

The traditional Torah reading we read on Rosh Hashana Morning is Akeidat Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac. It is a story of personal tragedy of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac on the mountain top, angelic intervention, and animal substitution for human sacrifice. Rabbis frequently preach on the relationship between dutiful and possibly conflicted Abraham, his demanding G-d, resilience of Isa how after all of this, any kind of father son reconciliation can be reached.

This morning's teaching is about the time *before* Isaac was born and specifically Abraham and Sarah's reactions when they receive the prophecy of pregnancy.

Sarah was in her nineties, and Abraham was pushing one hundred and one.

Abraham got the news first. His response? text says, "*Vayipol Avraham al panav vayitzchak* – Abraham fell flat on his face and laughed (Genesis 17:17). When

Sarah overhears the angel tell Abraham that Sarah will have a son within a year, *Vatizchak Sarah* – and Sarah laughed (Genesis 18:12). They both comment on the absurdity of intimacy etc at this stage of life. They found it funny. The fact that the Torah even talks about giggling suggests it's a sacred topic.

Laughter happens when we can laugh at ourselves. Laughter happens when a strong emotion brews and spills out in the expression of cracking up. Laughter mostly happens in relation to other people. It's contagious and strengthens

relationships. relational laughter when we laugh with another person builds strengthens relationships. In 1962 was actually in Tanganyika, which is now Tanzania, where laughter epidemic broke out. It spread throughout nearby villages and while thought to be a virus, there was nothing detected in the blood samples. They just laughed.

A Jewish folk tale is told about a learned rabbi who becomes curious who will be his neighbor in the world to come. One night he dreams that he can actually meet his Heavenly neighbors to be the next town over at the farmer's market. There they will be located next to the onion and potato stall.

The next morning, the rabbi reaches the onion and potato stall at the farmer's market and sure enough, there are two people next to the stand, but they are ridiculous. They wear funny hats, they make funny unexpected noises, do slapstick and the early morning crowd of people around them is howling with laughter.

The rabbi waited until there was a pause in their shtick and clearing his voice, earnestly asked, "Gentlemen, tell me, what do you *really* do?" Shoulders rising toward their ears, they doubled over in laughter, "Rabbi, this *is* really what we do. We come the market, we act silly and people laugh. When they walk away

giggling, smiling into their lives, we know we've done our job." The rabbi thanked them kindly, said the perfunctory, *L'hitraot* – see you later, only he knew what it implied. G-d viewed a life of Torah learning on par with these comedians.

Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine." Laughter relieves stress and enhance one's physical and mental health. And beloved writer, Maya Angelou confessed, "I don't trust anyone who doesn't laugh."

If that weren't enough, laughter burns calories. Often what makes us laugh is when our brain is expecting one thing and hears something else. G-d seems to think Sarah's laughter has to do with lacking faith in the fertility of love in one's nineties. In fear, Sarah denies that she laughed rather than offend G-d, the promiser of pregnancy.

Sarah wasn't mocking G-d, she was laughing at herself and the absurdity of it all.

G-d makes good on the promise and when Sarah gives birth, the couple name their child after their first response nine plus months prior. They call him Yitzchak, meaning he will laugh. Sarah takes it further saying, "G-d has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

As the first Jewish couple, Abraham and Sarah's giggles express radical acceptance of the unplanned. They even they laugh at themselves.

Were Jews always funny? Our history, not so much. However, in 1978, Time magazine claimed that 80 percent of all stand-up comedians in the United States were Jewish. So either we got funnier, or we were just funny all along and nobody noticed.

Laughter is not just about telling jokes, it's a life attitude.

The Talmud relates that the great Rabbi Akiva and three of his colleagues visited Jerusalem shortly after the Temple was destroyed. When they arrived at Mt Scopus, they all tore their garments in *kriyah* as a sign of mourning.

When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw in the spot where the Holy of Holies used to be, a fox, emerging from among the rubble that used to be the holiest place on earth. Seeing this painful sight, the rabbis began to cry—except for Rabbi Akiva—he began to laugh.

