



Photo courtesy of Stacy Markin

STACY MARKIN

a child's story

BY DANIEL HOROWITZ

When Stacy Markin's first child was born 11 years ago, the prognosis was not good. Just five months into what should have been the happiest time of her life, Markin and her husband, Murray, were told that their precious daughter, Shayna Bracha, was born with microcephaly. Shayna, it was explained to them, would never be able to talk, walk, or even identify them as Mom and Dad.

Microcephaly is a neurological condition in which the head circumference is abnormally small for the child's age and gender. In other words, Shayna's brain, although fully developed, was simply too small. Shayna now functions at the cognitive level of a 2-year-old, with fine and gross motor dysfunction and delays affecting all areas of her development, including verbal communication, eating, sleeping, and toileting. Shayna is also diagnosed with autistic tendencies, low muscle tone, and a seizure disorder.

With the help of many, the Markins' remarkable daughter smiles, plays with her siblings, communicates, and routinely shouts "Mama!" when Stacy enters a room. The doctors were right about one thing: Shayna doesn't walk much—but that's only because she prefers to run!

Needless to say, despite Shayna's ongoing improvement, life is still not going exactly as planned for Stacy Markin, a savvy native of Bayside, New York. She graduated from New York University, earning her bachelor's degree in journalism with a concentration in public relations. As a full-time university student, Markin worked part-time on Wall Street in investment banking and also interned as a publicist with a Jewish agency on the Lower East Side, creating and promoting fundraising and awareness events. Post-graduation, Markin moved to the Upper East Side, where she stayed for a decade, sharing space with her only sibling and best friend, Natalie. She led a fast-paced, New York City life selling mutual funds and annuities on Wall Street, as well as working in promotions and marketing.

Markin met her husband, Murray, a Toronto entrepreneur, on a blind date. They made Toronto their home after a whirlwind eight-month courtship and subsequent marriage in 1994.

"Being raised in a Jewish household, I had a dream while I was growing up, which I'm sure is a basic dream of most people," says Markin, who describes her Jewish upbringing as Reform and not terribly observant. "My dreams included having healthy and happy children. I thought my dreams would soon be easily fulfilled."

But, as an old Yiddish proverb

proclaims: "God laughs when we make plans."

Markin's long, intensive, and remarkable journey to Orthodox Judaism began soon after she realized that Murray, who is Modern Orthodox, was her *bashert*. Shortly after beginning to date him, Markin called her mother to proclaim she had found the man she was going to marry. She quickly began her Jewish education and, with the help of classes at Aish HaTorah in New York, she became observant.

"We spent a lot of time getting to know each other by phone. Then



Photo courtesy of Stacy Markin

Shayna Markin, age 11.

Murray kept flying to New York and our dates were intense," she says. "Besides going out for beautiful dinners where we talked for hours, we enjoyed theater, jazz, art galleries, museums, Central Park, comedy clubs, and all the exceptional activities the city had to offer. At the same time, we had serious discussions about Judaism, ethics, family values, and the future. The more we talked about it, the more I realized that I really liked what it was all about. I had a *chavrusa* (learning partner) who taught me about becoming *shomer Shabbat*, *kashrut*, and what it meant to live a more observant life. The more I learned, the more spiritual

I became. I was becoming immersed in understanding the traditions of the Jewish people. I read many books about Judaism and found it to be quite beautiful. Ultimately, I decided that this was the life I wanted to live. I yearned for a more complete understanding of being Jewish."

After moving to Toronto, where the couple had an Orthodox wedding at the Park Plaza Hotel (now the Park Hyatt), Markin continued her transformation with the help of Rebbitzin Lori Palatnik, who was instrumental in launching Aish HaTorah's Village Shul.

Life was working out just as she had always planned; in fact, she even became pregnant soon after marrying. "I had everything to look forward to," she says, looking back wistfully.

After a normal pregnancy, Shayna Bracha—which translates to "beautiful blessing"—was born. The little girl immediately captured her parents' hearts.

After some difficult and worrisome early moments, which included Shayna suffering seizures at just a week old, Markin knew that this was not the way it was supposed to be.

"I knew right away that things were not right," says Markin, her eyes welling with tears. "There was no eye contact from Shayna, and she wasn't even nursing properly. She was limp like a rag doll. She couldn't even hold her head up. The early days were tough."

As time progressed, Shayna, unfortunately, did not. She was not meeting any developmental milestones and she soon began regular bouts of incessant high-pitched screaming that often lasted up to 20 hours a day. "It was impossible to soothe her," Markin recalls.

Her lifelong dream had suddenly become a nightmare.

"Imagine coming to a new

country, changing your whole life as I did to become observant, and then it all falls apart," she says. "I was in the hospital for five days after the baby was born and the whole time I was there, Shayna wasn't nursing properly. My husband had just started a new business, so he was bouncing in and out of the hospital. I really didn't have friends or my family here, either, which really made it disheartening."

In fact, Markin began a downward spiral made worse by the limited family and friends available to her.

