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## AND SARAH LAUGHED . . .

One of the more enigmatic passages in the Biblical stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs occurs as a sub-plot in the drama of *Parashat VaYera*, as Avraham Avinu hosts the three mysterious guests. After describing Avraham's elaborate hospitality, the narrator allows the guests to reveal their nature and their respective missions, as they foretell the miracle of Sarah's conceiving and bearing a child in her dotage.

In response to the incredible news, we are told, "*Va-titshak Sara be-kirba . . .*"—"and Sarah laughed . . . to herself"—or *at* herself [Genesis 18:12]. Ostensibly, Sarah's laughter expresses astonishment and joy, just like the laughter of Avraham in the preceding chapter [17:17] when he is told, after his circumcision and change of name, that Sarah will bear his son. Indeed, except for the fact that his laughter is preceded by an act of prostration, Avraham's reaction seems no more or less appropriate than Sarah's:

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart: 'Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? . . .' (17:17).

And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: 'After I am waxed old (lit. withered) shall I . . . ?' (18:12).<sup>1</sup>

And, like Avraham's laughter, Sarah's mirth or incredulity does not seem inherently reproach-worthy, for what response do we expect, if not wonder?

But the very next verse casts doubt on the appropriateness of the laughter, as Hashem asks Avraham why Sarah laughs [18:13]. And our initial impression of Sarah's innocence vanishes for good when she attempts to deny having laughed and is rebuked: "*Lo, ki tsahakt*"—"Nay, but thou didst laugh" [18:15]. While our commentaries have

struggled to justify Sarah Imenu's laughter, some going so far as to explain that her impulsive denial is the immediate response of a highly sensitive conscience (see, for example *Or haHayyim* and *Sefat Emet*), this paper will focus on the laughter itself, and only secondarily on Sarah's attempts to repress and deny it.

At this point in the story, we are struck by the fact that the query, "Wherefore did Sarah laugh?" [18:13], is addressed to Avraham and not to Sarah directly. This problem is particularly striking in light of the fact that the questioner (be it God or His messenger) reports that Sarah had said to herself, "Will I indeed give birth, and I am so aged," while the objective narrator attests that Sarah had actually thought that what made the good news so incredible was that *Avraham* is too old. Perhaps the physical changes that birth requires are already manifesting themselves in her body, and the tense of the verse may bear this out—"hayta li edna"—indicating, perhaps, that some tangible transformation has already taken place,<sup>2</sup> while no perceptible change has occurred in Avraham. Now, while a male can remain fertile even to old age, it seems that after the conception of Ishmael, Avraham has no more children with Hagar. Thus, perhaps Sarah knew that, short of an additional miracle, it was unlikely that she would bear a child by Avraham [this interpretation is consistent with *Midrash Rabba*, 48]. However, with her extreme sensitivity, Sarah avoids mentioning Avraham's inability to father more children and allows the thought to linger but a moment in silence.

If, though, Hashem alters Sarah's words for the sake of peace between husband and wife, as suggested by the *midrash*,<sup>3</sup> why does He bring up the issue of Sarah's laughter to her husband? Is this meant to engender love and respect between husband and wife? If we explain that Hashem addresses his indirect rebuke to Avraham because Sarah does not merit direct prophecy, how do we explain the direct address in the following verse (18:15): "*Va-yomer: 'Lo, ki tsahakt'*"?<sup>4</sup> And if we argue that this reproach is mouthed by Avraham, and that here, too, Sarah is not addressed directly by Hashem, how can we explain how Avraham is so certain what her thoughts had been?<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, once the point is conceded—albeit silently—that Sarah did indeed laugh, we still puzzle, "So what?" If laughing is a sin, we expect either an overt reproach from Hashem or an open confession and expression of repentance from Sarah.

THE HIDDEN MEANING OF LAUGHTER

It is hard to imagine that this interruption of the narrative with the issue of Sarah's laughter was intended for nothing but a break in the dramatic narrative or a brief glimpse of the involuntary but all too human response of a woman. It is clear that this laughter, which continues to reverberate throughout the continuation of the tale, has deep significance, particularly as the newborn son is named Yitshak—for the laughter. Indeed, several chapters later, after the child is born, the hidden, silent laughter of Sarah comes echoing out loud:

“*Va-tomer Sara, tsehok asa li Elokim . . .*” (21:6).

