

And Sarah laughed to herself. (18:12)

Sarah *Imeinu*, the *tzadekes*, righteous and pious Matriarch, was a prophetess. Thus, her incredulous laughter begs elucidation. Is anything beyond Hashem's ability? Indeed, it is specifically this question that Hashem presented to Avraham *Avinu*. Furthermore, why did Sarah deny her mirthful reaction to the news that she would have a child? It seems that when Avraham *Avinu* laughed at the same news, it was acceptable. Why did Sarah's reaction draw the Almighty's subtle rebuke? To set the record straight, Sarah *Imeinu*'s laughter was no different than that of Avraham; both expressed joy and gratitude. Nonetheless, Hashem saw a nuanced variation, a tinge of impurity in Sarah's laughter, sufficient to warrant His rebuke. Wherein lay the difference between these two laughers?

Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl, explains that the slight tinge of laughter, rooted in ridicule, which stained Sarah's expression of joy was so minute that the Matriarch herself was unaware of it. How did it occur? The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and *leitzaanus*, ridicule/cynicism, are total opposites. One who ridicules lacks *yiraas Shomayim*. Therefore, Sarah, who was certain that she was filled with *yiraas Shomayim*, understood that ridicule had no place in her personality. The slightest vestige of ridicule would have tainted her *yiraas Shomayim*, and she would have noticed it. This is why she replied, *Lo tzachakti*, "I did not laugh." She intimated that had it been a laugh of ridicule, she would have noticed a drop in her level of *yiraas Shomayim*, which did not occur. She was confident that her laughter was an expression of joy – not ridicule.

Avraham responded that although he did not understand how it was possible, Hashem had spoken, which means that He sensed something improper, even though Avraham and Sarah did not. Sarah accepted the rebuke, acknowledging the fact that it was possible to be (on some remote level) insensitive to the ridicule in one's own mirth. She worked on herself to the point that this failing, which Hashem identified in her, would be expunged. From now on, her manifestation of joy would be one that expressed *simchah shel mitzvah*, the joy of performing a *mitzvah*, in its most pristine form.

It is for this reason that when Sarah observed Yishmael "laughing," she understood that the laughter which Hagar's son expressed was not a laughter of joy, but a malicious form of laughter that bespoke his latent tendency toward murder and idol worship. We derive a powerful lesson herein: Laughter is not innocuous. Laughter can betray the real motivation behind it. Yishmael grew up in Avraham *Avinu*'s home. Hence, he was privy to the character refinement and moral cultivation that existed in this home. Furthermore, G-d was an intrinsic part of their lives. Thus, Yishmael's laughter should have been a refined, honorable expression of joy. For all intents and purposes, quite possibly, as far as Yishmael was concerned – it probably was. However, Sarah, having learned a powerful lesson concerning the depth of expression that laughter can manifest, realized that something was amiss in Yishmael's laughter. When she shared her feelings with Avraham, he was at first not in agreement, until Hashem instructed him to listen to Sarah. She had a deeper understanding of laughter, having herself undergone an educative experience followed by

self-imposed sensitivity training.

Rav Belsky makes an insightful observation concerning the *leitz*, scoffer/cynic/ridiculer, and his bag of tricks called *leitzanus*. Hashem created the universe *yeish mei'ayin, ex nihillo*; something from nothing. The *leitz* employs his power of ridicule to create nothing out of something. This is why *yiraas Shomayim* and *leitzanus* can never coalesce. The *leitz* tears down anything in his way, because it means nothing to him. Nothing is sacred if it is in his way. One who fears Hashem recognizes His Creation and its significance. He acknowledges that everything in this world has a purpose; otherwise, Hashem would not have created it.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* concludes with an exhortation to expunge ridicule and cynicism from our lives. As long as we are subject to the effects of these reprehensible character deficiencies, we will never rise above the exile in which we live. Wherever we go, we take it along with us. It is similar to someone who carries a foul-smelling object in his pocket. He thinks the stench is the product of the environment in which he finds himself, so he moves elsewhere. It still smells. He moves again. It still smells. He never thinks that he is transporting the smell from place to place – in his pocket! The *leitz* takes his miserable outlook on life wherever he goes. In the beginning, he is funny. When the people stop laughing and he is rejected for what he is, he just moves on and takes his toxic personality elsewhere – until someone has the courage to tell him: You are not wanted here.