At the end of last week's parasha, God tells Abraham that he is going to have a child with Sarah. At that moment, Abraham was 99 years old. Let's examine his reaction:

Does flinging himself on his face express exhilara-הָבַת הִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה הֵלֵד. (בר' יז:יז)

But Abraham flung himself on his face and laughed, and said in his heart: To a hundred-vear-old man shall there be [children] born? Or shall ninety-year-old Sarah give birth? (Gen. 17:17)

tion or frustration? Does he laugh from joy or sarcasm? Irony or disbelief? He refers to both his and Sarah's advanced age and the seeming impossibility of bringing a child into the world, let alone raising that child to adulthood.

But wait. Fathering children at advanced ages is not unheard of, even in Abraham's time. In the aftermath of the Flood, Noah's son Shem begot children when he was 100! While the average age of fatherhood for the generations between Shem and Terah was ~33¹, Terah begot Abraham at 70! And Abraham already fathered Ishmael at 86! Moreover, (spoiler alert), following the death of Sarah at 127 Abraham will get a new wife and go on to beget another six children! (He was 137!) (Gen. 25:2). Age is not Abe's problem. We should consider, not what he says here to himself, but what he says to God:

ויאמר אברהם אל האלהים לו God, I already have a (בר' יז:יה) יִשְׁמֵעֵאל יִחְיֵה לְפָּנֵידְ. (בר' יז:יה) child. He's a big boy, he's Abraham said to God: If only Yishmael might live in your presence! (Gen. 17:18)

13 years old. I don't want to have another child at this point. (Not with Sarah.)

To which God responds: 1

וַיאמֶר אֵלהִים אָבַל <mark>שַׁרָה אָשְתְדְּ</mark> יֹלֶדֶת לְךָּ בֵּן (בר׳ יז:יח) God said: On the contrary, Sarah your wife is to bear vou a son, (Gen. 17:19).

Above, Abraham did not refer to Sarah as *his wife*, but here, God reminds him of this fact. The emphasis on **Sarah your** wife, discloses the real issue here: it's not that Abraham

thinks he and Sarah are too old to have a child. That is a convenient excuse. Rather, here is a plausible speculation: Abraham is somewhat estranged from Sarah, and the prospect of having a child with her, would have required some kind of rapprochement between the two of them, something that he may not have been prepared to do. Here's the argument:

1. Abraham was 75 when God told him to go to Canaan. It doesn't say how old he was when he married Sarah, but, with the average age of fatherhood somewhere in the 30's, it's quite likely that he married her also in his 30's. If that's the case, they would have been childless already for four decades prior to their journey. As Samson Rafael Hirsch remarks, לד לד, lekh lekha, Go for yourself, could very well have meant, isolate yourself from your country, from all your previous connections. Including, we may add, your wife! But in an extraordinary demonstration of loyalty to her, Abraham takes her with him. To her credit, she goes with him. 2. Once he is in Canaan, he decides to go to Egypt because of the famine. Once he gets there, he instructs her to lie to Pharaoh and tell him that she was his sister: למער ייטַב לִי בַעבוּרֶךְ וְחַיָּתָה וַפְּשִׁי בְּגַלֵּלֶךְ-in order that it may go well with me on your account, and I myself may live thanks to **you.** The Torah is silent about her response. This was not their finest hour as a couple. 3. God keeps promising Abraham that he will be the father of multitudes, but he is the father of none. In despair, Sarah tells him to cohabit with Hagar, her maidservant and he agrees without protest. Ok. whatever. Of course, concubines and co-wives are a feature of that world, but the fact that Abraham is so ambivalent about this speaks volumes. Hagar immediately gets pregnant and lords that over Sarah. Sarah unloads her anger on Abraham: הַמְּסִי עֵלֵיך. The wrong done me is on you! (Gen. 16:5) To which Abraham responds with apathy: *Here, your* maid is in your hand, deal with her however seems good in *your eyes.* (Gen. 16:6) The child is born. A subtlety is worth noting here: when Hagar ran away from Sarah, an angel found her and told her to return, promising her that she will have a boy and that she would be the one to name him Yishmael (Gen. 16:11). However, when the child is eventually born, Abraham is the one who names him (Gen. 16:15). Why? Because, unlike Sarah, Hagar had enough of a relationship with Abraham to tell him what the angel said Now let's turn to the opening scene in our parasha. Abraham and Sarah are apart from each other! He is sitting at the opening of the tent, she is inside. When he spots the three travelers, he rushes to tend to them. Then: וימהר אברהם האהלה אל שבה Abraham hastened into his tent to Sarah. (Again, Sarah is not referred to here as **Sarah his wife**. Of course they are still married, but this curious omission signals emotional distance). And then, here's how he talks to her: פָּגוֹת. וַעֲשִׂי נְעֲשִׁי עָגוֹת. -Make haste! Three measures of choice flour! Knead it, make bread-cakes! (Gen. 18:6) He orders her around! Arguably, he is treating her harshly, as a slave! You would think that with honored guests, she would be present at their feast. In fact, her absence startles the guests. Expecting that she would at least make an appearance, they ask Abraham: Where is Sarah your wife? To which he curtly replies, as if with a shrug and an eyeroll, הנה באהל-here, in the tent. Emotional distance. When they tell him -והנה בן לשרה אשתה that Sarah your wife will have a son, Sarah, who was eavesdropping, laughs to herself. This is news to her! Abraham didn't tell her what God told him! At least Hagar and Abraham talk! Sarah and Abraham do not! Up until this point, the conversation is between the men and Abraham. They are outside under a tree, and she is at the entrance of

¹ Gen. 11:10-27. Read this carefully.

the tent. She can hear them, but they can't hear her, especially since she laughs to herself. Then she says: אַהַרִי This verse is difficult to translate. the word בלתי comes from the root בלתי, which means to wear out. It is usually a reference to clothing, shoes or even wineskins, but here, this is how she refers to herself. as an unloved object that is fit to be discarded.

