

## Sarah Laughed

Shannah Tova! “Hayom Harat Olam- today the world is born.” Today, we recall God’s original creative act, God’s calling the universe into being out of nothingness. On this anniversary of creation, we might have assumed that the Torah reading would be the opening chapter of Genesis, which describes God creating the world in six days, and God’s resting on the seventh. But we don’t. We bypass that text in order to read about mothers struggling with infertility, families in crisis, and, most specifically, the birth of a single child, Isaac, born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.

And how different is that single birth than the birth of the world! In the beginning- *Bereishit*- God spoke, and it was so. God wills each step with divine self assurance, and it comes to be as ordained, according to plan. Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, must have been taken completely by surprise. Pregnant? At our age? How could such a thing be? Sarah, so the story goes, laughed. She must have laughed at the sheer unpredictability of it. Life certainly is full of surprises, she must have thought to herself. Just when you think things have settled down- they had always wanted a child- but now! Well, what else could Sarah do but laugh? What courage it must have taken to have wanted a child at their age, and without the benefit of amniocentesis or fetal monitoring! What a risk they were taking, at a stage in life when most people have put risks safely behind them. Were they really up to handling diapers and 2am feedings at their age? And what about their careers? Abraham and Sarah were making quite a name for themselves by this time, bringing souls closer to the knowledge of God. Could either one of them spare the time

from such important work to play with a baby? To show him how to shovel in the sand, or to throw a ball? And what, God forbid, if they did not live long enough to rear him into adulthood? Who would care for him? Under the circumstances, the appropriate response might have been tears, rather than laughter.

Abraham and Sarah, however, chose not to dwell on the inevitable problems; rather, they recognized the birth of a child for what it is: a miracle. A larger than life, bawling, gurgling symbol of the newness of creation. Yes, it was taking a chance, but what's life without taking chances? For them, having a baby was not only the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham; it was an affirmation. An affirmation that life is not static, that God creates the world anew each day, and that the world is pregnant with the potential of new life, new options, new beginnings.

The Torah's picture of family life however, is neither simple nor saccharine. First, the matriarchs all struggled with infertility, as did Hannah, the remarkable subject of this morning's Haftarah. Then, after having babies, the fabric of their families is nearly torn apart by jealousies, rivalries, and worse. How does one begin to understand Sarah forcing Abraham to cast out his son Ishmael? And oh, how we all struggle to make sense every year of Abraham's marching off their boy to offer as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. What kind of a world is the Torah describing in which the happy story of unexpected parenthood late in life ends up there? Yet, even in their excesses, these stories are a kind of mirror into our own struggles to make meaning of our lives.

For many parents today, the struggle still begins, as it did with the matriarchs, with the ability to conceive a baby at all. How many times have I sat and cried with some of you, over the inability

to conceive, or over hopes dashed after multiple miscarriages. About a year ago, my daughter Talia published an article in Hadassah magazine about her own battle with infertility. She wrote:

“I am surrounded by the specter of my Biblical foremothers, most of whom struggled with infertility themselves. I desperately seek hope in their stories. After years of heartbreak, God opened Rachel’s womb and gave her two sons. Someday, I try to tell myself, God will open my womb, too. Sarah, the matriarch of the Jewish nation, remained childless into old age, until she was promised a son. I wonder, when I hear such news, will I too laugh with disbelief? “

What my daughter didn’t know at the time she wrote the piece, was that, after countless medical procedures, painful injections, and three rounds of IVF, she was carrying a child. Today she and Gaby are the parents of a beautiful little boy. And this is also true for all us- we don’t always get what we want, or what we feel that we deserve, but sometimes, life surprises us.

At other times, I have sat with some of you in hospital rooms, as you hovered between joy and fear, spending harrowing days and nights watching over their newborns in the NIC U, precisely at a time when you should have been joyously celebrating the miracle of starting a family.

Jessica Valenti, author of the book, “Why Have Kids,” describes her experience. She developed a pregnancy complication that resulted in liver failure. After an emergency C section, her daughter was born prematurely, weighing barely two pounds. The baby spent weeks connected to wires and breathing machines. She writes, “most people get flowers when they give birth- I got a two pond baby and a failing liver. There were no balloons or cigars passed around, just worried glances and the hum of machines checking vital signs.” For a while, Jessica suffered from a kind of post traumatic stress, afraid to feel the incredible love she had for Layla because of her fear of losing her.

