

Who Gets the Last Laugh¹

Sarah Yitzchak and the Limits of the Possible

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1 The future we try to understand

It is difficult to get away from election talk. We discuss leadership here in Toronto, political uncertainty in Israel, and the choices facing voters in the United States. Even a conversation that begins with something entirely different can find its way back to who might win and what that might mean for us.

And behind the political conversations are questions that matter very much. What will keep our community safe? Who understands the concerns of Jewish people? What decisions will be made about Iran? What will happen if negotiations succeed, or if they fail? We care because these are questions about people's lives.

We listen to someone who understands the situation. We look at the information available. We compare the possibilities. That is a reasonable thing to do. A person has responsibilities and should use the seichel Hashem has given him.

Listen to the confidence with which we sometimes talk about what will happen next. One person is certain that an election will change everything. Another is equally certain that nothing can change. We all have reasons for our opinions. How much do those reasons actually allow us to know?

We will come back to those conversations. First, I want to put several passages from the parsha in front of us. Listen closely to who laughs, what prompts the laughter, and what the Torah says about it. There are differences here that we need to explain.

2 Avraham hears a promise and a name

Let us begin before the visit of the malachim. In parshas Lech Lecha, Hashem tells Avraham that Sarah will bear him a son. Avraham is ninety-nine at the time of this announcement. He knows what a birth at these ages would mean. Listen to his response.

¹ Adapted from a shiur by Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus, Tiferes Shimshon, Bereishis, Hagdarat Hatzchok, pp. 208-212, with supplementary sources and applications.

1. Bereishis 17:17

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחָק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלֵבֵן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-שָׂרָה הִבְתִּיתְשָׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד:

Avraham fell on his face and laughed. He said in his heart: Will a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? And will Sarah, who is ninety, give birth?

Avraham falls on his face and laughs. He speaks of a hundred-year-old father and a ninety-year-old mother. The Torah records the laughter, but there is no rebuke here. Keep that detail in mind; we will need it when we hear Sarah's response.

Now listen to Hashem's reply. There will indeed be a son, and Hashem Himself gives the child a name.

2. Bereishis 17:19

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶבְרָהָם אִשְׁתְּךָ יֹלְדָת לְךָ בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת-שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִקְרָאתִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לִזְרְעוֹ אֲמַרְיוֹ:

Hashem said: Indeed, Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitzchak. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

The name is not a passing remark made by the parents. It is part of the divine promise and covenant: "You shall call his name Yitzchak." Laughter is being built into the identity of one of the Avos (patriarchs).

Let us play a little Family Feud style game. Imagine that we asked a studio audience for one word to describe Yitzchak. This is our classroom game, not an actual survey. What would you put on the board?

Reveal the first suggestion: פחד — pachad, fear. That certainly sounds like Yitzchak.

Another suggestion: גבורה — gevurah, strength. That fits the picture too.

And another: מסירות נפש — mesirus nefesh, self-sacrifice. Think of the Akeidah.

Question 1. Why does Hashem name an Av (patriarch) for laughter, and make that response his permanent identity? If we had to describe Yitzchak in one word, would we choose laughter? We would sooner say pachad, fear; gevurah, strength; or mesirus nefesh, self-sacrifice. He was hardly the family comedian! How can laughter express who Yitzchak is?

A child's name can express his task and his place in the world. What does laughter tell us about the task of Yitzchak? Let us leave that open and follow the story into our parsha.

But here is the surprise at the top of our board: יצחק — Yitzchak, he will laugh! It is the name Hashem chose. How does laughter describe this Av, this patriarch, whose life we associate with fear, strength and self-sacrifice? That is the question we have to answer.

3 Sarah hears the announcement and welcomes the child

In Vayeira, the visitors come to Avraham's tent. Sarah is listening as one of them promises to return at this time next year, when she will have a son. Before describing her response, the Torah asks us to take account of the physical circumstances.

3. Bereishis 18:10

וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֶשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהָיָה בֶן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שָׁמְעָה כְּתֵחַ הָאֵהָל וְהוּא אָחֳרָיו:

He said: I will surely return to you at this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son. Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

4. Bereishis 18:11

וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זָקְנִים בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים הַהֵם לְהִיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֵרֶחַ כְּנָשִׁים:

Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. Sarah had ceased to experience the way of women.

The Torah places the promise and the ordinary course of nature beside one another. Avraham and Sarah are old; Sarah has ceased to have the bodily conditions normally associated with childbirth. We are being prepared to hear news that goes beyond the existing picture.

With those circumstances before us, listen to Sarah's response and then to Hashem's question to Avraham.

5. Bereishis 18:12

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אֶחָדִי בְלֹתִי הֲיִתְהַלֵּל עַדָּנָה וְאֵדֹנִי זָקֵן:

Sarah laughed within herself, saying: After I have become worn, shall I have renewed youth, while my husband is old?

6. Bereishis 18:13

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צָחָקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֶמְנָם אֵלֶּד וְאֵנִי זָקְנָתִי:

Hashem said to Avraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I really give birth when I have grown old?

Sarah laughs within herself. Then Hashem asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" The Torah is directing our attention to the laughter itself. We have already heard Avraham laugh at the prospect of this birth. Here, however, the response is challenged.

Question 2. Why is Sarah's laughter challenged? What exactly is deficient in her response?

We should be precise. The question is not merely whether childbirth at this age is unusual. The Torah has already made that clear. We need to understand what Sarah's laughter expresses.

Hashem's next words take us beyond the ages of the parents. He asks whether anything is beyond Him. The exchange then returns to the laughter.

7. Bereishis 18:14

הִיפֹלֵא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְלִשְׂכָּה בֶן:

Is anything beyond Hashem? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.

8. Bereishis 18:15

וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂכָה לֵאמֹר לֹא צָחֲקֵיתִי כִּי יִרְאָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צָחֲקֵיתִי:

Sarah denied it, saying: I did not laugh, for she was afraid. He said: No, you did laugh.

"Is anything beyond Hashem?" That is the question at the heart of the announcement. Then Sarah says, "I did not laugh," and the reply is, "No, you did laugh." The Torah could have ended with the renewed promise. Instead, it gives us this exchange.

Question 3. The Torah says that Sarah laughed. Yet Sarah says, "I did not laugh," and the reply is, "No, you did laugh." It appears that Sarah Imeinu is lying. How can we understand such a thing?

We are speaking about Sarah Imeinu. We must understand this apparent denial of the truth. Keep that difficulty before us as we investigate the meaning of laughter.

Now move forward to the birth. The promised event has become a reality. Notice how the opening words emphasize the fulfillment of what Hashem had said.

9. Bereishis 21:1

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁלֹשׁ אֶתְשָׁכָה כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לִשְׂכָּה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר:

Hashem attended to Sarah as He had said, and Hashem did for Sarah as He had spoken.

10. Bereishis 21:2

וַתֵּהָר וַתֵּלֵד שָׂכָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לִזְקָנֹוֹ לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים:

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the appointed time of which Hashem had spoken to him.

11. Bereishis 21:3

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שְׁם־בְּנוֹ הַנּוֹלָד־לּוֹ אֶשְׁרֵי־לֵדָהּ לֵאמֹר יִצְחָק׃

Avraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Yitzchak.

The child is born at the appointed time, and Avraham gives him the name Hashem commanded. The laughter has become a living child, with a name that the Jewish people will continue to say.

The Torah next records the bris and the age of the father. These are not detached biographical details. The child enters the covenant, and the age that seemed to stand in the way of his birth is recorded again.

12. Bereishis 21:4

וַיִּמַּל אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בֶּן־שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱתֹנִי אֱלֹהִים׃

Avraham circumcised his son Yitzchak at eight days old, as Hashem had commanded him.

13. Bereishis 21:5

וַאֲבְרָהָם בֶּן־מֵאָה שָׁנָה בְּהוֹלִיד לּוֹ אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ׃

Avraham was a hundred years old when his son Yitzchak was born to him.

Avraham is one hundred years old when Yitzchak is born. We have now heard both the promise that seemed beyond nature and its fulfillment. What will Sarah say about laughter now?

Listen to Sarah after the birth. Earlier the laughter was challenged. Now she speaks of laughter as a gift from Hashem, something that everyone who hears will share.

