

THE SHALSHELET: MARK OF AMBIVALENCE

Mois A. Navon

Published in Jewish Thought, OU Publications, Vol.4, Num.1 (5755-6)

Introduction

The Torah represents man's greatest resource for contending with, interacting in and developing from the exigencies of our temporal world.¹ This notion of the Torah as the essential and necessary guide book for man is most poignantly illustrated in the Aggadic dramatization in which Moshe presents his polemic to the angels for man's need of the "heavenly jewel", the Torah:

. . . "L-rd of the universe, what is written in that Torah which Thou intendest to give to me? *I the L-rd your G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt* (Shemoth 20:2). Oh angels, have you gone down into Egypt? Have you served Pharaoh? Then why should the L-rd, blessed be He, give you the Torah? Again, what else is written in this Torah? Is it not written, *You shall have no other G-ds beside Me* (ibid. 3)? Are you living among heathens that you should serve other G-ds? It is further written therein, *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy* (ibid. 8), which means, rest on that day. Are you working that you should have to be commanded to rest? Furthermore, it is written therein, *you shall not swear falsely* (ibid. 7). Are you engaged in business that you should be commanded not to take false oath? Furthermore, *Honor your father and your mother* (ibid. 12). Have you a father and a mother that you should be commanded to honor them? *You shall not murder, you shall no commit adultery, you shall not steal* (ibid. 13). Is there envy and hatred among you that you should be commanded not to do these things? Of what good, therefore, is the Torah to you?"

(Shabbat 88b)

Moshe's winning argument is based solely on distinguishing man's intrinsic need for moral refinement; appropriately Chazal applied to the Torah the fitting appellation: *Tavlin* - corrective to man's base inclination.²

To convey the full potential of this powerful gift, the Lawgiver, upon bestowing the Torah to Moshe and His nation, utilized much more than the mere letters of the text. In its written form the Torah includes among its devices crowns upon the letters from which it is said that "mounds of laws are derived."³ In addition, it includes as part of an oral tradition the exact vocalization and accentuation of the text.⁴ All these elements are not simply ancillary, but rather together with the text as a whole form the authoritative basis for the understanding of the content. The Talmud brings various examples, whereby if the vocalization was not transmitted along with the original text a completely deviant interpretation would result.⁵ Chazal went as far as defining the principle, *Yesh Eim L'Mikrah* - the vocalized text is

authoritative, such that the meaning of the text is to be derived from the vocalized text.⁶ Also of great import to the full understanding of the text is the accentuation with which the text is to be read. The Talmud attributes to King Solomon, over and above his famed wisdom, his ability to “teach the people knowledge” specifically in that he taught them the Torah with the notes of accentuation.⁷

With such a pedagogic system built into the oral transmission of the written text it is no wonder that a comprehensive definition of public readings has been ordained. Though the Torah itself prescribes explicitly only one public reading every seven years,⁸ Moshe established that the Torah be read publicly on Shabbat, Festivals, the first of each month, fast days, and the second and fifth days of every week.⁹ Furthermore Ezra the Scribe instituted that it be read additionally at the Shabbat afternoon service,¹⁰ and later the men of the Great Assembly fixed various other public readings.¹¹ It is thus specifically through the oral reading of the Torah that we attain the fullest appreciation the text can offer.¹²

Let us investigate but one of the notes of accentuation - the shalshet - which appears only a mere four times in the entire Torah. Adding to the significance implied by the rarity of its occurrence, is the unusual demand that the shalshet places upon the reader of the Torah - forcing a threefold extension of the vocalization of the letter it marks. As such, this cantillation draws particular attention from the listening audience; what wisdom is it trying to impart?

LOT - possessed by possessions

The first occurrence arises when Lot *lingers* in Sodom after the angels disclosed to him the city’s imminent destruction: “And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the L-rd being merciful to him: and they brought him out, and set him outside of the city” (BeReshith 19:16). The shalshet occurs over the word “lingered”, the obvious implication of the intonation being to vocally emphasize the literal sense of the word. R. S.R. Hirsch broadens the understanding of the term used for lingering - *vayitmahmah* - in his explication on the meaning of the word. He notes that the word comes from the root, *mahah*, from which is derived *mah*, what, undecided.¹³ Thus the lingering is expanded to include indecision giving the fuller sense of “tarrying in indecision.”¹⁴ In general terms, this occurrence of the shalshet would seem to indicate that it is to connote a lingering by the subject due to some indecision.

Is there contextual support for such a definition; or more specifically, what could motivate such ambivalence in Lot at a time when his very life and that of his family was in immanent danger? Rashi, echoing the Midrash,¹⁵ supplies the answer: “in order to save his property.” So strong were his feelings preoccupied with his property that the verse (BeReshith 19:16) relates that only by the manifest expression of Hashem’s *chemla* - undeserved mercy,¹⁶ was he forcibly removed from the city. Even after Lot had been dragged outside of the city, his thoughts still remained fixated on his possessions¹⁷ such that he had to be urged on by the angel, “escape for your life” (BeReshith 19:17). Thus the definition of the shalshet as intimating a lingering by the subject due to some apprehension to carry out a prescribed action is consistent with the classical interpretation of the narrative.

