

Memorial Day

By Hanna Tal

This feature was published in Kolbo a local newspaper in Haifa on 11.8.06.

One week after Daniel Shiran was killed.

Dr Avinoam Shiran is not used to press interviews, despite his successful career as a Senior Cardiologist in the Carmel Medical Centre in Haifa. Since the death of his son, Staff Sergeant Daniel Shiran on Friday the 4th of August 2006, he is willing to share his pain. He opens Daniel's photo albums, where each photo is perfectly placed and labeled. He looks through dozens of photos from family events, stored on his laptop, and tells his consolors: "this is Daniel, and what a magnificent boy he was".

The need to introduce Daniel to those who have never met him, is probably what gives Dr Shiran the strength to stand in front of Daniel's fresh grave and to talk about his beloved son to the hundreds of people who gathered to accompany him on his last journey. The funeral is held at the Military Cemetery in Haifa on a warm Friday afternoon, the same day Daniel died at the break of dawn.

Quietly, fluently, attempting to hold back the tears, Dr Shiran describes his son. He tells about a brilliant, talented, handsome boy, who fought for his right to be a Golani fighter. He tells that Daniel's face were intact, except for the

murderous bullet wound, that marked the end of Daniel's young life and instantly joined the Shiran family with the families of the bereaved.

Nothing has prepared Dr. Shiran and his family for this moment. His wife, Varda, works as a business administrator in an architects' office. The two remaining siblings, Guy aged 16 and Noga aged 10, stood there in silence, clasping each other tightly, struggling to grasp the moment.

The pain and tension are shown on the faces of the numerous visitors to the family home in Haifa. Varda and Avinoam are grieving, but they respect Daniel's choice to be a combat soldier. They are mourning, but try to avoid emotional outbursts. They swallow their tears and focus on their mission; to tell Daniel's story. Their speech is quiet, a whisper at times. They are revealing painful emotions, and immediately move on, trying to ease the pain by searching for photographs, reconstructing events, describing minute details. They barely cry, but the pain is excruciating and sharp. The silence is harder than any cry or expressive outbursts.

The computer's screen perpetuates a photo of Daniel's face: a handsome man, bright forelock of hair, clever blue eyes looking out at the world. So fine looking, one wishes to cry. So young, one wishes to scream. Another click and Daniel is shown at his splendor and grace, with his muscular figure, 6' 3", consequence of intense physical workout at the gymnasium. Yet another click and Daniel is seen in a nightclub, hesitantly stretching his strong arms towards a girl who falls into them, kissing him passionately.

“He was shy with the girls”, his close friend Yossi Mizrahi tells Daniel's parents, “girls always tried to pick him up, and there is no surprise in that. He was exceptionally handsome, the best looking guy in the crowd. He was not interested in casual relationships; he was looking for that special someone”.

Daniel was born when Varda and Avinoam were students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Avinoam was at his sixth year of medical studies, Varda was a final year microbiology student. They lived in a small studio flat in Jerusalem. Their great happiness is lovingly documented by the camera which was chasing the blue eyed baby. Daniel was the first baby to his parents and the first grandson to his grandparents.

“Daniel was brilliant in an extraordinary way” says Avinoam. “He did everything early and well. When he was three weeks old, he reached out with his hands towards the mobile that was hanging opposite his face. He stood at ten months, completed jigsaws before he was a year old and made giant Lego constructions at four years of age. His whole family – uncles, aunts and grandparents surrounded him with love. Despite our studies, Varda and I spent a lot of time with him. If we did not play with him for several hours a day, we felt that we were neglecting him”.

The investment paid off, Daniel grew up to be a loving child, exceptionally clever and with incredible potential. His proud parents captured every

childhood gesture which will not repeat. In the bathtub, at the playground, playing, smiling, throwing pots and pans all around the kitchen and pulling faces.

On completion of Varda and Avinoam's studies, the family moved to Haifa. Here Daniel began making friends. A group of children, whom he met in kindergarten and later in elementary school in the Ramot Itzhak neighborhood, would accompany him throughout his life. Daniel turned out to be a gifted child, with a brilliant mind and unique scientific abilities. As a gifted child, he was often bored during the early years of school. "The headmistress Mrs. Herzelia Siton invited us to discuss ways to calm our temperamental child, who could not find a challenge in the standard curriculum" says Avinoam. "Creatively, she suggested a programme of special studies that would stimulate him".

"I remember a gorgeous, very clever child" says Mrs. Siton. "I have initiated extracurricular studies for him". A Russian math teacher took him out of class for several lessons a week. Daniel was given math problems that encouraged him to think in different ways. The results were extraordinary. His form teacher added a special program that stopped him from getting bored and the child thrived."

