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Modern Commentaries

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Why a rare note in Genesis signals inner ambivalence

Rabbi Sacks: The Ambivalent Jew

The rare shalshelet trope, appearing three times in Genesis, musically conveys psychological ambivalence—the frozen, wavering state of a person caught between two identities or paths, as seen in Eliezer's mixed feelings, Yosef's inner struggle, and especially Lot's hesitation to leave Sodom after investing his identity in assimilation there. Lot's tragic indecision, rooted in his failed attempt to belong among people who ultimately still saw him as an alien, mirrors the experience of modern Jews who sought acceptance through assimilation only to find it did not protect them and cost them their authentic identity. The contrast with Avraham—who lived apart as a "stranger and sojourner" yet was honored as "a prince of God"—teaches that security and respect come from embracing one's identity fully, never from ambivalence about who and what one is. AI SUMMARY

The Ambivalent Jew

The Torah does not have a word for ambivalence – the nearest is Elijah's question to the Baal-worshipping Israelites: "How long will you waver between two opinions?" (I Kings 18:21). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the shalshelet.

The shalshelet is an unusual note, going up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. The sixteenth-century commentator Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi best defined what it was meant to convey: namely, a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalshelet itself looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement" (tenua me'uvetet), a mark that goes repeatedly backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion – what Hamlet called "the native hue of resolution sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought" – in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. The shalshelet is the music of ambivalence.

The rare notation appears three times in Genesis, in each case signifying an existential crisis.

The individual concerned is called upon to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend – but finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either choice will involve letting go of intensely felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. These are moments of high psychological drama.

One instance occurs in Genesis 24:12. Abraham has sent his servant (not identified in the text, but taken by the commentators to be Eliezer) to find a wife for his son Isaac in the city of Haran. Arriving at the town's well, Eliezer proposes a test: the woman who comes to draw water, offers some to the traveller, and in addition gives water to his camels, will be the one chosen by God for his master's son. Over the "and he said" introducing his request of God that this test should succeed, the masoretic tradition has placed a shalshelet.

The commentators identify multiple sources of ambivalence at this point. First are doubts about the permissibility of the test – Jewish law forbids relying on "omens," and Eliezer may have felt that his test

was dangerously close to pagan practice (the Ran to Hullin 95b, however, states that Eliezer's conduct was legitimate; he sought not an omen but a sign of the woman's character). Ibn Caspi suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac. The Midrash, however, offers the most insightful explanation: Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test, but about the mission itself. Until that point, says the Midrash, he had been "sitting and weighing whether his own daughter was suitable for Isaac."

He had hoped, in other words, that one way or another, Abraham's estate would pass to him.

There are two cues that led the Midrash to this hypothesis. The first is that when Abraham first spoke to God about his childlessness, he said: "O Sovereign Lord, what can You give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus" (15:2). Eliezer, at that time, was Abraham's putative heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges his servant with the mission to find a wife for his son, Eliezer replies, "Perhaps [ulai] the woman will not be willing to come back with me to this land" (24:5). As Ibn Ezra notes, the word ulai is not neutral.

It signifies an emotional involvement in the outcome: one wishes for the eventuality to either come to pass or not come to pass. Eliezer's "perhaps" may have been an unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. This would have once again placed him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham's heir. It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for the woman who would be God's choice of Isaac's wife to appear.

More dramatic still is the case of Joseph. Child of a shepherd, Jacob, an almost youngest son, hated by his brothers and sold by them into slavery, he finds himself in Egypt as head of household to one of its prominent citizens, Potiphar. Left alone with his master's wife, he finds himself propositioned by her: "Now Joseph was beautiful of form and fair to look upon. And it came to pass that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and she said: 'Lie with me'" (39:6–7). The text continues: "But he refused..." (39:8). Over this verb, tradition has placed a shalshelet.

We can imagine the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said No. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of sexual propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of Potiphar himself:

With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; he has entrusted everything he has to my care. No one is greater in this house than I. My master has withheld nothing from me but you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? (39:8–9)

And yet, the temptation must have been intense. He was in an urban civilisation of a kind he had not seen before. It was his first experience of "bright lights, big city." He was far from home. No one could see him. After all the hostility he had suffered in his childhood, being propositioned by Potiphar's wife must have been flattering as well as seductive. It was a decisive moment. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue – was he to become an Egyptian, with all the sexual laissez faire that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity?