14. Bereishis 21:6

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צִחֶק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כְּלִי־הַשְׂמֵעַ יִצְחָק־לִי׃

Sarah said: Hashem has made laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh with me.

15. Bereishis 21:7

וַתֹּאמֶר מִי מִלֵּל לְאַבְרָהָם הַיִּנִּיקָה בָּנִים שָׂרָה כִּי־יֵלְדָתִי בֵּן לְזָקְנָי׃

She said: Who would have said to Avraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne a son in his old age.

“Hashem has made laughter for me.” Sarah does not put laughter aside as an unfortunate beginning to the story. She welcomes it. She invites us to hear the wonder of this birth.

Question 4. After Yitzchak's birth, Sarah speaks joyfully of laughter and invites everyone who hears to share it. What is different here? Why does Hashem not criticize this laughter, as He did earlier?

The answer cannot be that laughter itself is always wrong. It belongs in the story of this birth. We must learn to distinguish one kind of laughter from another.

Before leaving these passages, let us return to Avraham's response to the original promise. We can now place it alongside the two responses of Sarah that we have just learned.

1. Bereishis 17:17

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחָק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלֵבֵן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יוֹלֵד וְאִם-שָׂרָה הִבְתִּי-תִשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד:

Avraham fell on his face and laughed. He said in his heart: Will a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? And will Sarah, who is ninety, give birth?

Avraham too laughed and spoke about the ages of the parents. Yet the Torah did not record a rebuke there. We now have enough of the story before us to formulate the comparison.

Question 5. Avraham also laughed. Why was he not challenged as Sarah was?

Return in your mind to the first pasuk we read. The action sounds similar, but the Torah's response differs. We will bring the Rashi that addresses this comparison when we have the language to explain it. First, we need to understand the human faculty called laughter.

4 The noise of foolish laughter

To understand laughter, let us begin with a very different description of it. Koheles pictures thorns burning beneath a pot. Before we apply the image, let us read his words.

16. Koheles 7:6

כִּי קֶקוֹל הַסִּירִים תַּחַת הַסִּיר ...

For like the sound of thorns beneath the pot, ...

16. Koheles 7:6 continued

כֵּן שִׁחֻק הַכְּסִיל וְגַם-זֶה הֶבֶל:

so is the laughter of the fool. This too is vanity.

Koheles 7:6 compares the laughter of a fool to the sound of thorns burning beneath a pot. Thorns make a crackling noise. There can be a great deal of sound. Koheles asks us to consider whether the sound expresses anything of substance.

A thorn fire can announce itself very loudly. Its crackling does not by itself tell us how much substance it has. Koheles asks us to listen to foolish laughter in that way.

Question 6. How can laughter identify an Av (patriarch) if it can also be the empty noise of a fool?

That question is useful. It makes us distinguish the human capacity from the use a person makes of it. A faculty can be precious while a particular expression of it is shallow. The discussion has to reach the faculty itself.

The image becomes clearer through a Midrash about trees. The Midrash contrasts fruit-bearing trees with barren trees. Let us read the exchange itself before we explain it.

17. Bereishis Rabbah 16:3 selection

אומרים לאילני מאכל למה אין קולכם הולך? אמרו להם אין אנו צריכין פירותינו מעידין עלינו.

The fruit trees are asked why their sound is not heard. They answer that they have no need: their fruit testifies for them.

17. Bereishis Rabbah 16:3 continued

אומרים לאילני סרק למה קולכם הולך? אמרו להם הלואי נשמע קולינו ונראה.

The barren trees are asked why they make noise. They answer: If only our sound will be heard and we will be noticed.

The Midrash gives us a picture of trees. The fruit-bearing trees are asked why their sound is not heard. Their fruit is sufficient testimony to their presence. The trees without fruit are asked why they make noise. If they do not make themselves heard, who will know that they are there?

The fruit-bearing tree does not need to call attention to itself. Its fruit already tells you what it contributes. The barren tree asks, in effect, to be noticed through its sound. The Midrash supplies the picture; now we can understand how that picture illuminates Koheles.

The Gra applies this distinction to the laughter of the fool. Notice the contrast between noise that draws attention and fruit that speaks for itself.

18. The Gra in Divrei Eliyahu as quoted in Tiferes Shimshon pp. 208-209 — Hebrew summary

והנה הבהמה אינה יכולה לשחוק, אבל הכסיל שוחק ומרים קולו.

An animal cannot laugh, while the fool laughs and raises his voice.

Here laughter concerns a reflective recognition: a person grasps the contrast between the familiar picture and its surprising reversal. Chochmah allows us to consider what that contrast means, beyond its immediate usefulness to us.

We can recognize the human phenomenon. A person wants to establish that he is present. He wants others to notice him. Noise can take the place of something more substantial. The Gra applies this image to the laughter of a fool.

The Gra, as quoted in Divrei Eliyahu, considers the distinction between human laughter and the animal. The fool raises his voice as though the ability to laugh were enough to establish his superiority. But what is the value of that ability if he does not use the wisdom that gives it meaning?

There are two distinctions to keep in view: a human being possesses seichel and can laugh. The image of the trees also contains two distinctions from the inanimate: a tree may bear fruit, and its wood may serve as fuel. The fruit-bearing tree has its fruit to testify for it. The barren thorn, when set alight, crackles as though announcing that it too belongs among the trees. In the same way, the fool who lacks chochmah makes much of his laughter, as though the sound alone established what it means to be human.

Why should this be a significant difference? An animal has life and sensations. It eats, drinks, moves and responds to what happens around it. What does a person possess that becomes visible in laughter?

The answer turns on the ability to perceive a chiddush. The person recognizes something as new or striking in relation to what he already understands. To see why that matters, let us take a familiar example.

Answer to Question 6. The faculty is valuable because it can express recognition of chiddush. The fool uses its sound as a substitute for chochmah. The same faculty can serve a profound recognition of Hashem when directed properly.

5 What the mind recognizes before we laugh

Picture a man walking along in a beautiful white shirt. He is pleased with himself, and there is a certain dignity to the scene. Before anything happens, what picture have you formed of him?

Now he falls into the mud. He is unhurt, but the white shirt is covered in mud. A moment ago he appeared dignified and self-assured; now the picture has suddenly changed. It is this harmless reversal, rather than pain or injury, that can provoke laughter.

Question 7. What has the mind recognized in the moment before a person laughs?

The white shirt by itself was not funny. The mud by itself was not funny. What changed between the first picture and the second?

A white shirt by itself is not funny. Mud by itself is not funny. What produces the response is the departure from the pattern the observer had already formed.

Something about the new picture collides with the picture that was there a moment before.

The more unusual the departure, the more striking the effect can be. Laughter involves a mind that can recognize how things ordinarily go and then experience the unexpectedness of what has occurred.

What has to be present in your mind before you can be surprised? If you had no sense of the ordinary, could anything strike you as extraordinary?

Answer to Question 7. The observer recognizes a striking departure from the picture already formed in his mind. That recognition can provoke laughter. Novelty alone does not make every event funny; here the expected picture has been overturned in a harmless, striking way.

Consider an animal that ordinarily receives barley. One day its trough contains delicious fruit. Does it notice? Certainly it may: it can smell the fruit, distinguish it from barley and respond eagerly to food it prefers. Now suppose the trough is empty. It can notice that too, search for its food and become distressed. So we cannot explain the difference by saying that the animal notices nothing, remembers nothing or expects nothing.

What is missing from those responses? Eating the fruit answers a question about appetite: "Is there something here that I want?" Searching the empty trough answers a question about an unmet need: "Where is my food?" Even surprise at the change remains a response to what has happened. None of those reactions, by itself, expresses the further thought: "How extraordinary that the familiar arrangement has been overturned!"

Laughter expresses this reflective recognition of chiddush. The human mind can hold together two pictures: the ordinary course of things and what has now appeared in its place. A person can appreciate the relationship between them. He can see the unexpected as unexpected, find the reversal absurd or delightful, and enjoy the discovery itself.

Imagine someone setting a magnificent banquet of delicacies before an animal in its stall. The animal may enjoy the food. A human observer, even one who is not hungry and will eat none of it, can smile at the incongruity: a royal banquet in a feeding trough! What he enjoys is the surprising relationship between the two pictures. The humor is not in the fruit's taste. Nor is there anything funny about an animal going hungry; an empty trough simply makes clear that detecting a change and appreciating a chiddush are different questions.

