

Parashat Vayeira וַיִּירָא

Torah: Genesis 18:1–22:24

Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:1–37

Test Time

General Overview

A potter does not examine defective vessels, because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. What does he examine? Only the sound vessels, for he will not break them even with many blows. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, tests not the wicked but the righteous, as it says, "The Lord tries the righteous." (Bereshit Rabbah 60.2)

It is test time for Abraham. By now he has acquired a well-deserved reputation for being a man of faith. But how faithful *is* he, especially when things get really tough?

The Lord will let us know in this *parasha*. For in this *sidra* we will see the Holy One giving Abraham a battery of examinations concerning his faith. The tests are not for God to discover something about Abraham. He knows all things all of the time! The tests are designed for Abraham — to show him how much he has learned about God and in which areas he needs the greatest improvement.

This portion is also written for us, so that we can get a glimpse into the extraordinary quality and depth of Abraham's faith. After these episodes in his life, we should have no doubt why Abraham is mentioned frequently in the Bible as a man of faith.

As we examine this Torah portion, we will also learn that our tests are like our father Abraham's. They too, are custom-made for us by our loving heavenly Abba. They will teach us how to grow in our trust in the Holy One just as we observe how Abraham, the man of faith, walked through his trials.

Naturally, as in all of God's tests, there are many other things to learn besides trust. As we study some of Abraham's trials, we will look at some of these lessons as well. We will approach this *sidra* using this outline:

- I. The Announcement
- II. The Visitors
- III. The Second Lie
- IV. The Other Son
- V. The Akedah

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayera, we will focus on the section, The Announcement.

I. Test #1 — The Announcement

A. God's Sense of Humor

Even before this week's *parasha*, Abraham had an amazing knowledge of his God. This is evidenced by the different names that he used in referring to: God

(*Elohim*, אֱלֹהִים), Lord (*YHVH*, יְהוָה), The Almighty (*El Shaddai*, אֵל שַׁדַּי), and the Most High God (*El Elyon*, אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן). Each name represents a large degree of knowledge about the person and nature of God. However, the Lord was not willing to let Abraham remain even at that significant depth of knowledge.

Consequently, God had wonderful lessons planned for both Abraham and his wife. These would be lessons on God's supernatural abilities, His grace, His justice, and even His sense of humor. Let us begin this week's study by going back a bit into the previous parasha in order to see this divine sense of humor.

In 17:15–16, God revealed to Abraham that Ishmael would not be his heir. Instead, said God, "As for Sarah your wife, I will give you a son through her." Then the text simply indicates in verse 17 that Abraham fell on his face and laughed!

Some commentators see Abraham worshipping here, taking the verb *yafol* (יָפַל) in verse 17, in the sense of prostrating himself in worship. However, there is usually another word indicating that kind of falling. Instead, it seems that the most logical way of looking at *yafol* is, in its usual sense, simply "falling."

The Targum Onkelos translates the word "laugh" to mean, "laugh in the sense of joy." However, the root *ts-ch-q* (צַחֵק) can also be used in the sense of mocking someone or making fun of someone because of something ridiculous, something inconceivable.¹

Is it not possible to combine both meanings? Perhaps Abraham was laughing partially because the whole idea of his ninety-year-old wife having a child was too far fetched. Yet, at the same time, deep down inside of him, he knew that God was serious and this deep-seated assurance simply caused him to rejoice.

Let us not lose the full impact of this. Picture the one hundred year old Abraham learning that his ninety-year-old wife will have a baby. Then imagine the head of grey hair falling on the floor of his tent laughing hysterically at what the Lord told him! I think that the Lord was having a lot of fun with His aged friend. This seems especially evident since the text does not show any sense of rebuke coming from the Lord. In fact, God plays right along with this moment of divine humor and tells Abraham in so many words, "You laughed?! OK, Sarah will have a son and you shall name him 'He laughed!'" The English name Isaac, is derived from the Hebrew *yitshak* (יִצְחָק), which is from the root, meaning laughter *ts-ch-k* (צַחֵק).

To be sure, God was very serious. For, in 17:21 He tells us that Isaac will be the heir to the covenant. However, God also has an incredible sense of humor.

B. Nothing too Difficult for God

The Lord chose to use a different way of breaking the news of her upcoming pregnancy to Sarah, possibly because Sarah and Abraham may have been in two slightly different places in their spiritual lives. At least this, in essence, is what most commentators suggest.

They base their interpretations on the text in 18:10–15. Here Sarah hides herself behind the flap of her tent while she listens to the conversation her husband is having with their unusual visitors. The text says that while she was eavesdropping, she heard a bombshell: the guests said she was going to have a baby! Upon hearing this announcement, "Sarah laughed within herself!" (verse

12). The reason given for her laughter is the same one as Abraham. The thought of having a baby in their old age, after she had been post-menopausal for many years, seemed too incredulous.

However, according to some commentators, the similarity of their reactions stopped here. Verses 13–14 describe how the Lord brought Sarah's skeptical laughter to Abraham's attention. It seems that this was a rebuke. However, it was only a minor rebuke, for in verse 14 the Lord answered Sarah's laugh when He spoke great encouragement to Abraham (although it was meant for both of them) saying, "Is anything beyond the Lord?"

The full impact of this statement was felt by the next exchange of words. Sarah, still listening at the door, hears one of the visitors say to her husband, "Why did Sarah laugh?" She was completely taken back. How could anyone hear her inward laughter? This caused Sarah to be frightened. Hence, she denied her laughter.

Perhaps at this point, the Holy One caught her completely off guard — while He was in the process of teaching her a great lesson. She needed to know about the greatness of God. Abraham was in the process of learning it. God was now teaching her according to her own needs. Abraham believed God could do miracles. He just did not know to what extent. At the same time, the Lord was leading Sarah down the path of greater intimacy with Him.

It was one thing for her to hear that a miracle is about to happen, but it is quite another thing to actually see a confirming miracle in the process. In the end, both Sarah and Abraham would know in the deepest sense of the words that, indeed, nothing is too difficult for the Lord.

C. Our Example of Faith

There is one last point to make before we leave this section of the commentary. Paul draws upon this section of the Torah as an example of what it means to have faith in the Holy One. In Romans 4:18–21, he writes,

In hope against hope he believed ... without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead ... and the deadness of Sarah's womb, yet with respect to the promises of God, he did not waiver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.

According to Romans 4, Abraham trusted God to the extent which he did because of two things he knew about Him: 1) His God is the God who brings to life that which was dead and, 2) His God is the God who calls into existence that which does not exist. Abraham's situation matched exactly what he knew about his God. Sarah's womb was dead. But Abraham knew his God to be a God who brings to life that which is dead. Therefore, believing that God could produce life from Sarah's womb was not much of a problem for Abraham.

Moreover, Abraham's God is also a God who creates life when there was no life before. Thus, it was not problematic for Abraham to believe that God could call life into being in Sarah's womb.

Though he laughed at the improbability of it all, Abraham, nevertheless, held strongly to his trust in the God whom he knew on a very intimate level. With the birth of Isaac, Abraham also learned that this life-giving God was also a miracle-

working God. The name of “Isaac” would forever remind both of them that nothing is impossible with God. It can also remind us that we have the same God. Our role is to trust Him, but the extent to which we can trust Him will be commensurate with what we know to be true about Him.

¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 850.