

Too Old to Cry, Too Hurt to Laugh – Parashat Vayera

Rabbi Arnold Goodman tells the story of Adlai Stevenson who, while conceding the presidential election of 1952 to Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted the reaction of a not-so-little boy who had recently stubbed his toe. “I’m too old to cry but too hurt to laugh,” the child said, succinctly capturing the experience of anyone who has ever faced disappointment past the age at which we’re somehow supposed to know better. Goodman writes that this quote could easily have been spoken by Hillary Clinton following her defeat in 2016. I would add that these words probably have resonance for any of us here who have ever encountered a major upset or rejection or failure which caused us significant pain, this despite gracious attempts to put on a brave face. “I’m too old to cry but too hurt to laugh.” I imagine that these words might even have been spoken by our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the protagonists of our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Vayera*.

Of course, Abraham and Sarah *do* laugh throughout Torah, repeatedly in fact, and they even name a son for laughter although, as we know, not all laughter is of the same quality. Many of us will remember the story – how after ten years of infertility, Sarah gives maidservant Hagar to her husband as a surrogate, hoping to be “built up” through the womb of her concubine. While this may seem to us a strange intervention, such practice was common in the ancient Near East and even mentioned in the Code of Hammurabi; nevertheless, the act still proves problematic as Sarah feels immediately diminished by Hagar’s pregnancy and begins to treat the woman and her child with enmity, eventually causing Hagar and Ishmael to run away. Bereshit Rabbah, a collection of rabbinic stories generally sympathetic to our patriarchs and matriarchs, imagines that Hagar brought this mistreatment upon herself by prancing around town saying: “Sarai, my mistress...seems righteous but she is not.... If she were righteous, see how many years she’s been unable to conceive and I conceived on the very first night” (Bereshit Rabbah

55:4). Other commentators, including the medieval rabbi Ramban, criticize Sarah for her unkind behavior and implicate Abraham as well for enabling such cruelty. Whatever the reason and whoever is at fault, the end result is the same – God ultimately saves the life of both mother and child but orders them to return to their master’s home. The whole extended family is still living together thirteen years later when God comes to tell Abraham that Sarah, too, will finally bear a son.

This announcement of future progeny is the first time that Abraham laughs as the text says, “*Vayipol Avraham al panav vayitzhak* – Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?’” (Genesis 17:17). The classical commentators tend to see Abraham’s reaction as conveying straightforward delight and amazement here rather than sarcasm; what an astonishing thing it is to sire a child at such an old age! How miraculous it is to again experience fatherhood, this time with one’s very own wife! Some modern commentators take a more cynical approach with Robert Alter suggesting that Abraham’s laughter expresses “disbelief, perhaps edged with bitterness,” the fake mirth of a man who feels this baby is too long in the coming, who will believe it only if and when he sees it (*The Five Books of Moses*, p. 83). Professor Leon Kass, too, understands Abraham’s reaction as being one of derision suggesting that “Abraham clearly prefers the son in the flesh to the one in the mind” (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, p. 281). Already anticipating potential conflicts that are, in fact, to come, Abraham has deep feelings of ambivalence about the birth of this second baby boy.

Ambivalent or not, the next time that a child for Abraham and Sarah is mentioned, husband and wife are together and visited by three angels at their infamous tent. On this occasion it is Sarah who laughs upon hearing the news and then immediately denies it; she also, amusingly, covers up her true skepticism about the announcement, musing to herself that *Abraham* is too elderly to have a baby yet saying out

loud “Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am” (Genesis 18:13). It is interesting to note that God chastens Sarah for her laughter while the Divine did no such thing when Abraham chortled. Perhaps this is because Abraham’s laughter was, indeed, that of joy and gratitude while Sarah’s seems somehow tinged with incredulity and doubt.

At long last, baby Isaac is born and his name should be no surprise to any of us by now. “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me,” says Sarah in calling her son *Yitzhak* – literally “He laughs” (Genesis 21:6). Finally Sarah’s giggles seem pure and true - the simple pleasure of a new mother, the intense relief of a painful struggle finally coming to its end. Leon Kass cleverly suggests that the boy’s name, too, hints at Divine comeuppance, reading it as “God has had the last laugh” and reminding readers that anything that God wishes to do can, in fact, come into being. Were the story to close here, it would be a very happy ending indeed. Abraham has an heir to his faith, Sarah has the child she has always longed for, and God has created the first Jewish family against incredible odds. Abraham and Sarah may be too old to cry but they’re not too old to laugh. In fact, through laughter they have realized their dreams.

Unfortunately, as we well know, the story does not stop here, and laughter ends up being not only the miracle of this first family but also its undoing. At some point following Isaac’s birth, certainly after he has been weaned but with very little other information by which to determine date or age, Sarah sees her son and Hagar’s son “playing.” The Hebrew word here is again *m’tzahek* – the word for laughter, the word that serves as the basis of Isaac’s name – and although this play initially sounds innocent, it seems to be anything but as it leads Sarah to immediately say: “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). It is possible, of course, that the two boys are simply goofing around and that Sarah cannot help but to carry past

jealousies and bitterness, to not feel it unfair that Abraham split his bequest rather than giving it all to her son. But the commentators wonder if something more nefarious is going on here, and they offer intriguing proof-texts to back up their supposition.

