

Parashat Vayera: Laugh Your Way to God

Dear Friends,

Parashat Vayera is one of the great parashot in the Torah: divine messengers tell the elderly Avraham and Sarah that they will have a son in a year's time; S'dom and Amorah are destroyed and Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt; Yitzchak is born; Sarah insists on the banishment of Hagar and Yishma'el; Yishma'el is miraculously saved in the desert; and finally, we read the story of the binding of Isaac, Akeidat Yitzchak.

Despite all of these amazing stories, I have only one question this week: why call a son Yitzchak (meaning "he will laugh")? Can you imagine names like "he will smile", "he will rejoice" or "he will dance"?

The usual explanation for the name, is that Sarah laughed when she heard the news: **"And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?'"** (Bereishit 18:12). She also laughed from embarrassment after Yitzchak's birth "Sarah said, **"God has brought me laughter [or mocked me]; everyone who hears will laugh with me [or at me]."** (21:6) Avraham laughed last week when God told him he will have a son with Sarah: **"Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as 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)

But Yitzchak's name does not derive from Sarah and Avraham's chuckles.

One of Avraham's moments of crisis is described in the previous parasha, as he is growing old and God's promise of offspring does not materialize. Avraham asks whether his devoted servant, Damesek Eliezer, will inherit him. God responds: **"But Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Yitschak... My covenant I will maintain with Yitschak, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."** (17:19-21)

It appears that Yitzchak's name is determined long before Sarah hears the messengers' promise, and certainly long before Yitzchak's birth and the embarrassment of a very late motherhood. Apparently, the name is much more significant than first appears.

Rivka Miriam, a wonderful and beloved poet, wrote a modern, witty midrash on this topic. Like our Sages, z"l, she too understood that there must be a reason for the offspring of the

father of the nation to be called Yitzchak. Read her poem (unofficially translated here) slowly, and savor it:

*Sarah was infertile because she did not know how to laugh.
To walk behind Avraham's broad back she was drawn and she went,
as he was drawn and went behind the broad back of the command.
And the command is clear and direct, without any turns
It does not contain any loss of balance - and therefore it does not contain laughter.
It does not contain any loss of balance - and therefore no agitation, no breached borders
which are the only means of birth.
Sarah and Avraham had difficulty giving birth.
They removed graven images from themselves,
and if graven images were removed, perhaps, too, the frolicking.
And the frolicking, the laughter, the mirth that are the source of love and sexuality - these
lead one off the path.
And only leaving the path can beget something new in the world.
In order to bring forth a child, they had to learn to laugh.
Perhaps for this they needed to don a mask and play the role of siblings before Pharaoh,
until gradually, through play, they would rediscover their joy.
And maybe through Hagar and her son Yishma'el, who was born with the ability to frolick,
laughter would flow between them again.
The presence of laughter between them would create an image
which becomes a full partner with them in meeting the divine messengers,
that meeting which heralded his birth.
This is the son for whom laughter was commanded: Yitchak.*

Is it possible that Yitzchak's name is much more significant than the embarrassed laughter of his parents? If so, what was the Creator trying to teach us through this name, the name inherit Avraham's connection with God?

A well-known Yiddish proverb may help us here: ***Man plans and God laughs ("אָ מענטש אַ טראַכט און גאָט לאַכט")***. It is often used when our plans don't work out as we intend them to. But perhaps these are simply two completely different paths of creativity, one human - cerebral, logical, planned out, and calculated - and the other, the Divine, which is... is... uh...I mean... hmmm... Well, actually, I'm not sure...

There is very little we can say about Divine creation, because words too were created through human logic and reality.

Don't get me wrong. Human creation is very important. A stable house cannot be built without minute planning. A business cannot be run, nor can a family, without thought and planning of time, budget, etc. But human creativity is all in the domain of what is, what exists.

Divine creation, on the other hand, originates in the infinite void. In that void, i.e. the Einsof, there is no logic, system, organization, planning, or plans. It is a place of chaos, and in such a place even pregnancy at 90 is possible.

Most of us - even those of us who lead a very chaotic life - are still bound by our contriving human nature. We live and create in a world of law and order. In such a world, creation is very limited. It is limited by certain laws of cause and effect. Such a world can be the impetus for many wonderful things, but these will never deviate from the accepted and understood laws of logic and coherence.

Divine creation is one of laughter and insane theatrics.

Artists are perhaps the only ones who thrive in God's insane theatre. Scientists, on the other hand, are driven mad by it. They seek logic and systems; they try to understand the Divine creation, to catalog and organize it in order to make it fit our systematic planned out thinking.

Einstein, one of the greatest contributors to the discovery of (the amazing) quantum physics, refused to accept some of his own discoveries. In 1926 he wrote to his good friend Max Born, "Quantum mechanics is very impressive. But an inner voice tells me that it isn't the real thing. The theory says a lot, but it doesn't really do much to bring us closer to the "old man's [God's] secret. In any case, I am convinced that He does not throw dice."

"The old man's secret", i.e. a system... Einstein was seeking the formula. But perhaps God is, in fact, throwing dice, playing and laughing all the way to Creation.

Laughter and play (which have the same root in Hebrew, ל.ח.ש.) release us from our limited world of creation into the infinite world of the Creator.

Many people are drawn to means of escaping the limited human experience, with alcohol and drugs, hoping to unite - even for a moment - with the world of the divine, the infinite. I admit I have never tried any of these methods (I am a pretty boring guy, after all), but I can definitely understand the attraction.

Everything in parashat Vayera is about leaving the limited human boundaries and the limited creative ability. Parashat Vayera suggests that we laugh!

I think Chassidism is based on this idea. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his great-grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, both celebrated joy and warned against sadness. They knew that the Divine can only be experienced through laughter and joy.

There are many wonderful songs, poems, and quotes about laughter. Here is one to start your Shabbat off laughing:

"From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down, I was convulsed with laughter. I must read it one day." Groucho Marx

Indeed, we may be taking life, Torah, Judaism, and even God too seriously.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha