

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Nothing Is More Serious Than Humor

*“Go for yourself... (lit. Go to yourself)” (12:1)*

**A**round twenty-five years ago, I remember sitting in the dining room of Ohr Somayach at a *Sheva Berachot* (post-wedding celebration). One of the Rabbis there was noted for his seriousness, self-control and gravitas. He sat, his hooded eyes fixed on a small Gemara held by his slender fingers. As soon as the bride and groom entered, he set his Gemara down, stood up and took a small vase with a flower in it that was on the table in front of him. He then proceeded to climb onto the table, place the vase on his head, and dance on the table with the vase perched precariously on his head. The bride and groom were beside themselves with laughter. After the singing and dancing to welcome the bride and groom had died down and everyone returned to their seats, I noticed that the Rabbi had gone back to his learning as though nothing had happened. Every time I saw him, he would do the same thing. It was fascinating to watch this instant metamorphosis. I have never managed to work out if he is a deeply serious person who could turn on the merriment at the turn of a mental switch, or a deeply humorous person who held his humor in check with his self-control.

The Gemara in Ketuvot (17a) recounts that Rav Yehuda bar Ilai would take a branch of myrtle and dance before the bride. Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak would dance while juggling three branches. Rabbi Zeira complained to Rav Shmuel and said, "The elder is embarrassing us." But when Rav Shmuel passed away, a pillar of fire separated him from everyone else, and there was a tradition that this happened only for one or two people in each generation. The question arises: Why didn't a pillar of fire separate Rav Yehuda bar Ilai from everyone else when he passed from the world? It cannot be because he only used one myrtle and not three. The *Eitz Yosef* explains that, whereas Rav Yehuda would dance in front of a bride, it wasn't part of his habitual behavior. He would do it only on occasion. Rav Shmuel, however, never failed to do this.

There are times when we can slip and fall very far, and there are times when we can reach for the stars – but what we normally do is who we really are.

**We wish all of Ohrnet Magazine's readers -  
and all of Ohr Somayach's alumni and friends  
- a healthy winter.**

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## *Eruvin 86-92*

### Honoring the Righteous Rich

*“Rebbi honored wealthy people. Rabbi Akiva honored wealthy people.”*

These statements on our *daf* require explanation. Why are we taught that these great Torah Sages apparently singled out wealthy people as deserving honor? Is it not important to honor everyone who does not show contempt for Hashem and His Torah? Indeed, we are taught in Pirkei Avot (4:1): “Who is honorable? One who honors others.”

Our *gemara* relates a reason why Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva honored the wealthy. Rava bar Mori expounded a verse that states, “May he dwell forever before Hashem; kindness and truth should be prepared to guard him.” (Tehillim 61:8) The primary meaning (*pshat*) of this verse is to describe King David’s prayer to Hashem to extend his life, due to his virtues. However, Rava bar Mori expounds on an additional meaning of this verse. He explains it in a wider sense, as referring to wealthy people who supply food and other needs for the hungry and the downtrodden. These wealthy people, he teaches, justify the world’s continued existence. As we learn in Pirkei Avot (1:2), Shimon HaTzaddik would say, “The world stands on three things: Torah study, service of Hashem (in the Beit Mikdash, in the synagogue and via mitzvah observance), and acts of loving-kindness (e.g., giving charity and assisting those in need).”

Wealthy people are best-positioned and generally predisposed to provide food and other needs for the poor, and are therefore “pillars” who sustain the existence of the world. For this reason, they are undoubtedly deserving of being shown special honor and gratitude for what they do! This seems to be the approach of Rashi in our *sugya*. (Anecdotally, the Nobel Peace Prize was recently awarded to the “World Food Program” for its

efforts to minimize and hopefully eradicate hunger in the world. Real hunger is not just an idea, but is unfortunately still a reality in our world of plenty. Even if this author or the reader has never been in a state of real hunger, virtually everyone knows of a hungry soul, especially in the era of COVID-19. And many of us have known relatives who miraculously survived unimaginable starvation during the Holocaust.)

Another explanation for honoring the wealthy is found in Rabbi Akiva Eiger’s *Gilyon Hashas* on our *daf*. Rebbi, in addition to being a great Torah scholar, was also exceedingly wealthy. He made a special effort to honor the wealthy so that people would learn to honor him for his wealth, just as he honored others people for their wealth. Why was it important to Rebbi that he be honored for his wealth? He was concerned that people would honor him for being a Torah scholar, and he did not want to “use the crown of the Torah” as a reason for his being honored and treated with special deference. As we learn in Pirkei Avot (4:5), Rabbi Tzaddok would say, “Do not make the Torah a crown to magnify yourself with, or a spade with which to dig.”