The missing ingredient we are trying to identify is chochmah: the reflective grasp of what a change reveals about the picture we had taken for granted. A person can move from “something different has happened” to “what I assumed was the whole order of things was not the whole possibility.” That is the capacity we will now carry into our discussion of emunah. When Hashem brings about an extraordinary reality, we can recognize more than a benefit to ourselves: we can recognize something of His greatness.

6 Chochmah and the truth of existence

We say every day that Hashem formed the human being with chochmah. In this teaching, that familiar wording opens a discussion of the wisdom with which a person recognizes truth. Let us hear the berachah and then develop that interpretation.

19. Asher Yatzar opening selection

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה

Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d, King of the universe, Who formed the human being with wisdom.

Among the berachos we say each day is the expression that Hashem formed the human being with chochmah. Chochmah here means recognizing truth. A human being can ask what is really so. He can examine appearances and seek the truth of what exists.

The Rambam begins Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah with the truth of Hashem's existence. Here he asks us to consider what would follow if the Creator did not exist.

The Rambam begins Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah with a fundamental distinction. The Rambam teaches that all existence depends on Hashem. Nothing else could exist independently of Him. His existence, however, does not depend on anything else.

Let us slow down, because the distinction is easy to say and difficult to hold in the mind. We are accustomed to things that need other things. A building needs materials and someone to build it. A person needs conditions that sustain life. Whatever example we take from the created world, we are looking at something whose existence is dependent.

20. Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 1:2

וְאִם יִשְׁעֶלָה עַל הַדַּעַת שֶׁהוּא אֵינוֹ מִצְוִי אֵין דִּבָּר אַחֵר יָכוֹל לְהִמָּצְאוֹת:

If one were to suppose that He did not exist, nothing else could exist.

Now the Rambam reverses the thought. Suppose all created things ceased to exist. Would that affect the existence of Hashem? Read his answer carefully.

21. Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 1:3

ואם יעלה על הדעת שאין כל הנמצאים מלבדו מצויים הוא לבדו יהיה מצוי. ולא יבטל הוא לבטולם.

If one were to suppose that all other beings did not exist, He alone would still exist. Their absence would not negate Him.

21. Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 1:3 continued

שכל הנמצאים צריכין לו והוא ברוך הוא אינו צריך להם ולא לאחד מהם. לפיכך אין אמתתו באמתת אחד מהם:

All beings need Him, while He needs neither them nor any one of them. Therefore His reality is unlike the reality of any of them.

The Rambam's teaching about Hashem is of a different order. We are not placing Him at the top of a list of things that all exist in the same way. Created existence is dependent on Him, while His existence is independent. This helps us understand the recognition of truth that belongs to chochmah.

The human mind can recognize that the world does not account for itself. It can recognize dependence and seek the reality on which dependent existence rests. This is part of what gives human chochmah its elevated meaning.

The Rambam next explains the language of a pasuk in Yirmeyahu. Before reading his explanation, let us see the pasuk itself. It calls Hashem the true G-d.

22. Yirmeyahu 10:10

וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶמֶת הוּא־אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים וּמֶלֶךְ עוֹלָם מִקִּצְפוֹ תִרְעַשׂ הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא־יָכִלוּ גוֹיִם וַיִּשְׁמוּ:

Hashem is the true G-d. He is the living G-d and eternal King. At His anger the earth trembles, and nations cannot endure His wrath.

"Hashem is the true G-d." What kind of truth are we speaking about when we apply that word to His existence?

The second pasuk quoted in the Rambam comes from Devarim. It teaches that there is none besides Him.

23. Devarim 4:35

אַתָּה הָרָאָתָ לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְבָּדוֹ:

You have been shown, so that you may know that Hashem is G-d. There is none besides Him.

With these two expressions before us, listen to the Rambam's explanation of the difference between His existence and ours.

24. Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 1:4

הוא שֶׁהַנְּבִיא אֹמֵר (ירמיה י') "יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶמֶת". הוא לְבַדּוֹ הָאֶמֶת וְאֵין לְאַחַר אֶמֶת כְּאֶמֶתוֹ. וְהוּא שֶׁהַתּוֹכָה אֹמֶרֶת (דְּבָרִים ד' ל') "אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ". כְּלוּמָר אֵין שָׁם מִצּוּי אֶמֶת מִלְּבַדּוֹ כְּמוֹתוֹ:

This is what the prophet means when he says that Hashem is the true G-d. He alone is truth, and no other has truth like His. The Torah says that there is none besides Him: no other has true existence like His.

His truth is not one more example of the way created things exist. All other existence is dependent. His existence is independent. Chochmah can recognize that difference. It can seek the truth that lies beyond appearances.

Now let us take another step. Suppose a person knows that a Creator exists. Has he thereby understood what it means to recognize the Creator's greatness? Has he reached the recognition that allows a meaningful relationship with Hashem?

Consider two comparisons: a wealthy person and a physician. Knowing that someone possesses wealth or medical ability tells us something real about him. But if we imagine Hashem simply as possessing vastly more of a familiar human ability, have we grasped the greatness of the Creator? We must get beyond measuring Him by an enlarged version of powers we already know.

We can illustrate the same difficulty with a carpenter. Someone imagines the Creator as an extraordinarily accomplished maker. That picture has attached great skill to the One Who made the world, but still measures Him within a category drawn from created beings.

We know what wealth, medical ability and skilled work look like. We can imagine them multiplied to an astonishing degree. Our imagination may still be operating inside a familiar category. The recognition we are seeking reaches beyond that category.

The question is how we recognize the Creator Who is free of the boundaries within which all created things exist. That requires us to examine what we mean by limitation and unlimited power.

Question 8. If I imagine a maker with vastly greater skill than mine, have I understood what it means to call Hashem all-powerful?

If I say, "Hashem can do much more than I can," have I yet understood what it means to call Him all-powerful? Or have I only imagined a greater version of powers I already know?

Keep that question in view. We now need to understand what chiddush reveals about the Creator.

7 Chiddush as the revelation of gevurah

Consider the familiar formulations of emunah. They remove bodily limits from our understanding of Hashem. Let us read these short selections and think about what they exclude.

25. Rambam Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:11 excerpts

וכיון שנתברר שאינו גוף וגווייה יתברר שלא יארע לו אחד ממאורעות הגופות. ... ואינו משתנה שאין לו דבר שיגרום לו שינוי.

Since it is clear that He has no body, none of the conditions of bodies applies to Him. ... He does not change, for nothing can cause Him to change.

Hashem has no body and is not subject to bodily conditions. He is not governed by the changes that characterize created things. These principles of emunah teach us to distinguish the Creator from everything He creates.

As we go on to speak of a new reality, keep the distinction clear: the change is in what Hashem creates and in what we come to recognize. We are not describing a change in Hashem Himself.

Hashem's power to bring about chiddush helps us recognize His unlimited power. Hashem is not confined to the possibilities that the present order seems to contain.

Consider the following illustration. Suppose someone asks whether it is possible to put the entire world into a very small box. We immediately say that it cannot be done. According to the conditions we are assuming, the thing proposed does not fit. We know how space works. We know what a box is. The proposal contradicts the existing arrangement.

Our reaction reveals an important distinction. When we call something impossible, we are making a judgment within the order of existence as we know it. Hashem's power to bring about chiddush is not bounded by that order.

The argument goes further than an unexpected event. It concerns Hashem's power to create an entirely new reality from absolute nothingness. The existing order is itself His creation; it cannot serve as an independent boundary on His creative power. The small-box illustration challenges our assumption that the conditions we know must exhaust what He can bring into being.

In this illustration, the difficulty comes from the size and spatial conditions we have assumed. Its purpose is to distinguish the Creator from the conditions of creation.

We can now see the connection between chiddush and recognizing the Creator's unlimited power:

26. Adapted from Tiferes Shimshon p. 210 — Hebrew paraphrase

כח החידוש! היינו שבכחו יתברך לחדש חידושים, וזהו ההוראה על אין סופיות הבורא.

The power of chiddush: His power to bring about new realities reveals the Creator's infinitude.

There is also a reverse side to the argument. Imagine a power that could only operate within the unchanging limits of what already exists, with no capacity to bring about anything new. However impressive it might appear within those limits, we would not yet be speaking about unlimited power.

