



Parshat Lech Lecha

Why is only Sarah Judged for Laughing?

Dear Rebbetzin,

It really bothers me that the Torah seems prejudiced against woman. Both Avraham and Sarah laughed when they were told that Sarah was going to bear a son for Avraham. However, only Sarah is reprimanded for laughing. Her laughter is interpreted as an expression of her lack of emunah, but no one criticizes Avraham for laughing. Why should there be a difference between Avraham's and Sarah's laughter? And why was only Sarah reprimanded for laughing, whereas Avraham's laughter is accepted?

Surah Avrahamson (name changed)

Dear Surah,

You are asking a very good question, which has bothered me as well. For indeed it does seem unfair that only Sarah is judged harshly for her laughter when Avraham laughed no less. To deal with your question, we need to compare the exact language describing both laughers and to understand the nature of laughter. Laughter is triggered by a surprise element of something completely unexpected. It can also be a release of tension and an expression of going beyond all boundaries and limits. In this way, laughter can indicate a way of relating to G-d's unlimited power and ability to run the world.

Contrasting Laughers

It states at the end of *Parashat Lech Lecha* that Avraham laughed when Hashem promised him a son through Sarah:

ספר בראשית פרק יז פסוק יז וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבִּי הֲלֵבֵן מֵאָה שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם שָׂרָה הִבֵּת תִּנְשָׂעִים שָׂנָה תֵּלֵד:

“Avraham fell on his face and laughed, as he said in his heart, can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?” (*Bereishit* 17:17).

Although the same Hebrew root צחק/*tzchok* is used when describing Avraham and Sarah's laughter, the Aramaic translation, Unkelos translates Avraham's laughter "*chadei*" (to rejoice) but Sarah's laughter "*chayechet*" (to mock). How can the same word be used in two completely different ways? Rashi, based on Unkelos' translation, seems to only amplify our question: “Avraham had faith and rejoiced, whereas, Sarah had no faith and mocked. That is why G-d was angry with Sarah, but was not angry with Avraham. SHALL A CHILD BE BORN TO ONE WHO IS A HUNDRED YEARS OLD –Some questions express astonishment, and do not imply a doubt but rather affirm the certainty that the circumstance referred to has happened or will happen... This question affirms the certainty that it is possible for G-d to cause Avraham at the age of a hundred to beget a son and this in effect is what he said to himself: “Would a child be born to any other man who is one hundred years old? What a favor the Holy One is doing to me!” (Rashi, *Bereishit* 17:17). How can Rashi be so sure that Avraham's laughter was an expression of his emunah, whereas Sarah's laughter was an expression of disbelief?

Laughter of Belief after Returning to her Youth

In order to answer this question, we need to compare the Torah verses describing Avraham and Sarah's laughter:

Please send your **Ask the Rebbetzin Questions** to director@berotbatayin.org
Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum | Director, Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin | www.berotbatayin.org

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק יב ותצחק שרה בקרבה לאמר אחרי בלתי היתה לי עדנה ואדני זקן:

“Sarah laughed within herself saying; after I am faded shall I have pleasure? My lord being old also?”
(*Bereishit* 18:12).

Ramban explains that “laughing within oneself” is not an expression denoting happiness. Therefore, Sarah’s laughter is considered mocking, since she laughed בקרבה/*b’kirbah* – within herself. Moreover, Avraham laughed at the time of the good tidings, whereas Sarah laughed only after experiencing that her youth had returned. This can be understood from the following alternative translation of the abovementioned verse: “After I was worn out I experienced youth.” Her laughter was not a laughter of disbelief, when she got her period back. She did indeed believe in the promise that she would bear a child. However, she did not believe in the promise immediately when she was told, but only after she experienced a change in her own body. Avraham, however, believed without experiencing any change in his body. Therefore, Hashem was only strict regarding her laughter (Ohr Hachaim, *Bereishit* 18:13).

Contrasting Personal and General, Past and Future Language

Yet, we need to go deeper into comparing the language of the two Torah verses in order to understand the textual basis for interpreting Avraham’s laughter as an expression of happiness, and Sarah’s laughter as an expression of disbelief. 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. Sarah, however, 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. Sarah laughed in disbelief that the nature of her own body would actually be altered. We also find a support for this view in the different tense of their language. Avraham spoke in the future form, indicating that the future can deviate from what has been until now. Sarah spoke in the past tense, emphasizing that the way it was is the way it will be. She was unwilling to accept drastic changes from the past. (This textual analysis is based on what I heard from Rav Daniel Kohen in the name of Rav Mattis Weinberg).

Laughing through the Happiness of Faith

I would like to clarify that not all commentators criticize Sarah for laughing. Kli Yakar, for example, ascribes praise to Sarah for only laughing in her thought, and never daring to bring this laughter to her lips. Malbim goes even further in his praise for Sarah, explaining that Sarah laughed out of great happiness because she had already heard from Avraham that Hashem had promised that she would give birth to a son. She, moreover, had changed her name to Sarah rather than Sarai for this very purpose. Thus, she surely believed in Hashem’s promise. However, since she didn’t have her period anymore, she knew that she couldn’t have children unless a great miracle was performed for her, creating her anew. This kind of miracle may possibly take away from a person’s reward. Yet, when Sarah received her period back, she was happy to believe that she would bear a son without diminishing her reward (Malbim, *Bereishit* 18:12). Later, after Sarah is holding Yitzchak in her bosom, she surely laughs out of happiness and exclaims, “G-d has made laughter for me, whoever will hear will laugh with me” (*Bereishit* 21:6). Sarah exclaimed, “the main laughter was for the miracle that G-d performed for me, to the extent that everyone who will hear will not laugh for the miracle done for Avraham, but only for the miracle done for me (Malbim, *Bereishit* 21:5)

Complete Rectified Laughter

There are different opinions as to whether Sarah's first laughter included an element of disbelief in G-d's power to completely change reality. Yet, her second laughter, after having given birth, is surely completely rectified laughter expressing incredible joy for the amazing miracle she experienced. Sefat Emet explains that when "Sarah denied that she laughed because she feared" (*Bereishit* 18:15), she immediately repented and rectified her laughter. Through her teshuvah, it may be considered as if she never laughed out of disbelief. However, only teshuvah from love has the power to revert the past sins and turn them into merits. At that point, Sarah had only repented out of fear "because she feared." Therefore, Avraham insisted "But you did laugh" (*Ibid.*), meaning, you have not yet rectified your laughter completely. To do so, you need to repent out of love. Later, after Yitzchak's birth, Sarah is able to rectify her laughter completely out of love when she exclaims, "G-d has made laughter for me" (*Bereishit* 21:6). Now, she was able to redeem her laughter from any traces of disbelief and transform it into the highest kind of laughter, totally overflowing with emunah and Simcha (happiness).

May we soon reach the level of Sarah when "our mouths will be filled with laughter!" (*Tehillim* 126:2).