

TWO NOTES ON THE EXCEPTIONAL *SHALSHELET*

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THE FOUR INSTANCES OF SHALSHELET IN THE TORAH

The cantillation mark *shalshélet* appears only four times in the Torah. The root of this word is *shin-lamed-shin*, meaning three, and, in the Ashkenazic tradition as well as in many Sephardic traditions, the melody ascends and descends three times. It appears three times in the book of Genesis and one time in the book of Leviticus. In the *Mesorah* it is referred to as *Mar'imín u'Mafsikín* (*Mesorah Gedolah*, Lev. 8:23). *Mar'imín* means thunderous, and *Mafsikín* means pausing, terms that appear to describe the sound of its melody.¹ In this article, we will see how all four *shalshélet* in the Torah consistently relate to the texts in which they are used.

These are the four instances of the *shalshélet* in the Torah:

1. Genesis 19:16: *Shalshélet* appears in the story of Lot in Sodom, when the angels tell Lot that he must leave the city, for God is about to destroy it. The word with the *shalshélet* is the first word in the verse, *Still he delayed* [vayitmahameha]. *So the men* [angels] *seized his hand* . . . Although not directly mentioning the *shalshélet*, many commentators note here that Lot hesitated to leave and responded in an unusually slow manner. This approach is found for example in Pseudo-Jonathan, Rashi, Ibn-Ezra, and Radak on this verse. This is based in Genesis Rabbah 50:11, that Lot was concerned about losing all the property he had accumulated and was hesitant to leave Sodom. This hesitation is well indicated by the up and down melody of the *shalshélet*. This is the first instance of *shalshélet* and sets the tone for it representing a passage of time.

2. Genesis 24:12: The servant of the patriarch Abraham is on a mission to find a spouse for Isaac, Abraham's son. The first word of the sentence has a *shalshélet*: *And he said* [vayomar], *O Lord* . . . Here again the melody can indicate the passage of time, as we find explicitly stated a few verses later, *He had scarcely finished speaking when Rebecca....came out with her jar on her shoulder* (Gen. 24:15). The *shalshélet* can indicate that he prayed for the

entire time, wondering if his prayers would be answered and if he would find a suitable wife for his master's son, until Rebecca appeared.

3. Genesis 39:8: Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, who was enslaved in Egypt, was subjected to attempted seductions by Potiphar's wife. At an opportune time when no one else was at home, she tried particularly hard to attract him. Joseph was struggling with his own sexual desire and the knowledge that it would be very wrong to surrender to it. The first word of the sentence has the *shalsholet*: *But he refused* [vayema'en] . . . Ramban depicts the struggle as one between Joseph's fear of Potiphar's wife and his fear of God. Bachye, on the other hand, depicts it as a struggle between his heart (his desire) and his knowledge of what was right and proper. Again the *shalsholet*: indicates a prolonged event, here it is Joseph's struggle.

In all three of these instances, the explanations are straightforward, and they see in the narrative similar associations with temporal extension. The *shalsholet* represents a prolonged period of time, rather than an internal deliberation per se. Of course in the case of Joseph, it is the internal conflict that takes a long period of time, but the *shalsholet* is focused on the passage of time. Note that Joseph's refusal takes about 40 words in the narrative rather than a brief statement, as we indeed find later in the case of the subsequent refusals which are summed up with *he did not yield to her request to lie beside her* (Gen. 39:10). The focus is on the time lapse in the narrative. Additionally, in Genesis 19:16 Lot may very well be undergoing an internal struggle about leaving Sodom behind, but the word *he delayed* [vayitmahamecha] which has the *shalsholet* is always used in Tanach to indicate a temporal delay (Gen. 43:10, Ex. 12:39, Jud. 3:26, Ps. 119:60) rather than a conflict.

However, the one *shalsholet* in Leviticus differs from the other three, for it is associated neither with a prolonged act nor even with an inner struggle.

4. Leviticus 8:23. The verse describes the consecration of Aaron as a High Priest, here through use of the ram of consecration. The first word has a *shalsholet*: *and it was slaughtered* [vayishchat]. The verse further states, *Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot*. In other contexts, interpreters have warned us to be careful in the act of slaughtering; to pull the knife continuously and fast in order not to transgress by doing one

of the prohibited acts during a slaughter, such as delaying, or carrying out sporadic, rather than continuous, etc.² However, one cannot interpret the first word as indicative of a prolonged slaughter, during the course of which the animal suffers excessively. A *shochet* must perform the act quickly! So this explanation cannot logically fit the verse at hand. Some interpreters point out that this is Moshe's last act as a priest, and the prolonging inherent in the *shalshélet* concerns his state of mind, marking his realization that he will never carry out this act again (see TB *Zevahim* 102a). However, if that was the intent, we would have expected the *shalshélet* to be on the word *cohen* (priest) somewhere else or on the actual last act of offering that Moses performed (Lev. 8:29) and not on *vayishchat* here.