The capacity for chiddush therefore matters to how we recognize Hashem's greatness. It is not a decorative addition to our belief that He exists. It helps us recognize the difference between the Creator and the conditions of His creation.

Answer to Question 8. A vastly more accomplished craftsman would still belong to a familiar category of created power. The power of chiddush directs our recognition toward the Creator, Whose power is not bounded by the existing conditions of creation.

Question 9. Why should laughter belong especially to Yitzchak, the Av (patriarch) associated with gevurah?

This power of chiddush reveals gevurah. Here gevurah concerns divine might, the revelation that Hashem is not limited by the conditions within which His creatures operate. It helps us understand why laughter belongs to Yitzchak, the Av (patriarch) associated with gevurah.

We can now connect the two sides of the argument. Gevurah reveals the power to bring about chiddush. Laughter is the human response to recognizing chiddush. The connection is beginning to emerge.

Now we can return to the human mind. Why can a person begin to understand this? Because the person has a capacity to recognize chiddush. We understand the familiar order and recognize something that transcends what we expected from it. That capacity is a means through which a human being can recognize Hashem.

In this account of the human distinction, the animal does not possess that reflective recognition. Its experience does not lead it to the same apprehension of a new reality beyond the familiar order. A person can recognize that something extraordinary has occurred and begin to understand what it reveals about the One who brought it about.

A creature whose awareness is confined to its own experience cannot, through that awareness alone, apprehend what is higher than its own measure. The human recognition of chiddush opens a way to recognize the greatness of the Creator beyond ourselves. This is why the ability matters so deeply: it can lead us beyond our familiar frame of reference into recognition of Hashem.

At that point, the person responds with laughter of love and genuine wonder. The recognition touches him. It becomes a living response to the greatness of Hashem.

We have travelled a long way from the white shirt and the mud. The same general human capacity to recognize a striking departure has led us toward an encounter with divine greatness. Of course, the spiritual value of the two experiences differs enormously. The familiar experience helps us understand the faculty that can serve something much higher.

When something extraordinary happens, do I only notice that it is unusual, or do I ask what it reveals about Hashem? What would turn surprise into a response of love?

We can now return to the child whose name first raised our question.

8 The birth that embodied chiddush

Now we can return to Yitzchak. His name is connected to laughter because his existence was chiddush. The circumstances of his birth made that visible from the beginning.

Avraham and Sarah were unable to have this child through the ordinary course of nature. The difficulty was not only a matter of their physical condition. Avraham's understanding of the mazalos also indicated that he would not have a child. In the order he could discern, this birth had no place.

27. Shabbos 156a excerpt

אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, נסתכלתי באיצטגנינות שלי ואיני ראוי להוליד בן. אמר ליה: צא מאיצטגנינות שלך, שאין מזל לישראל.

Avraham said before Him: Master of the world, I have examined my astrology and am not fit to father a son. He said to him: Leave your astrology, for Israel is not bound by the stars.

When Yitzchak was born, a new reality appeared where the existing order did not provide for it. Avraham and Sarah could recognize what that revealed about Hashem. The event called forth laughter because its chiddush was so great.

Every time the name Yitzchak is spoken, it preserves that recognition. His existence bears witness to the fact that the conditions visible within creation do not set the limit of Hashem's power.

That also helps us answer the question about gevurah. Yitzchak's association with divine might and his association with laughter belong to the same argument. His existence reveals the power to bring about chiddush, and the recognition of that chiddush calls forth laughter.

We can now return to Sarah. The birth is supposed to evoke laughter. We can now understand why. So what was the problem when Sarah laughed at the announcement?

That answers question 1: the name preserves the recognition of a new reality brought about by Hashem. It also answers question 9: the chiddush reveals gevurah, and recognition of the chiddush calls forth laughter. We have not yet answered the difficulty about Sarah. Let us return to her words now.

Answer to Question 1. Yitzchak's existence embodies chiddush. His name preserves the joyful recognition of the new reality Hashem brought about. The laughter is the joy of recognizing Hashem's greatness; it does not mean that his personality was that of a comedian. His fear, gevurah and self-sacrifice can therefore stand together with the laughter expressed by his name. Its future tense will take us still further, toward the laughter of Olam Haba.

Answer to Question 9. Gevurah reveals Hashem's power to bring about chiddush. Laughter is the human response to recognizing that chiddush. Yitzchak embodies their connection.

9 The laughter that was questioned

Recall the sequence we learned: Sarah laughed at the announcement; Hashem challenged the response; after the birth, Sarah welcomed laughter. The distinction is between kinds of laughter. Let us read a selected excerpt from the maamar.

28. Tiferes Shimshon p. 211 excerpt with an omission

כל ההקפדה שהיתה על שרה לא היתה על עצם השחוק, אלא שהיה זה שחוק של לעג מרוב החידוש ... ולא שחוק של שמחה על החידוש.

The criticism concerned the kind of laughter: mockery in response to the extraordinary, rather than joy in the extraordinary.

There is a precise distinction here. The criticism concerned a laughter that mocked the chiddush. The fitting response would have been a laughter that rejoiced in the chiddush.

Answer to Question 2. The criticism concerns the quality of Sarah's response: the extraordinary should evoke joyful recognition of Hashem's chiddush. A dismissive response to the chiddush fails to express that recognition.

That distinction explains why laughter can be questioned and then welcomed. But what about Sarah's denial? Ramban offers another reading of the exchange: Avraham is the one addressing Sarah. Let us follow his reading to understand her fear and what she did not yet know.

29. Ramban on Bereishis 18:15 selection

והיא מפני יראתו של אברהם תכחש כי חשבה שאברהם בהכרת פניה יאמר כן או מפני ששתקה ולא נתנה שבח והודאה בדבר ולא שמחה

She denied it out of fear of Avraham, thinking that he inferred it from her expression, or from her silence and lack of thanks and joy.

29. Ramban on Bereishis 18:15 continued

והוא אמר לא כי צחקת אז הבינה כי בנבואה נאמר לו כן ושתקה ולא ענתה אותו דבר

When he said, “No, you did laugh,” she understood that he knew through prophecy, and she remained silent.

We should hear how close the two responses can appear from outside. Both involve recognizing that something lies beyond the familiar course of events. But the person’s relationship to that extraordinary possibility is different.

A person can hear something and respond with a dismissive laugh. The laughter says that the suggestion is too extraordinary to be taken seriously. Or a person can recognize that Hashem is bringing about something extraordinary and respond with joy. The extraordinariness itself becomes a reason to rejoice.

This helps us understand Sarah’s laughter. Laughter belonged in the story, but its quality mattered. The response should have expressed joy in the chiddush.

After the birth, Sarah says that Hashem has made laughter for her and that everyone who hears will share it. This expresses joy over the chiddush of Yitzchak’s birth. The extraordinary event can now be shared as a source of rejoicing.

Answer to Question 3. Sarah really had laughed inwardly, and she denied that she had done so. According to Ramban, she spoke out of fear of Avraham, thinking that he had inferred her response from outward signs. When he insisted, she understood that his knowledge came through nevuah, and she stopped denying it. Ramban describes her becoming silent; the Torah records no spoken confession.

First, what had actually happened? Sarah heard the announcement and laughed within herself. Ramban describes that inner response as scoffing: the promised birth seemed impossible to her. She did not know that the visitors were malachim. Avraham then challenged her laughter without telling her that Hashem had disclosed her inward response to him.

Second, what did she deny? She said, “I did not laugh.” She was denying the inward laughter itself. She thought Avraham was drawing a conclusion from her expression, or from her silence and failure to give thanks and rejoice. Afraid of him, she denied his charge. Ramban is not saying that her denial was true, or that she merely meant, “I did not laugh aloud.”

Third, what changed? Avraham firmly replied, “No, you did laugh.” Then, Ramban says, she understood that he had been told through nevuah. He knew her actual inner response, rather than merely guessing from her appearance. She became silent and gave no further answer. She did not admit to a different, innocent kind of laughter; she ceased disputing the inward laughter he had identified. Ramban explains why she first denied it and why she then stopped. He does not turn the denial into a truthful statement.

Answer to Question 4. After the birth, Sarah’s laughter expresses joy and gratitude for the chiddush Hashem has brought about. That is the welcome laughter appropriate to Yitzchak. The earlier criticism concerned the deficient character of the response, rather than a prohibition against laughter itself.