"I knew that for my family I had to pick myself up and keep going, and that's when I started seeing doctor after doctor," she says.

Her well-regarded pediatrician, Dr. Colin Geft, sent her to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto for a barrage of tests. It was a frustrating and, ultimately, futile mission, in which she met with lactation specialists, neurologists, developmental psychologists, feeding specialists, and geneticists. Markin also retained her own collection of homeopathic

and extremely depressed. Shayna had dozens of ear infections and, of course, still screamed all day and night. She and I were miserable. I never slept, seldom sat down to properly eat a meal, usually spent the day in pajamas, and could hardly manage to leave the house. I remember thinking to myself every morning, 'God, how am I going to get through this day?' That was day after day, month after month."

Ironically, it was Markin's new observant lifestyle that made a difficult situation seem more palatable.

"I believe that Murray and I were



(l-r) Stacy Markin with co-chairs Robin Shugar-Hershkop and Renée Rosenzweig.

Photo courtesy of Stacy Markin

twins, Joshua and Kayla, born completely healthy seven years ago. Joshua resembles his father, and Kayla resembles her mother.

"The twins are the best thing that could have happened to Shayna." Shayna emulates them and lovingly beams when she is with them. When other children are puzzled by Shayna's differences, her siblings proudly explain that their sister is special, proclaiming, "Our sister may not speak, but she understands us, and we understand her, and you can play with her, too!"

But when Shayna Bracha was born four years earlier, things were much different: Five of North America's most highly respected neurologists told Markin that her daughter might never walk, never talk, and would never be able to think for herself or live an independent life.

"One neurologist actually suggested that I put my baby in an institution; that she'd be a vegetable her whole life. How he could have said that to me I'll never understand. I was so upset that I almost had a car accident on the way home."

"I believe that this child was going to be born on this earth, and God chose us because he knew we would give her the best possible life and help her to become the best she could be."

gurus. Not only was this search frustrating, it was both physically and mentally exhausting to the new mother.

"Since, at that time, I had only made a few acquaintances here in Toronto, I had no one to turn to except my husband and his immediate family, who were busy with their own young families," she says. "It's no wonder that I soon felt very alone, overwhelmed,

chosen to have this child; that's how we look at it," she says. "I believe that this child was going to be born on this earth, and God chose us because he knew we would give her the best possible life and help her to become the best she could be. He knew that we could handle it. Although, it's still not always so easy."

The Markins were also blessed with

Both Shayna's pediatrician and her neurologist at Sick Kids didn't give Markin much hope for her daughter's future, either. "Their only recommendation was that she attend Zareinu," she remembers.

During her first visit to Zareinu Educational Centre—a Jewish day school and treatment center located just north of Toronto that provides spe-

cial education and individualized therapies to children with a wide range of physical and developmental challenges—Markin knew it was special.

“It was such an emotional and moving experience to see so many babies and children with a variety of physical and mental disabilities,” she remembers. “It was truly a sobering experience. Although as warm and understanding as Zareinu was, I could not bring myself to send my 5-month-old baby there.”

Perhaps still experiencing a dose of denial, Markin took her daughter home and continued to scour the continent for any and all available therapies and early childhood education programs.

It was then that Markin made the first in a series of key discoveries: She met Toronto physiotherapist and MEDEK specialist Ester Fink. [MEDEK is a therapeutic intervention for the development of gross motor skills in children with movement disorders. Developed in Caracas by physical therapist

Ramon Cuevas, it stands for Método Dinámico de Estimulación Kinésica.]

“Ester was just incredible,” says Markin. “I wasn’t ready for Zareinu and had no one to guide me. Ester worked with Shayna privately for several months in her office. Ester is the real deal; no wonder people move from Israel and from around the world just to have access to her incredible abilities.”

With diligence and proficiency, Markin performed all the MEDEK exercises at home throughout the day, every day, on Shayna. Shayna began to make gains, and the exercises advanced.

After Fink worked with Shayna, creating head control by working from the “head down,” bringing signs of life into this previously lifeless child, Markin felt that now, at 8 months of age, little Shayna needed much more. So, she returned to Zareinu.

“The best place was right here in Toronto, and right in my own backyard,” she says of Zareinu. “Only one school offered all kinds of intensive one-

of directors. She hosts tours of Zareinu for prospective philanthropists and interested groups. She is a co-chair of Zareinu’s annual high-end fashion show, An Evening of Fashion & Song, a vitally successful fundraising and public relations extravaganza with celebrity guests, now in its fourth year. This event boasts over 700 attendees, a dinner, auction, inspiring music, and an expertly produced fashion show featuring profes-

sional models alongside the special children of Zareinu modeling spectacular designer collections. Last year, Shayna proudly walked down the runway flanked by Joshua and Kayla, “an emotional scene that is forever etched in my memory,” Markin offers.



Photo courtesy of Stacy Markin

Shayna Markin (center) holding hands with siblings Kayla and Joshua at the Zareinu fashion show.

