Earlier this month, I turned 56.

I'm still deciding how I feel about that.

Fifty-six is not old. At least that is what every 56-year-old I know tells me. But it is old enough that when you hurt yourself, people no longer ask, "What happened?" They ask, "Were you getting out of a chair?"

It is also an age when birthdays begin to feel a little less like celebrations of achievement and a little more like invitations to take stock.

You begin to realize that you have probably lived more years than you have remaining. You can still imagine many chapters ahead, God willing, but you can no longer pretend that the book is just getting started.

And so a birthday like 56 raises questions.

What have I done with these years?

What have I learned?

What do I still hope to accomplish?

And perhaps most importantly: What is everything I have learned for?

Not long ago, I read an article about Arthur Brooks, a professor at Harvard who studies happiness and meaning.

When Brooks was 55, one year younger than I am now, he found himself burned out and uncertain about what should come next. He had spent more than a decade as president of the American Enterprise Institute, a prominent and demanding position. His career had consumed much of his life. His children were growing up and needed him differently. He had accomplished many of the things he once believed would make him happy.

And yet, as he put it, his tank was empty.

So he went for a walk.

Not a walk around the block. Not the walk I take when Sharon tells me that I have been sitting in the same chair for three hours and should probably see whether my legs still work.

Brooks walked the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route through Spain. For weeks, he traded meetings, emails, deadlines, and devices for sore feet, cheap hostels, silence, and long stretches of road.

Somewhere along that road, he began to understand that accomplishment and meaning are not the same thing.

Accomplishment asks: What have I achieved?

Meaning asks: What is my life in service of?

That realization led Brooks into the work he does today, studying happiness and helping other people build more meaningful lives.

Brooks teaches that a happy life has three essential ingredients: enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning.

Enjoyment comes from the experiences and relationships that bring us pleasure.

Satisfaction comes from effort, progress, and accomplishment. It is the feeling of working toward something difficult and finally reaching it.

But meaning answers the deepest questions: Why am I here? Why does my life matter? Who needs me?

And Brooks argues that many of us have become very good at pursuing the first two while neglecting the third.

We know how to entertain ourselves. We know how to work hard and accomplish things. We know how to set goals, fill calendars, build résumés, collect experiences, and count successes.

But none of those things necessarily tells us what our life is for.

In fact, Brooks believes that some of the conveniences of modern life make the search for meaning more difficult.

We have become very good at removing friction.

If we are bored, we reach for our phones. If we need something, it arrives at our door the next day. If a conversation becomes uncomfortable, we can retreat into a screen. If we do not know the answer, we can find it in seconds without asking another human being.

And I am hardly one to criticize this. I have devoted an embarrassing number of hours to watching strangers on Facebook cook things I will probably never make.

Although, in my defence, I have saved the recipes. Somewhere on my phone are approximately 600 dinners I fully intend to prepare as soon as the days become 47 hours long.

But Brooks argues that when we eliminate too much friction, we also eliminate some of the conditions in which meaning grows.

Boredom allows the mind to wander.

Difficulty develops strength.

Uncertainty forces us to ask questions.

And needing other people creates relationships.

This does not mean that suffering is good or that we should go looking for it. Life is perfectly capable of finding us without our assistance.

But difficulty is part of being alive. Disappointment, rejection, uncertainty, failure, grief, fear, and pain will enter every life.

The question is what we do with them.

Brooks tells his students that they should try not to waste their suffering.

He suggests keeping what he calls a failure journal. When something goes wrong, write it down. A month later, return to it and ask: What have I learned? A month after that, return again and ask: Has anything grown from this experience? Has it changed how I understand myself? Has it allowed me to help another person?

One of Brooks's most powerful pieces of advice is also one of his simplest:

"If you want something, give it away."

If you are struggling with something, find another person struggling with it and help them.

If you want hope, offer hope.

If you want connection, create connection.

If you want your life to have meaning, become part of the meaning of someone else's life.

