



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayeira

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October 31, 2015

Vayeira

**Giving Birth to Laughter**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### **ABSTRACT**

What can laughter teach us about ourselves? What can laughter teach us about safety in Israel? How may we laugh our way to victory over anyone who threatens our being?

In this week’s Torah reading, we get the answer from our Patriarch Isaac. He was the only one of the three patriarchs never to leave the Holy Land. Is it a coincidence that his name in Hebrew, Yitzchak, means “laughter”?

Studies show that laughter may actually be the best medicine for things that ail us. Perhaps laughter may then also be the best medicine for the world at large? Perhaps laughter is indicative of a world approaching the Final Redemption?

Fascinatingly, laughter as a healing agent is rooted in Yitzchak, thousands of years before modern research discovered its remedial powers. As one doctor puts it: “The recommendation for a healthy heart may one day be – exercise, eat right and laugh a few times a day.”

Laughter is a most serious matter. And seriousness is a laughing matter.

## GIVING BIRTH TO LAUGHTER

### 1. Is Laughter Really the Best Medicine?

We have all heard that laughter is the best medicine. But is it true? Does laughter really hold healing properties?

From a medical standpoint, it seems that it does. And, as we shall presently discover, from a spiritual standpoint, it does as well. The Torah certainly maintains that laughter is indicative of the healthiest of realities, of the Messianic Age.

In November of 2000, a group of cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore published the results of a study showing that laughter may actually prevent heart disease.<sup>1</sup> Among their findings: people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease!

Participants in the study were asked to respond to a series of questions designed to discover how much or how little they laughed in certain situations and how they coped with anger and hostility. For example:

- If you arrived at a party and found that someone else was wearing clothes identical to yours, would you (a) not find it particularly amusing (b) be amused but not show it outwardly (c) smile (d) laugh or (e) laugh heartily.
- If you were eating in a restaurant with some friends and the waiter accidentally spilled a drink on you, would you (a) not find it particularly amusing (b) be amused but not show it outwardly (c) smile (d) laugh or (e) laugh heartily.

People with heart disease were less likely to recognize humor in uncomfortable situations. They generally laughed less and displayed more anger and hostility.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://umm.edu/news-and-events/news-releases/2000/laughter-is-good-for-your-heart-according-to-a-new-ummc-study>.

Explaining the results, Dr. Michael Miller, director of the study group, said that although we don't know exactly how laughter protects the heart, we do know that "mental stress is associated with impairment of the protective barrier which lines our blood vessels; this impairment can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack."

So it seems that people who laugh are able to reduce stress in their lives, and reduced stress is good for the blood vessels and for the heart.

"The ability to laugh," added Dr. Miller, "may have important implications in societies such as the U.S. where heart disease remains the number one killer. We know that exercising, not smoking and eating foods low in saturated fat will reduce the risk of heart disease. Perhaps regular, hearty laughter should be added to the list."

Dr. Miller suggested reading something humorous, watching funny videos and trying to find ways to take ourselves less seriously. He concluded: "The recommendation for a healthy heart may one day be - exercise, eat right and laugh a few times a day."

## 2. The Situation in Israel

The world sure could use a laugh today. And, among the world's nations, the one country that is not laughing much these days is Israel.

Israel, the cosmic barometer of the globe's health, is threatened from within and from without. How can we be at ease in such threatening times? Never mind trying to laugh!

And yet, perhaps laughter itself - as in transcending the fear and thinking positively - may hold the answer to the problem. If laughter has healing properties on an individual/medical level, perhaps laughter can also be remedial on the global level?

What can a healthy laugh teach us about bettering the world? What can laughter tell us about protecting Israel?

As Divine Providence would have it, this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vayeira* – describes the first documented case of laughter in the history of the world.

Who was it that laughed? The first Jewish mother – Sarah.

### 3. When Sarah Laughed

We just read in the Torah how three (camouflaged) angels showed up at the tent of Sarah and Abraham. After being pampered by their gracious hosts, the angels blessed Sarah, conveying the amazing news that she will give birth to a son in one year's time. The 89-year-old Sarah, way past her natural child-bearing age and married to a 99-year-old man, laughed at the notion.

The Torah describes this event as follows:

*And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have become worn out, will I have smooth flesh? And also, my husband is old."*

*Then God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?' Is anything hidden from God? At the appointed time, I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son."*

*Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," because she was afraid. And He [God] said, "No, but you laughed."<sup>2</sup>*

At first glance, these verses seem to be saying that Sarah's laughter was cynical – that she found ridiculous the idea that an old woman could give birth to a child, fathered by an equally old man. "*After I have become worn out, will I have smooth flesh? And also, my husband is old.*" On the face of it, we could assume that Sarah was questioning how an elderly woman could get pregnant, and especially since her husband was old too!

