

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vayeira

Sarah's Laughter

Background: A Miracle Blessing

In the beginning of our parsha, Avraham is visited by three angels, in the form of wayfarers, to whom he extends his legendary hospitality. After enjoying their meal, one of the guests informs Avraham that this time next year Sarah will have a son. Sarah, who is currently eighty-nine years old and never had children, overhears this blessing. Verse twelve describes her reaction:

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֲיִתֶּה לִּי עֵדָנָה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן

Sarah laughed inside saying, "After having become withered will I then become young? And (besides,) my husband (too) is old!"

Sarah's laughter is met with rebuke from Hashem, as stated in the following verse:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צָחַקָה שָׂרָה ... הֲיִפְלֵא מִה' דָּבָר

Hashem said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?... Is anything beyond Hashem?"

This situation, which is already somewhat uncomfortable, becomes infinitely more so in the verse which follows:

וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי יִרְאַהּ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צָחַקְתְּ

Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He (Hashem) said "No, for you did laugh."

Amazingly, the Torah leaves it at that, immediately moving on to other matters, leaving us confounded and perplexed. How could Sarah, upon being confronted by Hashem over her laughter, hope to deny it out of fear?

Understanding Sarah

To understand this situation, we need to return to Sarah's laughter itself. Here, too, we ask, how could she laugh in incredulity upon receiving a blessing from an angel? In this matter, however, we are failing to see things from Sarah's perspective. We are aware that the guest who issued the blessing was, in fact, an angel. Avraham and Sarah, however, are not. As far as they know, these are three random strangers who have been wondering around in the mid-day sun, probably for a little too long!¹ When one enjoys hospitality in a stranger's home, it is customary to express one's appreciation to the hostess, to which end a simple "thank you" tends to suffice. It is **not** customary to inform the hostess that she will have a son next year by which time she will be ninety years old! Looked at in this light, we can well understand Sarah's reaction – for who *wouldn't* laugh in such a situation?

The Ramban explains that the reason Sarah was nonetheless rebuked for her laughter was that, regardless of who says it will happen, someone on Sarah's spiritual level can never reject *the possibility itself* that she may yet have a child. This is the *madreigah* of the *Avos* and *Imahos*!

Blessing, Laughter – and Divine Intervention

What form did Sarah's laughter take? The simple reading of the word "בקרבה – inside of her" indicates that Sarah did not express her thoughts verbally. Indeed, this understanding is corroborated by the fact that the rebuke for this laughter

¹ One of the first things Avraham does upon approaching his guests is to request that they wash their feet. Rashi explains that Avraham suspected them of being idolaters who bow down to the dust on their feet, and did not wish for items of idolatry to enter his home. We may ask: How prevalent was dust-worship at that time that this should be a standing concern for Avraham? Moreover, even within the misguided world-view of idolatry, how does the concept of dust-worship even exist? Idolatry tends to isolate things that are powerful and ascribe to them independent power. Nothing reflects insignificance more than dust. How would even an idolater subscribe to such a practice?

The Shelah Hakadosh that, in fact, no-one worships dust. If someone bows down to dust is because he worships the sun – for dust represent the power of the sun, which beats down on things, crumbling them and reducing them to dust. Thus, we understand that Avraham actually suspected that these men were sun-worshippers. Should we then proceed to ask why he would specifically suspect them of worshipping the sun, we need only to remind ourselves of what the weather was like on that day. We are informed that, in order not to trouble Avraham with guests while he was recovering from his milah, Hashem made it so hot that no normal person would be out of doors. Avraham, however persisted in looking for guests, at which point Hashem sent him the three angels in the guise of men. This is why Avraham, who thought they were people, naturally assumed that they were sun-worshippers, for the only people who would venture outdoors on a day like this would be those who were celebrating the hottest day in history!

came from Hashem Himself, as the verse states, “Hashem said to Avraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh etc.?’” Let us remind ourselves, Avraham had taken leave of Hashem in order to tend to his three guests, and the entire conversation had been conducted between them, including the blessing that Sarah would have a child. Why does Hashem have to enter the conversation at this stage to rebuke Sarah? Is this, too, not something that the angel could have done? However, once we realize that Sarah’s laughter took place solely in the realm of thought, we understand that the angel could not have responded to it, for angels to not know what a person is thinking. That knowledge is restricted to Hashem alone, as the verse states in Tehillim,² “ה' יֵדַע מִחְשְׁבוֹת אָדָם – Hashem knows man’s thoughts,” implying that this is something only Hashem knows, not even an angel.

A Tosafos that Thickens the Plot

However, this matter becomes somewhat more intriguing when we consider a most interesting comment of Tosafos. The Gemara³ states that an individual should not pray in Aramaic, since the angel who are involved in conveying his prayers do not relate to that language. Tosafos⁴ ask: why do angels not relate to Aramaic? It cannot be because they do not understand Aramaic, for angels even know what a person is thinking!

Tosafos clearly are of the understanding that angels, too, know a person’s thoughts. In terms of our discussion, we now have the following two questions:

1. If an angels knows a person’s thoughts, the question returns as to why it was necessary for Hashem to intervene regarding Sarah’s laughter.
2. Tosafos’ position seems to be directly contradicted by the verse quoted from Tehillim, which implies that only Hashem knows a person’s thoughts!