Today, Shayna Markin is a delightfully engaging, beautiful young girl who walks, runs, climbs, and dances. She has already exceeded the expectations of a handful of neurologists. Although she has limited verbal skills, this

on-one therapy, a high teacher-to-student ratio, personal dedication, and, as an added bonus, a sense of Jewish identity and tradition for the children. When she was 8 months old, I placed little Shayna in Zareinu and she’s been developing and making miraculous progress ever since. Zareinu was literally a lifesaver.” Eventually, combining her experience at Zareinu with Fink’s ongoing tireless and dedicated hands-on therapy, Shayna, at the age of 3, finally took her first steps.

In fact, Markin is now providing unique, firsthand insights as a member of Zareinu’s dedicated and tireless board

loving and caring bundle of energy expresses herself in myriad ways through the use of pictures, gestures, and partial words. Shayna delights in her weekly horseback riding therapy, where she is accompanied and assisted by Zareinu staff. Zareinu is working in conjunction with Bloorview MacMillan’s communication specialists to train Shayna on a laptop-like touch screen, a talking communication box, which she is eager to use. She is also becoming increasingly successful and proficient in making her requests known. “We send the box back and forth from school to home because

whatever she learns to do at school needs to be continued at home and vice versa.

"She's also the only girl in her class, so she even flirts with some of the boys," says a delighted Markin. "Zareinu has worked with me in every aspect of my daughter's life and they have taught me patience. Having a child with delays in development can make a parent feel that you're trying to force a plant to grow. All goals are painstakingly met, but each milestone is precious, appreciated, and applauded. I am forever indebted to the professional staff at Zareinu and do not know how we would have gotten this far without them."

Recently, she enrolled Shayna in bat mitzvah lessons for special needs children through Chabad Lubavitch's

tears of joy to Markin's face.

"I went to pick Shayna up at Zareinu and, when some of the other parents and therapists saw me approach, a few of them pulled me toward a classroom, saying, 'Come here, quickly, you've got to see this, Stacy!'"

Stacy was in for the happiest shock of her life.

"They had been showing Shayna my picture and right then, in front of me, she pointed and shouted 'Mama!' I just hugged my little girl; this beautiful child who, I was told, would never recognize me. Everyone started hugging each other. It was just the most unbelievable moment in my life," Markin says, fighting back tears.

It's been suggested that a person's true character comes to the

lives of so many. She helps parents cope with everything—from their terrified questions about their world that has just been turned upside down to filling out piles of forms for medical assistance and explaining the services available at Zareinu. Stacy is now an encyclopedia of knowledge about children with disabilities."

"I met Stacy three years ago during our first fashion show," reflects Renee Rosenzweig, Stacy's co-chair of the annual fashion show and close friend. "Stacy's just one of those people who, no matter what they do, they somehow make a difference—an important difference. She always backs up her words with actions, especially when it comes to Zareinu. The amount of difference she's made to not only her

"My wife and I agree that this is why God blessed us with Shayna Bracha, who, because of her incredible spirit and personality, touches so many around her."

Friendship Circle program in Thornhill. "We are planning a meaningful celebration for Shayna and for all who are a part of her life."

"Stacy Markin is pure heart," affirms Randy Spiegel, executive director of Zareinu. "She radiates goodness. I can't figure out where she gets her energy, tenacity, and drive. What I do see is an uncompromising desire to achieve, overcome adversity, and to do her part, *l'tikun et haolam*, to help repair the world. In addition to being the mother of a special needs child, she is a loving mom to her twins as well. She speaks to children in schools, parents who are struggling, and she's an invaluable resource to families who don't know where to turn for assistance."

One very special day at Zareinu, back when Shayna was 6, still brings

forefront at times of crisis. According to Markin's dear friend, Rachelle Bronfman, who Stacy credits with helping her get through the worst of times, this test has taught her much about her friend. Markin has taken the painful and exhausting lessons she has learned throughout her ordeal and become a beacon of information and hope for other parents dealing with a similar scenario.

"Stacy is one of the most genuine and strongest people I have ever met," says Bronfman, a Toronto native and mother of three, who met Markin shortly after Shayna's birth. "As the years went on, I saw Stacy grow from a quiet mother who suffered in silence to an outgoing, positive, and leading advocate for children who are struggling with all kinds of disabilities. She has used her own experience to better

own daughter but to so many families as well is remarkable. She truly makes this world a better place."

As for Murray Markin, an amiable, warm fellow, his advice to other families facing a similar situation is simply to be open, honest, and communicate.

"There's no longer a stigma around developmentally disabled children, at least not that I've witnessed," he says. "Families in this position need to reach out to one another, to their community, and, most of all, to Zareinu which must be the focal point of any healing. I am so proud of my wife—of my whole family—for taking what *Hashem* has given us and helping others. My wife and I agree that this is why God blessed us with Shayna Bracha, who, because of her incredible spirit and personality, touches so many around her." [lifestyles](#)