

# ISAAC: A LIFE OF BITTER LAUGHTER

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ISAAC (AND LAUGHTER): AN IRONIC NAME

Isaac's birth comes late in his parent's marriage. Twenty-five years following God's promise that from Abraham, and presumably through Sarah his wife, would spring a *great nation* (Gen. 12:2), finally Sarah conceives. Their child is the long-awaited heir. This is more than just a momentous event. It is a time filled with miraculous joy: *Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac* [lit. he will laugh] (Gen. 21:3). This was the name God directed Abraham to call his son (Gen. 17:19).

Isaac, in Hebrew *Yitzhāk*, from the root letters *tzadi-het-kuf* [*tz-h-k*] in this long-hoped-for context clearly refers to celebratory laughter.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous references and word plays in the Genesis birth narrative associated with the root letters *tz-h-k*. These occur in the announcement that Isaac would be born (Gen. 17:17), in Sarah's comments both at the promise of his future birth (Gen. 18:12-15) and her remarks following his birth (Gen. 21:6), and in the circumstances that take place some time after his weaning (Gen. 21:9).

Isaac's name connotes laughter. He will know periods of happiness, in particular when he marries Rebekah. More often however, ironically, it is bitter laughter that dominates his life.

CHAPTERS 17 AND 18: THE ANNOUNCEMENT

In chapter 17, God asks Abraham to circumcise himself and his household as a sign of the covenant between them. As a part of this dialogue, God explains that Abraham is to change his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah, and that she will bear a son. Abraham is incredulous. He doubles over with laughter [*va-yippol... va-yitzhak* (verse 17)].<sup>2</sup> In his doubt and disbelief he questions God's statement. With seemingly incredulous laughter, Abraham in effect says to God, "Now, at this advanced age, after all these years, *now* we are going to become parents?" God not only affirms that Sarah will give birth

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at this season in a year's time, but that the child will be named Isaac. Further, God will continue the covenantal relationship through Isaac.

The next episode linking Isaac and the root letters *tz-h-k* appears in Genesis 18. That chapter features the three strangers who unexpectedly visit Abraham and Sarah's encampment. They ask about Sarah's whereabouts. Then one of the visitors announces to Abraham, *'Next year . . . your wife Sarah will have a son!'* According to the biblical text, *Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent . . . Sarah laughed* [va-titzhak] *to herself* (Gen. 18:10, 12). In this instance, Sarah is the one who is incredulous. She knows that she is post-menopausal. Now it is too late; this simply cannot happen. Her sour laughter reflects the fact that she considers Abraham (who is 99) an old person, as she is herself (at age 89).<sup>4</sup> Due to the bitterness of her response, God chides Sarah. *The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh? [tzahakah] . . . Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?'* Sarah overhears this question. She is embarrassed. She denies the fact that she laughed. She says, *'I did not laugh* [lo tzahakti]; *for she was frightened. But He replied, 'You did laugh [tzahakt]'* (Gen. 18:13-15).<sup>5</sup> God's response to Sarah's remark should be seen as a gentle rebuke.<sup>6</sup>

#### CHAPTER 21: ISAAC'S BIRTH

When Sarah finally gives birth, *Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac* [lit. he will laugh] (Gen. 21:3). Sarah now laughs again. *Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter [tzehok].'* Sarah then continues, *'Everyone who hears will laugh [yitzhak] with me'* (Gen. 21:6). Alternatively, she may have thought that "everyone will laugh *at* me."

According to rabbinic tradition, many did mock her. People had heard that Abraham and Sarah had spent time in Gerar. There were those who claimed that Isaac was really Abimelech's son, not Abraham's child.<sup>7</sup> Others suggested that Sarah had never gotten pregnant, that the child was a foundling that the aged couple had discovered on the road.<sup>8</sup> Some alleged that the child was not hers, but her maidservant Hagar's, Sarah was only making believe when she said she was suckling him.<sup>9</sup> Each of these *midrashim* ultimately refutes the allegations against Sarah and Abraham, but on the face of it, the accusations are a form of mocking laughter, aimed at Sarah, as well as Isaac, as they cast doubt on Isaac's legitimacy.

## CHAPTER 21: LAUGHTER LEADS TO SORROW

Although the biblical text does not specify his age, Isaac was probably weaned at about the age of three,<sup>10</sup> making his older brother Ishmael, Hagar and Abraham's son, about sixteen or seventeen at the time. Some time after his weaning, the celebration of this important milestone in his life, Sarah seems suddenly upset over something Hagar's son Ishmael does. The biblical narrative is deliberately vague. *Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing* [laughing? – *metzahek*] (Gen. 21:9) – again a pun on Isaac's name, derived from the same root letters *tzadi-het-kuf* [*tz-h-k*].<sup>11</sup> Underscoring the ambiguity of the term *metzahek*, in the recent Schocken Bible translation, Everett Fox translates this line: "Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian-woman, whom she had borne to Avraham, laughing . . ." <sup>12</sup>

Sarah then confronts Abraham. She says, '*Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac*' (Gen. 21:10). Though reluctant to do so, Abraham complies with Sarah's demand. He sends away both Ishmael and Hagar (Gen. 21:11-14).

*METZAHEK*: MULTIPLE MEANINGS.

What did Sarah see? What was Ishmael doing? What prompted Sarah's reaction? There are several possible answers to those questions, and they all revolve around the correct interpretation of the crucial verb *metzahek*.

Depending on the context of where the word is found, its possible translations include laughing, playing, mocking, jesting,<sup>13</sup> lewd revelry, seduction (and perhaps rape), bantering, or sexual fondling. A close homonym to its root letters refers to mortal combat. *Abner said to Joab, 'Let the young men come forward and sport* [*vi-sahaku*] *before us*' (II Sam. 2:14).

