

Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

	FOX	JPS	HEBREW
9	They said to him: Where is Sara your wife? He said: Here in the tent. Now he said:	They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent."	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אַיִה שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֹהֶל
10	I will return, yes, return to you when time revives, and Sara your wife will have a son! Now Sara was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.	Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.	וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהֵינִה-בֶּן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שֹׁמְעַת פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו
11	And Avraham and Sara were old, advanced in days, the way of women had ceased for Sara.	Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.	וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זְקֵנִים בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים חֲדָל לְהִיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֲרַח כַּנְּשִׁים
12	Sara laughed within herself, saying: After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me? And my lord is old!	And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"	וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי הֵיטֵה- לִי עֲדָנָה וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן
13	But YHWH said to Avraham: Now why does Sara laugh and say: Shall I really give birth, now that I am old?	Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'"	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צִחַקְךָ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֶמְנָם אֵלֹד וְאֲנִי זְקֵנָתִי
14	Is anything beyond YHWH? At that set-time I will return to you, when time revives, and Sara will have a son.	Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."	הֲיִפְלֵא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וּלְשָׂרָה בֶּן
15	Sara pretended (otherwise), saying: No, I did not laugh. For she was afraid. But he said: No, indeed you laughed.	Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh."	וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר לֹא צִחַקְתִּי כִּי יֵרָאֶה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צִחַקְתְּ

V. 9

*They said to him...*

- **RADAK**<sup>1</sup>... there are dots on the letters וַיֹּאמְרוּ. Such dots can only be explained by our resorting to allegorical interpretations.... In our case, the dots mean that the angels also enquired from Sarah where to find Avraham (וַיֹּאמְרוּ = Where is he?). This teaches that a guest is to enquire from the host about the hostess and from the hostess about the host. The sages say further that the angels knew very well where Sarah was at that time, but the question is reported

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) was a French medieval rabbi, biblical commentator, philosopher, and grammarian.

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

only to draw attention to the modesty of Sarah who was not in evidence, did not allow her curiosity about the nature of the guests to cause her to peek out of her tent. Knowing that she was so modest would endear her even further to her husband....

- **RABBEINU BAHYA**<sup>2</sup>... According to our sages in Baba Metzia 87 the dot on the letters א"י in the word אלו indicate that the angels also asked Sarah about Avraham's whereabouts. It would have been appropriate to place a dot on the letter ה of that word. Seeing that there is no such dot we must draw some inference from the absence of such a dot on that letter [instead of having to put dots on three letters of that word. Ed.]. Actually, the reason the dot was not placed on the letter ה is the fact that it already has the tone-sign zakef katan. Placing an additional dot on that letter would have resulted in confusion. [i.e. a third dot and where exactly to place it. Ed.] This is why the chachmey hanikkud decided to place the dots on the other three letters of the word אלו instead....

### *where is your wife Sarah?...*

- **JPS**...As noted by Rashbam<sup>3</sup>, the question is merely a rhetorical device for the purpose of politely opening a conversation about Sarah.
- **WOMEN'S COMMENTARY**... The visitor knows of Abraham's wife Sarah, asks where she is, and continues speaking in her hearing.
- **ALTER**... The fact that the visitors know her name without prompting is the first indication to Abraham (unless one assumes a narrative ellipsis) that they are not ordinary humans.
- **OR HACHAIM**<sup>4</sup>... The angels wanted that Abraham should realize that the message they had to deliver was primarily for Sarah; this is why they enquired about her whereabouts. Abraham indicated that she was within the tent ready to listen to what they had to say to her.

## V. 10

**JPS**... The divine promise has been unfolding in stages. First, in 15:4, Abraham was assured that his heir would be a natural-born son; then, in 17:16-21, he was assured that Sarah would bear this child; now a time limit is set for the fulfillment of the promise.

