



SERMON VAYESHEV:1
THE SHALSHELET AND THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 21 December 2019
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 Those of you who have been watching *His Dark Materials* on BBC One will be familiar by now with the idea of parallel universes. “Every world and every universe,” explained Lord Asriel, “came about as a result of possibility. Take the example of tossing a coin: it can come down heads or tails, and we don’t know before it lands which way it’s going to fall. Then it comes down heads. But on another world, it does come down tails. And when that happens, the two worlds split apart. One moment several things are possible, the next moment only one happens, and the rest of the possibilities don’t exist. Except that other worlds have sprung into being, on which those things did happen.”²

- 2 In this theory, every decision we make is made differently in another world. Sometimes, that world might end up looking almost indistinguishable from this one. The world in which I chose a different-coloured shirt from my wardrobe this morning, for example, will be otherwise identical. But sometimes, a decision – even a seemingly insignificant decision – can cause massive ripples and lead to huge ramifications. Leaving home one minute later could lead to being in a car accident that you would otherwise have missed. For everyone who met their partner at work (or whose parents met at work), the decisions which led to both people being employed there at the same time were very significant.



- 3 In this week's parashah, Joseph makes the decision to reject the advances of Potiphar's wife. But there's something unusual about the word וימאן, 'he refused'. Every word in the Hebrew Bible has a symbol attached to punctuate the text and to provide musical direction for those who leyn. Most of these symbols – called טעמי המקרא are so common and repetitive as to be monotonous.
- 4 But Joseph's refusal is different. The ta'am marking Joseph's refusal is incredibly rare. It's called a שלשלת and it only appears four times in the entire Torah. The 14th century commentator Joseph ibn-Caspi suggested³ that each shalsholet denotes a moment of intense hesitation and dilemma. Its unusually drawn-out tune supports this.
- 5 But it's more than that: each shalsholet moment is a time of indecision despite one choice being obviously right. Clearly Joseph shouldn't have slept with his boss's wife. His wavering marked his natural human instinct to do what's best in the short term struggling with his knowledge that he had to say no.
- 6 But what would have happened if the four shalshelot had gone the other way? In the parallel universe where the four men whose dilemmas are highlighted by shalshelot had taken the other option, what would that world be like?
- 7 The first shalsholet belongs to Lot, Abraham's nephew.⁴ Urged to pack his bags and lead his righteous family out of Sodom before the city was destroyed, we are told ויתמהמה, 'but he lingered'. What would have happened if he'd stayed? Well, he and his family would have been obliterated. But the effects on the universe would have been wider. God



would have wiped out a group of innocent people. God, who was rebuked just a chapter earlier by Abraham for threatening to kill the righteous alongside the wicked. How would the Holy One feel about having annihilated Sodom while Lot was still in it? It's actually quite terrifying to think of. Angst. Depression, even. A loss of confidence in the use of Divine powers to regulate human behaviour. I'm imagining a parallel universe marked by a horrified Divine withdrawal from active interaction with humankind. And if God suddenly stopped being willing to use supernatural powers, where would that have left the Israelite slaves in Egypt?

- 8 The correct decision for Lot was obvious. The wrong decision would have been disastrous – not just for him but for everyone. In this world, he hesitated but ultimately did the right thing. That was the first shalsholet.
- 9 The second shalsholet belongs to Abraham's servant.⁵ Sent out to find a wife for his master's son Isaac, he prays for success, but only hesitantly. His **ויאמר** is marked with a shalsholet. Why was he so hesitant? Probably because he knew that, if Isaac was married off and continued the family line, that was where Abraham's wealth would go. Whereas, if he, the servant, failed to find Abraham a route to an heir, he stood to gain by inheriting more on his master's death.
- 10 In this case, the consequences of a different decision from the unnamed servant are more obvious. If Isaac died childless, there would have been no Israelites. So much of history would simply never have happened. So many of us would simply not be here. A parallel universe with no Jews.
- 11 The servant, then, held in his hand perhaps the greatest amount of power of any biblical character. His decision was the most momentous. In this world,



he hesitated but ultimately did the right thing. That was the second shalsholet.

