Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Lech Lecha, Genesis, Chapters 12-17 | October 28, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Abraham and Jewish Eternity

Last week, Pierre Poilievre, the opposition leader in the Canadian parliament, delivered a remarkable speech to Jewish Canadians attending a rally for Israel, a speech we have shared with you. Poilievre described visiting Auschwitz along with Jews on the "March of the Living." He was shown one building where the confiscated treasures of the inmates were kept, which he learned the Nazis had nicknamed "Canada." He broke down, he said, as he pondered how by the happenstance of history his family had immigrated safely to one Canada while Jews suffered and died near another. As he put it, "There was this sight of this Gentile in the corner of the room, bawling his eyes out, being comforted by Jews."

Poilievre may be a Gentile, but to commune with the pain of Jewish generations is very Jewish; and to receive comfort and to hope in the face of evil is very Jewish as well. Both of these experiences are featured in the early tale of Abram, whose story teaches us why we are a people like no other, one which will never die.

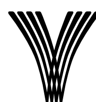
Our reading opens with the clarion call that changed the world:

> The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, . . . and I will bless those that bless you, and curse those that curse you, and through you will all families of the earth be blessed."
> (Genesis 12:2–3)

We are not informed as to why Abram is chosen. Many instinctively assume that Abram is the only monotheist alive; that, as we shall see, is not the case. Abram's faith is essential, but we must wait to discover what makes him exceptional.

Abram, along with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot, arrives in Canaan, the Promised Land; given God's promise, we would expect for a great nation to arise immediately. Yet Scripture suddenly, surprisingly, shifts:

> And there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there . . . (Genesis 12:10)



Abram arrives at the locus of his destiny—and leaves. It would be comical if it were not so serious, akin to Groucho Marx's quip, "Hello—I must be going."

What are we to make of this sudden departure? Abram, commentators explain, embodies the talmudic phrase "_ma'aseh avot siman l'banim_," "the tales of the ancestors are a sign to descendants." He is pre-experiencing what will occur to his progeny; Jacob will also descend to Egypt due to famine. Abram's almost immediate departure from Canaan is thus a sign of the fragility of Jewish life. When Groucho sang "Hello, I must be going," he was unintentionally expressing an aspect of Jewish history. From its very beginning Abram's journey foretells exiles yet to come, and therefore it also inspires us to search the text for the essence of Jewish resilience.

Upon returning to Canaan, Abram and his nephew Lot part ways. When a war erupts and Lot is captured, Abram organizes an army and saves his nephew. His triumphant troops are welcomed by an unexpected individual: in the midst of pagans, there is a monotheistic monarch, reigning over Shalem, which will ultimately be called Jerusalem.

[T]he fact that Abram desperately desires fatherhood is why he, and not Melchizedek, is chosen. Abram not only cognizes a Creator, he dreams of founding a faithful family.

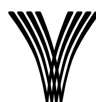
> And Melchizedek, king of Shalem, brought forth bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram to God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand." (Genesis 14:18–20)

Several conclusions can be drawn from this one moment. First: Jerusalem is bound up, from the beginning, with the story of monotheism. Second: the mysterious Melchizedek reminds us that there are those outside Abram's family who comprehend the miracle of Abram's story. Finally: if Melchizedek is also a monotheist, then the chosenness of Abram must be linked to more than his faith, bound up in another aspect of who he is.

That aspect is soon revealed:

> After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward will be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I am childless . . ." (Genesis 15:1–2)

God promises Abram reward beyond imagination, and Abram audaciously answers: "so what?" I want a child. But the Almighty is not angered; the fact that Abram desperately desires fatherhood is why he, and not



Melchizedek, is chosen. Abram not only cognizes a Creator, he dreams of founding a faithful family. He is therefore chosen to be the father of a chosen people.

But what sort of a people will this be? We must study's God's response:

> He took him outside and said, "Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them," and He added, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:5)

Abram's children will be as the stars; earlier in the reading, a different description is given:

> "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth." (Genesis 13:16).

