

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Laughter

- There was once a man, a non Jew, named Lewis who was going through a bunch of struggles in life. He was struggling with his parnassah, his shalom bayis, and everything seemed to be going wrong for him. Visibly upset, he went to the park to the park to sit on a bench after feeling complete despair. He put his head in his hands and started to cry. Suddenly, a jogger who was running around the park noticed this man crying and went to sit next to him comfort him. “Everything ok?” asked the jogger. “Actually its not,” Lewis responded. “I just lost my job, my wife and kids don’t respect me at all, and my life seems to be falling apart.”

The jogger proceeded to talk to Lewis. He asked him about what work he had done in the past and the man replied that he was involved in certain types of investments and certain things just didn't go his way. After a while of talking, the jogger told Lewis that he was really surprised that he wasn't doing well financially. He told him how he seemed to be a very wise business man who really has a lot of potential.

“You may not recognize me,” said the jogger. “But my name is Warren Buffet. Listen , I'm going to write you a check for one million dollars.” The jogger took out his checkbook, wrote a check for one million dollars, and gave it to the man. “I'm giving you this check and in exactly one year from today your going to pay me back this money. I'm not worried at all about losing my money, because I have faith in you.”

Overjoyed and shocked, Lewis ran to his home and sat in his desk. With renewed confidence he picked up the phone and started to make business deals. He makes more phone calls and makes more deals, and so on so forth. After 12 months Lewis made 7 million dollars and got his life back together. He couldn't believe his fortune. He opened the draw to his desk and pulled out that one-million-dollar check that he was too scared to check, of course.

He went back to that same park, that same bench he sat at 12 months ago, getting ready to give back the check Warren Buffet had given him. We'll come back to this story in just a bit.

- The concept of laughter seems to pervade the end of this week's parsha and the beginning of next week's. In this week's parsha Hashem informs Avraham that he will finally have a child of his own with Sarah. After hearing this news, the Torah describes Avraham's reaction:

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבִּי הֲיִלְבֵן הַלְבָּן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-שָׂרָה הִבְתִּתְשָׁעִים שָׁנָה יִלְד׃

“Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed (vayitzchak), as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"

- Avraham's reaction to this incredible and miraculous news is interesting. The Torah describes Avraham as **laughing**, a reaction we don't find too often in all of Tanach. (In fact, most of the time when this word “צ-ח-ק” or its corollary “ש-ח-ק” is used, it is used to connote terrible sins such as idolatry, adultery, and murder!)
- This peculiar reaction is made more intriguing by the fact that the next pasuk tells us that Hashem actually informs Avraham that he should name his son **Yitzchak, and he shall laugh**.
- To make matters more strange, the concept of laughing does not end there. In the beginning of next week's parsha the three angels visit Avraham and Sarah's tent and inform them that in a year from now they will have a child. Upon hearing this news the Torah tells us:

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִיתִי הֲיִתְהַלֵּי עִדְנָה וְאֲדַנִּי זָקֵן׃
“And Sarah laughed (vatitzchak) to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?"

- Again, we encounter the concept of **laughing**. It seems to be the essential theme of the entire birth of Yitzchak. However, despite the same terminology used in both Avraham's and Sarah's reaction to having a child at such an old age, Chazal seemingly interpret them very differently. Rashi, quoting Onkelos, says that Avraham's laughter was a result of his

overwhelming joy to the great news. It was the appropriate response. On the other hand, however, Sarah's laughter was done out of scorn and disbelief. Essentially, according to this approach she was doubting the veracity of this promise. She did not believe it would actually happen. Her response was really a mocking laughter.

- Support for this approach can be found in the continuation of the story. The Torah tells us:

“Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too wondrous for the LORD?..Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But He replied, “You did laugh.”

Hashem's questioning of Sarah's laughter while not questioning Avraham's laughter, and Sarah's denial of her laughter, indicates that there was a difference between their responses. While Avraham's laughter was a result of joy and happiness, Sarah's was done out of mockery and derision.

- However, upon further analysis it appears that there are a number of difficulties with this approach.
 - One, a textual problem. It is difficult to understand how the same word and response to the same news can be interpreted so radically different from each other.
 - Two, If it is really true that Sarah sinned by laughing, why did Hashem ask Avraham why she laughed? Previously in the Torah we have seen that whenever someone sins Hashem addresses them directly in order to give them a chance to do Teshuva. We find this by Adam HaRishon where Hashem asks him “איכה”, and by קיו where Hashem asks him “איה הבל אחיך”. Seemingly Hashem should have addressed Sarah directly like He did in the past! And we can't say that she was not worthy of being spoken to by Hashem because Chazal teach us that Sarah was on a higher level of prophecy than Avraham was!
 - Three, there is a medrash that says that Avraham actually did sin by laughing but the reason he is not criticized in the Torah is because he

could have figured out his mistake on his own. According to the standard approach, Avraham is actually praised for his laughter and certainly not criticized!¹ How does this fit with this medrash?

