalted (although, of course, one is initially obligated to salt them as well). See Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Mizbe'ach* 5:12.

² Rambam generally views the service in the Temple as a “replacement” for idol worship. He explains:

ומפני שעובדי ע"ז לא היו מקריבים לחם אלא שאור, והיו בוחרים להקריב העניינים המתוקים ומלכלכים קרבניהם בדבש, וכן לא תמצא בדבר מקרבנותיהם מלח, מפני זה הזהיר ה' מהקריב כל שאור וכל דבש, וציווה בהתמדת המלח... מורה נבוכים, חלק ג' פרק מו

And since idol worshipers would not bring bread but leaven, and would choose to bring sweet things and season their sacrifices with honey, and since none of their sacrifices included salt,⁴

אי אפשר, לפי טבע האדם, שיניח כל מה שהרגיל בו פתאום. וכאשר שלח הא-לוה משה רבנו... ואמר: "ואותו תעבודו" – והיה המנהג המפורסם בעולם כולו, שהיו אז רגילים בו, והעבודה הכוללת אשר גדלו עליה – להקריב מיני בעלי חיים בהיכלות ההם אשר היו מעמידים בהם הצלמים ולהשתחוות להם ולקטר לפניהם... לא גזרה חכמתו ית' ותחבולתו המבוארת בכל בריאותיו שיצונו להניח מיני העבודות ההם כולם ולעזבם ולבטלם, כי אז היה זה מה שלא יעלה בלב לקבלו, כפי טבע האדם, שהוא נוטה תמיד למורגל... ומפני זה השאיר ית' מיני העבודות ההם והעתיקם מהיותם לנבראים ולעניינים דמיוניים שאין אמיתות להם – לשמו ית', וצונו לעשותם לו ית'. וצונו לבנות היכל לו, "ועשו לי מקדש", ושיהיה המזבח לשמו, "מזבח אדמה תעשה לי", ושיהיה הקרבן לו, "אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן לה'", ושישתחו לו ושיקטירוהו לפניו. והזהיר מעשות דבר מאלו המעשים לזולתו.

Man, by nature, cannot suddenly abandon everything to which he was accustomed. And when God sent our teacher Moses...and he said, "And you shall serve Him"; and as at that time the accepted way of life throughout the world, which they were accustomed to, and the general [concept of] service that they had been brought up with was to sacrifice various animals in halls in which idols stood, and they would bow to them and offer incense... [Therefore,] His wisdom, may He be blessed, and his gracious cunning, which is manifest with regard to all of his creatures, did not require Him to command [them] to leave those types of services and abandon and abolish them, for then they could never have considered accepting this, as is man's nature, for he always tends towards that which he is accustomed to... Therefore He, may He be blessed, allowed them this worship, but transferred it from created or imaginary things which hold no truth to His blessed Name, and He commanded them to practice these things with regard to Him; and he commanded us to build him a Temple for Him: "And they shall make Me a temple," and an altar to His Name: "An altar of earth you shall make for Me," and that the sacrifices be made to Him: "When any man of you brings a sacrifice to God," and that they bow to Him and bring Him incense. And He warned against doing any of these things to anyone but Him. (Guide for the Perplexed 3:32; see also ch. 46)

³ The *Midrash HaGadol*, as quoted by *Otzar HaMidrashim*, writes:

"תקריב מלח" – וכל כך למה? גזירת הכתוב היא שלא להדמות בעובדי עבודה זרה ובתקרובת שלה, ולמה? "כי תועבת ה' כל עושה אלה" (דברים י"ח, יב). לפיכך הזהיר הכתוב שלא להדמות בהן. שלא נצטוו ישראל בקרבנות אלא כדי שיתעסקו בעבודת ה' ולא בעבודת דברים אחרים.

"You shall offer salt" – and why all of this? The text decreed so to prevent similarity to idol worship and its sacrifices. And why? "For one who does these [i.e., worships idols] is an abomination to God" (Deut. 18:12). Therefore the Torah warned against acting similarly to them. For Israel was only commanded regarding sacrifices so that they would be involved in worshiping God and not in worshiping other things. (*Otzar HaMidrashim* on Leviticus, p. 20)

⁴ Rabbenu Bahya attaches particular significance to the idolaters' refusal to use salt in their sacrifices:

ולא יקריבוהו [את המלח] כלל, מפני שהמלח בולע את הדם, והרחיקוהו כדי שלא ילך אפילו טיפה מן הדם לאיבוד – כל כך היו נמשכים אחר מאדים וכוחותיו. וכדי להרוס כוונתם מצווה התורה "לא תשבית מלח".