A common interpretation of the *shalshélet* here is that it refers to the idea in *Torat Cohanim*, quoted by Rashi, that Aaron was uncomfortable being chosen to be the High Priest and was hesitating until Moses explicitly told him *Come forward to the altar* (Lev. 9:7). However the verse on which the midrash and Rashi discuss this is a chapter after the verse in which the *shalshélet* appears.

Recently Zecharia Goren³ dealt with this very issue, and he wrote [my translation]: "In this verse we have three verbs (slaughter, took, gave), but the most important part of the verse is the blood [smearing] on the ear lobe, the thumb, and the large toe. The *shalshélet* is separating the first act from the rest of the acts." However, the *shalshélet* does not act in this way, as a separator, in the other examples. Goren's article also mentions that J.M. Jafet⁴ and Dr. J.M. Imanueli⁵ both stated that the relationship of the trope to the content of the text is clear in the first three of the four instances of *shalshélet* in the Torah, but not in the fourth.

It appears to me that the *shalshélet* here represents something beyond the swift cut of the neck of the ram, but also the treatment of the blood thereafter. In our case of the slaughtering of the ram we have multiple examples of post-slaughter blood placed on the bodies of each cohen, *Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot* in (Lev. 8:23). Moses applies the blood to the right earlobe, right thumb, and right toe (3 parts of the body) of Aaron and his four sons (5 cohanim), for a total of 15 applications. Later, we find another twelve applications: Moses sprinkles the blood around the altar (1) and from the same blood in verse 30 he sprinkles the blood on Aaron

(1), on his clothing (1), on his four sons (4), and on the clothing of his sons (4). Adding up the number of times blood is placed on the cohanim, their clothing, and the altar, amounts to a considerable number of instances. Together with the actual slaughter (1), Moses applied the blood a total of twenty-seven times. Thus, the last act of Moses as a priest consisted of a very long *shechita*, in the sense that there was a lot of work to be done with the blood. This can be viewed as the most straightforward (*peshat*) explanation for the *shalsholet* cantillation on the word *vayishchat*.

Additional texts demonstrate that the slaughterer was always the one responsible for taking care of the blood afterwards, so it is reasonable for the term *shechita* to imply also the work done with the blood after the slaughter takes place.⁶

We can further understand that the *shalsholet* goes on the word for slaughtering rather than the blood mentioned in the verse because the entire *shechita* ceremony took a long time, as this is the third slaughtering listed in Leviticus 8 (verses 15, 19 and 32). In fact, since this is the third and final act of slaughter can tie in with Goren's attempt to find a correspondence between the *shalsholet* and the idea of something coming in threes. Here it is the culmination of three *shechita* acts, which clearly took a while.

We can now understand that there is a common denominator linking all four *shalsholet* cantillations in the Torah, all of them show a prolonged process of one kind or another. This is represented by the length of the *shalsholet*. In the Ashkenazic tradition, the *shalsholet* is often the longest of the *ta'amei hakriyah* in terms of both its duration – i.e., it lasts longer in performance – and the number of musical notes of which it is comprised.⁷

THE SHALSHELET AND THE PASEK

A separate, but important, dimension of the *shalsholet* trope might also be mentioned: its grammatical function. All of the *ta'amei hakriyah* convey grammatical significance by denoting connection to the word that follows (conjunction) or separation from it (disjunction). All *shalsholet* tropes are followed by a *pasek* trope. Clearly, any Torah reader who just intoned the long *shalsholet* will need to breathe; the *pasek* is an indication of the latitude to take this breath. The *pasek* has no melody of its own; in musical terms, it might be called a caesura (i.e., a pause). In terms of our understanding of

shalshélet as denoting a prolonged period of time the *pasek* would serve as an end to the waiting, ending the prolonged process we are enduring with the *shalshélet* and moving on to the rest of what needs to get done. This is particularly powerful in the Sephardic trope which has a very sharp ending sound for *pasek*.

The grammarian and masorist R. Wolf Heidenheim wrote in his book *Mishpatei hate'amim*:⁸ [my translation] "The *shalshélet* is a disjunctive mark (except in the books Job, Proverbs, and Psalms where it can be either conjunctive or disjunctive). In all seven occurrences in the twenty-one other books of the Bible, it is the first word in the *pasuk* and a *pesik* follows it, and the *Mesora* refers to it as *Mar'imin u'Mafsikin*."

In a recent article,⁹ Marc B. Shapiro presented again¹⁰ the idea that since the *shalshélet* is a disjunctive trope, it can never be followed by a *pasek*. The reason for this is that a *pasek/pesik* is only found after conjunctive *te'amim*, and in the Torah *shalshélet* is always disjunctive. So why is there a vertical line after *shalshélet* if it is not indicating a *pesik*?

