

Senior Sermon
 Parashat Vayera
 November 10, 2022
 Lara Tessler

What makes human beings laugh anyway? Is it a good joke? A silly situation? A moment of joy? Or is it even a moment of doubt? A release of emotions? Well... it's all of the above.

Laughter is a spontaneous release of emotions whether good or bad, for many different types of reasons. Laughter is a neurological occurrence within our bodies.. It comes from connections made within circuits of our brains that spark both feeling and expressing emotion. When one laughs, other parts of the human brain are shut off momentarily.

These regions of our brains are those that are responsible for decision making, and controlling behavior. Genuine human laughter is one that is brought on suddenly, and not always controllable.

There are many different types of laughs as well. An unbridled laugh, as loud as you can imagine sparked from pure joy and happiness. A burst of a giggle. The unvocalized laugh, mouth open or closed that sounds somewhat like a pant. Then there's also a scoff, or a snort brought on by anger, or doubt.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayera, we witness our matriarch Sarah experiencing such drastically different emotions, and with these different emotions come laughter. At the beginning of Genesis chapter 18, Abraham is sitting outside of his tent alone, when all of a sudden, he looks up and sees three figures.

וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְצִים עִלָּיו. He lifts up his eyes and sees three messengers, agents of G-d standing in front of him. After Abraham greets them and brings them food and drink, one of them asks where Sarah is, and Abraham tells him that she is inside of the tent. One agent tells him that a year from that very moment he will return, and when he does, חֵהָהּ וְהִנֵּה־בֵן לְשָׂרָה "Sarah will have a child".

Now, during this scene, Sarah is inside of the tent at a distance overhearing the conversation. She hears the news that she is going to have a child and she laughs to herself. She laughs in doubt, of the ability of her own body, of her age, and of her husband's age.

Up until this point in Sarah's life, she has had every reason to doubt her ability to become pregnant. She, and her husband, and society have written her off as barren. With Abraham's relationship to Hagar and the birth of Ishmael, she could only further believe in her lack of ability. At this point in our story, Sarah is old and no longer even menstruates, so how could she even believe in herself to even have a chance to become pregnant!

She is full of doubt, and why wouldn't she be. Even from the moment that we meet her in Genesis chapter 11, Sarah is described as עֲקָרָה barren.

וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ יוֹלֵד. "Sarah was barren. She had no child". Sarah as a childless woman is so much of who she is, and who she is depicted as, that it is the very first thing that we learn about her. From what the Torah text tells us, key moments in Sarah's life were determined by men. When Sarah finds out that she is going to have a child, she is only an onlooker, overhearing the conversation between Abraham and the messengers.

Later on in this same parsha, Sarah is used by her husband, Abraham, to protect himself from King Abimelech. Whether they be from her husband or the messengers, Sarah follows the directions she is given.. She has little power or autonomy to make choices for herself. When she does find herself with power, it is in her relationship with Hagar, who was not a man, and had even less autonomy than she did.

When Sarah first laughs, it is out of doubt, frustration, and disbelief. The text states that in this instance, וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ. And Sarah laughed within herself. This sort of silent laughter or scoff that came from Sarah in this moment could even be thought of as her gut reaction to hearing the news. The Ramban explains that when Sarah heard the news from the messengers, she did not know that they were angels of God because she did not see them, and this only added to her doubt. This inward laughter was one of derision and denial.

The laughter of joy is one that everyone can hear, says the Ramban. This kind is the sort of laugh we hear from Sarah later, when Isaac is actually born.

We know how the story ends. Sarah DOES conceive, she DOES have a baby, and then she DOES laugh out loud for others to hear and join in. This joy was brought on by something that her own body was able to do, but that ability was unknown to her until it was communicated to her, by men and by agents of God.

The women in our Torah, like Sarah, like Hagar, and like Rebecca - the timing of their pregnancies are regulated by people who are not them. The news of Sarah's ability to become pregnant comes from a messenger of God, and the timing is one that she did not have control over.

Hagar becomes pregnant with Ishmael, but not through her own volition. Sarah, the one with the power in this situation, tells her husband to lay with Hagar, her maidservant, and through this act Hagar becomes pregnant. From the text we do not know how Hagar feels about serving this purpose, but we do know that her pregnancy was one that was chosen to happen by people other than herself.

Rebecca was another woman in our Torah described as עֲקָרָה, barren. She, like Sarah, is described with this qualifier in the first instance of ours meeting her. Her husband, Isaac, acted on her behalf and prayed to God for her to conceive, God answered his prayers, and she did.

For all of these women, the timing of their pregnancies was not up to them. Sarah's laughter when she finds out that she will become pregnant surely comes from her doubt. It is her body, her life, and yet - she doesn't have full control. Before, it was out of her control TO conceive, and now, it is out of her control WHEN she will. Although Sarah had her doubts, she ultimately WANTED her baby. She WANTED to conceive.

For her, though, it was her doubt in her own control over the situation that sparked her reaction. Although this conception story for Sarah ends in joy, there are far too many people in our world today whose conception story will not.

Since the overturn of Roe v. Wade just a few months ago, anyone who can become pregnant in this country is under direct attack over their right to their bodily autonomy. According to the Center for Reproductive Rights Abortion Laws by State map, twelve states have made abortion illegal, meaning that it is banned entirely, and the consequences for such action are criminal penalties. Fourteen states fall under the "hostile" category, meaning that these states have expressed interest in prohibiting abortions entirely, and none of them has legal protections set in place for people who do choose to get an abortion.

Some already have restrictions set in place which include 15 and 18 week bans, as well as other restrictions that make access incredibly difficult.