### *I will return ...*

- **JPS**...The supernatural character of the visitors now asserts itself. The statement is not meant to be literal. It simply means, as Ramban<sup>5</sup> noted, that by this time next year the prediction will have been fulfilled.
- **ALTER**... Evidently, one of the three visitors, unless the text reflects a fusion of two traditions, one in which there were three visitors, another in which there was one (which would then explain the switch from singular to plural early in the story).

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340) was a commentator on Tanach.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, or Rashbam, (c. 1085-c. 1158) was Rashi's grandson and a leading French Tosafist out of Troyes.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (1696-1743), a Talmudist and kabbalist, wrote *Or HaChaim*, his commentary on the Torah.

<sup>5</sup> Nachmanides, or RAMBAN, (1194-1270) was a Sephardic Rabbi, philosopher, physician, Kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

- **OR HACHAIM...** The angel used the singular, indicating that each one of them had his own task. In view of this why did **all three** angels ask about Sarah's whereabouts? Perhaps they simply wanted to enquire from her husband about Sarah's wellbeing. According to the rules of etiquette then, all three angels enquired.
- **OR HACHAIM...** The reason the angel repeated the words **שוב אשוב** and added the word **והנה**, may be better understood on the basis of a tradition that when Isaac was born he suffered from a congenital defect; he was sterile. It was only after agreeing to be the sacrifice at the **עקדה**, that he was cured of that defect. The angel hinted that he would have to return twice **כעת חיה**, at a time when he would "give life," in order that Sarah's son would be a true son, able to procreate. The words **והנה בן לשרה** indicate that Sarah's son emanated from the left side of the emanations, the female, weaker side. The word **והנה** emphasizes this origin of Isaac in Sarah's domain. Only when the angel would return once more would the male component, i.e. Abraham's input, become dominant within Isaac. This occurred in Genesis 22:11 where the Torah reports that an angel called out to Abraham not to harm Isaac. The angel therefore had two tasks to perform, 1) to announce that there would be an Isaac, 2) that he would possess a soul that could procreate.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA...** The angel who said this was the one who had revealed that Sarah would bear a son. He said this, meaning that his prophecy would come true in the following year. Nonetheless, we do not find a mention anywhere that the angel did in fact return to Avraham in the following year although he had said so twice. [the repetition of **שוב אשוב** plus verse 14. — Ed.] Perhaps the angel had not meant that he, personally, in his present manifestation, would return to visit Avraham but that the fulfillment of his prophecy would be equivalent to his return. After all, what would be the purpose of the angel returning in person when he did not have a specific message for Avraham?
- **RADAK...** **ויאמר**, the senior angel, the one whom Avraham had addressed in verse 3 with the words **אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך. שוב אשוב אליך**, this was the one whose task it was to tell Sarah that she would bear a son. He spoke of his return visit a year from the present time. The other two were to destroy Sodom and to rescue Lot respectively. Three angels were required as no angel is charged with more than one mission at a time. (Bereshit Rabbah 50:2)
- **SFORNO**<sup>6</sup>... on the anniversary of the circumcision.

### *next year...*

- **JPS...** Compare 17:21. The phrase *ka- 'et hayyah* recurs only in 2 Kings 4:16f. and in a similar context. Its exact meaning is uncertain. The first element is "at the/this time." The second is taken by Rashbam, Bekhor Shor<sup>7</sup>, and Radak to be the postbiblical *hay(y)ah*, "a pregnant woman." The phrase would then refer to the nine months of pregnancy. Alternately, *hayyah* could also simply mean "life," as in Ezekiel 7:13 and Job 33:18, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1550) was a biblical commentator, philosopher, and physician from Italy.

<sup>7</sup> Yosef Bekhor Shor (c. 1140-?) was a French Tosafit and commentator on Torah and Psalms.

