

A Covenant of Salt

בְּרִית מֶלַח

Parshat Vayikra, Torah in Motion

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I. Our pasuk

1. Vayikra 2:13

וְכָל־קָרְבַּן מִנְחֹתֶיךָ בַּמֶּלַח תִּמְלַח וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִלַּח בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵעַל מִנְחֹתֶיךָ עַל
כָּל־קָרְבָּנְךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח:

And every meal offering you shall season with salt; and do not omit the salt of the covenant of your God from your meal offering: on all your sacrifices you shall offer salt.

II. The Dead Sea

2. deadsea.com

The Dead Sea is mentioned in the prophecy of the Seer Ezekiel. The Book of Ezekiel (Chapter 47) recalls how he foresaw a time when the Dead Sea would be transformed from saline waters that cannot host life into freshwaters teeming with sea life. He prophesized that “Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish because this water flows there and makes the saltwater fresh... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail.”

The prophet Zechariah also echoed this same prophecy centuries later. He predicted that “living” water would soon flow where today the water is salty.

These prophecies are often interpreted as follows. According to the biblical narrative, the Dead Sea region was once vibrant, filled with life, and watered. It was only after God rained down fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah did the area become a wasteland, and the sea became a hyper-saline salt lake. However, in the messianic era, once mankind repents, the region will return to its original status.

3. Zecharia 14:8

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יֵצְאוּ מִיַּם־חַיִּים מִירוּשָׁלַם חֲצַיִם אֶל־הַיָּם הַקְּדֹמוֹנִי וְחֲצַיִם אֶל־הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרוֹן
בְּקִיץ וּבְחֶרֶף יִהְיֶה:

In that day, fresh water shall flow from Jerusalem, part of it to the Eastern Sea (the Dead Sea) and part to the Western Sea (the Mediterranean), throughout the summer and winter.

III. Salt in the Torah

4. Bereishit 19:26

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח:

His wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

5. Devarim 29:22

גְּפְרִית וּמֶלַח שָׂרְפָה כָּל־אֲרָצָה לֹא תִזְרַע וְלֹא תִצְמַח וְלֹא יֵעֲלֶה בָּהּ כָּל־עֵשֶׂב כְּמַהְפֹּכֶת
סֹדֶם וְעַמֹּרָה אֲדָמָה וְצִבּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִפָּךְ יְהוָה בְּאִפּוֹ וּבְחֵמָתוֹ:

all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing and producing, no grass growing in it, just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which GOD overthrew in fierce anger—

6. Bereishit Rabba 50

“He prepared a feast for them” – he had spent time in the house of our forefather Abraham, who would welcome passersby.

[“He baked unleavened bread [matzot].”] Rabbi Yitzhak said: A great quarrel [matzut] arose over the salt. He said to her [his wife]: ‘Give these guests a little salt.’ She said to him: ‘Do you seek to promulgate this despicable and evil custom here, as well?’ (‘Not only do you offer them lodging, but you wish to pamper them as well?’ It was because of this that Lot’s wife later became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26).)

7. Bereishit Rabba 51

“His wife looked behind him, [and she became a pillar of salt]” – Rabbi Yitzhak said: This was because she sinned with salt on that night that the angels came to Lot. What did she do? She went to all her neighbors and said to them: ‘Give me salt, as we have guests,’ and her intention was that the residents of the city should become aware of them. That is why “she became a pillar of salt.”

8. Shemot 30:35

וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתָהּ קְטֹרֶת רֶקַח מְעֻשָּׂה רוֹקַח מִמֶּלַח טָהוֹר קֹדֶשׁ:

You shall make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the perfumer, *memulach*, pure and holy.

IV. Our pasuk - Salt on korbanot, the covenant of salt

9. Vayikra 2:13 (reprise)

וְכָל־קָרְבַּן מִנְחֹתֶיךָ בַּמֶּלַח תִּמְלַח וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִלַּח בְּרִית אֶל־הָיָה מֵעַל מִנְחֹתֶיךָ עַל כָּל־קָרְבָּנְךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח:

And every meal offering you shall season with salt; and do not omit the salt of the covenant of your God from your meal offering: on all your sacrifices you shall offer salt.