And they would not bring [salt] with their sacrifices at all, since salt absorbs blood, and they distanced it from their sacrifices so that not one drop of blood would be lost – so drawn were they to Mars and his powers. And in order to spoil their intentions, the Torah commands: "You shall not leave out the salt." (Rabbenu Bahya on Lev. 2:13)

The purpose of salting the sacrifice was to remove any traces of blood, as a contrast to the idol worshipers who were careful to bring their sacrifices with the blood included.

However, a simpler understanding of Rambam's explanation is that in contrast to the idolatrous sacrifices, which were sweetened with honey, the Torah stated that the meat of the sacrifices must be salted in order to give it a different taste.

this is why God warned against bringing any leaven and any honey, and commanded them to always include salt... (Guide for the Perplexed 3:46)

Salt – The Traditional Seal of Covenants

Samuel David Luzzatto suggests another explanation for the obligation to add salt:

עד היום הזה, נשיאי הערביים כשכורתים ברית מביאים כלי של מלח ואוכלים יחד פת במלח. והנה זה היה מנהג ידוע בימי קדם בארצות המזרח שהברית נכרת במלח. ואמנם, כל קרבן הוא לרצות ולפייס הא-ל ולהביאו עמנו בברית, ולפיכך ציווה לתת מלח בכל קרבן וקרא לאותו מלח "מלח ברית א-לוהיך", כי בו אתה כורת ברית עם א-לוהיך. פירוש שד"ל, ויקרא י"ב, יג

Until this day, the Arab princes bring a container of salt and eat bread and salt together when forming a covenant. And this was a well-known custom in the ancient Eastern countries that a covenant was sealed with salt. And since every sacrifice comes to placate and satisfy God and bring Him into a covenant with us, therefore He commanded us to put salt on every sacrifice and call that salt "the salt of the covenant of your God," for with it you make a covenant with your God. (Samuel David Luzzatto on Lev. 12:13)

According to this interpretation, the sacrifices symbolize a covenant formed between man and God. Therefore, the Torah commanded us to sprinkle salt on the sacrifices, as it was customary to eat bread (or, in this case, the sacrifices) with salt when making a covenant.

Luzzatto does not discuss the source of the custom that links salt with forming a covenant, but merely accepts it as a cultural given. In this case, the Torah employs established human practices to convey a divine message.

Rambam, too, does not attach any fundamental importance to the salt itself. He merely states that it is meant to contrast with the customs of idol worshipers at the time.

This lesson will discuss the positive, fundamental significance of salting the sacrifices. We will start by reviewing other contexts in which salt is mentioned in the Bible and the commentaries.

B. The Properties of Salt and Salting the Sacrifices

Salt as a Destructive Force and its Connection to the Sacrifices

Salting the Earth – Part of Destruction

In the Bible, salt is generally mentioned in a negative context. For example, references to salt appear a number of times in descriptions of destruction:

גְּפִרִית וּמֶלַח שֶׁרָפָה כָּל אֲרָצָה לֹא תִזְרַע וְלֹא תִצְמַח וְלֹא יִעֲלֶה בָּהּ כֹּהֵל עֵשֶׂב כְּמִהְפֹּכֶת סֹדֶם וְעִמְרָה...

דברים כ"ט, כב

The entire land is sulfur and salt and burning; it shall not be planted nor shall it grow, and no grass shall grow there, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Deut. 29:22)

כי מואב כסדם תהיה וכני עמון כעמרה ממשק חרול ומכרה מלח ושקמה עד עולם.

צפניה ב', ט'

For Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, the breeding place of nettles, and saltpits, and desolation forever. (Zeph. 2:9)

ושכן חררים במדבר ארץ מלחה ולא תשב.