Question 5 remains: what about Avraham? Rashi on the first pasuk we read makes the comparison explicit. He draws attention to the different translations used by Onkelos. Let us read his words.

30. Rashi on Bereishis 17:17 selection with an omission

ויפל אברהם על פניו ויצחק. ... לשון שמחה, וסדי, ושל שכה לשון מחור; למדת שאברהם האמין ושמח ושכה לא האמינה ולגלה, וזהו שהקפיד הקב"ה על שכה ולא הקפיד על אברהם.

“Avraham fell on his face and laughed.” Onkelos translates this as joy, while Sarah’s laughter is expressed as mockery. We learn that Avraham believed and rejoiced, while Sarah did not believe and mocked. This is why Hashem challenged Sarah and did not challenge Avraham.

Rashi on Bereishis 17:17 addresses our comparison with Avraham. Avraham also laughed when told about the child. Rashi points to the difference reflected in Onkelos and explains Avraham’s response as belief and joy, while Sarah’s response is described as unbelief and mockery. This Rashi directly addresses the comparison we raised at the beginning. We can now understand the distinction between those forms of laughter more deeply.

Can you hear the difference between “That is beyond anything I can imagine” said dismissively, and the same words said with wonder? What has changed in the person even though the event being discussed is the same?

The same outward action can express different relationships to what is being heard. That is why we could not answer the question merely by saying that both Avraham and Sarah laughed.

Answer to Question 5. Rashi explains that Avraham believed and rejoiced. The similar outward act expressed a different inward response, and therefore did not receive the criticism directed at Sarah’s laughter.

Was Sarah deficient in emunah?

We have to ask the question directly. Rashi says that Avraham believed and rejoiced, while Sarah did not believe and mocked. Was something lacking in Sarah's emunah? And why could Avraham respond with joy to what she found so difficult to believe?

According to Rashi, there was a real shortcoming in her response to this announcement. We should preserve the force of his words. The question concerns this particular promise and this particular moment; it does not give us a description of Sarah's entire life of emunah. Hashem's challenge, "Is anything beyond Hashem?" calls her to receive this extraordinary possibility differently.

Ramban supplies a further distinction: Sarah did not know that the visitors were angels. She was not knowingly rejecting a divine promise that she had recognized as such. Even so, he explains that a righteous woman should welcome the possibility that Hashem could do this, rather than dismiss it. Knowing in general that Hashem can perform wonders and receiving this astonishing possibility with one's whole heart are not always the same experience.

Perhaps Avraham's experience at the furnace helps us appreciate his response. Rashi on Bereishis 11:28 recounts his miraculous rescue. He had personally lived through an event in which the expected course of nature did not determine the outcome. Might that experience have helped him greet another extraordinary promise with joy? It is a possibility worth considering.

But Sarah, too, had already experienced miraculous protection in Egypt; Rashi on Bereishis 12:17 describes the angel acting on her behalf. So we cannot explain the contrast by saying that Avraham had experienced miracles and Sarah had experienced none. The deeper lesson is how demanding it can be to bring emunah into a new and intensely personal situation. Even someone who has known Hashem's wonders can still be called to grow in receiving the next chiddush.

10 Yitzchak after the Akeidah

Until now we have explained the chiddush of Yitzchak's birth. But a person lives for many years after his birth. Let us follow Yitzchak to the Akeidah and see whether this name describes only the beginning of his life.

Question 10. Why should the name Yitzchak remain his identity long after the extraordinary circumstances of his birth?

At the Akeidah, the Torah brings us to another encounter with the limits of ordinary life. Listen to the Torah's description:

Avraham and Yitzchak have reached the place Hashem indicated. Avraham builds the mizbe'ach, arranges the wood and binds Yitzchak. Listen to the next action.

31. Bereishis 22:9

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיְבִן שָׁם אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת־הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׁם אֹתוֹ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לָעֵצִים:

They came to the place of which Hashem had told him. Avraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Yitzchak and placed him on the altar, above the wood.

32. Bereishis 22:10

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבִרְהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

Avraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

The Torah brings us to the moment when Avraham takes the knife. The next words are the command that stops him.

At that moment, the call comes from heaven.

33. Bereishis 22:11

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מֵלֶאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

An angel of Hashem called to him from heaven and said: Avraham, Avraham. He answered: Here I am.

Avraham answers, "Here I am." What will he now be told?

34. Bereishis 22:12

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנֶּעַר וְאַל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִירָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חִשַּׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

He said: Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear Hashem, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.

The command stops the action. Yitzchak remains alive. Chazal reveal another dimension of what happened in this encounter. We need to read that Midrash as well.

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer describes the departure and return of Yitzchak's neshamah. Here is the passage itself.

35. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 31:10

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: כִּי־נָשָׂה הַחֶרֶב עַל צַוָּאָרוֹ, פָּרְחָה וַיִּצָּאָה נַפְשׁוֹ שֶׁל יִצְחָק. וְכֵן נִשְׁתַּמֵּיעַ קוֹלוֹ מִבֵּין הַכְּרוּבִים וַאֲמַר לוֹ "אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ", נַפְשׁוֹ חֲזָרָה לְגוֹפוֹ, וְקָם וַעֲמַד יִצְחָק עַל בִּגְדָיו.

Rabbi Yehudah says: When the blade reached his neck, Yitzchak's soul departed. When Hashem made His voice heard from between the cherubim and said to him,

“Do not stretch out your hand,” his soul returned to his body, and Yitzchak rose and stood on his feet.

35. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 31 continued

וַיֵּדַע יִצְחָק שֶׁכֵּן הַמֵּתִים עֲתִידִים לְהַחְיֹת, וּפָתַח וְאָמַר: “בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים.”

He understood that the dead would one day return to life and began to say: Blessed are You, Hashem, Who revives the dead.

The Midrash describes his soul returning when the divine command stops Avraham. Consider the continuing wonder: Yitzchak remains here, alive in this world. His life continues after an encounter with the end of life.

There is an even more striking expression. In the discussion of how the returning exiles recognized the site of the mizbe'ach, the Gemara speaks of Yitzchak's ashes. Let us read the words themselves.

36. Zevachim 62a selection

ורבי יצחק נפחא אמר: אפרו של יצחק ראו שמונח באותו מקום.

Rabbi Yitzchak Nappacha said: They saw the ashes of Yitzchak resting at that place.

Let us first see the pasuk that Rashi is explaining. Listen carefully for each mention of remembrance.

37A. Vayikra 26:42

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶף אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶף אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֶזְכֹּר וְהָאֶרֶץ אֶזְכֹּר:

I will remember My covenant with Yaakov; and also My covenant with Yitzchak; and also My covenant with Avraham will I remember; and the land I will remember.

The pasuk says “I will remember” with Yaakov, and again with Avraham. Yitzchak is certainly included in the covenant, but no separate word of remembrance accompanies his name. That precise difference is Rashi's question.

37B. Rashi on Vayikra 26:42 selection

ולמה לא נאמרה זכירה ביצחק? אלא אפרו של יצחק נראה לפני צבור ומונח על המזבח.

Why is remembrance not mentioned with Yitzchak? Because Yitzchak's ashes appear before Me, gathered and resting upon the altar.

Chazal speak of אפרו של יצחק — afaro shel Yitzchak, the ashes of Yitzchak. The Akeidah is present before Hashem with the force of a completed offering. Rashi uses that language to explain why Yitzchak does not need a separate mention of remembrance: his ashes are already before Hashem.

Hold the ashes alongside the living Yitzchak. The paradox becomes stronger still when we speak of his soul departing and even of his becoming ashes, yet he remains here in this world. An olah, and nevertheless alive here! The point is the extraordinary chiddush of an existence that continues beyond the limits we thought defined it.

A clarification belongs beside that teaching. In the plain account of the pesukim, the malach stops Avraham and the ram is offered in Yitzchak's place. Chazal disclose another dimension through the language of his ashes. Keeping these levels distinct lets us preserve both the Torah's narrative and the full force of the maamar's paradox.

Yitzchak — יצחק

Ketz Chai — קץ חי

There is also a reading of the Hebrew letters of יצחק (Yitzchak) as קץ חי (Ketz Chai): reaching an end and yet living. The two forms are יצחק — Yitzchak; קץ חי — Ketz Chai. This is a rearrangement of the letters, a reading that reinforces the theme. Yitzchak's existence continues to carry chiddush.

