

Laughter in the Isaac Narrative: Who Has the Last Laugh?

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Abstract— This article tackles the question of the nature of Sarah’s laughter. It argues that it is imperative to go beyond labeling the laughter as either incredulous or joyous, as it is a reductive approach. The nuanced approach of this paper appreciates the “both and-ness” of the laughter demonstrating its larger significance in the Genesis narrative.

Introduction

One would not expect the word *tzchok* (laughter) to be intimately linked to the story of one of the forefathers in the Bible. This verb appears 13 times in the entire *Tanakh*; 11 of those appear in the early chapters of Genesis. The stories of the patriarchs are often construed as serious, building the covenantal future of the Jewish people. Where is there room for laughter and joy? Moreover, it is especially surprising that the first time laughter is mentioned in the Bible is in a scenario that does not seem fitting for laughter. Sarah and Abraham are old, and although promised by God multiple times that they will have a child to continue the covenantal destiny, throughout much of their adult lives they remain childless. Without a child, the abundance of promises that God promised Abraham are unfulfilled, since there would be no one to continue and build the legacy.¹

The story of the birth of Isaac transpires over the course of three chapters, Genesis 17, 18, and 21. In each of these, Abraham and Sarah laugh as they receive the divine news that they will give birth to a child. What sparks laughter as a reaction? What is the nature of the laughter? Many commentators have tried to categorize the laughter as either meritorious or dishonorable- a reflection of belief and joy or distrust and a lack of faith. However, in these attempts “to fix its meaning, the laughter eludes its

¹ Abraham had another son named Ishmael through the maidservant of his wife Sarah. Although Ishmael was the oldest son, as we will discuss further, God does not view him as a legitimate covenantal heir.

commentators.”² The closer one got to defining the laughter, the more questions arose, cementing the laughter as a mystery and ineffable.

This paper will focus on teasing out the significance of the laughter that reverberates throughout these chapters, but will refrain from placing the laughter on the positive/negative binary. Rather, it will build on Catherine Conybeare’s method that embraces the capaciousness of the laughter as one that holds a lot of tension, and can be many things at once. I will therefore argue that the laughter cannot be reduced solely to a reaction, but rather is a generative force that jolts Abraham and Sarah out of a state of tension and strife in their relationship, and ultimately reunites them towards a shared partnership in the covenantal legacy. Isaac’s name therefore serves an eternal reminder of the transformative power of laughter, one that I consider necessary within the larger covenantal framework.

Genesis 17: Abraham’s Laughter

Although the birth of Isaac is ambiguously promised first in Genesis 15, he is specifically named for the first time in Genesis 17. In Genesis 17, God changes Abraham and Sarah’s names, renews the covenant with Abraham through commanding circumcision, as well as once again, promises Abraham that a child would be born through Sarah, “I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”³

In this narrative, it seems that God is attempting to restore the relationship between Sarah and Abraham, God changes both of their names, and specifically mentions that He will bless Sarah, which elevates her status. In a sense, God is almost marrying them anew and preparing them for the birth of their covenantal heir.⁴

Yet, instead of Abraham accepting this blessing, Abraham reacts in a manner that is profoundly shocking. “Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart: ‘Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?’ And Abraham said unto God: ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!’”⁵

² Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory and the Concept of Delight*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 23.

³ Genesis 17:16. In the original Hebrew ” וברכתיה ונתתה לגוים, וגם נתתי ממנה לה בן; וברכתיה ונתתה לגוים, ”מלכי עמים ממנה יהיו

⁴ Yair Lorberbaum, “Yitshak and God’s Separation Anxiety,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 21 (2013): 112.

⁵ Genesis 17:17-18.

יז ויפל אברהם על-פניו, ויצחק; ויאמר בלבו, הלא בן מאה-שנה יולד, ואם-שָׂרָה, הבת-תשעים שנה תלד. יח ויאמר אברהם, אל-האלהים: לו ישמעאל, יהיה לפניך

The problematic reaction to God's blessing can be distilled into two separate issues. The first is the laughter, and the second is Abraham's rejection of God's plan to have the child through Sarah and his offering that Ishmael can continue the covenant. I will first deal with the latter issue. The mention of Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar, here is wholly problematic as it highlights the sense of distance between Sarah and Abraham.⁶ While throughout the entirety of Genesis 17 God encourages Abraham to open his eyes and include Sarah in their joint project to form the nation, through mentioning Ishmael's name as one who "could live by your favor," (seemingly in place of Isaac), Abraham underscores his belief that Sarah perhaps does not need to play a part.

