

Bnei Akiva Svivot 5780: Choveret Chinuchit

Jewish humour is an integral part of who we are – there are even jokes recorded in the Mishna and Gemara! This week let's look at perhaps the most famous case of laughter in the Torah. Wishing you all a week full of simcha!

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WEEK 5: Laughter is the best medicine

A great thank you present

Parashat Vayera's opening scene takes place in the plains of Mamre, with Avraham welcoming in three guests who appeared by his tent in the heat of the day. After a hearty meal, the guests want to thank their host. But these are no ordinary guests and their gift is not your average chocolate or flowers. Instead, one of them tells Avraham that his elderly wife Sara will give birth to a son! But someone was eavesdropping in on the conversation:



*"Sara was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. Now Avraham and Sara were old, advanced in years; Sara had stopped having the periods of women. **And Sara laughed** to herself, saying, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?' Then Hashem said to Avraham, 'Why did Sara laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for Hashem? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sara shall have a son.'" Sara lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh." (Bereishit 18:10-15)*

Laughter is normally a positive reaction to something surprising. And yet, when Hashem asks why she laughed, Sara is so fearful that she tries to deny it! What could she possibly have done wrong?

Is laughter encouraged in Judaism?

Laughter is something quite dangerous. It's an expression of happiness, but often that happiness can come at the expense of others. It's also hard to take things seriously when you are always joking around – and there are a lot of things that we as Jews need to take seriously! This is something that Sara recognises later on in the Parasha, when she asks Avraham to send Yishmael away after seeing him laughing.



"Sara saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Avraham laughing. She said to Avraham, 'Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Yitzchak.'" The matter distressed Avraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Avraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or

your slave; whatever Sara tells you, do as she says, for it is through Yitzchak that offspring shall be continued for you.” (Bereishit 21:8-12)

The two sources we’ve read so far seem to imply that laughter is not a good thing. Sara is rebuked for it and Yishmael is banished into the wilderness when he laughs!

However, it’s not as straightforward as that. Take a look at this excerpt from last week’s parasha:

*“And God said to Avraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sara. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.” **Avraham 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 Sara bear a child at ninety?”” (Bereishit 17:15-17)*

Avraham’s reaction seems to be the same as Sara’s when he hears the news, but not only is he not rebuked for it, Hashem reiterates the promise. According to the commentators, Avraham’s laughter is joyful and praiseworthy. Why the contrast?

The Gemara in Avodah Zara 3b describes God’s daily routine. According to this source, God spends three hours of every day sitting and laughing with the Leviathan (a big sea creature, possibly a whale). This is a strange passage for many reasons, which we won’t go into here (but feel free to discuss amongst yourselves). One noteworthy point, however, is that God spends an entire quarter of His day laughing! This teaches us that laughter is a Godly action.

In fact, we are commanded to serve Hashem with joy. Not only is laughter permitted, it is an integral part of our Avodat Hashem.

The right kind of laughter

“Rabbi Elai said: In three matters a person’s true character is ascertained; in his cup, i.e., his behavior when he drinks; in his pocket, i.e., his conduct in his financial dealings with other people; and in his anger. And some say: A person also reveals his real nature in his laughter.” (Eruvin 65b)



Laughter is a powerful thing, and it must be used in the right way, to get closer to Hashem. This is Avraham’s laughter. He is surprised and delighted by Hashem’s promise. He accepts that God has the power to work miracles.

When Sara hears the news that she is going to have a child she is 90 years old and barren. She doesn’t believe that she is capable of having children, something that must have caused her a lot of bitterness in her life. It would seem that Sara’s laughter is something akin to mockery, a sarcastic laugh at her own body that had failed to give her children. This kind of cynical laugh is a laugh of disbelief. Sara does not want to allow herself to believe in case it isn’t true. She is protecting herself from hurt.

As soon as she is questioned about her laughter, Sara denies it out of fear. She realises that she was wrong to mock her body – after all, it was given to her by God, and God is capable of anything, including making a 99-year-old woman pregnant!

The miraculous child who is later born is named Yitzchak, meaning 'he will laugh'. Sara has recognised the potential for laughter to elevate oneself and deepen a connection with Hashem, as well as the danger of using laughter to deny God's power.

Questions to ponder

- Who was Sara trying to lie to when she claimed that she didn't laugh?
- Laughter is a form of communication – we are 30 times more likely to laugh when we are with other people than when we are alone. So why did Sara laugh when she was by herself?

Peula Ideas for Younger Years

Games to do with laughter

- Smile if you love me baby – try not to laugh!
- BaaBaaTwinkleEFG – "Baa Baa Black Sheep," "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," and The Alphabet Song all share a tune. One person begins by singing any one of the three songs. Whenever the first person stops, the next person must continue, without missing a beat, using the lyrics from the same, or one of the two remaining songs.
- See who can go the longest without laughing!
- Joke of the weeeekkk

Peula Ideas for Older Years

Games to do with laughter

- The Minister's Cat – All players sit in a circle, and the first player describes the minister's cat with an adjective beginning with the letter 'A' (for example, "The minister's cat is an adorable cat") Each player then does the same, using different adjectives starting with the same letter. Once everyone has done so, the first player describes the cat with an adjective beginning with the letter 'B'. This continues for each letter of the alphabet. A player is "out" of the game if they are unable to think of an adjective, or if they repeat one previously used.
- Oonga – everyone needs an action and a sound effect.
- Sheep Baaaaaaaaa

Discussions

- Can you think of occasions where you have laughed without feeling amused?
- When does Yitzchak live up to his name and use joy to serve Hashem?

