

Parshat Vayera: Laughter

Our parsha this week is filled with dramatic episodes; the destruction of Sedom, the banishment of Yishmael, the Akeda. This week's parsha also sees the birth of Yitzchak, the heir to Avraham's legacy. The name Yitzchak is interesting. It is derived from the word for laughter - Litzchok. But it is not only in Yitzchak that this "laughter" finds expression. The more one focuses upon it, one realises that almost all the events surrounding Yitzchak's early life are somehow connected to laughter. This week then, we will examine the role of the root "tz-ch-k" in Hebrew. What does it mean? How should we translate it? And how does our patriarch Isaac become connected with laughter? Read on!

Chavruta

Look at the following sources (all from Bereshit unless otherwise specified)

1. 17:15-19
2. 18:9-15
3. 21:6 and Rashi there, but also see Rashi on 25:19 about the "leitzanei hador" - the cynics or jokers; lit. the "clowns" of the time.
4. 21:9-10 . See the very important midrash brought by Rashi here on passuk 9 op cit. "metzachek". What are the THREE possible meanings that he brings for this word?
5. 26:8
6. 39:14 (note the context)
7. Shemot 32:6 (again, note the context)

If you don't have enough questions of your own by now, then think a little about these:

1. YITZCHAK: Why is this his name?
- Is he named after Avraham's laughter (#1), Sarah's laughter (#2)?
- And why is there so much laughter surrounding Yitzchak? Is there something in any way "amusing" about his coming into being? Yitzchak means "He will laugh". Will he?
2. AVRAHAM laughed and SARAH laughed. Why does God criticise Sarah and not Avraham
3. YISHMAEL. What does he do that rouses Sarah's anger so much? Are any of Rashi's options plausible?

Shiur

If you have taken the time to study the mekorot suggested, you will no doubt be aware that this topic is a thorny issue. First there is the basic question of translation. What does "Yitzchak", or "letzachek" mean?

Then, there is the identical reaction of Avraham and Sarah, a mysterious response to the news that they will have a son. Can we explain it? Additionally, it would seem that it is specifically Yishmael's "metzachek" behaviour that precipitates his banishment from the family home. And finally there is, of course, Yitzchak himself. Of all the Avot, Yitzchak appears to us as the most sober, the least "jolly" or "jovial". Is "Yitzchak" an appropriate appellation? Does the name fit the man?

So much for questions. Let us turn to some answers.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Avraham receives the news of the immanent arrival of a son. His reaction:

"Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, and he said to himself 'Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?'" (17:17)

Later Sarah hears the good tidings:

"And Sarah laughed to herself saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment-with my husband so old?'. Then the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?"' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? ... Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh', for she was frightened. But He replies, 'You did laugh'." (18:9-15)

Similar stories¹. In both cases, laughter. In both cases an internal voice responds with a reaction of surprise at the promise of a child. In both cases they point with wonderment at to their advanced age. Yet, in the first instance, Abraham's laughter passes unnoticed. Sarah's laughter, on the other hand, prompts a swift Divine rebuke. What is the difference between the two situations?

JOY AND SKEPTICISM

Rav Yoseph BECHOR SHOR picks up on a basic difference between the passages. With Abraham, we see a reaction of prostration; "He threw himself upon his face". This does not appear in Sarah's reaction. The Bechor Shor uses this textual difference to explain:

¹ One of the interesting things about the stories of Avraham is the way in which many episodes seem to find expression in a follow-up story which repeats or develops the original story. Think about it: In ch.12 Avraham goes to Egypt due to a famine and his wife is taken by the king. The same story happens with Avimelech in Ch. 20. The story about Hagar running into the desert is paralleled in Ch.21 with the sending away of Hagar and Yishmael. There are two stories which herald Yitzchak's birth. Two Avimelech stories. Twice Lot gets into trouble in Sedom.

Whether this indicates a progression within Avraham's life, or something else, is still an open question. Yoni Grossman who writes for the VBM has done an interesting job with some of these "doublets" explaining them in a somewhat localized fashion. As of yet, I have not read an overarching explanation which might explain the breadth of this phenomenon, its meaning and implications.

"His falling down and bowing before God demonstrate that he believed God. When he laughed it was an expression of joy and happiness, an emotion of thanks. He bowed down in thanksgiving exclaiming, 'What a miracle! What an incredible kindness for God to change the laws of nature for me'."