This verse is translated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch as follows:

“And Sarah said: God hath made me into a laughing-stock, all that hear will laugh at me.”<sup>6</sup>

This translation seems to coincide with the simple meaning of the Hebrew—albeit with an ear attuned more to Modern Hebrew usage—which suggests that Sarah expresses consternation at being an object of mockery.<sup>7</sup> This translation belies Rashi's explanation, based on *Midrash Rabba*, that Sarah praises God for bringing joyous laughter to her, and that all who hear of her story would rejoice with her. Rashi's interpretation is consistent with *Onkelos* and is followed by many earlier English translations:

“And Sarah said: God hath made laughter for me; every one that heareth will laugh on account of me.”<sup>8</sup>

However, a mere three verses later [21:9], Rashi provides a more thorough analysis of “*tsehok*,” again relying on *Midrash Rabba* and explaining that the word is used euphemistically to signify behavior such as idolatry, illicit sexuality, and murder.

While it is true that in verse 6, the verb *tsehok* is conjugated in *kal*, and in the ninth verse (as in the various citations cited in Rashi's commentary on this verse), the verb is conjugated in *piel*—which may lend a twist to the original meaning of the root—it is also true that the *kal* version of this verb appears nowhere in *Tanakh* except in the context of the laughter of Avraham and Sarah (*Genesis*, chapters 17, 18, and 21) with regard to the birth of their son, Yitshak. Thus, we have no independent sample as a standard for usage.

If we accept the translation of *tsehok* as joyous laughter, as Rashi posits in verse 6, then consistency would require that we interpret Sarah's initial laughter in Chapter 18 (upon learning of the prophecy that she will bear a child) as a manifestation of deep joy, in which case we would be at a complete loss to explain why Hashem would rebuke her laughter. If, on the other hand, the laughter is an expression of derision and mockery, then we should translate Sarah's statement in Chapter 21 as Hirsch has, namely, as an expression of consternation and bitterness at being made an object of mockery.

A search through *Tanakh* for other examples of usage of the verb produces little to support Rashi's interpretation. Indeed, aside from the proper noun, "Yitshak," the root *tsehok* used as a verb appears only 15 times in *Tanakh*, twelve of which appear in *Genesis*. The remaining three support Hirsch's contention that the word implies derision. The most obvious case appears in *Yehezkel* [23:32], which compares the sorrowful fate of Jerusalem to that of the vanquished Kingdom of Israel, predicting that she too will be "*li-tshok u-le-la'ag*," an object of laughter and mockery. The coupling of the two nouns suggests their relation as synonyms.

Similar usage is found in *Judges* [16:25], which describes how the Philistines brought the blinded, bound Samson up from the dungeon to amuse his captors:

" . . . *va-yomer: Kir'u leShimshon, ve-yi-sahek lanu. Va-yi-kre'u leShimshon mi-bet ha-asurim, va-yi-tsahek li-fneihem . . .*"

The verse most tellingly shifts the "*sehok*" to "*tsehok*," and relates, "*Va-yi-tsahek li-fneihem*," foreshadowing Samson's ironic turning of the tables, when he twists the amusement of the victorious to the shock of the vanquished, bringing the temple down on himself and the Philistines. Malbim explains the play on the roots, *sehok* and *tsehok*, in this one verse: "*Sehok*, which is synonymous with *tsehok*, is differentiated from it in that *sehok* indicates that the laugher himself has joy in his heart, unlike the *me-tsahek*, who has no joy." Thus, Malbim's analysis suggests that *tsehok* is used where laughter is devoid of joy, and may serve to mask mockery (including self-mockery) or to signify lascivious intent or behavior.

This sense of the verb is evident in its use in *Exodus* [32:6], which relates how, in the context of the Sin of the Golden Calf, the Israelites ate and drank and "arose to laugh." Malbim's explanation is borne out in a study of the use of the word in its various permutations in other

places in *Genesis*. The sense of mockery resounds in the use of the word in 19:14, where Lot's sons-in-law refuse to heed his warnings, dismissing him as a joker. The seamier connotation comes through when we read [26:8] that Avimelekh spies Yitshak and Rivka in what appears to him an act of incest.<sup>9</sup>

We might suggest, alternatively, that the root *tsehok* always implies laughter with a twist, laughter that hides what one is trying to repress. In contrast, *sehok*, except when it is used ironically or euphemistically,<sup>10</sup> signifies an expression of happiness.

