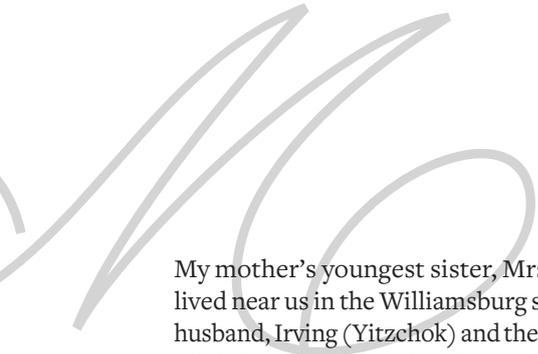




*Tzippy
Remembers
When...*

Unforgettable Tanta Shaina Esther

Tzippy Clapman



My mother's youngest sister, Mrs. Shaina Esther Szmerkes, lived near us in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with her husband, Irving (Yitzchok) and their three sons. With my mother's influence and gentle guidance, she became totally religious: she kept strictly glatt kosher, Shabbos, taharas hamishpachah. She sent her three sons to the Mesivta Tiferes Jerusalem on the Lower East Side. Her husband worked for Meal Mart as a trucker, and never worked on Shabbos and Yom Tov.

My aunt had no need to work in those years, and she decided to make a difference in the community. She realized how the elderly Jewish Americanized women, mostly widowed and living alone, needed some assistance in their daily needs. These women were not very religious and the *chassidische* neighbors did not even consider them Jewish due to their ignorance of Torah, their lack of *mitzvah* observance and immodest dress. Some were homebound, with help from government-sponsored home health aides, in and out of their homes a few times a week. Most of this population had children out of town who could not assist them in their daily needs. The government health aides were mostly lazy and dishonest. They would just come by to watch television and eat. They were known to steal, and to neglect or even mistreat their patients. My aunt decided to make it her mission to visit these homebound Jewish women on a daily basis, to look in on their health aides and the treatment they were receiving. This kept the workers on their toes,

as they knew there was someone coming to check on them, someone who cared

Tanta Shaina Esther knew the needs of each of her non-paying "clients," and she turned their needs into her personal responsibilities. One needed help with banking, as her Social Security check had to be cashed and bills had to be paid. My aunt would make sure her rent, grocery accounts, telephone, electric, gas, and other bills were paid on a monthly basis. One woman liked fresh bread or rolls, daily. Others needed her to accompany them to their medical appointments. A few of her clients were totally non-mobile and bed-ridden. My aunt would make sure to be there for their daily bath, to assist the home attendant in washing, drying, lifting, turning. Because of my aunt's presence, the bathing and dressing were done very gently and lovingly, under her watchful eyes.

Any time we would sit in the Williamsburg park near the housing projects, we would see my aunt rushing through the streets, coming and going from one apartment to another. She was always schlepping a bag of groceries or a stack of envelopes.

There was a mentally disturbed older woman in our community who suffered from severe anxiety issues. She was divorced and had a child who was taken away from her due to her lack of childcare skills and resources. Her pain was great. Without proper medical attention for herself, she would run through the neighborhood screaming and shouting. Naturally, most people avoided her. My aunt knew her situation and would greet her daily with hugs and kisses. She would calm her down, find out what issue was bothering her at the time and work on resolving it. Whether she needed to go to the doctor's office or re-apply for her medical benefits, rent subsidies, etc., my aunt would escort her to the various offices all over town with no hesitation.

Tanta Shaina Esther had three children. Her oldest, Shmuel, was in his teens when he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. *Baruch Hashem*, he was successfully treated at the time and grew up to be a fine religious young man. Like his mother, he was kind, giving, helpful and loved by all his friends and co-workers. He never married, and in his early 40's he had a recurrence of his disease, from which, *R"l*, he did not recover. My aunt was heartbroken, but after *shivah*, she ran out doing her *mitzvos* with more

vim and vigor than before.

The other two sons also never married, so my aunt was left without any grandchildren at all. However, she would not allow this situation to take over her life. She kept busier than ever helping people in need, people nobody else wanted to deal with.

My aunt also regularly visited her mentally challenged brother, Chaskel Zelig, in the HASC Group Home where he was a resident. She always came with her sons, and took him out to his favorite restaurants. She made sure he had anything he wanted that was within her power to provide.

In her 70's, my aunt lost her devoted husband. A lone survivor of the Holocaust, he was never a very happy man, but he was very supportive of his wife's activities and he always worked hard to support her and care for his family. After his death, once more my dear Tanta Shaina Esther picked herself up from her sadness and went back to all the people who needed her.

Over the years my aunt always partook in our family *simchos* and she would visit with our family on special occasions. But we knew that she was always on call and in high demand in her community *mitzvos*. She never had any fancy clothing or expensive jewelry, as these things were totally worthless to her. Her apartment had only basic furniture as she had no use for material goods. Accumulating them was not her goal. Caring for and comforting people in need was all she needed, to be content.

Three years ago on Pesach, my aunt suffered a heart attack and spent a year going in and out of the hospital. I spoke with her almost daily and often visited with her during that year. She kept saying that it wasn't her own pain or discomfort or limitations that bothered her. What caused her the most pain and regret were the lonely women who needed her and all the *mitzvos* she was missing out on.

Her holy *neshamah* left us on Pesach, one year after the first heart attack. Three years later, I still cannot stop feeling grateful to Hashem for blessing me with such a special aunt in my life, someone who lost first her child, then her husband, who left no grandchildren at all, but never stopped caring, loving, and giving. ■

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Crown Heights with her husband, Rabbi Yehuda Clapman, a certified sofer. Formerly a NICU nurse and now a provider in school-based clinics, Tzippy has written extensively for the N'shei Chabad Newsletter, always with the goal of demonstrating the supreme importance of being kind to those in need as well as creating warm, happy, Yiddishe memories for our children. This is the sixth installment of her eagerly awaited regular column, "Tzippy Remembers When..."



Tanta Shaina Esther with her youngest son, Yisroel, approximately 1975.