

Laughter as an Antidote to the Pandemic: A Jewish Perspective

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We learn the name of the first Jewish child in the Book of Genesis, chapter 21, verse 6. There, Abraham and Sarah named their son Isaac—"Yitzchak" in Hebrew—derived from the word "laughter." According to the Book of Genesis, Sarah was ninety years old and Abraham one hundred years old when Isaac was born. After many years of disappointment due to her failure to conceive, Sarah first laughed in disbelief when God told her that she would have a baby. But in Genesis 21:6, her child is born, and according to biblical commentators, her laughter transforms from disbelief to sheer happiness and delight.

The juxtaposition of Sarah's heartache with her laughter and joy speaks to an eternal message that has resonated through centuries of Jewish history. This teaching is highlighted by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth of the United Kingdom, in referring to this late-age birth: "What we can laugh at, we can survive." We learn that the name Yitzchak should be seen as both retrospective AND prospective. On the one hand, the baby is named Yitzchak to remind Abraham and Sarah that they should have believed it possible to have a child. On the other hand, the name is a reminder that future generations should try to laugh in the face of adversity. Doing so will ease our pain and give us hope. This lesson is embedded in the firmament of the Jewish people: that suffering and joy are connected; one should believe in a better future even in moments of hardship.

This message from Genesis has inspired me over the past two years as my family and the world has faced unimaginable challenges in the face of COVID-19. I was raised in a religious, egalitarian Jewish household. As a reader of Jewish texts in Hebrew and English, I learned to rely on the lessons of these texts, and the collective experience of Jewish history, during the most joyful and the hardest times. This deeper study of Judaism's approach to adversity has resonated with me as something I engaged with, wrestled with even, but had not experienced until March of 2020.

As a ninth-grader in March 2020, when COVID was inching closer, I was dressed up and ready as a defense attorney for my second Mock Trial at the White Plains Federal Courthouse when the competition was abruptly canceled to the imposition of new COVID restrictions. I had worked for months preparing, and that cancellation was, I felt, a perfect representation of everything taken away from me. The societal quarantine occurred right as high school was gaining momentum, and then my world hit pause. Our safe, protected routines were threatened by a virus called COVID that could sicken, cause long-term health issues, and even kill our elders. We were

forced into lockdown as a means of self-preservation and to flatten the curve of the raging virus. Like many of my peers, this stasis was dark, scary, and even ominous. I felt isolated and bereft, as if part of my youth was stolen from me. It was hard not to feel depressed and wallow in self-pity.

Despite these feelings, the severity of the suffering around me forced me to look outward from my inward perspective. COVID was impacting all of society, and I began to engage, question, and understand its impact through the lens of Jewish history and textual study, such as the story of Isaac's birth. I read the news, helped my parents wipe down our groceries for germs, and banged pots and pans at 7 PM from my doorstep to give thanks to my neighbors who were healthcare workers. I helped my mother deliver food to ill people's doorsteps, and my family stepped up to support the local food pantry and area hospitals. In response to the suffering around us, this action gave us strength as we tried to make the best of our situation. For instance, we began to FaceTime my great-grandmothers every week before lighting Sabbath candles. Seeing the happiness on their faces and feeling the hope in those around me reminded me that although times were hard, glimmers of joy still existed.

Ultimately, I began to feel gratitude. My eyes opened up to see my family and friends through a new lens as true support during hard times. I began to appreciate socially distanced picnics and the creative ways we celebrated birthdays and other milestones. I appreciated the dedication of my teachers and their commitment to my learning despite the limitations of the screen. And, more than anything, seeing my great-grandmothers, ages 98 and 100, both Holocaust survivors and living alone when the pandemic started, light up on FaceTime whenever I called was moving and transformative for me. I began to see the joy in our shared struggle and felt part of a country, community, and family that wanted to help, heal and comfort others. Although the world has changed, I believe that I am personally better for the challenge. My appreciation for our blessings and how we respond to adversity has changed completely due to the pandemic.

In May 2021, my school opened a clinic to vaccinate all children ages 12 and older. Waiting in line to receive my first dose, I saw excitement and even some tears in the eyes of my masked classmates – that we had come so far – that we could be free from fear – of true happiness and unabashed relief. I imagine that when Sarah gave birth and saw her child born, she was overcome with gratitude, disbelief, and relief all at once. When I sat in the chair, and my first dose was administered, I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds around me. What I heard, above all, was the ubiquitous sound of ringing laughter.