

Who are you laughing at?

Parashat Vayera

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(With gratitude to Rabbi Kenneth Brander, of Ohr Torah Stone, whose article "From Derision to Redemption: The Journey of Laughter" inspired this sermon)

I was speaking to a wonderful young couple in our congregation this week, who are expecting their first child, *b'ezrat Hashem* in January. And they called me to discuss the parameters of how to select a Hebrew name for their baby. Like most couples that I talk to, they were shocked when I told them that there are actually no "rules," about Hebrew names. Ashkenazi Jews only name babies for relatives who are no longer alive. Sephardic tradition is to only name babies for living relatives. Some people replicate the exact name of the loved one they are commemorating, some just the first letter of the name, some even select an attribute of that person, for example if Grandpa Max was a very comforting presence, the baby named for him might be Menachem, which means comfort. Some people even derive baby names from the time of year when the child was born...A spring baby could be Aviva, the Hebrew name of that season. Now there are all kinds of superstitions about names; like a person who died an untimely or particularly tragic death—It would be an *ayin hara*, a bad omen for many, to give such a person's name to a newborn, as if God-forbid doing so would determine the same fate. But again, this is all *minhag*..all custom. There is no 'halacha of baby naming,' no hard and fast rules outside of cultural sensibilities, and the attempt to honor the legacies of those who came before us. Which is why I would love to ask our patriarch Abraham and our matriarch Sarah why in the world they named their son Isaac, *Yitzhak*. The name *Yitzhak* means laughter, and there is no family, no part of the Torah where people laugh more than in the Abraham and Sarah sequence. They laugh repeatedly, at various points in their lives. And not the same kind of laughter either. Sometimes they laugh because they are overjoyed, happy, euphoric. Sometimes the laughter is a bit cynical, and sarcastic. And other times, the laughter we encounter in these chapters of Genesis is downright mockery and disdain. Occasionally it's not so clear to the reader exactly which kind of laughter is going on...

Take the first example in our parasha, when Sarah is informed that she is pregnant, *acharei v'loti!* she exclaims, 'Look at me I'm all withered and worn out!' This is long before anti-

ageing, skin regenerating, moisturizing, skin-plumping, retinol-rapid-wrinkle-repair creams were invented. *Vatitzhak Sarah bekirbah*, the Torah says...she laughs inwardly, internally: this is unbelievable...I'm going to have a child at my age? What kind of laugh is that exactly? Could be utter amazement, could also be thinking 'I'm too old to get up in the middle of the night to feed a baby, and chase after a little one! Oy vey!'¹

Compare that the Abraham's laughter in the previous chapter where the Torah says he fell off his chair laughing when he finds out that he's going to be a father. *Vayipol Avarham al panav va'yitzchak*...he literally fell on his face laughing!² 'I'm 100 years old! That's the funniest thing I've ever heard; and she's 90. *Gevalt!* Hashem really does have a sense of humor!'

But like I said, not all laughter is the laughter of joy or astonishment. Take the laughter in the episode that Adam spoke about a short time ago. In the midst of the story of the destruction of S'dom and Amorra, there is laughter. You may have missed that little detail in the midst of Abraham's towering speech or the sulfurous fire from heaven or Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt. But in Genesis 19:14, Lot tries to warn his family that they have to leave S'dom because the city is about to be annihilated. *Kumu tz'u min ha'makom hazeh*, You have to get out of this place now! He shrieks. *Ki mashchit Hashem et ha'ir*, the city is doomed, God is going to destroy it! But instead of hurrying to pack their bags, Lot's sons-in-law look at him like he's lost his mind. *Vayehi ke'mitzachek b'eini chatanav*, he looked like a joker, a buffoon, a stooge in their eyes. This is not only the laughter of mockery, it's the dark laughter of those who are about to be destroyed.

That laughter of mockery and scorn is exactly what Sarah is afraid of when she says that when people see a 90 year old pregnant woman walking around they will Yitzchak li, they will laugh at me. Maybe they'll gossip about Sarah, or prattle about who the real father was...was it Abraham, or maybe Pharaoh, or possibly Avimelech...you know she was in not one but two harems! This is not the kind of snickering Sarah was looking forward to...

Did you know, by the way, that there is a fear of being laughed at, a paranoia that whenever someone is laughing it must be at you...Gelotophobia, from the Greek word *gelos*, which means

¹ Genesis 18:12

² Genesis 17:17

laughter, gelotophobes are suspicious of any laughter, and tend to interpret it all as malicious. Did our matriarch Sarah suffer from these tendencies?

