

Thank you, Gracias, Todah Rabbah.

I am sure that we all have experienced certain events, heard ideas or engaged in conversations that have left an indelible mark on us. These moments affect how we engage the world around us and help shape who we are.

For me, I know I carry extra baggage being a first generation American. I feel perpetually indebted to my parents who emigrated from Argentina to this country nearly forty years ago in pursuit of a better life. They left their families, their culture and all the comforts of home and eventually settled in Miami. And it was challenging. They didn't understand all of the cultural norms; they didn't have vast social circles or relatives living close by; and perhaps most challenging, they didn't speak the language. One's limited linguistic abilities makes everything more challenging: a learned college professor cannot teach and a talented jeweler cannot craft or mend.

I compare my life today to what it could have been had my parents remained in Argentina and I feel blessed. I stand here before you today, as a congregational rabbi, comfortable speaking three languages, at home in the suburbs of Boston, on the streets of Buenos Aires, and in the *shuk* in Jerusalem.

How can I possibly adequately thank my parents for their brave choice forty years ago? How can words, whether in English, Spanish or Hebrew, convey my gratitude, my appreciation for them? I've carried that weight for many years. And despite my parents' acknowledgement of my appreciation, my words never seem enough.

As I am sure you have all read and heard, the past few weeks have been challenging for my family. Nadav was born on Sunday, December 22, 2013 in the evening and weighed 8 pounds, 1 ounce and was a mighty 20.5 inches long. The joy and euphoria of Nadav's birth was jolted, shattered, by the news of his congenital heart defect. Nadav was born with an Aortopulmonary window. In short, part of the tubing of his heart was conjoined and as a result, he needed to breathe twice as hard to circulate oxygenated blood through his body. AP windows account for roughly 0.1% of all congenital heart defects. They would need to operate on him soon.

Devastated by the news, we were assured that we were in the best place in the world. Our own Mitch Feldman comforted me and told me that the surgery that Nadav would undergo in a few days was actually invented and first performed at Boston Children's Hospital by Dr. Robert Gross in 1952. After learning more about the history and innovation of Boston Children's, I looked at Shayna at one point and said, "I am so glad I interviewed so well and got the job at Emunah...."

Early on Friday, a week after Nadav's birth, we were discharged from Children's and were able to spend Shabbat at home. There, surrounded by Shayna and our parents, we sang Shalom Aleikhem, made Kiddush, and Shayna and I blessed Nadav for the first time.

Two days later, on Monday morning we went back to Children's for Nadav's surgery. After meeting one more time with the surgical staff, we handed Nadav over to the skilled surgeons and went to the lobby. As the elevator doors opened, we saw hundreds of parents shuffling about with their children, heard the clanging and bells of the Charles Rhoad Ball sculpture, and made our way to the fish tanks where we were meeting our family.

After the longest breakfast of our lives, Shayna and I returned to the Hospital and met with the surgeon who told us everything had gone exactly as planned. No surprises, no complications – everything went according to the book.

For the next six days, three in the Intensive Care Unit and three in the Cardiac Care Unit, we stayed by Nadav's side. Finally, a little less than a week after his surgery, Nadav was discharged from the hospital and we came home. This time for good.

The doctors expect a full recovery and, aside from a yearly check in with his cardiologist, a pretty normal life. Well, as normal a life as a Rabbi's kid can have.

As Nadav grew stronger, I found myself returning to the theme of gratitude.

How on earth can I possibly show my appreciation to the people at Children's and Newton-Wellesley (the hospital where Nadav was born and where the heart defect was discovered)?

How can I appropriately thank the pediatrician who initially found the heart murmur?

How do I thank the cardiologist who came in on Erev Christmas just to explain things to us face to face instead of over the phone?

The nurse who bent the rules and allowed me to sleep in the playroom because she saw that I couldn't bear to leave Shayna or Nadav on our first night at the hospital?

A dear friend and colleague who interrupted his vacation and made the trip to Boston to be there for me and my family? Whose words, expressed through the Misheberakh blessing transformed the cacophony of the main lobby into a place of *kedushah* and tranquility.

How does one thank the surgeon – whose steady hands inserted the patch that sealed Nadav's heart – and gave him a *lev shalem* – a complete heart?

Not a rhetorical question – I asked each and every health care provider – how can I possibly thank you.

Of all the answers, it was the surgeon's, a gentleman by the name of Aditya Kaza, which has stayed with me.