Yitzchak's life did not return to an ordinary pattern after the Akeidah. He remained an olah temimah, wholly devoted to Hashem, throughout his life.

38. Adapted from Tiferes Shimshon p. 212 — Hebrew paraphrase

ויצחק נשאר עולה תמימה בנפשו כל ימי חייו, עד שהקב"ה ייחד שמו עליו בחייו, מה שלא עשה כן אף לאברהם וליעקב.

Yitzchak remained an unblemished offering in his soul throughout his life. Hashem associated His name with him during his lifetime in a way not done even for Avraham and Yaakov.

Yitzchak remains an olah temimah, wholly devoted to Hashem, throughout his life. He was already attached to Olam Haba, his life wholly bound in holiness. His closeness is so extraordinary that the familiar question becomes: what place does such a person have in this world?

This answers another of our questions. Why should a name referring to laughter remain his identity decades after his birth? Because the name describes something enduring. The chiddush remains woven into his existence and his relationship with Hashem.

This gives the name Yitzchak a continuing meaning. Every further day of that extraordinary life is another chiddush. He is living in this world while already attached to Olam Haba. Each renewed encounter with Hashem's greatness brings another reason for the laughter of recognition and joy.

Now we can understand how laughter can belong to a whole life. The birth was a chiddush, his continuing life after the Akeidah was a chiddush, and his enduring closeness to Hashem made that wonder an ongoing reality. We are speaking of the joy expressed by his name, rather than claiming that he physically laughed at every moment.

There is one more step. Let us turn from Yitzchak's life to the future. The name that has taken us back to his birth will now take us forward.

Answer to Question 10. The chiddush remains woven into Yitzchak's continuing life: his life after the Akeidah, his enduring status as an olah temimah, and his extraordinary closeness to Hashem. The name continues to describe him.

11 The laughter of the future

There is one more dimension to Yitzchak's name, and it is the destination of the whole discussion. יצחק — Yitzchak — is in the future tense: he will laugh. The name turns our attention forward. His birth and the Akeidah have shown us what chiddush means. Now we must ask what laughter still lies ahead.

Yitzchak's name expresses the relationship he established for his descendants. He built Olam Haba for Israel; he is the Av (patriarch) of deveikus and closeness to Hashem. His enduring kedushah establishes that relationship for the people who follow him. The future tense belongs to the world of attachment and delight that he built for Israel.

The fullness of this relationship belongs to Olam Haba. Its delight is closeness to Hashem, and that closeness brings an inexhaustible chiddush. Each new moment discloses more. The name Yitzchak directs us toward that future laughter.

39. Yeshayahu 58:14

אֲזַי תִּתְעַנֵּג עַל־ה' וְהִרְפָּתִיךָ עַל־בְּמִתִּי אֶרֶץ וְהֶאֱכַלְתִּיךָ וְנָחֵלְתָּ יַעֲקֹב אָבִיךָ כִּי פִי ה' דִּבֶּר:

Then you will delight in Hashem. I will cause you to ride upon the heights of the earth and nourish you with the inheritance of Yaakov your father, for the mouth of Hashem has spoken.

“Then you will delight in Hashem.” The promise is of a relationship, a closeness and a delight. What is the character of that experience? Chazal give us the next expression.

In Berachos, Chazal describe the World to Come through enjoyment of the radiance of the Shechinah. Let us read the selection.

40. Berachos 17a selection

העולם הבא אין בו לא אכילה ולא שתיה ... אלא צדיקים יושבין ועטרותיהם בראשיהם ונהנים מזיו השכינה

In the World to Come there is neither eating nor drinking. The righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads and enjoy the radiance of the Shechinah.

The name directs us toward Olam Haba and its closeness to Hashem. We have been learning why an extraordinary event evokes laughter. We now have to consider an extraordinary relationship whose depth continues to unfold.

Hold that description of enjoyment of the Shechinah alongside the language of Tehillim. We are now ready to learn the pasuk about the laughter of the future.

Shir Hamaalos describes the future rejoicing of the Jewish people. Notice the specific response with which the pasuk begins.

41. Tehillim 126:2

אֲזַיִמְלֵא שְׁחֹק פִּינוּ וּלְשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה אֲזַיִאמְרוּ בְּגוֹיִם הַגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּדָלָהּ:

Then our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues with song. Then they will say among the nations: Hashem has done great things with these people.

“Then our mouths will be filled with laughter.” We understand why there will be relief and joy. But after everything we have learned, we can ask more precisely about this laughter.

Question 11. Why will future closeness to Hashem fill our mouths specifically with laughter?

What does Yitzchak’s name teach us about a delight that can continue without becoming familiar and exhausted?

This closeness brings a chiddush in every moment. Each moment brings something that has not been before, and the renewal continues without end.

42. Adapted from Tiferes Shimshon p. 212 — Hebrew paraphrase

כל רגע ורגע על החידוש שיתחדש באותו רגע, חידוש שעוד לא היה, וכן רגע שאחריו, ונצחיות — עד חידוש ועוד חידוש — עד עולם.

Each moment brings a chiddush that has not been before, and the next moment another, continuing without end.

Why laughter? Because closeness to Hashem contains an ever-renewed chiddush. Each moment brings a recognition that was not present in the same way before. When we say “another day” of delight in Olam Haba, we mean this inexhaustible renewal; we need not imagine its experience as the same twenty-four-hour days we know here.

Think about an ordinary pleasure. We can become accustomed to it. What first delighted us can become familiar. That comparison helps us appreciate the extraordinary claim here: the delight of closeness to Hashem will continue to

disclose new depth. Another moment, another chiddush, and then another. The wonder will never be exhausted.

This is why the future tense matters so much. We are not only remembering a laugh at an extraordinary birth long ago. The name of this Av (patriarch) points ahead to a delight that continues to renew itself. He will laugh. Our mouths will be filled with laughter.

Relief from trouble is precious, and the Jewish people long for geulah. Here the conclusion reaches into the positive content of Olam Haba: deveikus and closeness to Hashem. The laughter expresses the chiddush of that closeness as it is continually renewed.

Now look back at where we began. The fool's laughter could be empty noise. The human capacity that can be used so shallowly can also become the response to the deepest recognition of Hashem. The journey from Koheles to Yitzchak has shown us why laughter can belong to something exalted.

It has also shown us why Yitzchak is the right name. His birth, the Akeidah and his enduring kedushah reveal chiddush. His name points toward the future laughter that accompanies renewed closeness to Hashem. The apparently simple word has carried the whole argument.

Before we bring this home, let us answer the central question in one sentence. What distinguishes the laughter that was questioned from the laughter that belongs to Yitzchak? The distinction is whether the extraordinary evokes dismissive mockery or the joy of recognizing Hashem's chiddush.

This answers question 11. The laughter belongs to ever-renewed recognition. Closeness to Hashem will continue to reveal something new; the wonder will not be used up.

Answer to Question 11. Yitzchak built for Israel the relationship of deveikus and closeness whose fullness belongs to Olam Haba. That closeness brings an ever-renewed chiddush: each moment discloses new depth and delight. His future name points toward that inexhaustible laughter.

12 The surprise of Jewish continuity

Consider how this thought illuminates Jewish history. Perhaps the greatest expression we can see in history is the continued existence of the Jewish people. We began with Yitzchak, a child whose birth did not fit the expected picture. Now consider the people who descend from him. The wonder has become the story of a nation.

Think of what Jewish families have carried through exile, displacement and persecution. A parent teaches a child Shema. Another generation opens a

Chumash. Jews gather to learn the words that their grandparents learned. We are doing that very thing in this room.

The wonder is more than physical survival. It is the continuation of a people with its Torah, its mitzvos and its relationship with Hashem. History has given us repeated reasons to fear for that continuity. Yet here we are, still responsible for carrying it forward.

We can call that the great surprise of Jewish history. We must hear the word laughter as we have developed it tonight: the joy of recognizing a reality that exceeds the picture we had formed. The subject is precious, and the suffering along the way is real. The laughter is the wonder of discovering that the suffering has not been the whole story.

Yitzchak's name now sounds different. He is the child whose existence was a chiddush, and we are the people who continue to bear witness to Hashem through our existence and our avodah. Each Jewish child learning Torah makes that continuity visible again.

