Stella and Reuben, you've done a wonderful job here this morning and you've taught us some very important Torah for this moment in our country's history.

Reuben, you asked us to think about the qualities that make a great leader, pointing us not toward one who seeks fame or personal gain, or power over others, but you suggested that perhaps what makes a great leader is someone who wants to make things better for everyone, someone whose own humility and compassion allows all people to thrive.

And Stella, you took us deep into a conversation about sacrifice, asking how we decide what truly matters to us, for which we are willing to put it all on the line. And how, tying it back to the biblical concept of sacrifice, how what we give of ourselves helps us draw near to others, maybe to God, certainly to our own most closely held values.

Truly, you have both offered us today critically important ideas to help us face this challenging moment in our country's unfolding story: what kind of leaders we want to be, and what we are willing to fight for.

We don't have to look far to see what troubles we're facing today. In fact, the Brookings Institution, a non-partisan research organization, wrote all the way back on February 13th: "we have seen the President and his administration issue a blitz of executive actions, many of which overtly challenge the checks and balances and separation of powers that are fundamental to the U.S.'s constitutional governance."

This has looked like the freezing of congressionally-allocated international aid for the poorest children in the world, the firing of federal workers and the freezing of funds, hurting countless families, including veterans. The giddy stripping of DEI, everywhere. A chaotic downsizing of any number of federal agencies including now the Department of Education, several invitations for people to rat out their neighbors, threats on Medicaid and Social Security, a roll back of voting rights, and the administration has chosen to side with a dictator over our ally, Ukraine. And if I asked you to raise your hands and start sharing what's on *your* radar, no doubt you'd have dozens more to add.

Our democracy is in danger domestically and internationally. And that makes us all less safe. But as we consider your questions this morning, Stella and Reuben, we are not without a map, without models, or a narrative to guide us in how we might live and lead in this moment.

Later this week, we'll celebrate the holiday of Purim in which the Jewish people are living amongst others in the make-believe land of Shushan. And there's a king, Achashverosh, who's often distracted by his own ego and desires. He's got a second in command, Haman, who we find manipulating both the king and the people of Shushan for his own gain.

As the story unfolds, King Achashverosh falls in love with a woman named Esther, who hides from him the fact that she is Jewish. When Haman develops a plan to kill all the Jews - Esther's uncle, Mordechai, rushes to the palace, wearing sackcloth - the clothes of mourning and

despair. And at the gate, Mordechai pleads with the guard there to get a note to Esther, alerting her to Haman's terrible plan and saying that she must go to the king now and tell him that she is a Jew so that he, out of his love for her, will change the decree.

Mordechai writes to her, saying: וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת׃ Esther, perhaps it is for just such a moment as this that you have attained to power. Which is to say: Maybe this is why you're here right now.

And Esther is stirred. And so she goes to King Achaverosh and she tells him: I am a Jew and that man, Haman - he is a bad guy. And so the plan is overturned and so our people celebrate and live to fight another day.

Esther is a hero, a leader for sure. And a situation has arisen in which she has a difficult decision to make. She could just keep her head down, and let the tragedy unfold. Or she could take a risk and decide to stand up. And in a moment that depends on her doing so, Esther acts with a profound moral courage.

So this term - moral courage - it's going to matter to us today. For as it was with Achashverosh and Haman, it matters today if people are willing to stand up, maybe even to see ourselves as having attained to whatever position we're in for just such a moment as this.

So what is this thing: moral courage? Is it something we're born with? Are people who have it just built a little differently than the rest of us? Can you borrow it? Return it? And if we want it, how do we get it?

Author and ethicist Rushworth Kidder, describes it like this: "moral courage (is) the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical challenges firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating. (It is) 'the courage to … adhere to the values of honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion," when **risk** is involved.

In fact, Kidder continues: Anyone can "endure" security and well-being. The real challenges arise in the face of hazard. So it is with moral courage, where danger is endured for the sake of an overarching commitment to conscience, principles, or core values."

So: When a situation arises that challenges one's moral code or threatens others, it is the decision to act, even knowing the gravity of the situation and its possible consequences.

Consider Esther's response in the Megillah. She says that going to the king without being summoned could result in her death. And upon realizing what she must do, she utters these famous words: *V'cha'asher avad'ti, avad'ti*. If I am lost, then I am lost. Recognizing the possible dire consequences, she decides to act anyway so that a whole people are not erased.

