

EULOGY FOR MARSHA STERN

I rise to speak the eulogy over Marsha this morning, despite great reluctance, because she requested it of me often, very often, directly and indirectly, over a long period of time; and halakhic authority has informed me that *mitzvah le'kayyem divrei ha-met*, it is a sacred obligation to fulfill the wishes of the dying.

So I speak, despite my hesitation and discomfort and scruples, because it is a *mitzvah* -- and because I loved my friend Marsha dearly.

I first met Marsha while co-chairing with her a Yeshiva University Women's Organization function about seven years ago. It was a spiritual and psychological discovery getting to know this attractive, efficient, outspoken, demanding, open-hearted, and extremely generous young woman. From then on we became fast friends, and the friendship increased with every week.

What kind of person was Marsha? It is hard to describe her in a single set of adjectives -- she was much too human, too complex, and too special for that. Perhaps her personality can best be expressed in the paradox that Carl Sandburg used to describe Abraham Lincoln -- she was "made of steel and velvet."

The steel was her indomitable will, her incredible bravery, her powerful character. She leaves behind her a legacy of strength and moral courage. At no point, no matter what the provocation, did she succumb to self-pity or to panic. She stared the Angel of Death in the face, and wrested from him his most precious secret: how to live. Marsha maintained that this five-year period of illness and agony was actually the most creative part of her life. She discovered her own identity and learned to be happy with it. Or perhaps it is inaccurate to say that she "discovered" her identity; more correctly, she created it, she forged an identity in the very furnace of affliction.

Beset by problems and suggestions of despair that would normally have crushed any ordinary person, she fought back and mastered them. Every rock and every boulder in her path she considered stepping-stones to grow and mature and climb and gain a higher vision of her own life and destiny. She rejected morbidity -- she would not have wanted anyone to cry at her funeral -- and she opted instead for the joy of living. She savored every moment of its delights and wonders.

Marsha was not a romantic -- at least not in most things. She did not fantasize and create myths and illusions in order to make it easier for her to cope. She was hard-headed, and often mercilessly honest, especially with herself. And all this makes



her achievements all the more admirable, all the more unique. She had courage without illusions, heroism without pretenses, strength without self-deception. She was a real person, in everything, and there wasn't an ounce of artificiality in her. She said what she meant -- and, even more important, she meant what she said.

I shall miss, terribly, painfully, her daily telephone calls -- which began with a quick series of inquiries about family and friends, proceeded to plans and ideas, and concluded with the plain, old-fashioned yet authentic message: that where there is a will, there is a way; that suffering can be overcome and transmuted into something sweeter; that real creativity lies in taking the raw material of anguish and pain and insult and frustration, and forging from them the instruments of personal redemption. She gave me this beautiful recipe that is available to anyone beset by suffering: equal measures of acceptance and resistance, of goodness and toughness, of spunk and love, with a dash of humor and lots of realism.

She was, in this sense, what King Solomon in his Proverbs called an *Eshet Hayil*, which means not only, as it is usually translated "a woman of valor" or "a virtuous wife," but quite literally: a powerful woman, a wife of great strength. It was because of this strength that she never had time to "be sick," that she was always planning trips or on the go, that she brought to her life brightness and verve and creativity and innovation and insight -- and also the capacity to think in big terms and on a grand scale. It was because of this strong-as-steel quality that she loved life powerfully and took its brevity so bravely. In her typical, no-nonsense way, she took a philosophical approach: no one's life is unlimited anyway, so whether you are granted more years or less years, you might as well live them fully, get the most out of life, throw yourself into things. She acted according to the Hasidic formula: whatever you are doing, do it with all your heart and all your strength.

And this steel-hard aspect of her character, this flintiness which endowed her with the incredible tenacity and perseverance which we all noticed in her to her very last breath -- it is this which made possible and enhanced the velvet part of her personality, her authentic sweetness and genuine goodness.

Marsha was an incredible friend -- loyal, affectionate, concerned, extraordinarily generous in all ways: with her time, her substance, her love, her care. She was a person of gratitude -- grateful for all the gifts God had given her, whether material or emotional or the gifts of family and life. Characteristic of her outlook was this: every night she would say to Stanley, "Let's review: what good things happened today?"

For Marsha, charitable work was not a diversion; it was a value and a vocation. She threw herself into philanthropy,



and focused her prodigious talents on her volunteer work. She was organized, systematic, practical, and creative -- and she deeply believed in the causes for which she worked. For instance, it was Marsha's advice and ideas and behind-the-scene efforts which gave new impetus to and rekindled the Channukah Banquet of Yeshiva University two years ago. I shall never forget -- how can I? -- how she limped, painfully, to the florist with me to check every flower, so that Yeshiva's event would be elegant and inspiring.

