

## **EULOGY**

*Susan B. Shpeen  
November 25, 2009*

It is hard to believe just a little more than three months ago, that Susan and I were enjoying a glorious summer. Adam had returned safely from the Peace Corps and we had moved him into his apartment in New York City as he prepared to begin Law School at Columbia. Hilary was finishing up her master's degree and planning to graduate in December. In October I was finally going to have Susan join me on our Temple trip to Eastern Europe. We had a cruise planned for January and our dream trip to Italy next October. When I commented to Susan on the ride home from moving Adam into his apartment, how lucky we were and that everything in our lives was falling into place and we could now begin yet another stage rest assured that the kids were settled, she warned me not to make a kinahorah.

Little did I know that just ONE week later, on August 17<sup>th</sup>, not only was the carpet abruptly and without warning pulled out from beneath our feet, but our entire world came shattering down in an instant. I knew then, no matter what I WANTED to believe, that this day would eventually come and we would be gathered here together in this Sanctuary. I had just hoped and prayed that it would not have been this soon and certainly not on the same date that my mother died. But after three months of one horror after another, of everything going wrong that could have gone wrong, my only comfort now is that Susan is at peace and we no longer have to endure watching the nightmare she was experiencing.

If I have learned nothing else during these last few months, I have learned what I always knew and never took for granted. When Susan and I came here to Albany 25 years ago, we came to a very special community....a community that embraced us, accepted us and enabled us BOTH to pursue our life's calling AND to provide a loving and supportive environment in which to raise our children. It DOES take a village, and we found the very best.

My family and I would never EVER have been able to endure and survive this horrific ordeal, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, were it not for all of you. I am grateful beyond words and surely overwhelmed when I realize how fortunate, indeed, we are....from the medical community, the physicians and caregivers, the staff at Daughters of Sarah, our Beth Emeth and JCC families, my colleagues near and far and certainly our close friends who stood with us even when things got really tough....All of you have been our anchor and our safety net....And for that my entire family and I will forever be eternally grateful.

A few years ago, during a quiet dinner together at home, for whatever reason our discussion turned to what each of us would do if something happened to the other. I said to Susan jokingly that perhaps it might be easier if she went before me so she would be spared that grief and anguish. Well, she looked at me and gave me her typical Susan glare and simply said, "I think I'll manage". But then she added that the only downside would be that she would then not get a Scott Shpeen Eulogy. So, even though you might presume that in the 30 years since starting rabbinical school that this might well be the most difficult eulogy I have had to

write and deliver, truth be told, it is the easiest. Because no one knew Susan like I knew Susan and doing this is the greatest honor and tribute I can possibly provide.

Susan grew up in the Detroit area as did her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents before her. She and her younger brother, Steven, had the typical family upbringing revolving around holiday celebrations, their active involvement at their Temple and surrounded by a very large extended family. Susan was taught and grew up believing three things....the same truisms which guided most everyone in her family. The first, she would go to the University of Michigan, as did her mother and grandfather before her and her brother after her. Second, she would become an accountant, as was her grandfather, her father and eventually her brother as well. And lastly, like her grandparents, her parents and her brother, she would meet someone, marry and settle down not far from home somewhere in the Bloomfield Hills suburbs of Detroit.

Well, two of out three ain't bad! She did go to the University of Michigan Business School. She did become a CPA, BUT then she also met me. AND when we met during the first week of college both just 18 years old, she didn't know what hit her and the entire course of her neatly planned out and organized life went totally off track.

After attending a Hillel Open House for new students during freshman orientation, ten of us decided it was not for us. So, we walked into town to the then famous P Bell Pizza Palor to get something to eat. The place was very busy and there were only two tables available, one for eight and one for two. Susan and I ended up at the table for two and have been together ever since. A few days later, our first unofficial date in order to test the waters, to see if things really did click, we decided to meet and to do our laundry together. When Susan arrived, I looked and asked her where was her fabric softener?. She looked at me rather confused and replied, "What's fabric softener?" At that moment, I think she realized I could be very useful and had potential!