After he was formally classified as a gifted child, in year three, Daniel attended a special programme of lessons during school hours at fourth grade. A year later, Avinoam obtained a fellowship position in Washington Hospital

Center in Washington DC, and the family moved to the US for two years. Daniel moved to a new and unknown setting, leaving his well loved friends and supportive surrounding behind. "He could not forgive us" said Avinoam, "He felt like a plant uprooted from his cozy greenhouse, thrown to an unknown stead".

In Washington his academic talents were demonstrated again. He learned English easily. After one year in the English program for foreign students, he was able to study in the ordinary class, where he excelled even in compare to local children.

When the family returned to Haifa, Daniel obtained a place at the prestigious Hareali High School in Haifa. He specialized in biotechnology. He was shy, quiet and talked little. He excelled in his studies.

Despite moving to a new neighborhood and studying at a different school, Daniel maintained close bonds with his primary school friends. He remained loyal to his old buddies who loved him dearly. The friendships forged in early childhood, were kept in teenage years. Five or six, close friends, almost brothers, went through their formative experiences together: parties, clubs, snooker games, expeditions. He was the only one of the group attending Hareali School and the only one living outside the neighborhood of Ramot Itzchak in Nesher. He spent all his spare time with them, and felt comfortable with them. They admired him. "He was the best looking and smartest amongst us", says another one of the group, Lior Caspi, a logistics Officer in the

Northern Command. "He was willing to do anything for each one of his friends".

"He was big, tall, muscular", remembers Mizrahi "but also talented, someone who excelled at everything. Despite his size he was still shy. No wonder girls tried to pick him up. Yet, despite of all that he was not a show-off. On the contrary, he was not impulsive, he was responsible and reliable. He was the first to get a driving license. We loved being driven by him since we trusted him. "

The friends particularly admired Daniel's desire to become a combat soldier, in spite medical problems which lead him to have a low military profile score. "Daniel should have enlisted in August 2004", says Avinoam, "he had a congenital problem with an ankle, and was given a low profile. This meant he could not be a combat soldier. He was very offended. I tried to encourage him. I told him that with his brains, he would be more useful in an intelligence unit than a whole battalion of Golani soldiers. He was very upset. Reluctantly he took the tests required for enlistment to an intelligence unit. Finally, Daniel decided not to accept the judgment and tried to improve his medical profile. I told him, I would not help him. I would not make telephone calls, nor would I use my contacts. I know a lot of people, I could have helped, but I decided not to do anything about it."

Why?

"I did not want to have it on my conscience that I have helped him become a combat soldier. I worried about it, but from a moral point of view, I could not

stop him or pressured him not to do it. I was a combat soldier in the paratroops. I was a Reserve Officer and was involved in combat in the first Lebanon War. I could understand his desire to be a combat soldier. I did not think that in our country it is moral to tell a child not to go into combat service, so that others would go instead. I tried to persuade him; I told him that he did not choose his profile, he did not escape his duty, and he did not play tricks to lower his profile. This did not convince him. He was sporty, with impressive physical abilities. He was brave and very stubborn. He was certain he could contribute more as a combat soldier. “

After he repeatedly appealed his profile, Daniel managed to raise it to 82. “He was happy as could be” says Varda. He asked to serve in the paratroops. On this occasion, his father agreed to help him get a place in the try-outs. “I would have preferred him to be in an intelligence unit” says Avinoam, “however, when that did not work and I saw that I could not stop him and that only one thing would make him happy, I helped him.”

Daniel did not manage to get a place in the paratroops and joined Golani. “He became a part of the military and absolutely identified with Golani. He turned us all into members of Golani. We wore Golani T-shirts and had Golani stickers on our car. He was completely identified with the brigade.”

“He found it hard, his foot caused problems once advanced training started”, recalls Avinoam. “I would ask him to do half a training expedition, but he simply would not hear of it. He did not miss anything out and did all the

expeditions. On each expedition his leg would swell and he would limp for one to two weeks afterwards, but he would not give up. He did an eighteen mile expedition carrying heavy equipment, followed by nine miles walk with stretchers. The doctor warned him that the more pressure he would put on his ankle, the more likely he was to need surgery. He told Daniel: 'if you are doing this for the chief of staff or the prime minister, I will recommend reducing your profile. If you are doing this for yourself, you must understand the consequences'. Daniel dismissed him with 'it will be OK'.

"I would lie awake at night worrying" says Varda. "Daniel did not talk much and did not tell stories. At most he would answer questions, but only up to a point. One question too many and he would immediately stop me with 'enough of the interrogation'".

Daniel's first front was the Philadelphia Line in Gaza. Varda says: "once I knew that he was in action on the Line, I couldn't properly sleep until he finished the shift. He knew that I was very worried and we tried to speak every day."

