As you walk out tonight, after services, I hope you’ll glance up at the heavens and marvel at the shape of the moon and the wonder of the universe. The cosmos is vast and glorious, but recent studies have estimated that our universe is slowly losing energy following the big bang. It continues to expand, as many of us know, but as it spreads out, the levels of energy decline and as a result the cosmos is growing less dense and potent. What’s more, scientists believe that the cosmos is approximately at half its life expectancy. When they calculate the age of the universe and the average life span of a star, they estimate that the universe is mid-life. Mid-life for us, as well, is marked with a loss of energy, potency, a spreading out of sorts and a loss of BONE density.

When most of us hear the word, mid-life, we think of the next word that comes with it….crisis. So often, we hear of men and women doing the most outrageous things, because they are beginning to confront the fact, that like the universe, we are slowing down. We assume more risk to make us feel more alive, make poor social and moral choices and often abandon our social connections, loosening the ties that have bound us together for so long.
Too many come into my office, and lament this fact and share with me some of their behavior that resulted from their crisis. More often than not, they regret it, once the pleasure passes, but that is another sermon.

I stand before you tonight, in mid-life. I am 58 years old, and like all things I am not what I once was. This summer, I was in Saratoga Springs, New York, walking along a lovely brook with Laurie and some friends. Boulders were scattered out into the water, forming a natural path across the waterway. I couldn’t help but walk out onto them. And once out there, I found myself teetering and losing my balance. There was a time, when I could jump from rock to rock, like a gazelle. No more. Now I’ve known that my balance is less stable, but almost falling into the water, reminded me once again, that I’m not what I was.

But in exchange for my unstable rock hopping ability, I do think that I’ve learned a thing or two, as we all have. So, I’d like to share with you, a little later on, three mid-life lessons.

Judaism encourages the introspective journey. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Moses, all undertook perilous and interesting journeys, fraught with failure, loss, love and success. Most cultures in the ancient world, from Buddhism, ancient Greece, Taoism and Confucianism encouraged not the journey but staying still and meditating. It was in
contemplation, not in the journey that Siddhartha, or the Buddha discovered his purpose. The founder of Taoism taught that even in motion, one must develop mental stillness. Mental quietness, even as one moves through life, is the path to a sense of balance and inner peace. We Jews found wisdom not in staying still and in finding acceptance of things as they are, but rather in the journey to discover things as they might be.

Consider, the first journey depicted in the opening chapters of Genesis. It describes the Garden of Eden. The Garden was a womb of sorts. Life was safe, everything was provided by God. There was no want, no curiosity and certainly no independence. Eden is, as a colleague once taught, was a theological fantasy land, a place in which God lets Adam name the animals, and creates Eve out of a rib. In Eden, snakes talk. But there is no exploration, either. In the Garden, life is without human guile, without want, strife or conflict. Eden is recreation without procreation. Incidence without consequence. “Enjoy,” said the Divine, “but under no circumstances eat of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.” But, Eve and then Adam ate thereof and everything changed. They at once became fully aware of their creative potential and fully mature adults. This begins the journey of humanity from childhood to adulthood.

Laurie has reminded me about childhood in a funny way. If mom is
hungry, then it’s time for the children to eat. If Mom is cold, then they have to put on a jacket. Childhood is by definition, not having the capacity to choose. Kids live by their parent’s standards and norms. And that was the very nature of Adam and Eve in the garden. They did not know, as the text tells us “good from evil.” They did whatever God told them to do. They were children, and God was the parent.

But the children of the garden wanted to grow up. They wanted independence. They wanted to choose. So they ate from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, even after God told them not to. So God drove them out, not in anger, but because he feared that being knowledgeable now, especially about their mortality, they might eat from the other tree in the garden, the Tree of Life and thus become immortal.

Of course, different faith communities see this journey differently. Some blame Eve and thereby all women for tempting Adam. As a consequence, they force women to dress in modest clothing, so that the temptation will not happen again. Some see the story as a “fall” into human failure and disobedience. Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so their progeny must atone for that sin. But we Jews see the story not as one of sin, but of leaving childhood and entering into responsible living. Only outside of Eden does life becomes life at all—
one that can have meaning.