Valenti captures a basic truth about parenting, and about life, when she writes:

*“We don’t have control over whether or not our babies will be ill or disabled, premature or otherwise hurt. Most of us have no say over whether the child care available to us will be affordable, if our jobs will have maternity leave, or if our boss will let us leave early to pick up our sick kid from school. We can’t stop bad things from happening- our children from being bullied, our neighborhoods from being unsafe, or the world from being unfair.*

*So parents focus on the things they can control. For some, that means buying expensive strollers and over-scheduling their kid with French tutors and piano lessons. For others its simply making sure their kid is well fed and put together as they leave the house. No matter what the worry is, however, it’s always there. I’m sure some parents have learned to let go, but I haven’t met many of them.”*

Whether or not we have children, all of us have had moments where we sense the chaos that resides just under the surface of things. But what is the alternative: To not love? To not commit ourselves? To not give our hearts to another? A life free of emotional risk would be a life...unlived.

When Fran and I were starting a family, we were relatively lucky. We were young, still in school...and maybe a little clueless. Fertility issues? All we had to do was look at each other funny and Fran got pregnant. Labor and delivery? Fran’s labors were so quick and simple that they are the source of comedic family lore about running six traffic lights to get to the nearest hospital, NOT the one we had planned on; or Fran being told by the admitting nurses not to “push” until she signed consent forms. Can you imagine? “All right,” my lawyer wife snapped

back as she scribbled her signature, “but I’m signing under duress, so it is absolutely meaningless!”

Now, if Fran were standing here telling the story, it would come out differently. She’s the one who had to deal with gestational diabetes, and chronic back issues that occasionally plague her to this day...all I had to do was stand there looking pretty and say, “breathe.” Fran’s the one who had to deal with law firm partners who wrote off young, pregnant lawyers as “not serious about their practice,” and had to curtail the arc of her legal career to the needs of our family. Long before policies for maternity leave (let alone paternity leave) existed in law firms, Fran trail blazed a path in that work environment, for herself and for other women.

When people ask me if there is a secret to having raised five relatively well-adjusted kids, my stock response is “benign neglect.” But the truth is of course a lot more complicated. At first, we schlepped our baby to Columbia Law School classes and JTS Talmud seminars. Later on, we experimented with every possible version of childcare known to mankind, including live-ins, a co-op with other families, private home day cares and JCC’s. The schools we eventually chose, the synagogue communities we created, the Jewish camps we sent them to, and the circle of friends and family who were always there, they all played their part in raising our kids. It really did take a village.

In retrospect, I am grateful, and humbled, that we were not plagued by serious illness or the myriad disasters that sometimes seemingly fall from nowhere. I am in awe of my good fortune, and I thank God every day. But many of you sitting in this room have not been so lucky, and have given a much more challenging and difficult hand to play.

My friends, I am sharing all of this with you in order to explain why, I think, the Rabbis zeroed in on childbirth and families as the theme of the Biblical texts for Rosh Hashannah. The birth of a baby is a miracle; it represents our partnership with God in the unfolding creation of this world. But it is also where the duality of awesome miracle and terrifying fragility merge, saying, “This is the true nature of our lives!” Parenting is an act of faith in the future; and it is not for sissies.

When you take a closer look at the Biblical text, you’ll notice something that you might have overlooked about Sarah’s laughter. Sarah actually laughs twice, once before she conceives, and a second time after she gives birth to Isaac. The first time is at the beginning of Parshat Vayera, a few chapters before this morning’s reading begins. When angelic messengers arrive at Abraham’s tent to reveal that Sarah will soon conceive a child, Sarah, overhears the conversation, and laughs to herself, saying, “Now that I am old and withered am I to have enjoyment- with my husband so old?” It is a laughter of skepticism and disbelief (not to mention that it is also a crack at Abraham’s expense). It comes from a place of resignation that says, I’ve already missed my opportunities, and I’m stuck in a reality that can’t change. It is a laughter tinged with bitterness, and when she laughs in this manner, it offends God. God says to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh...? Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?” Sarah, frightened, demurs, and says, I didn’t laugh! But God holds her to the truth, insisting, “Yes, you did!”