Avraham's immediate response of falling to the floor is perceived here as an act of thanks to God. No such gesture is apparent in Sarah's response. This must explain God's critique of Sarah. Whereas Abraham's response was a declaration of thanks for an unexpected, unthinkable good, Sarah's response was more incredulous in nature. She "laughed" at the possibility of it all happening. When she laughed, it was not the laugh of joy and thanks but rather, a cynical laugh of one who entertains a ridiculous, way-out idea, entertaining a notion curious and unbelievable. After she has been rebuked Sarah attempts to tell God that she laughed in fear, but God is insistent. She laughed because she doubted the possibility of her having children.

FEELINGS

What leads to these different responses in Avraham and Sarah. Are we going to suggest that Sarah was a woman of lesser faith than her husband? I suggest not. We might see their variant reactions as reflecting their own personal situations.

Sarah knows her own body. "Sarah had stopped having the periods of women" (19:11). She knew that child bearing was an impossibility. Indeed, she has never had a child in all her ninety years, and she probably felt the lack of children in every fibre of her being. Sarah's response then, is the response of the barren women who with immense anguish and self-torment had to painfully come to terms with, and accept her infertility. Now, after menopause, after the last vain hope of giving life to a child has faded away, God suggests that she will have a child. It is not surprising that she sees the idea as comical, preposterous, an impossibility. Nonetheless, it would seem that Sarah Immeinu is expected by God to believe even that impossibility.

For Avraham, who had fathered a child (and fathered children later. see 25:2-4) the biological issue did not seem as formidable an obstacle. Avraham receives the news in a very different context. He is told about his new son in the context of a new covenant with God, the command of Brit Mila - circumcision. Abraham is told by God that, "you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant" (17:9). As far as he is concerned, his only offspring is his son from Hagar - Yishmael. He had never been granted the pleasure of sharing a child with his life-partner Sarah. And now, at this moment, God drops quite a surprise.

Abraham then, on hearing this news, would seem to be more concerned with the notion of his heir; the son who will succeed him. His pure joy relates to the fact that this baby will be a product of the union between him and Sarah. Not just his son, but also Sarah's son. It is

interesting that Abraham responds to the news of Yitzchak with concern towards Yishmael. Up until this point in time (for 13 years!), Avraham had assumed that Yishmael would be his successor. Now with the prospect of a son from Sarah, he asks "O that Yishmael might live in your favour!" (17:18). Yitzchak will be my heir. What will be of Yishmael? But God tells him: "I will maintain my covenant with Yitzchak." (17:21) Avraham's joy relates to his joy at the birth of a covenantal son from Sarah.

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

Sarah's expresses disbelief, her amazement at this "biological joke". In contrast, Abraham's reacts with pure joy at the birth of his heir from Sarah. Both these dimensions are reflected in the Biblical description of Yitzchak's birth. Both Avraham and Sarah respond to the birth of little Yitzchak. The responses to his birth by his father and mother are very different.

"Abraham gave his newborn son, WHOM SARAH HAD BORNE HIM, the name Yitzchak, and when his son Isaac was eight days old, ABRAHAM CIRCUMCISED HIM, as God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne to him, the name Yitzchak.... Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh (YETZACHAK) with me'. And she added 'WHO WOULD HAVE SAID to Avraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age.' The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned." (21:1-7)

Abraham relates to the son "that Sarah had borne him" and he calls him Yitzchak "as God had spoken". He then performs the covenant of circumcision. He sees the birth of Yitzchak in covenantal terms. Yitzchak is his future, his covenantal heir. The Yitzchak - the laughter - that Abraham sees in Yitzchak is pure joy. In the words of the Rambam (17:17), "His name will be Yitzchak as an expression of the great elation that his birth held for Avraham."

Sarah's reaction to the name Yitzchak, is the fact that people would laugh when they saw her, the old woman, suckling her baby child. The impossible had happened! Her Yitzchak, her laughter, is the laughter of the once barren woman who is now happy with her children. For Sarah, the laughter is one of bewilderment and wonderment.

FIRST AND SECOND

Many commentaries do not draw such a stark difference between Sarah's response and that of Avraham. Here is the Abarbanel's reading of the situation.