Analysis of the circumstances which brought Lot to take up residence in the wicked city destined for destruction renders a deeper comprehension of Lot and his dilemma - manifest as lingering. Following a quarrel between Avraham's shepherds and those of Lot due to their overabundant wealth of flocks and herds,¹⁸ Lot, in the interest of continued financial prosperity, selected the most suitable region:¹⁹ "And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw all the district of the Jordan,²⁰ that it was well watered every where, before the L-rd destroyed Sodom and Amorah, even as the garden of the Eternal, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Tzoar. And Lot selected all the district of the Jordan" (BeReshith 13:10-11). It was Lot's proclivity to amass wealth, to the exclusion of moral considerations,²¹ which brought him to the corrupt capital of Sodom in the first place. Consequently, it was his punishment in kind, due to his inability to overcome his capitalistic appetite, that he was to leave his material haven penniless.²² Thus the shalshet does not only come to denote an event based on the subject's apprehension, but furthermore comes to distinguish the event as the culmination of a primary struggle within the subject.

ELI'EZER - a man with a hidden agenda

The second instance of the shalshet is found when Eli'ezer, servant of Avraham, *speaks* to G-d, venturing to elicit a sign that would indicate the proper mate for his master's son: "And he said, Oh L-rd G-d of my master Avraham, I pray thee, cause it to happen before me this day, and show kindness to my master Avraham" (BeReshith 24:12). The shalshet marks the word "said." Taken out of context, it is not immediately obvious what apprehension might be implied in Eli'ezer's petition. However, closer examination of Eli'ezer's position in Avraham's family within the context of the task to which he was entrusted reveals a highly charged conflict of interest.

When Avraham adjures Eli'ezer to seek a wife for his son, he responds, "Perhaps the woman will not come ..." (BeReshith 24:5). The Midrash (*BeR.R.* 59:9) explicates the use of the word "perhaps" to imply a hope that the woman would not follow him - for in fact, Eli'ezer aspired to marry off his *own* daughter into his master's family.²³ Eli'ezer's personal agenda is thus exposed, and consequently the motive for his hesitancy to request Divine intervention is evident. His inner aspiration is so overpowering, that even after he does manage to open his mouth in prayerful entreaty, he contrives such an utterly irrational scheme whereby he attempts to draw inference from a completely unrelated incident to divine the proper mate:²⁴ "Let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, incline thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, 'Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also.' Let the same be she that Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Yitzhak" (Bereshith 24:14). Though some commentators find merit in his formulation, chazal, in both the Talmud and the Midrash, harshly impugn Eli'ezer of making an improper request, which, if not for Divine favor, might have had dire consequences.²⁵ So severe is the Talmud's opinion of Eli'ezer's petition that it is brought as an example of divination forbidden by Torah law.²⁶

This event represented Eli'ezer's bid for greatness, his once in a lifetime opportunity to independently overcome his own passions,²⁷ and thereby realize the virtue of subordinating one's will to a transcendent one, an essential step on the road to spiritual emancipation.²⁸ In

this sense Eli'ezer failed miserably,²⁹ his prayer being the test and manifest symbol of that failure. He was unable, through his own initiative, to utter a pure and unambiguous petition to Hashem which would have incontestably demonstrated his self mastery. Instead he contrived such an indeterminate and enigmatic conglomeration of conditions, that Hashem had to answer him before he was even finished speaking (BeReishith 24:15). As such he remains at best the quintessential servant, a faithful emissary carrying out the *imposed* will of his master, under the ever-present guiding hand of G-d and his angels.³⁰ Once again, this instance of the shalshet further corroborates its use to connote apprehension and distinguishes the event as the climax of an essential character struggle.

YOSEF - caught in the clutches of desire

The third incidence of the shalshet occurs when Yosef *refuses* the seductive advances of his master's wife: "But he refused, and said to his master's wife, Behold, my master knows not what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand" (BeReshith 39:8). The shalshet is found over the word "refused". Employing the definition of the shalshet derived from the first two occurrences, one may postulate that just as Lot lingered, experiencing some apprehension in leaving, and Eli'ezer wavered, experiencing some apprehension in speaking, so too Yosef faltered, experiencing some apprehension in refusing. Appropriately, many aggadot bear out this interpretation of the scene, as the following illustrates:

And it came to pass about this time that he went into the house to do his work (BeReshith 39:11). R. Yochanan said: This teaches that both [Yosef and Potiphar's wife] had the intention of acting immorally. '*He went into the house to do his work*'--Rav and Shemu'el [differ in their interpretation]. One said that it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires. '*And there was none of the men of the house*' (ibid.) --is it possible that there was no man in a huge house like that of this wicked [Potiphar]!--It was taught in the School of R. Yishmael: That day was their feast-day, and they had all gone to their idolatrous temple; but she had pretended to be ill because she thought I shall not have an opportunity like today for Yosef to associate with me. '*And she caught him by his garment saying ...*' (ibid. 12).