Bereshit Rabbah points out that the word *m'tzhaek* has many different meanings in Hebrew, “play” and “laugh” being but two of them. In the story of Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar, for example, *m'tzahek* seems to indicate sexual advances as this word is used to describe Potiphar’s wife’s (false) accusations against Joseph. In the story of the Golden Calf, *m'tzahek* seems to suggest idol worship as this word is used to describe the behavior of the Israelites as they turn away from God and serve a graven image. And in the Book of Samuel, *m'tzhaek* seems to imply violence as this word is used to describe Abner and his troops preparing for battle. Seen in this way, what is taking place between Isaac and Ishmael is not so very innocent at all and Sarah’s response is much less of an over-reaction – far from being a jealous mother, she’s rather trying to protect her son from incestuous advances or pagan worship or physical attack, and given that Ishmael is more than 13 years older than her son it would be reasonable to blame him disproportionately for such bad behavior. To this, Robert Alter adds another interesting possibility when he suggests that the word *m'tzahek* indicates that Ishmael is, as it were, “Isaac-ing it” up, that he’s doing something that makes clear he is trying to encroach on his half-brother’s inheritance, trying to take the place of the true Isaac. Ishmael, too, may be too old to cry but he’s not too old to laugh either. Through laughter, he is attempting to steal what rightfully belongs to his brother.

Too old to cry, too hurt to laugh. I can imagine each of the characters in our story this morning feeling quite this way. I’m too old to cry, says Sarah, but the pain of giving my husband to another, of watching my nemesis get exactly that which I’ve always dreamed of for myself, of fearing for my son and his safety – it is all too much. I’m too old to cry, says Hagar, but it is a terrible thing to be vulnerable and

dependent and living as a second-class citizen in a home where I'm hated for reasons that have nothing to do with me. I'm too old to cry, says Abraham, but I'm sick of trying to mediate between the members of my family and feel enormous responsibility for both my sons and their mothers. I'm too old to cry, say Isaac and Ishmael, but I'd like to be able to have a real relationship with my brother without our parents getting in the way. There are so many different ways to read the tale of this first Jewish family, so many different ways to either implicate or exonerate members for the choices that they do and don't make, so many different ways in which to understand each character's hurt and anger and pain – real or perceived. In literature as in life, there are so many more than just two sides to any story. So many times we have to laugh or else we'd certainly cry.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that I don't think a person is ever too old to cry, and given that you've all seen your emotional mush-ball of a rabbi well up on more than one occasion I hope that tears can sometimes be seen as evidence of deep feeling and humanity and connection to others in addition to being evidence of immaturity or weakness. But Stevenson's "too old to cry, too hurt to laugh" isn't really, in the end, about weeping, it is rather about the messiness of life and the complicated nature of families and the imperfections of human beings. "Too old to cry, too hurt to laugh" is the reason why, unlike in Christianity with its beatific martyrs and saints, Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs are portrayed with all their frailties and foibles – the fact of their struggles, and particularly how they are able to manage them, serving as a more realistic example for us to follow than their absolute innocence or flawlessness. "Too old to cry, too hurt to laugh" is about husbands and wives loving yet sometimes inadvertently hurting one another. It is about brothers trying to balance trust and self-protection, loyalty to parents and autonomy of self.

It is well worth noting that despite the terrible dysfunction in this first Jewish family, both of Abraham's children eventually go on to become the progenitors of great nations that endure until today, Isaac – of course- serving as one of our own patriarchs and Ishmael seen as the founding father of Islam. And although tensions amongst the Jewish and Muslim communities, quite sadly, exist still in our time, Isaac and Ishmael themselves were able to at least temporarily reconcile their differences when they came together to bury father, Abraham, so many hundreds of years ago. While the Torah does not necessarily say that it is so, I like to believe that upon meeting at Abraham's burial the two brothers realized how much they had missed one another and that the parents who had once divided them were now gone and that they could choose a better path for themselves moving forward. Through their shared tears, they remembered their once shared laughter. Just maybe, this allowed them to create a fresh new start.

And so it is for us! In our lives, too, there are bound to be disappointments and set-backs, relationships not as we'd wish for them to be, family conflicts, failures, embarrassments, defeats. There will be times that we, too, will feel too old to cry, too hurt to laugh – such, unfortunately, is the nature of human experience. The next time we encounter one of these moments, perhaps, we can recall the very fine role models contained in the pages of Torah and remember that pain almost will almost always eventually yield to healing, that there is great wisdom in maintaining optimism and hope even when times are tough. Despite their tears, Abraham and Sarah selected for their son a name borne of laughter. And in so doing, they indeed brought abundant happiness into their lives.

Vayikra Avraham et shem b'no...Yitzhak – And Abraham gave his son..the name of Isaac. When the hurt finally starts to fade, may we too always look towards the joy.

Shabbat Shalom!