ירמיהו י"ז, ו

And he shall inherit the parched places of the wilderness, a salt land and uninhabited. (Jer. 17:6)

Salt is Destructive and Prevents Growth

These verses portray salt as a substance that burns the ground and renders it infertile, thus transforming the earth into a barren wasteland.

Abimelech's actions in Shechem can be read in the same way:

אבימלך נלחם בעיר כל היום ההוא וילכד את העיר ואת העם אשר בה הרג ויהיץ את העיר ויזרעה מלח.

שופטים ט', מה

Abimelech fought in the city that entire day, and he captured the city, and he killed the nation within it, and he beat down the city sowed it with salt. (Judg. 9:45)

Ralbag explains:

“ויהיץ את העיר ויזרעה מלח” – עשה זה כדי שלא תהא ראויה לשדות ולכרמים.

“And he beat down the city and sowed it with salt” – he did this so that it would not be fit for fields and vineyards. (Ralbag on Judg. 9:45)

While the verses do not explicitly mention the use of salt in this manner during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is still an element in the narrative:

ותבט אשתו מאחריו ותהי נציב מלח.

בראשית י"ט, כו

And [Lot's] wife looked behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (Gen. 19:26)

Why was Lot's wife punished by becoming a pillar of salt? According to Ibn Ezra, the punishment was that Lot's wife was not saved with the rest of his family; she became a pillar of salt simply because this was the fate of the rest of the inhabitants of Sodom.⁵

Apparently, salt causes land to become infertile and is linked to destruction and barrenness.

Healing Water with Salt

However, the following incident involving Elisha directly contradicts this conclusion:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר אֶל אֱלִישָׁע הֲנֵה נָא מוֹשֵׁב הָעִיר טוֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר אָדֹנָי רָאָה וְהַמַּיִם רָעִים וְהָאָרֶץ מְשֻׁכָּלֶת: וַיֹּאמֶר קַחוּ לִי צִלְחִית חֲדָשָׁה וְשִׂימוּ שָׁם מֶלַח וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלָיו: וַיֵּצֵא אֶל מוֹצֵא הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ שָׁם מֶלַח וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה אָמַר ה' וְפָאֵתִי לַמַּיִם הָאֵלֶּה לֹא יִהְיֶה מָשֶׁם עוֹד מִנָּת וּמְשֻׁכָּלֶת: וַיֵּרְפוּ הַמַּיִם עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כַּדְּבַר אֱלִישָׁע אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר.

מלכים ב' ב', יט-כב

And the people of the city said to Elisha, "Behold, please, the situation of this city is good, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land miscarries." And he said, "Bring me a new cruse, and put salt inside it," and they brought it to him. And he went out to the source of the water and threw the salt into it, and he said, "So said God, 'I have healed these waters; there shall not be any more death or loss from them.'" And the waters were healed until this day, as the words of Elisha that he spoke. (II Kings 2:19-22)

In this incident, salt – which is generally associated with destruction – actually heals the water!

Healing with Salt Highlights the Miracle

The following *midrash* explains Elisha's actions:

ר' שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: בא וראה כמה מופרשין דרכי הקדוש ברוך הוא מדרכי בשר ודם. בשר ודם במתוק מרפא את המר, אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא מרפא את המר במר. הא כיצד? נותן דבר המתחבל לתוך דבר המתחבל כדי לעשות בו נס... כיצא בו ויצא אל מוצא המים וישלך שם מלח ויאמר כה אמר ה'... "מהו רפואתו? והלא המים היפין שתתן בהם מלח מיד הם נסרחין; הא כיצד? נתן דבר המתחבל לתוך דבר שמתחבל כדי לעשות בו נס.

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דויסע, בשלח, פרשה א', ד"ה "ויצעק אל"

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says: Come and see how different are the way of the Holy One, Blessed be He, from the ways of flesh and blood. Flesh and blood heals the bitter with the sweet, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, heals the bitter with the bitter. How so? He puts something destructive

⁵ Rabbenu Bahya interprets Ibn Ezra's comments to mean that the description "and she became a pillar of salt" refers to the land of Sodom, not to Lot's wife:

וְהָיָה צִיב מֶלַח – כֵּתַב הַחֲכָם ר' אַבְרָהָם בֶּן עֲזָרָא: "וְהָיָה הָאָרֶץ".

