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).

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 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, ‘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). 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, hekdesh, 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.