

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

What's So Funny?

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

As we discussed last week, there is great significance in the selection of names. This week, we meet our Patriarch Isaac, *Yitzhak* in Hebrew. The literal translation of the name is “*he will laugh*.” There are several references to laughter in the early days of Isaac’s life, as well as before he was born.

In last week’s Torah Portion, G-d informed the elderly Abraham that his elderly wife Sarah would soon bear him a child:

Abraham fell on his face – VAYITZCHAK – and he laughed, thinking, “shall a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? And shall Sarah – a ninety-year old woman give birth!?” (Genesis, 17:17)

In this week’s Torah Portion, three angels come to visit Abraham, (see “Not Now, G-d, I’m Busy . . . I’ll Talk to You Later!”) and one of them reiterates to Abraham the prophecy that he has already heard:

“I will come back to you at this time next year, and behold Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent that was behind him ... – VATITZCHAK – Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have withered, will I again have delicate skin? And my husband is old!” Then G-d said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying: ‘Shall I really bear a child, since I am old?’ [Note that G-d diplomatically leaves out the fact that Sarah also made mention of the fact that Abraham was old. Why tell Abraham that his wife called him an old man? Our Sages tell us that we learn from here that SOMETIMES it is o.k. to stretch the truth for the sake of peace.] Is there anything beyond G-d’s ability? At the appointed time I will return to you at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” (Ibid.18:10, 12-13)

Two people hear the same prophecy. Abraham laughs, and G-d says nothing. Sarah laughs, and is criticized by G-d. What’s the difference? If Sarah is criticized for doubting the truth of the prediction, why isn’t Abraham?

Actually, there is laughter and there is laughter.

Unkelus was a Roman convert to Judaism (see “Sheepskin or Cheapskin?”) who translated the Torah into Aramaic. To this day, his translation/commentary is studied weekly. He gives two different translations to the Hebrew word for laughter:

Abraham fell on his face – VAYITZCHAK – VACHADI – and he was happy.

Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent that was behind him ... – VATITZCHAK – VACHAYCHAS – and she mocked.

Now we can see why Sarah was criticized by G-d, while Abraham was not. Abraham believed. Sarah did not. She needed to hear G-d's reprimand: "*Is there anything beyond G-d's ability?*"

This is rather surprising. Read on:

Sometime later, after the birth of Isaac – ... *Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham METZACHAIK – laughing (according to Unkelus' Aramaic translation – MECHAYICH – mocking.)* (Ibid. 21:9)

Since Ishmael had turned into such a scoffer, mocking the teachings of his father, (Rashi quotes interpretations that he was engaging in idol worship, promiscuity, and/or murder) Sarah insisted that Abraham banish the boy and his mother, lest they become a negative influence on Isaac. (See "Under the Influence of Dregs") Sarah's request was endorsed by G-d:

"...*Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice...*" (21:12) The Talmud tells us that "*her voice*" was divinely inspired; that Sarah's level of prophecy was greater than that of her husband.

SARAH WAS MORE DEVINELY INSPIRED THAN HER HUSBAND! Her prophecy was greater! How could it be that when these two people heard the same prediction from G-d, that the lesser prophet laughed for joy, while the greater prophet ridiculed it?!

For the answer, we have to look back at the actual situation. Abraham was having a vision, clearly a communication from G-d. Of course he believed it. Anyone would believe a direct communication from G-d.

On the other hand, look how Sarah heard the news. Three strangers walking through the desert, invited to dinner by Abraham. Yes, they were angels. But did Abraham and Sarah know they were angels? They walked in; they had dirty feet! They ate food. They looked for all the world like exactly what they were disguised as -- three wandering nomads. Very nice, one of the strangers made what seemed nothing more than a well-meaning – if naïve – blessing: Next year may you have a child. Of course she laughed. She was almost ninety years old! She was well past menopause, and even in her pre-menopausal years she had been unable to bear children.

Now, had she known it was an angel speaking, could there be any doubt that she would have accepted it? Of course she would have believed the prophecy had she heard it the same way Abraham did. That's why he laughed in joy, while she laughed in disbelief.

So now it all makes sense, right? Abraham believed because he knew the message was from G-d, while Sarah rejected the message because she thought it was from humans.

So why, then was she criticized? She had every reason to believe that the three fellows outside were a group of mortals who had no idea what they were talking about. Would you believe it if a complete stranger told you that a miracle was going to occur?

The answer given by several commentaries is that Sarah was not taken to task for not believing the words of the stranger. She was taken to task because she DISMISSED the words of the stranger. A man came to her home and blessed her. He wished her well. He wished her very well. He wished her miraculously well. Why did she reject his blessing?

Yes, it was impossible for her to bear children without a miracle. But she had seen miracles before! Why shouldn't she see them again?

G-d criticized her. She was a great prophet; she should have known better! "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: 'Shall I really bear a child, since I am old?' Is there anything beyond G-d's ability?" No one told you to believe it as an absolute fact -- but why didn't you answer "Amen"? Do you think I can't do miracles?

Life is full of "impossible" situations. But we believe in miracles. We pray for the sick, even the "hopelessly" sick. Sick people get well, sometimes in spite of their doctors' predictions. Weak armies can defeat powerful enemies. (As in Chanukah) Sad stories sometimes have happy endings.

No, it doesn't always work out as we'd like it to. But we always have to maintain hope and faith that it will. Or, at least, with G-d's help, that it might!

May we always have reasons to laugh for joy. (Did everyone out there say "Amen"?)

Have a great Shabbos.

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