

When God told Abraham that he and Sarah would become parents, he **fell on his face and he laughed** (Gen. 17:17). That moment is located in these verses at the end of our parasha:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם שְׂרִי אֲשַׁתְּךָ לֹא תִקְרָא אֶת שְׁמָהּ שְׂרִי כִי
 שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ. וּבֵרַכְתִּי אֹתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֶּן וּבֵרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה
 לְגוֹיִם מְלֻכֵי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יִהְיוּ. וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר
 בְּלִבִּי הִלְכִן מָאָה שָׁנָה יִנָּלֵד וְאֵם שָׂרָה הִבֵּת תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תִּלְדֵּ. (בר'
 יז:טו-יז)

God said to Abraham: As for Sarai your wife—you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sara/Princess is her name! I will bless her, and I will give you a son from her; I will bless her so that she becomes nations; kings of peoples shall come from her! 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 Sara give birth? (Gen. 17:15-17)

At this point in the story Abraham is 99 years old. Here is a brief recap of everything that has taken place up until now: Having been promised that he will be a great nation (12:2), and that **all the families of the earth shall be blessed through him** (12:3), Abram migrated from Haran; **he was 75 years old** at the time (12:4). Immediately upon reaching the land he had to travel to Egypt to save himself and his family from a terrible famine (12:10-20). He returned to Canaan **with great wealth** (13:1-4), was separated from his nephew Lot (13:5-14), and was again promised the land as his possession (13:14-18). There is a war, and his nephew Lot is taken captive (14:1-13). Abram engages in battle and retrieves Lot from captivity (14:14-24). Abram then receives another promise of greatness from God, but we can sense that at this point, with nothing to show for all of God's promises to him, Abram is growing frustrated (15:1-3). God makes yet another promise to Abram, telling him that his descendants will be **as numerous as the stars in heaven**, and Abram **believes him** (15:4-6). God makes a formal covenant with Abram through the ritual of sacrifice, promising him - yet again - that he will be giving this land **to him and his descendants** (15:18-21). At this point, Sarai, realizing that despite all of God's promises she is still childless, suggests to Abram that he cohabit with her handmaiden Hagar and father a child with her. Abram dutifully complies (16:1-4). Conflict erupts between Sarai, Hagar and Abram. Hagar runs away. In her fleeing she encounters an angel who tells her to return, promising her that she too will have innumerable offspring. When Ishmael

is born, Abram is 86 years old (16:5-16). Fast-forward 13 years to the moment under consideration in our story. Abram (still named Abram) is 99 years old and he and Sarai (still Sarai) still remain childless. God promises Abram - yet again - that he will make him into a large people and changes his name to **Abraham** (17:1-5). God - yet again - promises to give Abraham the land and that he will uphold the covenant that he has made with him. To demonstrate his partnership in the covenant, God instructs Abraham to circumcise himself and all the males in his household (17:6-14). Right after instructing him about circumcision, God turns to Abraham and tells him that Sarai will henceforth be called **Sarah**, and that she will bear a son. That's when Abraham **falls on his face and laughs**, (17:15-17, above).

What are we to make of Abraham's reaction here? The tradition overwhelmingly sees Abraham's laughter as the **laughter of joy**. This is reflected in Onkelos' Aramaic targum, and appears in many of the classic commentators:

Targum Onkelos
 וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל אִפְוֵהוּ וַיִּצְחַק
And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced.

Rashi	שֶׁאַבְרָהָם הֶאֱמִין וְשָׂמָח	<i>Abraham believed and rejoiced.</i>
Ramban	שָׂמָח וּמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּיּוֹ.	<i>He rejoiced and his mouth was filled with laughter.¹</i>
Bekhor Shor	שָׂמָח וְצָחַק וְהוֹדָה וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוָה וְאָמַר כַּמָּה גִּסְדּוּל וְכַמָּה טוֹבָה בְּכֻלָּהּ שֶׁמִּשְׁנֵה סִדְרוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם עָלִי לְטוֹבָה.	<i>He rejoiced and laughed, and praised and bowed and said, What a great miracle this is! And how good! God is changing the order of the world for me, for goodness!</i>
Malbim	הִנֵּה צָחַק וְשָׂמָח עַל הַבְּשׂוּרָה, אֲבָל הִיא לִפְלֵא בְּעֵינָיו.	<i>He laughed and rejoiced on this news, but it was truly baffling in his eyes.</i>

Arpachshad	35
Shelach	30
Ever	34
Peleg	30
Re'u	32
Serug	30
Nachor	29
Terah	70

But the tradition's overwhelming preference for his laughter as a signal of joy is suspicious precisely because we could make a very compelling case for that Abraham's laughter is the **laughter of disbelief**. Here are some reasons:

1. It is now close to 25 years that God has been promising innumerable progeny to Abram. 2. After fathering a child with Hagar, it is clear that Sarah, not Abraham, is the one who is incapable of having a child. 3. Abraham is aware of his advanced age. 4. He is aware that in the preceding generations in his direct line of ancestry, the ages of parenthood were much younger.²

