Asher and Meera,

Yasher Koach. Those were fantastic divrei Torah, rich in Jewish wisdom and moral clarity. You both offered us such profound teachings from our tradition. And for that, this morning, I am so proud and grateful.

Asher, you approached head on one of the most challenging laws in the Torah. What's called lex talionis, in Latin, the law of reciprocal punishment, or "an eye for an eye." As you taught us, our rabbis give endless explanations for why this is no longer a viable matrix of crime and punishment. Even two thousand years ago, our sages understood that this notion would yield only a never ending cycle of violence. And, per medieval commentaries, you led us to consider what might instead bring about a more lasting peace in the form of restorative justice. That is, a system by which a perpetrator and victim can together find some new way forward. Lest we think that this is merely a modern, lefty fixation, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe himself famously emphasized restorative justice over "an eye for eye," as a model for teshuva, repentance and reconciliation. And *you* reminded us of its potential as we seek to repair this broken world.

And Meera, *you* looked at a different set of verses, but you likewise followed in the rabbinic tradition of turning the plain sense of the Torah language on its head. As you explained, focusing on the blemishes that make a person unfit for leadership, our rabbis taught that what really makes a leader qualified is not their physical perfection, but their ability to discern between right and wrong. And diving deep into those rabbinic texts, you invited us to think of today's leaders, begging us to hold *them* accountable. Instead of condemning or blaming entire peoples, you reminded us to go straight to the source – taking our leaders to task, and resisting the impulse among peoples to hate each other.

All of this wisdom, Meera and Asher, speaks for itself, noting the brokenness of our world and using the Torah to help us repair it.

These days, as we know, the world is deeply in need of that. Since the beginning of January, I have given fifteen sermons that focused, in some way, on the moral crises that beset us as Jews and as Americans. In that time, Rabbi Kolin and Rabbi Traylor have also focused almost exclusively on the avalanche of bad news we face each day. Attacks on our democracy. The war in Gaza. The uses and abuses of antisemitism in our time. And so on. Amidst all the analysis of current events from our clergy team, alongside insights from our Torah cycle to meet the moment, we've also had to contend with the reality that the chaos of national and global affairs is likely to continue for a while. Maybe even years to come. Perhaps it should be said, therefore, that I am appreciative of you both for reminding us that there is a generation waiting in the wings to bring us all out into something better.

And it's in that *waiting* that I want to focus this morning on yet another part of this week's parsha. As we call out for better leadership, both here and in Israel, as we yearn for a world in which wrongs are made right, and as we acknowledge that our yearning and hoping will continue for a long time to come, this week's reading (and in fact this month in the Jewish calendar) teach us a lesson about the value of waiting.

For 34 days now, we have performed the annual ritual of counting the omer: counting the days between Passover and Shavuot, recalling the way in which ancient Israelites counted their grain harvest each spring. And as part of our ritual of counting the Omer, during every evening service here at CBE we recite the Torah's commandment to do so…which comes directly from this week's parsha. In Leviticus 23, verses 15 and 16, we read:

*From the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the sabbath—you shall **count off** seven weeks. They must be complete: you must **count** until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to God*.

And so, each year, we do that. We count the 49 days leading up to Shavuot, *waiting* for that fiftieth day to come.

Even if ancient Israelites understood this as an agricultural accounting before getting taxed on Shavuot, the rabbis of the Talmud couldn't resist finding some way to make the Omer relevant in Diaspora. And so they explain that these 49 days are the days in which the Israelites waited before they would receive the Torah at Mount Sinai. And as a result, they explain, these weeks of waiting are designed for us to build our spiritual energy, growing in anticipation for the day on which the Torah will be given.

Now that may or may not feel suspenseful to *you*. But according to tradition, right now, we're supposed to slow down, and allow ourselves to want something we don't yet have. Day by day, we're supposed to really feel the time in which we go *without* whatever it is that we want. And this feeling, this drama, is supposed to escalate.

Though you might think we should count *down*, as if we're waiting for a ball to drop on New Year's Eve, our sages explain that we count *up*, instead, as if we don't yet know when we will reach our destination. The 13th century Sefer HaChinukh explains: "We count constantly – [wondering] when the day will come that we yearn for, the day that we go out to freedom. Because counting [towards a certain date] shows a person that all his desire and longing is to reach that time." In other words, by counting up towards an unknown time, we allow ourselves to get excited, to grow our awareness about what we actually need and want.

It's kind of melodramatic. But the idea is that while we wait for what we want, we can use our time to get clear on how best to enjoy that thing, or experience, so that when we actually attain it, we will be grateful for it, and we will know how best to proceed when it comes.

I think of this teaching all the time. Not just during the springtime Omer season. But anytime I find myself waiting for something that I'm not sure will ever materialize. I think of it when I encounter someone waiting for an illness to pass. Or waiting for a project to be complete. I think of it when I encounter activists and artists who hustle each day to realize their vision,

with no clear sense of when the world will transform into what they imagine. And I think of it now, for all of us: wondering, when will things actually start to feel better? When will our country feel like it's building *toward* a safe and equitable future? When will justice be restored, Asher? And Meera, when will Israelis and Palestinians finally get the leadership to lead them out of this horrific cycle of violence?

With these questions yet unanswered, we find ourselves waiting. But our waiting itself does not need to add to the angst we otherwise feel about the news. Following the ritual of counting the Omer, perhaps our waiting can open us up to creative imagining. By actively waiting, we might allow ourselves to prepare for whatever it is that comes next. As we do during the Omer, perhaps we might ready ourselves spiritually to receive something holy yet to come. Or perhaps, as Sefer HaChinukh explains, our waiting might push us to build anticipation toward something far better that we can build.

The Hasidic Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was once asked by a student: "Rebbe, who is a good Jew?" "Anyone who *wants* to be a good Jew," the rebbe replied. "But rebbe, who wouldn't want to be a good Jew?" "That's easy," he says finally, "anyone who thinks he's a good Jew already."

In other words, we should never be satisfied with a broken world, or about our role in it. Rather, it's in our waiting for things to be better, that we can push ourselves to *create* that more perfect world. And so we continue counting *up*, imagining a world to come that is so much better than anything we might've assumed possible before. It is annoying, and it is painful to recognize the ways in which our world is not yet redeemed. It is excruciating, even, to consider that we may be in this mess for a long time to come. But in our waiting, we are able to receive the wisdom that you both preached, Asher and Meera. We are able to imagine something far better, like you described, and we can carve out space in which we might make it so.

May we continue to count these days. May we continue to imagine something better, pursuing it, believing in it, and making it real. And as we wait for that dream of justice, slowly and deliberately, may these days continue to count.

Shabbat Shalom.