

Three men come to Avraham and Sarah and one tells Avraham that Sarah will give birth to a child in a year's time.

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֵיטָהּ לִי עֲדֹנָה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן:

And Sarah laughed surprisingly (at the news), to herself, saying, it has already passed me to bear children, it was to me already my time of enjoyment, and my master is old.” (Genesis 18:12).

There are many ways to interpret this verse. We see that Sarah's surprise was a detriment to her faith in HaShem for it says immediately after, “Then HaShem said to Avraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’” (ibid 18:13). So much so that HaShem confronts Sarah about her laughing (not about her saying he was old), as it says, “Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But He replied, “You did laugh.” (ibid 18:15).

Why was it problematic that Sarah laughed? After all, the same expression is used to describe Avraham's reaction to similar news. “And HaShem said to Avraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. 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 Sarah bear a child at ninety?” (ibid 17:15-17). HaShem does not challenge Avraham when he laughs. It is said with the same word and equal surprise. *How can we have children when we are so old?*

Further, would not Avraham have told this good news and fortune to his wife, Sarah, that she would bear a child? If so, why did she laugh when they received the news? It seems to be that Avraham never told Sarah that she would bear a child because he did not believe it himself.

And if he did believe it, he did not trust the news enough to tell his wife the news. Otherwise, why would Sarah have been so surprised when she heard the news now? Further, why would a messenger have to come to tell Sarah that she would bear a child (or have to come to repeat the news to Avraham) if she already knew?

The messenger was really there for Sarah and not for Avraham because the messengers asks, “They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.” (Ibid 18:9). Clearly the news was meant for Sarah. When Avraham said she was predisposed then they told him the news. However, they knew she would hear. “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.” (ibid 18:10).

The verse then goes out to say that Sarah and Avraham were old. (ibid 18:10). The verse would not have to point this out, as Avraham himself pointed out that he and his wife were old in verse 17:17. This must be Sarah’s internal thoughts that she and her husband were old and she laughs with surprise, expressing that she is no longer able to bear children (menopause) and Avraham is old. However, she is confronted for saying her husband was old, when Avraham already admitted this to himself.

Therefore, verse 18:13 is saying that HaShem was telling Avraham what Sarah thought: *how can I have a child if my body no longer can physically have children, as I am old and passed that point.* It has to be Hashem, then, that Sarah overhears and she denies it. Avraham would not confront Sarah because he has a similar reaction (17:17) and his confronting Sarah would be hypocritical.

The Gemara Bava Metzia 87a actually says this verse to Sarah’s credit. The Gemara analyzes the verses that describe Sarah at the time: “And Sarah laughed within herself, saying:

After I am waxed old [*veloti*] shall I have pleasure [*edna*]” (Genesis 18:12). Rav Hisda says: After the skin had worn out [*nitballa*] and become full of wrinkles, the skin once again became soft [*nitadden*] and her wrinkles smoothed out, and Sarah’s beauty returned to its place.” Therefore, Sarah also laughed in surprise and pleasure, (as did Avraham in *ibid* 17:15), because she had a youthful rejuvenation. However, if this is so, why did HaShem seem to take exception to her laughing and statement?

However, the same Gemara later on says the verse should be read plainly and is not to Sarah’s credit. Further in Bava Metzia 87a “It is written that Sarah said: “And my lord is old” (Genesis 18:12), and it is written: “And the Lord said to Avraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I certainly bear a child, and I am old?” (Genesis 18:13). This verse indicates that the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not repeat to Avraham that which Sarah actually said, that her husband is old. Why did God change the wording of her statement so that she was referring to herself? The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Peace is of such great importance that even the Holy One, Blessed be He, altered the truth for the sake of preserving peace, as it is stated: “And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, and my lord is old,” and it is written: “And the Lord said to Avraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I certainly bear a child, and I am old?” This means that Sarah was saying I am unable to have children and my husband is old. She was laughing in disbelief. She may be saying that ‘I have become young again’ but my husband is still old, so how can we bear children?

This statement may actually be to Sarah’s credit. She was saying, “Perhaps I can bear a child, but my husband is old. I do not want a child if it is not with Avraham.” This gives further credence that Avraham never told Sarah that she would have a child with him (*ibid* 17:16).

Gemara Megillah explains why Sarah is criticized while Avraham was not. Megillah 9a says “They replaced the verse: “And Sarah laughed within herself [*bekirba*]” (Genesis 18:12), with: And Sarah laughed among her relatives [*bikroveha*]. They made this change to distinguish between Sarah’s laughter, which God criticized, and Avraham’s laughter, to which no reaction is recorded. Based on the change, Sarah’s laughter was offensive because she voiced it to others.” While this states that both Avraham and Sarah laughed in disbelief, Avraham kept it to himself. Gemara Derekh Eretz Zuta says, “Bar Ḳappara said: Great is peace, for we find that the Torah modified a statement in order to maintain peace between Avraham and Sarah. It is stated, And Sarah laughed within herself, saying “... my lord being old;” (Genesis 18, 12), but in the sequel, when HaShem repeated this to Avraham it is written, “I who am old.” We learn from this that what was repeated to Avraham had to be changed. It would only have to be changed for shalom bayis reasons if it was detrimental.