Never the less, Sarah, at the ripe age of 90, conceived a child. Rabbinic legend suggests that this miracle happened on Rosh Hashannah. And nine months later, Sarah laughs again, a second time, saying, “God has brought me laughter. Everyone who hears will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet, I have borne a son in his old age.” Abraham and Sarah memorialized this laughter by bestowing upon the child the name Yitzchak, which, of course, in Hebrew means laughter. This was the laughter of a triumphant

spirit, a laughter that declares that everything is possible. In her voice, we hear an awareness of the unlimited creative potential of life. On that day, according to another rabbinic legend, the whole world laughed with Sarah.

My friends, these two distinct instances of Sara's laughter are very important. Because the distance between them is the distance from fear to faith, from cynicism to optimism, from a life of resignation to a life open to renewal and possibility. The journey from one to the other is the spiritual journey that we are on our entire lives.

It is not always an easy journey. Let's continue with the parenting metaphor. In her book, Valenti asks the question, if: If parenting is supposed to be so fulfilling, why are so many parents, particularly mothers, unhappy?

There is a website devoted to mothers, called Secret Confessions. Three years ago, a woman calling herself Ann logged on and wrote three sentences: "I am depressed. I hate being a Mom. I also hate being a stay at home Mom, too!" Three years later, the thread she began is still going on, having accumulated thousands of responses. One woman wrote: "I hate being a mother too. Every day is the same. And to think I won't be free of it until I am like 60 and then my life will be over." Another woman wrote, "I felt so trapped, anxious and overwhelmed. I love my daughter and she's well taken care of but this is not the path I would have taken given a second chance."(Jessica Valenti: Why Have Kids).

Valenti suggests that our society has produced an epidemic of unhappy moms because we have created a standard of parenthood perfection that cannot be met. Many moms feel bullied by social pressure into breastfeeding or not breastfeeding, intimidated by the latest fads and theories about maternal bonding, or are made to feel that any childcare decision other than staying at

home full time is at best a necessary compromise. First, Valenti suggests we should stop telling mothers that this is the hardest, most important job that they will ever have. If that were really so, more men would clamor to stay home and claim the primary parenting role for themselves. Parenting is hard work. But at its core, it is a relationship, through which we grow, as well as give, and through which we learn many of the lessons of life. Seen in this light, as a journey rather than as a job, it's easier to balance the awesome responsibilities of raising kids with its gifts; to focus on the "joy," instead of the "oy".

Here are some of the things we learn from our relationships with children: Because they are bottomless in their demands, which can never be fully met, we learn patience and humility. Because they are vulnerable and dependent, we learn responsibility and compassion. Their unpredictability teaches us to be flexible. Their capacity to wonder rejuvenates our sense of awe, and their capacity to love deepens our own. Actually, these are lessons that we learn in any relationship that we take seriously, any "I-Thou" relationship, as Buber describes it, in which we see God's presence reflected in the essence of the other, although with children the dynamic is writ large. And it is through these relationships, and the responsibilities that they bestow on us, that we grow on our journey through life.

When I am at a family's home for a baby naming or for a bris, I always like to point out that it is unique to celebrate a life cycle ceremony in the home. Bar\Bat Mitzvahs and weddings for example, are celebrated in public. This is the norm in Jewish tradition, to take our individual life-cycle events and celebrate them ritually in the context of community. But when a baby is born, we tend to do the opposite; we bring the community, family and friends, into the home. I think that's because bringing a new baby home is both wonderful, and frightening. I remember the panic that Fran and I felt when we brought our first child home to our tiny New York City

apartment. Looking beyond the initial homecoming, new parents come face to face with the reality that no aspect of their lives will ever be the same again. So a bris, and in recent decades, a baby naming ceremony for a girl, is commonly held at home, surrounded by family and friends, as a way of reminding the new parents that they are never completely alone- they have back-up (well, maybe not 3:00am backup). They have friends and family, and a community who are there for them and who can be called upon to help. We all need that.