### FROM WHENCE COMES THE BITTER LAUGHTER?

The differentiation between *sehok* and *tsehok* is noted by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch as well, as he comments on the irony that the child Yitshak, the future patriarch and pillar of the Jewish nation, would bear a name tinged with connotations of licentiousness and mockery:

It is quite possible that already here, this ironic phase of laughter is included. For the world knew the "pretension" with which these two individuals [Avraham and Sarah] dared to swim against the tide of the times, yea, the hopes they were bold enough to entertain of ultimately stemming this mighty stream and turning it into another direction. And now to graft this pretentious idea, in itself so absurd, on a late born tender sapling, how utterly absurd! One push and the whole hope is forever buried, at its very inception. Can we take it amiss if the contemporary people at the cradle of the Jewish nation could not refrain from a mocking smile, when, to those who do not ponder on and realise the effect which Judaism has had on the world in the course of the ages, the world-historic pretensions of a world-historic Jewish nation are still today, a mockery. This condition and position in the world is pointed out to us from the very beginning—the first Jewish "son of Abraham" was called *Yitzhak*, and so will be continued to be called until the hopes founded on God's promise and on His Management of the world will become a reality, and then "*az yemaleh sehok pinu*"—then the laugh will be on our mouth—does not the word *yitzhak* itself mean: he will laugh—and this laughter will be no *tzehok*, but it will be the gentle smile of happiness—*sehok*.<sup>11</sup>

Hirsch, then, implies that the irony that tinges both Avraham's hidden laughter and Sarah's laughter is a mute expression of the reality which surrounds them. Since "*tsehok*," even when conjugated in *kal*, is "the natural, involuntary laughter which we can hardly keep back at the sight

of some absurdity” (Hirsch, p. 352), it would indicate that both Avraham and Sarah are struck by the fact that the world in which they live will receive word of this miracle with even more incredulity than is generated by the monotheistic faith and selfless ethic which they had been expounding.

Given this hypothesis, Sarah, like Avraham, laughs with mixed emotions to hear that she will bear a child in her old age. There are equally viable explanations for this laughter. The bittersweet response may be not so much an expression of incomprehension or disbelief as it is a reflection of the irony inherent in the situation. Aside from the incongruity of an elderly couple conceiving a child, there is the fear that old parents will be inadequate to the task of raising it, or may not live long enough to accompany their heir into responsible adulthood. While Avraham’s self-mocking laughter may have risen to his lips, Sarah’s remained hidden in her heart. That laughter—bitter and maybe even angry—came from hidden knowledge and foreboding, from which Sarah protectively shields her husband but which Hashem wants Avraham to confront. Thus, when He asks Avraham, “Why is it that Sarah is laughing?”, Hashem is not rebuking, but attempting to open Avraham’s eyes to the dangers and threats which Sarah immediately senses.

The bitterness that coats the good news arises from the circumstances into which the long-awaited son will be born. It would not be unreasonable for Sarah to feel that this message has come “too little, too late,” and would have been more welcome sooner. How happily this child would have been greeted by a younger mother, who could look forward to raising him and participating in his great moments and achievements, in seeing his wife and children! Instead, this child will come after another child has already been born, after Yishmael has come to be. Surely, Sarah knows the nature of Hagar and her son and senses the cloud of contention and rivalry that hovers over Yitshak’s future. Her bitterness is further compounded by an amorphous anxiety that arises from the fact that “*adoni zaken*”—my master is old. She knows—and so does Hagar—whether Avraham can naturally father a child. While she may believe in miracles, will the rest of the world?

The ephemeral fears solidify over time, and by the time of Yitshak’s birth, Sarah’s fears for her child find verbal expression in her bitter statement (21:6): “*Tsehok asa li Elokim, kol ha-shome’a yi-tsahak li.*” Netsiv opens our eyes to the fact that Sarah refers to God as *Elokim*, commenting that the epithet suggests the manifestation of the divine quality of judgment rather than compassion: “‘All who hear will laugh at me,’ doubting whether I conceived by Avraham.”<sup>12</sup> Netsiv’s ap-

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proach is consistent with several *midrashim* which Rashi cites much later in *Parashat Toledot*, that the “clowns of that generation” whispered that Sarah had conceived by Avimelekh. These rumors were given some substance by the sojourn in the Land of the Philistines—an event related in the chapters interjected between the message that Sarah would bear a child and the story of his actual birth. One would not need a particularly cynical attitude to see some credence to the doubts that Sarah, whose restoration to youth was visibly apparent, could hardly have conceived by the aged Avraham. And the fact that Hagar, whose fertility was established by the birth of Yishmael, had failed to conceive again in all these years, further lends weight to these aspersions.