This also prepares us to hear "Az yimalei sechok pinu." We still await the fullness of that future laughter. We have not reached the end of the story. But even now, our presence here gives us reason to wonder, to thank Hashem and to take our responsibility seriously.

There is an interesting cultural echo here. Jews have made a conspicuous contribution to comedy and comic writing. That observation can open a useful question for us: what do we do with the capacity to notice the unexpected and see beyond the surface of things?

Here is a famous example of Groucho Marx's wordplay, spoken in *Animal Crackers* (1930): "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don't know."

Why is that funny? The first sentence leads us to imagine the speaker wearing pajamas. The second suddenly puts them on the elephant! Our minds have to replace one picture with another. That is clever, ordinary wordplay. It does not by itself teach emunah. The same capacity to appreciate a surprising change can also open our eyes to Hashem's greatness. We can enjoy the wit and still ask how much higher this faculty can reach.

13 Making room for a future we cannot yet see

Let us make a further application to the conversations with which we began. We will still consider the information available to us. We will still have responsibilities as citizens and as members of the Jewish community. The people making decisions about security must take the facts seriously. What we learned should deepen our emunah while we act responsibly.

Consider the way we hold our understanding of those facts. Our assessment takes place within a picture of the present. Hashem is not confined to that picture.

This does not tell us which candidate will win, whether a particular negotiation will succeed, or what will happen in a military conflict. We have not been promised any particular political outcome. We have reason to be humble about treating our visible possibilities as the whole of reality.

We can begin to taste something of that approach in our own lives. Each day, look for one fresh recognition of HaKadosh Baruch Hu: a detail of His wisdom in creation, a Torah insight, a kindness received, or a new understanding of what He asks of us. We need not wait for something spectacular. Something familiar can disclose a depth we had never noticed. "I have seen this before" need not mean "I have understood all there is to see." What an amazing way to live: another day, another discovery of Hashem's greatness, another reason for gratitude and joy.

Question 12. Where have I begun to treat the limits of my past experience as the limits of what Hashem can bring about?

The personal application may be even closer. A person has said the same thing about himself for so long that it feels like a fact of nature. "I have always had a temper." "I have never been able to concentrate on davening." "That relationship has been difficult for years." The history is real. The difficulty deserves to be taken seriously. Yet we can ask whether we have quietly added another sentence: "Therefore nothing can ever be different."

Choose one place where habit has persuaded you that growth is no longer possible. Describe the difficulty honestly, without treating it as the last word. Then choose one responsible action that could help. We cannot demand a miracle or predict Hashem's answer. We can leave room in our minds and hearts for a future whose possibilities we do not yet see.

When an extraordinary possibility is raised, the dismissive laugh can close the conversation before it begins. We have learned about another kind of laughter: the joy of recognizing what Hashem can bring into being.

Answer to Question 12. Identify one place where past experience has hardened into a claim that change is impossible. Describe the difficulty honestly, then take one responsible step toward growth while leaving room for possibilities you do not yet see.

Yitzchak's name has accompanied us for generations. We say it in our tefillos. We teach it to our children. After what we have learned, perhaps we can hear more in it. We can hear the birth that the ordinary order did not contain, the life that continued after the Akeidah, and the kedushah that remained. We can hear a name that also points forward, toward renewed closeness to Hashem and a mouth filled with laughter.

14 Three laughs and the laughter still ahead

A traditional chassidic story brings the subject of laughter into a remarkable Shabbos seudah. One Friday night, the Baal Shem Tov sat at his table with his talmidim. After Kiddush, he broke into an extraordinary laugh. It was so intense that those sitting with him were astonished. They could see nothing at the table that explained it.

He settled back into the seudah. Then he laughed again. After another interval, he laughed a third time. The talmidim had never seen him behave quite like this. They watched, wondered, and did not interrupt him with a question.

The talmidim looked to Reb Ze'ev Wolf Kitzis. On Motzaei Shabbos, when the Baal Shem Tov was smoking his pipe, Reb Ze'ev Wolf would sometimes ask him about something that had happened over Shabbos. Perhaps he would ask about the three laughs.

After Havdalah, he entered and asked the question. The Baal Shem Tov did not give an immediate explanation. He told them that he would show them what had caused his laughter.

The horses were harnessed. The Baal Shem Tov told his companions to join him and to take his weekday clothes. They travelled through the night without knowing their destination. Alexei, the peasant wagon driver, held the reins.

By morning, they had reached Apta. The companions still did not know why they had come. After Shacharis, the Baal Shem Tov asked that a local bookbinder, Reb Shabsi, be brought to him. He specifically asked that Shabsi's wife, Perle, come as well.

The communal host wondered why the Baal Shem Tov wished to meet this old man. Shabsi was honest, he said, but a very simple Jew, without great Torah learning. The Baal Shem Tov nevertheless insisted on seeing him.

When the couple arrived, he asked Shabsi to describe what had happened in their home on Friday night, without leaving anything out. Shabsi was alarmed. He would tell everything, he said, and if he had done something wrong, he asked the Rebbe to tell him how to do teshuvah.

Shabsi explained that he had earned his living by binding books. In better years, his work had supported the household comfortably. By Thursday afternoon, they would buy what they needed for Shabbos: flour, fish, meat, candles and the other provisions.

On Friday he would finish work early and go to shul, where he would read Shir HaShirim and the customary Shabbos readings, remaining through the evening davening. He had kept that practice for many years.

Now he was old. His strength had declined, and he could no longer earn what he once had. The previous Friday, the time to leave for shul arrived, and there was not a coin available for Shabbos. They had not even obtained flour for challah.

He had always worked rather than relying on gifts. He asked his wife to promise that she would not accept provisions from their neighbors, even if they urged her to take them. It was still Friday daytime when he went to shul as usual, with the hours of preparation and his customary readings still ahead. He intended to wait until everyone else had gone home, so no one would accompany him and ask why their window was dark. The couple would accept their circumstances together.

After davening, Shabsi waited. Only when the others had left did he begin the walk home. Then, from a distance, he saw light in his window. He knew there had been nothing with which to prepare Shabbos. How could the house be lit?

He assumed that his wife had been unable to keep her promise. Entering the house, he found the table prepared with challah, fish and wine. He felt the beginnings of anger, but checked himself. If he rebuked her, he would disturb the peace of Shabbos.

He sang Shalom Aleichem and Eishes Chayil. When his wife brought the wine for Kiddush and covered the challahs, he could no longer keep the question to himself. He asked gently why she had broken her promise. But she had a surprise for him: she had accepted nothing from the neighbors.

After he had left for shul, she had continued cleaning the house for Shabbos. In the course of that work, she found an old pair of gloves that had been missing for years.

In those days, such clothing could carry valuable ornaments. The gloves had decorative metal buttons and flowers. She recognized that the silver could pay for what they needed. What had lain forgotten in the house had suddenly become the means of preparing Shabbos.

She took the ornaments to a silversmith and sold the silver. With the payment, she bought the provisions for their meal. There was enough even to leave something for Sunday.

Knowing that her husband would remain late in shul, she bought large candles that would keep burning until he returned. Then she prepared the meal. The light and the food had come through something already belonging to them. She had accepted nothing from the neighbors.

When Shabsi understood what had happened, his eyes filled with tears of joy. He thanked Hashem for enabling them to honor Shabbos. With great joy he made Kiddush. They washed, and he made the berachah over the fresh challahs. After his first bite, he thanked his wife. When she served the fish, he spoke again of the

kindness Hashem had shown them. They could enjoy the seudah without having to accept the gifts he had so wanted to avoid.

He looked at his wife, and his gratitude could no longer remain inside him. He took her by the hand and they danced together, with the enthusiasm of a young couple at their wedding. They kept dancing, their attention on the kindness Hashem had shown them. Imagine the relief and delight of these two elderly people in the privacy of their home.

They sat down and continued their seudah with soup, roasted meat and the other food Perle had prepared. Then the joy rose in him again. They had already thanked Hashem. They had already danced. Yet the gratitude had not been used up. Again he rose with his wife, and again they danced.

Each dance grew out of the same thanksgiving. They continued the meal, tasted the kindness Hashem had granted them, and found that their gratitude had not been exhausted.

After the second dance they were tired, and sat down again. Later, as they enjoyed the fruit and dessert, their hearts filled with joy once more. For a third time they got up and danced. Their delight and thanks once again demanded expression.