Similarly, Hillel would say, “One who makes personal use of the crown of Torah shall perish. Therefore, one who benefits himself from the words of Torah removes his life from the world.” Therefore, Rebbi showed special honor to the wealthy so that people would honor him for his wealth and not for his Torah greatness. Although this approach does not mention Rabbi Akiva, one may assume that he too honored the wealthy for the same reason as Rebbi, when he was financially blessed later in life. (Sources: *Likutei HaMaharil in the name of the Maharam; Iyun Yaakov*.)

Another meaning of the honor shown to the wealthy by Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva is taught by the Meiri, and, unlike the previous explanation, is *not* based on the fact that Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva were wealthy individuals. Rather, says the Meiri, it is fitting that a Torah scholar or a pious person should show respect and honor for others in a manner that is indicative of the specific reason for honoring each individual. For example, a wise person should be honored for his wisdom, a wealthy person for his wealth and a kind person for his kindness. “I am glad you are feeling better, dear Rabbi; here is a *sefer* that was just published and when I saw it I was sure that you would enjoy learning it.” Or, “How wonderful is it that Hashem has blessed you with great wealth! I am sure that

you must have given much *tzedaka* that helped you merit your wealth, and that that you will use your resources to continue helping the needy.” (*Chidushei HaMeiri. Eruvin 86a*)

It is essential to note that honoring another person for his wealth, wisdom or other positive attribute, is permitted and correct only in honoring a person who is worthy of the honor. False flattery of the wicked is called *chanufa* in the Torah and halachic writings, and is considered one of the most serious transgressions in the Torah. (See *Avosos Ahava* by Rabbis Newman and Becher, *chelek gimel perek gimel*, for a detailed presentation of the source texts.)

▪ *Eruvin 86a*

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## WHAT'S IN A WORD

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### Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

#### Lech Lecha

#### A Laughing Matter

**W**hen G-d informed Abraham that Sarah was still destined to produce an heir, his reaction was to “laugh” (*va’yitzchak*, Gen. 17:17). Similarly, when Sarah heard about this prophecy, she too laughed (Gen. 18:12). Indeed, when Isaac was born, Sarah exclaimed, “G-d is making ‘laughter’ (*tzchok*) for me; whoever hears will laugh (*yitzchak*) for me” (Gen. 21:6). In this case, the commentators (Onkelos and Rashi) explain that “laughter” stands for an outward expression of happiness. Because of all this “laughing,” G-d also said that this son will be called *Yitzchak* (Gen. 17:19) – a name which literally means “he will laugh.” Nonetheless, the Bible refers to this patriarch in a few places as *Yischak* – a name derived from another verb that means “to laugh.” What is the difference between *Yitzchak* and *Yischak*? And what is the

difference between *tzchok* and *s’chok*, from which those two names are derived?

Throughout the entire Bible, the name *Yitzchak* for our patriarch Isaac appears 108 times. However, as mentioned before, there are four places in which he is referred to as *Yischak*. In one place, the prophet Jeremiah refers to the Jewish People as “the seed of *Avraham*, *Yischak*, and *Yaakov*” (Jer. 33:26). In another passage, the prophet Amos foretells of the destruction of the illegal sites of worship, termed “the high places of *Yischak*” (Amos 7:9), and also offers a legitimate prophecy against Amaziah, the false prophet of Baal, who said that Amos should “not drip [words of prophecy] on the House of *Yischak*” (Amos 7:16). Finally, the Psalmist speaks of G-d’s “oath to *Yischak*” (Ps. 105:9) that the Jewish

People will inherit the Holy Land. These are the only four places in the Bible where Isaac is called “*Yischak*.” [The last passage is customarily recited at the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) ceremony, while a parallel passage (I Chron. 16:16), recited in the daily prayers, reads “*Yitzchak*” instead of “*Yischak*.”]

To understand the difference between *Yischak* and *Yitzchak*, we have to first explore the difference between their respective antecedents, *s’chok* and *tzchok*. The problem with such a line of investigation is that the major Hebrew lexicographers, such as Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970), Rabbi Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1955), and even Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim (1740-1840), explain that *s’chok* and *tzchok* mean the exact same thing. Indeed, the letters SIN and TZADI are considered interchangeable because they are pronounced by the same part of the mouth (see also *HaKsav VeHaKabbalah* to Ex. 25:29), and so it makes sense that *s’chok* and *tzchok* would mean the exact same thing.

Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the core meaning of *s’chok/tzchok* is “laughter” as an involuntary reaction to some sort of outside stimulus – whether one is physically tickled or simply encounters something humorous. Both words carry positive (“laughing,” “playing,” “enjoying”) and negative (“deriding,” “mocking”) connotations. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 21:6) explains it, those two meanings derive from one singular idea because “mockery/derision” refers to the use of sarcasm and irony to elicit laughter – i.e. getting somebody to “laugh at” someone or something (see also Malbim to Judges 16:25).

As an aside, Rabbi Hirsch (to Gen. 17:7) invokes the interchangeability of CHET and AYIN to explain how *tzchok/s’chok* is related to *tzaakah/zaakah* (“crying out”). He notes that these four roots all represent man’s reaction to the dissonance and incongruence of certain situations. When we perceive a situation in which there is a disparity between what we have beheld and what our expectations are, then there is room for one of two reactions: to laugh or to cry. They are two sides of the same emotional response. Using the examples that Rabbi Hirsch himself mentions, when we see a child wearing a wig like an adult, we might laugh, while

when we see an elderly person wearing a diaper like a child, we might cry. Laughter and crying are ways for us to reconcile what we see with what we expect. (Rabbi Pappenheim makes a similar point, but without comparing the etymologies of the terms in question.)

In short, there seems to be no semantic difference between *s’chok* and *tzchok*. Now, the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachos* 1:6) teaches that Isaac’s name – unlike Abraham’s and Jacob’s – was never changed, because his name was given by G-d Himself. This source clearly assumes that the names *Yischak* and *Yitzchak* are essentially one and the same, just like *s’chok* and *tzchok* are one and the same. Of course, this brings us to the obvious question: Why then does the Bible sometimes say *Yischak* and sometimes *Yitzchak* if both spellings are really one name? This question leads us to search for more esoteric ways of understanding Isaac’s two names.

Rabbeinu Bachaya (to Gen. 17:19, Num. 32:3) writes that Isaac’s name is really *Yitzchak*, but the prophets sometimes spelled his name with the letter SIN/SHIN to allude to the fact that Isaac personifies the Divine trait of judgment, which is likened to a “raging fire” (*aish*). We can further add that Rabbi Pappenheim maintains that the word *aish* is derived from the monoliteral root SHIN, thus solidifying the connection between the variant spelling of Isaac’s name and the Divine trait that he represents.

Interestingly, Rabbi Shmuel Feivish Kahane (a 17<sup>th</sup> century sage), in his work *Leket Shmuel*, offers the exact opposite explanation. He writes that Isaac’s name should have really been written as *Yischak*, not *Yitzchak*, but since the presence of the letter SIN/SHIN would have alluded to raging judgment from which the Jewish People would have no possible recovery, the Torah instead spells the patriarch’s name with a TZADI instead of a SIN.

Another approach suggests that Isaac’s name (or at least the way it is spelled) changed or will change. For example, Rabbi Yehuda Moscato (1530-1593) writes that in the future Isaac’s name will change from *Yitzchak* to *Yischak*, because the letter SIN stands for the concepts of *sasson* and *simchah* (different forms of “happiness”). He writes that this new name only

appears four times in the Bible as a hint to the fact that it will appear only after the Jewish People had already completed four exiles.

Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein (1855-1926) uses a variation of this idea to reconcile an apparent contradiction in traditional sources. The Talmud (*Berachos* 61b) and *Sefer Yetzira* (ch. 5) imply that the spleen corresponds to man's ability to engage in "laughter" (*s'chok*), while the *Tikkunei HaZohar* (*Tikkun* #84) associates the spleen with "sadness." To resolve this contradiction, Rabbi Borenstein stipulates that there are two types of laughter: legitimate, holy laughter, versus illegitimate, impure laughter. The former is essentially something reserved for the future, as it says "Then [in the Messianic Era], our mouths will fill with laughter (*s'chok*)" (Ps. 126:2). Until then, most laughter is but an illusion intended to mask one's sadness and despondency. Accordingly, the spleen can be associated with both "laughter" and "sadness" if we assume that the type of laughter it characterizes is the illegitimate laughter of This World, which is merely a cover for "sadness."

Rabbi Borenstein explains that in the future, when *schok* will denote a legitimate expression of laughter, the patriarch Isaac's name will transform from *Yitzchak* (which is associated with only the holy type of laughter) to *Yischak* (which is derived from the formerly unholy form of laughter). [The Arizal (*Shaar HaPesukim* to Isa. 52:3) also offers an explanation of the *Yitzchak-Yischak* switch.

