



Words of Wisdom

By

Rav Aryeh Dachs

Vayera: Always Hope

R' Yisroel Salanter begins his iconic essay *Iggeres Hamusar* with the words, “*Adam chufshi b’dyimono*,” man is free, unchained in his imagination. Yet, “*Ve’usur b’muscalo*,” he is bound by his *seichel*, his rational intellect. This opening line touches on the inherent struggle between our fantasy and our rational intellect. R' Yisroel explains, we are expected to use our *seichel* to reign in our flights of fancy. However, the *Ramban* in his commentary on this week’s *parsha*, *Vayera* teaches us that there are times when we need to embrace fantasy and not allow our rationalist mind to seize the day.

The Torah relates that three “*anashim*,” angels or *malachim*, appeared to *Avraham* and *Sora*. Although they were from another realm, they appeared as regular wayfarers, desert travelers. *Avraham* and *Sora* fed them and cared for them. Before they left, they told *Sora* that she would have a child, a boy in one year. *Sora* was 89 years old at the time and *Avraham* was 10 years her senior. When the “men” informed *Sora* that she would give birth to a baby boy, *Sora* laughed in disbelief at the possibility. The *Ramban* explains that *Sora* laughed because she was not aware that the three men were angels; she thought they were regular wayfarers. Surprisingly, we find that *Sora* is taken to task for her reaction. It was inappropriate to scoff. Yet, if she did not know that the “men” were angels, why, asks the *Ramban*, was she chastised for laughing. What was wrong with her reaction? The *Ramban* explains that however ludicrous this prediction sounded, it would have been appropriate for her to believe it would happen, or pray, “*amen*,” so should be the will of G-d.”

The answer of the *Ramban* begs an explanation. Why should any credence be given to the blessing of the men? In *Sora*’s mind, they were foolish travelers, simple people giving a useless blessing. What does the *Ramban* mean when he says she should have believed them and used their prediction as a springboard to pray?

By considering the *Ramban*’s question, we can bring to light an extraordinary explanation. The *Ramban* was only bothered as to why *Sora* was chastised for laughing because *Sora* did not realize that the visitors were angels; she thought they were ordinary men. The *Ramban* takes for granted that if she had known they were really angels dispatched by G-d, she would never have scoffed. Why? A great *tzadikes* and *prophetess* like *Sora* understands fundamentally that G-d runs the world, and he can engineer it so that even an old man and an old lady can give birth. She knows *Hashem could* grant her a child. This is not an issue of whether *Hashem could* grant her a child; this is an issue of whether *Hashem would*. When she scoffs at that prospect, she reveals that she had abandoned *all* hope of *Hashem* granting her a child.

I think the idea of hope is irrational at its core. We find ourselves in life circumstances which, for better or worse, are a product of a million different factors. At the end of the day, whether we like it or not, where we find ourselves usually makes sense. It seems almost wrong to hope for change. Why would, why should, our circumstances change? Especially in the case of *Sora Imenu*, the birth of a child would require a complete change in nature. Yet, *Sora* was expected not to abandon the prospect of hope. A fleeting irrational glimmer should have inspired her to reconsider her lot; there is a G-d who can and would cultivate a faint hope and allow it to spring eternal. Circumstances can always change for the better. The *Ramban* teaches, a Jew never abandons the prospect of change. As they say in Israel, “*Hashem gadol, hakol yachol*.”