According to the book of Genesis, Eden still exists, but we can’t go back. “And so God sent them out and east of Eden, he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword, which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of eternal life.” It is there, but we can never go back.

Our second journey narrative is less mythical and more historical. It is the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt. Metaphorically, Egypt is enslavement, denial, fear and confusion. Egypt is Pharaoh, all-powerful human conqueror, abusive and controlling. Egypt is where to be a Jew is dangerous. Egypt is work without play--procreation without recreation, adulthood without childhood. It is the opposite of Eden.

No choice and therefore no worship was allowed to take place in Egypt. Moses comes before Pharaoh in order to obtain the release of Israel that they may go three days into the desert in order to worship God. In the biblical paradigm, Egypt is where . . . there can be no human fulfillment, no faith, no freedom, and no responsibility. So they leave Egypt and wander in the desert, wistfully remembering their childhood in Egypt, till they arrive at their adulthood and responsibility; Sinai. It is there that they receive the Ten Commandments and learn about morality, personal responsibility and communal accountability.
If it is God who must drive Adam and Eve from Eden lest they stay and live on eternally as non-creative children, it is God through the efforts of Moses who must drag the children of Israel out of Egypt lest they become the non-creative robots of a dehumanizing totalitarian system. So Eden and Egypt become paradigms for places one must leave, for they are not conducive to human growth and development.

Mid-life is a lot like leaving the garden and entering the desert. There is no roadmap. There are no signposts. And it was for our ancestors and often for us today, terrifying. Our children grow up, leave the house and we ask, “now what?” Relationships go on the rocks and divorces sky rocket. We start to get sick and visit the doctor more and more, filling us fear and anxiety. We worry about retirement and whether or not we will have enough money on which to live. Our parents get sick, and our hearts break as we watch their declines, knowing in our hearts how this will end. We are no longer children riding in the back seats of our parent’s Oldsmobile, without a seat belt, I might add. Now we are in the front seat, and it can be daunting. Like the Israelites and Adam and Eve before them, we can never go back. We may want to, but we cannot.

Alas, the journey is one way, but lest we stumble through without paying attention, our sages taught: live every day as if it were your last. Our
journey, like the universe, is finite. Though we reflect on days gone by, we can’t, as the Great Gatsby wished, repeat the past.

Our family learned this lesson this August, during the middle of our vacation. Laurie’s father, Buncy suffered a debilitating stroke, which left him aphasic and partially paralyzed. We all gathered at his bedside and reminisced about his childhood and his journeys. It was sad, yet meaningful. It was poignant yet painful. The stories brought us to tears because deep down inside, we knew that we could never go back and relive them. The past is gone.

We will all have moments like that, sooner or later.

That's why, as we reach our middle years, we so often find ourselves depressed and demoralized. The dream we've cherished for years comes crashing to the ground; everything we've worked and struggled can falls to pieces. So what do we do?

We buck up and we move on. Here are three lessons that have helped me.

The first is that we need to be flexible. Most of us start out on our journey with a clear and powerful sense of where we're headed. We know where we want to go and how we're going to get there. But things don't always work out as we planned. We make
bad decisions, are shortsighted or lack the talent to follow through. More often, though, it is fate, luck, and pure happenstance. Whatever the reason, when things change, we need to be flexible.

One of my favorite stories is about Thomas Edison? On the night of December 9, 1914, the great Edison Industries of West Orange New Jersey, was virtually destroyed by fire. Thomas Edison lost millions of dollars that night and much of his life's work went up in flames. He was insured for only a little more than $200,000, because the buildings had been made of concrete, and at that time it was thought concrete was fireproof.

Edison's son was twenty-four; Thomas himself sixty-seven. The young man found his father that night standing near the fire, his face ruddy in the glow, his white hair blown by the December winds. "My heart ached for him," Charles Edison said, "he was no longer a young man--and everything was going up in flames. He spotted me. 'Charles,' he shouted, 'go get your mother; bring her here. She'll never see anything like this again as long as she lives.' The next morning, walking amid the charred embers of all his hopes and dreams, Thomas Edison said: “There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew."