In other sources, it seems like Isaac's original name was *Yischak* and it was later changed to *Yitzchak*. These sources relate that when the Jews cried out to

*For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at [rcklein@ohr.edu](mailto:rcklein@ohr.edu)*

G-d during their exile in Egypt, He asked the forefathers which of them was willing to sacrifice the numerical value of their name in order to save the Jewish People. It was the patriarch Isaac who stepped up to the plate, and he allowed G-d to change the SIN (which holds a numerical value of 300) of his name *Yischak* into a TZADI (which equals 90) to become *Yitzchak*. The difference came out to 210, which is why the Jews were redeemed from Egypt after an exile of 210 years. [This tradition is cited in numerous works, including *Imrei Noam* to Ex. 6:2, a source that is called the *Rosh* (to Ex. 6:1), *Siddur Rokeach*, *Be'er Mayim Chaim* to Gen. 15:13, and *Leket Shmuel* to Gen. 25:19.]

The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), in his commentary to the Kabbalistic work *Safra d'Tzneusa* (end of chapter 3), writes that each of the three patriarchs of the Jewish People had two names – a Lower Name and a Higher Name. In light of the above, we can now better appreciate the Vilna Gaon's assertion: Just as Abraham was called both *Avram* (lower) and *Avraham* (higher), and Jacob was called both *Yaakov* (lower) and *Yisrael/Yeshurun* (higher), so did our middle forefather, Isaac, have two names (or at least two spellings of his one name): *Yitzchak* (lower) and *Yischak* (higher). *Sefer HaShem* (a work ascribed to the *Rokeach*) fascinatingly notes that the sum *gematria* of the names *Avraham*, *Yischak*, and *Yeshurun* equals 2448 (assuming a final MEM equals 600 and a final NUN equals 700) – the year when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai.

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# Q & A

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## LECH LECHA

### Questions

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites". How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?
17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

### Answers

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of G-d.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 4:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - G-d had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's King to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## ASCENDING THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: THE GRAND FINALE

**W**e made it! Last week we reached the fifteenth and final blessing in the series of the Morning Blessings. We recite these deceptively innocuous blessings each morning. In fact, they are the “opening salvo” in our daily prayers. Due to the pressures of the morning and our rush to begin our day, it is possible that they might sometimes be recited without the required intent. But, for the last few months we have been travelling together on a voyage of exploration. It has been a voyage, which has delved not just into the fifteen Morning Blessings, but, perhaps more significantly, has delved into all of us as well.

We have learned that each blessing is integral to the structure of the Morning Prayers. Not only that, but each blessing is also essential to my own understanding of myself, and my understanding of my responsibilities in our physical world. For this reason we need one last article to arrange all the blessings according to their deeper meanings, and in this way be aided in scaling the Stairway to Heaven.

- It all began with the very first blessing. A blessing that delineated the fact that the concepts of good and evil are universally innate within every person, Jew and non-Jew alike.
- The second blessing begins the triumvirate of blessings that all begin with the words, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me...” The first of these three blessings starts our journey in earnest, as it acknowledges the most fundamental characteristic of all – that we are Jews and that we belong to G-d.
- The third blessing thanks G-d for having given us our freedom. Not freedom in the conventional, secular sense and understanding. But freedom to serve G-d the way that G-d wants us to.
- Blessing number four introduces us to the commandments and our obligation to keep them.
- The fifth blessing “opens our eyes” to the fact that the opportunity to perform the commandments is ubiquitous.
- The sixth blessing brings us to the next stage, where we are actively performing the commandments.
- Blessing number seven teaches us that by living our lives according to the commandments, we are able to release ourselves from the negative influences in this physical world that distract us from our spiritual obligations.
- The eighth blessing shows us that we have a purpose in this world. That we can stand up straight, safe in the knowledge that we have a defined objective that is waiting to be achieved.
- The ninth blessing is pivotal, as it takes us into the realm of building a relationship with G-d, which is founded on belief as well as actions.
- Blessing number ten is the astonishing declaration that I have all that I need (not necessarily *want!*). This blessing truly reflects my complete conviction that G-d is with me in all my endeavors.