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

- **PLAUT...** *Ka-eit Chaya* literally, “at the time of life.” Our translation takes cognizance of a close linguistic parallel in Akkadian, where *balatu* means “life,” but is used regularly in prepositional phrases to mean “next year.”
- **ALTER...** This phrase, or its equivalent, recurs in the various annunciation type-scenes, of which this is the first instance. The narrative motifs of the annunciation type-scene, in sequence, are: the fact of barrenness, the promise of a son by God or angel or holy man, and the fulfillment of the promise in conception and birth. But only here is the emphatically matriarchal annunciation displaced from wife to husband, with the woman merely eavesdropping on the promise; only here is the barren woman actually postmenopausal; and only here is there a long postponement, filled in with seemingly unrelated episodes, until the fulfillment of the promise (chapter 21). Thus the patriarch takes over the center-stage location of the matriarch, and the difficult—indeed, miraculous—nature of the fulfillment is underscored.
- **CHIZKUNI**<sup>8</sup>... The expression is so unusual that we must revert to the fact that angels live forever. Were it not for that fact, how did they know that it was in their power to return again, maybe they would have died in the interval? ...
- **RASHI**<sup>9</sup>... means at this time next year — it was the Passover, and on the next Passover Isaac was born — since we do not read כָּעֵתָּא (at “a” time) but כְּעֵתָּא (at this time).
  - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM**<sup>10</sup>... You might ask: How does Rashi know it was Pesach? The answer is: Yitzchak was born [exactly] one year later. And it is written (Shemos 12:41): “It was at the end of the 430 years, and on *that very day*, all of Adonai’s multitudes went out...” The 400 years began with the birth of Yitzchak, from which time Avraham had progeny [who sojourned in foreign lands]. The 400 years began and ended on the same date, and on the very day the 400 years ended, the Israelites left Egypt, as Rashi explains there. They left on the fifteenth of Nisan, the first day of Pesach. Therefore, the angel’s foretelling of Yitzchak’s birth — as well as the actual birth — were on Pesach. A further answer: Rashi learned it from what is written about Lot (19:3), “And he baked matzos,” indicating it was Pesach. And this was the same day that the angel foretold Yitzchok’s birth [to Avraham].

**WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...** *at this time next year...your wife Sarah shall have a son...* Since Abraham already knows that Sarah will have a son (17:16-19), the annunciation seems to be primarily for her benefit.

### *Sarah was listening...*

- **WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...** For the first time, Sarah learns about her forthcoming pregnancy. Some use this verse to criticize Sarah for listening to other people’s

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<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) was a French rabbi and student.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) was a medieval French rabbi and author.

<sup>10</sup> Sifte Chachamim was a commentary on Rashi’s commentary on Torah. It was written by Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass (1641-1718).

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

conversation. But the speaker has asked specifically about Sarah, speaks knowing her proximity, and has information specifically designated for her. Clearly she is his audience.

- **OR HACHAIM...** On the one hand the verse indicates that what Sarah heard was a message intended for her by a heavenly messenger, the messenger himself standing behind her. Nonetheless I have seen a *Midrash* according to which the angel was disciplined for not addressing Sarah directly with the message, preferring to deliver it to Abraham. Angels are punished for inadvertently committed disobedience or minor deviations from the instructions they receive.

**RABBEINU BAHYA...***which was behind him...* This verse tells us that Sarah was sitting inside the tent as it says: והנה באהל (verse 9); she had meanwhile risen from her chair in order to listen to what was being said at the entrance of the tent. The angel who relayed the message stood on the other side of the entrance to the tent.