When Sarah's son Yitzhak was young, she notices that his older half-brother Yishmael was *metzachek*-ing with him.³ It's unclear from the context exactly what was going on, but whatever it was, it wasn't good. Various translations say that Ishmael was "making sport of Yitzhak,; others say that he was teasing him," still others suggest it was more insidious and violating. Sarah lashes out, sends Yishmael and his mother away, and they end up far away in *midbar Paran*, somewhere in the Sinai desert, no longer a part of Abraham and Sarah's household.

Perhaps you noticed that in every one of these situations, from the happy laughter to the cruel, taunting laughter, the same word is used: some form of *tzachak*, the root of the name Yitzhak. Why would these parents, who could have named their son anything, choose to name him in a way that conjures both positive and also very negative experiences? Both rejoicing and mistrust? The answer is, they didn't. Abraham and Sarah actually did not pick their own child's name! God did. *Ve'karata et sh'mo Yitzhak*, God says, when you have this son, you will name him Isaac, Yitzhak, laughter. So if this name is God's explicit will, the question is why... This name must represent something larger than Isaac himself. It must presage something about the Jewish people...

Rabbi Kenneth Brander teaches that sometimes Judaism will be experienced in ways similar to both of these kinds of laughter...

Look, this is a very countercultural tradition. We have a different calendar, observe different holidays, worship in a different language, eat different foods, observe the Sabbath on a different day, stand for a set of values that go against the grain of secularism, and the list goes on and on. Sometimes the very things that set us apart will be met with cynicism and misunderstanding. Sometimes they will be misunderstood and ridiculed. For many centuries we have heard the laughter of Lot's sons-in-law, the laughter of those who sneer and jeer at us because they don't understand us or don't want to. I think that's the experience of anyone who stands for something that is unique or diverse or different from what everyone else is doing or behaving or believing.

³ Genesis 21:9

Because I believe so strongly in Judaism's wisdom and holiness, I am willing to put up with that unpleasant laughter now and again.

But don't forget the other kind of laughter. God forbid that we forget the laughter of celebration, of ecstasy, of joy and festivity! That too is intrinsic to the destiny of the Jewish people! We have so much to be proud of, to be hopeful about, to be excited and energized by! This is what the siddur means when it says: *Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u'mah yafa yerushateinu!* Here's my translation: "We are ecstatic about how awesome it is to be Jewish, and how fortunate we are to have inherited this beautiful tradition!" Try saying those words without smiling! Remember what we sing in *birkat ha'mazon*, the Grace After Meals for Shabbat and holidays: *Az yimalei s'chok pinu, u'lshoneinu rina...* These words come from Psalm 126, they mean that "our mouths will be filled with laughter and joyous songs," when we return from exile to the Promised Land. We are the people who have recited those words for centuries and to this very day because the Jewish people continues to blossom and thrive in our holy land and in so many other places too.

Yes we will occasionally be made sport of, as Yitzhak was by Yishmael, but we will also sing and celebrate and laugh and revel in the many blessings of our Jewish heritage. The name Yitzhak is about so much more than that baby born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. It is an oracle for the entire Jewish experience.

The great teacher Rabbi Kenneth Brander tells the story of his father-in-law, whose name was also Yitzhak; a holocaust survivor and a young, single man in a DP camp with barely anything to his name, he bartered for Shabbat candlesticks. People thought he was crazy. They laughed, they taunted him...why, when you have so little, would you trade for a Shabbat candelabra? For Yitzhak Tambor, acquiring that candelabra was a way to hold onto hope and optimism. It was his way of clinging to the belief that he would someday marry, someday get out of that DP camp, someday have a family with whom he would kindle the Sabbath lights and experience the blessings of Shabbat and Jewish life. To this day, Rabbi Brander says, that candelabra is used every week to welcome Shabbat by Yitzhak Tambor's children and his children's children who light it to this day in their home in Jerusalem.

To be a *Yitzhak*, or descendant of Yitzhak is to never let the laughter of cynicism, insult, or derision be louder than the laughter of joy, hope, and optimism. While both may be part of the Jewish experience, let us never forget how blessed we are, how profoundly fortunate we are to

have inherited such a beautiful tradition and way of life. That should put big smile on all of your faces!