(Sotah 36b)³¹

Moreover, it should be remembered that Yosef was in the prime of his youth, a time during which man has a greater disposition to succumb to moral weakness.³² The Midrash pithily notes the tension by posing the question: "Is it possible that Yosef, at seventeen years of age, with all the hot blood of youth, could act thus" (BeR.R. 87:6)? Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that Yosef was very attractive as the verse states: "And Yosef was of beautiful form and beautiful appearance" (BeReshith 39:6). The Midrash takes great pains to illustrate this fact graphically:

It once happened that the Egyptian women gathered to see the beauty of Yosef. What did the wife of Potiphar do? She handed an ethrog to each one, and to each one a knife, whereupon she called to Yosef to stand before

them. When they saw his beauty their [knives slipped] and they cut their fingers.

(*Tan. VaYeishev:5*)³³

The Rabbis point out that there is no greater proof of faithfulness than the case of a *handsome* bachelor living in a neighborhood of seductresses and yet he does not sin.³⁴ The embroilment is further intensified by the fact that the mistress of the house is passionately attracted to Yosef as is plain from the text, “and she said, Lie with me.” Chazal underscore the unabated tenacity of the temptress, portraying a desperate seduction wherein she uses every device at her command:

It was told of Yosef the virtuous that the wife of Potiphar every day endeavored to entice him with words. The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening, those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning. She said to him: Yield to me! He said: No. She said: I shall have you imprisoned. He said: *The L-rd releases the bound* (Tehillim 146:7). She said: I shall bend thy proud stature [with slave labor]. He replied: *The L-rd raises those who are bowed down* (ibid. 8). She said: I shall blind your eyes. He replied: *The L-rd opens the eyes of the blind* (ibid.). She offered him a thousand talents of silver to make him yield to her, to *lie with her, to be near her* (BeReshith 39:10), but he would not listen to her; not to ‘*lie with her*’ in this world, not to ‘*be with her*’ in the world to come.

(*Yoma 35b*)³⁵

A brief look into Yosef’s past leading up to this event will elucidate to what end did he find himself in such a severe predicament. Yosef is introduced as a young talebearer³⁶ who evokes the hatred and jealousy of his brothers with his visions of grandeur (BeReshith 37:5-11). However, for all his immaturity,³⁷ he does evince potential for moral greatness as demonstrated by his forthright response to his father’s call to “check on his brothers” all the while knowing their hate for him could be mortally dangerous.³⁸ Subsequently he is thrown into the pit and then sold as a slave (BeReshith 39:20-28). It would seem that this traumatic sequence of events would have a strong effect on the character of the young self styled potentate; appropriately he does exhibit allegiance to G-d, for even in pagan Egypt “the name of the L-rd is on his lips.”³⁹ Yet as soon as he is promoted, he soon forgets his home and his education.⁴⁰ He thus falls into moral complacency and begins to delight in his new found appointment, as is evidenced by the midrashic comment on the contextually late description⁴¹ of Yosef’s good looks:

As soon as he saw himself a ruler, he began to pamper himself with food and drink and curl his hair. Said the Holy One blessed be He: Thy father mourneth, notwithstanding thou dost curlest thine hair . . . I shall arouse the bear against thee. Forthwith “his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Yosef.”

(*BeR.R. 86:7*)⁴²

And thus Yosef is put to the test. Will he choose power, affluence and all the base material rewards that accompany such a position; or will he reject them in favor of morality, justice and the G-d of his fathers. In the end he emphatically rejects the advances of the temptress

and all that she represents stating unequivocally, “How can I do this great wickedness and sin against G-d” (BeReshith 39:9).

It is this test that sets Yosef apart, and it is his scrupulous forbearance demonstrated by this very trial that enabled him to go on to attain the title of Shepherd of Yisra’el; as the Talmud (*Sotah* 36b) comments on this trial: *‘From thence is the shepherd the stone of Yisra’el’* (BeReshith 49:24) -- from there was he worthy to be made a shepherd as it is said *‘Give ear Oh Shepherd of Yisra’el, Thou that leadest the flock of Yosef’* (Tehillim 82:2). Chazal throughout the Aggadic literature unambiguously paint a picture of a difficult character test, and of a refusal which in fact required all the moral fortitude the young and handsome Yosef could muster.⁴³ This incident reinforces the definition of the shalsholet as signifying a lingering eventuating from a primary personal trial requiring moral resolve and *mesirut nefesh* - giving up one’s own desires in deference to those of Hashem.

MOSHE - longing for the crown of priesthood

The fourth, and final appearance of the shalsholet occurs in the eighth chapter of VaYikra which describes the ritual inauguration of the Temple priests. The shalsholet designates the word *vayishchat* “and he slaughtered”, describing Moshe’s action affecting the priestly inauguration: “And he slaughtered it; and Moshe took of its blood, and put it upon the tip of Aharon’s right ear, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot” (VaYikra 8:23). Ostensibly, it might seem most difficult to apply the heretofore established understanding of the shalsholet to this case. The word “to slaughter”, in all its various forms occurs so many times, in this the book of priestly rites - of which ritual slaughter is fundamental, that one might impassively overlook any particular instance of its use. However, by dutifully applying the previously acquired definition of the shalsholet a clearer and deeper picture of the event it denotes can be discerned. The resultant picture is one of action done apprehensively - with *mesirut nefesh*, of slaughter done with lingering - yet with deference to Hashem.

Though at first glance this interpretation might not be readily apparent, a deeper look into the text reveals that this is exactly the case. cursory reading of the text relates a series of directives of G-d, obediently executed by Moshe to initiate the new priests - Aharon and his sons. Upon careful examination however, the underlying emotions of the event are exposed. The section begins with G-d’s command to take Aharon and his sons and the requisite offerings, and gather the congregation at the tent of meeting. The subsequent verse records that “Moshe did as the Eternal commanded him” (VaYikra 8:4). Moshe then informs the congregation, “This is the thing which the Eternal commanded to be done” (VaYikra 8:5). A seemingly innocuous statement, until we understand its implication revealed by Rashi’s comment, “The things you see me doing in your presence has the Holy One, blessed be He, bidden me to do, and do not think that I am doing them for my own honor or for my brother’s honor.” Rashi’s comment reveals that Moshe is hereby informing the people that the procedure to follow was done *solely* at the behest of G-d, and was not done of his own initiative.⁴⁴ From here we see Moshe’s explicit deference to the will of G-d. Yet what could be so difficult in carrying out this particular procedure that Moshe had to sublimate his wishes? The Midrash supplies the motive:

R. Shemu'el bar Nachman said: All the seven days of the [burning] bush, the Holy One, blessed be He, was trying to persuade Moshe to go on His mission to Egypt. This is [indicated in] what is written, "Also from yesterday, also from the day before, also since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant (Shemoth 4:10)", which makes six days, and on the seventh day he said to Him, "Oh L-rd, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of whom Thou wilt send (Shemoth 4:13)." Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moshe: As thou livest, I shall tie this in thy skirts [indicating retribution]. When did He repay him? ... R. Chelbo said: All the seven days of consecration Moshe ministered in the office of High Priest, and he imagined it was his. On the seventh day He said to him: It belongs not to thee but to thy brother Aharon.

(VaY.R. 11:6)⁴⁵

The scene at the burning bush begins with Hashem informing Moshe that He had decided to deliver the Jews out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey (Shemoth 3:8). Hashem then solicits Moshe to be the earthly executor of this Divine plan (Shemoth 3:10). What follows is a series of objections, each of which the Eternal overrules (Shemoth 3:11-4:13). Finally, "The wrath of the Eternal glowed against Moshe, and He said, *Is not Aharon the Levi your brother? I know that he can speak well*" (Shemoth 4:14). Rashi provides the Talmudic (*Zevachim* 102a)⁴⁶ analysis to explain the implication of Hashem's response:

R. Yehoshua the son of Korcha said: wherever the term "and [G-d's] wrath glowed" occurs in the Scripture it leaves a definite impression [i.e. mention of punishment of some kind follows], but here no such result is mentioned, for we do not find that any punishment came in consequence of that anger. R. Jose said to him: Even in this case a definite result is mentioned, viz., "Is not Aharon the Levi thy brother?" - [implying] that he was destined to be a Levite and not a priest, - and I intended the priesthood should proceed from you. Now, however, this shall not be so, but he will be the Priest and you the Levite.

There is subtle yet telling evidence of Moshe's disappointment over being removed from the position he was originally destined. Though VaYikra chapter eight narrates the actual event of the priestly installation, it is the portion of TeTzave (Shemoth 28-29) which contains the directives which define the inauguration. Most appropriately, it is from this portion, and this portion alone since his birth, that Moshe's name is conspicuously absent. The Ba'al HaTurim (on Shemoth 27:20) comments that Moshe's name is missing from the text for he was pained by the thought that he would not attain the coveted high priesthood for which he was originally destined.⁴⁷

The depth of the test which Moshe was to undergo in the installation of the new priests can now be understood. It was not simply a procedure of installing his brother into a position of great honor, but rather that he was installing him into what was to have been *his* position of honor. The Or HaChayyim, in commenting on the unusual phraseology of G-d's command to Moshe to install his brother as high priest, explains:

“And you shall bring close to you” (Shemoth 28:1). . . . G-d said to Moshe at the time of the event [of the installation], “you”, meaning not only that I command you but more so that you yourself “bring close” Aharon in your stead; and do this [with such eagerness] as if it were your own will, for this [action] is in place of a sacrifice to atone for your brazenness before Hashem. And He said, “to you” to atone for you in your bringing close [installing] Aharon and transferring your greatness to him, you have no greater sacrifice than this.

Thus the installation procedure was the very means to effect the necessary atonement required as a result of his obstinate refusal⁴⁸ to carry out the command of G-d. Since he had rejected the will of G-d, he was now to execute the will of G-d in a matter which he clearly would not have initiated. Moreover he must perform it with all the alacrity that would accompany the execution of something that was originating of his own desire.

The final inauguration day is introduced in the text as “And it was on the day of the eighth” (VaYikra 9:1). The Or HaChayyim, employing the Talmud (*Megillah* 10b), notes that the usage of the phrase “And it was on the day” comes to denote pain. He insightfully postulates that perhaps the pain of this day was that of Moshe who had to undergo this most difficult of trials, giving up his foreordained greatness. The Or HaChayyim amplifies on the difficulty of the test explaining that the test was intensified by three circumstances through which Moshe demonstrated the utter “completeness of his desire to do the will of the Creator, to the extinction of his own feelings.” 1) He followed through on the command with all due expedience, not delaying in the least. 2) The procedure was a drawn out and gradual one, performed first on Aharon and then on Aharon’s sons. 3) It was done in the presence of a large and important audience, the “elders of Yisra’el”.