### V. 11-13... ALTER

This sequence of three utterances is a brilliant example of how much fine definition of position and character can be achieved in biblical narrative through variation in repetition. First the narrator informs us, objectively and neutrally, of Abraham's and Sarah's advanced age, stating the fact, repeating it with the emphasis of a synonym, and reserving for last Sarah's postmenopausal condition, which would appear to make conception a biological impossibility. When Sarah repeats this information in her interior monologue, it is given new meaning from her bodily perspective as an old and barren woman: her flesh is shriveled, she cannot imagine having pleasure again..., and besides—her husband is old. The dangling third clause hangs on the verge of a conjugal complaint: How could she expect pleasure, or a child, when her husband is so old? Then the LORD, having exercised the divine faculty of listening to Sarah's unspoken words, her silent laughter of disbelief, reports them to Abraham, tactfully editing out (as Rashi saw) the reference to the patriarch's old age and also suppressing both the narrator's mention of the vanished menses and Sarah's allusion to her withered flesh—after all, nothing anaphrodisiac is to be communicated to old Abraham at a moment when he is expected to cohabit with his wife in order at last to beget a son.

### V. 11

**RADAK...** this line has been written only in order to account for the reason of Sarah's laughter.

*old, advanced in years...*

- **CHIZKUNI...** We do not find a single reference to old age in the Torah anywhere before this point. Avraham was the first human being described as having "aged." The Midrash attributes the fact that the Torah here refers to Avraham's age as due to his having said to God: "with all respect, God, when father and son walk together and come to a town where neither of them is known, how will they know to honor the father, seeing that they both

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

appear as equally youthful? If You were to “crown” elderly people with a visible sign of their being old, they will know to whom to pay their respects first.” God answered Avraham that he had presented a valid argument and that therefore he would be the first human being upon whom this distinction would be bestowed....

- **RADAK...** this is the standard mode in which the Torah describes people who feel that aging has affected their general physique and imposed limitations on them. What the Torah means is that both Avraham and Sarah had reached the years when other people are subject to the limitations of old age. These are the years when the soul begins to separate from the body.

### *the periods of women...*

- **JPS...** Literally, “the way of women.” The phrase refers to the menstrual cycle.... Mention of this fact is intended to indicate that the emergence of the people of Israel is an extraordinary event. Its life and destiny are under God’s special guidance and are not subject to what seem to be the ordinary norms of history.
- **WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...** Sarah no longer menstruates, also meaning that she can no longer conceive. The reference highlights for the reader why she will be surprised by what she hears.
- **DAAT ZKENIM**<sup>11</sup>... She suddenly saw menstrual blood again, something that does not occur in women over a certain age which she had long passed attaining....
- **CHIZKUNI...** the Torah emphasizes that although other elderly women had stopped menstruating, Sarah had continued to experience menses, as Rashi has explained on the line; “he took butter and milk,” i.e. that he could not take bread as on that day Sarah had become niddah, had menstruated, thus causing the dough she had handled to become ritually unclean.
  - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM...** You might object: Rashi explained on v. 8 that she began to menstruate that day, and the dough became impure. Doesn’t this indicate that she now had the “way of women”? [The answer is:] She seems to have thought it happened by chance, not as a regular cycle. Thus she asked: היתה לי עדנה? (v. 12). She meant: “I am in doubt about the blood I saw. Is it my regular cycle, or a chance occurrence caused by my hurrying to knead the dough?” For Avraham had said (v. 6): “Hurry! Three measures of flour...” This is preferable to *Re’m’s*<sup>12</sup> explanation — on v. 13 — that Sarah was saying, “My regular cycle has indeed returned, although I was worn out. But Avraham is an old man.” The *Maharshal*<sup>13</sup> writes: Hashem set her childbirth to be one year later, to give her three months to establish a regular period, as she had ceased seeing blood and now returned to her youth, and then nine months for pregnancy. However, it says in Rosh

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<sup>11</sup> Daat Zekenim is a Torah commentary compiled by later generations of scholars from the Franco-German (Ba’alei HaTosafot) school in the 13th century.

<sup>12</sup> Elijah Mizrachi (c. 1455-1525) was a Talmudist, authority on Halacha, and a mathematician. He wrote a supercommentary on Rashi’s commentary on the Torah.

<sup>13</sup> Solomon Luria (1510-1573) was a teacher and Halachic authority from Poland.