"And she became a pillar of salt" – the wise Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra wrote: "And the earth became [a pillar of salt]." (Rabbenu Bahya on Gen. 19:26)

According to this interpretation, the phrase "The entire land is sulfur and salt and burning" in Deuteronomy matches perfectly with the description of Sodom's punishment in Genesis.

into something which is being destroyed in order to perform a miracle... And so too, “And he went out to the source of the water and he threw salt there, and he said, ‘So said God...’” How does this heal it? For is it not so that sweet water becomes spoiled when salt is put into it? How does this work? He put something destructive into something which is being destroyed in order to perform a miracle. (*Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Mesechta DeVaYisa, Beshalach 1, s.v. “VaYitzak el”*)

According to the *midrash*, salt – which normally spoils drinking water – was specifically chosen here to heal the water in order to highlight the miraculous nature of the event. In this case, this incident also relates to salt as a generally destructive and negative substance.

Why Add Salt to the Sacrifices?

The question remains: why did God command the nation to sprinkle their sacrifices with salt – a substance associated with destruction and prevention of life?

Bringing Sacrifices as a “Ransom for the Soul”

The commandment to add salt might stem from the general concept behind the sacrifices themselves. Ramban writes:

...צוה השם כי כאשר יחטא יביא קרבן, יסמוך ידיו עליו כנגד המעשה, ויתודה בפיו כנגד הדבור, וישרוף באש הקרב והכליות שהם כלי המחשבה והתאוה, והכרעים כנגד ידיו ורגליו של אדם העושים כל מלאכתו, ויזרוק הדם על המזבח כנגד דמו בנפשו, כדי שיחשוב אדם בעשותו כל אלה כי חטא לא-לוהיו בגופו ובנפשו, וראוי לו שישפך דמו וישרף גופו לולא חסד הבורא שלקח ממנו תמורה וכפר הקרבן הזה שיהא דמו תחת דמו, נפש תחת נפש...

רמב"ן, ויקרא א', ט

...God commanded that when one sins, he must bring a sacrifice; he must lean his hands upon it corresponding to his [sins committed via] actions; and he must verbally confess, corresponding to his [sins committed via] words; and he must burn the innards and the kidneys, which are the source of thoughts and desires, [which led him to sin]; and the thighs, corresponding to his arms and legs, which perform all of his actions; and he must sprinkle the blood on the altar, corresponding to his life's blood, so that he will think when doing all of these things that he sinned to his God with his body and soul, and it would have been fitting to have his blood spilled and his body burned were it not for the kindness of the Creator, Who took a substitute and a ransom from him whose blood will be instead of his blood, and its soul instead of his soul.... (Ramban on Lev. 1:9)

One who brings a sacrifice must internalize the fact that it is brought in place of his own death. The sacrifice atones for the person's soul and relieves him from the penalty of death.

This may also explain the requirement of salting the sacrifice: adding salt, which negates life, reminds the one bringing the sacrifice that he was deserving of having his life negated, were it not for God's mercy in giving him this opportunity for atonement.⁶

The Positive Properties of Salt

Yet other sources do, in fact, enumerate the positive properties of salt:

Enhancing Flavor

A. Salt enhances the flavor of food, as Job says:

הַיֹּאֲכָל תֶּפֶל מִבְּלֵי מֶלַח...

איוב ו', ו

Shall that which has no flavor be eaten without salt... (Job 6:6)

Salt is the most basic of the spices used to enhance the flavor of food.

Preservation

B. Salt is a preservative and does not spoil. The following *midrash* views this as the reason Lot's wife became a pillar of salt:

...“זכר עשה לנפלאותיו” (תהלים קי"א, ד), ואף כשהפך את סדום הניח זכרון – “ותבט אשתו מאחריו ותהי נציב מלח”, ועד עכשיו הוא עומד נציב מלח...