Within the remaining less than half of the states in our country, although abortion remains legal, some are not fully protected by the law, and limitations still exist.

Only nine states - New York, New Jersey, Vermont, Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, Washington, Oregon, and California - have made abortion completely legal, completely protected, have expanded access and care, and created more laws and policies to do so.

Although there are states where reproductive rights still exist, those of us who live in such states are not fully safe. While the overturn of Roe v. Wade has directly impacted the future of abortion regulation in our country, the conversation is much larger than that. A bill for a potential nationwide ban on abortions was proposed by Republican senator, Lindsey Graham, in mid-September. If passed, this bill alone would put all of the access in every state to an end. It would ban abortions nationwide after 15 weeks (with RARE exception); and, it would allow for states to enact even stricter regulations.

In the election that took place two days ago, five states had abortion related amendments on the ballot. This was the largest number of such amendments in state elections in history. Although these specific ballot measures resulted in less harmful results than many of us feared, we cannot become complacent. Emergency contraception and birth control are next to be threatened. Fertility treatments such as IVF and medicated abortion options are still being targeted by anti-choice advocates. Sadly, the attempt to control bodies, pregnant or otherwise, has been a reality throughout human history.

When I say all of this, standing in front of all of you today, my first instinct is to laugh. To let out that tension that is building inside of my body, not out of joy, but out of frustration, and fear, and doubt for what the future will look like. I can't help but chuckle, not because any of this brings me joy, but because it is too much to bear.

Maybe that is what Sarah felt, too, when she found out that she would conceive. Not immediate joy, but rather a sense of being overwhelmed by a force larger than herself.

A good joke brings people together. It can spark laughter and feelings of joy and connection. Jokes and laughter can also be defensive ways that human beings cope with uncomfortable and upsetting situations. Dark humor is a genre of comedy categorized by topics that are less than pleasant, that highlight either the physical or emotional pain or embarrassment of others or even of oneself. The joke can be simple, like the classic slipping on a banana peel bit, and it can also

be much more twisted. Biologically, the laughter brought on by these jokes ultimately releases endorphins, which can relieve the pain that an individual is feeling.

In an article entitled “The Psychology of Dark Humor”, counseling psychologist and social worker, Namratha Dinesh writes, "Dark humor enables the individual to assess the situation through cognitive reappraisal and convert the threatening circumstance into something easier to manage”. She goes on to explain that this sort of humor can also help to manage collective stress, and elevate social bonds and positive well-being. Dinesh wrote this article in March of 2021, over a full year into the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when all of us were searching for some relief from the fear and loss that we were experiencing. We longed for community and laughter with others.

But as helpful a coping mechanism as humor can be, we have to ask - what happens to the more difficult emotions that may lie under the surface of our laughter? Do they just go away? Do they get thwarted by the laughter that arises?

If all we do is fill our spaces with humor, over and over again, what is left to do with the darker feelings that came along as well? Those feelings, the anger, sadness, disappointment, powerlessness, can feel overwhelmingly heavy. The laugh, or snort, or scoff that comes along with them can help to release some of the tension, but the power that these emotions generate in our bodies can, and MUST be harnessed for more than just a good dark joke. We in this room have voices to use, but not only for the jokes and the laughs that make the harder moments feel a little lighter. We have voices to make noise, and to educate, and to inspire.

Many of us in this room live in the types of bodies that are being threatened, restricted and regulated across our country, but we still have these bodies to use as vessels for action. Our emotions can fuel us. Our joy can spark celebration, and our anger and frustration can ignite inspiration.

Yes, we must acknowledge our anger and our frustration, and allow the laughter and the jokes to be released, but if we stop there, then we haven't done enough. Every day we have the opportunity to take the emotions that we feel, and let them move us from being reactive, to proactive. As individuals and as a collective, we have the power and the autonomy to inspire and support so many around us. So, why don't we use the power that we do have? Why do we too often feel frozen, helpless to act?

There are so many excuses that we make for ourselves, that allow for complacency: “I’m too busy.” “I’m mentally - or emotionally or physically - exhausted.” “This isn’t my problem to solve.” “I live in a state where reproductive rights are protected.” “My loved ones and I are safe.” Actually, we are NOT as safe as we think. Are there other excuses that you’ve told yourself?

Although this general election is over, the fight for personal reproductive autonomy in this country is not. The constitutional right to an abortion has been fought over since its enactment in 1973, and the conversation around a person’s autonomy over their own body existed long before that. This election was simply a beginning to the conversations and legislation to come. But we are NOT helpless. We have the power to use the emotions that we feel to propel us forward in action.

Although we are not the people with the power to make legislative decisions, there is still so much that we can do. We can continue to encourage conversation and education, volunteer our time in person at clinics or on the phone reaching out to local representatives. We can write letters, emails, and postcards to state leaders, and to our communities. We can post in whatever form of media we have access to. We can offer thanks and support to healthcare workers who are working every day to provide care to those who need it, in states where abortions are legal, and especially in the states where they are not.

We have all been onlookers just like Sarah, watching and witnessing the threats to our lives from a distance. She could not determine many of the things that happened to her. In some ways, we, too, are standing inside of Sarah’s tent, observing and overhearing decisions made for our bodies by others. But we, her children, have power that Sarah did not.

If only she could see all of us today, fighting for rights that she did not have. It started with Sarah, but now, it is about all of us and so many more who feel powerless and afraid for the future. Imagine us taking Sarah by the hand, and leading her out of the tent to witness future generations defending the autonomy that every human being deserves. I believe that she would have laughed - not out of fear this time, but out of relief, and joy, at not having to go through it all alone.

Boker Tov.