Today, we are also living in a "time such as this." And the most incredible thing - is that we are seeing moral courage alive all around us.

We could look to US Attorney for the Southern District of NY, Danielle Sassoon, an Orthodox Jew, who, when instructed to drop the charges against NY Mayor Adams, understanding that he had exchanged such a privilege for an agreement to comply with the federal government's immigration policies here in this sanctuary city, Ms. Sassoon acted unquestionably with an Estherian moral courage. She wrote in a now famous 8 page letter letter:

"When I took my oath of office… I vowed to well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I was about to enter. … I have always considered it my obligation to pursue justice impartially, without favor to the wealthy or those who occupy important public office, or harsher treatment for the less powerful." …

She continued: I cannot agree to seek a dismissal driven by improper considerations. … In the event you are unwilling to meet or to reconsider the directive in light of the problems raised . . . I am prepared to offer my resignation."

Which is to say: *v'cha'asher avad'ti, avad'ti.* If I am lost, then I am lost.

Asked to violate her values, and sell out refugees and asylum seekers in our city, she could not.

Or we might look to one Ms. Ellen Weintraub, a NY Reform Jew, who occupies the role of Chair of the FEC, the Federal Election Commission. On January 31, the president sought to remove her from this position and her response, worthy of Purim's irreverent nature, was: "There *are* legal ways to remove an FEC Chair. This is not one of them." For perhaps it is for this very moment that Ms. Weintraub attained to this position, wielding the ability, if she must, to protect the millions of people in this country who rely on the integrity of free and fair democratic elections.

And there are countless others - we might read the recent words of Bishop Mariann Budde, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, or attorney Marc Elias - for stories of people who didn't sign up for this, but when the moment came - their answer was no. Their answer was I will stand up, stand for. Knowing that the consequences might be significant.

Now, that's *them* . . . maybe these folks are just built differently than the rest of us. Or maybe . . . maybe it's in all of us, this seed of Esther's courage.

In some ways it's so simple - ya know - acting on what we know is right. So obvious, yeah? But that doesn't make it easy. Maybe we're worried we'll lose our job, or a friend, or there will be retribution, or even physical threat. And it's okay to acknowledge that, or for our moral courage to be imperfect, or in development - or to be unsure if we'll have it when the moments come.

Ya know, Esther also didn't ask for the hand she was dealt. Actually, when Mordechai showed up at the gates, telling her she had to go to the King - ya know what she said at first? Mordechai, put on some clothes, dude. You can't be walking around here in sackcloth. She tried

to make it go away. But then something tingled in her and she knew it - it had to be her. And her actions stopped the dominoes from falling, and gave hope to a demoralized and frightened people.

Our actions of moral courage, all of us, whether it's in one big action or lots of little ones, can stop the dominoes from falling and give hope to a demoralized and frightened people.

Teachers of moral courage explain that there are three ways to nurture our own moral courage. One is to connect deeply with our own inner core, our values, where our heart is, and to name for ourselves what's important to us. Two is to connect with our community to feel less alone. And three is to connect with our neighbors, and develop the relationships and connections that make us want to take risks for one another.

Esther was scared as heck, but midrash tells us that she found her moral courage first through prayer. In Esther Rabbah, she prays: "O Adonai, . . . help, please, … O God, bring success to me, Your poor handmaiden.. . . You, O Parent of orphans, stand at the right hand of this orphan, who trusts in Your compassion. May this man have mercy on me, for I fear him." I wonder what our words would be.

And then, as soon as she resolves to act, she tells Mordechai: *k'nos et kol HaYehudim.* Go and gather up all the Jews. We're gonna turn this thing around. So while *she* is *alone* with the king, she's not really alone. And, as you can maybe see - neither are we.

Stella and Reuben, we are so proud of the questions you are raising and the answers you are exploring in this time in history, already becoming the leaders we need and need to be, and already teaching us all that is worth fighting for.

This moment isn't easy, but there is an electricity running through us that means that we do not have
to see ourselves as powerless just because someone wants us to believe that we are. It's already happening. It's being born inside of each of us right at this very second. And it's amazing. In spite of it all - it's amazing. And it might look different for each of us, when our Esther moments will come, but it helps to maybe imagine them a bit. This is, in fact, our legacy, it is our birthright, and it is already making a difference. May this **also** be the story that is unfolding right now. Shabbat shalom.