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:12-15.

Additionally, Sarah's statement, *"Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?"* seems to convey her doubts about the whole thing and thus her laughter seems in jest, and certainly not joy.

The next verse is also quite strange: And Sarah denied it, saying, *"I did not laugh," because she was afraid. And He [God] said, "No, but you laughed."* Obviously Sarah laughed, so why is she denying it? And to the omnipotent, all-knowing God no less.

What's going on here?

#### 4. A Child Named Laughter

Later in the portion, when we read about the realization of the blessing and the birth of a son to Sarah and Abraham – Mazal Tov! – we once again come across laughter.

*And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac [Yitzchak in Hebrew] was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh (tzchok); whoever hears will laugh (yitzachak) with me."<sup>3</sup>*

Sarah named her son Yitzchak/Isaac. Why? She said, *"Whoever hears will laugh (yitzachak) with me."* Yitzchak means laughter, more specifically laughter in the future tense, as in "will laugh." This seems to imply that laughter is a joyous and positive thing, not an expression of doubt or ridicule. How does this mesh with the earlier verse that suggests Sarah laughed in doubt and jest?

If her laughter were a negative thing, why would Sarah name her child Yitzchak, meaning "laughter"?

And, finally, why does Yitzchak's name mean laughter in the future tense? Who will be laughing in the future and how is that laughter connected to Yitzchak's name?

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 21:5-6.

## 5. Broadening the Question

To broaden the question:

In this week's portion, we are told that Sarah will birth a nation that will change the world. Further, God promises Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sands of earth. Yet, when she hears the good news, Sarah laughs, seemingly in disbelief. God made the promise – did she not have faith?

Sarah had the gift of prophecy, so it is difficult to believe that she would not see the blessing as a realization of the ultimate dream, and even more difficult to believe that she would laugh it off as some improbable notion.

It's not as if Sarah was short on faith in God; so why would she laugh when God tells her that her son is finally coming?

The answer lies in the anatomy of laughter.

## 6. The Anatomy of Laughter

When does a person laugh? And why?

Laughter is elicited from an experience that is out of the ordinary.

When a human being speaks, that very fact does not spark laughter, because it is normal for a human to speak. But when a bird speaks, it elicits laughter, because it is abnormal for a bird to speak and thus shocking and unexpected.<sup>4</sup>

The same is true of a good joke with a great punch line: its unexpected and unpredictable nature causes us to laugh.

Something novel and exotic causes laughter – something that we cannot see coming.

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<sup>4</sup>See Torah Ohr, Vayeitzei, 21c.

A punch line results in rumbling laughter precisely because we didn't see it coming. The sheer wit of it is laughter inducing.

Laughter bursts from our essence when the unexpected, the unpredictable happens. And for this reason, laughter is characteristic of the ideal universe, the utopian vision of the Final Redemption, the world we now cannot imagine.

We are so entrenched and programmed by our current egocentric status quo that we cannot envision a higher-conscious driven universe.

This is why the ultimate laughter will happen when the Final Redemption arrives.

## 7. Psalm 126

The famous Psalm #126 states: *When the Lord returns us to Zion, we shall be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter...*<sup>5</sup>

This Psalm relates that when the Final Redemption arrives and all the Jews now scattered throughout the Diaspora return to the Promised Land, to Zion, we will all be filled with laughter.<sup>6</sup>

This will be the ultimate punch line. Now, in exile, we are experiencing the construction of the joke; when we reach the punch line we will all finally laugh out loud.

Because Sarah saw through prophecy that the birth of Yitzchak would eventually (in a few thousand years) lead to the laughter of the Final Redemption, she laughed and named her son, "will laugh."

This was no frivolous laughter, nor was it out of cynicism. Sarah's laughter reflected the ultimate experience of the unexpected - ultimate transcendence.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalms 126:1-2.

<sup>6</sup> For the following, see Likkutei Torah, Shemini Atzeret 89a. Hemshech 5672 vol. 3 p. 1280. Maamarim Melukatim I, p. 281. Likkutei Sichot, vol. 30, pp. 103.



Giving birth to Yitzchak, to laughter, was giving birth to the future cosmic laughter that would peel throughout the earth when the ultimate punch line would be revealed with perfect timing.

