

## 929 Genesis Chapter 22

### Deena Cowans, JTS Rabbinical Student

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When our feet touch land again, it is no longer freshly baked earth watered by the grace of dew. It is broken by rivers flowing over cracks and crests like spilt blood. The ground hurts. Still God asks each of us to live on, to be fertile.

This narrative, though one of the most well-known in the Torah, is perplexing at best to the modern reader. Avraham hears God's message that he must sacrifice his beloved son Isaac and agrees with blind faith. When they reach the designated mountain, the Torah tells us that Avraham tells his servants to wait while he "took the wood for the offering and put it on his son Isaac, then took in his hand the fire and the knife, and the two walked off together" (v. 6). Why would the Torah tell us that Avraham and Yitzhak walked together? Physically, Yitzhak had a more arduous journey, and would have slowed down Avraham's pace due to the burden of the wood. Most traditional commentators, following Rashi, conclude that the addition of the extraneous word "together" indicates that they both walked with joy—Isaac because he did not know what was to come, Avraham because he was about to fulfill God's command.

But perhaps the opposite is true—the Torah specifically indicates that Avraham and Yitzhak walked together because they both walked slowly, encumbered by a heavy burden. Yitzhak labored with the wood, but Avraham also carried a heavy load as he trudged toward the seemingly certain death of his beloved son. With this one extra word, the Torah teaches us to pay attention to the burdens others carry—the weight on their shoulders that causes them to shuffle and drag their feet—even if we cannot see them. Avraham may have willingly obeyed God's command, but he went to fulfill it just like his son, slowly making his way up the mountain, painfully aware of the weight on his shoulders.

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וִירָא תש"ף



## The Gravity of Laughter

**Rabbi Ariella Rosen, Director of Admissions,  
The JTS Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial  
School, JTS**

Parashat Vayera opens with a flurry of action. Yet several of the narrative's most significant moments are driven not by action, but by reaction.

After Abraham runs to welcome the three wandering strangers he sees from the entrance to his tent, inviting them to bathe, rest, and feast, the action slows, opening space for a story to play out in the realm of emotions. The strangers share the news that in one year's time, Sarah will give birth to a son, ending the couple's decades-long wait to fulfill their destiny as the parents of a nation:

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" (Gen. 18:12)

God omnisciently asks why Sarah laughed, suggesting that her reaction was misguided, for nothing was too wondrous for God's abilities. (No matter that Abraham also laughed upon hearing the same news in the previous chapter, with no rebuke.) Sarah, then lies about her reaction:

Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But God replied, "You did laugh." (18:15)

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?”

In the midst of a conversation about whether or not one should approach Torah study from a place of joy, the Talmud relates the practice of the sage Rabbah, who before beginning to teach matters of Jewish law, “would say something humorous so that the Sages might be cheered” before beginning the daunting and awe-some task before him. (BT Shabbat 30b) Incredibly, Rabbah determines that the best way to prepare his students for complex Torah study is to *tell a joke*.

By inviting them to laugh together, their nerves are put at ease, and their hearts and minds are opened to possibility. They embark on their journey having felt the power of sharing a moment of joy. As such, laughter becomes part of the sacred act, a prerequisite for engaging collectively with that which is deep and profound.

To the extent that laughter is a social glue, Sarah has committed a faux pas. She giggled at an inappropriate time, when her joke (or rather, her gut

reaction) was not shared. In that moment, it was easier for her to deny laughing when questioned than to try to explain the reason she responded as she did.

Yet, she seems unwilling to be shamed by her reaction in the long-term, and even seems to assert that laughter is the exact right response to the incredible circumstances of Isaac’s birth, as her own prerequisite for engaging with the profound nature of life. After Isaac was born,

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (21:6)

All who hear of my circumstances will laugh *with me*.

Numerous commentaries and midrashim tell of Isaac’s birth sparking a wave of babies born to previously barren women, illnesses healed, and goodness restored, so that others could share in the joy and laughter of this moment. Yet there seems to be another message here as well, if we understand Sarah’s two encounters with laughter to be part of the same story: laughter is a communal connective tissue. It is an act of faith, rather than doubt, an act of defiance and triumph rather than acquiescence. While Sarah might not have been able to control her reaction before, now her laughter is deliberate, and forever bound up in the name of her child.

Isaac’s name is a symbol of Sarah’s hope that she might indeed still become the matriarch of a nation. It is perhaps a most intentional reaction to name her first (and ultimately only) offspring after a force that is uncontrollable. Laughter, in its role as a bodily response to the unexpected, allows us to forge ties, to build a sense of connection, and uncover the joy that makes way for the profound. That is no joke.

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