Covenant & Conversation

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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Vayera

WRITTEN BY RABBI SACKS IN 5768 (2007–2008)

The Music of Ambivalence

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?"). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the *shalshelet*. It appears three times in Bereishit, each time at a moment of crisis for the individual concerned.[1] In each case it signifies an existential crisis. The agent is called on to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend, but he finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway on him. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either way will involve letting go of deeply felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. It is a moment of high psychological drama.

The *shalshelet* is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. It was the 16th century commentator Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi (in his commentary to Bereishit 19:16) who best understood 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" (*tenuah me'uvetet*), a mark that repeatedly moves 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.

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. He goes to the city of Haran where Abraham's family remained while Abraham himself went on to the land of Canaan. 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, was the test permitted? Jewish law forbids relying on "omens" (Deut. 18:10, Hullin 95b), and Eliezer may have felt that his test was dangerously close to pagan practice.[2] Ibn Caspi himself suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a

1 The *shalshelet* note does appear a fourth time in the Torah — in Vayikra 8:23, where its significance is less apparent — but we will be focusing on the implication of the three occurrences in Sefer Bereishit.

2 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.

decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 59:9), however, offers the most insightful explanation. Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test but about the whole 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: 'My Lord God, what will You have given me if I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' (Gen. 15:2). Eliezer, at that time, had reason to hope that he would be Abraham's heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges him with the mission to find a wife for his son, he replies, 'What if [*ulai*] the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?' As Ibn Ezra notes (Commentary to Psalm 116:16), the word *ulai* is not always neutral. Sometimes it signifies an eventuality one does not want to happen, but at others it indicates an event one does wish for. Eliezer's "what if" may have been an unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. That would once again place him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham's heir.

It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for a woman to appear who would be God's choice of Isaac's wife.

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 well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph. "Lie with me," she said. But he refused …
>
> Bereishit 39:6-8

Over 'he refused', 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; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'

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] *ephod*, 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 the third case (chronologically the first) in Vayera. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They tell him the city and

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

> The visitors said to Lot, "Who else do you have here — children-in-law, sons, or daughters, or anyone else in the city? Bring them out of here, because we are about to destroy this place. So great is the outcry against them before the Lord that He has sent us to destroy it."
> Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, the men who were betrothed to his daughters, and told them, "Get up and leave this place: the Lord is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought him laughable.
> As dawn was breaking, the angels hurried Lot, "Get up!" they said. "Take your wife and your two daughters here, or you will be swept away amid the city's sin." Still *he hesitated*. So the men seized him, his wife, his two daughters by the hand, and led them safely outside the city, for the Lord had mercy upon him.
>
> Gen. 19:12-16

Over 'he hesitated' is a *shalshelet*.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. We recall that earlier, when he and Abraham agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsmen, 'Lot raised his eyes and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan up to Tzoar was well-watered. It was like the garden of the Lord... So Lot chose for himself the entire plain of the Jordan. He travelled eastward…' (Gen. 13:10-11). He chose to make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that - as the Torah states - at that point its inhabitants 'were evil, great sinners against the Lord' (Gen. 13:13).

When we see Lot in chapter 19, he and his family have already become profoundly assimilated. His daughters are set to marry local men. On the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, 'Lot was sitting in the city gate,' the Sages said that '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. Lot does not see himself, as did Abraham, as a 'stranger and temporary resident'. He has decided to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain. This is henceforth where he belongs — so much so that the visitors have to physically drag him away.

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 (Gen. 19:4-5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot too is, 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 a migrant, and now he is setting himself up as a judge! We'll treat you worse than them."
>
> Gen. 19:9

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, 'But his sons-in-law thought him laughable' (Gen 19:14). 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 'a migrant', and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself in 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 is fundamental to human beings, otherwise it creates unbearable tension. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve - and which is signalled by the *shalshelet* over 'he hesitated'. It was 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. (There were, tragically, many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s who refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them, that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy Jews).

Incidentally, 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.' 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 agonise 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 encountering overt or covert antisemitism, 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 antisemitism 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.

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 'laughable'. 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. What did they think of him? Early in the next sedra – Chayei Sarah - the Hittites call him 'a prince of God in our midst' (Gen. 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.

Around the Shabbat Table



- When does the desire to belong become a danger to our Jewish identity, and how can we distinguish between reasonable integration and maintaining our Judaism?
- Eliezer, Joseph, and Lot each experience a moment of inner conflict. What helps a person act on their deepest convictions when powerful competing desires pull them elsewhere?



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FAMILY EDITION

INSPIRED BY THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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Vayera: The Message and the Messengers

DEVELOPED BY SHOSH HILL

parsha recap

Avraham is visited by three strangers who are in fact angels in disguise, sent by God. Although he is in pain from his brit milah, Avraham hurries to welcome them and gives them a fine meal. One of the angels has come to heal Avraham. Another comes to tell Avraham and his wife Sarah that they will soon have a son. The third angel is on the way to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Amorrah.

As the angels leave, God wonders whether Avraham should be told what will happen to Sodom and Amorrah. He decides that because Avraham will become a great leader who teaches people to do what is right and fair, he deserves to know.

→ What does Avraham's behaviour teach us? Is it possible to be kind even when we are not feeling great ourselves?

→ Why do you think God wanted Avraham to know about the cities before they were destroyed?

a closer look

לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט

"I have chosen him so that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just."
(BEREISHIT 18:19)

RABBI SACKS TEACHES US:

'The Bible tells us very little about Avraham that might explain why he is chosen for the mission he undertakes. It does not call him righteous, as it does in the case of Noach. It does not portray him as a miracle worker, as it does Moshe. The only place in the Bible to explain why Avraham is chosen is this verse. He is chosen because he will hand his way of life on to future generations.'

Source: *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?*, ch. 2.

moral matters

LET'S DISCUSS!

→ How will Avraham 'hand his way of life on to '**future generations**'?

→ How do you think Avraham's example of '**doing what is right and just**' (לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט) can help people today?

→ How can you follow Avraham's example **in your own life**?

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