We were engaged during our junior year in college, got married that summer and when we returned from our honeymoon, I began filling out the application for rabbinical school. So, indeed, Susan and I have not only spent the last 34 years together, but truly we grew up together.

From the moment we started dating, her family became mine and mine became hers. Susan coming from a more formal, perhaps even a bit stoic family of accountants, when I entered the scene, it was almost as if a hurricane hit their home. They did not know WHAT to make of me, but embraced my spirit and energy and were VERY proud and VERY supportive of my desire to become a rabbi.

When Susan got to know MY family, not only was she taken back a bit by our intensity of affection, teasing and often heated discussions, they embraced her such that she became in many ways the rock and over the years the stabilizing influence and certainly paved the path for my sister-in-law and brother-in-law when they enter the family fold.

In reality, even as I have known Susan's brother, Steven, since he was 14 years old and we have shared so much over these past decades, my sister, Mariam, and Sharon truly became to Susan the sisters she never had, sharing a particularly close and loving relationship with each of them as well as with Mariam's husband, Bob, and my brother Stephen.

Susan also loved each of her nieces and nephews. Unfortunately, because of the distance, we were not able to spend as much time with Andy, Melissa and Josh as they were growing up. But Susan never missed an occasion and, even if it meant having to go out to Detroit alone, she did manage to attend the special milestones in their lives. Because we were able to spend far more time with Samantha, Ben, Max and Jacob, in many ways Aunt Sue became a second mother to each of them. And since Sam and Ben and Hilary and Adam are all just five years apart, Susan took particular pleasure and pride in the closeness they have shared as cousins over the years and that now finally another Shpeen, my nephew Ben, is carrying on the tradition of attending the great University of Michigan.

And as difficult as she knew it would be and the burden it placed on my life, when we made the decision to bring my grandmother, GG, here to Albany to spend the last three years of her life, Susan in fact encouraged me to do so and NEVER EVER faltered in supporting that decision.

Susan was never thrilled that I wanted to become a rabbi. But she knew it was part of the package when we first met. Although she realized the demands it would place on her and our family, she never wavered in her encouragement and support both emotionally and financially in enabling me to fulfill my lifelong dream. I knew that this rather shy and reserved young woman with whom I fell in love, as private and as guarded as I was open and unabashed, Susan never EVER wanted to be the center of attention NOR the topic of discussion. But she knew how much being a rabbi meant to me and, as she did for all whom she loved, she put her own needs aside and did what needed to be done and, in fact, became MY strength and MY rock and, other than my grandmother, the ONLY person I FELT in my life who truly loved and supported me UNCONDITIONALLY in every sense of the word.

As we all know, Susan was a no-nonsense, straightforward person who certainly had no patience for drama. She worked hard, was very pragmatic, did what she had to do and approached everything, whether it was her active involvement over the years in our Temple Sisterhood or her professional work, with precision, with accuracy and with the utmost of grace and dignity, always the diplomat, always the problem solver and peacemaker.

For many years, I did my thing in the Jewish community and she was busy with her career in the business community. But then 15 years ago last week, Susan received a call that changed her life. She was asked to resign her position on the JCC board and to step in and help out with a crisis the JCC was having and to become the Controller. With some arm twisting she agreed, assuming it would be on a temporary basis. The LAST thing that either of us EVER imagined was that BOTH of us would become involved professionally in the Jewish community.

However, not only did Susan find the position challenging and exciting, truly believing in the mission and importance of the JCC, but she dove in head first and went full steam ahead. I was not only proud when she was then appointed Executive Director, but prouder still to stand on the sidelines these years and watch her build the JCC into the strong, vibrant and important institution that it is today AND watch and admire the respect and admiration she commanded from so many in our community with whom she crossed paths.