She was deeply devoted to Yeshiva's Albert Einstein College of Medicine; to the Jewish Center Sisterhood; to Ramaz School, the school of her children.

She loved Israel; it exhilarated her. She adored her home in Ceaseria -- she had been thinking of spending this coming Passover there, despite her growing weakness.

She worked hard for UJA and Bonds, especially Bonds. Last year, despite her illness, she insisted upon hosting a Bonds luncheon in her own home. So her sisters helped her to dress, and she hosted the luncheon; and she was ready to do so again this year.

She had a big, kind, compassionate heart even for strangers. If someone needed a job, a loan, any help -- even if that person was only a casual acquaintance, and in a much different social class -- she made that cause her own.

Marsha was, in this respect, my teacher and the teacher of all of us who stood vigil with her during this long and difficult illness. We were taught by her a great secret of life: the mystery of human resolve, the power of the will, the love and wonder of existence. That is why so many of us revered Marsha. She was our teacher and our dear, dear friend.

Marsha was very much a family person. She loved her parents, and they were deeply devoted to her in turn. They did not leave her side for a moment during this last, grave ordeal.

The love between Marsha and her sisters -- Wilma, Gayle, Sharon -- was an inspiration. It was beautiful to behold their warmth and closeness -- and their tenderness towards her. She loved them all: them, and Stephen, and Judy and Leonard, her sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, her nephews and nieces, and her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Her heart encompassed them all.

Stanley was not only a husband but a loyal friend to her. He went to every length, and beyond, in caring for her health. Nothing that possibly could be done was left undone by him. She took enormous pride in his achievements, especially in philanthropy, and most especially in Yeshiva. She unabashedly wanted all the world to know how valuable a human being, how



superior a son and brother and communal leader he is. So devoted was she, that at one point in her illness, when Stanley momentarily succumbed to despondency, she said to him, "Look Stanley, it could have been much worse: it could have been you who were sick... If I had my choice, I'd prefer it this way. I'd rather that it happened to me than to you."

And, of course, she was a deeply loving mother. The joys of her children lent a special glow to her young life, so cruelly decimated by dread disease. Who will ever forget how radiant she was at Caroline's Bat Mitzvah just last year? -- how she exulted and sang and danced? And all during this time she was in pain -- and she took pains to hide it.

And how she looked forward to other simchas in the lives of Douglas and Debbie and Julie! I remember meeting her only a few weeks before this last hospitalization. She was full of zest and enthusiasm. "Mindy," she sang out to me, "Douglas started taking his Bar Mitzvah lessons today!"

Let me say this to the children, because I know how deeply she felt about it. Always remember your brave and courageous mother. She wanted very, very much that you continue your Jewish education. Her dearest wish was that you learn and understand and appreciate what it is to be a Jew. So, always be Jews, good Jews, loyal Jews, practicing Jews -- if only for her sake. It was her last wish.

For Marsha was truly a religious personality. Her faith in God was unshakable, and her commitment to Judaism and to the life of our tradition was profound. It is interesting that while others asked the inevitable question -- why did God do this to her? -- Marsha never uttered such sentiments. She never whined and she never complained. People of genuine faith rarely do.

We bid farewell to our beloved Marsha on this first day of the month of Nisan, the month of Freedom, the month of Passover. This is the *Rosh Chadashim* that is highlighted by the Seder. In so many ways, Marsha's life was like the Seder. It was suffused with *Kaddesh*, with holiness. Like the Seder, Marsha had more than her share of *maror*, the symbol of bitterness. But she also had her compensations, her *matzah*, the symbol of freedom and opportunity and joy. What Marsha accomplished most of all was to follow the formula of Hillel who, according to the Haggadah, would make a sandwich of *matzah* and *maror* and eat them together. Marsha had plenty of *maror*, of bitter herbs. But she deftly and wisely surrounded it by *matzah*, by all the positives and the affirmations of joy in her life, and recited a blessing over it -- and she herself became a blessing for all of us who were fortunate enough to have our lives touched by her.

Now the Seder of her life is done. With her passing, her children have lost a caring and devoted mother; her parents



and parents-in-law -- a luminous daughter and daughter-in-law; the Jewish community -- a tireless and resourceful worker; Stanley -- an extraordinary and loving wife; her sisters -- a most remarkable and irreplaceable sister; and I -- a friend such as I have never had before, a friend who was dear and precious and beloved; truly, a sister.

Just two days ago, I stood by Marsha's bed. She opened her eyes, saw me, and repeated several times, "I'm so happy you're here, I'm so happy you're here."

Marsha, we're so sad, we're so sad. We are heart-broken that you've left us.

We shall miss you -- forever.

May your beautiful soul live -- forever.