



#StaySafeWithAlyth

MUSAF FOR THE MIND – THE POWER OF LAUGHTER

Rosh Hashanah, 2 Tishrei 5782



Genesis 21:8-9

ח וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּנְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֵּה גָדוֹל בַּיּוֹם הַגָּמַל אֶת־יִצְחָק : ט וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־הָעִבְרָיִת אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק :

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian (who she had born Abraham) laughing.

Rashi, commentary on Genesis 21:9

מצחק. לשון עבודת אלילים, כמו שנאמר ויקומו לצחק.

דבר אחר לשון גילוי עריות, כמה דתימא לצחק בי.

דבר אחר לשון רציחה, כמה דתימא יקומו נא הנערים ז וישחקו לפנינו וגו'

'Laughing' – this is the language of idol worship, as it says, 'And they rose to play/laugh/make merry' (Exodus 32:6).

Another interpretation: it is the language of sexual immorality, as it says, '[Potifar's wife said, "The Hebrew slave who you brought into our house came to me] to dally with me!"' (Genesis 39:17).

Another interpretation: it is the language of murder, like it says, 'Let the young men arise and make sport before us' (2 Samuel 2:14).

Ibn Ezra Commentary on Genesis 21:9

מצחק. כי כן מנהג כל נער ותקנא בו בעבור היותו גדול מבנה :

'Laughing' – For so he behaved like a youth. She [Sarah] was jealous of him because he was older than her son.

Sforno Commentary on Genesis 21:9

מצחק מלעיג על המשתה שנעשה בבית אברהם כאמרו שנתעברה מאבימלך

'Laughing' – He laughed at the feast the house of Abraham made. He said that [Isaac] had been fathered by Avimelech.

Radak Commentary on Genesis 21:9

מצחק, כאילו מלעיג על יצחק שנולד מהזקנים :

'Laughing' – He laughed at Isaac that his father was an old man.

Robert Alter, commentary on Genesis 21:9

Some medieval Hebrew exegetes, trying to find a justification for Sarah's harsh response, construe the verb [laughing] as a reference to homosexual advances, though that seems far-fetched. Mocking laughter would surely suffice to trigger her outrage. Given the fact, moreover, that she is concerned lest Ishmael encroach on her son's inheritance, and given the inscription of her son's name in this crucial verb, we may also be invited to construe it as 'Isaac-ing-it' – that is, Sarah sees Ishmael as presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir.

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 31a

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי : אסור לאדם שימלא שחוק פיו בעולם הזה, שנאמר : אז ימלא שחוק פינו ולשוננו רנה, אימתי - בזמן שיאמרו בגוים הגדיל ה' לעשות עם אלה. אמרו עליו על ריש לקיש, שמימיו לא מלא שחוק פיו בעולם הזה מכי שמעה מרבי יוחנן רביה.

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, 'It is forbidden for a person to fill their mouth with laughter in this world, because it says, "Then will our mouth be filled with laughter and our tongue with singing" (Psalm 126:2). When will that be? At the time when "they shall sing among the nations, the Eternal has done great things with these" (Psalm 126:2).' It was related of Resh Lakish that he never again filled his mouth with laughter in this world, after he heard this saying from Rabbi Yochanan his teacher.

Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b

והא אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: שתים עשרה שעות הוי היום, שלש הראשונות הקב"ה יושב ועוסק בתורה, שניות - יושב ודן את כל העולם כולו, כיון שרואה שנתחייב עולם כלייה, עומד מכסא הדין ויושב על כסא רחמים, שלישיות - יושב וזן את כל העולם כולו מקרני ראמים עד ביצי כנים, רביעיות - יושב ומשחק עם לויתן, שנאמר: (תהלים קד) לויתן זה יצרת לשחק בו

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav, 'The day is twelve hours: The first three [hours] the Holy Blessed One is sitting and busy with Torah. The second [three hours] God sits and judges the whole world. As soon as God sees that the universe deserves destruction, God stands from the throne of judgement and sits upon the throne of mercy. The third [three hours] God sits and feeds the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin. The fourth [three hours] God sits and plays with Leviathan, as it is written, "This is Leviathan, who you created to sport with" (Psalm 104:26).'

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: עם בריותיו משחק, ועל בריותיו אינו משחק אלא אותו היום בלבד.

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said, 'God plays/laughs with God's creatures [regularly], but not at God's creatures except on that day.'

א"ל רב אחא לרב נחמן בר יצחק: מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין שחוק להקב"ה.

Rav Acha said to Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak, 'From the day of the destruction of the Temple, there has been no laughter for the Holy Blessed One.'

...

ברביעיות מאי עביד? יושב ומלמד תינוקות של בית רבן תורה, שנאמר: (ישעיהו כח) את מי יורה דעה ואת מי יבין שמועה גמולי מחלב עתיקי משדים, למי יורה דעה ולמי יבין שמועה? לגמולי מחלב ולעתיקי משדים.

What does God do in the fourth [three hours of the day]? Sits and teaches the children who are in the house of the rabbis, as it says, 'To whom should one teach knowledge, and to whom should one make understood the message? Those who are weaned from milk' (Isaiah 28:9). To whom does God teach knowledge, and to whom does God explain the message? To those who are weaned from milk and taken and removed from breasts.

Proverbs 31:25

עֲדוּקָהּ לְבוּשָׁה יִתְשַׁחֵק לַיּוֹם אַחֲרֹון:

She is clothed with strength and splendour; she laughs on the last day.

Rivka Miriam (translated by Rachel Adelman)

Sarah was barren because she did not know how to laugh. After Abraham's broad back, she was drawn and went forth; and he was drawn and went forth, following the broad back of Command (*hatzivui*). Straight and clear was that Command, lacking turns. In it, no loss of balance. And since there was no loss of balance, there was no humour – no curves or curls, nor breach of boundaries, from which the ability for conception and birth emerges.

Sarah and Abraham had difficulty conceiving. They had cast off idols and masks, and with the idols and masks, their innards (*meimam*) were cast off, too. And perhaps also play. The play and the joy and the laughter from which erotic love arises – blurring the line.

Only through blurring the line can 'a new being' be born into the world.

In order to bring about a child, they had to learn how to laugh ...

And to do so, perhaps they had to don masks, play the role of brother and sister for Pharaoh, until, slowly, as a result of play, laughter was aroused in them anew ... Gradually their laughter gained momentum, enabling them to form an image of themselves, until a time when the laughter joined them as a full partner in their encounter with the angels, that same encounter conveying the news of their son's birth.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

To laugh is to confront the pressures of necessity on one's individual destiny and one's infinite desires.

...

The mouth filled with laughter ... is an image representing the end of days, the overcoming of separateness and closure. In this world, it remains a possibility that constantly destroys itself.

Rachel Adelman

Laughing out loud is shared and therefore expansive and joyful. Yet why is Sarah's laughter turned against herself? Precisely because she is excluded from a direct relationship with God. Her laughter, symptomatic of lack of faith, reverberates with protest.

...

Initially her laugh is private, *bekirbah*, inward-bound. But after she conceives, her laughter is transformed into a great breathy howl in which we are invited to join, a contagion of joy that spreads at the feast of Isaac's weaning.