

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayera)

Go to any Yemenite Jewish wedding or Bar-Mitzvah, and you will hear the women shouting the 'yelilot' traditionally 'sung' at all celebrations. I can still recall, at my Bar Mitzvah, when being called to the Torah for the first time at the Kotel (the Western Wall in Jerusalem).

Some of the Yemenite women standing up on a bench looking over the divider saw me being called to the Torah and let loose with some blood curdling sounds, nearly knocking my mother off the bench! While not being exactly sure why they were all yelling, I realized, watching everyone else smiling, that the sudden cries and 'yelilot' (which seemed to me at the time like a blood curdling war cry) must be part of the 'party' in Jerusalem.

Nearly ten years later, at the military funeral of one of my men killed in a Jordanian border ambush, I heard the same blood curdling sounds, only this time they were cries of anguish, not joy. These communities have the custom to let loose these powerful, almost guttural sounds, at occasions of both great joy as well as great sorrow, perhaps because often the line between joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, is so thin as to be almost indistinguishable. And this is true as well for laughter.

Sometimes, we laugh because we are experiencing such joy and gladness that there are no words, as for example, when people laugh so hard they cry tears of joy. And yet, sometimes, laughter is tinged with so much pain and anger, even cynicism, that we can only remain silent, knowing there are no words of comfort left.

I recall once, attending the festive meal following a brit milah (circumcision), when an older gentleman began to speak. He looked like a closely connected relative, perhaps even the grandfather, and I settled in my chair to listen.

I was sure this grandfather or great uncle, whom I had seen holding the baby and hugging the new father earlier on, would share some thoughts of Torah, or perhaps some reminiscences of the family, to lend some historical perspective tying the newborn with past generations.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, when this elderly fellow began what turned out to be a standup comedy routine! Even more surprising was the fact that none of his jokes were even remotely funny, and yet nearly everyone else was laughing themselves silly! Noticing that all the people laughing with him were either similarly elderly, or close to the family, I was starting to wonder whether I was somehow missing some series of inside jokes, when he finally calmed everyone down and began to speak.

"Some of you may wonder why, here at a Brit, all that interests me is making you laugh. So let me share a story with you, to put this all in perspective.

"Nearly fifty years ago, before we came to America, we lived in Germany, in Frankfurt. Our family had lived there for generations, and included many great rabbis and community leaders, and our family

name was greatly respected and admired. In all the years of my childhood, I never recall anything but the utmost respect that was accorded to both my family and me; certainly no-one ever laughed at us, or ridiculed us, until the Nazis came to power.

I was a young married man, with a newborn baby at home, when the world caught up with me on my way home. We were required to carry papers with us at all times, and were constantly on guard lest German soldiers catch us out in the open.

Sometimes, one would walk an hour to get someplace five minutes away, in order to avoid unnecessary contact with Nazi soldiers.

“One day, thinking I had avoided all the patrols, with my home in the distance, I was caught in the open by a few German officers out for some fun. They forced me to get down on all fours and howl like a dog, and then to hop and jump while another Jew, caught like me, was forced to accompany my ‘dance’ with a song. All the while this was going on, a crowd was gathering, and the laughter of these Germans filled the street.

In my heart, I knew eventually they would tire of their fun and laughter, and I would be allowed to go home, where the laughter would stop, and those who loved me would surround me.

But they weren’t finished. One of them sent a boy to the barber to fetch a pair of scissors, and they began to cut off my beard, all the while laughing and pointing and enjoying themselves.

You see, in those days, it was only those Jews who had less relationship with Jewish tradition that had shaved their beards. We however, were a traditional family, and would never have considered such a thing, so the thought of being publicly humiliated by walking around without a beard was something that filled with me with more pain than the actual experience of having my beard cut off. And, to make matters worse, they did not cut off my entire beard, but only half of it.

It was then that they finally asked me for my papers, and, realizing I lived nearby, told me they would come calling, and that if I cut off the other half of my beard, they would do unspeakable things to my family.

For nearly a week, I lived in terror as we desperately searched for a way to escape, and eventually we succeeded in getting away from Germany, and eventually out of Europe.

But the laughter and the catcalls that I experienced that week, as children noticed this young man walking the streets with half a beard, will stay with me forever.

So today, with the Germans gone, and my family here surrounding me, and a new baby having just arrived, I want everyone here to smile with me, because this baby gives me again the opportunity to have the last laugh; after all these years, I finally have the chance I did not have then: to laugh back.