10. Rashi on Vayikra 2:13

מלח ברית. שֶׁהַבְּרִית כְּרוּתָהּ לַמֶּלַח מִשְׁשֶׁת יָמֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית, שֶׁהַבְּטָחוֹ הַיָּמִים הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים לַקָּרֵב בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ בַּמֶּלַח וְנִסּוּךְ הַיָּמִים בְּחָג:

because a covenant was established with the salt as far back as the six days of Creation when the lower waters (those of the oceans) received an assurance that they would be offered on the altar in the form of salt and also as water in the ceremony of “the libation of water” on the Feast of Tabernacles.

11. Bartenura on Vayikra 2:13

מלח ברית שהברית כרותה למלח שהובטחו מים התחתונים פי' שכשומר הקב"ה יהי רקיע ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים נתרעמו המים התחתונים ואמ' מה נשתנינו מחברינו להיות רחוקים מכסא הכבוד ואז הבטיחן הקב"ה לקרב במזבח במלח וניסוך בחג הכי איתא במדרש:

The covenant is enacted with salt, since the lower waters were promised, that is, when Hashem said “There shall be a sky and it will separate between the waters,” the lower waters remonstrated and said: How are we different from our fellow waters to be distant from the holy throne, and then God promised them that the sacrifices offered on the altar would include salt, as would the water libation on Sukkot, so it is in the Midrash.

12. Bechor Shor on Vayikra 2:13

מלח ברית אלהיך. מלח דבר המתקים, לפיכך צוה הק' להקריבו במנחות ובקרבתות, להראות שהקרבתות ברית קימת לעולם וכפרה. וכבר פירש, כי הכל יודעים שהק' אינו צריך לא לריח ולא לשום הקרבה, אלא לזכות בהם את ישראל, כשאדם חוטא ומקריב קרבן, מתכפר לו ויודע שהוא נקי ונזהר יותר מלכלך עצמו בחטא, כאדם שיש לו בגדים נקיים ונזהר מן הטיט, אבל כשהם מלוכלכים אינו נזהר; וכן אמרו רבותינו. כיון שעבר אדם עברה ושנה בה, **ונתלכלך**, נעשית לו כהיתר, כיון שנתלכלך נתלכלך.

Salt is something that preserves, therefore Hashem commanded to offer it on the minchas and the other sacrifices, to show that the sacrifices are a lasting covenant forever and for atonement. And it is already explained that everyone knows that Hashem does not need scent or any sacrifices, rather the sacrifices serve to bring merit to Israel, when a person sins and offers a sacrifice, it atones for him and he knows that he is absolved, and he is careful not to soil himself with sin, like a person who has clean clothing and is careful not to get mud on them, but when they are already soiled he is not so careful; and so said the sages. When a person has sinned and does it again, he is soiled, and it acts as a permission for him to sin further.

13. Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 2:13

ברית אלהיך. הכנסתיך בברית והשבעתיך שלא תקריב תפל ולא יאכל כי הוא דרך
בזיון:

God caused you to enter the covenant and made you swear that you would not offer anything which is unsalted and inedible, for that is an insult.

14. Da'at Zekenim on Vayikra 2:13

ולא תשבית מלח. לפי שהוא דבר המתקיים להודיע כי הקרבתות ברית לעולם לכפרה ולא לצורך הקב"ה שהרי אין לפניו לא אכילה ולא שתייה

Because it is a substance that preserves, to indicate that the sacrifices are an everlasting covenant for atonement, and not for God's needs, since God has no need to eat or drink.

15. Yechezkel 43:21

וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' וְהִשְׁלִיכוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלַח וְהֶעֱלוּ אוֹתָם עֲלֵה לַה':

And you shall present them before the Lord, and the priests shall cast salt upon them, and they shall offer them up for a burnt offering to the Lord.