- 12 The third shalsholet is Joseph's. As we read today, he turned down Mrs Potiphar, but was clearly tempted, somewhat understandably, to say yes. What would have happened if he'd begun a relationship with her? In all probability, he would not then have started a family with the Asenath, who the Torah records as his wife. Joseph and Asenath had many descendants, none of whom would have been born had he stuck with Mrs Potiphar, but perhaps the most notable descendant was Joshua, successor to Moses. Without Joshua, where would the Israelites have found themselves after the Moses's death? There would have been a power vacuum, civil war, maybe, just maybe, in this parallel universe our ancestors would never have made it into the Promised Land at all.
- 13 Joseph knew he shouldn't commit adultery. In this world, he hesitated but ultimately did the right thing. That was the third shalsholet.
- 14 The fourth and final shalsholet belongs to Moses himself.⁶ God had commanded Moses to commission Aaron and his sons as priests, to be in charge of the Israelites' spiritual welfare and to control the tabernacle ritual. The climactic moment of the induction ceremony was to be the sacrifice of a ram. And when we read וישחט, that Moses slaughtered it, there is a shalsholet.
- 15 Why was Moses reluctant to slaughter a ram? (No, he wasn't a vegetarian.) Because, in sacrificing the ram, he would also be sacrificing his absolute control over the Israelites. Up until this point, he had been an absolute ruler, responsible for all Israelite affairs in all areas. By installing his brother as High Priest, he would be creating an area of public life in which he had no



authority. He would be creating a whole new cadre of leadership from which he was excluded.

- 16 What would have happened had he refused? Well, in a word, dictatorship. The Israelites would have continued to be ruled by Moses's one-man-band of autocracy, with no separation of powers, no consultation, no outside input. But it gets worse. Lord Acton once observed, quite accurately, that "the example of the Hebrew nation – with kingship balanced by prophecy and tyranny countered by a priesthood – laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has been won".⁷ Without that example, without a biblical model of separation of powers and a biblical lesson of avoiding concentrating too much power in the hands of one man, how much more despotism and oppression would a parallel universe have suffered?
- 17 Moses knew he had to separate religious leadership from political leadership. In this world, he hesitated but ultimately did the right thing. That was the fourth and final shalsholet.
- 18 These days, we mainly recognise the shalsholet by its unusual melody. On the face of it, it can certainly be hard to see the link between the four seemingly innocuous biblical stories where it appears. Four everyday actions of a sort that happen all the time all over the place: moving house, doing a task for one's employer, starting a relationship... slaughtering a ram. Yet, whether or not the characters were aware of this, their decisions affected millions or billions of people.
- 19 The Hebrew word 'shalsholet' literally means 'chain'. Our lives collectively form the chain that holds society, and the history of this world, together. Each decision we take forges a link, and each link we forge affects the chain and the world as a whole.



- 20 Perhaps the message of the shalshet is not that hesitation is weak or fickle or self-centred, even when we hesitate between the obviously right and the obviously wrong, but rather that hesitation is important. Our choices – even ostensibly small ones – have ramifications and we should agonise over them.
- 21 But then, mindful of our importance in the world, we should make the right choice. The wrong choice is one we can leave for other parallel worlds to contend with.

Check against delivery.

GKW 21.12.19

¹ Genesis 39:1-18

² Philip Pullman. *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 1995; repr 1998): 376-377.

³ Mishneh Kesef on Genesis 19:16; see also Jonathan Sacks, *On Not Trying to be What You Are Not* (10 March 2014): <<http://rabbisacks.org/trying-tzav-5774/>>

⁴ Genesis 19:16

⁵ Genesis 24:12

⁶ Leviticus 8:23

⁷ John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity" in *The History of Freedom and other essays* (London: Macmillan, 1907; repr 1919), 1-29: 4.