

Parashat Vayera-2019/5780

Today, I want to discuss "humor". To Jews, this should come easy, because frankly, we have been through a lot, and one of the ways that we have survived throughout the ages pogroms, inquisitions, auto-da-fé, prejudice, institutional and individual anti-Semitism, assimilation, and the greatest threat: mothers-in-law, is through humor.

When I dared to inquire through Google about how many types of humor there are, one site cited 20, others, nine, other sites showed the inter-relationship between types of humor graphed as a pyramid, with physical humor at the base, followed by situational humor, word play, and at top, satire. Other sites added Venn diagrams to include self-effacing humor, personal anecdotes, quotations, lists (like the Top-10 list from David Letterman), and one-liners. Within seconds, it became apparent to me that humor should not be left to the hands of academics.

The reason I bring up humor is that because today's parasha, Vayera, recounts how Sarah first learns that at the age of 99, she will bear a child, and in response, we are told that she laughs. And for us to truly understand this episode, we must understand which humor is being referred to here.

The episode starts with three men approaching Abraham's on what is described as a hot day. Two things: one, this scene is somewhere just north Masada, along the Dead Sea; it's ALWAYS hot, so when the Torah says it was a hot day, it must have been a real scorcher. Second, we know from last week's parasha that Abraham has just circumcised himself and his sons, and yet the Torah says that rushed to greet these visitors, and then bowed to the ground before them in respect. This is either amazing dedication to visitors, *hachnasat orchim*, or he must have been really bored for company. Nonetheless, we know that these "men" are really angels from their role in trying to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah in the subsequent chapter.

Within no time, he is serving them, with Sarah's help, bread cakes (probably pita loaves), cheese and milk, and a calf, probably roasted.

ת העץ ויאכלו:ויקח סמאָה וְחֵלֶב וּבֹרֶה־בְּקָרֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן לְפָנֵיהֶם וְהוּא־עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַ

Two things are striking about this: one, why would Abraham serve dairy and meat together when the Talmud explicitly says that even though the Torah had not been given at Mount Sinai, Abraham somehow knew of all the mitzvot and observed them. One answer is that Abraham suspected that they were angels, sent to test him; angels, who are not mortal, are not bound by the laws of kashrut, and therefore, if they ate dairy and meat together, this would tip off Abraham. In essence, the joke was on them. But the Torah ends the sentence with a conditional version of the word, they ate, *Vayochayloo*, as if to imply that their eating was not normal. In fact, it is the same usage of *Vayochayloo* that it used when Moses first meets G-d, and it talks about the burning bush "that was not consumed". In other words, angels can't eat like people, so the joke was on Abraham.

Then the text continues:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אַיִתָּה שָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֵהָל:

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.”

Here again, things are not normal; why, because above every letter of the word *aylav*, are dots in the Torah scroll, as if to say, things are not as they appear. Of course, if they were angels, they knew where Sarah was, just as G-d knew where Adam or Moses were when he called out to them, *ayeka*, and they answered, *hinayni*.

וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חִיָּה וְהִנֵּה-בֵן לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שֹׁמְעֶת פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו:

Then one said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

כַּנְּשִׂים: וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים חָדָל לְהֵיוֹת לְשָׂרָה אַרְחַ

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי בְלִתִּי הֵיטְהִלְתִּי עַדְנָה וְאַדְנִי זָקֵן:

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?”

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צָחַקְתָּ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵפֶה אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּךָ וְאַנִּי זָקֵנָתִי:

Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’

הִיפֹלָא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כַּעֲת תִּיָּה וְלִשְׂרָה בֵּן:

Is anything too wondrous for the LORD? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

וּתְכַחַשׁ שָׂרָה וּלְאמֹר לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי וַיִּרְאֶה וַיֹּאמֶר וְלֹא כִּי צָחַקְתִּי:

Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But He replied, “You did laugh.”

Rambam, Moses Maimonides discusses this interchange, and breaks down exactly what type of humor this episode uses. He notes that וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ "She laughed inside her" was a guarded laugh, a nervous laugh, reflecting a humor of absurdity. After all, what 99 year-old gets pregnant, let alone has a son; you MUST be joking! The Rambam sees this laughter as tragic, a sort of black comedy, because he states that "laughter in joy is with the mouth", as it is written in Psalms 126:2, אֲזַ וְיִמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק, פִּינּוּ, 'then our mouths will be filled with laughter'. But laughter in the heart [inside] is not said with reference to joy."

So, in essence, this turns on its head the story of Isaac being named *Yitzchak* because his mother laughed when learned she was to become pregnant at 99. Suddenly, we've gone from "two Jews walk into a bar", to Paddy Cheyefsky's dark satire in the movie Network. Bummer!

The answer, my friends, may lie within the sentence we just read:

וַאֲבָרְתָם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמֵם תְּדַלְ לְהַיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֶרֶח פְּנֻשִׁים:

In addition to saying the obvious, that Abraham and Sarah were old, "coming in their days", it says that Sarah had stopped having her period. Yet, a slightly different translation would have it that "it ceased to be for Sarah of her hosting as for women". Note that term "אֶרֶח פְּנֻשִׁים" itself in Hebrew can mean "women's guest room".

For Sarah, as with all women, having gone through a lifetime of monthly pain as a down payment, if you will, for the ability to endure more pain in childbirth, this was all a bad joke indeed. Now that she was old, post-menopausal, having paid her debt in pain to not avail- she never got pregnant, now she is being told that she will not just get pregnant, but that

she will have a son. Because in that day and that society, a major part of a women's worth was not just bearing children, it was bearing heirs.

As read and interpreted by men for millenia, this episode was reduced to Sarah having a chuckle at the absurdity of having a son at her old age. Yet, to women, there is the dark humor that after all the trials and tribulations that Sarah went through- remember, for example, the episode in which Abraham claims to King Avimelech that she is his sister!, after all this, and after enduring a lifetime of monthly pain, after putting that pain behind her during menopause, coming to grips with the fact that she would fail in her role as a mother, now she was being told that she would have son. Her laughter that followed was an internal one, not the joyous type from her mouth, but more like a primal scream, something, the Torah tells us, she needed to cover up with a sort of lie. Yet, G-d, through the angels, knew of her pain, knew what it meant to her, knew that it was bitter-sweet.

As we say in the current vernacular, she got the last laugh.

Shabbat shalom.