I corresponded with Prof. Shapiro about this issue, explaining that *pasek* in this, and in similar cases, acts as a breather. Thus, there are, in fact, two kinds of *pasek* cantillation marks, one is a disjunctive trope and one, when combined with the *shalshélet*, is a breathing sign, which, in the musical sense, is also disjunctive although less forcefully than in some other instances. Wolf Heidenheim, in fact, addresses this very issue in his book and states that the *shalshélet* and *pasek* do act as tropes, but not within the hierarchic framework governing grammatical conjunction and disjunction.¹¹ Heidenheim appears to have believed that the normative processes of disjunction and conjunction do not apply to the *shalshélet*, it is in fact an exception to the Masoretic rules which govern the other cantillation marks.¹²

NOTES

1. Nurit Reich "Lishmotav shel ta'am ha'shalshelt" in *Mehkarim bemasorot ha'lashon uvilshonot ha'Yehudim* 13-14 (2007). She noted other names for the *shalshélet* such as *ra'ad*, *zikfa*, *darga*, all of which hint at a particular strong and prolonged trope. She did not deal with the meaning of the *shalshélet* or with its textual connotation.

2. See for example, Rambam, *Hilchot Shechita* 3:2.

3. *Al mashma'ut parshanit shel ta'am ha'shalshélet*, see Tura: asuphat ma'amrei hagut umehkar ce'mahshevet Israel, hamerkaz le'limudei Yahadut benhshevet (Oranim: Hotzatat Hakibutz

haMeuhad, 2019), pp. 83-92. If Goren's explanation is based in some fashion on the three verbs, thus related to the concept of three in the word *shalsholet*, it is worth noting that that particular name for this cantillation mark was not known to Rabbenu Tam (the twelfth-century *Tosafist*) in his poem about cantillation, it was called something else unrelated to the number three. Therefore, Goren's explanation based on the three items would be applicable only after the twelfth century. The poem in question by Rabbenu Tam was entitled "*mahberet hashir: haruzim im perut meduyak shel hate'amim, tafkidam, veshimusham.*" It was first published in 1865, edited by R. Shimshon Rephael Hirsch in Frankfurt am Mein, in the fifth Jahrgung of *Jeshurun* (p. 123). A subsequent edition with explanations by R. Shmuel Halevi Weinfeld appeared in *Ta'amei Hamikra*, Jerusalem 1972.

4. J.M. Jafet in his German book *Moreh Hakore*, (Frankfurt am Mein: 1896).

5. Dr. J.M. Imanueli, *Sefer Bereshit, hesberin ve'hearot* (Tel-Aviv: 1978).

6. *And if any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of all flesh – its blood is its life. Therefore, I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off* (Lev. 17:13-14). From this text, it is clear that the obligation to cover the blood falls on the slaughterers. *Slaughter the bull before the Lord, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and take some of the bull's blood and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger; then pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar* (Ex. 29:11-12). Here the slaughterer is responsible to do the blood applications. Later in the same chapter: *Slaughter the ram, and take its blood and dash it against all sides of the altar* (Ex. 29:16). Similarly, *Aaron came forward to the altar and slaughtered his calf of sin offering. Aaron's sons brought the blood to him; he dipped his finger in the blood and put it on the horns of the altar; and he poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar* (Lev. 9:8-9). And, once more, in Leviticus 9:12, 18: Aaron slaughters the calf, and he gets the blood from his sons, and he applies it with his finger to the altar.

7. Thanks to Lawrence F. Bernstein (Emeritus Music Professor at the University of Pennsylvania) for his help in formulating this musical concept.

8. Rödelheim, 1808.

9. Mark B. Shapiro, "The Seforim Blog: Another Obvious Mistake, More Grammatical Points, Bubbe Mayseh, Apostates and the Zohar," January 15, 2019. He quotes Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd expanded edition (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2017). Jacobson writes, "The vertical line after the *shalsholet* word is not a *pasek* :it does not indicate an extra pause" (p. 99). However, this contradicts the position he took on p. 97 where he suggests that the *pasek* is a symbol indicating a brief pause, like a "rest" in European musical notation. See also, R. Mordechai Breuer, *Ta'amei Hamikra* (Jerusalem: 1982), pp. 128-154.

10. See Joshua R. Jacobson, *ibid.* and Shapiro in his article listed above, lists a few more references.

11. Heidenheim defines the terms *te'amim* and *meshartim* at the beginning of his first chapter of his book, and explains the exception in the *shalsholet* part (p.7a).

12. Shapiro stated in a follow-up email correspondence that the breather is included in the *shalsholet* trope itself. This is a strange position; the Masoretes put a *pasek* there to indicate the breather. We get the rules for Masoretic notes from the Masoretes, yet Shapiro seems to be challenging precisely what they taught us. The problem really resides in the rules modern writers

have based on the principles articulated by Masorettes. That literature fails to list the exceptions to these rules.



קבע תורתך עשה

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

January	Numbers	4 – 31
February	Numbers	32 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 23
March	Deuteronomy	24 – 34
	Joshua	1 – 17
April	Joshua	18– 24
	Judges	1 – 21
May	I Samuel	1 – 28

