

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:

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר
בְּלִבִּי הִלְכִּין מֵאָה שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם שָׂרָה
הִבְתָּ תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד. (בר' יז:יז)

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

Does flinging himself on his face express exhilaration 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:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֵל הָאֱלֹהִים לוֹ
יִשְׁמְעָאֵל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ. (בר' יז:יח)
Abraham said to God: If only Yishmael might live in your presence! (Gen. 17:18)

God, I already have a child. He's a big boy, he's 13 years old. I don't want to have another child at this point. (Not with Sarah.)

To which God responds: ↓

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲבֹל שָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ
יִלְדֶּת לָךְ בֶּן. (בר' יז:יח)
God said: On the contrary, Sarah your wife is to bear you 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, לֵךְ לֵךְ, *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: לְמַעַן לֵמַר לִי בַעֲבוּרֶךָ וְחִיתָה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְלֶךָ *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: חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ *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 to her! 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: וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם הָאֵלֶּהָ אֶל שָׂרָה *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: וַיֹּאמֶר מְהֵרָה שְׁלֹשׁ סָאִים קֹמַח סֶלֶת לְוִישִׁי וְנַעֲשִׂי עֲגוֹת. *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, הִנֵּה-הִנֵּה בָּאֵהָ *here, in the tent.* Emotional distance. When they tell him לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ *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.

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!*