Thank God we can start anew. No matter how tragic our loss, no matter how debilitating our failure, we can start over again--and build
something even better. This is what Edison was telling us. Most of us, though, don't see it this way. We think we have to be perfect, that we have to get it right the first time every time. But sooner or later, no matter who we are--no matter how capable, no matter how careful--we fail, we lose. Then what do we do? Most of us, I think, are so shocked, so demoralized that we give up altogether. That's how we become old--really old--we give up trying. We resign from the struggle. We say: "It wasn't meant to be," "We're too old to make a fresh start," "It's too late to begin again." But it's not true. It's only too late when we're discouraged and defeated; we're only old when we give up on life.

We need the courage to go on--in spite of everything, to be able to "roll with the punches" whatever life brings. Above all, we need flexibility--the faith that, in spite of our failures, we can always find new and inventive ways to triumph.

My second lesson for mid-life is “don’t sell out.” We need to maintain our integrity and remain true to ourselves and our higher principles as we reach the critical halfway point in our life. How easy it is to give up on the things we always thought were right, the things we always believed about ourselves.
The temptations are many and great. We see someone cheat and we think we’re being foolish if we don’t cut the same corners.

We are the masters at rationalization. We go against our better judgment, put our souls on ice. And it looks so good, nobody has to know the truth. On the outside, we maintain our image as fine, upstanding citizen, decent person, a good Jew. But on the inside we're tainted by dishonesty and callousness. Our integrity is lost; we are not what we pretend to be.

Once in the wilderness of Sinai, the Jews were told to fashion an ark, which would house the Ten Commandments. The tabernacle was to contain an ark built of acacia wood--covered with pure gold outside and in.

The ancient rabbis saw in the ark’s design, vital lesson for the building of our lives. We have to try, they said, to be on the inside what we appear to be on the outside. The part of us that is not visible should be fashioned with the same care and attention as the visible part. Gold outside and inside! We will not be able to find peace in our lives as long as there is an abyss between what we are and what we pretend to be

Third and perhaps most important of all. We need intimacy. The journey we take is long and wearying. It is full of false turns and failure, dead ends and disappointment. We never really know what the next bend in the road will bring. But when we have a good and trusted companion beside
us, we can bear whatever comes. It's true. Whether it be wife or husband,
son or daughter, relative or good friend, we are better able to survive the
suffering, to rejoice in the triumphs, to wrest meaning from the struggle,
when we have beside us an intimate and trusted friend.

We must fight the modern tendency to become "intimate strangers"--
talking together, working together, and raising children together, but
ultimately unknown to each other. We may have been marriage partners for
decades, friends for years, but so often we do not really know each other at
all. The truth is: for many of us, our intimacy is mock intimacy. A recent
sports betting commercial pointed this out to me. Two friends had nothing
to talk about except the welfare of a cat, if they weren’t betting on fantasy
football. How pathetic is that? We go looking for real support and comfort,
and there is none to be found.

How wonderful it was, visiting Laurie’s father, to spend our days in
the hospital and have friends come by to visit. Of course, we hung on the
words of the doctors and nurses, but we also depended on the love of our
family and friends. I will always remember my father in law lying in bed,
unable to speak, but looking at us and smiling. What we need most when
times are tough are intimate companions who will walk with us and comfort
us.
The times of the young are filled with hopes and dreams. The times of the elderly are filled with memories. But the times of those in the middle can be filled with tension and personal challenge. And this time can be difficult, but it can also be so fulfilling if we remember that we need flexibility, integrity and intimacy.

Our mythical and historic ancestors taught us that we can only journey forward through life. We can never go back. In the most basic way, we just have to put one foot in front of the other.

As the physical world around us grows in age, perhaps it, like us, grows too in wisdom. For us, I pray the added years bring all kinds of wisdom, to discover things as they could be. The Wisdom to choose life and begin anew. The Wisdom to recognize the gold within and the gold without. The Wisdom to open our hearts to intimacy and vital connections. This is the journey that begins now with one simple step…