Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Lekh Lekha

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Lekh Lekha:
Abraham and Sarah's Laughter

When God promises Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son in their old age, both respond with laughter. Their reactions appear remarkably similar, yet God responds to them differently. Abraham receives reassurance, while Sarah is challenged for her apparent disbelief. Why does God treat their seemingly identical reactions so differently?

When God informs Abraham that Sarah will bear a son, the Torah relates: Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!" God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac" (Genesis 17:17–19).

In the following chapter, Sarah overhears the promise that she will bear a son: And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment, with my husband so old?" Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:12–14).

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh, expressing astonishment that they could have a child at such advanced ages. Yet God does not explicitly criticize Abraham,

whereas Sarah's laughter elicits a divine rebuke. Classical commentators offer several approaches to this striking discrepancy.

Onkelos distinguishes between the two instances of laughter. He translates Abraham's laughter as *va-hadei*, indicating joy, while rendering Sarah's laughter as *ve-haykhat*, suggesting laughter expressing disbelief. According to this approach, Abraham rejoiced at God's promise, whereas Sarah doubted its fulfillment. Rashi and Ramban similarly distinguish between the intentions underlying their laughter. Although the Torah employs the same Hebrew verb in both accounts, their emotional and spiritual responses were fundamentally different.

Targum Yerushalmi, however, translates both instances of laughter with forms of the same verb, *tamah*, expressing astonishment. Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann likewise understand Abraham and Sarah as reacting with wonder to the extraordinary promise. This interpretation preserves the close parallel between the biblical accounts, but it leaves the central difficulty unresolved: If both expressed essentially the same astonishment, why did God rebuke Sarah but not Abraham?

Rabbi Saadyah Gaon offers a different solution. He maintains that Abraham, no less than Sarah, demonstrated insufficient faith in God's promise. However, God's rebuke of Sarah was intended to address Abraham indirectly as well. By challenging Sarah's incredulity in Abraham's presence, God indirectly rebuked Abraham as well, enabling him to recognize his own failing without confronting him explicitly. *Midrash HaGadol* and several later commentators adopt this approach.

This interpretation has a particular advantage: It preserves the similarity between Abraham's and Sarah's reactions while explaining how both were subject to divine criticism. Nevertheless, it raises a further question. Why would God spare Abraham the embarrassment of a direct rebuke while openly challenging Sarah? Indeed, God addresses Abraham when questioning Sarah's laughter, making the difference in their treatment all the more conspicuous.

Each interpretation illuminates an important dimension of the narrative, but each also encounters difficulties. Onkelos explains God's different responses by distinguishing between two forms of laughter, although the biblical text uses the same verb. Targum Yerushalmi preserves the parallel between Abraham and Sarah but struggles to explain God's different reactions. Rabbi Saadyah Gaon offers an ingenious reconciliation, yet his interpretation raises questions of its

own.

The account of Abraham and Sarah’s laughter thus illustrates an essential principle of biblical interpretation. Genuine textual difficulties do not always lend themselves to definitive resolution. The classical commentators offer thoughtful and compelling explanations, but the text does not provide sufficient evidence to determine conclusively which approach is correct. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of each interpretation is itself an important part of studying the Torah with intellectual honesty and humility.