-מדנה לי עדנה Robert Alter points out that the term בדנה 'edna is cognate with Eden and probably suggests sexual pleasure. Perhaps she refers to him as אָלנִי וַקּן because it sounds a bit like עַדְנָה. But there is more going on here. אָדֹנִי is often translated as my husband, but the more common biblical word for husband is בעל. Wives seldom refer to their husbands as אָלני אָלני ought to be rendered as, my lord,² which on the one hand is more deferential, and on the other hand, coming from Sarah, conveys emotional distance, inequality, and sarcastic condescension. With that in mind, I offer this rather caustic translation: After being worn out by age, and at the point of being discarded like a used wineskin, how do you expect me to have sex with my honorable "old lord," the man who bosses me around and treats me so unkindly?³ Sarah laughed bitterly to herself. The visitors don't hear her. But God hears her. It's at this point that God realizes that he has a problem. In his plan Abraham and Sarah are to have a child, and that that child will carry on the covenant. They both say that they are incapable of having a child because of age. But the real reason is that they have no relationship (or sex) at this point. Rather than engage in a rebuttal with Sarah, God intervenes directly with Abraham and appeals directly to him:

הַאַף אָמְנָם אֵלֵד וַאֵנִי זַקְנְתִּי. Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying, 'Shall I really give birth, old as I am?' (Gen. 18:13)

But that's not what she said! When she laughed she complained about Abraham's old age not her own! This has long been noted by the commentaries, summed up beautifully by Rashi: ישנה הכתוב מפני השלום (God)

changed the text (of what she said) for the sake of peace. And that's the point! God wants them to reconcile! Then God says, referring to himself in the third person, הַפַּלָא מָהי קבר Is anything beyond God? לַמוֹעָד אָשׁוֹב אֵלֶיךְ כָּעַת חַיָּה וּלְשַׁרָה בֶּן-In due time I will return to you, at this very season, and Sarah shall have a son. (Gen. 18:14) The challenging issue here is not sex between two elderly people and a post-menopausal pregnancy. For God that's easy! The big challenge for God is getting them back together in order, you know, to "get together"! What happens then? The text tells us that Sarah denied the allegation that she laughed. But nowhere does it tell us who alleged this. Was it God? Was it Abraham? Consider this: When God tells Abraham that at this very season (meaning next year at this time) Sarah **shall have a son** it is, in fact, **a command** (!) to Abraham to "get busy". Like everything God has said to him so far (and right up to the Akedah later in this parasha), Abraham does whatever God tells him. Abraham finally understands that he has to have a conversation with Sarah, so he approaches her and says: So...listen Sarah. So...these men were here and they told me that, um... you and I were going to have a baby next year. How about that! And then God told me that you laughed when you overheard this. Is this true? רַתְּכַחֵשׁ שַׂרָה לֵאמֹר-But Sarah denied this, saying לא צָחַקתִּי I didn't. And here the narrator interjects and says, בי יראה because she was afraid. To which Abraham replied, לא כי בּחַקּה -Ah...no. You laughed. Now the text goes silent about what transpires between the two of them. But a year later, a child in fact is born! They would have had to reconcile, at the very least temporarily, in order to for that to happen! PS. In the next verse (Gen. 18:17), when God says, הַּמְכַּסֶה אָנִי



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מַאַבָרַהַם אֲשֵׁר בעשה Do I ever hide from Abraham what I do? he is not only a referring to what he is about to do to Sodom, he is also slyly referring back to the previous episode: I told him that he will have

a child, and I will

make it happen for them and help them reconcile and get back to each other, and unleash their youthful powers. And now, I'm telling him that I will bring judgement to Sodom. **Shabbat Shalom!**

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Barbara and Stephen Parkoff to commemorate the Yahrzeit of Barbara's father, Harry Weinstein, z'l.

TODAY IS THE 407th DAY OF THE CAPTIVITY OF THE HOSTAGES. WE LONG FOR THEIR FREEDOM. MAY GOD SHIELD ISRAEL AND PROTECT THE IDF FROM DANGER IN GAZA AND IN LEBANON.

means "my husband," but it also means "my Baal." (my Canaanite god).

² In fact, in next week's parasha, Abraham's servant refers to Abraham all the time as אדני, my lord. The semantic range of also includes "master," "owner," and "cohabitation," as well as being the name of the chief Canaanite god. Arguably, the more intimate term for "my husband" is אישׁי. Leah refers to Jacob as אישׁי several times (Gen. 29:32, 34, 30:15, 20) and Hosea brings the two terms into sharp contrast with each other: וֹהַיַה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נָאָם ה׳ תַּקְרָאִי אִישִּׁי וְלֹא תַקְרָאִי לִי עוֹד -בַּעְלִי You will call [Me] Ishi, *Ishi I.e., "my husband." And no more will you call Me Baali. *Baali like Ishi, Baali

³ Robert Alter: **After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure,** and my husband is old?. JPS: Now that I've lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment-with my husband so old? Everett Fox: After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me? And my lord is old!