ספרי דאגדתא על אסתר, מדרש פנים אחרים, נוסח ב', פרשה ה

“He has made a memorial for his wondrous works” (Ps. 111:4), and even when He overturned Sodom He left a memorial – “And his wife looked behind him and she became a pillar of salt,” and until this day the pillar of salt stands there... (*Sifre DeAggadeta* on Esther, *Midrash Panim Acherim* ver. 2, *parasha* 5)

According to this *midrash*, the term “a pillar of salt” refers to a memorial made of salt. In contrast to ibn Ezra's explanation quoted above, here Lot's wife becoming a pillar of salt not only prevents her from being saved; she actually becomes a memorial for the entire destruction. Salt lasts forever, and thus the pillar of salt will forever stand as testimony to Sodom's destruction. This *midrash* attests to another positive quality of salt: it lasts forever. Not only that, but it can even be used to prevent other foods from spoiling. Vegetables, meat and fish, which naturally spoil quickly, can be pickled in salt and preserved for long periods.

⁶ Ramban's explanation relates only to sacrifices that are brought to atone for sins, in which case one should feel as though he is sacrificing an animal instead of himself. Yet salt is also added to other types of sacrifices, such as the *shelamim*, which is brought at times of gratitude and joy.

Strengthening the Skin

C. Another positive property of salt is its ability to strengthen and toughen the skin: it has been used both for treating the delicate skin of babies⁷ and for processing animal hides.⁸

Salt's Positive Properties and Salting the Sacrifices

In light of the above, it is possible that the commandment to salt all sacrifices stems from the positive properties of salt.

Salted Sacrifices are More Respectable

Some commentators explain that the sacrifices are salted in order to enhance their flavor:

“ברית א-להיך” – הכנסתיך בברית והשבעתיך, שלא תקריב תפל ולא יאכל, כי הוא דרך בזיון.
אבן עזרא, ויקרא ב', יג

“Covenant of your God” – I brought you into a covenant and made you swear that you would not bring anything unimportant or inedible as a sacrifice, for this would show scorn. (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 2:13)

Similarly, Rabbenu Bahya states:

...ועל דרך הפשט: טעם המלח בקרבנות לפי שלא יהיה דרך כבוד בקרבן ה' שיהיה תפל בלי מלח, ולמדה תורה דרך ארץ,
דמלכותא דרקייעא כעין מלכותא דארעא...

And according to the simple understanding of the verse: the reason for the salt is because it would not be respectful for a sacrifice to be brought before God in a way that is not respectable, without salt. And the Torah has taught us the ways of respect, for the Heavenly King is parallel to an earthly king. (Rabbenu Bahya on Lev. 2:13)

⁷ For example:

ומולדו ותיך ביום הולדת אמו לא כרת שרף ובמים לא רחצת למשעי וקמלח לא המלחת וקחתל לא חתלת.
And your nativity, on the day you were born your navel was not cut, and you were not bathed in water for cleansing, and **you were not salted with salt**, and you were not swaddled. (Ez. 16:4)

Radak explains:

“הומלחת” – כי המלח מחזק עור בשר הילד ומקשה אותו.
“Salted” – for salt strengthens and toughens children’s skin. (Radak on Ez. 16:4)

⁸ The laws relating to the Sabbath reference the fact that animal hides were treated with salt:

...הצד צבי השוחטו והמפשיטו המולחו והמעבד את עורו...
...One who traps a deer and skins it, **one who salts it** and treats its hide... (*Mishna tractate Shabbat 7:2*)
In his commentary on the Mishna, Rambam explains:

ואמרו “המולחו והמעבדו” אינן שתי מלאכות, לפי שמליחת העור היא מין ממני העבוד, והזכירו להשמיעך שהמליחה עבוד היא.
And [the Sages] said, “One who salts it and treats it” – these are not two separate actions, for salting the skin is one of the types of treating, and they mentioned it to teach that salting [the skin] is considered treating [it].

This interpretation would be perfectly acceptable if the obligation to salt sacrifices applied only to those designated to be eaten by people. However, we have yet to explain why it also applies to sacrifices that are burned completely as a total offering to God. Does it matter to God whether or not He is offered flavorful sacrifices?⁹ Here, Rabbenu Bahya states an important principle: “The Heavenly King is parallel an earthly king.” How can one honor the Divine King? In the same way one would honor a flesh-and-blood king. Although God does not physically eat from the sacrifice, it is fitting to show Him respect in the same manner one would for a human king.¹⁰

Sefer HaChinuch also explains that the salt is added to the sacrifices to enhance the flavor, but adds further significance to this point:

משרשי מצוות הקרבן להכשיר ולהישיר נפש המקריב אותו, ועל כן לעורר נפשו של מקריב נצטווה בהקרבת דברים הטובים והערבים והחביבים עליו, והמלח בו גם כן מהשורש הזה, כדי שתהיה אותה פעולה שלמה, לא תחסר לפי הנהגת האדם דבר, כי אז יתעורר לבו אליו יותר, כי כל דבר מבלי מלח לא יערב לאיש לא טעמו ולא ריחו.

