

## **God's Gift in an Unexpected Package**

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On February 9, 1994 my son, Brandon, was born. Dina and I immediately recognized that something was different about this child, as he had a visible disability. Within an hour the pediatrician walked into Dina's hospital room and told us that there was a problem with the baby. I listened as he described Brandon's rocker bottom feet, short neck, wide set eyes and a simian crease on his hand. Through the fog that just settled upon us, Dina and I observed a parade of specialists who examined Brandon, each radiated an aura of doom and gloom, and each gave us the comforting three word report, "I don't know."

Months later, as the High Holy Days approached I was prepared to go the synagogue to ask God why he did this to us. Why did he take a child, who was supposed to be perfect, and burden him – and us – with so many disabilities?

But then a very pivotal event happened at the Kaplan household. I awoke one morning and looked up at Dina's smiling face. Dina looked at me and said "Michael, I finally realized that Brandon didn't happen to us. Brandon happened for us."

At that point, I realized that Brandon was God's gift. It is just that this gift arrived in an unexpected package. I recognized that when gifts arrive in your life, you better take them and approach them in a positive way. Otherwise you lose, and if the gifts involve your children, your children lose too.

That day my world, Dina's world, and my family's world began to change. And change for the better. On Yom Kippur, instead of asking God why he did this, I thanked him for the gift that he had given to us.

Within a short period of time I watched Dina refocus her law practice from civil litigation to special education law, representing families of children with special needs. I also watched as Dina, along with two colleagues; establish a non-profit organization for the purpose of training parents of children with special needs to be advocates for their children, in dealing with the red tape in procuring a proper education for their children. As Dina shared her experiences with me, it became clear to me that in her new profession, her work forever changed the lives of the children that she represented. And Dina's work changed their lives for the better. Dina has since become the president of the special education PTA and is very active member of the team that is bringing a universally accessible playground to the City of Calabasas. All of this happened because of God's gift, the gift that arrived in an unexpected package. Dina took the gift and ran with it.

My daughter, Jennifer (the one who makes delicious homemade gefilte fish), was in the delivery room when Brandon was born. She was 16 years old and had planned on pursuing a career in nursing. As time went on I noticed that Jenny was very interested in Brandon's communication abilities – limited as they were. I remember the day that Jenny told me that she wanted to become a speech therapist, and I remember the day that she told me that she had been accepted

to one of the top speech and language pathology programs in the country. And I also remember, vividly and proudly, the occasions on which members of our community, our Or Ami community, have pulled me aside and told me how much Jenny has done for their children in her role as a speech therapist. Just last Saturday, I ran into a former colleague of mine. When I mentioned Jenny's name, he lit up and began to tell me about the many ways my Jennifer had helped his son, Brent. I recently learned of a child who had no speech for ten years. After Jennifer worked with him for a time, the child is now speaking.

Yes, it was Brandon. It was God's gift, in an unexpected package that directed Jenny into a profession that is truly her calling.

Last Sunday, Brandon and I attended Mishpacha. In a break out group, I found myself in a discussion with four other parents. We were to discuss mercy and justice on Yom Kippur. I soon learned, that 4 of the 5 of us, had children with special needs. Although the Rabbi thought that we were discussing Torah, we spent some portion of the session discussing our children and how members of the community react to children with autism and other disabilities, and how we as parents deal with it. We discussed the "why me" question and we discussed the "accept the challenge and be positive" answer. And as I thought about the things that we as parents can do, I realized that each and every one of these children represents a gift from God. The gift just happens to be in an unexpected package.

I then looked around the sanctuary and saw at least 6 other groups of Mishpacha parents engaged in discussion. I wondered if these individuals had gifts or blessings in common that they were sharing. Their gifts may have been packaged as financial struggles, family dynamics, aging parents or a particularly talented child. But one thing was very clear. At Congregation Or Ami, we talk about these things and take what some may see as insurmountable challenges and find the gifts that can be shared.

Last Yom Kippur I was standing at the back of our sanctuary. I was photographing a mother and infant child who were attending the service. The connection between mother and child was beautiful and moving. As I stepped back and lowered my camera, one of our ushers, a congregant walked over to me and whispered: "If you want to get a great photograph, there is a kid in a wheelchair in the front row, hugging his Torah." I looked at him and I smiled. I said "That kid with the Torah, is my son."

Several years ago I was at a social gathering at which I had the opportunity to qvell about my family and tell the story of Brandon. When I finished, the gentleman sitting next to me said, "Michael, I feel your pain." I turned to him and responded, "There is no pain. Please understand that we are totally blessed to have this child."

Yes we are all given God's gifts, and yes, sometimes gifts arrive in unexpected packages. My gift arrived in the form of a child with many special needs. Your gift may have arrived in another unexpected package. The important thing is how we deal with them. Today, Yom Kippur is the day that we stand before God and ask to be inscribed in the book of life for the coming year. It is a perfect time for each of us to look around at the gifts that we have been given and ask "What

have I done with these gifts? Today, on Yom Kippur, I ask you to take these gifts and use them as a contribution to our community, our congregation and the world.

There is one more thing. Brandon, my son, I remember looking at you at the end of last year's Yom Kippur service. As everyone was walking out of the sanctuary, you looked up and, with a glowing smile on your face; you signed "more Torah!" Brandon, I am so proud of you, for each and every day you radiate the light of Or Ami with love, and inspire us to do what it takes to make this world better.

May each of us be inscribed in the book of life for a good year!!

*[http://www.arami.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2630&pge\\_prg\\_id=5688&pge\\_id=1137](http://www.arami.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2630&pge_prg_id=5688&pge_id=1137)*