As an epilogue⁴⁹ to the seven days of pomp and ceremony, with the trying installation being complete, the text now describes the new priests’ first day in office. The instructions are given for Aharon, his sons, and the general populous to bring their requisite offerings (VaYikra 9:2-4). The big day has arrived - the entire population along with the elders and the new priests gather - the tension mounts as all await the new high priest to begin. The Torah records the moment as follows: “And Moshe said unto Aharon, *Approach unto the altar, and offer thy sin offering, and thy burnt offering, and make expiation for thyself and for the people; and offer the offering of the people, and make expiation for them; as the Eternal commanded*” (VaYikra 9:7). Rashi, following the *Sifra*, notes that Moshe’s command to his brother, “Approach the altar” is superfluous. He explains that Moshe’s added directive is indicative of Aharon’s diffidence to assume the priestly mantle.⁵⁰ Perhaps Aharon’s hesitancy to finally commence in his new position can be understood in light of the Or HaChayyim’s elucidation that Aharon was in fact the vehicle for Moshe’s trial. Perhaps Aharon, the man whom the Mishnah (*Avoth* 1:12) describes as *Pursuer of Peace*, was also feeling the pain and struggle his dear brother had gone through.⁵¹ As a consequence, he too experienced some apprehension at this portentous turning point. Moshe however assures,⁵² persuades⁵³ and finally commands, Aharon to “approach the altar” ending, “as the Eternal commanded”. This illustration comes as a final emphatic declaration that Moshe had indeed passed the test in that he desired that which Hashem desired.

Thus the inauguration procedure was a truly difficult test of Moshe's moral mettle. The moment of truth, as it were, came at the final sacrifice, the one which would forever remove Moshe from the officiating priesthood. As explained by the text, there were three animals offered (on each of the seven inaugural days). The first was a bull designated as a sin offering (VaYikra 8:14), "and Moshe slaughtered it" (VaYikra 8:15). The second was a ram designated as a burnt offering (VaYikra 8:18), "and Moshe slaughtered it" (VaYikra 8:19). The third and final offering was a ram designated as a *miluim* offering (VaYikra 8:22), variously translated as an installation or consecration offering. Rashi explains that it was so labeled for it was by means of this ram that the priests were fully (*m'mal'in*) and completely installed in their priestly office, "and Moshe slaughtered it" (VaYikra 8:23).⁵⁴ This *vayishchat* is the last recorded slaughter attributed to Moshe - the next *vayishchat* occurs twenty-one verses later, executed by Aharon. It is this final sacrifice, this momentous *vayishchat*, that is so poignantly denoted by the shalsholet. With its long extended note one can feel, if for only a second, the anguish on the first rung of the note, the resolve and forbearance on the second rung, and finally the humility and self-triumph that distinguishes true strength⁵⁵, true *mesirat nefesh*, true greatness.

Conclusion

The shalsholet arouses our attention at these four incidents which incisively illustrate the archetypal struggles which man must battle within himself. Such are the character traits for which, if one does not overcome, are said to "remove a man from the world." The Mishnah (*Avoth* 4:21) states, "Jealousy, lusting, and [seeking] honor remove a man from the world." Jealousy (*kina*), rooted in the word *koneh*, to acquire, indicates man's base desire for material possessions.⁵⁶ The story of Lot and his obsessive lingering over his property vividly depicts the battle over avarice. Lusting (*ta'avah*), is a word used to describe man's proclivity for physical gratification, especially sexual.⁵⁷ The narrative of Yosef's difficult refusal of the lascivious temptress provides an emotional paradigm of the struggle to overcome this desire. Honor (*kavod*), denotes the desire for acknowledgment of achievement, and is especially satisfied through attainment of an eminent position.⁵⁸ Moshe's difficult relinquishment of the exalted priesthood serves as an eloquent example of the battle to sublimate this character trait.

In the case of Eli'ezer, the Midrashim are replete with references to his weakness in all three of these areas. "R. Shimon said: ... This servant is suspected of all the transgressions of the Torah, and deceit is in this servant, as it is said, 'He is a Canaanite, the balances of deceit are in his hand; he loveth to defraud' (Hos. 12:8)" (*Pir.DeR.E.*16). Perhaps the independent, yet analogous⁵⁹ teaching in *Avoth* (2:11), "An evil eye, the evil inclination, and hatred of others remove a man from the world" is most appropriately applied to Eli'ezer. Evidence of Eli'ezer's penchant to acquire (*koneh*) material wealth (especially of others), commonly referred to as the "evil eye,"⁶⁰ is revealed by the Midrash in Eli'ezer's declaration, "and I shall be the heir of Avraham" (*Pir.DeR.E.* 31). Of *ta'avah*, physical lusting (particularly sexual) indicated by the evil inclination,⁶¹ the Midrash informs that upon Eli'ezer's return with Rivkah, Avraham suspects his servant of the most severe abuse of this drive, "See, lest he defiled her..." (*Pir.DeR.E.* 16). His aspiration for honor, which manifests in its most negative form as "hatred towards others,"⁶² is found in Eli'ezer's egocentric proclamation to Yishmael as they awaited Avraham's sacrifice of Yitzchak: "He [Avraham] has already driven

thee [Yishmael] out like a woman divorced from her husband, and he has sent thee away to the wilderness, but I am his servant, serving him by day and by night . . .” (*Pir.DeR.E.* 31).⁶³