Here in our Temple Israel community, when a baby is born, most parents take the opportunity to write their own naming ceremony, combining traditional texts with their own aspirations and wishes. They always include details about whom the baby is named for, honoring their relationship to the past even as the future unfolds before them. But just last week, at the naming of little Sela Finstein Schneider, we added an element of ceremony that was new. Parents and friends held firmly to the edges of her father's tallit as little Sela lightly bounced, as if in a hammock, in its center. For a few moments, she lay there in wonder, held aloft in the tallit, held by no hands in particular, but supported by many. As we swaddled her in the four corners of the garment, I thought to myself: it doesn't only take a village to raise a child, it takes a village to live a life. When we live in community, we are not in this alone.

But sometimes, a person may feel so alone, so cut off from the sources of support that nurture and sustain our souls, that we stumble and fail; we give up. Here is an extreme example: In 2008, Nebraska passed a safe – haven law, in order to address increased rates of infanticide. Many states have such laws. By decriminalizing child abandonment, parents who feel unprepared to care for their newborns, can drop them off at hospitals, without fear of criminal prosecution. The Nebraska law, however, neglected to implement one key provision: an age limitation for dropped-off children. Within two months, thirty-six children were left at state

hospitals and police stations, but none of them were newborns. Twenty-two of the children were over the age of thirteen, and eight were between ten and twelve. A grandmother dropped off a twelve year-old boy. A father dropped off his entire family- nine children from ages one to seventeen. On the last day before the State of Nebraska closed the loophole, a grandmother drove over 1000 miles from California in order to drop off her 14 year old grandson. (Valenti).

We rightly recoil when we hear stories about child abandonment. But, actually, these are acts of extreme desperation. These are people so trapped by the emotional and physical circumstances of their lives that they have given up on the future. What they have abandoned is hope. None of us would contemplate ever abandoning a child. And yet, aren't there moments, in the darkest hours of the night, when many of us have come close to the edge of a precipice, when fear of what tomorrow may bring paralyzes us? It can take many forms: "Who am I if I lose this job?" "What will I do if she leaves me?" How can I survive when he dies?"

But we pull back from the edge, and we do survive. We find that we have capacities that we never imagined: to absorb loss, to be open to new realities, to live even when what tomorrow looks like is still a mystery, or even a little frightening. *"Min hametzar karati Yah, anani ba merchav Yah- In the constricted narrow places I call to God, and He answers me from a place of expansiveness and freedom."*

The most striking use of birth imagery that you can find in the Bible is the crossing of the Red Sea. A mother in labor is the metaphor for the birthing of the Jewish people. Consider the scene: After months of planning the Exodus, when the time comes, Moses and the people seem somehow unprepared, beginning the journey in great haste. In the next scene, the Israelites are caught between the waters of the Sea and the pursuing Egyptians. Like a baby not quite ready to

leave the womb, Moses has to push the people beyond their fears, urging them to go forward. Finally, the waters of the red sea split, or quite literally, break, and the people push forward through a narrow straight, like an infant through the birth canal, onward into their future, into life.

In every morning prayer service, there is a moment when we stand up, and sing that song in which our ancestors burst forth after crossing the Red Sea. For me, that song is a powerful reminder that every morning is an opportunity to cross all over again, from a place of narrowness and constriction, to a place of freedom and expansiveness. Every morning, every moment, if we are aware, and open to it, can be an opportunity for rebirth and renewal in our lives. I appreciate that daily reminder, because in the Song of the Red Sea, I hear the echo of Sarah's laughter, which itself is a kind of song.

In the daily morning prayer service, the Rabbis assigned a Psalm of the Day, a unique psalm for each day of the week, and for special occasions. For Rosh Hashanah, the tradition is to recite psalm 8. It may be familiar to some of you, because I often use it at a baby naming. It begins:

*Adonai, our master,*

*What Majesty is yours throughout the world!*

*The heavens display your splendor.*

*The sounds of infants attest to your power;*

*Silencing enemies and the vengeful...*

It is one of the pleasures of my work that each Friday morning Cantor Ken and I celebrate with our Nursery School children. They will tell you that the Rabbi is silly. And I often tell them that it is my job to be silly, to make them laugh. It is the laughter of Sarah that I hear in their voices—the laughter of hope, of faith in the future, the laughter of life's unpredictable surprises. May we take that laughter with us into the coming year as an encouragement to face life's challenges joyfully, vigorously, and without fear. *L' Shannah Tovah Tikateivu!*