

PARSHAS VAYERA: LAUGHTER AND HAPPINESS

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

Our Torah places great significance on the names given to children. It is therefore appropriate that we examine the background of the names that were given to our great leaders.

In the case of Yitzchak, however, the origin of his name seems to elude a simple explanation. It is not that we do not have pointers from our Torah as to the reasons given for selecting the name Yitzchak. Quite to the contrary, there seems to be too much information.

At first glance, things seem to be rather straightforward. In last week's parsha, (Bereshis 17:19), Hashem gave Avraham a direct command to give the name Yitzchak to the son that he would eventually have together with Sara. That would seem to close the case on this name. Not so simple, though.

Rashi attributes the reason for the name to the response of Avraham - VaYitzchok (Bereshis 17:17), generally translated as laughter - when Hashem informed him that he and Sara would have a son despite the fact that they were so advanced in years (100 and 90, respectively). Sara, in this week's parsha (Bereshis 12:12) had a similar reaction and laughed. Hashem's reaction to the laughter of the two parents is strikingly different. Sara was admonished for laughing (12:13) while Avraham was not.

The Targum Unkolus (See Rashi 17:17) offers an insight into this matter. He translates the 'VaYitzchak' of Avraham (17:17) as 'Vachadi, and he was happy (similar to the word chedvah). Sara's 'VaTizchak', (12:12) on the other hand, is translated as 'Vchaychas, and she laughed.' Two very different responses - Avraham was overjoyed and celebrated, while Sara laughed in disbelief.

Making Amends

I would like to suggest that a careful reading of the pesukim that describe the actual birth and naming of Yitzchak (Bereshis 21; 1-6) reveal a striking change in the approach of Sara. Our great Matriarch adjusted her views on this subject after she internalized the guidance of Avraham.

An initial reading of these pesukim raises a difficulty. Things seem very much out of order. Here is how they appear in the chronological order of the Torah (Perek chof alef):

- * *Pesukim alef-beis* : Describe the birth of their child
- * *Pasuk gimel* : Avraham names the child Yitzchak
- * *Pasuk dalet*: Avraham gives Yitzchak a bris milah
- * *Pasuk hey* : The Torah informs us that Avraham was one hundred years old at that time

* *Pasuk vav* : Sara says, "Tzechok asa li Elokim", Hashem has made 'laughter' for me.

Two questions arise. Firstly, if the quote of Sara in *pasuk vav* is to explain the rationale for the name Yitzchak, it should have been mentioned earlier - before *pasuk gimel*? More difficult to understand is why Sara would mention the word laughter after her previous admonition for laughing?

I would like to suggest that the order of the *pesukim* informs us of the *teshuvah* of the *tzadekes* Sara. This time (21:6), Unkelos translates the *âtzechok*' of Sara as *âchedvah*'. Happiness not laughter. Faith in Hashem, not irreverent amusement.

Perfect Balance

With this insight, things seem to be perfectly aligned. After Yitzchak was born, named, and given a *bris*; we are informed of Avraham's age. At that point the proud mother Sara is given the opportunity to recalibrate her response to this miracle - and demonstrate her Faith in Hashem's word. She states, "Hashem brought me happiness." And as Rashi notes, her happiness led to great *simcha* for many others who were in need.

With this in mind, we can understand Sara's response to the dangerous *âtzechok*' of Yishmael (21:9) a few short *pesukim* later. When Yishmael displayed the crudest form of laughter, symbolizing the three cardinal sins (see Rashi 21:9), she banished him from their home. Perhaps that is why Sara stepped in (and not Avraham) to demonstrate her understanding of the *âgolden path*' that we need to follow in our service of Hashem.

Reckless, derisive laughter removes our focus from our spiritual pursuits. Happiness, a true *simchas hachayim*, helps us serve Hashem properly and fulfill our purpose in life - *b'simcha u'vtuv levav*.

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