

10:00-10:10 Schmooze

10:10-10:12 Torah Blessing

10:12-10:15 Where are we in the text

- This portion: Abraham and the messengers, Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaac born, Hagar is cast out, Akeidah, Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt, other crises

10:15-10:25 Read Beginning of Parsha

- Gen 18:1-15

10:25-10:45

- Read commentaries on Sarah's laughter
- What does it mean to laugh inward or outward? Is there a difference?
- Is her laughter disbelief? Derision? Both?
- Does this change the story at all?

10:45-11:15

- Read Talmudic account of this passage
- How does the Talmud describe Sarah? What qualities does she have?
- God hides Sarah's laughter.
 - What does this suggest about the nature of her laughter?
 - Is altering truth for the sake of peace good? Why?
- This text describes many miraculous things that happen to Sarah. What is the point of telling us them? How does this stand in contrast to, or support, her laughter?

11:15-12:00 Power of laughter

- Hirsch and Rosen
- What does laughter do? What can it do?
- How do we think about humor today?

Vayera: Sarah's Laughter

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18 Cheshvan 5783, November 12, 2022

Rashi on Gen 18:12

בקרבה. מסתכלת במעייה ואמרה אפשר הקרבים הללו טעונין ולד? השדים הללו שצמקו מושכין קלב?

Sarah laughed "b'kirba" - she reflected on her appearance and said, "Is it possible that this womb shall bear a child? That these dried-up breasts shall give milk? *Quoting from Midrash Tanchuma*

Ibn Ezra on Gen 18:12

וטעם **בקרבה** בנפשה והשם גלה סודה למלאך:

b'kirba - In her soul. God revealed Sarah's inner thoughts to the angel

Chizkuni on Gen 18:12

בקרבה במחשבתה ולבה

b'kirba - in her heart and mind

Ramban on Gen 18:12

ותכחש שרה לאמר אני תמה בנביאה הצדקת איך תכחש באשר אמר השם לנביא וגם למה לא האמינה לדברי מלאכי אלהים והנראה בעיני כי המלאכים האלה הנראים כאנשים באו אל אברהם והוא בחכמתו הכיר בהם ובשר אותו שוב אשוב אליך ולשרה בן ושרה שומעת ולא ידעה כי מלאכי עליון הם כענין באשת מנוח (שופטים יג ו) ואולי לא ראתה אותם כלל.

"And Sarah denied it, saying..." I wonder about the righteous prophetess: How could she deny what God said to the prophet (Abraham). Also, why did she not believe in the words of God's angels? The answer appears to me to be that these angels - who appeared as men - came to Abraham, and he, in his wisdom, recognized them. They announced to him, "and Sarah shall have a son" (18:10). And Sarah heard it, but she did not know that they were angels of the God, as was the case with the wife of Manoah, and maybe she did not see them at all.

ותצחק בקרבה ללעג כמו יושב בשמים ישחק ה' ילעג למו (תהלים ב ד) כי השחוק לשמחה הוא בפה אז ימלא שחוק פינו (שם קכו ב) אבל השחוק בלב לא יאמר בשמחה והקב"ה האשים אותה לאברהם למה היה הדבר נמנע בעיניה וראוי לה שתאמין או שתאמר "אמן כן יעשה ה'" והנה אברהם אמר אליה למה צחקת היפלא מה' דבר ולא פירש אליה כי השם גילה אליו סודה והיא מפני יראתו של אברהם תכחש כי חשבה שאברהם בהכרת פניה יאמר כן או מפני ששתקה ולא נתנה שבח והודאה בדבר ולא שמחה והוא אמר לא כי צחקת אז הבינה כי בנבואה נאמר לו כן ושתקה ולא ענתה אותו
דבר

Therefore she laughed within herself in derision, similar to (the verse) "just [as the word "laugh" is used in the verse: "The One who sits in heaven laughs, Adonai mocks them" (Psalms 2:4). For joyous laughter is in the mouth, "our mouths shall be filled with laughter,

our tongues with joy” (Psalms 126:2). But laughter in the heart is not talked about as joyous. God accused her before Abraham, “Why is this matter impossible in your eyes?” She should have believed it, and therefore she should have said, “Amen, this is what God will do!” Now Abraham said to her, “Why did you laugh? Is anything too hard for God?” He did not explain to her that God had revealed her secret to him. And she, because of Abraham’s reverence for God, denied it for she thought that Abraham had said so through recognition of the expressions on her face or because she had kept quiet and gave no expression of praise and thanksgiving or joy. *And he said to her, “No, you did laugh.”* Then she understood that it was told to him in a prophecy, and so she remained quiet and did not answer a word.