ספר החינוך, מצווה קיט

Among the roots of the commandments surrounding sacrifices are to make the soul of one who brings them worthy and upright. Therefore, in order to rouse the soul of the one who brings the sacrifice, he is commanded to offer things which are good and savory and that are beloved to him. And the salt is included for this same reason, so that the action shall be complete, and that nothing will be lacking according to the usual human customs, for then his heart will be all the more roused – for anything without salt is not appealing to man, neither its taste nor its smell. (*Sefer HaChinuch* commandment 119)

According to *Sefer HaChinuch*, the salt is added not to honor God, but to cause the person to feel that he is offering something respectable and thus further internalize the significance of the sacrifice.

Sacrifices Preserve Our Existence

As mentioned above, one of the positive properties of salt is its ability to endure – salt lasts forever and can even act as a preservative for other things. *Sefer HaChinuch* views this property as consistent with the general concept of sacrifices:

...ומלבד זה יש במלח עניין אחר רומז, כי המלח מקיים כל דבר ומציל על ההפסד ועל הרקבון, וכן במעשה הקרבן ינצל אדם מן ההפסד, ותשמר נפשו ותשאר קיימת לעד.

ספר החינוך, שם

⁹ The *Ba'al HaTanya* adds that the purpose of salt is to bring out the concealed flavors in the meat (see *Ma'amarei* 5564 p. 87).

¹⁰ Rambam states the following with regard to sacrifices in general:

וצוה שיהיו כל הקרבנות תמימים במיטב מצבם כדי שלא יבא מכך זלזול בקרבן ויקלו במה שקרב לשמו יתעלה כמו שאמרו “הקריבהו נא לפחתך”.

And He commanded that all of the sacrifices would be perfect, in their best condition,, so that [the people] would not come to scorn the sacrifices and be lax in what they offer to His Name, may He be exalted, as they said: “Present it now to your governor...” (Guide for the Perplexed 3:46)

...And besides this, salt has another implicit significance, for salt preserves everything and saves one from loss or spoilage; so too, bringing a sacrifice saves one from loss, and his soul is preserved and will endure forever. (*Sefer HaChinuch*, commandment 119)

Sacrifices atone for man's sins and allow him to continue to exist. According to this interpretation, adding salt to sacrifices reflects their essence: just as salt preserves existence, so too the sacrifices allow man to exist and his soul to endure.

C. Complementary Forces

The Contradictory Properties of Salt

The sources quoted above list a number of salt's fundamental properties, both positive and negative:

On one hand, salt is destructive and prevents growth; on the other hand, salt enhances flavor, lasts forever, preserves other foods, and strengthens both human and animal skin. By considering each of these qualities, we have suggested a number of possible explanations why God commanded us to add salt to sacrifices. Each of these explanations relates to one of the fundamental properties of salt described in the Bible.

Contradictory Properties

Interestingly, these properties are not only varied – they are actually contradictory: **destruction and preservation**. This coexistence of positive and negative properties might be why salt, specifically, is added to sacrifices.

Opposing Forces within the Covenant

Ramban explains:

...שהמלח מים, ובכח השמש הבא בהם יעשה מלח, והמים בתולדותם ירוו הארץ ויולידו ויצמיחו, ואחרי היותם מלח יכריתו כל מקום וישרפו, לא תזרע ולא תצמיח. והנה הברית כלולה מכל המדות... כמלח שיתן טעם בכל המאכלים ותקיים ותכרית במליחותה... ולכן אמר בקרבנות (במדבר י"ח, ט): "ברית מלח עולם היא", כי הברית מלח העולם, בו יתקיים ויכרת... רמב"ן, ויקרא ב', יג

