

Parashat Vaera

Why Don't Anyone Laugh Anymore?

Where Did all the Playfulness and Laughter Go?

I miss having a baby or a grandchild that's a baby. My youngest granddaughter is already five! What is so delicious about babies that I miss? I believe it is their joyous, free unrestrained laughter. Especially when you make them laugh, then their contagious laughter makes you laugh with them. They will just laugh and laugh from that deep place of carefree unblocked *simcha* (happiness). I remember, as a little girl when my friends and I couldn't stop laughing for no reason at all. This sometimes happened in school, especially when we had a substitute teacher. We would just look at each other and get a fit of unstoppable laughter. We would laugh so hard until our stomach hurt. How sad that today I cry so much more than I laugh. It seems like many of us adults have completely forgotten how to laugh. This is why several Rabbis allow us to hear music during the semi-mourning period between Pesach and Shavuot. Since we are in such a state of general unhappiness, music no longer bring us extra joy, it just helps lift us up from our extra sadness. Perhaps it is hard for us to laugh because we are too serious. We take upon ourselves the burdens of the world, rather than surrendering all control to Hashem. Yitzchak, who is born in this week's *parasha*, completely surrendered all control to Hashem in his willingness to be sacrificed. We can surrender in smaller ways, by placing our burden on Hashem, and allowing Him to take charge. We would be so liberated and free while releasing much shoulder tension. Then we could laugh again like Yitzchak, whose name means, "He will laugh." In Hebrew the word for laughing *לִצְחֹק*//*litzchok* and for playing *לְצַחֵק*//*tzachek* share the same root. Often we are too serious and not enough playful. The Torah states that Yitzchak played with Rivkah, his wife (*Bereishit* 26:8). We need to bring playfulness and laughter into our relationships. What once used to be natural and spontaneous, now takes conscious effort. We may even consider inserting playtime into our busy schedules! My husband and I have a dancing date one evening a week in our dining room. Not only is this great cardiovascular exercise, dancing has brought so much joy into our relationship, I highly recommend it!

Why did Sarah Laugh?

When we lose the ability to laugh freely out of unbridled joy, unhealthy laughter leaks out and causes us to laugh in unrectified ways. A friend once told me that as a girl whenever she would tell her mother about some difficulties she had in school or with friends, her mother would laugh scornfully. Because of her inability to feel compassion, her mother reacted with a nervous laughter, since she was unable to deal with her daughter's pain in an emotionally mature way. There are many kinds of unrectified laughter. People may laugh at others in a way of putting them down, or cynically in disbelief. Sarah, our Mother laughed when she was told the wonderful message that she would bear a son at the age of 90.

פַּר בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרַק יִתְּ (יב) וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתֵּי הַיָּתֵה לִּי עֲדָנָה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן:
(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צִחְקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הָאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּד וְאֲנִי זָקֵנָתִי:

"Sarah laughed within herself saying, now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my lord being so old?" (*Bereishit* 18:12-13).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Sarah is reprimanded for this laughter of slight disbelief by no other than Hashem Who asked, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am? (Ibid. 13). Sarah's laughter was a result of her tinge of lack of *emuna*. Understandably, it is difficult to believe in Hashem's unlimited control and power of bringing about the greatest miracle that completely defies scientific reality. When Hashem told Avraham about the son Sarah would bear for him he also laughed, "Then Avraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" (*Bereishit* 17:17).

Rashi compares to two kinds of laughter and explains, "Sarah's laughter was mocking. We learn that Avraham believed and was happy, but Sarah didn't believe and mocked, and therefore G-d criticized Sarah but didn't criticize Avraham" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 17:17). Two types of laughter greeted the news about the birth of Yitzhak. The difference between them is that Avraham spoke in a general language stating how unusual it would be if a hundred-year-old man had a child. He didn't put himself in the center, as did Sarah when she began by describing her own situation. From this difference, there is a hint to the different quality of their laughter. Avraham laughed at the absurdity that something should change from the usual way of the world, while Sarah laughed privately in disbelief that the nature of her own body would actually be altered. A support for this view can also be found in the different tense of their language. Avraham spoke in the future form, indicating, that the future might deviate from what has been the usual way until now, whereas Sarah spoke in the past tense emphasizing that the way it was is the way it will be, not accepting drastic changes from the past.