That idea stayed with me because I had recently heard it expressed in another way, by Rachel Goldberg-Polin.

When Rachel sat here in our sanctuary, I asked how she managed to walk through the world carrying the unimaginable grief that she and Jon carry for their beloved son Hersh, who was murdered in a tunnel in Gaza after 330 days as a hostage of Hamas.

Many of you were here. Do you remember her answer?

Rachel said that each of us is born into this world for at least one purpose: to do one thing that another person needs in one particular moment.

We may never know what that thing will be. There may be many such moments in a lifetime. But we are here to offer something that another human being could not provide for themselves.

Rachel explained that this is one way she has tried to come to terms with Hersh's murder, even as she will never emerge from the heartbreak of losing him.

She imagines that during those terrible months of captivity, Hersh did something for the people imprisoned alongside him.

Perhaps he gave Carmel, Eden, Alex, Almog, or Ori strength when one of them was losing hope.

Perhaps he offered courage, humour, love, compassion, or wisdom.

Perhaps there was a moment in that tunnel when one of them needed something only Hersh could give.

In Rachel's theology, once Hersh had done what his soul had entered this world to do, the mission of his soul was complete. It could then be gathered, as our tradition teaches, *tachat kanfei haShechinah*, beneath the wings of God's presence.

This does not make Hersh's murder acceptable. It does not make the suffering good or suggest that it was part of some divine plan we are expected to understand.

Meaning does not justify suffering.

But even unimaginable suffering does not have to deprive a life of its meaning.

Hersh's life had meaning because he loved and was loved. Because he brought something into this world that no one else could bring. Because even in the darkness of that tunnel, there may have been words only he could speak and courage only he could offer.

Rachel's insight reminded me of something Rabbi Lawrence Kushner once wrote:

"Each lifetime is filled with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

For some there are more pieces.

For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.

Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.

And so it goes, souls going this way and that trying to assemble the myriad parts.

But know this. No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle.

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle.

Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don't.

And when you present your piece which is worthless to you, to another, whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, you are a messenger from the Most High."

No one has all the pieces to their own puzzle.

And every one of us is carrying pieces that belong to someone else.

What Rachel Goldberg-Polin and Rabbi Kushner are teaching is the same great truth Viktor Frankl discovered amid the horrors of the concentration camps: human beings need meaning and purpose in order to live.

Frankl taught that meaning is not simply something we invent. It is something life asks of us.

Each moment places a question before us:

Who needs me now?

What is mine to do?

What responsibility has been entrusted to me?

What do I possess that another person needs?

Sometimes we find meaning through the work we create. Sometimes through the people we love. And sometimes, Frankl taught, when suffering cannot be prevented or escaped, we find meaning in the way we carry it and in what we allow it to call forth from us.

Most of us, God willing, will never be asked to find meaning amid suffering of the magnitude that Frankl endured or that Rachel and Jon endure.

But the question is still addressed to each of us:

What piece of someone else's puzzle am I carrying?

What have I learned that could help another person find their way?

What can I give that another person cannot provide for themselves?

I have been thinking about those questions since turning 56.

I have now been a rabbi for more than 25 years. In that time, I have learned some things about how to be a rabbi.

I have learned many more things about how not to be a rabbi.

I have made decisions I am proud of and decisions I wish I could make again. I have navigated difficult congregational moments, built programs that succeeded, built programs that did not succeed, delivered sermons I still remember, and delivered sermons that, mercifully, no one remembers.

When I was younger, I thought wisdom meant knowing what to do.

Now I think wisdom often means recognizing the situation, because you have been there before. You know which questions need to be asked. You know which dangers are real and which fears will pass. You know that there is rarely only one possible road forward.

And you know that the person standing at the beginning of that road cannot yet see what you can see.

That is true in every profession.

Some of you know what it is like to begin a career with no idea whether you have chosen the right one.

Some of you know what it is like to be turned down for the job you believed you deserved.

