Isaac's Laughter: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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By

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“…Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out a window, and saw, and, behold, Isaac was sporting with Rebecca his wife…(Bereishith 26:8).”

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in a shiur for the New York Board of Rabbis, offered keen insight into what this verse might actually mean. Instead of translating metzahek as “sporting,” Rabbi Kushner suggested going to the root meaning of the word: laughter. Isaac was making Rebecca laugh! (See also Targum Onkelos on this verse.)

The verse relates to a difficult time, when Isaac and Rebecca were in a precarious position vis a vis Abimelech. Isaac feared for his life. Rebecca was posing as Isaac’s sister, and was in a vulnerable state. At this time of crisis, Isaac makes Rebecca laugh. He attempts to soothe her.

Earlier in this week’s Torah portion, we find Isaac showing solicitude for Rebecca’s wellbeing. Rebecca had been distraught due to her inability to bear a child. Isaac deeply empathized with her. He prayed for her.

Isaac’s behavior contrasts with that of his father Abraham and his son Jacob. Abraham’s wife Sarah was barren; when Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child with Hagar, Abraham did so without apparent qualms. Jacob’s wife Rachel was barren; when Rachel cried in despair at her barrenness, Jacob responded curtly: “Am I in God’s stead who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb? (Bereishith 30:2)”

Only Isaac is recorded as having had deep sensitivity to the despondent feelings of his wife. Just as his own name suggests laughter, so he sought to bring laughter and optimism into the life of Rebecca.

We are not speaking here of silly laughter, or telling jokes to evoke a guffaw. Superficial comedians can actually be among the saddest and most pathetic people, hiding their inner selves by pretending to be happy and humorous.

Rather, we are speaking of a positive worldview that seeks to bring light and joy to others on a profound emotional level. We are speaking of the special qualities of genuine empathy and loyalty that reflect love and happiness.

In his book, Happiness and the Human Spirit (Jewish Lights, 2009), Dr. Abraham Twerski describes what he calls “Spiritual Deficiency Syndrome.” People feel a sense of malaise with their lives…because they do not realize that happiness depends on a spiritual worldview. They cannot gain happiness simply by attaining more physical or material things; they will always be left wanting more. A spiritual deficiency is a lack in the development of those qualities which distinguish human beings from mere biological organisms.

Among the human characteristics that is essential for happiness is compassion, a feeling of empathy for others. Dr. Twerski, who is both a rabbi and a psychiatrist, writes: “As a physician, I try to fix people’s pain, to relieve them of their suffering. But as a rabbi, I learned to share people’s pain. As advanced as modern medicine is, there are still times when I cannot fix things, but I can always share (p. 73).” He points out that empathic listening is a vital ingredient in living a happy and fulfilled life.

Dr. Twerski notes that those who try to control others suffer from Spiritual Deficiency Syndrome. Instead of trying to share with others, they try to control others. This reflects their basic discontent with themselves; to compensate for their poor self-image, they seek to lord over others and thereby gain status. But this strategy inevitably fails, because the controller still remains discontented. Dr. Twerski notes: “People who fulfill themselves by controlling others are caught in a vicious cycle. Because control is the antithesis of true self-fulfillment, the more we try to exert control, the less we fulfill ourselves, the greater our symptoms of Spiritual Deficiency Syndrome (p. 79).”

By empathizing with Rebecca’s plight, Isaac showed himself to be a spiritually sensitive person. His love and loyalty led him to pray for Rebecca and to make her laugh, to make her see the brighter aspects of life.

The quiet, meditative Isaac earned his place as one of our forefathers.

Angel for Shabbat