

# Vayaira

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They say that laughter is the best medicine. Though it is definitely not always the *best* medicine in every situation, it is certainly a good one in the right place, at the right time. Who doesn't feel healthier after a good, hearty, endorphin-stimulating laugh?

Personally, I not only enjoy a good laugh, I really enjoy causing one. There is something very gratifying in making someone else laugh, especially when the humor is clean. Crude language and rude humor are just a result of a lack of self-dignity, evidence that a person is far more body-oriented than soul-oriented. As the *Zohar* says, "You can tell the quality of a person by how they speak."

It is interesting how something seemingly as trivial as laughter should play such an important role in life, and in Jewish history. The name of our second forefather, Yitzchak, is chosen by God and based upon it. The announcement of his impending birth by God was met with laughter from his father and mother, albeit for different reasons. And later in the *parsha*, when Lot tries to warn his sons-in-law about Sdom's impending doom, the Torah says that Lot seemed more like a comedian to them (*Bereishis* 19:14). Even God is said to laugh on occasion.

When Sarah *Imeinu* explains the meaning of her long-awaited son's name, she says:

*God has made laughter for me; whoever hears will rejoice over me. (Bereishis 21:6)*

Laughter is both obvious and mysterious. It's such an integral part of life, and yet so few people understand why. They'll spend good money to have a comedian crack them up for an hour, but spend little time using laughter to get through life. That's part of the mystery.

What is even more ironic is that Yitzchak represents the concept of humor, and yet he is the least humorous of the three *Avos*. He comes off being so straight and serious, and represents the trait of *Gevurah* which seems antithetical to the kind of laid-

backness that humor seems to promote. But there is this one story that involves Yitzchak that kind of turns all of that on its head:

In the future, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will say to Avraham. “Your children have sinned against Me.” He will answer Him, “Master of the Universe! Let them be wiped out to sanctify Your Name!” He (God) will say, “I will tell this to Ya’akov who experienced the pain of rearing children, and maybe he will ask for mercy for them.” He (God) will say to him (Ya’akov), “Your children have sinned,” but he [too] will answer Him, “Master of the Universe! Let them be wiped out to sanctify Your Name!” He [God] will say, “There is no logic in old men, and no counsel in children!” So He will say to Yitzchak, “Your children have sinned against Me.” He will answer, “Master of the Universe! Are they *my* children and not *Your* children? When [receiving the Torah] they said ‘*We will do*’ before ‘*we will listen*’ before You, You called them, ‘*Yisroel my son, my firstborn.*’ And now they are *my* sons, and not *Your* sons?! Besides, how much have they [really] sinned? How many years does a person live? *Seventy*. Subtract [the first] twenty for which You do not punish a person, [and] fifty remain. Subtract twenty-five [years] for the nights, [and] twenty-five remain. Subtract twelve-and-a-half [years used] for prayer, eating, and personal needs, [and] twelve-and-a-half [years] remain [for sinning]. If You will bear all of it, then good. If not, half can be on me and half on You. And should You say they must all be upon me, I [already] offered myself up before You [at the *Akeidah*]!” (*Shabbos* 89b)

The piece of *aggadata* from the *Gemora* is interesting for a number of reasons, but at least two of them are how both Avraham, who challenged God on behalf of the wicked people of Sdom, and Ya’akov, who had risked everything to build his family, had been ready to let God destroy their descendants without even a fight. The other surprising thing is how Yitzchak *Avinu*, who never made light of anything while in this world, seems to make light of God’s willingness to wipe out his descendants in order to save them. Talk about a reversal of roles!

Laughter seems a lot like pain, except with the opposite effect. We *automatically* feel pain to warn us about situations that can harm us so we can avoid them. Laughter is also an automatic physiological response to specific stimuli and it says, “This is good. We should get more of this.”

The other thing about pain is that it focuses a person on the negative, and maybe even cause fear as well. Laughter makes life seem positive and results in a sense of calm. Pain makes a person forget about the good in life, and can make people lose their dignity and desire to continue. Laughter makes people feel good about life and themselves.

Interestingly enough, irony plays a central role in both pain and laughter. Irony, in its

broadest sense, is the juxtaposition of what on the surface *appears* to be the case and what is *actually* the case or to be expected, to a person's upsetting or uplifting surprise.

When the irony is negative, like Eisav when he later lost his blessings because he earlier willingly sold his birthright, pain results. When the irony is positive, like when Avraham and Sarah parented Yitzchak past the age for usually doing so, a person laughs. Many of the best jokes take advantage of such positive irony. But the real advantage of laughter, and its Divine importance, will have to wait until next week's *parsha, b"H*...