

Dear Rabbi Fried,

After reading this past week's Torah portion for the tenth year straight, I'm once again bothered by the same question that always bothers me: When Abraham and Sarah are told by the angel that she will have a son, she laughed out of scorn, how could she, a woman of ninety, bear a child. God asks Abraham why is Sarah laughing, is there anything I can't do? Abraham asks Sarah, why did you laugh, and she denies it, and Abraham lets her know that he knows it from God himself. What bothers me, is how could a woman of such impeccable truth attempt to lie to Abraham, especially if she knows he's a prophet? Aren't the matriarchs supposed to be an example for us women? Marcie K.

Dear Marcie,

I, too, was bothered by this question for many years, until I heard a beautiful insight this very week from a local friend and colleague, Rabbi Shmuel Fried (no relation), in the name of his mentor, Rabbi Y. Belsky of NY.

If you look carefully in the verse, (Genesis 18:12), it does not exactly say that Sarah simply laughed. It adds the word "*bekirbah*", which means that she laughed "deep inside herself". This means to say, that much as Abraham laughed out of joy when G-d first gave him the good news of a son, (hence the name Isaac/ *Yitzchok*, meaning "will laugh"), so did Sarah, with the faith in G-d that even a miracle such as this could transpire. However, although Sarah had the belief, G-d detected, deep down, a slight doubt that even Sarah herself did not perceive. Deep in the recesses of her subconscious Sarah remained with the natural feeling of a woman who had passed her childbearing years, and had long since lost the natural ability to do so. This caused a subconscious laughter, or scoffing, at the very notion of her bearing a child, without consciously detecting she had that feeling. "After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin, and my husband is old?!"

That is why, in verse 15, says "Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh", adds the Torah "ki yare'ah". This is usually translated to mean "for she was frightened", and therefore denied the charge. Rabbi Belsky explained it to mean, because she was a fearful woman, meaning she truly had the fear of Heaven in her heart, and therefore denied it, because she, herself, didn't realize this laughter which was hidden from her conscious mind. Abraham answered her, "No, you laughed, indeed", you have a hidden trait you need to work on.

This rebuke bore fruit, when, in Chapter 21, Sarah has a son, and then notices that Ishmael, the first son of Abraham, has laughter/scoffing in his heart, (21:9). She now knows the affect scoffing can have upon the heart, and asks Abraham to separate Ishmael from her son, Isaac. Abraham was greatly troubled by this request, until G-d Himself told Abraham that he should listen to whatever Sarah tells him. The commentary *Rashi* explains this to mean, that G-d was telling Abraham that Sarah has elevated herself *above* his level of prophecy! She, since that original rebuke, had so much looked within herself and perceived the subtle, hidden feelings of scoffing until she could perceive it in others, to a prophetic level, to the point that she actually surpassed Abraham who gave her the original rebuke based upon *his* prophecy.

Keep on studying and asking questions!