



A Covenant of Salt

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Covenant is a central concept in Judaism. The Torah and later tradition make clear that the people Israel have a special relationship with God, and Jews have acquired the epithet “the chosen people” (though Jewish particularism need not preclude other peoples having their own unique relationships with God). Rabbi David Hartman, z”l, titled his exposition of Jewish theology *A Living Covenant*. Rabbi David Wolpe, in a speech at JTS, proposed highlighting the mainstream ideological approach of Conservative Judaism by rebranding it as “Covenantal Judaism.”

There are several distinct covenants with God in the Tanakh, including with Noah and all humanity; with Abraham and his descendants; with the Jewish people through the giving of the Torah; with Aaron and his priestly descendants; and with David and his royal House.

And in our parashah, the (somewhat lesser-known!) covenant of salt:

וְכִלְקַרְבָּנוּ מִנְחָתְךָ בַּמֶּלַח תִּמְלַח וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵית מֶלַח בְּרִית אֶל-לֵהֲיִיד מֵעַל מִנְחָתְךָ עַל כָּל-קָרְבָּנֶיךָ תִּקְרִיב מֶלַח:

You shall season your every offering of meal with salt; you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt. (Lev. 2:13)

The law here is clear: the grain offering and all other (i.e. animal) sacrifices have to be made with salt. The use of the word covenant (berit) is puzzling and an exploration of this phrase can teach us about the nature of covenants with God and beyond.

A similar phrase (berit melakh, rather than melakh berit) appears two other times in the Bible:

All the sacred gifts that the Israelites set aside for God I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a

due for all time. It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before God for you and for your offspring as well. (Num. 18:19)

Surely you know that the God of Israel gave David kingship over Israel forever—to him and his sons—by a covenant of salt. (2 Chron. 13:5)

Unlike in our parashah, in these contexts the subject matter isn’t about salt at all—so what is this “covenant of salt” in Numbers and Chronicles?

Ramban suggests on our verse in Leviticus that the phrase refers to the requirement for salt in sacrifices as a covenant itself, and that the other verses are compared to it to emphasize their long endurance:

“because there is a sacrificial covenant, the Torah also uses this covenant as a model for other covenants, as both the priestly covenant (Numbers 18:19) and the Davidic covenant (2 Chronicles 13:5) are called “covenant of salt” because they are upheld just as the sacrificial covenant of salt.” (Sefaria Community translation by Zev Prael)

The notion of an enduring covenant—one that continues through the generations in particular—is important in both Numbers (where the verse specifically discusses Aaron’s descendants) and in Chronicles (where this is part of a demand by David’s great-grandson, Abijah, that a challenger submit to his authority). But it’s not immediately clear why this “covenant” of salt on sacrifices is so quintessentially enduring.

I suspect that as covenants broadly have a link to salt, the word “covenant” was added in Leviticus because the emphatic requirement regarding salt brought this link to the author’s mind. So, what is the connection between salt and covenants that endure? One quite intuitive suggestion is that it is due to salt’s preservative qualities. The Midrash on the passage from Numbers states:

“The covenant was made with Aaron with something that is not just healthy [i.e. resistant to decay], but maintains the health of other things.” (Sifrei Bemidbar, Korah, pis. 118, ed. Horovitz)

Similarly, on 2 Chron 13:5, the Metzudat David commentary of David Altschuler explains the phrase “covenant of salt”:

“The establishment of the enduring covenant [with David’s house] is like salt, in that it endures and does not rot.”

Salt is in fact mentioned in reference to covenants in several ancient Near Eastern sources beyond the Bible, and this may well be because “its preservative qualities made it the ideal symbol of the perdurability of a covenant.” (Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 191)

Salt also played a less figurative role in some ancient covenants as it was a key ingredient in meals that were eaten on the establishment of a pact:

What is fundamental is that “the communion partaking of salt is a sign of friendship and a symbol of communality.” [from Wilhelm Rudolph’s Handbuch zum Alten Testament volume on Ezra and Nehemia] The same was true for the Greeks and Romans. . . .

Binding mutual commitments result from the hospitality of table fellowship. . . . The “covenant of salt” transfers to the divine covenant the notion of hospitality associated with table fellowship, with its subsequent commitment to loyalty and solicitude; Israel is to keep its covenantal obligations, although God, too, is to provide for the election and rights of the covenantal partner (Hermann Eising, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, s.v. salt)

Sitting down and eating a proper meal together (salt seems to make the meal “proper” in some of the ancient world) forms a bond. And it’s worth noting that the priestly families literally shared sacrificial meals with God! Biblical scholars often compare the covenant between God and Israel to political arrangements between leaders of greater and lesser powers. That kind of geopolitical framing can obscure the personal, even intimate nature of these covenants. (Indeed, political leaders today still have state banquets as acts of foreign relations.)

A kabbalistic connection between salt and covenant can also be found in Rabbenu Bahya (on Lev. 2:13), who conceptualizes salt as the product of sea water and the heat of the sun. Therefore,

“In the essence of salt is the power of water and the power of fire, which signify two of the [Divine] attributes on which the world is

established: the attribute of Compassion (midat rahamim) and the attribute of Justice (midat hadin), and for this reason . . . it is called “the salt of your covenant with God” And just like [the Rabbis] said [in Midrash Bereshit Rabbah], God saw that it [humanity] could not endure with Justice [alone], so God combined it with the attribute of Compassion. Relatedly, salt preserves and destroys, it preserves meat for a long time and gives flavor to food, and it also destroys, as vegetation cannot grow in a place that is very salty.”

This commentary serves to highlight two important features of covenants: that they are very powerful forces, and that they must be held in balance to harness their forces for benefit and not for harm. The illustration given by Bahya is instructive: that God had to compromise on God’s initial plan to allow a place for humans in the world. The notion that both parties have to compromise in order to have a successful relationship is familiar from human relationships, but radical when ascribed to divine ones!

Covenant is a form of committed relationship—and the facets of the covenants revealed by the efforts of commentators traditional and modern to explain this curious reference in our parashah can be instructive to us as we think about the relationships in our own lives (including our relationships with God). How will we make them endure? Will they have impact beyond our own lifetimes? What intimate activities seal and reseal our commitments—especially during a time when physical proximity is limited? How can we keep them in balance and thereby harness their power instead of being consumed by it?

The Ben Ish Hai notes that there was a custom amongst the Jews of Baghdad to put salt on the dish that they used to gather pieces of bread whilst searching for hametz before Pesah. One of the reasons he suggests for this tradition is that it might be an omen for fulfilling this mitzvah for many years to come as the Torah refers to salt as an “eternal covenant.” (Halakhot, Year 1, Tzav, 6)

As we prepare for our upcoming sederim, when we hope to sit down for a ceremonial meal together with some of those with whom we are in relationship, and as we continue to celebrate the ongoing relationship that God established with our ancestors, may we remember (perhaps as we taste the salt water) to reconsider, reseal, and strengthen all the covenants in our lives.

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