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

Hashanah 11a that Sarah conceived on Rosh Hashanah, which implies that she gave birth in the seventh month of pregnancy. This calls for further thought.

### V. 12

#### *Sarah laughed inwardly...*

- **WOMEN'S COMMENTARY...** Sarah, alone in the tent, responds with no outward sign—as opposed to Abraham, who fell on his face, laughing aloud, while he was in conversation with the Deity (17:17).
- **PLAUT...** ...The Septuagint has: “Sarah laughed openly” (instead of “to herself”).
- **CHIZKUNI...** when the month of Tishrey began, six months after the prediction of the angels, and she had not experienced signs of pregnancy, she abandoned all hope of that prophecy becoming true, as there were only six months left for it to become true. Contrary to her husband Avraham, she had lost faith in the prediction. The reason that Avraham maintained faith in the prediction was that he had heard it from God directly, (the angel had spoken to him in the name of the Lord), whereas Sarah, had only been an eavesdropper, and possibly she had not heard correctly. She had assumed that the angels speaking to Avraham had been ordinary human beings. She took a look at her belly and asked mockingly whether such a belly could possibly produce a fetus. As soon as she had done so, in Tishrey, God asked Avraham why Sarah had reacted in such a manner, adding that at the time appointed, i.e. when a year had passed at the time of Passover, in the following year, the angel would return and she would have become a mother. In practice this means that the first time she heard the prediction she had heard it from the mouth of an angel whom she had believed to be a mortal human being. The second time Avraham heard it from God directly, i.e. 'ויאמר ה', “the Lord said;” this was followed by God adding: “Is anything impossible for the Lord to do?” Support for this interpretation can be found seeing that when the angels on the same evening met Lot, Lot offered them unleavened bread, matzot for supper, a hint that the date was the date that would later on become the night of the Seder of the Jewish people. [This is not far fetched at all, as the night when Avraham had fought and secured Lot's freedom, had been the corresponding date, and Lot therefore had good reason to observe it as an anniversary of great significance for him also.... Ed.]
- **CHIZKUNI...** בקרבה, “in her heart and mind.”
- **RADAK...** Sarah laughed derisively internally, not audibly; she did not believe that the man who had made the prediction was an angel, though she assumed that he was a prophet.
- **SFORNO...** she assumed that the words of the angel were merely a blessing, not a prophecy.... She believed that when such a blessing is given to old people, people who would require a miracle for the blessing to come true, it would not be effective in her case. She considered the kind of rejuvenation required for her to bear a child as equivalent to reviving the dead. Such an act, in her opinion, required God's personal attention, not merely that of a prophet. At the very least it would come about in answer to a prayer.

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

- **TUR HAARUCH**<sup>14</sup>... This was not like the joyful laughter the Torah reports Avraham as breaking out into in 17:17 upon being told something similar by God. Avraham rejoiced because he believed the message, whereas Sarah found the message as beyond belief. The reason that she did not match her husband in believing in this instance was that whereas he had received the message from God directly, she had only heard it from a man dressed like an Arab. [even though she laughed soundlessly, so as not to embarrass the messenger. Ed.]

**CHIZKUNI...saying...** לאמר, what is the meaning of this word, which literally means: “to say;” [apparently contradicting the previous word, Ed.] According to the plain meaning we should assume that this word here is no different from elsewhere where it appears and means that certain thoughts were to be voiced by mouth. Sarah then would have prepared to voice her opinion of the prophecy which had not come true. In other words: she was ready to voice her ridicule publicly. This would account for the fact that the Torah took her to task for her disbelief more so than it had taken to task Avraham in Genesis 17:17, where he is reported to have reacted similarly to the promise by God that Sarah would become the mother of a son of his. However, he had not intended to go public with his doubts.