It is not at all clear what motivates Sarah, or if she has multiple motives for her action. Whatever translation or nuance one gives to *metzahek*, it is evident that the immediate effect which results from Sarah's response to Ishmael's laughing/*metzahek* is a deep sadness, a rift in the family fabric.

At such a young age, Isaac would be too immature to grasp what was taking place. All he could fathom was that suddenly his birth parents had ripped away two of the closest family members that he knew, Hagar and his half-

brother, without an explanation that he could comprehend. Once again we find the verb denoting laughter in a context bereft of joy and mirth.

#### CHAPTER 26: ISAAC AND REBEKAH AT GERAR

Many years later, in Genesis 26, Isaac and Rebekah live for a time in the Philistine enclave of Gerar. There, in order to protect himself, Isaac explains to the local inhabitants that Rebekah is his sister, not his wife. One day, however, when together privately, Isaac demonstrates his affection for his wife. This display of affection does not go unnoticed. *Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looking out of the window, saw Isaac fondling [metzahek] his wife Rebekah* (Gen. 26:8). Abimelech immediately senses that they are married, not siblings as they claimed.

Through this affectionate act Isaac endangers both himself and Rebekah. When Abimelech confronts Isaac with evidence of the patriarch's true relationship with Rebekah, Isaac has good reason to laugh bitterly at his careless deed. King Abimelech is upset over the deception (Gen. 26:10) but does not lash out at Isaac. In fact, he issues a decree that anyone who molests Isaac and Rebekah faces death.

The exposure of the false claim that Rebekah is Isaac's sister hinges on the word *fondling* [metzahek]. The verb denoting laughter here put Isaac and Rebekah in a precarious situation.

#### CONCLUSION

Although his name, *Yitzhak*, technically means "he will laugh," bitter, rather than humorous or amusing laughter, more often filled Isaac's life. While God hinted at his birth for twenty-five years, Isaac's actual conception occurred late in his parents' lives. Both Abraham and Sarah were incredulous when each learned that they would be parents. After Isaac's birth, Sarah rightly feared that others would question his legitimacy. Some time after Isaac's weaning, "laughter" gave rise to family dislocation, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Years later, while they were living temporarily in Gerar, intimate laughing/fondling led to an unexpected revelation, with potentially fearful consequences.

Isaac's life was not bereft of laughter, but on many occasions he may have felt that he was ill-named, for laughter would too often be tinged with sad-

ness. *The heart alone knows its bitterness* (Prov. 14:10). Life was frequently no laughing matter for Isaac. Still, in a world where the fullness of years suggested divine approval, at the end of his days he had lived longer than all of his relatives, and through this longevity earned the last laugh.

## NOTES

1. For a different understanding of the root letters *tz-h-k*, meaning, "exult," see A. Lichtenstein, "Isaac and Laughter," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 18:1 (Fall 1989), pp. 13-18.
2. Genesis 17:17 is the Bible's first instance of the root word *tz-h-k*. A portent of things to come, this laughter is tinged with bitterness.
3. "The repeated laughter of humans in connection with the birth of Isaac... is a questioning of divine sovereignty": N. M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary - Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 127, comment on Genesis 17:19.
4. Sarah seems to suggest that not only is she postmenopausal, but that Abraham is impotent: '*my husband [is] so old*' (Gen. 18:12).
5. Ilona N. Rashkow suggests, "Sarah [is] condemned for laughing." See I. N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), p. 97. Alternatively, Abraham is the one who chastises Sarah. See: Tammi J. Scheider in T. C. Eskenazi and A. L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), p. 89.
6. Jewish tradition notes that when sharing Sarah's comment with Abraham, God slightly changes her words so as not to give offense to him. Unvarnished truth can be needlessly hurtful. See *Genesis Rabbah* 48:18: "Bar Kappara said: Great is peace, for even Scripture made a misstatement in order to preserve peace between Abraham and Sarah." Cf. TB *Bava Metzia* 87a, and the explanations in David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001), pp. 101-2.
7. *Genesis Rabbah* 53:6. Some questioned Abraham's ability to father a child at his age. The Midrash then explains that when this allegation was made, Isaac immediately took on Abraham's features. Some say that they looked so much alike that people confused them one for the other. The prooftext is *These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham...* (Gen. 25:19), as if the text were saying "Abraham's son, Abraham" (TB *Bava Metzia* 87a).
8. TB *Bava Metzia* 87a.
9. *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*: Rabbi Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days. Translated by W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), *Piska* 22:1.
10. "Extant documents suggest that... in the ancient Near East, mothers usually weaned their children at around the age of three." See Adele Berlin in T. C. Eskenazi and A. L. Weiss, op. cit., p. 312.
11. The Masoretic (traditional Jewish) text ends the verse with the word "playing." The Septuagint and therefore most Christian translations read: "playing with her son Isaac."
12. *The Schocken Bible, Volume I, The Five Books of Moses*, translation by Everett Fox (New York: Schocken, 1995).

13. For a more extensive discussion of the multiple meanings of *metzahek* and what they mean in this context, see D. J. Zucker, "What Sarah Saw: Envisioning Genesis 21:9-10," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 36:1 (January-March 2008), pp. 54-62, as well as D. J. Zucker, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Sarah," *Judaism* 55:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2006), pp. 30-39.



## עשה תורתך קבע

### THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	I Kings	5 – 22
	II Kings	1 – 11
May	II Kings	12 – 25
	Isaiah	1 – 14
June	Isaiah	15 – 42
July	Isaiah	43 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 4
August	Jeremiah	5 – 32