“Jealousy, lusting, and seeking honor” are singled out by the Mishna, and, as I have submitted, distinguished by the shalshet, for overcoming them is fundamental to man’s development and fulfillment of purpose in this world. The Rambam (on *Avot* 4:21) explains that, “from a combination of these traits, or any one of them, faith in the Torah necessarily suffers; and thus neither intellectual achievement nor character refinement can be achieved.”⁶⁴ This notion is best summarized by R. S.R. Hirsch in his commentary to *Avot* (4:21):

God caused man to live in the world and made him fit for it. It is only in connection with this world and through the endeavor to utilize his energies in the service of the world and its welfare that man fulfills his purpose. The vices listed here, however, make selfish interest the sole purpose of him whom they dominate and so they cause him to clash with the rest of the world, for under such circumstances the world has value to him only as long as it will cater to his desires. Thus he forfeits the destiny for which God made him.

Noteworthy is the fact that both Yosef and Moshe overcame their inclinations of their own volition. Lot however, had to be forcibly dragged from the scene by an angel (*BeReshith* 39:8); and similarly did Eli’ezer require the accompaniment of an angel to insure his performance (*BeReshith* 24:7). Appropriately, Moshe and Yosef are counted among Yisra’el’s shepherds, Lot and Eli’ezer, conspicuously are not. There exists a tendency to take for granted the greatness of our exalted paragons, however in so doing we often lose what is really to be gained from having such noble models. It is not in looking up to their perfection that we learn from their example, but in examining their path and their struggle to that perfection that we stand to gain the most. And it is only by maintaining an ever attentive ear to every nuance of our heritage, as profoundly demonstrated by the shalshet, that we stand to reap all of its didactic rewards.

-
- 1 *Kiddushin* 30b. Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*, 1:4:9, 4:8:6. Ramchal, *Mesillath Yesbarim*, Ch.1. R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, p.178.
- 2 *Baba Bathra* 16a, *Kiddushin* 30b.
- 3 *Menachot* 29b.
- 4 The following is brought in the Talmud as proof that the accentuation is a tradition from Moshe: “R. Ika bar Abin said in the name of R. Hannanel who spoke in the name of Rav: What is the meaning of, *And they read in the book, in the law of G-d, distinctly, and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading* (Neh. 8:8)? *And they read in the book, in the law of G-d* refers to Scripture (*Mikra*); *distinctly* refers to translation (*Targum*); *and they gave the sense* refers to the division of the sentences; *so that they understood the reading* refers to the accentuation (*Ta'amim*)” (*Nedarim* 37b). See also *Megillah* 3a, *Yer. Megillah* 4:1, *BeR.R.* 36. Also in a festival prayer book of a disciple of Rashi: “the descriptions of the melodies were said to Moshe...but the signs of the melodies were set by the Soferim” (Simha ben Samuel of Vitry, France, disciple of Rashi, in *Machzor Vitry* quoted in *Encyclopedia Judaica* Vol.16, p.1417).
- 5 *Nedarim* 37b-38a “R. Yitzchak said ...”
- 6 *Sanhedrin* 4a-4b.
- 7 “Rava expounded on the verse, 'And besides that *Kobeletz* was wise, he also taught the people knowledge...! (*Kobeletz* 12:9). *He also taught the people knowledge* implies that he taught them with notes of accentuation...” (*Eruvin* 21b).
- 8 *Devarim* 31:10-12.
- 9 *Bava Kama* 82a. Rambam, *Yad Hil. Tefillah* 12:1-2. Mishna *Megillah* 3:6. *Megillah* 31a-32a.
- 10 *Bava Kama* 82a. Rambam, *Yad Hil. Tefillah* 12:1-2.
- 11 Rambam, *Yad. Hil. Tefillah* 12-13. Mishna *Megillah* 3:4-6. *Megillah* 29a-32a
- 12 The Rambam (*Yad Hil. Tefillah* 12:1) explicitly states the *takanot* of public readings were in order that the people “hear” the Torah. The Ramchal expresses this notion in more spiritual terms: “It is important to realize that one of the major rectification's that the prophets selected for Yisra'el was the concept of [the public] reading the Torah” (*Derech Hashem*, 4:8:6).
- 13 R. S.R. Hirsch, *Commentary on BeReshith*, p.336. See also Ibn Ezra on *BeReshith* 19:16.
- 14 R. S.R. Hirsch, *Commentary on BeReshith*, p.336.
- 15 “He kept on delaying, exclaiming, 'what a loss of gold and silver and precious stones!’” (*BeR.R.* 50:11).
- 16 “*Chamal*, . . . , designates as a rule, undeserved mercy, or at any rate such mercy which only arises out of compassion” (R. S.R. Hirsch, *Commentary on BeReshith*, pp.336-7). “...Not in his merit” (Ramban ad loc.). See also Sforno ad loc..
- 17 “Let it suffice for you to save your lives; do not give a thought to your possessions” (Rashi on *BeReshith* 19:17). “Lot was returning after his possessions” (Hizkuni *ibid.*). See also *Yer. Sanhedrin* 10:8.
- 18 Hizkuni on *BeReshith* 13:6. Rashi *ibid.*.
- 19 Ramban on *BeReshith* 13:10. Sforno on *BeReshith* 13:11.