¹ An allusion to a verse that is familiar to us, Psalm 126:2: **our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy.**

² Notice that all of the ancestors in the direct line of Abraham's ancestry (listed in Gen. 11- with the exception of Abraham's own father, Terah, had their firstborns at the average age of 31.4. Like Noah, who is a kind of archetype, Terah has his children later than the average of his

Perhaps Onkelos and all the commentators *doth protest too much. Maybe they are going out of their way to claim that Abraham was laughing out of joy as opposed to laughing out of disbelief.* What is at stake here is nothing less than the character portrait of Abraham. How is Abraham to be portrayed in the collective imagination of the Jewish people? Is Abraham a man of gratitude and joy, as per Onkelos, or a man of frustration and disappointment, as per the plain reading of the text? *Clearly, the tradition prefers a jovial Abraham as opposed to a serious, sober, and perhaps even cynical Abraham.* Both are defensible positions, and not mutually exclusive. After all, there are plenty of people who are both jovial and cynical!

But what is laughter anyway? Montreal-born author, Steven Pinker, discusses this question in his current bestseller, *When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows . . . : Common Knowledge and the Mysteries of Money, Power, and Everyday Life*. Basing his ideas of laughter on the work of renowned laughter scholar Robert Provine, Pinker

identifies some of the features of laughter with which we are familiar: *laughter is involuntary; laughter is contagious; laughter occurs usually in public and very seldom when one is alone; and lastly laughter generates common knowledge.* Reading these qualities of laughter back into the story, one can easily identify with Abraham's laughter without getting overly analytical or theological: *Abraham's laughter is an involuntary response to the irony of his situation,* the way he hears what God is saying compared to the reality that he is experiencing. He laughs not because of joy or disbelief, but because he perceives that what God is saying is funny! Humor is a feature of life! It breaks the tension that often builds up in relationships. What Provine demonstrated in his study of laughter is that people laugh all the time in conversation, and that most of the time, the things that we are laughing at are not even funny. We laugh because it is the glue that is part of any normal human relationship. There is a normal give and take in conversation, a normal banter, a normal conviviality that is expressed through laughter. Under normal circumstances, we are always laughing. Even people who suffer severe depression can laugh, albeit the laughter can be fleeting. It was always assumed that because of his public persona as a living symbol of the Holocaust, always very somber and sad, that



predecessors. The question underlying this list of numbers is: to which era does Abraham belong? Does Abraham belong to the present post-Flood era, in which the ages of fatherhood are recognizable, normal, and young? Or is Abraham to be considered like Noah's son, Shem, in the immediate post-Flood era, who had his first child when he was 100 years old (Gen. 11:10)?

Elie Wiesel never laughed. But if you were ever with him in person you knew that he loved to laugh, and he had a great sense of humor. His famous lectures at the 92nd Street Y were filled with laughter.³ Abraham's involuntary response is part of a full life. *And Abraham's laughter is contagious!* Perhaps the following is too theological of a reading, but (here goes): *Because laughter is so contagious, we can assume that even God is laughing with him!* And while of course he is depicted as being very much alone in this scene, *Abraham's laughter is not private.* We are with him! We are witnessing his laughter! We understand the humor and the incredulity of the situation, and we are with him in the moment. But Pinker's main point (following Provine) *is that laughter generates common knowledge.* He writes: *When you laugh, you know you're laughing, and those with you, know it, and you know, that they know it, and they know, that you know, that they know it.* In other words, it's a shared experience that everybody understands, and that everybody understands that everybody understands! Laughter builds and solidifies relationships. *But it also dissolves boundaries and hierarchies in relationships.* So in effect what is taking place here with Abraham's laughter is that, arising as an involuntary response to a baffling statement, on the public stage of the story, in the presence of God, relating to the most intimate areas of life, namely one's relationship with one's spouse and the universe of sexuality, *it is a moment in which God and Abraham become just a lit bit closer than they were prior to it. It brings the relationship to a new level. The covenant between him and God, which had heretofore been based on lots of God's grand statements, and lots of Abraham's very somber and earnest actions is now, because of the laughter, going to be even stronger.* Isaac's identity will forever be connected to this story. His name encapsulates the relationship between God and Abraham, a relationship which will be bequeathed to him as the heir to the covenant. Throughout his life it will be a reminder of his father's (and we will see next week, his mother's as well) laughter, a laughter that discloses so much: it is the commingled response of joy, incredulity, confusion and indeed, even sadness.⁴ And as Abraham's descendants, we are the descendants of the one who laughed and the one who was named for that laughter. **SHABBAT SHALOM!**

We continue to pray for the repatriation of the bodies of the 11 slain hostages that remain in Gaza. May their grieving families attain a measure of peace soon. AMEN

³ See especially this tribute to him on YouTube, **Elie Wiesel: "To Life!" A Celebration of 180 Jewish Lectures at 92Y**. The speech by Jeff Greenfield (49 minute mark) is especially poignant.

⁴As we all know through experience, and as the scholars of laughter point out, there is tremendous physiological and neurological proximity in the mechanisms of laughter and crying.