

Parshat Vayeira 5782

The birth of Yitzchak is connected to the theme of laughter. Sarah laughed when she heard that in her old age she would bear a child. It seems from the text that her laughter is interpreted as disbelief. How do we reconcile the suggestion that Sarah imaynu doubted the word of Hashem? The Leket Imrei Kodesh explains that when one gets a bracha from a tzaddik, one should be careful not to get an ayin hara from a rasha. Targum Yonasan states that Yishmael was standing right behind the tent (וְהוּא אֶחָרָיו Chapter 18, verse 10) when Sarah heard this news, so she laughed, expressing incredulity, to dispel the ayin hara. But Sarah is criticized because this bracha came from Hashem and not a tzaddik and the bracha of Hashem is impervious to any ayin hara.

Rav Gifter states that although Sarah had the capacity to know that this was prophecy, her lack of faith desensitized her. If Sarah's faith was complete, her response would have been 'Amein', may it be so. Many of our mistakes come from imperfect emunah. If we really believe that nothing is beyond Hashem, our outlook and decisions would certainly change. These events teach us how we need to approach emunah and how careful we have to be to ensure that what we do and say should only reflect kavod shamayim. We even have to be very careful of permitted things which may only *look (mechzei)* like something improper.

The Alei Shur notes that often our emunah is based purely on imagination but when real life challenges appear, our trust crumbles. Emunah has to be knowledge. We recently said on Rosh HaShana 'Vechol maaminimhavadi shemo, kain teheloso'. 'And all believe..... it is for certain that that is His name and that is His praise' The greatest praise we can give Hashem is living a life of emunah. Rav Dessler stresses that emunah is something we must study over and over until we actually feel Hashem's presence in every part of our life. The Sfas Emes says that when Sarah laughed she immediately did Teshuva out of fear. (ch. 18 verse 15) (כִּי יִרְאֶהָ) Repentance removes sin so denying her laughter was not totally untrue. But Hashem wanted her to repent from love, to take what she had done and turn it into something positive, not just to erase it. This teaches us the power of teshuva, that a person can take their past and transform it into something dramatically new and exalted.

The Torah writes that both Avraham and Sarah laughed. Rav Belsky says that both

rejoiced in the good news but Hashem perceived just a minuscule twinge of ridicule in Sarah's laughter. It was so minute that even Sarah herself was unaware of it which was why she denied it. לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי יִרְאֶהָ (verse 15). Sarah felt she was full of yiras shamayim and believed that her fear of Hashem was whole, firm and undiminished so she was confident that she had not expressed even the faintest whisper of scorn. Sarah nonetheless accepted the rebuke of Hashem and refined this sensitivity to the point that it was only she and not Avraham who sensed something faintly malicious in the petty laughter (מִצָּחֶק ch.21, verse 9) of the teenage Yishmael, something that betrayed his latent tendency towards grievous sin. Hashem then told Avraham to listen to Sarah and send away Yishmael and in a sense Sarah is vindicated.

Even a very slight amount of mockery eg of Rabbonim, of teachers, can turn something of import into nothing. Mockery takes holiness away and removes the gravity of sin; even a wink, a word or a seemingly insignificant gesture can cause untold damage. Thus the repercussions of Sarah's laughter were that when Yitzchak was born, people mocked her; the scoffers of the time suggested that Avimelech (king of the Philistines who represent scoffing) was the father of the child, not Avraham (who represents the core of emunah). Rav Woolfson notes that Sarah needed to be taken away by the Philistines to release the negative aspects of leitzanut (mockery) within her and replace them with kedusha. And then later after Yitzchak is born (chapter 21, verse 6), Sarah is able to say : צָחַק עֵשָׂה לִי אֱלֹקִים :

"God has made joy for me; whoever hears will rejoice over me." Rashi says on the word יִצְחָק that many prayers were answered with Sarah's and there was much joy in the world. Thus the negative sparks of laughter are replaced with the positive. And even the child is named יִצְחָק, "he will laugh". Making people happy is an expression of kindness. Hashem wanted Yitzchak to acquire an element of *chesed*. It is written in Tehillim about the end of time, 'אֲזַיְמַלֵּא שְׂחוֹק פִּינִי', 'then our mouths will be filled with laughter'. This laughter will be שְׂחוֹק, the gentle smile of happiness, the future will be totally different to our expectations. The only way to hold on will be to develop unshakeable emunah. Rabbi Tatz writes that laughter results from the unlikely juxtaposition of opposites. Sharp contrasts create laughter. This is the entire story of the Jewish People, who begin where the improbable ends.

(Sources: Rabbi Reichman, Mr. Glasser, Mrs Prero, Mrs Smiles,)