Indeed, as chapter 21 opens, the Torah virtually screams as it insists that Yitshak is Avraham’s child, first by using the pluperfect tense, “*Va-Hashem pakad et Sarah . . .*” (21:1), placing the conception in the distant past, preceding the events of chapters 19 and 20. Furthermore, the text continues to focus on Yitshak’s paternity: “And Abraham called the name of *his* son, that was born unto *him*, whom Sarah bore to *him*, Yitshak” (21:3). In this light, Sarah’s statement, “*Tsehok asa li Elokim,*” is a bitter but accurate assessment of the state of affairs into which Yitshak is born, namely, one in which his legitimacy would be questioned. Moreover, when Sarah spies Yishmael (referred to with no small measure of animosity as “the son of Hagar the Egyptian”) “*me-tsahkek,*” she saw not only the moral threat that Yishmael imposed by his licentious behavior, but also a threat to Yitshak’s name and inheritance. Netsiv interprets “*me-tsahkek*” as:

“Casting doubts, as if to say that there is no evidence to be had [for Yitshak’s paternity] from what Avraham does [i.e., from the weaning celebration and the granting of his name to his child] for the woman he loves.”

Thus, Sarah’s original laughter proves prophetic, as if her heart had prognosticated that Yishmael would attempt to disinherit her son.

### LAUGHTER AS RETROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTION

Who more than Sarah, who had experienced Hagar’s attempts to usurp her position in the household, understood the ambitions of this woman? Who more than Sarah could understand what resentment and ill will Yishmael and his mother would feel towards her son? Yet, how

could she accuse before they had actually attempted to harm Yitshak? How could she give voice to her suspicions to her husband, the father of Yishmael? Though Hashem attempts to reveal the darker side of the gift that is being bestowed upon him, Avraham cannot or will not believe ill of his first son.

Perhaps this is why Hashem focuses Avraham's attention on Sarah's hidden laughter—He is hinting to Avraham of the negative implications of Sarah's bearing a child into such an entangled family situation. Perhaps Hashem asks Avraham, "Wherefore did Sarah laugh?" to direct his attention to the hidden aspect of the miracle, the negative consequence which accompanies this gift. Or can we contend that Avraham, too, in his earlier laughter, senses the irony—if not the full depth of danger—that this miracle highlights? However, in his optimism and hopefulness, Avraham represses the early hints of danger lurking, and attempts then, as later, to ignore the fact that Yitshak would be born not only into a disbelieving and imperfect world, but into a complex and thorny family setting.

Avraham's attempt to deny the curse that accompanies the blessing becomes more apparent as Yishmael's licentious behavior becomes more blatant and the threat to Yitshak becomes undeniable. Avraham remains reluctant to send Yishmael away. Only a direct and unequivocal imperative works [21:12]: ". . . In all that Sarah says unto you, hearken unto her voice." This broad assent to Sarah's commands implies affirmation of her earlier, though silent, assessment of the situation.

Sarah's aversion, on the other hand, to openly expressing her bitter realization seems to emanate as much from compassion for her husband as from self-deprecation. Sarah's silent self-mockery may be a form of "*tsiduk ha-din*"—acceptance of the divine judgment for meddling in and subverting God's plan by pushing Avram to take Hagar [Genesis 16:2] to produce a surrogate son for her. If Sarah had failed the test of faith, it was not in disbelieving God's miracles, but in failing to believe that she was worthy to bear the heir to Avraham's legacy.