What is laughter all about? Is it something to aspire to, or simply something that occurs?

This week’s portion, ‘**Vayera**’, seems to introduce us to the challenges of laughter, when misplaced.

Hashem (G-d), by way of three special men (angels), tells Avraham that in a year's time, his wife Sarah will give birth to a baby boy.

“And he said, I will surely return to you this time next year, by which time your wife, Sarah, will give birth to a (baby) boy; and Sarah was listening behind the entrance to the tent.

“And Avraham and Sarah were old, and well on in years, and Sarah had ceased having her ‘women’s ways’ (menses).

“And Sarah laughed to herself, saying: Now I am worn out ... and my husband is old!

“And G-d said to Avraham: Why did Sarah laugh and say: ‘Can I really give birth (to a child), when I am so old?’

“Is anything too difficult for G-d? At the designated time, I will return, and Sarah will have a son.

“And Sarah was afraid (in awe?), and denied it saying: ‘I did not laugh’ and he said: you did laugh.”
(Bereishit 18:10-15)

What exactly did Sarah do here that was so inappropriate as to require the intervention of no less than G-d Himself? Was it so terrible that Sarah was in doubt, or at least surprised by this sudden revelation? Wouldn't any woman who found out she was about to give birth at the age of ninety, long after her body's biological clock had stopped functioning, be just a little incredulous at the prospect? Why was it so terrible that she laughed?

Even more challenging was the fact that Sarah was not told of this impending birth directly as was Abraham, but had to 'overhear the news that was being told to her husband! Add to that the fact that Sarah, according to the verse, did not even laugh out loud, but rather only *“Be'Kirbah”*, *”to herself”*, leaving us wondering why G-d has to intervene to point out this flagrant violation of... what, exactly?

Adding to this confusion is Sarah's reaction to G-d's accusation: she actually *denies* laughing! How could anyone, much less a woman of Sarah's stature, actually deny that which Hashem says to be true? What could be the point of lying to G-d? Once you know it is G-d you are actually talking to, obviously G-d would know what is in your heart, as well as your mind. So why, and in fact, **how** could Sarah deny what G-d says to be true?

And why, in that event, does G-d (or Abraham?) nonetheless insist that she has indeed laughed?

Imagine that someone has taken the last (extra) piece of pizza, and you suspect one of your friends who denies taking the last slice. As an adult, you would most probably just let it go. In fact, if such an accusation turned into a full-fledged argument over who took the last piece of pizza, you would assume the participants were in kindergarten! So why is G-d here pressing the point?

Exactly what was going through Sarah's mind when she in fact laughed? It would seem, especially from verse 14, that Sarah was having a hard time accepting that she, a ninety-year-old woman, could give

birth. But how could someone like Sarah, viewed in Jewish tradition as a prophetess, doubt that G-d could do *anything*?

Strangest of all, is the explanation as to why Sarah denies her laughter:

“Ki’ Yare’ah’.” For she was... afraid?

Indeed, most people translate *‘yare’ah’*, as ‘she was afraid’, but the truth is, *yir’ah* is closer to a sense of awe of G-d than a fear of Him. Thus, *Yirat Sha’mayim* is less *fear* of heaven, and more *awe* of heaven: the challenge of seeing G-d everywhere one looks. Which explains why it is considered such a lofty level and which brings us back to our story: How could the awe of seeing Hashem in everything be the source of Sarah’s seeming disbelief? And again, why was this disbelief, which would seem to be perfectly in order, warrant Hashem’s intervention?

Lastly, and strangest of all, is the fact that Sarah is not the only one guilty of laughter here: Abraham too, when first informed of the imminent birth of a son, laughs in disbelief:

After Abraham is circumcised, Sarai is re-named Sarah, and G-d tells him:

“And I will bless her (Sarah) and give you a son from her as well... and she will be a mother of nations, and kings of nations will come from her.

“And Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart: ‘will a child be born to a one hundred year old (man)? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth’?

“And Abraham said to G-d: would that Yishmael should live before you!

“And G-d said: ‘ But Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you will call him ‘Yitzchak’... ” (Bereishit 17:16-19)

So Avraham, immediately upon hearing that he will have a son, laughs as well! In fact, he laughs so hard he falls on his face! Yet there is no admonition from G-d, nor any denial!

Why was Avraham’s laughter fine, while Sarah’s seems to have been problematic?

Perhaps the root of this entire question lies in understanding the difference between these two experiences of laughter over the same event.

