

Shele's Memorial

The French Philosopher Voltaire once said: *"tears are the silent language of grief."*

How many tears have been shed as we have grieved the loss of Shele and digested the shockingly new reality that she will never be with us again? Like many other people, I must confess that I have not had an easy time with Shele's passing. The year has passed with a blur and I am still in disbelief. I keep thinking to myself that Shele will walk through that door, dressed in one of her gorgeous designer outfits and I'll once again hear her cheerful voice and contagious laugh or just hug the sister I loved more than words can say. I know that will never be.

Shele clearly made an indelible mark on so many lives. But who was Shele Danishefsky Covlin? Shele was a beautiful, loving, warm and compassionate person, with so much to offer the world. She was an extraordinary daughter, sister, relative and friend, and above all she was a mother par excellence, to her darling children, Anna and Myles.

Shele had an incredible inner strength and fortitude, which perhaps stemmed from a series of unfortunate accidents starting with serious burns she sustained as a 3 years old, when an urn of boiling water fell on top of her. A few years later, she fell into a pit, during summer camp, requiring stitches in her head. Then she was bitten by our dog in the face! Several years later, she ran into a plate glass window at a friend's home. She fought her way through all of these experiences and although scarred externally, she would not allow these injuries to stop her from living a vibrant, active life.

Shele was incredibly determined! I remember a number of instances where I was prepared to accept "no" but she would have no part of it. On a trip to Israel one year, our tour was scheduled to stop and sightsee in a country, considered dangerous at that time. Both of us wanted to change our itinerary, but I didn't want to upset the status quo. Shele had other ideas! She sprung into action and launched a series of telephone calls, in both English and Hebrew and made alternative arrangements for us, deviating from the tour. We spent extra time in the south – then traveled to Jerusalem and spent the day with a private tour guide who took us to places like Kever Rachel – the Tomb of Rachel - and the Mt. of Olives where several family members are buried.

I will never forget that experience. That of course was Shele. She immediately took charge of the situation, and at that time, all without the help of the internet or an iPhone!

Shele was a natural born leader and exhibited these characteristics at the young age. When she was about 10 or 12 years old, out of the blue, she decided to produce a play. She wrote a script and speaking parts for the family members who wanted to participate and we rehearsed it for a week. Mom invited the extended family to attend our debut matinee, the following Sunday afternoon. Shele arranged the chairs in the backyard in a very organized fashion, and the show was ready to go on....except for one thing, I developed terrible stage fright just hours before the guests were due to arrive. Needless to say, Shele was exasperated, but quickly went into survival mode. She changed her own script to incorporate my speaking parts, while still allowing me to participate. The play ended up being a success, nobody was the wiser. We received a standing ovation from the family audience!

Perhaps Shele's leadership qualities may have also stemmed from the fact that she assumed the role of matriarch of our family, from an early age. During those times that my mother was ill or unable to fulfill her normal household duties, Shele substituted perfectly and completed all her household responsibilities, as Mom would have done. At times, Shele prepared and cooked weekday and Shabbat meals, did the family shopping and looked after the household, all while doing her own job of going to school, doing her homework and studying for exams. I believe this experience also helped to mold Shele into becoming a responsible, able and nurturing mother-like figure, that we all admired. From my own personal view, I always felt more relaxed and comforted when Shele was around.

Shele was a very spiritual woman. To give you an example, one day I told her I was having trouble preparing a speech I was to deliver at our shul's annual dinner. When I mentioned this to Shele, she asked me why I didn't come to her. I asked her, "come to you – for what?" She replied; "for the speech – I like to write D'var Torahs in my spare time". I was fascinated by that. Here she was, a working woman looking after two young children, with the usual stresses of life, and her relaxation time, was composing words of Torah!

She was a woman who routinely performed acts of kindness, as if it were second nature. These acts were done very quietly and privately. If she met someone who was single, she always asked herself, “who do I know for that person?” She was forever trying to fix people up and help others to be happy. During Shiva, Rabbi Buchwald shared with me a story about Shele’s charitable nature. Shele told him that if he knew of anyone that wanted to attend his organization, National Jewish Outreach Program’s, annual dinner – and couldn’t afford the admission fee, to please tell that person they could still attend and she would quietly pick up the cost.

Shele was serious about the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim, welcoming guests into one’s home, as taught by our great Forefather, Avraham Avinu - Abraham. Her home was always open to anyone that didn’t have a meal on Shabbat or any other time. Stories of Shele’s kindness to neighbors, friends and strangers have shown that these acts were performed on a regular basis and all without fanfare.

Shele had a tremendous sense of style. She always looked so elegant and chic – even on a Sunday afternoon. Whenever she complimented me on my dress and appearance, I always felt so good. A compliment from Shele really meant something to me. We had a running joke in the family that stemmed from one Thanksgiving dinner. It was a casual meal and Shele was wearing very stylish flat rubber soled shoes. I add parenthetically, that if you knew Shele, she prided herself on her heels – the higher the better. But at this particular dinner, she was in her black patent leather Tod loafers. At a certain point in the evening, my dear unassuming husband commented on her footwear and said – “Nice shoes Shele – they look so practical”. This didn’t sit well with Shele and she bolted across the room to me and told me that I must teach my husband a lesson about describing a woman’s shoes and “practical” was not an apt compliment. She and I giggled at Marc’s faux pax and I blamed it on the fact that he was Zimbabwean. What did he know?!