Rashi also interprets Sarah’s words in the negative, saying, “She reflected on her physical condition, saying, “Is it possible that this womb shall bear a child, that these dried-up bosom shall give forth milk.” Sarah did not believe it was possible to have a child given her condition. (As an aside, Rashi here seems to contradict what he wrote earlier, in verse Genesis 18:8. *See below bonus shtikel* for more.)

Ibin Ezra interprets Sarah’s words also as a kind of disbelief. He interprets the word “עָדָה” saying, “the word *ednah* means pleasure and enjoyment. *Va-yitaddenu* (and luxuriated) in *and luxuriated* (va-yitaddenu) “in Your great goodness” (Nehemiah 9:25) is similar. The meaning of our verse is: How can the enjoyment and pleasure of youth be renewed in me, seeing that I have waxed old and aged and my husband, too, is old.” This explanation is not like the

Gemara, that she was getting smooth skin and renewed vigor of youth, but that the enjoyment was not being renewed in her, so how can she bear a child?

Sforno explains how it was even possible for Sarah to not believe the word of HaShem. “She assumed that the words of the messenger were merely a blessing, not a prophecy, as occurred with the prophet Elisha. (Kings II 4:16) She believed that when such a blessing is given to old people, people who would require a miracle for the blessing to come true, it would not be effective in her case. She considered the kind of rejuvenation required for her to bear a child as equivalent to reviving the dead. Such an act, in her opinion, required HaShem’s personal attention, not merely that of a prophet. At the very least it would come about in answer to a prayer.” Sarah did not know it was from HaShem. She thought the men who came were merely pious and a well-wishers. If this is so, why did HaShem take exception to it asking “Is there anything too wondrous for HaShem to do?” (ibid 18:14).

Radak explains similarly: “Sarah laughed derisively internally, not audibly; she did not believe that the man who had made the prediction was an angel, though she may have assumed that he was a prophet or merely a well-wisher. “Saying” means that she contemplated saying out loud what she had only been thinking so far. Even though, she did not laugh in the messenger’s face, but contained herself due to her good manners, asking instead in wonderment. She went on to ask how is it possible that I, who have stopped ovulating should become sufficiently rejuvenated? The word עֲדֹנָה refers to youthful flesh and skin. It describes a certain elasticity of the skin. The angel was fully aware that she had laughed; this is why he said to Avraham: why did Sarah laugh?” However, it does not seem correct that the messenger asked why Sarah laughed. It seems HaShem is the one that asked.

There is a way to interpret the words as follows: Sarah says, she is old and withered, and “אֲנִי זָקְנָה” is old. ‘My master’ is not Avraham, but HaShem. Thus, HaShem says, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying ‘shall I bear a child, for I am old.’ ‘I’ is not Sarah, but HaShem. Hashem was saying, Sarah was calling Me old. Thus, in the next verse, HaShem says, “Is there anything too wondrous for HaShem to perform?” That would be why Sarah then tries to deceive or deny saying “I did not laugh.” However, this interpretation would mean that Sarah not only did not believe HaShem could perform the miracles but also believed there was some limit to the existence of HaShem and it is problematic.

Chizkuni defends Sarah and gives a distinction in her faith in the words of the messenger with that of Avraham when he heard the words of HaShem Himself. “These words, that she laughed, did not happen now, but happened six months later. When the month of Tishrei began, six months after the prediction of the messengers, and she had not experienced signs of pregnancy, she abandoned all hope of that prophecy becoming true, as there were only six months left for it to become true. Contrary to her husband Avraham, she had lost faith in the prediction. The reason that Avraham maintained faith in the prediction was that he had heard it from HaShem directly (verse 17:15), whereas Sarah, had only been an eavesdropper to a messenger, and possibly she had not heard correctly. She had assumed that the angels speaking to Avraham had been ordinary human beings. She took a look at her belly and asked mockingly whether such a belly could possibly produce a fetus. As soon as she had done so, in Tishrei, HaShem asked Avraham why Sarah had reacted in such a manner, adding that at the time appointed, i.e. when a year had passed at the time of Passover, in the following year, the angel would return and she would have become a mother. In practice this means that the first time she heard the prediction she had heard it from the mouth of an angel whom she had believed to be a

mortal human being. Later, in Tishrei, she overhears HaShem talking to Avraham, i.e. וַיֹּאמֶר ה', "the Lord said;" this was followed by "Is anything impossible for the Lord to do?"