A little confused, the others questioned the cause of Rabbi Akiva's mirth. In response he gave the following explanation: "In the writings of the prophets we read of two prophecies—one of destruction, and the other of hope and ultimate redemption. As I

stand here and witness the fulfillment of the first prediction, I am confident that the second will also take place.'

And with that, they said, "Akiva, you have consoled us. Akiva, you have consoled us."

- Makkot 24b

Think of an example when you were sure one thing was going to happen and then it something else happened instead. Instead of complaining at the unexpected turn of events, you absorbed the information, took a deep breath, shook your head a few times in disbelief and laughed. And somehow you got through the situation.

In 1995, Dr. Madan Kataria of India realized how essential laughter was to life and that even feigned laughter helps us cope. The body, he discovered, cannot tell the difference. Mira Nair made a documentary film called the Laughing Club of India inspired by an actual moment when she living in Mumbai, rushing in a cab to an appointment and suddenly the traffic halted.

The culprit was a procession of 2,000 women dressed in white laughing as they marched toward the ocean. Ditching the cab, Mira Nair found they were part of a laughing yoga group committed to bringing more joy to the world.

Now there are about 6 thousand laughter clubs in the world. The groups gather at 7:00 am, not unlike a traditional minyan, to chuckle for 40 minutes.

Children laugh naturally hundreds of times a day and adult average 15 times a day. The work of children is play and laughing is the byproduct. Laughter at a playground is one of the most beautifully contagious melodies known to human-kind. It's time to reclaim laughter.

There is humor in Torah. In the book of Numbers we learn of a king named Balak who hired a sorcerer named Balam to curse the Jewish people. That part isn't funny. Balam agrees to the job and rides his donkey to perform it. But the donkey starts talking to him. Remember Ed, the Talking Horse or My Mother, the Car. This one is Donkey, my Guilty Conscience.

Another story is about King Ahasuerus, a somewhat dimwitted autocrat overdoing the grown up beverages and demanding his queen, Vashti, entertain wearing just her crown and she refuses. Done as a comedy with actors from our congregation is always funny. But there's more, the really bad guy is Haman and we end up eating cookies matching the shape of his hat.

Symbolically we've been chewing his hat for hundreds of years. We sell them at our Food Faire, the grocery stores carry them year round. It's an invitation to laugh any time. Jewish towns and villages that faced near tragedy of pogroms but survived counted that very day as an additional purism where

people would dress up, and in the face of a near fiasco, commemorate it with laughter.

If that were not enough on Yom Kippur, we read the absurd story about a man named Jonah who is swallowed by a whale and then is spit out on the shore. Jonah is disobedient of heading west to Tarshish when G-d said northeast to Niveh. Jonah is put on “time out” to think about things in the belly of the whale.

There is a great deal of heaviness in our world but sinking into the paralysis of despair will not bring us home. There is no spiritual practice that works for everybody. It may not work for you, but let’s try it.

Everyone, if you are able, please stand. This will not be difficult as there are only two techniques. The first one is breathing.

Fill up your diaphragm and sigh it out. (2x)

Second. Imagine you take out a cell phone, your own cell phone and bring it to your ear. Pretend you are hearing the funniest story from someone you know well. Imagine the voice cracking up on the other end and fake a laugh.

Be brave and try another. Shake hands with those around you, look them in the face, smile and laugh. Call it the Sarah and Abraham method. Lastly, take a look at your imaginary cell phone with an outrageous PG&E bill. You can’t change the bill, but you can laugh.

Feel free to take a seat.

Through laughter we shake something up, we become more clear headed, resilient and more capable of riding the waves of life.

Sarah and Abraham didn't argue with the oracle of conception. They didn't faint. They laughed and they even named their son, Yitzchak, the equivalent of Chuckles. Every single time we pray the Amida, we honor the lives of our of spiritual ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What if we could only hold, if only for an instant, that we were affirming Abraham, Chuckles and Jacob.

Laughter is divine.

It is within our power to make our narrative a resilient and joyful one.

Shana Tova