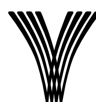
No tides of time, no pain of persecution, could overcome a nation that is a family, whose memories span millennia...which even in periods of darkness remembered salvation and never stopped believing in joyous laughter yet to come.

Abram's children are akin to stars *and* to dust. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin explains that the Torah provides two sublime similes for our identity. First, stars: the emphasis is on the individual, a description of the Jew as a beacon of faith. But then there is dust. With dust, each grain is insignificant; only together, in multitudes, is dust made unmovable. Later in Genesis, this simile changes slightly: Jacob is told that his children will be "like the sand on the shore of the sea." Rabbi Berlin notes that to see an enormous wave is to assume it will destroy all it comes upon; but the sand is so solid that the wave dissipates. The waves of history loom against Israel and crash asunder, while Israel remains; or, as the musical *Hamilton* put it, "Oceans rise; empires fall."

Dust, or sand, is strong as a collective; stars are strikingly singular. Another aspect of Jewish nationhood is suddenly revealed, recalling what the Catholic historian Paul Johnson told Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about the greatest achievement of the Jews:

> He replied in roughly these words: "There have been, in the course of history, societies that emphasized the individual—like the secular West today. And there have been others that placed weight on the collective—Communist Russia or China, for example." Judaism, he continued, was the most successful example he knew of that managed the delicate balance between both—giving equal weight to individual and collective responsibility.

Stars and sand, individuality and collectivity. Judaism is a unique form of community that sustained itself



against the tides of time. But what is the source of this bond? We must read on. Abram is informed that terrible suffering would befall his descendants:

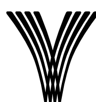
> As the sun set, a sleep fell on Abram, and a dark dread came upon him. And He said to Abram, "Know that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will judge the nation that they serve, and then they will go free in great wealth." (Genesis 15:12–13)

Thus did Abram understand that his previous journey to Egypt foretold another exile. And Abram experienced more than mere prophecy; the darkness and fear that overcame him, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik argued, reflected the fact that he truly communed with his future children:

> Abraham actually came in contact with the future sorrows and miseries of his children. He was overwhelmed by a vivid, sensuous awareness, which reached the intensity of real pain and suffering; a horror of great darkness fell upon him. The woes and agony of many years were condensed into a single moment. In an instant, he went through the oppression, fear, and uncertainty. For whatever would be inflicted upon his offspring was brought to him in its full impact and vigor.

This is what Rabbi Soloveitchik has called Jews' "unitive time-consciousness": our minds merge with other Jewish generations. I once described to the historian Andrew Roberts how Jews mourn the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon 2,500 years ago. He was struck by this. I asked Andrew about the historical references made by Churchill, the ultimate historian-statesman; he replied that generally they did not go further back than Agincourt in 1415, a relatively recent moment in Jewish history. No nation remembers as we do; our people feels the pain of past destructions and rejoices in the salvations that occurred millennia ago; as Abraham _pre_-experienced the past in the present, we _re_-experience the past in the present. If we never lose hope, it is because our memories also encompass and relive moments of salvation. Like Abram, we feel the darkness but also know the redemption. In another striking speech by a non-Jew, delivered just last week—one that I heard in person in London, and that you must see if you have not yet—the writer Douglas Murray described another conversation between Rabbi Sacks and a non-Jew about the nature of Judaism. Murray said:

> I once asked Jonathan Sacks what he thought it meant to be a Jew. And he replied, quite characteristically, by quoting someone else; specifically, he quoted his friend, the late great philosopher Isaiah Berlin. He said, "Douglas, Isaiah once answered this question when he was asked, by saying 'to be a Jew is to have a sense of history.'" And I looked at Jonathan; I knew there was something more. He tilted his head. And I said, "What do you think?" He said, "I think Isaiah was almost right." And I said, "So what's your answer?" He said, "To be a Jew is to have a sense of memory."



