

א ב י ס כ ל ת ו ר א !

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ט"ז חשוון תשפ"ו · וירא

Can Laughter Ever Be Righteous?

By Menshi Trachtenberg '26

When שרה hears that she will have a son despite her old age, "וַתצַחֵק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ" (בראשית) "she laughed to herself" (יהיב). At first glance, it looks like this laughter is out of disbelief - but later, when יצחק is born, the same word צחק becomes a symbol of joy and faith: "אֵלֶּיִם בְּלִיַּהֲשִׁמָּע וְצַחֵק לִי" (בראשית) "G-d has brought me laughter; everybody who hears it will laugh with me" (כאז). In this story, what began in disbelief, eventually transferred into celebration and gratitude.

Although it seems like שרה made a mistake, רש"י explains that שרה laughed "בְּקִרְבָּהּ" "to herself" because she was thinking about her physical limitations. This teaches us that her response was humane and private, a natural response to something extraordinary. From רש"י we can learn that doubt itself is part of the human experience - not necessarily blameworthy - but it can be holy when transformed by faith.

Interestingly, the גימטריה of צחוק is equivalent to that of צדיק. Perhaps the תורה is teaching us that righteousness is not only about seriousness and strictness; it is also about happiness, positivity, and seeing the joy in the world. A true צדיק finds holiness not by rejecting laughter, but by using it as a tool to serve Hashem. The fact that the גימטריה's are the same shows that holiness is not only expressed through strict observance - it can also be found in joy itself. Just as שרה's laughter eventually became a source of great blessing, and as small acts of celebration can bring spiritual impact, joy and positivity are a central part of living a Jewish life.

I heard a story by my גמרא teacher, Rabbi Simhi, about a person who enters the מדרש of רבי יעקב ישראל קנייבסקי of בית מדרש seeking a blessing from the Rabbi. He says that his daughter has been looking for a spouse for a few years. All of her sisters were married and now she wants to get married, but still did not find the right guy. So, this person was seeking a blessing to help her get married. The Rabbi said, "when she was born, did you celebrate with a קידוש"? The person said "no, but that was 27 years ago, and she was my third daughter. What is the connection between that and the spouse for my daughter? The Rabbi explained that by not making a קידוש for his daughter, she missed out on many blessings from people at the קידוש. One of which could have helped her get married. We do not know which blessing is the one that will end up helping us, so it is important to accept all blessings, no matter how crazy one might think of them. So, this person made a קידוש for his daughter and within weeks, she was engaged.

This story beautifully connects שרה's laughter and the lesson of joy and faith. Just as שרה's initial doubt and private laughter turned into a source of blessing and celebration, the father's missed opportunity to create a קידוש shows that small acts of joy and recognition can have lasting spiritual impact. Sometimes we hesitate or dismiss seemingly minor moments, but these moments can carry hidden potential for blessings when embraced by faith and gratitude. Serving Hashem is not only about serious practice, it is also found through celebrating life's moments and accepting the blessings that come our way, even when they seem unexpected or delayed. Joy, laughter, and gratitude are not just pleasant emotions - they are ways to live as a צדיק, turning

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ordinary moments into channels of blessings and holiness.

Sending Away ישמעאל

By Anton Druskin '28

A recurring trope of אברהם's story is his tests from Hashem. According to רמב"ן, his 8th and 9th tests are really the same event but divided into two parts: sending away his wife הגר and sending away ישמעאל. The ברטנורא compresses both into the 9th test. Although these are both pretty standard interpretations, I would argue that the test wasn't sending ישמעאל out, but rather the existence of ישמעאל is a test. In a way, the test of ישמעאל is very similar to the עקידה, which is often considered אברהם's hardest and most consequential test. Paraphrasing Rabbi Jaffe, the reason why the עקידה was אברהם's hardest test is that it went against אברהם's life's achievement. He had spent his whole life fighting against child sacrifice, only for the G-d, who is against it, to tell אברהם himself to commit it. Similarly, אברהם had spent his whole life fighting against idolatry, only for his own son to commit it. At the end of לך לך, when Hashem promises אברהם's descendants rewards and another son, אברהם says, "לֹא יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ" "may ישמעאל live by Your favor" (וּבְרָאשִׁית יָחִיד). רש"י gives two ways to understand why he said this. The first is out of disbelief. אברהם thinks that he doesn't deserve these rewards, so he is afraid that the cost of this gift is ישמעאל's death. The second explanation is אברהם saying that he hopes ישמעאל will devote his life to serving Hashem. In the end, despite אברהם's efforts in teaching him, he still strays from the right path. When you think about it that way, one could say that instead of sending ישמעאל away, meaning אברהם passed the test, it means

he failed it. Maybe the test was to make sure ישמעאל goes on the right path. This does not make sense because the whole point of the ten trials, according to פרקי אבות, is that אברהם passes all of them. One answer is that he did pass the test in the same way he passed the test of leaving behind his family, the famous test of לך לך. He tried his best to convert them, what with the story of him breaking his fathers idols, however after his best efforts failed, G-d commanded him to leave behind his family. In the same spirit G-d commands אברהם to cut ישמעאל off, after his best efforts don't set ישמעאל straight. Another possible explanation is that sending him away is part of the solution to setting ישמעאל right. In וּבְרָאשִׁית כה:ט, רש"י makes note of how it says that both ישמעאל and אברהם יצחק are buried. He cites a גמרא in בבא בתרא that shows that in the end ישמעאל repented in his ways, so that could show that אברהם really passed the test.

How אברהם dealt with his son and family can tell us valuable lessons in dealing with our surroundings. First and foremost, when we notice something is off we should try to correct it and fix it in the way אברהם did in regards to his family and ישמעאל. If this doesn't work, we may just have to take a step back and distance ourselves from these negative influences. This, however, does not mean we stop caring about them, as אברהם did not stop caring about ישמעאל or לוט when they, respectively, were sent away.



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