

OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parshah Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

Parshat Vayeira

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Cheshevan 19-20, 5770

Ari Hoffman

Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh. -Genesis 18:15

Perhaps I know best why it is man alone who laughs; he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter. -Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will To Power

Laughter is a funny thing, in that it seems to come from a part of us that is older than that which spells out words, and sentences, and paragraphs, and pages and pages of speech and writing and contemplation. It is inchoate, of no language, or maybe even pre-language, but also perfectly expressive, and employed by the young, the old, and the young at heart. At the same time, it can say more than the most eloquent address, or sincere gesture. Although it is just a kind of noise, it often lets two people know that they are on the same page, and signifies shared understanding, a communication without words. Laughing is as old as the Bible itself, and if we listen closely, we can hear Sarah, giggling through the ancient parchment and cracked letters, while Avraham, in the next room, had to be told that she laughed, by an angel, or even God Himself, seek-

ing refuge from the heat of the day, and delivering the good news that presaged Sodom's apocalypse.

Of course, the effects of time have muffled Sarah's laugh, and we can no longer tell what its tone was; joy or disbelief, mockery or the chuckle of a faith rewarded. The text leaves this question ambiguous, and interpreters have spent centuries trying to guess at what a laugh meant, and what it could say if it could speak. This laugh was passed down to Sarah's son Isaac, and to all of us, a kind of aural birthright, so rich because of the spectrum of meaning it contains, including, occasionally, no meaning at all, but the absurdity and miracle of living.

A laugh can cause harm and pain, and it can be evidence of mockery or cynicism, a withdrawal away from constructive speech into voyeurism. This week's parsha features this valence as well, and the mockery of others engenders fear in Sarah, and humiliation in turn leads to anger. But laughter can also lift up an entire world, and dispel so much darkness, and remind us of all there is to celebrate, today, and every day.

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Nell Hawley

Ari Hoffman '10 begins his contribution to this week's Open Scroll with a quote, and so will I. I'll quote him.

"[Sarah's] laugh was passed down to Sarah's son Isaac [the name meaning "he will laugh"], and to all of us, a kind of aural birthright, so rich because of the spectrum of meaning it contains, including, occasionally, no meaning at all, but the absurdity and miracle of living."

Ari writes of laughter as a mode of communication that is prior to speech; its range of expression can encompass, in his words, "joy or disbelief, mockery or the chuckle of a faith rewarded." In Sarah's case, I believe, it is a little bit of each of these. Most of all, I agree that her laugh – as a knee-jerk reaction, or a gut feeling, or something certainly not thought out – is an expression of sheer surprise at what Ari calls "the absurdity and miracle of living." In other words, when it comes to the meaning of life, laughter is sometimes (perhaps always?) the only possible response.

I see the other elements of this week's parshah through the lens of Sarah's laughter. While I understand that opinions differ as to the intentional ordering of the events in the Bible, I believe the remainder of the stories within this parshah are designed so that we know, first of all, that Sarah laughs (for whatever reason) at what only God can bring into the realm of possibility. We are supposed to read the rest of the parshah with the understanding that no matter how catastrophic and irreversible things may seem – such as the situation of a centenarian family who desperately wants a child – redemption could well be on the horizon.

There is almost nothing in this parshah that is not in some way tragic, faithless, irredeemable, or unbelievable. The people of the city of Sodom are less than hospitable to their guests; God

destroys Sodom and Gomorrah despite Abraham's pleas; Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt; Lot's daughters, thinking they are the only people left on earth, conceive children from their own father; King Avimelech takes Sarah for himself, thinking she is Abraham's sister; Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham and Sarah's keeping; and, finally, Abraham almost kills Isaac. Almost.

I believe that "almost" is the key to making some sort of sense of these momentous – and momentarily problematic – events that occur at this critical moment in Genesis. In many cases, God, humankind, or both manage to avert complete disaster. The cities may be burned, but Lot and his family are saved; the children conceived by Lot's daughters live on "until this day" (19:37); Avimelech returns Sarah and makes a truce with Abraham; the children of Ishmael are "made into a nation" (21:13); Isaac lives. The parshah begins with the source of Isaac's name – Sarah's laughter – as a reaction of surprise at the miracle of creation, and it ends with Isaac yet again symbolizing an extraordinary course of life. At first, we may not see why Sarah laughs at the work of God – but by the end of this parshah and the story of Isaac's near death, we understand just how miraculous these acts of redemption are. They go beyond words or even actions; they compel something deeper within us. At total tragedy, we might cry – and if God hadn't blessed her with a child, Sarah might have cried, too. But at extreme redemptions such as these, what else can we do but act as Sarah did, and laugh?

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