Murray further reflected:

> Now memory can be a burden, for some people an almost impossible burden. But it's also a blessing. Because if you as a people, you as individuals, know what went before, you know that the Jewish people have been here many times before, in too many situations, and too many times to count. . . . What we know . . . is that the Jewish people have seen off every one of its enemies for millennia.

As Abram experienced the future, we experience the past, and draw from it our faith for the future. This is what sustains us.

With Sarai barren, Abram has a child with a concubine, Hagar, who bears Ishmael. Abram assumes that through this child God's promise would be fulfilled. God gives him the symbol of circumcision—highlighting how fatherhood of a future child will be central to Abram's identity—and then tells him that the child of the covenant must come from Sarai, a woman as covenantally called as he, who took the journey with him. Thus does Abram learn that covenantal family requires both covenantal father and covenantal mother.

The way in which the "birth" of the Jewish people is told reminds Jews that as a people they are to see each other not as fellow citizens but family members. Henry Kissinger, in his memoirs, describes bringing Golda Meir a list of Israeli soldiers that he had confirmed had survived on the Syrian front in the Yom Kippur War. He tells us how intensely she studied it; for Golda, he writes, the list:

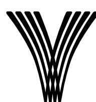
> was a record of the life or death of members of her family, names of young men that would bring joy to their loved ones, and despair by omission to others.

The Jewish people is not Rome, whose origins lay in a city's founding; Abram's nation begins with a father and mother, and the chosen people will always think of itself as a family.

Both patriarch and matriarch receive new names, "Abraham" and "Sarah," reflecting through a Hebrew pun that their lives will impact many peoples. Abraham, surprised that his elderly wife will bear a child, laughs in delight, inspiring the name of the child to be:

> And Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, saying to himself, "Can a child be born to a man of a hundred, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" . . . And God said, "nevertheless Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac" [in Hebrew, _Yitzhak_, i.e. "He laughs"]. (Genesis 17:17–19)

"He laughs;" this is a name that may seem simple, or silly, but is anything but. It embodies the Yiddish saying, "_man trakht, un Gott lakht_"—man thinks, and God laughs, or "man proposes; God disposes." Laughter, the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued, emerges from delighted surprise, such as from the punchline of a joke. The name Isaac highlights the fact that the twists and turns of Jewish history will be utterly unexpected, a point



captured by Menachem Begin when he, a man whose parents were murdered, came to the White House—as prime minister of Israel—spoke of the Holocaust, and then declaimed the great psalm of return.

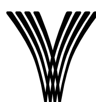
> When the Lord returned the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. (Psalms 126:1–2)

No tides of time, no pain of persecution, could overcome a nation that is a family, whose memories span millennia, which celebrates individuals but is joined together by this unitive time consciousness, which even in periods of darkness remembered salvation and never stopped believing in joyous laughter yet to come.

Pierre Poilievre spoke last week to Jewish Canadians in a very dark period. "My friends," he said, "it is very easy in these times to become hopeless and tired; all you want to do is live in peace and know your family in Israel can do the same. It has been a long history, hasn't it." After recalling how Jews had comforted him, a Gentile at Auschwitz, he, in the speech, sought to comfort the Canadian Jews in the audience. He recalled how at the concentration camp, after he wept, even as he stood at the precise spot where Joseph Mengele once stood, he experienced what he called one incredible "morsel of hope." He heard a cantor recite in Hebrew the 23rd Psalm, and, he added,

> As we literally walked in the valley between the old wooden shacks on each side, there were big, beautiful Israeli flags in the hands of young people, the greatest symbol of all, to say that "we are here, we survived, we are strong, we have a state, we have a people, an indigenous people, the longest standing indigenous people, the only people, the only story where the same people worship the same faith, on the same land, in the same language, in the same country as 3,000 years ago." From the time of the Pharaoh, many monsters have tried to attack and destroy the Jewish people; all of them have been condemned to the trashcan of history, and the Jewish people are still here, the Jewish people will still be here, the eternal Jewish people, and they will say the beautiful words in Hebrew, *am Yisrael chai*.

