

Salt of Life

Parshat Vayikra

Mois Navon

This week's parsha contains the injunction to include salt with every *korban* (sacrifice) brought on the altar, "...with all your offerings you shall include salt" (Leviticus 2:13). Various explanations are proffered as to the meaning and necessity of including salt with all offerings, yet how are we to relate to this commandment, or for that matter, any of the commandments related to the altar, today?! The Talmud (Hagiga 27a) in discussing the altar, addresses this very issue:

It is written (Ezekiel 41:22): *The altar, three cubits high, and the length thereof two cubits, was of wood, and so the corners; the length thereof and the walls thereof, were also of wood; and he said unto me: "This is the table that is before the Lord."* - [The verse] begins with the altar and ends with the table? R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish both explain: At the time when the Temple stood, the altar made atonement for a person; now a person's table makes atonement for him.

Thus, the common dining table is likened to the holy altar! On a purely superficial level the correlation is inferred on the basis of simple physical similarities. As described by the Prophet Ezekiel, both altar and table approximate each other in design, dimensions and materials. However their similitude in form is extended by R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish to indicate a similitude in function, both serving the same the role of atonement.

As a result of the comparison of the altar to the table, the Rama (Oreh Hayim 167:5) writes that it is a mitzvah to have salt on the table, "for the table is like the altar, and the eating like a *korban*." The Rama makes a critical observation by comparing the food eaten to the actual sacrifice, for really it is these "active" components which define the their respective structures through their function; that is to say - food, in the case of the table, and *korban*, in the case of the altar. A table without food is really just a platform with the potential for a myriad of uses. So too the altar, without a *korban*, is just a stand of indefinite utility. It is only in that there is food on the table, or a *korban* on the altar which renders their function apparent.

Thus the metaphor identifying the table with the altar can be replaced with one intimating food to a *korban*. Though one enigma has merely replaced another, by modifying our original question of "how does the table serve the role of the altar", to "how does our food serve the role of the *korban*", we can more readily extract the meaning of the metaphor. As such, what is needed now is to understand what was the essential function of a *korban*. R. Hirsch elucidates the meaning of *korban* by analyzing its etymology:

It is most regrettable that we have no word which really reproduces the idea which lies in the expression *korban*. The unfortunate use of the term "sacrifice" implies the idea of giving something up that is of

value to oneself for the benefit of another, or having to do without something of value, ideas which are not only entirely absent from the nature and idea of a *korban* but are diametrically opposed to it. Also the underlying idea of “offering” makes it by no means an adequate expression for *korban*. The idea of an offering presupposes a wish, a desire, a requirement for what is brought, on the part of the one to whom it is brought, which is satisfied by the “offering.” One can not get away from the idea of gift, a present. But the idea of a *korban* is far away from all this. It is never used for a present of gift, it is used exclusively with reference to man’s relation to God, and can only be understood from the meaning which lies in its root *krav*. *Krav* means to approach, to come near, and so to get into a close relationship with somebody. This at once most positively gives the idea of the object and purpose of *hakrava*, the act of bringing a sacrifice, as the attainment of a higher sphere of life.¹

The essence of the *korban* is thus not “sacrifice” - a giving up of what does not want to give. Furthermore, it is not an “offering” - a giving of what is desired by a receiver. Rather, the true meaning is revealed from the root of the word - *krav* - close, to come close.² Consequently, the essential purpose of the *korban* (and its attendant altar) is to bring one close to one’s Creator.

Having described the *korban* as a medium for effecting a closeness to God, what remains is to discover this latent potential in our everyday food. In other words, how is man to become close to God through his food? The simplest answer is through his sanctification of the act one incorporates the divine into the mundane. By following the dietary laws prescribed by God and by reciting the blessings on the meal, one elevates the meal from the purely utilitarian to one that serves a higher purpose of recognizing one’s creator. Furthermore when one eats a particularly sumptuous meal, defined in the Gemara as “meat and wine”, one achieves a level of satisfaction and gladness referred to as *simcha*. The Shulhan Aruch (Oreh Hayim 529:1-2) writes that on the holidays one is commanded to reach this level of rejoicing with God, and thus, our very meal which brings us gladness serves to connect us in this joy with the divine.³

However there is a deeper way in which we connect with the divine through our food, a way which also addresses the aspect of *kapara* that the *korban* provided. That way is through our existential need for sustenance on an immediate and constant basis. This need was designed into the relationship between man and God from man’s inception, as depicted in the description of his initial placement and development in the world. When man was first placed in the garden, God instructed him to “work it and guard it” (Gen. 2:15). Ibn Ezra and others⁴ interpret this to mean that man was instructed to take an active role in insuring his food supply. Following the sin, upon

¹ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary to the Pentateuch: Leviticus, p.6.

² Ramban remarks similarly that “korban is derived from the root meaning ‘to draw near’, implying that a sacrifice is but a method given to us by God of drawing near to Him.” (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Vayikra, p.33).

³ See esp. Biur Halacha (Oreh Hayim 529, s.v. *keitzad mesamhin*).

⁴ Ibn Ezra, Radak; Hizkuni (on *ibid.*).

which man was expelled from the garden and consequently from God's immediacy, he was forced to take an even more vigorous role in providing for his own sustenance. God told Adam, "cursed is the ground for your sake, in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life" (Gen. 3:17). But God does not wreak vengeance for vengeance sake, for even in justice He is a merciful God providing the cure before the illness. R. Hirsh explains, "Not because you sinned, but for your betterment, for your sake, 'cursed', is the ground to be restrained in its development."⁵ Thus the curse states "for your sake" - since now man is distanced from his Creator, He has provided the means for man to return, to approach, to close the distance.

If it was not for the fact that man was created with the intrinsic need for sustenance, and furthermore that he was subsequently placed in an environment which demanded his effort to fulfill this need, man might never have been impelled to seek His Creator, being perfectly content either having no existential burdens or having them satisfied effortlessly. It is only due to the fact that man must eat, and must toil to do so, that he is constantly driven to fulfill this urgent necessity. The quest for satiation is a matter of life and death. And in this daily struggle to survive, the potential is provided most poignantly for man to look heavenward for assistance. It is in this simple needy glance up in reliance that man develops a relationship with his Creator and Provider.

Thus, the metaphor imparted by the Prophet and interpreted by the sages, reveals the profound message that our food, symbolized in general by the dining table, is as powerful a vehicle to approaching G-d as were the *korbanot* on the altar. Man's active effort to approach his Creator, whether through acknowledgement of His power by bringing sacrifices, or acknowledgement from whence cometh his sustenance, closes the distance and effects atonement between man and his Keeper. And as all the *korbanot* were required to be accompanied by salt, we are thus to keep the salt on our table, with all our meals, as an ever present reminder of the profound potential sanctity that lay before us.

⁵ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary to the Pentateuch: Genesis, p.84.