### *Enjoyment/pleasure...*

- **JPS...** Hebrew *'ednah* is now known to mean “abundant moisture” and is an exact antonym of “withered.”
- **WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...** The word *ednah* is related to the word “Eden” (as in the Garden of Eden), alluding to a sense of “delight,” with a sexual connotation. Sarah is excited by the thought of an impending sexual encounter.
- **PLAUT...** The opposite of being old and withered. Others translate as “pregnancy,” “youthfulness,” “full of moisture,” all implying restoration of fertility.

**WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...with my lord so old!...** Sarah’s reaction reflects her delighted surprise in her husband’s abilities. God suggests a different reason (v. 13). This implies that Abraham and Sarah had stopped sexual relations, highlighting why the visitors inform her that the couple should renew them. Sarah does not doubt the Deity’s abilities, but rather Abraham’s.

## V. 13

### *Then the Lord said...*

- **JPS...** God and His angels often speak interchangeably.
- **RASHBAM...** the angel, the senior of the three.

**JPS...to Abraham...** The patriarch maintains a discreet silence.

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<sup>14</sup> Tur HaAroch, a commentary on the Torah, is written by R’ Jacob ben Asher (c. 1269 - c. 1343), known as Ba’al ha-Turim.



## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

### *Why is Sarah laughing so...*

- **WOMEN'S COMMENTARY...**Some interpreters have concluded, erroneously, that Sarah's laughter was derisive. When Abraham heard that he would have a child with Sarah, he "fell flat on his face and laughed, thinking: 'Can a child be born to a man of 100? Can 90-year-old Sarah bear a child?'" (17:17). Thus Sarah is actually now accused of Abraham's earlier actions. Since Sarah is alone in the tent when she laughs, is the Deity testing Abraham to determine if he will admit his own actions and protect Sarah? [Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who considers Sarah's laughter as an expression of doubt, interprets God's response to Sarah this way: "God ignores Abraham's laughter but reacts to Sarah's. After all, Sarah should understand how important she is.... Sarah's importance in God's scheme means that God will have zero tolerance for skepticism from her" (*Women in Scripture*, 2000, p. 151). – *Ed.*]
- **CHIZKUNI...** If you were to ask why God did not rebuke Avraham when he entertained similar doubts in Genesis 17:17, the answer is that seeing that Sarah is considered as on a lower spiritual level than her husband, it is considered as clear that if even her doubts were criticized, her husband's doubts were deserving of a rebuke even more so, without the need for the Torah to spell this out.... If God had rebuked Avraham in Sarah's presence, he would have felt ashamed; He therefore did so in an indirect manner.

### *old as I am...*

- **CHIZKUNI...**According to Rashi the Torah changed what Sarah had actually said out of concern for the harmony existing between Avraham and Sarah. What Sarah had actually meant was: "what good does it do for me to have been rejuvenated as long as my husband cannot be rejuvenated also?" How can I become pregnant from his seed? Had the Torah conveyed this thought to Avraham it would have meant that it was only Avraham's inadequacy that prevented Sarah from having a child.
- **DAAT ZKENIM...** Our sages base their view that it is permissible sometimes to tell a "white" lie when the purpose is to preserve harmony between husband and wife, based on this verse, where what Sarah obviously meant was that her husband was too old to sire a child, seeing that she herself had experienced rejuvenation. (Talmud, tractate [Baba Metzia folio 87](#)). Seeing that she had not said anything aloud about what she thought about her husband, God, i.e. His angel, still saw fit to change what she had thought to herself, in order to preserve her image as a dutiful wife respecting her husband's masculine dignity.... There is however an opinion which does not agree at all that God or His angel had changed the words that Sarah had thought but not uttered. It argues that it is totally absurd to argue that anything appearing to us as a lie could have been uttered by God or His agent, an angel.... He claims further that what Sarah had (thought) reported as having said was indeed what is quoted by the Torah, i.e. וְאֵנִי זָקֵנָה, "and I have become old." These words are to be understood as her wonderment at how she could have become pregnant even in spite of having seen menstrual blood once more, seeing she was way beyond child-bearing age, and had never previously conceived. The angel did not alter her words, he only did not report all

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

of her words. In this manner he prevented any bad feeling on the part of Avraham. Any ordinary person, other than a Divine creature, is permitted to tell white lies in order to preserve שלום בית, family harmony. If you were to argue that Avraham would not have cared, seeing that he was aware that what she thought or said was true, we must assume that he was still trying to impregnate Sarah but had been unsuccessful.