- The eleventh blessing is the certainty that I will be able to “march” to the beat of the Torah and the commandments.
- Blessing number twelve expresses the assurance that I have been granted the strength to succeed in the tasks that have been allocated to me by G-d.
- The thirteenth blessing reflects my spiritual growth until now. I am now crowned with a spiritual aura that is discernable to those around me.
- The penultimate blessing spells out the obligation of all of my spiritual development – that I have a responsibility to assist and support those who are weaker than me.
- And the fifteenth and final blessing is the resounding affirmation that the only way that I can truly accomplish what I need to do in this world is by internalizing the absolute knowledge that without G-d’s permanent presence in my life I cannot succeed.

What a journey! Fifteen blessings recited each morning that are our means of identifying our true selves. Fifteen blessings that raise us up and introduce us to a startling new vista of spiritual potential. They are so fundamental to our ability to serve G-d properly that these fifteen blessings should be said slowly, with pleasure and delight. Every morning we should savor each blessing, appreciating its depth and its clarity. By doing so, each day we will ascend the Stairway to Heaven anew.

*Ohr Somayach announces a new booklet on The Morning Blessings by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer*  
[www.ohr.edu/morning-blessings](http://www.ohr.edu/morning-blessings)

## The Rare Calendar Phenomena of 5781

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Part 1 of a new mini-series

As we entered into the *Yamim Noraim* of a new year, with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) still raging around the world, and Eretz Yisrael in yet another lockdown, we are surely all *davening* for the Gemara’s aphorism of “*Tichleh Shana U’Klaloteha* – May the year and its curses end” – and its addendum, “*Tachel Shana U’Birchoteha*” – May the New Year and its blessings be ushered in” – to rapidly come true.

Indeed, there are several suggestions floated as to

what the initials of תשפ"א may stand for, including ‘*Tehei Shnat Pdyon Acharon*’ (May this be the year of final redemption), or simply, and perhaps somewhat sarcastically, ‘*Ois Tav Shin Pei*’ – No longer 5780. Many are excited about the great Chasam Sofer’s referring to 5781 as “*Mei’ashpos Yarim Evyon*,” and our nation being exalted and lifted up, as opposed to 5780 being portent of death and calamity. Either way, we are all looking forward to a new year chock-full of blessing.



## ZaCh”A

Yet, there is more to 5781’s exceptionality. Much more. You see, this year is classified as **ז"חא** in our calendars. This abbreviation refers to Rosh Hashana falling out on Shabbos (*Zayin*), both months of Cheshvan and Kislev being *chaseir* (*Ches*, meaning 29-day months instead of 30; these are the only months that can switch off in our set calendar), and Pesach falling out on Sunday (*Aleph*). Out of the 14 possibilities in *Tur*’s 247-year calendar cycle, this is one of the rarest setups of a year, and occurs on average only once in 23 years. The last time we had this calendar makeup was 20 years ago (5761), and the time before that was 24 years prior. The reasons and rules governing the whys and the whens this transpires are too complex for this discussion. Suffice it to say, when the Mishnah Berurah discusses these issues, he writes that this is not the place to expound in detail, which is certainly good enough for this author.

A ZaCh”A year ensures that there will be a plethora of rare calendar phenomena that we will *iy”H* be witnessing, or, more accurately, taking an active part in.

### No Shofar

The first unusual *minhag* of the year is one that last occurred eleven years ago, back in 5770 (2009). This is that Rosh Hashana fell out on Shabbat. Accordingly, the shofar was not sounded on the first (Biblical) day of Rosh Hashana, but rather only on the second (Rabbinic) day. The reason given for this ‘silencing of the shofar’ is a remarkable *Gezeira* of Chazal, that one may come to mistakenly carry a shofar out from a permitted area on this Shabbat in order to learn how to properly blow it. Whenever Shabbat Rosh Hashana occurs, we are collectively astounded as to the strength of this extraordinary *Gezeira*: All of Klal Yisrael desists from performing one outright Torah mitzvah simply due to a seemingly far-out possibility that one person unwittingly and unintentionally might transgress

another mitzvah – that of *Hotza’ah* (carrying). Even in an age when many of us have *Eruvin*, which technically renders the issue as moot. This is simply incredible!

Yet, there is an alternate, and perhaps more appropriate way to view this situation. Not sounding the shofar on Shabbat Rosh Hashana, as per the *Gezeira* of Chazal, showcases to us all that the sanctity of Shabbat is of paramount importance in all that we do – even to the extent of pushing off a precious, once-a-year (okay, twice-a-year) Torah mitzvah. A number of Acharonim, including the *Chasam Sofer*, the *Aruch LaNer*, and *Ben Ish Chai*, stressed that, in a way, a year like ours is a gift. Not blowing the shofar due to Shabbat credits us with whatever spiritual gain we would have obtained had we been able to blow the shofar. Yet, there is a caveat. We need to show how much we honor, respect, and delight in our Shabbat observance in order to properly reap the spiritual rewards of a Shabbat Rosh Hashana.