○

- In order to answer these questions we need to ask a more fundamental and basic question: Why was it a shock to Sarah when she heard this news? Did Avraham not tell her what Hashem had promised him about having a child? Wouldn't this have been something that is worthy of discussing with your 90 year old wife who will soon give birth to a child?
- Rav Yosef Yehuda Leib Sorotzkin answers this question by suggesting something very simple but yet very profound. Sarah was shocked at the news because **Avraham indeed never told her she would have a baby!** And the reason is, because Avraham didn't have faith that Sarah would believe the message. He was afraid she would scoff at it and show lack in a emunah in Hashem.²
- With this understanding in mind, I would like to suggest a new way to understand the story of Avraham and Sarah and their different laughs. We mentioned before that the medrash states that Avraham in fact did sin in this story. However, we also saw how Chazal state that Avraham's laughter was done out of pure joy and not out of derision. I think both statements of Chazal can be true. Avraham did not sin by laughing....he sinned by not believing in Sarah enough to tell her the news of her upcoming childbirth.

¹ מפני מה מיחה הכתוב בשרה ולא מיחה באברהם, שנאמר "ויפל אברהם על פניו ויצחק?" אלא ללמדך ששנים שעשו דבר שלא כהוגן והיה אחד מהם גדול ואחד קטן ואין ממחין אלא בקטן והגדול מרגיש מאליו. (מדרש הגדול יז:ז)

² <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=51116&st=&pgnum=91&hilite=>

- It is not likely that this lack of faith in Sarah came out of nowhere. In all likelihood it was a result of latent feelings of a lack of confidence in Sarah. Far be it for us to criticize Avraham Avinu for we cannot even fathom his greatness and closeness to Hashem. However, on his own level, it seems that Avraham should have had more faith in Sarah that she would greet this message with joy and not with mockery.

- But wasn't Avraham correct? Don't Chazal teach us that Sarah did in fact scoff at the news of her impending childbirth? If so, what was his sin?

The answer to this is that it's true Sarah did not respond appropriately, but perhaps that was only a result of Avraham's self-fulfilling prophecy of how she would react to the news.

- Perhaps Avraham's underlying lack of faith in Sarah is what caused Sarah to act with a lack of faith in herself. Both Avraham and Sarah laughed to the same exact news, however Avraham's was done out of faith while Sarah's was done out of doubt-because she herself was treated as someone worthy of having doubts.
- This approach can answer the question we asked before. The reason Hashem asked Avraham why Sarah laughed instead of asking her Himself is because Hashem was reprimanding Avraham for his sin of lacking faith in Sarah. He was asking, "why did Sarah laugh now? Did you not tell her the news in advance because you lacked faith in her?"³

³ For a similar approach to the story see <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/take-my-son-please>

- We see from this story of Avraham and Sarah that the way you treat someone can have a major impact on their life. When someone is treated as someone who lacks faith, that person will in turn feel as if they are lacking faith and ultimately live a life with a lack of faith. But the opposite is also true. When we instill a sense of confidence in others, that person will feel and act the way he is treated and will then succeed.
- In a famous psychology experiment, teachers were given a class full of students. The researchers randomly chose certain children from the class and informed the teachers that these students were the “gifted” children. Throughout the year the teachers taught their classes and their students’ work were evaluated at the end of the year. Surprisingly, the researchers found that the students who were thought to be “gifted” actually performed much better on the exams than the “non-gifted” children. In reality, however, these children were not especially gifted. The reason they did better on their exams was because their teachers treated them as gifted. When given confidence, a person can accomplish way more than expected.⁴
- Along these lines, Viktor Frankel once said that “if you take man for what he is then you make him worse. If you take man for what he could be then you make him into what he can be.”⁵
- Let us return to the story we began with. After 12 months Lewis returned to that park bench with his head held high to give back the check to Warren Buffet. Warren approached him with a smile on his face and Lewis returned him the check. Warren asked him how the past year was and Lewis

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pygmalion_effect

⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/viktor_frankl_youth_in_search_of_meaning

responds, “Incredible! I made 7 million bucks!.” Warren Buffet then shakes Lewis’s hand and continues on his jog.

- Afterwards, a group of people who were at the park and witnessed this encounter approached Lewis and asked him, “Do you know that guy?” “Yeah,” responded Lewis. “That’s Warren Buffet.” They responded back, “That’s not Warren Buffet! You see that old-age home over there? That man lives there and takes a jog every single day at this time. Wait, let me guess- did you also fall for that trick by accepting his fake check made out for a one million dollars? He does that to everyone!”
- To Lewis it didn’t matter that the jogger was not actually Warren Buffet. What mattered is that someone gave him a sense of confidence and, in turn, he lived his life as a person who has faith in themselves. We learn from this week’s parsha that that one word of confidence to someone, one compliment, one expression of faith in someone, can propel them to new heights. Let us take this message to heart and have faith in others so that we can make man not what he is, but what he could be.