Genesis 26:7-9

וישב יצחק בגרר.
וישאלו אנשי המקום לאשתו. ויאמר: "אחותי היא", כי ירא לאמר "אשתי", 'פן יהרגני אנשי המקום על רבקה,
כי טובת מראה היא'.
ויהי כי ארכו לו שם הימים, וישקף אבימלך מלך פלשתים בעד החלון וירא, והנה – יצחק מצחק את רבקה
אשתו!

Yitzchak settled in Grar.
The people of the place asked *l'* his wife. He said: "She is my sister", because he was afraid to say "my wife", 'lest the people of the place will kill me over Rivkah, because she is good-looking".
It happened when his days there were extended, that Avimelekh King of the Pelishtim looked out of the window and saw, here – Yitzchak *metzachek et* Rivkah his wife!

This week's devar Torah is dedicated to Deborah Klapper as a belated birthday present.

Our focus this week is the phrase "Yitzchak metzachek". Puns are famously untranslatable, but my question is whether one loses meaning as well as style in translation here. This is in part a theological question – Dr. Moshe Bernstein asked us on occasion at YC whether we could accept there being meaningless puns in Chumash – but also a literary question, whether this particular pun seems likely or not to be thematically central. I suggest that it would be extraordinary if it were not, as the root "tz'ch'k" is of course the root of Yitzchak, and every previous use has been central. For example, it should be clear that when Sarah demands Yishmael's expulsion because he was *metzachek*, the underlying message is that he is threatening to take the place of Yitzchak. It follows plausibly that Yitzchak here is revealing the essence of his Yitzchakness, the reason that he is a better heir than Yishmael. But what is that essence?

Answering this question requires both a narrative and a grammatical excursus. Narratively, the most pressing questions may be why Avimelekh was looking out the window, and why Yitzchak was so careless. My suggestion as to the first is that Avimelekh never believed Yitzchak – many years ago, I framed this in class as "Eyes were rolling all over Phillistia – 'It's another of those Hebrews with their "sisters"' – and I would add now that unlike Avraham, Yitzchak is not besieged by suitors for Rivkah. Now it is possible that Rivkah was in fact unattractive, and Yitzchak simply realized over time that no one would care if she were his wife, but it seems to me more likely that Avimelekh simply never believed the "sister" story.

Why, then, was Yitzchak careless? The simple answer is that it had been a long time, and people relax their vigilance over time. But here the grammatical excursus may be helpful.

What does "metzachek" mean? As with many words, it can but does not necessarily have a sexual connotation. Potiphar's wife complains that her husband has brought a Hebrew slave "letzachek banu", to make us the object of his sexual play. Sarah says that anyone who hears on Yitzchak's birth "yitzachak li" – will make me the cause of his laughter. But Yitzchak is metzachek et, and Yishmael is simply metzachek.

What I want to suggest is that metzachek et does not mean, as most translations have it, "sporting with", or even as Everett Fox more comprehensively has, "laughing-and-loving with". Both these assume that "et" here means "with", rather than being a

direct object marker. I want to translate "was causing Rivkah his wife flirtatious laughter", or as Deborah suggests more directly, "was making Rivkah giggle".

In other words: What made Yitzchak who he was – in contrast to Yishmael, who was metzachek for himself, and even starker contrast to the stereotype drawn by Mrs. Potiphar of one who is metzachek himself at the expense of others – was that his tzchk was for the sake of others. Yitzchak did not grow careless – rather he responded to his wife's need for affection.

Deborah suggests further that perhaps his response was not even deliberate – perhaps, just as his birth caused tzchok for everyone who heard of it, being around him caused tzchk for Rivkah in a way which made it evident that he was her husband.

Shabbat Shalom!
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