When Thoughts are Hevel

One of the great Sefardi commentators, R’ Moshe Chagiz,⁵ explains Tosafos’ position in the following way. Every thought actually begins as a feeling, which then becomes developed and formulated into a finished thought. This transition

² 94:11.

³ *Shabbos* 12b.

⁴ *Ibid.* s.v. *she’ain*. See Commentary of Vilna Gaon to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 101 sec. 12 for a discussion of the source of Tosafos’ position.

⁵ *Mishnas Chachamim* sec. 92, cited by R’ David Pardo in his commentary on Rashi, *Maskil Le’David* (to verse 2), who, in turn, is cited by R’ Akiva Eiger in his glosses to Maseches Shabbos loc cit.

generally happens very rapidly, although sometimes it occurs quite slowly. For example, sometimes there is something about a situation which bothers us but we cannot immediately put our finger on it and say what it is. After pondering the matter, we can hopefully identify what the problem was, formulating the feeling into a thought.

With this in mind, R' Chagiz takes us back to the verse in Tehillim which states: "ה' יֵדַע מִחְשְׁבוֹת אָדָם כִּי הֵמָּה הַבָּל." The standard translation of this verse is based on the understanding of the word "הבל" as "vanity", thus reading "Hashem knows the thoughts of man, for they are vanity." However, the word "הבל" has another meaning, that of something which is formless and lacking in substance. Additionally, the word "כי", as we know, has number of meanings. It can mean "for", but it also means "when". This brings us to the difference between Hashem's knowledge of a person's thoughts and an angel's knowledge. Even an angel only knows a person's thought when it actually attains the status of a formulated thought. As long as the person himself is not aware of what he is thinking, an angel cannot know either. Hashem, however, knows the person's thought even at the initial primordial stage when it has no form and is nothing more than a feeling. This, then is the meaning of the verse. It is not to be translated as:

- "Hashem knows man's thoughts *for they are vanity*," but rather,
- "Hashem knows man's thoughts *when they are (still) formless*"!

Wow!

Between "The Heart" and "The Inside"

Now let us return once more to Sarah's laughter which, we established, took place in the realm of thought, and ask: *What* realm of thought?

Throughout the Torah, when the verse presents a person's thoughts, it describes him as "speaking in his heart,"⁶ for the heart is the realm of formulated thought. When it comes to Sarah's laughter, however, the Torah does not say that "she laughed in her heart (בלבה)", rather, she laughed *in her inside* (בקרבה)! What this means is that Sarah's laughter took place entire within her inside, never rising to the level of a formulated thought. Indeed, it is very easy to understand why

⁶ See e.g. Bereishis 17:17 and 27:41.

this was so. Since she did not take the “guest’s” blessing seriously, she did not invest any significant thought to how impossible its fulfillment would be. Rather, it was a fleeting and formless laugh whose contents Sarah herself did not develop, even internally. In terms of our discussion, Sarah laughter never went past the *hevel* stage. This is why, even according to Tosafos, Hashem had to intervene and enter the conversation, for even the angels were not aware of what Sarah had thought. In fact, what is fascinating to consider is that, from a certain point of view – neither was Sarah!

Fear and Denial

This brings us to the question of Sarah’s denial of her having laughed. Often, it is possible to “revisit” a feeling that one had earlier which was not developed at the time, and to access its contents in hindsight. However, this requires peace of mind, and cannot happen if a person is in a state of constricted consciousness. This is what lay behind Sarah’s denial of her laughter, which the verse explains was “Because she was afraid.” The meaning is not that she consciously denied having laughed because she was afraid to admit it, but rather that she was *unable to recognize* that she laughed since she was in a state of fear!⁷ In this light, when Hashem then said, “No, for you laughed,” it was not in the form of admonition, but of information.

Reinstating the Blessing

It remains for us to ponder the purpose of Hashem’s intervention. We may ask, if it was purely in order to rebuke Sarah, why did He not rebuke her directly, choosing to do so rather through speaking to Avraham?⁸ After all, Sarah was also a prophetess! Additionally, why was it necessary to conclude by restating the blessing that they would have a child, something which had already been said earlier and heard by both Avraham and Sarah?

It seems the answer is that in order for the miracle of Avraham and Sarah having a child to occur, it required their complete belief that this was possible. Once Sarah registered a sliver of disbelief, even on the most subliminal of levels, this had the effect of frustrating and even negating the blessing. Therefore, Hashem appraised them of this situation, and then proceeded to restate the blessing for purposes of

⁷ R’ Shimon Schwab, *Maayan Beis Hashoeva*.

⁸ As is well-known, by rebuking Sarah through speaking to Avraham, Hashem was then “required” to change her words from saying “my husband is old” to “I (Sarah) am old,” for purposes of maintaining harmony between them (*Yevamos* 65b); something which would not have been necessary had He rebuked her directly.

reinstating it! All this was done through addressing Avraham, as had been done with the original blessing.