Kli Yakar says that it cannot be that Sarah was saying something derogatively. She saw that a miracle occurred to her, that her skin was smooth, and that the way of women returned to her. So when she laughed it was out of joy. There was no need for HaShem to change Sarah's words, because if she saw a miracle happen to her then she could believe one would happen to Avraham, too, and he could then bear a child with her. It would not be wrong for HaShem to hear her say, "youth returned to me, but my master is still old." Avraham was still old. It was Sarah who saw that she returned to youthful days but she did not see a change in Avraham. She saw that he was still old and weak. Therefore, it was a laugh of joy, seeing as how miracles were happening. However, her concern was that she did not want a child with another man.

Rabbi Shamshon R. Hirsch explains that she laughed because her greatest desire was told to her, or she overheard it, in a state when she was unable to produce a child physically. She was barren in youth, and now certainly in her current state of age of body function her greatest desire was eluding her.

It seems to me that Sarah's words can be explained as follows. "Now Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women." (ibid 18:11). So when Sarah heard the news, news that Avraham heard but did not tell her previously—a prophesy that Avraham heard directly from HaShem—she laughed with joy. It was the same joy and the same laugh that Avraham laughed, except she laughed with joy at the possibility. Even though she only overheard this from a messenger, she believed that it can be true. She was saying, I can have a child even if the ways of women have expired in me, and my husband is old. He already conceived a child about 14 years earlier. She believed in HaShem's power. So HaShem

was actually rebuking Avraham. When HaShem told Avraham that he would have a child with Sarah he laughed (ibid 17:17), he threw himself on the ground in prayer and supplication before HaShem, thinking that he was old and his wife was no longer able to have children naturally (even if she was not barren as a youth) and asked that at least he have grandchildren through Yishmael (ibid 17:18). HaShem had to correct Avraham saying, again, that it was through Sarah that Avraham would have great generations come from him. (ibid 17:19).

HaShem then rebukes Avraham after Sarah laughed. “Why did Sarah *laugh* saying, ‘shall I bear a child, for I am old.’” Sarah is filled with joy despite her being old, that she shall bear a child. And she heard it from a stranger. Yet, when I told you the prophecy myself, you *laughed* in disbelief stating that you are old and you begged for Yishmael to at least give you generations. I had to assure you that it would be through Sarah. Yet, you never told Sarah. Sarah, being modest, then tries to placate Avraham. “I did not laugh, she fibs, because she was afraid” (ibid 18:15). She was afraid of embarrassing Avraham or making it seem she was better than him. Avraham then tells her, “No you did laugh. (And I am proud of you for laughing with joy and correcting—giving a tikkun for—my laugh.)” Thus, this was a lesson in faith and shalom bayis. Not that HaShem had to change the facts to protect the shalom bayis. Sarah said nothing that Avraham could not hear as the truth. It was that Avraham was rebuked through the piousness and faith of his wife and he was proud of her, not jealous or resentful.

There are many instances in life when we can lose a step and make a mistake. We see others close to us not make the same mistake. We should learn from them for good, and instead of resenting them, *laugh with them*, and be proud of their success.

BONUS SHTIKEL

There is a question in this episode of what happened to the bread. In this parsha it talks about how Avraham asked for bread and cakes to be prepared for the messenger guests. (Genesis 18:6). Then he only serves them the milk, butter, and calves. (ibid 18:8). Rashi explains that Sarah started to menstruate and she could not serve the cakes she prepared because they were impure. (*see Rashi* on 18:8; see also Gemara Baba Metzia 87a). However, this contradicts the verse later on that says that Sarah felt like she was old and no longer in the age of bearing children. (*see* ibid 18:11 that says “Sarah was old and stopped having a menstrual cycle”). If her menstruation returned to her she would not feel that she was old and in menopause.

There is another reason why the cakes were not served. The messengers came in the morning, close to midday. “The day grew hot.” (ibid 18:1). It takes time to bake cakes and it takes time to slaughter calves and cook their meat. By the time the meal was to be served it was about midday. We also know that day was the eve of Pesach (or Pesach itself). We know this because that night two of the messengers arrived in Sodom (ibid 19:1) and Lot served them matzos. (ibid 19:3). The verse mentions a meal but specifies matzo to tell us it was Pesach. (This is dependent on the view that Pesach could possibly be performed 4 centuries prior to the actual Exodus). Lot served them matzo because there is a specific mitzvah to eat matzo the first night of Pesach. On the eve of Pesach one cannot eat chometz after midday. (Midday is biblical, because matzo cannot be eaten once the Pascal sacrifice can be brought. Rabbinically, chometz may not be eaten after the fourth hour of the day). So, Avraham “hurries” to prepare a meal for the messengers (ibid 18:6). Avraham hastens quickly because he wants to serve the messengers but midday is approaching. By the time everything is ready, it was midday. Therefore, Avraham could no longer serve the chometz that Sarah baked.