



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

**Parshat Shemini:  
Letting the Light in**  
**Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn**  
*Class of 2016*

A time to weep, and a time to laugh. For everything there is a time, and for every purpose there is a time under Heaven. (Kohelet 3:1-4).

לְכָל זְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל-חֶפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם... עֵת לְבָכוֹת וְעֵת לְשִׂחוֹק (קוהלת ג:א-ד)

His chest laboriously rose and fell, as we sat by his bedside in the sunlit hospital room. His son had just told me that during zman Adar he was learning Hilchot Purim with his unconscious, dying father. Feeling my heavy and torn heart, I stated the obvious, 'It's hard to imagine marbim besimcha', an increase of joy at this time. The son raised his eyebrows and sighed with a heavy acknowledgment, 'Yes it is hard. But true simcha, true joy, is being with Ribono Shel Olam, the Master of the World'. A hesitant smile lingered across his lips. 'Is your father with God, Ribono Shel Olam?' I asked curiously. With a loving look toward his father's frail form, the son replied, 'I believe he is. Especially right now.' I noticed the fragments of light that were scattered around the room, as rays of sunshine danced through the window. 'Does that mean he is besimcha?'

In Parshat Shemini, we read of a similarly stark contrast between a time of joy and a time of loss. Aharon has just meticulously offered the korbanot both for himself and for the entire people in order to inaugurate the mishkan. He has blessed the people with Birkat Kohanim and has left the Ohel Moed with Moshe. As Rashi indicates, tension builds as the people wait to see if Aharon's offerings will be accepted by God (Vayikra 9:23). Suddenly the glory of God appears to all of the people, as a fire from God consumes the offerings. The people are elated and they sing praises and fall on their faces (9:23-24). In this moment we have given our entire selves, our olah offering which is to be completely consumed, and we have been accepted by God. A time for joy. Marbim besimcha.

Only a single pasuk later, Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu offer a foreign fire and perish before God. Aharon, who moments prior was overwhelmed with joy, finds himself in ruins, plunged into the depths of despair. Still freshly covered in *וּמִשְׁחַתְּהֵם*, the anointing oil, Aharon and his surviving sons are paralyzed and unable to leave the Ohel Moed. In this spiritually charged moment, the chaos of loss is unleashed, leaving Moshe to both contain and to comfort.

How would you respond?

A time to weep, and a time to laugh. Moshe turns to Aharon and comforts him, *הוּא אָשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' לְאֹמֵר בְּקִרְבִּי*, 'This is what God meant when He said 'I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified'' (10:3). *וַיִּדַם אַהֲרֹן*, Aharon hears him and is silent. Halachically, this moment in our parshah teaches us a great deal of hilchot aveilut, the laws of mourning, including how a mourner acts and how he is to be treated. This interaction is wrought with pain, faith, and the reality that sometimes silence best voices our turmoil. And the fact that this great personal loss is so closely juxtaposed with one of our people's greatest historical moments of spiritual joy and intimacy with God reveals a lesson worth examining more deeply.

We currently stand between Purim, the holiday of simcha, and Pesach, the holiday of redemption. Each holiday requires us to retell our stories of persecution and salvation. Each holiday tells of a leader, Esther or Moshe, who challenges a powerful king in order to save the Jewish people. And of course each holiday for many involves copious drinking. Yet, Purim is a holiday of hester panim, the hiding of God's Presence in this world, and Pesach is a holiday of gilui panim, the obvious revelation of God's hand in this world. And even more practically and emotionally striking, Purim is a time of mandated joy, so much so that we hardly even notice the violence recounted in the megillah. While Pesach is a time in which we demand to hear the voice of avdut, of slavery, as a prerequisite for cherut, freedom. How do we transition from one reality to the other?

Like the son learning Hilchot Purim at his father's deathbed, we are constantly straddling life's emotional roller coasters between joy and sorrow. We may experience this tension in much smaller moments, such as juggling work and play, or having to put on a strong face when we are feeling vulnerable. We may have to make decisions or sacrifices that make us wonder if we are losing ourselves, or we may know moments of uncontainable joy that we want to share with others. Or perhaps, we actually are standing at that deathbed, only wanting to exude peace and love when in reality we are terrified. Wherever we stand, we each know that small, liminal space between wearing a mask and being unmasked, between offering a sacrifice and being sacrificed, and between slavery and freedom.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh. As we transition between Purim and Pesach, Adar and Nissan, we move into one of the three festival new years in Judaism. As this new year begins, we bring our awareness of our fragility and liminality, as well as our commitment to joy and laughter. We bring our entire selves, as we did in Parshat Shemini to dedicate the mishkan, as a way of sharing our hopes and our yearnings with God. And we challenge ourselves to actively uncover that which is covered, to transform the hester panim into the gilui panim.

When we offer a sacrifice in a kli cheres, in an earthenware vessel, we must break it after it is used because something holy, hekdesch, was in it (Vayikra 6:21). We may wonder why shvirah, brokenness, is required in the process of giving a korban to God. In brokenness, we naturally create an opening within ourselves for fragments of light to filter in. We have space to draw close, karov, like korban, to each other and to God. And most poignantly, we embody the potential for connection and rebuilding, for the growing pains that transform individual slaves in Egypt into a holy people in Israel.



*Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn is a member of the spiritual leadership at B'nai David-Judea Congregation, an Orthodox shul in Los Angeles. She received her semikha from Yeshivat Maharat and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Brandeis University with a degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Classical Studies Archaeology and Ancient History. Rabbanit Alissa is also a Board Certified Chaplain (BCC) through Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC). Rabbanit Alissa is on the board of NAJC and on the board of the Rabbis and Cantors Retirement Plan. She is a member of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Clergy Roundtable and the Pico-Robertson Mental Health Neighborhood. In 2017, she was chosen as one of the Forward50, the Forward's annual list of the 50 most influential, accomplished, and interesting American Jews.*