...For salt is [derived from] water, and through the power of the sun that shines upon [the water] it becomes salt. And water, by nature, soaks the earth and brings forth birth and growth, and once it becomes salt it destroys every place and burns it, so that "it is not sown, nor can it grow." And the covenant includes both of these attributes...just as salt gives flavor to all foods and preserves them, and [yet also] destroys with its saltiness... And therefore He said regarding the sacrifices: "It is an eternal covenant of salt" (Num. 18:19), for the covenant is the salt of the world, by which it is preserved and destroyed... (Ramban on Lev. 2:13)

According to Ramban, salt has two contradictory properties: the ability to destroy and the ability to preserve. In this way, salt resembles the covenant between man and God. The covenant preserves the people so long as they adhere to its terms, but it can also destroy the nation if they violate it.¹¹ In this sense, the covenant is the spiritual equivalent of salt. Covenants were traditionally sealed with salt due to the conceptual similarity between the two. Similarly, sacrifices are required to include salt since they represent the vital covenant between God and the nation – a covenant that preserves the world’s existence, but also has the power to destroy it.

Justice and Mercy

Rabbenu Bahya comments on Ramban’s explanation:

ועל דרך הקבלה: יש במלח שני כחות משתנים, זה הפך זה, וזה המים והאש, שהם כנגד שתי המידות שבהם קיום העולם, והם מידת רחמים ומידת הדין, ומטעם זה אמר "מלח ברית א-לוהיך", קרא ברית א-לוהיך "מלח", לפי שבו יתקיים ויכרת העולם, וכמו שאמר: ראה שאינו יכול להתקיים בדין שיתף עמו מדת רחמים, וכן המלח מקיים ומכרית, כי הוא מקיים ומעמיד הבשר זמן מרובה ונותן טעם בכל המאכלים, והוא מכרית גם כן, כי המקום המלוח לא יעלה בו כל עשב...

רבנו בחיי, ויקרא ב', יג

And in a Kabbalistic sense, there are two opposing forces in salt, each the opposite of the other. These are fire and water, which are parallel to the two forces that sustain the world, the Attribute of Mercy and the Attribute of Justice. And for this reason He said: "The salt of the covenant of your God," and referred to the covenant of God as "salt," for by [salt] the world is preserved and destroyed. And as [the Sages] said: He saw that [the world] could not exist [based] on justice [only], and so he combined it with the Attribute of Mercy. So too, salt preserves and destroys, for it preserves meat for a long period of time and gives flavor to food, [but] it is destructive as well, for a place that has been salted will never grow any grass... (Rabbenu Bahya on Lev. 2:13)

Salt, Covenant and Sacrifice – Combining Justice and Mercy

Rabbenu Bahya highlights the fundamental issue at hand: the integration of two opposing forces, God’s Attribute of Justice and His Attribute of Mercy. The world continues to exist by merit of the balance struck between these two forces. Salt also represents the integration of two contradictory forces: existence and destruction.

Bringing a sacrifice is another expression of this integration of justice and mercy. On one hand, if a person sins, he must atone for his transgression and may even be deserving of death; only the sacrifice atones for his sin, acting as a "ransom" for his soul. On the other hand, God’s mercy allows for the

¹¹ This unique aspect of the commandment of salting the sacrifices is derived from the fact that in violating the positive commandment to salt the sacrifices, one also violates the negative precept prohibiting sacrifices from being brought without salt. This is derived from the verse quoted above: "And every sacrifice of meal-offering of yours you shall season with salt," the positive commandment, is immediately followed by: "And you shall not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your meal-offering," its corresponding negative commandment. For extensive discussion of the details of each of these commandments, see *Sefer HaChinuch*, commandments 118-119.

possibility of atoning for one's sins, allowing humanity to continue to exist. How are these two opposing forces reconciled?

Salt – Preventing Organic Processes

Salt seems to be an agent that prevents organic processes from occurring. Organic materials naturally undergo change: it spoils and rots. On one hand, salt preserves these materials by preventing them from spoiling. On the other hand, the decomposition of organic material is what leads to new growth. A seed must rot in order to allow the plant to sprout. Fruit that falls in the field decomposes and is absorbed by the ground, acting as fertilizer and preparing the ground for new growth.