So said this self-identified Gentile, reflecting on his experience of Auschwitz. From Egypt of old, the story of Abraham endures; and in the face of hate, there are also non-Jews who see that see the miracle that we are, exultantly exclaiming, like Melchizedek long ago, "blessed be Abraham to the Most High God." This faith will be vindicated once more, when our current enemy will be defeated, when the stories of the forefathers will once again serve as a sign to the descendants, when Melchizedek's concluding words to Abraham will be repeated, "blessed be God who has placed your enemies in your hands," and when the mouths of the Jewish people, in moments of joy, will be filled with laughter once again.



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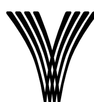
Additional Resources

Pierre Poilievre on the Hamas's October 7 Attack and Visiting Auschwitz, October 18, 2023. Click here to watch.

Douglas Murray on Israel, Britain, and Jewish Memory, October 11, 2023. Click here to watch.

Meir Soloveichik on Judaism and Laughter, "May You Be Inscribed for a Good Laugh," Commentary, September 2017. Click here to read.



JEWISH COMMENTARY

May You Be Inscribed for a Good Laugh

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

'LAUGHER," writes the essayist Jim Holt in his book *Stop Me If You've Heard This*, "is our characteristic response to the aesthetic category of the humorous, the comical, or the funny. What is it about the humorous situation that evokes this response? Why should a certain kind of cerebral activity issue in such a peculiar behavioral reflex?"

This is not only a question that is raised every time you watch the Marx Brothers; it is also, you will be surprised to hear, at the very heart of Judaism. Laughter is a central theme on one of Judaism's most serious days, a fact that makes it clear that for Jews, laughter is no laughing matter.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Awe that begins each new year, we read the passage in the Torah about the miraculous birth of a son to the elderly Sarah, then 90 years of age. This son's Hebrew name, Yitzchak, means "he will laugh." This, the Bible informs us, is linked to the laughter that his birth to Sarah provoked: "And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age.... And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me."

In other words, "laughter" is the name of one of our three patriarchs. Why is laughter so important that Abraham's son is named for this phenomenon? What can laughter tell us about what Judaism brought to the world?

Holt points out that there are two prominent theories of laughter and humor. The first is found in Plato, and it is known as the "superiority theory." It posits that laughter is an expression of delight in the downfall of others: "We laugh," Holt writes, "because these types of situations make us feel superior to other people." This is humor at the expense of someone else, the pleasure of the put-down. The problem with the "superiority theory," as Holt notes, is that there are all sorts of jokes that do not display a malicious instinct. There are simple little jokes that are just enjoyable, jokes we can tell our children and also laugh at as adults. To take one of Holt's examples:

Q: What does a snail say when riding on the back of a turtle?

A: Wheeee!

What else, then, lies at the root of laughter? Kant argued, contra Plato, that the essence of humor lies in "incongruity." As the scientist Richard Wiseman, who designed a complex experiment to uncover the world's funniest joke, explains: "The idea is that we laugh at things that surprise us because they seem out of place. It's funny when clowns wear outrageously large shoes, people have especially big noses, or politicians tell the truth"—or, as I might add, when a 90-year old woman becomes a matriarch. Yet as Wiseman notes, more sophisticated jokes also vindicate the "incongruity theory." A punch line's humor lies in an inversion of

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our expectations—there is a surprising incongruity between the set-up and the punch line. A snail, we know, is slow, as is a turtle; yet our expectations are inverted when we realize that a snail riding a turtle feels as if he's speeding. This shift in expectation is everything. To illustrate this, let's look at one popular version of a joke that scored off the charts in Wiseman's experiment:

> Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip, set up their tent, and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replies, "I see millions of stars." Watson ponders for a minute, and then continues. "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Holmes, what does it tell you?" Holmes is silent for a moment, and then speaks. "Watson, you idiot, it tells me that someone has stolen our tent."