Moreover, there is a significant word play in Abraham's request. Abraham asks, "לֹא יִשְׁמַע אֵל יְהוָה לְפָנָיִךְ." The word "לְפָנָיִךְ" is especially charged as the word shares a root with the word from the first verse of the chapter, in which God commands Abraham to "walk before ("לְפָנַי") Me, and be thou wholehearted.⁷ When Abraham mentions "לְפָנָיִךְ" instead of him following in the command to walk before God,⁸

Why does Abraham laugh here? Why is this the reaction? The laughter seems to be ambiguous. It is all the more strange that Abraham's laughter seems to reflect a lack of certainty about the future of the legacy he was promised, and yet God does not react to Abraham's laughter-there is neither punishment nor rebuke.

Instead, God reacts through doubling down on His promise of a child and for the first time, specifies that this hypothetical child will be named Isaac: "But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."⁹

Therefore, it is God who first makes the decision to embed laughter in Isaac's name, who will forever bear the imagery of laughter.¹⁰ Perhaps this could be read as the reaction to Abraham's laughter. The irony in naming the child Isaac subverts Abraham's wish for Ishmael to "walk before God," since Abraham's laughter ("וַיִּצְחַק") unintentionally and subtly confirms Isaac's existence. Moreover, God re-establishes Sarah's role, emphasizing that the covenantal heir will come from her, not Hagar, mother of Ishmael. In the first instance of laughter, it makes itself paradoxically both profoundly known, as well as subtly reshifts Abraham's internal conception of the dynamic between him, Sarah, and God.

⁶ Lorenbaum, "Yitshak and God's Separation Anxiety," 111.

⁷ Genesis 17:1.

⁸ It is also worth considering that in a patriarchal society, there would have been no need for Sarah as a partner in the covenant, since there was an eldest child, who theoretically was a fit inheritor. We will later see how this story reframes that broad, societal expectation as well.

⁹ Genesis 17:21. In the Hebrew, "וְאֵת-בְּרִיתִי, אֶקִים אֶת-יִצְחָק, אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה, בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֶרֶת"

¹⁰ Marcos Paseggi, "He Who Laughs Last: Some Notes on Laughter in Isaac's Birth Story," *Davar Logos* 5, no.1 (2006), 63.

Through God's decision to name Isaac, He takes away the naming power from Abraham and Sarah, thereby severing the intimate connection between parents and their child in the through naming that is described frequently in the Bible.¹¹ In the Bible, giving the *midrash shem*, the special reasoning behind the significance of the name, is an incredibly important event. This is especially true since in the Bible, "the name is the soul."¹² We will explore more about the significance of the name Isaac throughout the birth narrative, but for now it is important to broadly note that names are given for a specific reason, and they serve as a window into the essence of the person who bears that name.¹³

Broadly speaking, in Genesis 17, Abraham's laughter is tinged with complexity and tension surrounding the unknown future of the covenant. His laughter reflects a lack of certainty, and God's divine intervention to confirm Isaac's legacy through subliminal messaging further emphasizes this. The first definitive naming of Isaac is couched in God's need to reroute Abraham through laughter, since he shifts his focus away from Sarah and Isaac.

Genesis 18: Sarah's Laughter

Following God's command to Abraham to circumcise himself at the conclusion of Genesis 17, God sends messengers to Abraham at the beginning of Genesis 18. Although Abraham does not realize this from the outset, these three messengers are indeed angels of God. The messengers request to know where Sarah is, and Abraham responds "There, in the tent."¹⁴

In setting the scene that leads to Sarah's laughter, there are a number of subtle hints that further ground Sarah's eventual laughter in the tension and uncertainty of the relationship between Abraham and Sarah. Sarah is "in the tent," she is not privy to a direct encounter with God's messengers like her husband. From the start of this encounter, there is a disconnect and uneven playing field between them. Furthermore, the messengers use the word

¹¹ See, for example, Genesis 29: 32-34 (Leah naming four of her children), Exodus 2:10 (The daughter of Pharaoh naming Moses) I Samuel 1:20 (Hannah naming Samuel)

¹² B. Porten, "Names in Israel," *Encyclopedia Biblica* 8, (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1982), 35.