וראוי שנאמר עוד כי אברהם לא גילה לה הנאמר לו מתחילה (בראשית י"ז:ט) אבל שרה אשתך יולדת לך בן אולי המתין עד שלוח השם אליה הבשורה ביום מחר כי ידע כי לא יעשה ה' אלהים דבר כי אם גלה סודו אל עבדיו הנביאים (עמוס ג ז) או מרוב זריזותו במצות היה טרוד במילתו ומילת עם רב אשר בביתו ואחר כן בחולשתו ישב לו פתח האהל והמלאכים באו טרם שהגיד לה דבר

It is proper that we also say that Abraham had not revealed to her what had originally been told to him: “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son” (Gen 17:29). Perhaps he waited until God would send her the announcement on the following day for he knew, “Indeed, God does nothing without having revealed God’s purpose to God’s servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Or, it may be that due to his great enthusiasm for mitzvot, he was occupied with his circumcision and the circumcision of the many people in his house. Afterward, because of his weakness, he sat at the doorway of the tent, and the angels came before he had told her anything.

Baba Metziah 87a

אמר אפרים מקשאה תלמידו של רבי מאיר משמיה דרבי מאיר אברהם אבינו אוכל חולין בטרהה היה ושרה אמנו אותו היום פירסה נדה

Efrayim Miksha’a, disciple of Rabbi Meir, says in the name of Rabbi Meir: Abraham, our forefather, would eat non-sacred food only in a state of ritual purity (treating it with extra sanctity), and Sarah, our foremother, menstruated that day, (meaning Abraham could not touch them or serve them to the guests).

בראשית יח, ט) ויאמרו אליו איה שרה אשתך ויאמר הנה באהל להודיע ששרה אמנו צנועה היתה אמר רב יהודה אמר רב ואיתימא רבי יצחק יודעים היו מלאכי השרת ששרה אמנו באהל אלא מאי באהל כדי לחבבה על בעלה..לימדה תורה דרך ארץ שישאל אדם באכסניא שלו והאמר שמואל אין שואלין בשלום אשה כלל על ידי בעלה שאנ

The next verse states: “And they said to him: Where is Sarah your wife? And he said: Behold, in the tent”(Genesis 18:9). This informs us that Sarah was a modest woman, (staying inside when they had guests) Rav Yehuda says that Rav says, and some say it is Rabbi Yitzhak who says: The angels knew that Sarah was inside the tent. So why do they (as a question in order to have Abraham say that Sarah) is in the tent? To endear her to her husband (by highlighting Sarah’s modesty)... The Torah is teaching the proper etiquette that a person

should inquire of his hostess. But doesn't Shmuel say: One may not inquire about the welfare of a woman at all? Asking her husband (about her) is different.

בראשית יח, יב) אחרי בלותי היתה לי עדנה אמר רב חסדא אחר שנתבלה הבשר ורבו הקמטין נתעדן הבשר ונתפשטו הקמטין וחזר היופי למקומו

“After I am waxed old [*veloti*] shall I have pleasure [*edna*]” (Genesis 18:12). Rav Hisda says: After the skin had worn out [*nitballa*] and become full of wrinkles, the skin once again became soft [*nitadden*] and her wrinkles smoothed out, and Sarah's beauty returned to its place.

כתיב (בראשית יח, יב) ואדוני זקן וכתיב (בראשית יח, יג) ואני זקנתי דלא מותיב הקב"ה כדקאמרה איהו
It is written: “And my lord is old” (Genesis 18:12), and it is written: “And the Lord said to Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I certainly bear a child, and I am old?” (Genesis 18:13). God did not repeat what Sarah actually said. (Why?)

תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל גדול שלום שאפי' הקב"ה שינה בו שנאמר (בראשית יח, יב) ותצחק שרה בקרבה וגו' (בראשית יח, יב) ואדוני זקן וכתיב (בראשית יח, יג) ויאמר ה' אל אברהם וגו' ואני זקנתי
The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Peace is so important that even God altered the truth (for its sake), as it is stated: “And Sarah laughed within herself, and my lord is old,” and it is written: “And the Lord said to Abraham: ‘and I am old?’”