"Abraham laughed, not out of a belief that God was incapable of fulfilling his promise, but rather because it went against the course

of nature... God commanded him to call the child's name Yitzchak reflecting his laughter so as to stress Isaac's birth contrary to the natural course of events... "

So then, why was Sarah's reaction censured and Abraham's went by without comment? She also laughed out of a feeling that the whole thing was absurd, beyond belief. The Abarabanel continues:

"God attacked Sarah for her laughter and not Abraham... for there is no doubt that Abraham would have told Sarah (of the promise of a son.) He told her of the command of circumcision, and the purpose of that command ie. to give birth to Isaac in full holiness. He told her of their changes of name. Now when she heard .. of the birth of Isaac, it was not right to laugh for she had already heard this information from Avraham. If this was the first time, she would not have been criticised... but after she had been informed by Avraham, her guilt seems greater, as if she didn't really believe it the first time, nor the second." (commentary to Ch.17 & 18)

So Sarah's problem was that she was second. Avraham had expressed amazement at the prospect of his son from Sarah. But Sarah's reaction is wrong because it was not an immediate, spontaneous reaction to the news. She had heard the news many days earlier, and had the time to consider it. Even so, days later, she continued to express disbelief. This demonstrated a lack of faith.

YISHMAEL

We have already outlined the covenantal implications of the birth of Yitzchak. At the same time, we should be aware too, that Yitzchak replaced or maybe, more accurately, displaced Yishmael as the obvious heir to Avraham. It is therefore, not surprising that it is at the occasion of the weaning celebration for Yitzchak that certain tensions in the family explode.

Let us look at what we know of the story. Sarah sees Yishmael being "metzachek". The result is that Sarah demands that Yishmael leave the homestead.

"She said to Avraham, 'Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share the inheritance with my son Isaac.'" (21:10)

It would seem that it is Yishmael's "tzchok" that precipitates this family rift. What exactly was he doing? Laughing? What of Yishmael's "laughter"? Is it so objectionable? And how might it be linked to Yishmael's inheritance of Avraham?

The midrash, as you will have seen in your chavruta learning (Rashi 21:6) proposes various options of what Yishmael's behaviour might have consisted. It goes so far to suggest the sins of Idolatry, sexual immorality, and

murder. The midrash succeeds in identifying the word "metzachek" with all three of these heinous crimes. The midrash clearly shows a negative picture of Yishmael and thereby justifies his exile, but these options do not flow smoothly within the text. There are other readings however. The Ralbag explains that here "Metzachek" has connotations of mockery:

"He saw no superiority in Yitzchak over himself, for was he not a son of Abraham as well? He mocked the fact that Avraham made a feast on Yitzchak's weaning; something he had not done for Yishmael"

Rashi too echoes this explanation when he suggests that Yishmael was challenging Yitzchak over Avraham's inheritance.

LAUGHTER

But let us get down to basics here. What is laughter? Why do we laugh? When do we laugh? Laughter is a response to the unexpected. Humour is the art of coming up with a totally unexpected line, a surprise, that takes people off guard, that suddenly throws people off balance, and this causes laughter. Comedy utilises the unusual sudden situation, sometimes even the tragic to induce laughter. We laugh occasionally out of extreme fear, out of extreme joy.

Yitzchak represents all of these. He is a person of extremes. He is also "the unexpected one." He is the person who we least expected to come onto the scene. Avraham and Sarah didn't expect him. Yishmael was certainly jarred by his arrival. Yitzchak is a symbol of laughter because his very being is a riddle, a suspension of reality, a surprise.

"Tzechok is produced only by noticing something which strikes as ridiculous. But where, in the whole world is there any greater absurd contradiction than the expectation that a hundred year-old man and his ninety year-old wife, who never had a child in the course of their long married life, now, practically at the end of their lives, should get a son!

...According to all natural conditions of cause and effect, the whole beginning of the Jewish people, its history, its expectations, its hopes, its whole life based on these hopes must appear as the most unwarranted laughable pretension. It only makes sense when it reckons on the deeply infringing, completely free almighty will .. of a free Almighty God ...

... It was a question of creating a nation, which from the very beginning of to the end of its existence, was to be, even by its very existence, in opposition to all the laws of World History, an imitation of God in the midst of mankind, and therefore up to the present day ... appears as the most absurd absurdity." (Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch 17:17)

I believe that Yitzchak's birth is not the only event in his life that represents absurdity. The Akeida itself, unfathomable in its religious perplexity is a further absurdity in Yitzchak's life. Interestingly, we see the other Avot, Avraham and Yaakov, both experiencing a name-change in their life time. Yitzchak's name remains as it was given to him at birth, indicating that the characteristic of joy/unexpected/absurdity is a constant feature in Yitzchak's life.

Shabbat Shalom