

The story of Abraham's nephew Lot, which begins at the end of Parashah Bereshit and concludes this week, is full of ambivalence. And this ambivalence finds eloquent voice in the rare cantillation sign *shalsholet*, the first appearance of which defines Lot's departure from Sodom. *Shalsholet* derives from the Hebrew root שלש three, which describes its melody as it rises and falls three times, running the gamut of emotions in lightening speed before finally ending on a third ascent. It is the musical epitome of emotional turmoil. It will appear twice more in Genesis, and a final time in the Torah in Leviticus: Abraham's steward on the way to find a suitable bride for Isaac, Joseph tempted by Potiphar's wife, and finally, Moses in the final act of investing Aaron as High Priest. Of all these people, Lot is the most conflicted, righteous at times, but deeply flawed. Like his uncle, he is willing to host strangers in Sodom, although we recoil at his willingness to protect them by offering his daughters to the mob. One of his descendants, through Ruth of Moab, is an ancestor of David. He obviously has qualities that are in keeping with Abraham's high ideals. But these are offset by his materialism, desire to fit in, and tragic self-delusion. When their combined wealth becomes too great for the land to sustain and Abraham offers him a choice in where to go, he unhesitatingly claims the fertile Jordan plain and ultimately settles in Sodom, despite the wickedness of its inhabitants. In chapter 19, he is obviously assimilated and well regarded, since we find him sitting at the gate of the city. Midrash Genesis Rabbah tells us he has just been appointed chief justice that very day. During these times, disputes were resolved at the city gates, where the dignitaries of the city held court. Lot has arrived. Or has he? In verse 9 the mob clamoring at his door for access to his guests brusquely reminds him that he is only an alien resident. "This one came to sojourn, and now he is judging! Now, we will deal even worse with you than with them." Our sages teach that Sodom only tolerated wealthy guests, which is why Lot is able to live there. The poor are driven away or killed, along with those who dared to show kindness toward them. Sodom and Gomorrah are brutal places devoid of human decency, where insatiable greed is rampant and life is expendable. These cities have encapsulated the evil that in Parashah Noach caused HaShem to destroy the world and begin anew. But this time, only the cities and their inhabitants are destroyed, leaving a lesson for all to see. Comfortably ensconced in this society and driven by his penchant for materialism, Lot has adapted to his environment. But a vestige of the decency he had imbibed through having been raised by Abraham and Sarah prompts him to offer hospitality to the strangers. He does so with great enthusiasm, not knowing that they are angels sent to rescue him from utter depravity, and now faces the dilemma of his dichotomous existence. After the mob is forced to retreat and the guests persuade Lot to inform his family that they must leave, his sons-in-law ridicule him. On that fateful day Lot learns that he has been engaging in egregious self-deception. Despite all he has done to become part of the society in which he has chosen to live, he is still an outsider, and in danger as soon as he differs in the slightest from the prevailing norm. "But he hesitated" (19:16). The wavering *shalsholet* over "hesitated" poignantly expresses his existential anguish. How can he leave his comfortable life? But how can he stay? The angels order him to flee to the mountain. Rashi teaches that this means to Abraham, which is why Lot refuses "...lest the evil overtake me and I die." Compared to the inhabitants of Sodom he is righteous, but in Abraham's environment, his weaknesses will certainly be obvious. He is allowed to flee to a small city nearby, but afraid even to live there, Lot and his two surviving daughters settle in a cave in the hills above the city. He is still the outsider, unable to bring the dichotomous parts of himself into harmony. When I was learning to chant Torah, the *shalsholet* evoked my own dichotomies and the dichotomous existence of all of us diaspora Jews. Throughout history we have lived on the margins, creating our own culture within the larger civilization, sometimes participating, often rebuffed and persecuted. And throughout history some of us have opted for complete assimilation, overlaying our intrinsic Judaism with the veneer of the prevailing society. The 19th and 20th centuries have painfully taught us the lessons of Lot. We can put on the costumes of the culture in which we live, but we cannot change who we truly are, and there will always be those who will not accept us no matter how hard we try to be one of them. The tug of war between assimilation and isolation has been with us from the beginning and it continues unabated as we navigate the increasingly complex worlds we inhabit. But we can turn the *shalsholet* of indecision into a harmonious triad of strength. The foundation, the tonic note, is our Jewish inner core that connects us to our ancestors and reaches through us to our future descendants. *Shalsholet* also means chain. This winding musical chain repeats the foundation note three times, linking the Jewish parts of us to everything we encounter in our life's journey with all its ups and downs. No matter how much we waver, that tonic note will always ground and connect us, reminding us of who we are and giving us the strength to successfully balance the dichotomous parts of ourselves as we strive to be good citizens of our homelands and the world, as well as good Jews.

Shabbat shalom!