

## Salt of the 'Omer

by *Haham Amram Assayag*

It is customary in some Sephardic Kehilot, amongst them the Mekubalim and all of moroccan communities, to give out salt on the second night of Pesah when we begin to count the 'Omer. Some take salt for every member of the family.

Salt takes a prominent place in Jewish rituals, that we can trace back to the very first days of Hashem's creation of the world. The creation of the Heavens came about by the division of the waters that covered the vacuum that was to be the world. The Pasuk in Bereshit 1:7 states:

**ויבדל בין המים אשר מתחת לרקיע ובין המים אשר מעל לרקיע**

“And (Hashem) divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament”.

The Medrash says that when the earth waters saw that they were assigned to the earth while the other waters were destined to form the Heaven, they began to cry. They exclaimed: “Woe unto us that we are not worthy of staying close to our Creator, and we must be near impurities”. Hashem replied that they should stop crying and He will order the waters to be presented as a libation upon the altar. The Medrash states that this was not satisfactory to the waters as **ניסוך המים** - water libation was only once a year. So Hashem promised them that He will also make a covenant with the salt contained in the oceans, to be placed on the altar with every offering that the Jews bring. Thus, the commandment in Vayikra 2:13:

**וכל קרבן מנחתך במלח תמלח ולא תשבית מלח ברית אלהיך מעל מנחתך על כל קרבנך תקריב מלח**

“And your every meal offering shall you season with salt, you may not discontinue the salt of your G-d's covenant from upon your meal offering, on your very offering shall you offer salt”.

The 'Omer, which is the name of a measure for grains, is also the name of the meal offering brought to the Temple on the second day of Pesah. In order to allow the Jews to enjoy now the new crop of grain, we first present an offering of that grain to the Bet Hamikdash, after which time we, as individuals, make our bread and eat of the new crop. On Shavuot, we will collectively offer to the Bet Hamikdash, two breads made from the new grain. This offering is known as **מנחה חדשה לה'** - a new offering to Hashem. You will notice that the acronym of these hebrew words are the letters **מ' ה' ל'** which form the word **מלח** - salt. In honor of this special offering symbolized by salt, we too take salt, at the time that this offering would have taken place. One must also note that the word **לחם** - bread, is formed by the same letters as **מלח** -salt, thus the constant connection between bread and salt. On the second day of Pesah, when the new offering will allow us to begin to eat the new **לחם** - the new bread, we bring along the **מלח** -the salt which are inherently connected and totally inseparable, both in the Temple's altar and in our own altar, our home's table.

This may be a possible explanation for our ancient custom, however it does not yet address the mystical dimension we attach to the salt. Indeed, we all believe that this salt serves as protection to us and every family has put it to use in many similar ways as those of an amulet.

The 13th century commentator Rabenu Ba'hya Ben Asher of Saragossa, through his discussion of the Kabbalistic characteristics of the salt, may have shed some light in understanding the importance of the salt. He writes that salt is composed by two opposing elements of the four elements of creation: water and fire. Salt comes naturally in the water of the oceans, yet it is extracted through the means of fire, the sun when natural, or fire to stimulate evaporation.

Rabenu Ba'hya reminds us of what our Hahamim taught us in reference to the creation of the world. When Hashem decided to create the world, He thought to create it with only **מדת הדין** - the attribute of Justice, by which man would be accountable immediately for every action and be retributed accordingly. Hashem realized that the world could not stand with judgement alone, because man, as a potential sinner, would bring about immediate destruction to his world. Therefore, Hashem incorporated **מדת הרחמים** - the attribute of Mercy, a means of protection for man until he amends his ways. The fusion of these two attributes allow the world to exist and be sustained. Rabenu Ba'hya tells us that **מדת הדין** - the attribute of Judgement, is represented by the element of fire, while **מדת הרחמים** - the attribute of mercy is represented by the element of water. Salt is therefore, symbolic of the fusion of these two attributes, representing the formula for the very maintenance of the world. That is why, he says, the Torah in the above Pasuk refers to salt as **ברית אלהיך** - the covenant of your G-d, because it represents the very covenant of creation that allows the world to exist and not to crumble in the face of sin. This explains the chemical preservative qualities of salt and the spiritual protective dimensions attached to it.

The custom of the Mekubalim, as stated in their holy Sefarim, was to take salt in their hands, every night at the time of counting the 'Omer. However, on the first night they had a ritual that consisted of reading over the salt, Tehilim chapters 122, 131, 133 followed by the Perasha of the 'Omer in Vayikra 23:9-14. This was followed by a prayer that in the merit of counting the 'Omer, the Tehilim recited and in the merit of our forefathers, may Hashem designate this salt on my behalf (or on anyone else's behalf), to be a shield and protection against sickness, plague, evil eye, and any bad event . Amen

This is the original Tefila found in the Sefarim:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּזָכוֹת סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנוּ בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וּבְזָכוֹת שְׁמוֹתֶיךָ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים  
וְהַטְּהוֹרִים הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִהַמְּזֻמּוֹרִים הַלְלוּ הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִרְאֵשֵׁי תִיבוֹת וּמִסּוּפֵי תִיבוֹת וּבְזָכוֹת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים אֲבֹרְכֶם  
יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב שִׁיְהִי זֶה הַמֶּלֶח לִי לְשִׁמִּי וּלְכָל מִי שִׁישָׂא הַמֶּלֶח הַזֶּה עָלָיו יְהִי לוֹ לְמַגֵּן וְצַנָּה מִדְּבַר וּמִמַּגֵּפָה וּמֵעֵין  
הַרַע וּמִכָּל דְּבַר רַע. אָמֵן כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן.

May Hakadosh Baruch Hu indeed send His protection from Heaven to the entire 'Am Yisrael, and may we soon have the zechut to bring the Korban Pesa'h and the 'Omer offering in Yerushalayim Habenuya Bimhera Beyamenu Amen.

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