-
- 20 “A land for herds” Radak on BeReshith 13:10. “A vegetative region [for grazing]” Ibn Ezra on BeReshith 13:10.
- 21 “He wandered away from the Originator of the universe, saying, 'I want neither Avraham nor his G-d'” (BeR.R. 41:7). See also Rashi on BeReshith 13:11 and 13:13.
- 22 *Torah Temimah* on BeReshith 19:17.
- 23 See also Rashi on BeReshith 24:39.
- 24 The Midrash (BeR.R. 59:12) remarks in the name of R. Huna, “When a man goes to take a wife and he hears a dog barking, can he understand what they are saying?” R. Moshe Ashkenazi, in his commentary Yede Moshe, clarifies this midrash explaining, “R. Huna condemned Eli'ezer's test for one could just as reasonably attempt to draw an inference [to take a specific action upon hearing] the barking of dogs!” (quoted in BeR.R., Vol. II, Soncino, p.524).
- 25 “Four asked improperly ...Eli'ezer: 'So let it come to pass, that the damsel' - even a bondmaid!?” (BeR.R. 60:3).
 “R. Shemu'el bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Three [men] made haphazard requests, two of them were fortunate in the reply they received and one was not, namely: Eli'ezer, the servant of Avraham; Sha'ul, the son of Kish; and Yephtha the Gileadite. Eli'ezer, the servant of Avraham, as it is written, *So let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, 'Let down thy pitcher etc.'* She might have been lame or blind, but he was fortunate in the answer given to him in that Rivkah chanced to meet him. ...” (*Taanit* 4a).
- 26 *Chullin* 95b. “...the action to be taken was entirely dependent upon the happening of a certain event, and this is prohibited [by VaYikra 19:26]” (R. I. Epstein, *ibid.*, n.2). Rambam, *Yad Hil. Avodat Kochavim* 11:4.
- 27 It is his inability to overcome his own passions, to intrinsically change, which links Eli'ezer inextricably to be defined as “accursed.” (see R. Chaim Eisen, “Unmasking Avraham's Slave”, *Jewish Thought*, Vol.1, Num.1, pp.70-1).
- 28 By serving a master who himself subjugates his will to the Transcendent, the slave is to learn, incorporate, and hopefully spiritually develop by emulation. (see R. Chaim Eisen, “Unmasking Avraham's Slave”, *Jewish Thought*, Vol.1, Num.1, pp.53,59). The only way to achieve the next step is for the individual to sublimate his will, not just to his temporal master, but to the Heavenly Master of the universe. It is this ineptitude to internalize the teaching/example of the personal role model and take the crucial step of innovation which shackles the slave to his status (*ibid.*, pp.67-72). It should be noted that even though Eli'ezer is designated by the midrash as “having overcome his passions” this is really only a superficial praise as can be noted by Avraham's concern that he may have raped Rivkah. (see *ibid.*, p.69).
- 29 See R. Chaim Eisen, “Unmasking Avraham's Slave”, *Jewish Thought*, Vol.1, Num.1, p.82, n.89.
- 30 “G-d will send an angel...” (BeReshith 24:7). An angel came and killed Betuel (Rashi on BeReshith 24:55). “G-d contracted the road for Eli'ezer” (BeR.R. 59:11).
- 31 “At a time when there was no one in the house, and yet he was not concerned that he was bringing himself into a test, it is as if he consented in his heart to listen to her” (*Torah Temimah* on 39:11). See also BeR.R. 87:7.
- 32 The Rambam, in describing perfect repentance, clearly intimates that the sexual drive is far more powerful in youth than in older age, bringing a verse from *Kohleth* (12:1): “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth before the bad days come, and the years arrive when you will say, *I have no pleasure in them.*” (Rambam, *Yad Hil. Teshuvah* 2:1).
- 33 See also BeR.R. 98:18.