### No Lulav

As the Gemara continues, the same *Gezeira* holds true regarding Lulav and Megillah as well. Meaning, if the first day of Rosh Hashana occurred on Shabbat, then the first day of Succot, two weeks later, will also occur on Shabbat. And just as there was no fulfilling the Torah mitzvah of shofar on Rosh Hashana, but rather only on the second day, which is a Rabbinic mitzvah, there will also be no fulfilling the Torah mitzvah of taking and waving the Arba Minim on the first day of Succot – which is *M’Deoraysa* – but rather only fulfill it *M’Derabbanan*, as performing this mitzvah on the remaining days of Succot is *M’Derabbanan*. This is yet another spectacular testament to the prominence and centrality of the holiness of Shabbat.

*To be continued...*

*This author wishes to acknowledge Rabbi Shea Linder’s excellent article on this topic.*

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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*Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman*

## Laughing Stock

The book of Genesis mainly teaches us about our great forefathers, the lives they led, and the foundations they laid for the future of the Jewish People. We come from good stock. Avraham teaches us loving-kindness, Yitzchak teaches us disciplined courage, and Yaakov teaches us truth. Yitzchak's birth teaches us something else, no less fundamental to our national destiny – that we come from laughing stock.

Avraham and Sarah both laugh in response to the tidings that that they will bear a son in their old age. *Avraham fell upon his face and laughed, saying to himself: Shall a child yet be born to a man who is a hundred years old, or shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?* (Ber. 17:17)

The Hebrew word – *tzachak* – is closely related to the word for 'crying out' – *tza'ak*, or *za'ak*. These two different phenomena share a common theme. Both are triggered by the confluence of incompatible opposites. The objective reaction to such confluence is laughter, the subjective reaction is crying out. Noticing incongruity in something dissociated from ourselves makes us laugh; but if the incongruity affects us personally, or affects someone with whom we identify empathetically, our reaction is to cry out. A child wearing a wig, an old man dressed as a baby, a dignified adult who slips, an unexpected comparison, elicits laughter. But if we identify with the person and empathize with his pain or shame, we feel like crying out. The same is true when there is a disparity between expectation and performance. This can be a trigger for laughter or for crying, depending on the circumstances. Even exceeding expectations can elicit joyous laughter.

Here, the laughter is triggered by the absurdity of Avraham and Sarah bearing a child at ages 100 and 90. In the course of their long married life, Avraham had no children by Sarah. Now, close to the end of their lives, and way past the age of fertility, they were to have a son! The mere birth of the child would be totally unexpected, and even if he were to be born, he would be an only child and in all likelihood would be orphaned at a young age. Yet the prospect of fulfilling Avraham and Sarah's life mission – prevailing ideologically over the entire world... would the hopes of all mankind rest on this late-born, orphaned youth? If we consider only the natural course of things, this expectation seems totally absurd!

Great significance is attached to Avraham's laughter, and Sarah's laughter, which is recounted in two other places. Indeed, Yitzchak's name bears the reminder of this laughter: the beginning of the Jewish People was absurd. That a thriving people with high hopes and expectations would emerge seemed a ludicrous pretension – that is, to the eye that sees only natural cause and effect. But the Jewish People would not be so bound, because G-d intervenes in their affairs.

It was imperative that our ancestors knew this from the beginning. This is why Yitzchak's birth had to be absurd. The Jewish People were always, and will always be, the people who prove that nature does not rule this world. G-d is in the midst of mankind and He intervenes throughout world history. The laughter that follows the Jew on his way through history testifies to the Divine character of this path. It is a laughter that we have known for a long time, and still resounds today. And, ultimately, as is hinted at by the future tense of the name – Yitzchak (lit. "he will laugh), the last laugh will be ours – *then, our mouths will be full of joyous laughter.* (*Tehillim 126:2*)

- Sources: Commentary, Bereishet 17:17, 21:6

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# PARSHA OVERVIEW

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**T**en generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits G-d appearing to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants, and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants.

A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty could cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the

region and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs at accepting any of the spoils of the battle.

In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to Eretz Yisrael, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel, Hagar returns to Avram and gives birth to Yishmael. The weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and his entire household.

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