¹³ It is also fascinating to consider Abraham's other son's name, Ishmael, which perhaps as a literary foil that can further clarify the significance of Isaac's name. In Genesis 16, when Hagar (Sarah's maidservant) is pregnant with her eventual son, an angel appears to her. Hagar is in distress on the account of her mistreatment by Sarah. The angel informs her that she will name her son Ishmael, since *שמע יהוה אל-ענינה*. The motif of hearing becomes central in the Ishmael narrative, specifically, hearing in a context of suffering or pain. It is therefore interesting to place the naming of Isaac and Ishmael in conversation as a foil. The covenantal heir is seemingly named out of a process that ultimately leads to joy/transformation, while Ishmael, the son who is pushed out of the covenant is named for continual suffering.

¹⁴ Genesis 18:9. In the Hebrew, "הֲנִיָּה בְּאֵתֵּל"

“אַיִה” to inquire where Sarah is at the moment. *Why would angels need to ask after Sarah’s whereabouts? Should they not already know with their divine knowledge where she is located?*

The question, and therefore the use of this word, is no coincidence, as the only other times this word is used is in the context of God’s intervention in the stories of Adam and Eve after they sinned in the Garden and Cain after he murders his brother, Abel. God asks a hiding and guilty Adam, “Where are you?” (“אַיִהָ”) ¹⁵ and to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” (“אַי הָבֵל אֶחָיִךְ?”) ¹⁶.

God does not mean the question literally, but rather attempts to get the figure to understand what they have done wrong and to eventually confess. ¹⁷ However, each of the figures takes the question at face value, only answering the question straightforwardly. Adam answers “in the garden” (“בְּגַן”) ¹⁸ and Cain retorts, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (“לֹא יָדַעְתִּי, הַשֹּׁמֵר אֶחָי אֲנִכִּי?”) ¹⁹. scene-Abraham’s answer parallels this type. Further, there is a play on point of view as the audience knows that this question is rhetorical and not expecting an answer. He is unaware of the fact that God is prompting him to consider his relationship with Sarah, perhaps the balance and cooperation that is off-kilter is in need of a reset. ²⁰

The messengers then turn to the matter at hand, and announce Isaac’s birth, with Sarah overhearing the conversation from her place in the tent. The narrative then turns to a deeper exploration of Sarah’s laughter, and God’s reaction to it. The text states:

“Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sara had stopped having her periods. And Sarah laughed (“וַתִּצְחַק”) to herself, saying, “Now that I’ve lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” Then יהוה said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh (“וַתִּצְחַק אָמַר יְהוָה”) saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too wondrous for God? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” (“וַתִּצְחַק אָמַר יְהוָה”) for she was frightened. Came the reply, “You did laugh” (“וַתִּצְחַק אָמַר יְהוָה”).” ²¹

¹⁵ Genesis 3:9.

¹⁶ Genesis 4:9

¹⁷ Eitan Mayer, “No News is Bad News: Beneath the Surface of Genesis 18,” *Tradition* 53, no. 4 (Fall, 2021):108.

¹⁸ Genesis 3:10

¹⁹ Genesis 4:9

²⁰ To take this parallel one step further, it is interesting to point out that all the characters who get the question of *ayeka* all have relationships in their lives that are broken or in need of repair. Adam blames his wife, Eve, instead of taking responsibility, and Cain murders his brother. This perhaps further emphasizes to the reader the state of Abraham and Sarah’s relationship.

²¹ Genesis 18:11-15.

There are a number of ambiguous aspects to the *peshat* of the text that must be adressed. *What is the nature of Sarah's laughter here? Why laughter as a reaction? Moreover, if God explicitly promised Isaac to Abraham just one chapter ago, why does it seem that Sarah remains unaware of this development?*

Before even exploring the significance of Sarah's laughter, it is important to recognize the repeated emphasis on the word "laughter" in the verses cited above. In the span of just five verses, laughter is mentioned four times in quick succession. The narrative is subtly drawing our attention to the central motif through this *leitwort*. The irony of the laughter in Genesis 17 persists in this chapter as well with the "subtle literary fashioning of this chapter announcing the name without stating it explicitly."²² Once again, the laughter is simultaneously prominent and also plays a more subtle role.