בראשית כא, ז) ותאמר מי מלל לאברהם הניקה בנים שרה כמה בנים הניקה שרה אמר רבי לוי אותו היום שגמל אברהם את יצחק בנו עשה סעודה גדולה היו כל אומות העולם מרננים ואומרים ראיתם זקן וזקנה שהביאו אסופי מן השוק ואומרים בנינו הוא ולא עוד אלא שעושיין משתה גדול להעמיד דבריהם מה עשה אברהם אבינו הלך וזימן כל גדולי הדור ושרה אמנו זימנה את נשותיהם וכל אחת ואחת הביאה בנה עמה ומניקתה לא הביאה ונעשה נס בשרה אמנו ונפתחו דדיה כשני מעיינות והניקה את כולן ועדיין היו מרננים ואומרים אם שרה הבת תשעים שנה תלד אברהם בן מאה שנה יוליד מיד נהפך קלסתר פנים של יצחק ונדמה לאברהם פתחו כולם ואמרו (בראשית כה, יט) אברהם הוליד את יצחק

“And she said: Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah should nurse children?” (Genesis 21:7).” How many children did Sarah nurse? Rabbi Levi says: That day when Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he prepared a great feast. All of the nations of the world were gossiping and saying: See this old man and old woman who brought a foundling from the market and are saying: He is our son, and moreover they are making a great feast to bolster their claim. What did Abraham, our forefather, do? He went and invited all of the great men of that generation, and Sarah, our foremother, invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her but did not bring her wet nurse. And a miracle occurred to Sarah, our foremother, and her breasts were opened like two springs, and she nursed all of these children. And still those people were gossiping and saying to each other: Even if Sarah, at ninety years of age, can give birth, can Abraham, at one hundred years of age, father a child? Immediately, the countenance of Isaac's face transformed and appeared

exactly like that of Abraham. Everyone exclaimed and said: “Abraham fathered Isaac” (Genesis 25:19).

“Sarah’s Laughter” Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch

The entire beginning of the Jewish people is laughable: its history, its expectations, its hopes. God waited with the foundation of this people until its forefather had reached a “ridiculous” high age; therefore [God] began the realization of [God’s] promise only after all human hopes had come to an end. For a people was about to be created that was to stand with its whole existence in contrast to all historical experience. Therefore, until today, to those who in their shortsightedness deny God, this people must appear as the most ridiculous joke of all. The derisive laughter that has followed the Jew through history is the surest proof of the divine nature of its path. The Jew is not touched by this ridicule because from the beginning [we have] been prepared for it.

“The Gravity of Laughter,” Rabbi Ariella Rosen

Scholar Aviva Zornberg characterizes Sarah’s laughter as an embodiment of the tension of “joy at enlarged possibilities, on the one hand, and the laughter that (bitterly? cruelly?) denies any possibility but the quotidian reality. To laugh is to confront the pressures of necessity on one’s individual destiny and one’s infinite desires.” (*The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, 99)

Sarah laughs, not because she finds the promise of having a child at the age of 90 funny, but because she finds it inconceivable. She is processing the tension between the possibility of having her dreams come true, and the impossibility that her body would allow it to happen. She is unable to suppress her reaction, because this is news she long ago gave up on hearing.

Laughter is a most curious reaction. It is (almost) uniquely human, yet deeply physiological, a response that is at the same time difficult to control and something we seek to curate through humor. Numerous researchers have found that human beings laugh much more often when we are with other people than when we are alone. In fact, we even find ourselves laughing at things that are not remotely funny if others are with us. Laughter, then, must serve as more than a response to the unexpected and the humorous.

Zornberg, quoting the French writer Michel Tournier, relates that when individuals laugh together, “they are using a *pseudo-language*, laughter, based on a common ground . . . which, unintelligible in itself, has as its function to narrow the distance between their respective positions which divides them from that common base.” (100) Laughter is its own language, and it helps us connect on a primal, yet distinctly human level. When we laugh or seek to provoke that reaction in others, it is one way of asking, “are you thinking what I’m thinking? Can I see myself in you?”