Plato might insist we laugh here merely because we enjoy Watson's embarrassment. In truth, however, the delight lies in the sudden shift, the realization that there is more to the story than meets the eye. Moreover, this joke resonates because it is so true to life—because, like Watson, so often there is something right before us that we fail to notice and that requires a shift in perspective to understand.

The influence of Kant's theory of incongruity might be found in a fascinating source: The biblical commentary of the 19th-century rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. In his own exegesis on the origin of Isaac's name, Hirsch notes that in Hebrew the words for screaming and laughing are extremely similar: *tza'ak* (screamed) and *tzahak* (laughed). We have, he points out, virtually identical words for two apparently opposite emotional expressions. What then do the two have in common, what binds them together conceptually and therefore also etymologically? Hirsch suggests that both screaming and laughter are symptoms of surprise—reactions to something that, based on our own assumptions, our limited logic, we were not expecting to happen. Both represent a breaking of a pattern, something occurs that we had no notion of occurring beforehand; if tragic, in surprise we are *tso'ek*, we scream in alarm, in dismay; if wonderful then in delighted surprise we are *tsohek*, we emit peals of laughter. Hebrew, for Hirsch, provides evidence for the Kantian theory.

In the ancient world, human beings looked up at the sky and saw only cycles: the waxing and waning of the moon, the endless arc of the sun and stars, and they concluded that life on earth mirrored life in heaven. No one could live a truly revolutionary life; human lives were an endless cycle of birth and death, with one life ending and another beginning.

Judaism's birth itself was also about the inversion of expectation. Thousands of years ago, God took Avram—the man who would become the first Jew—outside and showed him a starlit sky. And He asked, as Holmes asked Watson, what do you see? And Avram said, as did Watson, I see millions of stars.

And God tells him, your descendants shall be as numerous as those stars.

This would have been difficult for Avram to understand; after all, Sarah, the love of his life, was barren. But he believed it anyway, and after Ishmael was born from another woman, he assumed that his heir had entered the world. It is only later, after he has changed his name from Avram to Abraham, that he realizes the incongruity of his expectations, and he too laughs:

> And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant

> with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

Jewish laughter begins with the continuity of the covenant God had established with Noah—thereby symbolizing that the continuity, and the eternity, of Abraham's children is the ultimate incongruity, the ultimate confounding of expectations.

This inversion changed humanity forever. Thomas Cahill, in his book *The Gifts of the Jews,* notes that the ancient world saw time as inherently cyclical: History never progressed, and people never improved. In the ancient world, in Sumer, in Maya, in China, in Greece, human beings looked up at the sky and saw only cycles: the waxing and waning of the moon, the endless arc of the sun and stars, and they concluded that life on earth mirrored life in heaven. No one could live a truly revolutionary life; human lives were an endless cycle of birth and death, with one life ending and another beginning, and each one no different than the next.

All this, Cahill writes, was changed by one Mesopotamian man named Avram. He was the son of an idolator, with his roots prosperously planted in Haran. And all of a sudden he decided to change his entire life, to leave his land, and found a faith and a family, risking everything on the belief that men and women can defy their fates, can determine their destinies.

Cahill recounts how the world in Abraham's time would have reacted to his insight:

> In most of Africa and Europe, they would have laughed at Avram's madness.... His wife is barren as winter, they would say; a man cannot escape his fate.... The early Greeks might have told Avram the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. Do not overreach, they would advise; come to resignation.... The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, and would explain that everything that has been comes around again, that each man's fate is fixed. On every continent, in every society, Avram would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lau-tsu, and Siddharta would one day give their followers: Do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life....

Cahill suggests that Abraham's journey, and his faith that he would father a family against all odds, signified "a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility." He goes on: "Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his [G]od.... Out of the human race, which knows in its bones that all its striving must end in death, comes a leader who says he has been given an impossible promise. Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something better, something yet to happen, something—in the future."