There is fierce debate surrounding the precise nature of the laughter. The overwhelming majority of the opinions, both modern as well as classical, can be placed on either side of a binary between positive and negative; either, the laughter is celebratory of Sarah's miraculous birth and reflects joy and happiness towards God for bestowing her with this eventual miracle; or, the laughter is interpreted as internal and incredulous, lacking belief in God, and mocking of her own self- both in terms of her physical and emotional weariness. But this seemingly logical binary creates a fundamental tension in interpreting the laughter. *If the laughter is celebratory and joyful, then why does God rebuke Sarah? If the laughter is then incredulous and mocking, why would God choose to name Isaac this as his everlasting legacy?*

Therefore, my own analysis will not pin down Sarah's laughter on either side of the spectrum, rather, I wish to demonstrate the significance behind Sarah laughter as a means to highlight the staging of laughter as a way to transform the tensions in Sarah and Abraham's relationship.

In the Isaac birth narrative, the reader is twice privileged to gain insight into the internal reaction of both Abraham and Sarah, a viewpoint that most readers are not usually privy to in other Biblical narratives. Therefore, the anomaly of why this viewpoint is made available needs to be explored further. In both the case of Abraham and Sarah when they hear the news that they will have a child, their internal reaction is exactly the same; they both laugh. This unity in their reaction is stark, perhaps even ironic, against the building tension within their relationship. The only part of their relationship that is in sync is the laughter.²³ The laughter is positioned as a hint to prompt them to realize something they are otherwise missing in their

²² Lorenbaum, "Yitshak and God's Separation Anxiety," 121.

²³ Kristine Gift, "Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy: An Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-15," In *MUJR*. Monmouth: Monmouth Coe College Press, (2012): 101.

relationship, something they are clearly incapable of coming to on their own.

Therefore, the laughter demands a more extensive treatment than just an interpretation of whether it is positive or negative. The laughter clearly is significant in ways that uniquely link it to the reworkings and refashioning of their relationship as they move closer to achieving their covenantal destiny through giving birth to Isaac. Limiting its meaning to either celebratory of the miracle or incredulous and distrusting of God mitigates the scope of impact of the laughter, and why it is so central to this narrative.

In this vein, we then must ask two questions— (I) what is God trying to get them to understand, and (II) why specifically through the mode of laughter? As mentioned previously, the relationship between Sarah and Abraham is fraught at this juncture with anxieties abounding regarding the future of the covenantal legacy. Through their ironic shared reaction, God is attempting to at a basic level get them to see above their current predicament and consider the ways they are in fact united. In each of the reactions of laughter, both Sarah and Abraham point to their spouses' old age as making the idea of having a child seem ludicrous.²⁴ In this challenging moment, God redirects their negative focus towards a positive context of a united covenantal relationship. Although the laughter can be interpreted as a rejection of the divine promise, in reality it subtly confirms the promise that together they will be responsible for the future of the covenant.

With this understanding of the message God sends to Sarah and Abraham through their laughter, the notion of why laughter was chosen as the divine vehicle of this idea can now be explored more fully.

In French Philosopher Henri Bergson's book, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, he demonstrates how laughter jolts humans from their staticness and conformity, namely through highlighting the absurdity of routine behavior. Humor therefore becomes a way to free individuals from the limitations and strictures of society.²⁵ This theory highlights the specific reason why humor and laughter are so central to this narrative. Moreover, it is useful in pinpointing the precise work of the laughter for Abraham and Sarah. Laughter has a generative power to shake up the status quo of Abraham and Sarah and encourage them to see beyond the normal constraints of their relationship. The laughter is not just a reaction, but is transformative and potent. It is effectively a way for God to encourage them to understand what is really going on in their relationship and reconsecrate it, a message they failed to understand earlier in Genesis 17 when God renames Abraham and Sarah in hopes of marrying them anew and resetting the relationship. As will be demonstrated in the next section, it is only the

²⁴ Ibid., 102.

²⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (London: Macmillan, 1990).

laughter that God brings, that comes from within, that has the power to accomplish this feat.

Genesis 21: The Last Laugh

The miracle finally comes to fruition in Genesis 21, when God remembers Sarah, and she gives birth to Isaac. The Bible states, “Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac.”²⁶ These verses form a chiasmic structure, shedding light on the new state of Abraham and Sarah’s relationship. The chiasm is structured as follows:

A: וַתֵּהָרֵם וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה
 B: בֵּן, לְזִקְנִי לְאַבְרָהָם,
 C: לְמוֹעֵד, אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר אֲתוֹ אֱלֹהִים
 B: אֶת-שְׁם-בְנוֹ הַנּוֹלֵד-לוֹ וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם
 A: יִצְחָק--אֲשֶׁר-יִלְדָה-לוֹ שָׂרָה

The chiasmic structure highlights a new perspective in their relationship. Instead of one being focused on the other in a negative way, Sarah and Abraham are acting in a joint partnership in bringing Isaac into the world, a perspective that was critically absent from Genesis 17 and 18. The chiasm further pinpoints the exact cause of this transformation: God. Without God and the bringing of laughter into their relationship, Abraham and Sarah would have remained in the same disjointed situation, unable to see the other as a worthy partner in bringing the future of the covenant to life. Genesis 21 therefore begins on a transformative note, one of covenantal unity between Abraham and Sarah.