## 8. An Unexpected Ending

Laughter, as we just learned, is caused when something unexpected and unpredictable happens. Right now, what's happening in Israel is all-too predictable and sadly expected. There is no laughter, only tears when the Nation of Israel is to be under attack by its enemies, when the norm is to know and accept that we are surrounded by millions of people that don't want us there.

The natural reaction to such painful events is to cry, to be despondent, to even feel resigned and hopeless. But that defeatist attitude can only contribute to being overwhelmed and demoralized by current events, and weakening our ability to face and overcome the challenges.

Enter our great grandmother Sarah. She teaches us that when you are faced with a seemingly impossible situation learn to laugh. Learn to look for the unpredictable in the situation. To know that despite the challenging present, there is a bright future ahead of us.

As one survivor of tragedy said: "In the end all will be good. Since its not yet good, it means it not yet the end."

So even as we fight the current battles with all the seriousness it demands, we don't lose our spirits and our confidence. We enter into the fray with a "laugh" and a spring in our step, knowing that we will prevail and despite the naysayers, we will come out of this unpredictably greater than ever - reaching unexpected, unrepresented heights.

Now that's something to smile and laugh about.

## 9. Practical Exercise: Aim for the Unpredictable

This positive attitude translated into a strategy to dealing with the current state of affairs in Israel. And that is to do something different, unexpected and unpredictable. We have to bring unfettered laughter to the streets of Jerusalem and roads of Israel. How? By doing something novel – something new, different and marvelous.

The predictable and expected has not worked. Peace talks haven't worked ... establishing authorities hasn't worked ... giving away land hasn't worked ... arguing over left wing versus right wing hasn't worked. Nothing that Israel has tried in terms of neighborly relations has worked. There have been wars, intifadas, bombers, shooters, stabbers, stone-throwers, car-rammers – nothing even remotely reminiscent of laughter.

So how about we try something else! How about we try something that may elicit laughter, joy and peace for all of Israel and, believe it or not, its neighbors as well.

How about we try this:

Israel as a whole – from its leadership to its laypeople, from the Prime Minister to the Egged bus driver, from a high tech entrepreneur to a falafel stand maestro – stands up and says:

We as a people, as a nation, and as a country have been commissioned from on high to bring light, laughter, joy and sanctity into this world. This is our family tradition and it started with our matriarch, Sarah. She taught her son to laugh; indeed, she named him “laughter.”

She taught us that the predictable, expected routines of life are not to be taken as the norm. Rather, it is our job and role to find a new perspective, to find witty punch lines and joyous takes on reality.

She taught us that we have a book – a playbook, if you will – to help us find these surprising and shockingly awesome sublime points-of-view, as well as a blueprint how to implement them.

She taught us that, ultimately, the goal of it all is to laugh, for the world is meant to be a place where everything is shockingly beautiful, unpredictably lovely, unexpectedly joyous.

So even as we do everything in our power to protect our citizens, know that you cannot weaken our spirits. We may need to fight, but we are not defined by battles. We do not succumb to the natural fear and despair that attacks may elicit in others. We are a people who always know how to laugh as we are firm in our beliefs in a world that will find peace.

What's if Israel took this approach, following the precedent set by Sarah, our mother?

Then the clarity – and laughter – would be a breath of fresh air.

Obviously, this comes hand in hand with doing whatever is necessary to create total security in protecting the people of Israel. But it adds a dimension of transcendence and spirit to even difficult times, declaring that we will not be controlled by natural fears.

This same approach is pertinent in our everyday lives as well. Imagine every decision we made was based on this question: Is what I am about to do going to be new and unique, introducing the unpredictable and the unnatural, making the world laugh? Or is this going to be rote and predictable, furthering nothing but blasé staleness and the natural, predictable reactions to daily events?

If every decision we made passed this test, our actions would truly induce laughter, making our mother Sarah proud.

## 10. Two Types of Laughter (Conclusion)

There are two types of laughter:

There is laughter that comes from disbelief; and there is laughter that is the source of belief.

Some laugh to forget; some laugh to remember.

The former happens when you laugh at a situation; the latter happens when the situation is a catalyst to create laughter.

Sarah laughed because she realized that Yitzchak's birth was the beginning of the realization of the ultimate laughter – that it was the ultimate novel and innovative punch line.

We, Sarah's grandchildren, will certainly follow in her steps – never laughing at anyone, but always demonstrating how everyone and everything must be a source of laughter.

You don't have to be a standup comedian to be a standup person. And you certainly do not have to have a honed sense of humor to make the world laugh.

All you have to do is live up to your inheritance, as gifted to you by your grandmother.

Shabbat Shalom!

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