For centuries, in the Pale of persecution, suffering Jews told jokes to one another, wonderful jokes, jokes that may work in English, but are so much more evocative in the original. These jokes were a subject of fascination to Sigmund Freud, who utilized them in developing his own theory of laughter: as embodying a release that comes from the ability to speak of taboo subjects.

Is it inappropriate, then, that Abraham's child is named for laughter? Surely not. Because the inversions, the shifts in expectation, are constant. Abraham is a revolutionary but he is acting on instructions from a higher authority. He needs to make choices no one else would have made in his time, defying all expectations, just as his descendants will choose to follow the call of God and defy all expectations. The story of the Jewish people is the ultimate embodiment of the Yiddish idiom *a mentsch tracht un Gott lacht:* Man plans and God laughs.

This is why the Jewish love of jokes is often so profoundly misunderstood. In his book *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods,* Michael Wex argues that the key to understanding the Yiddish language is the Jewish penchant for complaining. Yiddish, he insists, is a language in which we never say anything nice if we don't have to. For Jews, Wex suggests, "kvetching is not only a pastime, it is a means of apprehension that sees the world through cataract-colored glasses." For Wex, Yiddish—not only its humor but in the very makeup of its language—is a way of looking down on the world.

Is Wex right? It is true that Yiddish is a wonderful language for expressing negative sentiment. As Leo Rosten has noted, little miracles of discriminatory

precision are contained in the distinctions between a *nebekh*, a *shlep*, a *shmendrik*, a *shlump*, a *klutz*, a *yold*, a *shnook*, a Chaim Yankel, a *bulbenik*, a *shoyteh*, a *shlemazel*, and a *shlemiel*; all refer to someone pathetic, but pathetic for very different reasons.

At the same time, one can study Yiddish speakers and discern exactly the opposite perspective. For centuries, in the Pale of persecution, suffering Jews told jokes to one another, wonderful jokes, jokes that may work in English but are so much more evocative in the original. These jokes were a subject of fascination to Sigmund Freud, who utilized them in developing his own theory of laughter: as embodying a release that comes from the ability to speak of taboo subjects.

More profound insight into Jewish laughter has been provided by non-Jewish thinkers who were more sympathetic to Judaism than was Freud, and who were fascinated with the fact that, despite the sadness of their situation, the apparent hopelessness of their exile, the poverty, and persecution that was the shtetl-dweller's daily fare, Jews spent so much time laughing. The late sociologist Peter Berger wrote that if Jews loved jokes, it was because "the comic experience provides a distinctive diagnosis of the world. It sees through the façades of the social order, and discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones."

In other words, Jews loved jokes because they expressed the idea that there is more to life than meets the eye, that a pattern is not eternally set in stone, that our expectations can be uprooted—that, in Wiseman's words, there is a completely different way of seeing the situation. Superficially, the Jews appeared to have been rejected by God, doomed forever to wander the earth, if not worse. To many it must have seemed that they lived lives devoid of any reason for joy, for celebration, for laughter.

But to think this is to miss an essential part of the picture, to ignore an Almighty who maintained a close connection to His people, to miss out on a life of Torah that even in the Pale could bring joy, and to fail to understand what every Jew in prayer once confidently predicted: that one day the pattern would shift; that one day an incongruity would occur, a surprise would suddenly take place; one day the expectations of anti-Semites would be shattered, and the prediction in Psalm 126 of a return to Zion would be vindicated: "When the Lord turn again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter . . . . "

Jewish laughter is bound up with Jewish faith, and Abraham's child is named for laughter because his birth inverted expectations, vindicated Abraham's faith, and laid the foundations for a people who would confound those expectations again and again, thereby vindicating this faith throughout the generations. Which is why, for centuries, on the first day of the Days of Awe, Abraham's children have stood in synagogues all around the world, remembered the birth of Isaac, and beseeched Almighty God to grant them a year of life, love—and laughter.