

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Toldot

Stand Up Comedy

“These are the generations of Yitzchak the son of Avraham; Avraham fathered Yitzchak.” (Bereishit 25:19)

Readers of this parashah's first verse cannot help but notice the redundancy: If Yitzchak is the son of Avraham, there should be no need to state that Avraham fathered Yitzchak. Rashi, ever sensitive to the subtleties of language, tells us a back-story which explains this strangely-worded verse.

Yitzchak's miraculous birth to a ninety year old mother and a hundred year old father was fodder for the ancestors of late night television's stand-up comics. In Rashi's words, “The comedians of the generation claimed that Sarah became pregnant from Avimelech...” (Rashi, Bereishit 25:19)

Apparently, even in Avraham and Sarah's day, cheap shots were the stock in trade of clowns and cynics. The tabloids, as it were, went for the cheap laugh, at the expense of Yitzchak – as well as Avraham and Sarah. They preferred not to entertain the possibility that these people lived a life of holiness, and that they were blessed with a miracle. Instead, dirty minds let seedy imaginings come up with an alternate version, offering a "more rational" explanation for Yitzchak's birth. To these purveyors of gossip, destroying Avraham and Sarah's reputation was merely collateral damage.

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But was the stand-up version of events any more plausible than the miraculous truth of Yitzchak's birth? For some reason, the cynics considered the pregnancy of a ninety year old woman who had suffered decades of

infertility, to be rational, plausible, natural. What they refused to accept was the possibility that a man ten years her senior was capable of fathering a child. Such is the power of cynicism: It plants seeds of doubt even when the alternative narrative is equally implausible, or worse.

Rashi does not reveal the identity of these cynics, but a careful reading of the text in an earlier chapter will help us identify one of them, whose cynical and derisive laughter began as soon as Yitzchak was born.

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, laughing. And Sarah said to Avraham, "Banish this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak." (Bereishit 21:9-10)

At first glance, the reader might be taken aback by Sarah's reaction: Everything surrounding Yitzchak's life – even before his birth – is wrapped in joy and laughter. Avraham laughed when he was informed that Sarah would have a child; in fact, Sarah herself laughed. After Yitzchak was born, Sarah declared that all who hear her happy news will laugh with joy. Why, then, is Sarah incensed by Yishmael's laughter? Clearly, Sarah felt that Yishmael was not laughing out of joy, but smirking in derision. He was one of those cynics, one of the comedians who had a cheap laugh about the absurdity of Avraham having fathered Yitzchak.

Upon consideration, this is bizarre: Why would Yishmael risk calling Avraham's ability to father a child into question? Would he himself not be tarred by the same brush, his own lineage called into question? Apparently, Yishmael was troubled by the birth of Avraham's new son – a son who would threaten Yishmael's birthright and status as Avraham's sole heir. Sarah is unfazed by Yishmael's cynicism; she sees right through his one-liners and goes straight to the heart of the matter, addressing Yishmael's underlying motives: "And Sarah said to Avraham, "Banish this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak." (Bereishit 21:10) Sarah does not voice criticism of Yishmael's behavior, nor does she make any effort to rebut Yishmael's slanderous barbs. She focuses on the question of inheritance, because that is what Yishmael is really after.

Yishmael's *modus operandi* is oddly familiar to us in its modern-day version: Jealousy and hatred of others that becomes so profound, so consuming, that a person becomes willing to suffer, even to die, in order to harm the object of their hatred. The suicide bomber is a direct descendant of the strange character found in this section of the Torah, the 'suicide comic,' who is willing to harm his own chances of inheritance as long as he harms the object of his jealousy and hatred in the process.

With this in mind, we may now return to our opening verse, that strangely redundant description of Yitzchak's lineage: Indeed, Avraham fathered Yitzchak, and Yitzchak was the son of Avraham - a miraculous child, born to wonderful parents. Some people were overjoyed when they heard about this miracle. For others, it fueled laughter of a different sort: Smirking, knowing glances and cynicism. With all the progress the world has made over the past four thousand years, things have not changed all that much.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/audio-and-essays-parashat-toldot.html>

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