-
- 34 *Tan. VaYeishev*:5.
- 35 See also *Tan. VaYeishev*:5, (ibid. 9). *BeR.R.* 87:1.
- 36 *BeReshith* 37:2. See also Rashi, Rashbam (ibid.).
- 37 Though he was already seventeen, he is still referred to as a boy (*BeR.R.* 84:7).
- 38 Ramban on *BeReshith* 37:14. Rashi on *BeReshith* 37:13. See also R. A. Silverman comment to Rashi (ibid. n.4); *BeR.R.* 84:13. (see also R. Freedman on ibid. n.3).
- 39 Rashi on *BeReshith* 39:3. *Tan. VaYeishev*:8. *BeR.R.* 86:5.
- 40 *BeR.R.* 79:5 and 86:5.
- 41 Such an elementary character description would normally be expected with the introduction of the personality (N. Leibowitz, *Studies in BeReshith*, p.413).
- 42 See also Rashi on *BeReshith* 39:6.
- 43 “There is no one more faithful than a handsome bachelor living in a neighborhood of seductresses that does not sin, and in this regard there is no one more faithful than Yosef” (*Tan. VaYeishev*:5).
“Yosef had intended on associating with her, however a vision of his father's face appeared to him and he resisted temptation and did not sin” (Rashi on *BeReshith* 39:8).
Sotah 43a refers to Yosef as “he who overcame his passions.”
“R. Menahema said in R. Ammi's name: He saw his mother's face, which cooled his blood” (*BeR.R.* 98:20).
“Yosef refused even though she was his master's wife and he feared her” (Ramban on *BeReshith* 39:8).
See also *BeR.R.* 87:5-9; *Sotah* 36b; *Tan. VaYeishev*:9; *BeR.R.* 86:4; *Yoma* 35b.
- 44 In passages where the words, “this is the thing that Hashem has commanded” occur they are to be followed by a statement of what is commanded. Since such a statement of command is missing here, it is evident that the words are not intended to inform the people of a command which G-d had given. Rather, they are a declaration to the people that what he was about to do he did at G-d's bidding, and not on his own initiative. (R. A. Silverman n.3 on Rashi on *VaYikra* 8:5).
- 45 See also *Sb.R.* 3:14, *Tan. Shmini*:3.
- 46 See also *Sb.R.* 3:16-17. (Note: though Rashi quotes R. Yosi, *Zevachim* 102a has it as R. Shimon bar Yohai.)
- 47 The Ba'al Haturim also brings the Midrash which explains the absence of Moshe's name as response to his personal request to be blotted out of “Your book”. These two explanations are not in any way contradictory, nor does the veracity of one diminish from that of the other. Both could be equally true, the one circumstance (of the missing name) providing the expression for both cases.
- 48 This refusal on the part of Moshe should not be misconstrued to be a defiant rejection of the Divine demand. Rather, as Chazal point out, “[Moshe] wished to pay respect to Aharon; for Moshe said: Before I arose, my brother Aharon prophesied to them in Egypt for eighty years” (*Sb.R.* 3:16). Nevertheless, this was not the time for personal considerations, no matter how altruistic, as is evident in that it evoked Hashem's “wrath”.
- 49 Rashi, quoting *Sifra*, connects this verse, “And it came to pass on the eighth day” (*VaYikra* 8:1), with the preceding section describing the seven days of installation.
- 50 Rashi on *VaYikra* 9:7.

-
- 51 “Moshe called to Aharon, 'So has the Holy One Blessed be He said to me, the portion of the High Priesthood is yours.' Aharon responded, 'You toiled in the Mishkan and I will be made High Priest?!'” (*Tan. Shmini:3*).
- 52 “[Moshe] said to [Aharon], even though you will be high priest, it is as if I will be. Just as you rejoiced in my greatness, so I rejoice in your greatness” (*Tan. Shmini:3*).
- 53 Ramban on VaYikra 9:1.
- 54 See also Ramban on VaYikra 8:22.
- 55 “Ben Zoma says ... Who is strong? He who conquers himself (his desires)” (*Avoth 4:1*).
- 56 Rabeinu Yonah, *Commentary to Avoth*.
- 57 Rabeinu Yonah, *Commentary to Avoth*.
- 58 Rabeinu Yonah, *Commentary to Avoth*. See *Menachoth* 109b wherein the son's of Shimon HaTzadik fight for the “honor” of the high priesthood. See also Rav Ovadiah MiBartenura on *Avoth 4:21*.
- 59 *Tosfot Yom Tov* on *Avoth 4:21* (quoted in Kehati). *Sefath Emeth* on *Avoth 2:11*.
- 60 “The evil eye . . . denotes the eye on a person who is bent on pursuing wealth, and is constantly looking at the possessions of his neighbors” (Me'am Lo'ez on *Avoth 2:11*). “The evil eye is analogous to *Kina*” (*Sefath Emeth* on *ibid.*). See also Rav Ovadiah MiBartenura on *ibid.*
- 61 “The evil inclination denotes the desire to pursue worldly pleasures” (Me'am Lo'ez on *Avoth 2:11*). “The evil inclination is analogous to *Ta'avah*” (*Sefath Emeth* on *ibid.*).
- 62 “When a person pursues honor, he mistreats his fellowman, embarrasses him publicly, and gains honor through dishonoring others” (Me'am Lo'ez on *Avoth 4:21*). “The hatred of others is analogous to *Kavod*” (*Sefath Emeth* on *Avoth 2:11*).
- 63 Eli'ezer's intrinsic hatred toward others is most strongly conveyed by Chazal's (*BeR.R.* 59:9 and 60:7; *VaY.R.* 17:5) identification of Eli'ezer with Kenan. Kenan, whom Noah pronounced “accursed” for his involvement in the perpetration of Noah's physical disgrace, is impugned along with his father Ham for having no regard for the sanctity of another human being. The Kena'ani legacy to which Eli'ezer is heir, degrades man to a “utilitarian commodity”. (See R. Chaim Eisen, “Unmasking Avraham's Slave”, *Jewish Thought*, Vol.1, Num.1, pp.48-52).
- 64 “All sins of the world stem from jealousy, lust, and honor” (Me'am Lo'ez on *Avoth 4:21*).