

Vayeira

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Salt: Lessons of an Inert Crystal

In this week's Parsha- Yayeira, there are some interesting narratives described about the history of Avraham and Sarah and their journey to the birth of Yitzchak. The Parsha very specifically starts off about Avraham recovering from the circumcision of last Parsha (Lech Licha), and regardless of the pain ("K'Chom Hayom- Rashi there Ber. 18:1, that Hashem made it an unpleasantly hot day so guests wouldn't visit Avraham, which agitated him, and therefore when Hashem sent angels to tell Avraham and Sarah of the birth of their son Yitzchak, they came in form of men, and therefore guests), Avraham wanted to serve guests, and perform the Mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim. (Chassidus explains that a person's emotions are a reflection of their inner self. And in Avraham's case, he was so infused with Chesed, that he was uncomfortable not being able to serve guests even after recovering from his circumcision. His nature was to do good and he therefore felt uncomfortable when not being able to express this characteristic. The lesson for us is one ought to imbue themselves with positive emotions in order for it to reach our essence, particularly in the service of Hashem).

The actions of Avraham and Sarah are in direct contravention of the acts of Sodom (which comes later), in that Avraham wanted to sacrifice what he could to be charitable to guests, and even Sarah was part of the work and her actions are a model for us, (Rashi Ber. 18:9 explaining the dots on top of the word "Eilav", to show on Sarah's modesty, even though she was part of the service of guests.) As well, to point out that Sarah was incredibly righteous.

An interesting point is that in Parshas Lech Licha, there was a foreshadow to Yitzchak being named after laughter, (Ber 17:17), which Rashi and Onkelos explain as a difference between Sarah's laughter (Which was criticized) versus Avraham's laughter which was translated by Onkelos to mean joy, as he (Avraham) believed that he will still bear a son with Sarah. This would seem to contradict the fact that we know Sarah to be incredibly righteous. Sarah was so righteous that the opening Rashis of the next Parsha explain she was pure from sin (as a 20-year-old is free of sin- per the Talmud Maseches Shabbos 89b). This would mean that an alternative reading needs to take place on the posukim Ber 18:11-15 where Avraham and Sarah are told they will bear a child, and they thought about their age, and Sarah laughed. Sarah's subsequent denial of her laughter would mean she lied, and that can't be the case, therefore Rashi explains from the Gemara, that the angel's response saying "no - you laughed" the word Ki has to be read in 1 of 4 ways, "perhaps", "rather", "because", and "if". Meaning it ought not be read as a negative, rather Sarah was herself overjoyed as she will realize the blessing that was promised, even in her old age.

Sarah could have looked at her past, and the long life she had already lived and given up hope to the promise, instead she looked forward at the fact that all is not lost, and so perhaps her "laughter" could be read as doubt, wherein in fact it is her expression of disbelief that her mission is still yet to be completed. When the posuk says (Ber. 18:15) "Sarah denied saying I did not laugh for she was fearful, and he said no you laughed" could be interpreted as fearful, like Yiras Hashem, Sarah was saying my laughter wasn't doubtful, (as Rashi insinuated from Parshas Lech Licha) rather it was laughter because of her Yiras Hashem, which was expressed through her laughter-which through her denial the Angel clarifies, as if, "ah we misread your laugh"... (Again, otherwise this would be a mark against Sarah presumably, which it isn't). In fact, in the printed posuk there is a bar showing that in the correct

reading would be to take a breath between “Ki” and “Yoreiah” maybe to emphasize the point that Sarah denied laughing because she was fearful (i.e. of Hashem), rather Sarah laughed (as a reaction) because of her fear of Hashem...

The emphasis of Sarah’s righteousness at the beginning of the parshah (Eilav with the dots) and how she is glorified at the beginning of the next parsha in my mind in Chayei Sarah tells me that the story recounted ought not be read as a detriment, rather as a miscommunication which Sarah, and the Posuk clarifies to us, that she was not doubtful rather she was excited. Furthermore, Sarah knew she was to have a son, and once that would take place her full potential as our matriarch would be coming to fruition, so of course she was delighted when the message came to her that would be having a son. Finally, Yitzhak is called this because of the laughter, and if it insinuated any negativity, he wouldn’t have been named this.

The juxtaposition of this story with the story of Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt must therefore also be for a reason. When Avraham negotiated unsuccessfully with Hashem about saving the city of Sodom, Avraham and his family (Lot et al.) had to escape. Along the way Lot’s wife (who is unnamed in the Torah but is called Iris in the mepharshim) was turned into a pillar of salt for “turning back”. It is unclear if she was literally turned into salt or was called a salty person (the Chizkuni points this out).

I think the point of why salt was picked as a punishment is connected to the event. Salt is a crystal comprised of the volatile and poisonous sodium and chloride, which on their own are quite potent. But when mixed in a chemical reaction they become salt which is an inert but useful spice.

Salt as an inert substance has the power to bring out the essence of food. But should you oversalt a dish there is no recovering. Salt has to be in the right balance. Lot’s wife, by “turning around” she was living in the past, and had nothing to look forward to, so she became

like salt, which was a person is stuck in the past, and no changing (much like the stasis Sodomite trait of Sheli Sheli v’shelach shelackh - Avos 5:10). But, a person needs their history in the right dosages in order reveal their essence. As well even if a person is passionate (as volatile as sodium or poisonous as chlorine) if everything is in past tense, and in a should have could have mindset they become inert.

This is unlike Sarah who laughed at the announcement of her becoming a mother. Laughter according to Chassidus is an incredibly high level of T’anug which can allow for a person to connect to their essence. As the Talmud in Pesachim (117a) recount that Ravah when he began his lecture he used “Milsa D’vdichusa” (a joke) prior to learning in order to open the minds of the students to connecting to the words being taught by the teacher on a much higher level. As it says in Toras Chaim, that the root of laughter comes from a level of simple pleasure that has no restraint, and which is higher than the transmission of information on an intellectual level. Only through the laughter can one achieve “pnimius”. In contrast to the selfish, stasis, benign character of Lot’s wife.

The laughter that is taught in chassidus in relation to explaining how Hashem (a choson) is bonded to the Kalla (the Jews).

We are celebrating Eli’s aufruf this week, which is a point of simcha. Simcha Poretz Geder, which means that simcha breaks all boundaries, unlike being salty.

In this way, let us celebrate with Eli and Claudia so that the happiness is infused with our character to break all boundaries. Let the celebration of this special simcha be imbued in their lives in all ways as they build an everlasting edifice amongst the Jewish people.