After giving birth to Isaac, Sarah utters a small prayer of thanksgiving, saying, “Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”²⁷

Much like the laughter throughout the narrative until this point, questions abound regarding the specific nature of this proclamation of laughter. At first glance, it seems that in fulfillment of the divine promise, Sarah laughs out of joy. However, on a deeper level of analysis, there seems to be more in this short prayer than a joyful laughter. For the first time, Sarah’s laughter is outward—it has the ability to be heard by others. The laughter once again proves transformative for Sarah. With the relationship between Sarah and Abraham renewed, Sarah finally has the opportunity to

²⁶ Genesis 21:2-3.

²⁷ Genesis 21:6. In the original Hebrew, “וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צִחָק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כְּלִי-שִׂמְעָה יִצְחָק לִי”

laugh out loud. She is now able to bring the covenantal destiny to those around her, showing that this is the covenant being brought to life.

Tzechok makes its final appearance after Isaac's birth narrative concludes. After Abraham makes a feast in celebration of Isaac's weaning, the text shifts perspective to focus on Sarah: "וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בְּוֹהֶגֶר הַמִּצְרַיִת" וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בְּוֹהֶגֶר הַמִּצְרַיִת לְאִבְרָהָם מִצְחָק." Sarah demands that Abraham expel Hagar the handmaid and her son Ishmael. The obvious question is what did Sarah see that triggered her to expel them. Although the word "מִצְחָק" is vague and ambiguous, its use is no coincidence, especially immediately juxtaposed to the Isaac birth narrative. While etymologically, "מִצְחָק" could mean playing, it is unclear why that would have upset Sarah to the point where she needed to expel them. Therefore, "מִצְחָק" seems to very clearly be a word play on the name Isaac.²⁸

What Ishmael must have been doing was embodying Isaac, he was literally "Isaac-ing." Sarah recognizes the threat of Ishmael attempting to be like Isaac, and therefore, disinherit him. In response, she becomes the fierce protector of her son, and more broadly, the covenant. The laughter in the narrative comes to a close through becoming tied to the covenant, since Ishmael becomes categorically excluded from the idea of *tzechok*. The laughter, with its transformative power to set the future of the covenant back on course, is incompatible with Ishmael since he is not part of the future of the covenant

Conclusion

We can now ask: *why is Isaac named for the laughter? Why does this become his eternal legacy?* Moreover, while both other forefathers have name changes, Isaac's name remains the same for the rest of his life. In line with the analysis of laughter in the birth narrative so far, perhaps Isaac is named this as a reminder of his covenantal destiny, the ability to transform, and see beyond himself and his own problems in his continuation of the covenant. The covenant is not easy to uphold, but the laughter inherently tied to his name reminds himself that he is not living on this earth just for himself; it jolts himself out of the absurdity of the routine and strengthens himself as he continues the covenant.

This idea of laughter comes full circle in the dramatic conclusion of Genesis 26— after Abraham and Sarah have died— when Isaac and Rebecca travel to *Gerar* as a result of a famine. They dwell in *Gerar* for quite some time, and the Bible recounts that "When some time had passed, Abimelech king of the Philistines, looking out of the window, saw Isaac 'מִצְחָק' his wife Rebekah."²⁹ Laughter makes a reappearance, albeit in a

²⁸ Lorenbaum, "Yitshak and God's Separation Anxiety," 129.

²⁹ Genesis 26:8

seemingly strange situation: *why in the context of famine would Isaac make Rebecca laugh?* In spite of their difficult situation, he continues to see his wife as a partner, ratifying their relationship as one where they utilize humor and laughter to establish their equality.³⁰ Isaac's name ultimately comes to life through his embodiment of his own legacy by transforming a situation of hopelessness into an opportunity to continue the covenant through uniting him and his wife together through laughter.

³⁰ Many thanks to my dear friend, Meira Saffra (BC '24), for pointing this out to me