Daniel's unit arrived to the North two weeks before he died. The unit was supposed to join combat in the Lebanon several times. Each time the plans were postponed at the last minute. Avinoam found that reassuring. "At first I was out of my mind with worry" he says, "I found it difficult to work in the hospital, but gradually I understood that I had no option and I had to get used to it. I told myself that many soldiers are involved and we have relatively few losses, why should it be Daniel? But I also knew that Golani are in the most

dangerous places. I was worried about the Hizbullah anti tank rockets, I told Daniel in every telephone conversation that they should be careful when they go in and search through houses. I told him to make sure that they were not discovered and change position after each shooting. I tried to assure myself that they were in an anti-tank missile unit, and that they would be positioned on a hill in the back and not in the front line. I tried to banish worrying thoughts.

Like what?

Like what will I do if they tell me that he was killed and how and where would they find me”.

The news of Daniel’s death caught Avinoam by surprise. He returned on Friday morning from Jerusalem. His family stayed there to avoid the rocket attacks on Haifa. He returned to the hospital because he was on-call in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit. On the way he heard on the radio that Golani soldiers were hurt in a battle. “I thought that it is probably not Daniel’s battalion”, he says “I did not want to worry myself. I put the fears aside and arrived at the hospital. Before starting rounds I went to see one of my patients. A young intern who was completely pale and anxious came to me and said ‘come quickly, they are looking for you in the CCU’. I did not suspect anything. I did not understand the urgency, after all I have a pager. I went to return the patient’s file to its place. The intern pushed me and said: ‘do not worry about the file now’. When we arrived on the ward he shoved me into the doctor’s room, where I saw the army officers. I understood immediately. I only hoped that Daniel was just wounded, but the officer immediately said ‘your

son was killed in the Lebanon.' I asked them if they were sure. Do you know who I am? Maybe you did not come to me? Maybe you made a mistake?

Daniel died in the early hours of Friday morning the 4th of August 2006.

Do you know how he died?

"We only heard the full story when the soldiers of Daniels' platoon who fought with him, came to our house a few days later. They went into the village of Merkaba - a small village a mile and a half from the border – after they received some information about a house with weapons. Daniel led the force since he was a machine-gunner. He was next to the platoon commander Yonatan Lerrer on his right. When they got to the house at night, a burst of automatic fire was fired at them. They returned fire and Daniel sprayed the house with his Negev machine-gun. They decided to disengage, and on their way back, a terrorist emerged on their left. He fired a burst at a range of 20 ft. Daniel could not see that, as he was covering the right flank. He was hit by a bullet in the head. The company commander Hagai Sharabi shot the terrorist. Soldiers shouted that Daniel was wounded. The Doctor Captain Igor Rothstein immediately ran towards Daniel but was killed while trying to save him. An intense battle developed, during which the platoon commander and (Omri Elmakias were injured. The soldiers under the command of the platoon commander, returned fire and eliminated the terrorists. The medic, who got to Daniel, could see that he was shot in the head. He found him without a pulse and not breathing. The platoon commander and Elmakias were evacuated by helicopter. Elmakias subsequently died from his injuries. The platoon commander is still in hospital, with hand and facial injuries."

“We knew that Daniel was a wonderful boy, but only now after we heard his friends, we appreciate his strength and his exceptional qualities” says Avinoam as he swallows his tears.

He does not stop talking about Daniel. Varda sits by his side, closing her eyes, lost in her thoughts. “I cannot comprehend that Daniel is gone. Everyone around me is crying and I cannot. Avinoam says that he can physically feel the pain as if something was torn from him inside. I did not see Avinoam cry, even after his father died. I only once saw him in tears of joy, after Daniel was born. Now he sheds many tears. I find it difficult to feel the pain. I am defended against the idea that Daniel is gone. I was so close to him that something has died within me. I want to feel the pain but inside everything is sealed. I am afraid of the moment in which I will wake up, in which I will realize that life goes on, that all the children his age are growing up and he does not. He is in the newspaper because he is dead. Daniel died at the age of 20 years, I am older and I am still alive. Where is the sense in that?”

At the end of the conversation, Avinoam recalls the last moments with his son. “We were with him on Saturday, 6 days before he died. We heard that he was in the Golan Heights and went to visit him. We took a box of Coca-Cola, a bag full of sweets and nuts and three cakes that Varda baked for him and his mates. We found a grove and sat there with him for a couple of hours. Before leaving, we escorted him to the base. He held the box of Coca-Cola in one hand and the bag of sweets in the other and walked into the base. I do not

know why, but I had the disturbing thought that perhaps this is the last time I see him. I knew that they were about to go into the Lebanon. I stood there and looked at him. At one point he found it heavy, so he laid the box down, adjusted his grip and continued walking. I looked at him until he disappeared. I keep visualizing my Daniel walking with the provisions for his mates and I treasure his last picture in my heart.”