By preventing decomposition and change, salt also halts the process of growth.

The Connection between Destruction and Preservation

Just as growth is necessarily based on a process of decomposition, the destructive properties of salt are closely linked to its ability to preserve.¹² Salt symbolizes the idea that preservation and destruction, which may appear to be polar opposites, actually originate from the same source.

Human life encompasses these two extremes as well: while the body lives, it contains the everlasting soul, yet it is eventually destroyed. The human body is a vessel that allows one to exist in the physical world. Due to its physical nature, the body is subject to changes that allow for growth, and yet these same changes also lead to aging, illness, death and decomposition.

The Attribute of Mercy, which corresponds to preservation, and the Attribute of Justice, which corresponds to destruction, are two manifestations of God's sovereignty in the world. Although they manifest as opposing forces, they both derive from Him.

Crowning God through the Sacrifices

The sacrifices, then, are not only a source of atonement for one's sins. Bringing a sacrifice recalls these two extremes and the link between them.

Bringing salt with the sacrifice symbolizes the disruption of natural, organic processes and the end of physical life (slaughtering the animal for the sacrifice represents this as well). At the same time, it reminds us of the concurrent preservation of the eternal – the continued existence of the soul, which is pardoned in the wake of the sacrifice.

Salt – Opposing Forces from the Divine Source

Salt must be added to all sacrifices in order to emphasize that everything that happens in the world is rooted in the same Source, although some things might seem to be influenced by opposing forces. The

¹² In this context, it is interesting to note that the Dead Sea, so named due to the high level of salt in the water which prevents the area from sustaining life, is a primary source of phosphates and minerals used to produce fertilizer. It is also an international haven for people with skin conditions, who are healed by its salty waters.

sacrifice is a confirmation of God's status as ruler of the entire world and all of the contradictory elements within it.

The *Kli Yakar* expresses this idea as follows:

...כדי להמליך את הקב"ה על כל ההפכים הנראין בעולם... והנה מלח יש בטבעו דבר והפכו, כי יש בו כח האש והחמימות, ותולדת המים, עד שאמרו חכמי הקבלה שהוא כנגד מידת הדין ומידת הרחמים, על כן נקרא "ברית א-לוהיך", כי בהקרבה זו כורתים ברית עם ה' להשליטו על כל ההפכים...

כלי יקר, ויקרא ב', יג

...In order to crown the Holy One, Blessed be He, over all of the opposing [forces] that exist in the world... And behold, salt contains within it two opposing forces, for it has the power of fire and heat, and it is derived from water. And the Sages of the Kabbalah said that these are parallel to the Attribute of Justice and the Attribute of Mercy, and therefore it is called "the covenant of your God," for in bringing it with the sacrifice a covenant is made with God to crown Him over all of the opposites... (*Kli Yakar* on Lev. 2:13)

According to this interpretation, bringing a sacrifice is an act of acknowledging God's sovereignty in the world – recognizing that He controls everything, and that nothing is outside of His sphere of influence. Even things that seem like separate, contradictory powers are controlled by God: fire and water, good and evil, justice and mercy.

Salt, with its contradictory properties of destruction and preservation, represents the deep, existential connection between the Attribute of Justice and the Attribute of Mercy and symbolizes God's control over every force in the world.

D. Summary

The commandment to add salt to sacrifices is not merely another detail of the laws of sacrifices. The Torah refers to this addition as "the salt of the covenant of your God." Salt symbolizes eternal existence, just as the "covenant of your God" is eternal. Sacrifices represent the eternal covenant between God and the nation of Israel, and it is therefore appropriate to bring them with salt, which symbolizes eternity.

However, salt also symbolizes destruction. As discussed above, destruction and decomposition are the basis for growth. Although appear to be opposites, destruction and growth originate from the same divine source. The Torah does not only state a positive command to add salt to the sacrifices, it also addresses the corresponding negative aspect of the commandment by warning against bringing sacrifices without salt ("and you shall not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out..."). This reflects the dual nature of the covenant, which encompasses both positive and negative, existence and destruction.

Bringing salt with the sacrifices reinforces our knowledge that all of reality, with all of its contradictions, stems from the same divine source, Who guides the world with mercy and justice.