- **OR HACHAIM...** Until Sarah had menstruated she had thought of herself as too old to conceive and bear a child (hence derisive laughter). After she had menstruated, her laughter was no longer one of derision or disbelief but one of joy. She was doubly grateful to God that although Abraham had not yet demonstrated signs of rejuvenation, he surely would do so now.

### V. 14

#### *Is anything too wondrous for God?...*

- **RADAK...** Even though the angel did not answer her point by point, he did answer her with an overall statement that there simply is nothing which is beyond God's power to accomplish if he so desires.... The fact that he conveyed the content of what he had asked Avraham before undertaking his mission was important, the exact wording was not the issue. The angel did not even bother to reply to Sarah's statement that her husband too was too old to impregnate her with semen. The reason he did not do so was that Sarah having had her menopause was the far greater natural impediment to her becoming pregnant. It is not altogether unknown for old men to father children even in their advanced old age.
- **CHIZKUNI...** God teaches Avraham that He can hear even laughter that has only occurred in the heart or mind, without ever having crossed one's lips.
- **RASHI...** As the Targum takes it: is anything hidden — far distant and apart (מופלא) from Me that I cannot do as I would wish?
  - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM...** Rashi avoided explaining היפלא as "surprise and wonder," in which case the verse would mean: "Should we be surprised that Hashem can do a novel thing?" That would not be in accord with Targum Onkelos who explains it as, "Is it hidden?" Yet, there is a question on Targum Onkelos: How to understand Hashem's response "Is it hidden?" to Sarah's laughing? She said, "My master is an old man," conveying that it is impossible that she should give birth. Thus Hashem's response should have been: "Is anything too difficult for Hashem?" or, "Is God's hand unable?" But this response is understandable if היפלא means, "Should we be surprised...?".... Therefore, Rashi explains היפלא as "Is it hidden?" and nonetheless, Hashem's response to Sarah is understandable. She said that it is impossible. And He responded: "Is there anything beyond and apart and hidden from Me, which might prevent Me from doing My will?" Rashi means that something which is hidden from a person is "separated" from him, i.e., he cannot do it when he wants to. For if he can do it when he wants, then he can declare, "I know that it will be," [for it is not separated from him]. And why did Rashi not choose the explanation of "surprise and wonder"? Because then it should say היפלא על ה, as it is the proper usage to say that when one is surprised "over" something. Furthermore, Sarah did

## Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

not express surprise; rather, she decided that it is impossible. And the response of, “Should we be surprised...?” would not be appropriate. (*R. Meir Stern*<sup>15</sup>)

### *At this season...*

- **CHIZKUNI...** למינע, the numerical value of the letters in this word when totaled amounts to the same as the numerical value of the word: בפסח, i.e. 150.
- **DAAT ZKENIM...** according to Rashi, this means “at a time of year such as now, when nature is in full bloom, entirely alive.” Seeing that the angel did not say בעת, at the time, but כעת, “around that time,” it is clear that he referred to the time when Sarah’s pregnancy would result in her giving natural birth at the end of the cycle. She would not give birth prematurely. The expression היה for a woman giving birth occurs elsewhere also. Our sages in the Talmud tractate Taanit folio 2, have stated that there are three keys which God does not hand over to any agent (prophet or angel) They are: the key to resurrections, to rainfall, and to giving birth. This is also why the angel could not predict the precise date when Sarah would give birth, only an approximation, i.e. כעת, “at approximately that time.”...
- **OR HACHAIM...** The reason that the angel repeated the promise was that Abraham should not think that because God had objected to Sarah's laughter God would take back His promise. This is why he said when exactly the promise would come true.