16. Bamidbar 18:19

כל תרומת הקדשים אשר ירימו בני ישראל לה' נתתי לה' ולבניך ולבנותיך אתה לחק עולם
ברית מלח עולם הוא לפני ה' לה' ולזרעה אתה:

All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Yisra'el offer up to the Lord, I have given to you, and to your sons and your daughters with you, by a statute forever: it is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord to you and to your offspring with you.

17. Divrei HaYamim II 13:5

הלא לכם לדעת כי ה' אלהי ישראל נתן ממלכה לדוד על ישראל לעולם לו ולבניו ברית
מלח:

Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Yisra'el gave the kingdom over Yisra'el to David for ever, to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?

18. Rashi on Divrei HaYamim II 13:5

ברית מלח. בקיום ואמונה

with endurance and permanence

V. Salt in the rest of Tanach

19. Shoftim 9:45

ואבימלך נלחם בעיר כל היום ההוא וילכד את העיר ואת העם אשר בה הרג ויתן
את העיר וזרעה מלח:

Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city and massacred the people in it; he razed the town and sowed it with salt.

20. Yirmiyahu 17:5-8

כה אמר ה' ארור הגבר אשר יבטח באדם ושם בשר זרע ומן-ה' יסור לבו:

Thus says the Lord; Cursed be the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm, and whose heart departs from the Lord.

והיה כערער בערבה ולא יראה כי יבוא טוב ושכן חררים במדבר ארץ מלחה ולא תשב:

For he shall be like the juniper tree in the desert, and shall not see when good comes; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited.

ברוך הגבר אשר יבטח בה' והיה ה' מבטחו:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is.

והיה כעץ שתול על-מים ועל-יובל ישלח שרשיו ולא יראה כי יבא חם והיה עלהו רענן

ובשנת בצרת לא ידאג ולא ימיש מעשות פרי:

For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, and that spreads out its roots by the river, and shall not see when the heat comes, but its leaf shall be green; and shall not be anxious in the year of drought, nor shall it cease from yielding fruit.

21. Melachim II 2:19-21

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר אֶל־אֵלִישָׁע הִנֵּה־נָא מוֹשֵׁב הָעִיר טוֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר אָדְנִי רָאָה וְהַמַּיִם רָעִים
וְהָאָרֶץ מְשַׁכֶּלֶת:

The leaders of the town (Jericho) said to Elisha, "Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement."

וַיֹּאמֶר קְחוּ־לִי צִלְחִית חֲדָשָׁה וְשִׂימוּ־שָׁם מֶלַח וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלָיו:

And he said, Bring me a new flask, and put salt in it. And they brought it to him.

וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־מוֹצֵא הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ־שָׁם מֶלַח וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה רִפְּאתִי לַמַּיִם הָאֵלֶּה לֹא־יְהִיָּה
מִשָּׁם עוֹד מוֹת וּמִשַּׁכֶּלֶת:

And he went out to the spring of the waters, and cast salt in there, and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water; there shall not be from there any more death or miscarriage.

VI. Salt in the Talmud

22. Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 5:3

אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ דְּרוּמַיָּא שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים רוּבָן וּמִיעוּטָן רַע וּבִינוּתָן יָפָה הַשָּׂאֹר וְהַמֶּלַח
וְהַסְּרוּב.

Rebbi Joshua the Southerner said: There are three things of which too little or too much is bad and average is good: sour dough, salt, and refusal.

23. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 34a

תַּנּוּ רַבָּנַן: שְׁלֹשָׁה רוּבָן — קִשָּׁה, וּמִיעוּטָן — יָפָה, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: שָׂאֹר, וּמֶלַח, וְסָרְבָּנוּת

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: There are three things that are harmful in excess but are beneficial when used sparingly. They are: Leavening (in dough), salt (in a cooked dish) and refusal (for the sake of propriety).