He said: “God gives us all talents. The key to life is to find yours. Sadly, some people go through life not knowing what it is. I was able to find mine and put it to good use. I am just doing what I was meant to do. There is no need to thank me.”

It felt as if Yosef the dream interpreter himself was standing before me.

Again, although sufficient for the medical staff, my expression of gratitude seemed inadequate.

While the medical staff at the hospital took care of Nadav, it was our friends, family, and community that took care of us. You all took care of us. I can't express how much every email, text message, and phone call meant to us. You must know that we read every communication out loud to each other.

Your messages gave us strength, they made us cry, they gave us perspective and they allowed us to feel that we were not alone while we were in the hospital. You shared your stories with Shayna and me – and in doing so gave us the strength to be strong for Nadav. Shayna and I plan on printing out all the letters we received and putting them in a book. Nadav must know how much he was loved from the moment he entered the world.

It is my hope that whenever anyone in our community, whether we know them or not, experiences either grief or joy, that we make the effort to be present for them. That we pause from our busy days and send an email or text message letting them know that we care; that we jump at the chance to provide a meal; that we remind them that they are not alone.

One voice, which echoed loudly throughout the past two weeks, belongs to Gerry Stechler *zikharon li'vrakhah*. After giving a sermon that focused on children, Gerry called me to set up an appointment. The next day we met at Panera and he gave me some pointers, and he said to me: “Michael, children are resilient – they aren't as fragile as we think they are. They are strong, they are powerful – how else do you think so many of them make it to be adults!”

When I looked at Nadav in the hospital, knowing the limitations of language, in English Spanish and Hebrew – I reminded Nadav, I reminded myself of Gerry's words, he was strong, he was *fuerte*, he was an *ish gibor*.

As challenging as I find it to show gratitude to other humans, how does could one possibly show gratitude towards God?

This morning we read from *Shirat Hayam* – the song our ancestors sang in gratitude from their redemption from Egypt. For the people living in Egypt, liberated after years of bondage, they transformed their joy into music, their appreciation into song.

The challenge of praising God is also described in the Talmud. The discussion begins by recalling that in Deuteronomy 10:17, Moses describes God as “the great, mighty, and awesome God” – *ha’el ha-gadol ha-gibor v’hanora*; the rabbis incorporated this phrasing into the opening paragraph of every Amidah prayer. Two parallel passages, Berakhot 33b and Megillah 25a, relate that when a certain man led prayer in the presence of Rabbi Hanina, he praised God as “the great, mighty, and awesome, and glorious, and majestic, and revered, and powerful, and strong, and praiseworthy, and honored God.” The rabbi, however, rebuked him: “Have you finished with all the praises of your Master?” Could we ever finish such praises once begun? And if we did any less, would not our incomplete praise of God be a kind of insult?

Only because we have the example set for us by Moses can we escape this bind, reciting his three praises of God and no more ([http://www.aju.edu/Media/PDF/Walking\\_With\\_God\\_in\\_the\\_Talmud.pdf](http://www.aju.edu/Media/PDF/Walking_With_God_in_the_Talmud.pdf)).

The liturgy on Shabbat morning makes mention of our inability to effectively praise as well:

Could song fill our mouth as water fills the sea	אלו פינו מלא שירה פים ,
And could joy flood our tongue like countless waves –	ולשונו רנה כהמון גליו,
Could we soar with arms like an eagle’s wings	ונידינו פרושות כנשרי שמים ,
Never could we fully state our gratitude for one ten-thousandth of the lasting love that is Your precious blessing, dearest God, granted to our ancestors and to us.	אין אנחנו מספיקים להודות לך, ו-? א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו, ולברך את שמך, על אחת מאלף אלף אלפי אלפים ורבי רבבות פעמים, הטובות שעשית עם אבותינו ועמנו.

Through this journey of the past few weeks, I’ve been reminded that words alone might not fully express the depths of my appreciation.

My multiple attempts to appreciate my parents’ journey from Argentina to America remains incomplete.

My thanks to Dr. Kaza and the entire medical team at Boston Children’s, leaves me unsatisfied.

And lastly, a simple thanks to each and every one of you for your letters, prayers, and thoughts, does not encapsulate the profundity to which Shayna and I appreciate all that you did for us.

But it is all we can offer.

All we can say is thank you – ten thousand times over, in every language that we know – for supporting us, for caring for us, and for loving us.

Thank you, Gracias, *Todah Rabbah*.