## CONCLUSION

It seems, then, that Sarah knew that the joy of Yitshak's birth would be cloaked in tragic and difficult implications, leading to the bitter, self-mocking laugh which echoes across the ages. The full onus of God's judgment falls heavily on Sarah, who bears the moral censure of the ages for chasing away Hagar and Yishmael. But the consequences do

not end with the besmirching of her reputation. It seems that the ultimate penalty is exacted when Sarah dies believing that Avraham has taken her son as a burnt offering. Could she have died thinking that Avraham also questioned the paternity of Yitshak? Could she have died thinking that Yishmael would remain as Avraham's only heir?<sup>13</sup>

Like Hirsch, who noted the irony that the very name "Yitshak" bears, Netsiv also highlights the fact that unlike his father Avraham, whose name is changed from Avram, and unlike his son, Yaakov, who merits a new name—Yisrael—freeing him from the blemished undertones of his prior name, Yitshak is not given a new name. In his notes to the commentary *Ha'amek Davar*, entitled *Harhev Davar*, Netsiv points out that the very name "Yitshak" bears the ambivalence of the originating laughter, and it is no small irony that Yitshak, the patriarch who symbolizes the ultimate in sacrificial devotion and innocence, the one compared to the lamb, bears a name that makes him a ready object of mockery, derision and slander. Innocence and righteousness cannot protect him any more than they will protect the greatest of his descendants from calumny and defamation.

Netsiv goes on to point out that Psalms 105, which is identical to chapter 1 in *Chronicles I* in all but one verse, foretells a better future, in which also Yitshak's name will be altered. Referring to God's covenant with the patriarchs, the ninth verse in this Psalm differs from its correlate (*Chronicles I*, 1:16) in that the name *Yitshak* is spelled *Yishak* in the phrase: "*Ushevua-to leYitshak.*" Says Netsiv, David foretold through divine inspiration that some day, the patriarch would be renamed to indicate the full joy that would replace the mockery.

## NOTES

1. Scriptural quotations, unless otherwise indicated, generally follow the translation of Hertz Pentateuch, published by Soncino Press, 1964.
2. See *Midrash Rabba* 48, cf. Kasher, Menachem M., *Torah Shelema: Talmudic Midrashic Encyclopedia of the Pentateuch*, New York: Shulsinger, 1949, Vol 3, p. 76.
3. Cf. Rashi; see Kasher, *Torah Shelema*, p. 762.
4. See *Talmud Yerushalmi*, Sota 86, *Halakha Alef*, and *Midrash haGadol*; cf. Kasher, *Torah Shelema*, p. 764.
5. See *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, cf. Kasher, *Torah Shelema*, p. 762.
6. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch: Translated and Explained*, translated into English by Isaac Levy, London: 1963.

A similar translation may be found in Rosenbaum, M. and Silbermann, A.M. (trans.), *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's*

- Commentary*, New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1935: "And Sarah said, God hath made me a person to be laughed at, all that hear it will laugh at me."
7. Abarbanel also interprets this verse as an expression of rueful resignation that all would laugh *at* Sarah, pointing out that she had earlier laughed in disbelief that she would have a child. While Abarbanel also hears the jeering tone of the expression "*kol ha-shome'a yi-tsahak li*," his interpretation softens this expression into a mild self-reproach in which Sarah candidly admits her lack of faith upon hearing the "three angels" telling Avraham that she would bear a child.
  8. Cohen, A., *The Soncino Chumash*, Hindhead, Surrey: The Soncino Press, 1947.
  9. It is interesting that Rashi skips this citation, though it is closer in proximity, in explaining the various meanings of the euphemism "*me-tsahak*" (*Genesis* 21:9). He elects instead to cite the usage in *Genesis* 39:14, where Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph. In that citation, the alleged sexual assault constitutes a double crime, either as rape or as adultery, and thus serves as an excellent example of "*giluy arayot*." In contrast, the behavior between Rivka and Yitshak is perfectly legitimate, except from the perspective of Avimelekh, who still presumes that they are brother and sister rather than husband and wife.
  10. See, for example, *Samuel* II, 2:14, where the seemingly innocuous verb is used to signify a duel to the death. It is common to find that military leaders never call the activities in which they engage by their graphic and raw names. Generals and soldiers, then as now, use antiseptic jargon to cloak the true nature of military campaigns and the blood-drenched nitty-gritty of battle.
  11. Hirsch, 1963, V.1, pp. 352-353.
  12. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin, *Ha'amek Davar: Commentary on the Pentateuch*, New York: Friedman.
  13. Interestingly, it is only after her death and burial, after Yitshak is comforted with his marriage to Rivka, that Avraham's potency and fertility are proven by his marriage to Ketura and her subsequent fecundity. Only then is Sarah somewhat vindicated [See *Genesis* 25:1-6].