I thought it was very cute when Shele’s daughter Anna became of age to have her own opinion on fashion. She would critique Shele’s attire and Shele would seriously consider Anna’s opinion and not discount it due to Anna’s young age. They made a great Mother-Daughter team.

Which brings me to my next point about dear Shele. She was the consummate mother to Anna and Myles. Everything she did was for her children and there was no decision made without considering the ramifications on their lives. They were her bright light, her joy and she adored them with every ounce of her being. She was always trying to augment her parenting skills, by reading materials printed by experts on the subject. She wanted to be the best she could for her little darlings.

In her home she displayed her children's arts and crafts with pride. She hung them on her walls, doors and refrigerator and would share their creativity with anyone visiting, sipping nachos from the subsequent compliments that were given.

Shele was no pushover when it came to her children's homework and school assignments, which she viewed as an essential part of their education. However, Shele did not believe in "all work and no play", and she wanted to balance things out by ensuring the children had an appropriate amount of fun as well. In September, 2009 she decided to do something special for Anna and Myles, and took them on a cruise over the Labor Day weekend. She met many people on the ship, and in particular she bonded with one woman, with whom she exchanged email addresses.

The woman RSVP'd to this memorial and wrote:

"I am so very sorry for your loss. I met Shele and the kids briefly while on the Cruise....Needless to say I admired the strength of a woman in my peer group, putting all her love and energy into showing her children a magical time. During the trip our paths crossed several times and I was so impressed by the warmth and beauty of the family."

These comments were the essence of Shele. A woman with an inextricable bond with her children, which was transparent to even a stranger.

If you were lucky enough to have Shele as your friend, you know you had gold. As her good friend stated, "with Shele, you always knew she had your back." She was loyal as the day is long. Even when Shele was under duress, she often would think about someone less fortunate than herself.

I recall at one stressful time, she kept saying how she needed to get out to Roslyn, NY to visit with a dear friend who was sitting shiva for her mother who had just passed. In this case, Shele's problem required her undivided attention, but she digressed, focusing on someone else's pain. At times, life was not easy for Shele, but she derived strength from providing comfort and support to those in need.

Shele was a very smart and talented business woman and was a senior partner at UBS Securities, with my father, Joel and brother Philip. Shele joined my dad in the business more than 25 years ago, at then Merrill Lynch, and was instrumental in helping to build their business into one of the largest, most respected franchises at that firm. Shele really enjoyed interacting with her clients and she never took those relationships for granted, always nurturing them in a way only Shele knew how. Shele had diverse interests, which allowed her to relate to all types of individuals, as reflected in her client base. Shele was highly respected by her superiors, peers and colleagues. She made a point of remembering everyone's birthdays at work and derived joy from surprising them with an ice cream cake, to show them how much they were appreciated.

Shele had a strong love for music and the arts. My brothers and I recently reminisced over how Shele exposed all of us to her tastes in modern music. When she enjoyed a particular artist, she played it over and over and over again. Whether it was the music from the Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat or Elton John's Captain Fantastic album. There was no way you could live in the house and not hum a few notes of her artist of choice at that particular time. Shele certainly helped shape our appreciation of music to this day.

She also really enjoyed going to concerts and shows. I remember when I first started working with Shele and my father at Merrill Lynch, she asked me if I wanted to go with her to a concert. I told her I couldn't go because I was studying for the Series 7 financial securities exam and needed every spare moment to prepare myself. She said, nonsense – the concert was 3 days before the exam and I had plenty of time. She was very convincing – and I don't know how many of you experienced this with Shele, but it was very difficult to say no to her. Needless to say, I ended up going with her to the concert, the seats were amazing – 3rd row, center stage. The concert was fabulous and of course, Shele was right – I was fine and passed the exam.

Shele was the adventurous type. She learned to ski late, when she was in high school, but that was early for our family. I only learned to ski as an adult, with my son and I'm not too sure my brothers ever learned. Shele also became a lifeguard in her late teens. She passed all of the requirements and worked as a lifeguard at summer camps and our local Y. These athletic abilities are really quite astounding, especially in our non athletic family.

She was so warm and caring to almost anyone she came in contact with. She was bright and witty and just a delightful person to be around. If you were ever down and depressed, a simple phone call from Shele would just lift your spirits. As my brother Fred stated, after talking and laughing with Shele – over sometimes, nothing at all, he would feel infinitely better. She had a special uplifting effect on people without even knowing it.

I mentioned at the beginning of this speech that we are here to memorialize, and not eulogize, Shele, but I wanted to close on a personal note and tell you what I, Shele's sister, lost on that tragic day. She was my dearest, closest confidant in the world. She was my childhood roommate who knew all of my secrets and personality quirks. I sought her advice countless times on all different life issues and I always believed she would be there for me through thick and thin.

At times I felt helpless in dealing with this tragedy, but I feel blessed to have a wonderful support system in my husband, son, family, friends and rabbis. They have supported and comforted me, during the most difficult time of my life.

Thank you all for coming out and making this such an extraordinary tribute to my beautiful sister.

Thank you,

Eve Karstaedt