Shabsi finished his account with the concern he had expressed at the beginning. Had he done something wrong by dancing with his wife? If so, he wanted to put it right. His intention had been to thank Hashem for His kindness.

Now the Baal Shem Tov explained his own laughter. The heavenly company had rejoiced and danced with Shabsi. Seeing that rejoicing, he too had rejoiced and laughed. His three laughs corresponded to the three dances.

His laughter shared in the rejoicing Above. The talmidim had seen a laugh at their own table; now they understood that it answered the joy of this poor couple, whose home they had never seen.

Only after explaining the laughter did the Baal Shem Tov turn to the wife and offer a blessing. Would she prefer wealth and honor for the remainder of her life, or a son in her old age? The couple had no children.

Her answer looked beyond the comfort of the years she might still live. She wanted a worthy son, someone who would continue after them. The Baal Shem Tov blessed her that in the coming year she would bear a son. He said the child should be called Yisrael, after him, and promised to come as sandek if they informed him of the birth.

The blessing was fulfilled. A son was born to the elderly couple. He was named Yisrael. This was the child who grew to become the Maggid of Kozhnitz, author of Avodas Yisrael. The Baal Shem Tov fulfilled his promise to serve as sandek.

The tradition also describes the Maggid's great physical frailty throughout his life, and then the extraordinary energy of his davening. At prayer he would move, dance and cry out with the strength of a young man. The story of his parents' joy thus opens into the life of a tzaddik whose avodah would bring joy to many others.

Rabbi Yisrael ben Shabsi Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, lived circa 1737–1814, corresponding to 5497–5575. His yahrzeit is 14 Tishrei, Erev Sukkos. He was a talmid of the Maggid of Mezritch and of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, and a major figure in the spread of Chassidus in Poland. His best-known sefer is Avodas Yisrael.

We began with an elderly craftsman and his wife in their small home. The child born to them became a rebbe whose Torah and avodah would reach generations.

And that elderly couple became the parents of the Maggid of Kozhnitz! Yet the three laughs had already answered the joy of their Shabbos: as the Baal Shem Tov told his talmidim, the heavenly company rejoiced with the couple, and he rejoiced with them.

We can draw a connection to our class. We tend to measure a human act by what we can see of it. The story invites us to wonder whether an apparently small avodah can have a significance far beyond our measure. The poor home, the couple's gratitude and their dancing contained a greatness the ordinary observer had not recognized.

An earthly seudah and the rejoicing Above meet, and the Baal Shem Tov's laughter answers what has been disclosed. The story gives us a moment in which a familiar picture opens onto a reality far greater than we had seen.

Now return to the promise in Yitzchak's name. יִצְחָק — Yitzchak — he will laugh. His extraordinary birth, his continuing life after the Akeidah, and his enduring holiness teach us to recognize chiddush. As the Av (patriarch) of deveikus and closeness, he built for Israel the relationship whose delight finds its fullness in Olam Haba.

The fullness of that laughter is still ahead. The Jewish people's continued existence gives us reason for wonder now, and our acts of avodah matter now. Yet the fullness of that laughter awaits the future closeness in which each moment brings a new recognition, another chiddush, another delight.

We began with the name of an Av (patriarch), and can now hear its promise. The delight of drawing close to Hashem will never be exhausted. Another moment, another chiddush, and then another, without end. This hope also illuminates the future for which we daven.

The greatest laughter still ahead

Think of Jews who today feel far from Torah, who cannot imagine Mashiach coming, or who oppose the very Judaism that is their inheritance. If we judge only by the picture in front of us, we may decide that this is simply how things are and how they will remain.

Now imagine that picture overturned. The Jew who could not imagine believing comes to recognize Hashem. The person who seemed furthest away wants to come close. People whom we had quietly written off stand beside us in emunah and joy. And we too discover how much more there was to know. What an astonishing chiddush that will be!

Alongside the delight of Olam Haba, we await Israel's return to Hashem and the coming of Mashiach. Think of that transformation of hearts: what seemed fixed in our expectations of one another can be overturned. Listen to the nevuah's larger horizon:

43. Yeshayahu 11:9 concluding phrase

כִּי מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֶת ה' כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מְכַסִּים:

For the earth will be filled with knowledge of Hashem, as water covers the sea.

The promise of Israel's return is explicit in the Rambam:

44. Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah 7:5 excerpt

וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותן ומיד הן נגאלין.

The Torah has already promised that Israel will ultimately do teshuvah at the end of their exile, and immediately they will be redeemed.

Back to election night

Let us return to the elections with which we began. Imagine this election-night board: Republicans, 56 seats in the Senate; Democrats, 44. In the House, Republicans, 225; Democrats, 210. Now look at the faces in the studio. Wouldn't that be a picture! Depending on whom you ask, someone will be laughing and someone will be staring at the board in disbelief.

This is an imagined result, of course. But it reminds us how quickly the picture we expected can change. Now let us bring the thought back to Yitzchak. The joy for which we ultimately daven reaches far beyond a party winning an election: hearts returning to Hashem and a world that recognizes Him.

Four dimensions of Yitzchak's laughter

Let us gather the thought into four pictures. These are four dimensions of laughter, arranged in the order of our discussion.

Four dimensions of Yitzchak's laughter

1. The promised birth



A name before birth:
"He will laugh."

2. The Akeidah



Soul restored; life itself
becomes a renewed
chiddush.

3. Olam Haba



Closeness to Hashem:
ever-renewed delight.

4. Mashiach



Hearts returning; the
world
recognizing Hashem.

Birth and name • Akeidah and enduring life • Closeness and delight • Future hope

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1. The promised birth. Before he is born, Hashem names him Yitzchak: he will laugh. The child whose birth overturns the expected order will become a living reason for joy.

2. The Akeidah and return to life. Chazal describe his soul departing and returning. His continuing life becomes a renewed chiddush, and his enduring holiness carries that wonder forward every day.

3. Olam Haba. The closeness Yitzchak built for Israel brings an inexhaustible chiddush: each moment discloses a new depth of delight in Hashem. His own holy life already participates in that closeness here.

4. Mashiach. We can extend the thought to the future for which we daven: hearts returning to Hashem and the world filled with knowledge of Him. What seemed fixed is transformed. What a laughter of joy that will bring!

Imagine how funny these scenes would look to us today. Wouldn't they make us laugh? Let us picture four scenes in a world where hearts have turned toward Hashem.

Honor for Torah

Here comes an Israeli policeman toward a man learning Torah. Look at what he does: he removes his cap, bows his head and gives him kavod. He has come to

honor the Torah being learned. Look at their smiles. Wouldn't we love to see that warmth everywhere?

Shabbos on Dizengoff Street

And where are we now? Read the sign: Dizengoff Street, Tel Aviv. The clock says Shabbos. The street is busy—with families walking together in their Shabbos clothes, shops closed, everyone enjoying Shabbos. Imagine standing there and taking it all in. Wouldn't that make us smile?

Netanyahu among the chassidim

Look closely. Yes, that is Binyamin Netanyahu—in a shtreimel and bekeshes, with peyos! He is bowing respectfully before a great chassidishe Rebbe, among thousands of chassidim. Imagine recognizing him there. Wouldn't that make us laugh with delighted surprise?

Shema at the United Nations

Now look at the United Nations. Melech HaMashiach stands at the central dais, his face hidden in the light. And the entire assembly is saying, "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!" Imagine hearing that from the whole hall together. What a change—and what a laughter of joy!

These are the kinds of joyful surprises for which we daven. Hashem, let us merit that laughter: the joy of seeing hearts transformed, Torah cherished and Your presence recognized throughout the world.

What kind of laughter will that be? Joy in finding one another close to Hashem. The very people whose return we found hardest to imagine will share the rejoicing. The surprise will expose the smallness of our predictions, and the greatness of what Hashem can bring about.

We began with elections: who will win, who will lose, and what tomorrow will bring. Those questions matter in their place. But no election result is the last word about the Jewish people. Beyond the outcome we are discussing tonight lies the astonishing future for which we daven: a world filled with recognition of Hashem.

יִצְחָק — Yitzchak — he will laugh. The name still points ahead. When those who seemed distant draw close, and when knowledge of Hashem fills the world, what a laughter of joy there will be! May we all be there together to share it.

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