## V. 15

### *Sarah lied...*

- **JPS...** The Bible does not gloss over the human failings of national heroes.
- **PLAUT...** When Abraham confronted her.
- **CHIZKUNI...** this is the origin of the Rabbinic ruling that in most matters women are not acceptable as witnesses, as our matriarch Sarah had been guilty of lying to the Almighty. How much more would women lie to judges? Their lies are not due to their using falsehood as a way of life, but they are more easily intimidated than men, so that sometimes they tell lies to escape a harsh fate. Sarah, when becoming aware that her innermost thoughts were known to God, was suddenly very fearful [possibly recalling other occasions when she had had unbecoming thoughts though she had not voiced them. Ed.]

### *she was frightened...*

- **JPS...**No wonder, for she had laughed not out loud but to herself, and her innermost thoughts had been read!
- **WOMEN’S COMMENTARY...** Whom does Sarah fear? Most interpreters assume that Sarah is afraid of God. I contend that she fears Abraham. Sarah has no reason to fear God—who apparently comes to her rescues (in the house of the pharaoh, 12:10-18), blesses her and promises that she shall have a child (17:15-16), and has now sent messengers to tell her that she shall soon have her desired son. However, she does have reasons for fearing Abraham.

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<sup>15</sup> I am not sure who this is referring to. There is a contemporary R. Meir Stern who is a current dean of a yeshiva in the USA and a Talmud scholar.

### Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 18:9-15

He does not seem to object when she is taken to Pharaoh's palace (12:14-16); he allows Hagar to treat her with disrespect (16:3-4); and—insofar as the reader knows—has not informed her that they will be having a child.

**ALTER...*I did not laugh...Yes, you did laugh...*** Sarah's fearful denial and God's rejection of it afford an opportunity to foreground the verb of laughter, *tsachaq*, already stressed through Abraham's laughter in chapter 17, which will become the name of her son. After the birth, Sarah will laugh again, not in bitter disbelief but in joy, though perhaps not simple in joy, as we shall have occasion to see in chapter 21.

**WOMEN'S COMMENTARY...[God] said, "Ah, but you did laugh!"...** The present translation adds "God" in brackets because the speaker is unnamed. The grammar supports the interpretation that the speaker is not God but Abraham.... Another reason for doubting that God speaks here is that the Deity never speaks with Sarah before or after. And throughout 18:1-14 she is hidden from the visitors' sight, but not from Abraham's. This it is likely that it is Abraham who speaks these words, even though he has not heard her laugh.

**RASHI... *because...but...*** The first ׀ is used in the sense of "because", giving a reason for the former statement—Sarah denied ... because she was afraid; the second ׀ is used in the meaning of "but" — "and He said, 'It is not as you say that you did not laugh, but thou didst laugh'." For our Rabbis say (Rosh Hashanah 3a) that the word ׀ has four meanings: "if", "perhaps", "but", "because".

**RAMBAN...*you did laugh...*** And behold Avraham said to her, "Why did you laugh, is anything beyond God?" and did not explain to her that God had revealed her secret to him. And she for fear of Avraham denied [it] for she thought Avraham recognized it in her face or because she was silent and did not offer praise and thanks about the thing and was not happy. And he said to her "no, rather you laughed" at which time she understood that it was said to him so, and so she was silent and did not respond any word to him. And it is fitting that we say further that Avraham did not reveal to her that which was said to him before (see above, 17:19) "but Sarah your wife is bearing you a son." Perhaps he was waiting until God would send her the good news on the next day, for he knew that the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets (Amos 3:7) or because of his great alacrity in commandments he was preoccupied with his circumcision and that of a vast multitude of those in his house and after that in his weakness he sat by the entrance of the tent and the angels came before he had told her anything.