Rectifying Adam and Chava

How do we understand that Sarah, who took G-d's will on faith and accepted every situation with equanimity, would have any lack of *emuna*? And why did she deny having laughed? First of all, according to Ramban, Sarah was never told about Hashem's prior promise to Avraham that she would bear him a son (*Bereishit* 17:15-16), secondly, how could Sarah know that the angel dressed up as an Arab was a messenger of Hashem? Yet, at her level of righteousness and trust in G-d, she is still held accountable for not taking the blessing of the stranger as an encouraging sign of hope. When confronted about her laughter she realized that the message was from G-d. Therefore, she denied having laughed, as she would never have had a tinge of disbelief, had she known that it was a Divine promise. At her level of righteousness and trust in G-d, she is still held accountable for such a minor misdeed as laughing quietly to herself without anyone hearing it but Hashem. Avraham and Sarah together with the rest of our mothers and fathers were in the process of rectifying the sin of Adam and Chava. In my life-lessons on *Bereishit* I wrote how their major sin needing rectification was their failure to take responsibility for their actions. My friend Yedida Goldstein once told me the following in the name of Rabbi Twersky: Avraham and Sarah worked as a team to learn taking responsibility for their actions. When Avraham confronted her, "You did laugh" (*Bereishit* 18:15), Sarah learned to take responsibility for even a matter as small as a minute, miniscule laughter of disbelief, which hardly ever existed. Avraham enabled her to reach this very high level of refined rectification of Adam and Chava's sin.

Rectified Overflowing Blessed Laughter

Laughter is triggered by the surprise element of something completely unexpected. Rectified laughter indicates a belief in G-d's unlimited power and ability to run the world, which is beyond anything expected, breaking through all the physical boundaries of the world. Eventually, Sarah expands her level of *emuna* when, despite all odds, she gives birth to a son:

ספר בראשית פרק כא (ו) וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחַק עִשָּׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כֹּל הַשְּׂמֵעַ יִצְחָק לִי:
(ז) וַתֹּאמֶר מִי מִלֵּל לְאַבְרָהָם הַיְנִיקָה בָּנִים שָׂרָה כִּי יִלְדֵתִי בֶן לְזָקְנָיו:

“Then Sarah said, ‘G-d made laughter me; anyone who hears will laugh with me.’ She said, ‘Who would believe that that Sarah suckles children for Avraham? I have given birth to a child in his old age!’” (*Bereishit* 21:6-7).

Here Sarah rectifies her tinge of disbelief expressed to herself in her private laughter. Now as she is cradling her baby in her bosom there is no doubt that her laughter is one of exuberant joyful happiness, the source of overwhelming blessing for all humanity. “At the time that Sarah gave birth, many barren women conceived, many deaf people began hearing, many blind people started seeing, many insane people became sane” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 53:8). Whereas, Sarah’s first laughter included an element of disbelief in G-d’s power to completely change reality, her laughter after having given birth is the rectified laughter of complete joy for the amazing miracle, which brings blessed repercussion to the world.

Health Benefits of Laughter and Mashiach

One of the healthiest things a person can do is laugh. Sometimes we can see that those who have the most developed sense of humor are those who have been through the most traumatic events in life. Laughter has a preserving quality to it: it helps us through our darkest moments. Even on a physical level, medical studies reveal that laughter is healthy: it produces endorphins, aids our digestion, and helps us recover more quickly from illness. There are three possible reactions that we can have when receiving information: 1. The “A-Ha” reaction to logical and compatible information. When two pieces of information come together to create a more complete picture it elicits an affirmative response, as when one says “A-Ha.” 2. The negative “Uh-Uh” response, which is a second and opposite reaction that occurs when we receive incompatible information. When the pieces of information don’t make sense together. 3. The “Ha-Ha” reaction is when incompatible information fits together briefly in an amusing way. This is when two or more bits of data make sense together, but only temporarily. For a moment, we catch a glimpse of a reality that delights us, but then dissipate. Such is the nature of laughter. It is elicited as the result of looking at things in a new and unexpected way. When Mashiach arrives, Yitzchak will stand up for the Jewish people (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 89:2), and herald the new dawn of consciousness, and he will herald it with laughter. It will be all-knowing laughter, the laughter of the one who knew all along that something good was awaiting for us at the end. “Then our mouths shall be filled with laughter” (*Tehillim* 126:2).