The Talmud gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, "Joseph, your brothers' names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [high priest's] breastplate, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?"

The shalshelet is an elegant commentary to Joseph's crise de conscience. In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Which brings us to Parashat Vayera, the first appearance of the shalshelet in the Torah. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They warn him

that the city and its inhabitants are about to be destroyed. He and his family must leave immediately. But Lot delays:

The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here – sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, for we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that God has sent us to destroy it." So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who married his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. (19:12–16)

Over "he hesitated" is a shalshelet.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. Earlier, when he and Abraham had agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsmen, "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar...So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east" (13:10–11). He chose to make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that, as the Torah notes at that point, its inhabitants "were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (13:13).

Having chosen to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain, Lot no longer sees himself, as did Abraham, as "a stranger and temporary resident" (23:4). On the contrary, Lot and his family become profoundly assimilated. His daughters marry local men; Lot rises to public position. The sages interpret the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, "Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city" (19:1), as meaning "he had just been appointed as a judge" – the gate of the city being the place where, in Abrahamic times, the judges and elders sat to resolve disputes.

Sodom is where Lot sees himself as belonging – so much so that the visitors have to drag him away physically.

Lot's sense of belonging, however, is either naiveté or self-deception. The text makes this clear at three points. The first is the attempted sexual assault on Lot's visitors (19:4–5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot is also, in their eyes, a stranger. In fact, he is. The Torah, in its second indication, is brutally explicit:

"Get out of our way," they replied [to Lot, when he begged them to respect his visitors]. Then they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." (19:7–9)

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, and "his sons-in-law thought he was joking." Lot's elaborate new identity is about to come crashing down about him – not only because of the impending destruction but because he has discovered in successive blows that he has not been accepted in this place. Sodom hates strangers, they still consider Lot "an alien" and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself into the project of making his home among the people of the plain. He is a prime example of what Leon Festinger called cognitive dissonance.

According to Festinger, the need to avoid dissonance and the unbearable tension it creates, is fundamental to human beings. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve – and which is signalled by the shalshelet over "he hesitated." This was a moment when he faced the ultimate existential question: "Who am I?" Having tried so hard to become one of them, he finds it almost impossible to tear himself away.

Festinger's theory also explains the behaviour of Lot's wife who "looked back [against the explicit instruction of the angels] and was turned into a pillar of salt" (19:36). Festinger called this syndrome "post-decision dissonance." He predicted that the

more important the issue, the longer the person delays a decision and the harder it is to reverse, the more he or she will agonize over whether they have made the right choice. They have second thoughts; they need reassurance; they "look back."

The shalshelet over Lot's hesitation is no mere detail of the biblical text. It is, in a real sense, the story of the modern Jew. Entering mainstream society for the first time, and yet still encountering overt or covert anti-Semitism, many nineteenth-century European Jews became ambivalent about their identity. They tried to hide it and to assimilate. They became secular Marranos. It did not work. The more they strove to be like everyone else, the more conspicuous they were, and the stronger anti-Semitism grew. They themselves lost much in the process – not only their Jewish heritage itself, but also the simple capacity to know and take pride in who they were. Tragically, the confusion and emotional investment was so deep that many repeated the hesitancy of Lot: many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy the Jews.

The lives of Lot and Abraham exemplify for all time the contrast between ambivalence and the security that comes from knowing who one is and why. Lot, who tried to become someone else, found himself regarded by his neighbours as an alien, an arriviste, an interloper, a parvenu. To his own sons-in-law he was a "joker." Abraham lived a different kind of life. He fought a war on behalf of his neighbours. He prayed for them. But he lived apart, true to his faith, his mission and his covenant with God. Yet even as he called himself a "stranger and sojourner" (23:4), the Hittites saw him as "a prince of God in our midst" (23:6). That equation has not changed. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism. Never be ambivalent about who and what you are.