When Susan did begin working full time at the JCC 15 years ago she did so with one condition, that we take a family vacation each winter AND to somewhere where neither of us could be easily reached or contacted. At that time, a cruise seemed to be the best option. Sixteen cruises later, those memories are among the most treasured we have as a family. Even more so was sharing those cruises with Sharon and Steve, Samantha and Ben as well as our dear friends the Greensteins. In fact, Susan had T-shirts made up a few years ago CRUSIN WITH THE SHPEENSTEINS that she got for each of us and then insisted that we have a picture taken of all of us wearing those crazy t-shirts. None of us would have agreed to do so were it not for the fact that Sue organized it all.

Truly the greatest role Susan played in her life and the one for which she derived so much pride and joy was being mother to Hilary and Adam. And what a phenomenal mother she was!! There was not A THING that Susan would not do for her children...even after a long and exhausting day at work...whether it was attending all of Hilary's tennis games or schlepping Adam literally around the eastern seaboard when he was involved Speech and Debate, if the kids demonstrated an interest in anything, she was with them 100%. Today she might be considered a helicopter Mom, but truth be told, she gave new meaning to the term.

Even of more satisfaction, was the relationship she fostered with both Hilary and Adam. She and Hilary literally spent hours on the phone together discussing every minute aspect of their lives AND because of Hilary, Susan became proficient in text messaging, face book and BRAVO TV. And as much as it worried her to no end, even when Adam decided to join the PEACE CORPS and go off into the wilds of South Africa, Susan was so very proud of all that he did and accomplished.

I know and rest assured that her imprint and her influence in their lives is not only indelible, but that each of them are who they are because of their mother and all that she instilled in them and the love she showered upon them.

When I entered the rabbinate and we eventually moved here to Albany, we knew that the most difficult aspect of being a rabbi is never being able to live near family AND not having the luxury of celebrating so many Jewish holidays as others are able to do. So, friends became our extended family and how much Susan enjoyed hosting holiday celebrations at our home with so many who became part of our extended family circle over the years of all ages and from all parts of the community. She was a good and loyal friend and extended herself to others quietly and with no pretense or hidden agenda. You knew where she stood and she was never one to rock the boat.

During those few stressful days between her diagnosis and surgery, obviously Susan and I had some very frank and emotional conversations. The one thing we both felt and expressed to each is other is that in the 31 years of our marriage, we had absolutely NO regrets whatsoever. We both worked hard in order to provide what we could for our children as nothing was handed to us on a silver platter. We truly enjoyed each and every milestone, each and every simcha and overcame TOGETHER any of the challenges or struggles we faced as well. Susan went into surgery having no regrets, a heart full of gratitude for a terrific run together AND the assurance that I would be fine and the kids would be OK, too.

But what eats away at me, and tears at my heart, is not merely having to accept that we must continue in life without Susan, that I have lost my soul mate and the love of my life, and that our entire family is left with a void NEVER to be filled. We will all continue living and doing what Susan would want us to do as the greatest tribute to her influence and her love for us.

BUT what DOES rip at my heartstrings is now knowing that all of the experiences to which Susan looked so forward, now at age 52 she is being deprived.

So....Susan my love, I promise you this:

When Adam graduates from Columbia Law School in two years, you will be sitting beside me kvelling with pride.

When the day comes that I will walk Hilary down this very aisle when she gets married, I will not be alone because you will be walking along side me beaming with joy.

And when the day comes that I will hold our first precious grandchild in my arms, your arms will be around mine and my tears of happiness will mix with your tears as well.

For as long as I live, Susan, each and every day, your spirit and your presence will be with and will be sharing in all of the moments of life that I will have to endure without you at my side.

*Adonay Natan, Vadonay lachach, yihee shame adonai mvorach*

God, you have given, a life and dear and precious

Now that life has returned to you its everlasting source

THANK YOU, O God, for the blessings in Susan's life and for the blessings she brought into our lives as well.

AMEN

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