Some of you know how to enter a room where no one looks like you and no one expects you to succeed.

Some of you know what it is like to change careers at 45, to return to work after raising children, to take over a family business, to become a leader before you felt ready, to lose a business, or to build another one.

Some of you have learned how to ask for a raise, how to recover from a mistake, how to survive a terrible boss, and perhaps even how to recognize when you are becoming one.

You have learned how to lead through a crisis, how to admit that you do not know something, how to make a difficult decision, and how to recognize when it is time to leave.

You may think those experiences belong only to you.

But somewhere in this congregation is another person who needs precisely what those experiences taught you.

You are carrying a piece of their puzzle.

Our Torah understands that no one, including its greatest leader, succeeds alone.

Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness. From morning until evening, people line up before him with their problems, conflicts, and questions. Moses tries to handle every one of them himself.

His father-in-law, Yitro, watches him and says, essentially, “Moses, this is not going well.”

Lo tov hadavar asher atah oseh.

“What you are doing is not good.”

Both you and the people will wear yourselves out. You cannot do this alone.

And then Yitro says, *Atah shema b’koli, i’atzcha.*

“Listen to me. I will offer you counsel.”

I’atzcha. I will give you *etzah*.

Yitro does not take Moses’s place. He does not solve every problem for him. He sees something Moses cannot see because Moses is too close to it. Yitro offers perspective drawn from experience and helps Moses become a better leader.

Even Moses needed a mentor.

And perhaps that is why the Hebrew word *etzah* is so fitting.

Etzah means counsel, guidance, advice, or a plan. It is what one person can offer another when that person is standing at a crossroads and cannot yet see the road ahead.

Offering *etzah* does not mean having every answer. A good mentor listens. A good mentor asks questions. A good mentor shares experience without assuming that another person's life will follow the same path.

Sometimes a mentor simply says, "I have stood somewhere near where you are standing. Let me tell you what I learned."

This coming year, Temple Sholom is launching Etzah, a new professional career mentorship program.

We will begin with a pilot cohort early in 2027. We will thoughtfully match members seeking professional guidance with members who have relevant experience, wisdom, and perspective to share.

The program will take place over three months, with an opening gathering, a concluding gathering, and at least one conversation between each mentor and mentee every month.

This is for people beginning careers and for those changing direction. It is for people returning to work, growing into leadership, entering new industries, or wondering what comes next.

It is also for those of you who have accumulated something worth giving away.

Etzah is not a job-placement service. A mentor is not expected to produce a job, make introductions on demand, or become someone's permanent career counsellor.

We are asking for something at once simpler and more profound.

We are asking you to take what life has taught you and place it in the service of another person.

And I want to ask you tonight to consider taking part.

If you are searching for direction, perhaps someone in this congregation is carrying a piece of your puzzle.

If you have spent years building a career, making mistakes, finding your way, starting again, and learning what matters, perhaps you are carrying a piece that belongs to someone else.

Do not underestimate what you know simply because it has become familiar to you.

Do not assume your wrong turns were wasted.

Do not allow your experience to remain only experience.

Turn it into *etzah*.

Give it to someone who needs it.

Arthur Brooks began walking the Camino because, at 55, he wondered what the next chapter of his life was for.

At 56, I think I am beginning to understand the answer.

The next chapter is not only about what else we can accomplish. It is about what we can give away.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons a synagogue exists.

We come here to pray, to learn, to celebrate, and to grieve. But we also come because no one has all the pieces to their own puzzle. A sacred community brings together the person carrying a question and the person carrying a piece of the answer.

Everyone here has something to learn.

Everyone here has something to teach.

Everyone here has something to offer and something to gain.

We may never know which conversation will be the conversation, which word will be the word, or which moment will give another person precisely what they need.

But we can choose to be present.

We can choose to share what we have learned.

We can choose not to waste what life has taught us.

Somewhere in this community, someone may be waiting for the one thing that only you can give.