Rashi, though not addressing this problem directly, does note that **Onkelos**, in his Aramaic translation form the period of the Mishnah, translates these two instances of laughter differently:

In the case of Avraham’s laughter (17:17), **Onkelos** translates *Va’Yitzchak* (and he laughed) as *Va’Chadey’*, from the root *Chedvah’*, which Rashi explains means *Simchah*, or joy.

However, when Sarah laughs (18:12), he translates *Va’Titzchak* as *Ve’Chaychat*, which Rashi explains means laughter.

Note also that Abraham laughs, and *then* says to himself: ‘will a hundred year old man and his ninety year old wife give birth?’

Sarah, however, laughs to herself. So it seems that Abraham’s laughter is more public, and Sarah’s is more private.

And **Rashi** suggests that Abraham is experiencing pure joy, having naturally assumed G-d’s word is inevitable, whilst Sarah seems to be experiencing some initial reaction of doubt, perhaps almost afraid to believe that what her ears have heard can actually be true.

But can it be that Sarah, whose level of prophecy is described as greater than that of Avraham, doubted G-d’s ability to produce such a miracle, and, when confronted by no less than G-d, actually denies it? Equally strange, once she is told: “No, you laughed”, Sarah is at once silent and accepting? What is this dialogue all about, and what is really going on here?

Rav Avigdor Nevehnsahl, in his *Sichot Le’Rosh HaShanah*, suggests that Sarah denies laughing, because she had no idea that she actually did laugh. Thus, only when Hashem tells her that she did actually laugh does she silently accept this and begin her struggle to understand what it means.

Sometimes, there are character flaws that are so deeply hidden inside of us as to be barely discernible. Sarah’s disbelief is so miniscule as to be hidden deep inside to such a degree that even *she* did not realize she had laughed. Experiencing a disbelief of such mild proportions, Sarah, when questioned, even by G-d, naturally responds that she did not laugh, because in her heart she really did not laugh.

But G-d knows differently. However mild this doubt, hidden deep inside Sarah was the bare beginnings of a character flaw which, if allowed to flourish, might easily become first doubt, then cynicism, and ultimately denial of all the principles on which this new nation of Abraham and Sarah was meant to be founded.

The birth of Yitzchak is the beginning of the birth of the Jewish people. It will be the tremendous faith of this people that will carry them through the most challenging experiences in human history. And the world needs the Jewish people to believe, and to survive, so that one day the world will become a better place. This faith in the future, when we will one day all laugh together, is the reason this child will be named *Yitzchak*, meaning ‘*he will laugh.*’

Perhaps this is the difference between Abraham and Sarah: the shock of gratitude, which leads to joy, as opposed to the shock of disbelief which leads to doubt.

In the end, laughter is about the unexpected. That, in fact, is how comedians earn their living, by leading us down a story line with a completely unexpected punch line.

And this is the meaning of the psalm we sing on Shabbat and festivals introducing the *Birkat HaMazon*, the Grace after meals:

“*Az Yimaleh’ S’chok Pinu’.*” “*Then will our mouths be filled with laughter.*”

We will laugh at the coming of redemption, precisely because it will be so unexpected. If you would have told a Jew, huddling in the cold roll call of an Auschwitz morning in 1943, that five years later he would be dancing in the streets of Tel Aviv, in the new State of Israel, he would have said you were mad; who could have expected the miracle that was the birth of the State of Israel?

In the end, the mark of our relationship with G-d is how we ultimately laugh. If I truly can accept that Hashem (G-d), is the source of reality, then anything can happen, and nothing is really a surprise.

Caught in the world of Sodom, and having just experienced the evil of Egypt, deep inside Sarah is growing the kernel of the question, of whether we can ever really make the world a better place. Deep inside lies hidden the laughter of the impossibility of the dream that is Avraham. And so G-d tells Sarah to let it go, because if I have a relationship with my creator, then all things are possible, and one day, somewhere way off in the future, the world of Sodom will ultimately be destroyed, and we will laugh again.

We are living in such a time; when terrorism seems to flourish and children idolize suicide bombers we wonder whether the dream of a world of peace will ever come. And yet, imagine telling our great grandparents in the ghettos of Warsaw or Kovno, that they would one day have to endure bombings in a modern Jewish State with a Jewish Army, where the spoken language is Hebrew, and the star of David is no longer yellow but blue on the white flag of Israel, which flies over the first national Jewish Government in Israel in two thousand years...

It's all about how we laugh. May Hashem bless us all, soon, to have only wonderful things to laugh about, all of us, together.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman