

## CHAPTER 21

☞ <sup>1</sup>YHVH visited Sarah as he had said, and YHVH did to Sarah as he had spoken. <sup>2</sup>For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set of time of which God had spoken to him. <sup>3</sup>And Abraham called the name of his son that was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac.

The name Isaac comes from the word meaning *to laugh*. Since the verb will appear several times in the present chapter, under rather ambiguous circumstances, it will become crucial that we understand the full range of its meaning as it is used in the books Genesis through II Kings.



The Hebrew language is a much more formal language than the Western ear is used to. Verbs, and most nouns not of foreign origin, are built on a triconsonantal root; and often these roots themselves are interrelated. Sometimes there are whole nests of roots, each differing from another, one letter at a time, reflecting shades of meaning.

We are interested in two such roots. One is **צחק** (*tsahaq*), the other **שחש** (*sahaq*). The two share a wide range of meanings and in that sense are virtually synonyms. Fundamentally they both mean *to laugh*, but with a range that includes *to jest* or *play*, *to entertain* or *scoff*, the laughter of disbelief or the laughter of contentment. They appear together in the same verse only once; Judges 16:25 reads:

And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain (**שחש**) us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained (**צחק**) them. They made him stand between the pillars.

The first person in Tanar to laugh was Abraham:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed (**צחק**), and said to himself, “Will a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” [Gen. 17:17]

But from the next verses it becomes clear that his was not contented laughter, but the laughter of incredulity.

And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you will call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.” [Gen. 17:18]

Sarah’s laughter came next:

So Sarah laughed (קצצ) to herself, saying, “After having been without pleasure, and though my lord is old!” [Gen. 18:12]

But again, had her laughter been good natured and not that of disbelief, she would have felt no need to deny that she had laughed:

YHVH said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Will I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too hard for YHVH? ... But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.” [Gen. 18:13]

Then came Lot’s sons-in-law, who mistook his urgency for mere jesting.

So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who had taken his daughters, “Up! Get out of this place, for YHVH is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting (מצצק). [Gen. 19:14]

Sarah will provide the next reference to laughter. Her thoughts at the birth of Isaac are ambiguous because of her idiomatic use of the preposition ל (l’). This preposition, which is rendered in the following passage as “over,” can mean *for* or *of*; alternatively, *with* or *at*.

Sarah said, “God has made laughter (קצצ) over me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” And she said, “Who would say to Abraham that Sarah will nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age. [Gen. 21:6–7]

The next character associated with this verb will be Ishmael:

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking (קצצ). [Gen. 21:9]

It is difficult to know what Ishmael is actually doing, but certainly the consequences will be disastrous.

The same word often has sexual connotations, as it certainly does in the case of Isaac’s careless “play” with his wife:

After the days of his visit had been prolonged, Abimelech King of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw; and there was Isaac at play (קצצ) with Rebekah his wife. [Gen 26:8]

The next two occurrences of קנצ are sometimes even translated as *insult*:

She called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to insult (קנצ) us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice.” [Gen. 39:14]

...she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult (קנצ) me.” [Gen. 39:17]

Then will come the *laughter* or *play* at the time of the golden calf:

And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play (קנצ). And YHVH said to Moses, “Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.” [Exod. 32:6]

The next instance involves Samson, in a verse we have considered already:

And when their hearts were merry, they said, “Call Samson, that he may entertain (קנש) us.” So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained (קנצ) them. They made him stand between the pillars. [Judg. 16:25]

The word קנצ will never again appear in Tanar. The word קנש appears here for the first time and will occur twelve times more. It is difficult to believe that this is by chance; it is almost as though the text is saying that Judges 16:25 is changing the nature of laughter—though in what way, I have no idea.

The text almost immediately repeats the new word, קנש:

Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained (קנש). [Judg. 16:27]

The next instance is a women’s song, a song with a beat—in a tongue that rarely has a beat—in Hebrew a grating, grinding beat that drove Saul into madness:

The women sang to one another as they rejoiced (קנש), “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house. [I Sam 18:7,10]