

You've met her through her poetry; your kids have met her through her books. Now you'll meet Bracha Goetz in the pages of *Family First*, as Margie Pensak has a heart-to-heart conversation with this indomitable poetess, writer, and creative whirlwind, who abandoned her medical training to focus on raising a family

FROM HARVARD TO HASHEM

The Lifelong Journey of Bracha Goetz

MARGIE PENSAK

Bracha Goetz contends that she was never the intellectual type, despite the fact that she graduated Harvard University with honors, was nominated to Phi Beta Kappa, and attended medical school. Her lifelong quest for meaning and purpose has been so overpowering that it puts all her less spiritual pursuits into perspective.

I had the honor and privilege of becoming friends with Bracha Goetz

about fifteen years ago, when my youngest son was a baby. A young mother herself, Bracha came highly recommended as a warm, loving, and nurturing child care provider. The “home sweet home” ambiance of her roomy, chocolate-brown clapboard house, combined with her sweet gentility and joie de vivre, made you feel safe to entrust your most precious “possessions” to her charge.

One day, when I dropped off “Little

Tzvi,” as “Morah Bracha” called him, it came up in the course of conversation that she had attended Harvard and medical school. Not wanting to overstep my bounds, I held myself back from asking her why she was not performing surgery in Johns Hopkins or practicing pediatric medicine. In this exclusive **Mishpacha** interview, she explains her reasoning, and what she believes to be her *raison d'être*, settling my curiosity after all these years.

The Beginning of the Journey

Bracha Goetz has been trying to satisfy her spiritual thirst ever since she was a young girl. Although both her parents were American-born, her parents and their siblings were born in Russia. Bracha and her only sibling, a sister nine years her senior, grew up hearing that their paternal grandfather had started the first Conservative synagogue in New York. The Druss family lived a very simple, liberal,

and non-materialistic life, enamored as they were with socialism.

Sol and Florence Druss, *a"z*, were very sweet, simple, humble people. Bracha's father had worked his way up in the US Postal System as a systems analyst, and designed the US zip code system. Once Bracha started school, her mother worked part-time as an executive secretary for the Jewish Board of Guardians, which later became the Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister program in New York. Bracha

feels it is no accident that she now follows in a similar vein to her mother, as Bracha today is the mentoring coordinator of the Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister program in Baltimore.

From a very young age, Bracha could not understand why Judaism and its continuance were so important. She found it hypocritical that her mother wanted to keep her kitchen kosher, but they could eat non-kosher food in a different room in the house. Similarly, it made no sense to Bracha that her parents would become upset about her dating non-Jews. Because there seemed to be no understandable explanations to all the questions she had about Yiddishkeit, she almost completely dropped them, seeking spiritual fulfillment elsewhere.

The ever-evolving journey of Bracha's *neshamah* can be traced, perhaps, in the several writings she has penned in the form of ten published children's books, and articles and poetry she frequently contributes to chareidi publications. Writing since elementary school, she was recognized for her writing talents when she was as young as twelve. It was then that she won a prize for a poem about her now deceased father, which appeared in *McCall's* magazine.

At eighteen, Bracha left her native Rego Park, New York, for Cambridge, Massachusetts, to attend Harvard University. She entered as a sophomore because she passed advanced placement tests that allowed her to skip her freshman year. Upon graduating with a B.A. in Psychology and Social Relations, she attended the Medical College of Virginia. After her first year, she spent the summer in Israel, volunteering in Hadassah Hospital. Her parents encouraged her to make the trip because they were concerned that she would marry the non-Jewish boyfriend she was dating at the time.

Before Bracha left for Israel, her mother warned her: “You can do anything you want there, but just don't contact that friend of yours from elementary school who started out becoming a Conservative rabbi, and ended up going to Israel and becoming an Orthodox one!” Of course, as soon as rebellious Bracha heard that, she immediately contacted this friend. She asked him to point her in the right direction to learn more about Judaism. It wasn't long after she arrived in Israel that Bracha moved out of the Hadassah dorm

and into the Ohr Somayach dorm, to attend their short-lived women's program, which subsequently combined with Neve Yerushalayim.

"I always felt like I had a *neshamah*; there was some gnawing emptiness I had to fill," explains Bracha. "I just didn't know it was an entity, called '*neshamah*,' until years later, when I got to Israel. Soon after I arrived in Israel, I became frum and dated for the purpose of marriage. I started to date in June; by October, I had met my husband, Aryeh, who had become frum three years before me. Ironically, he was also a native of Rego Park, and had lived a block away from me until his family moved to Long Beach, California. He was studying at Aish HaTorah at the time, and we got married five months later."

The Goetzes ended up living in Israel for eleven years. They lived in Geula for two years before becoming pioneers in an Aish HaTorah *yishuv*, settlement, in the Judean Hills, called Maalei Amos. They were one of twenty families that lived in caravans, mobile modular units that occasionally had no electricity, food, or

water, thanks to the strong desert winds that would turn off their generators. After eight years, the Goetzes and their five small children moved to Baltimore, since Bracha's parents were not well and they would not be able to travel to Israel any more. In addition, the first intifada had begun, and it was very dangerous living on the *yishuv*. The Arabs were starting fires on the *yishuv* and attacking cars traveling out of it. Had the Goetzes moved elsewhere in Israel, they would not have been able to manage financially. Bracha's sister, who lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, thought that Baltimore would be just the right place for them, considering its degree of religiosity and affordable housing.

"We knew no one in Baltimore at the time," says Bracha. "We were jobless and homeless and we lived in people's basements. We had practically no furniture and when it started to get cold, we didn't have warm enough clothing. Eventually we both got jobs, and were able to move out of a tiny apartment and afford our house. Aryeh took a different job every

week, working for a temp agency as a draftsman, before becoming a city planner. He now works for the Associated-supported CHAI neighborhood housing program. I got my first job by opening up the community Eruv List directory, turning to 'Psychologists,' and making a cold call. When I told the office manager that I have a bachelor's in psychology and I am a writer, she said she couldn't believe I was calling, since she recently had a dream in which she hired someone with that exact background! I was hired immediately, and worked on a picnic bench in our apartment, handwriting reports."

For seventeen years, while raising their children, Bracha supplemented her husband's income by babysitting at home, in addition to writing and editing. Only when their youngest was six years old did she start working out of the house as an activity director of a 230-apartment independent living facility for elderly and disabled adults, a position she held for four years. For the past eight years, she has been the mentoring coordinator at the Big Brother and Big Sister program of the Jewish Community Services, a program of the Associated Jewish Federation.

The Turning Point

Apparently, I was not the only person who wondered about Bracha's decision to forgo a medical career. By now, she is

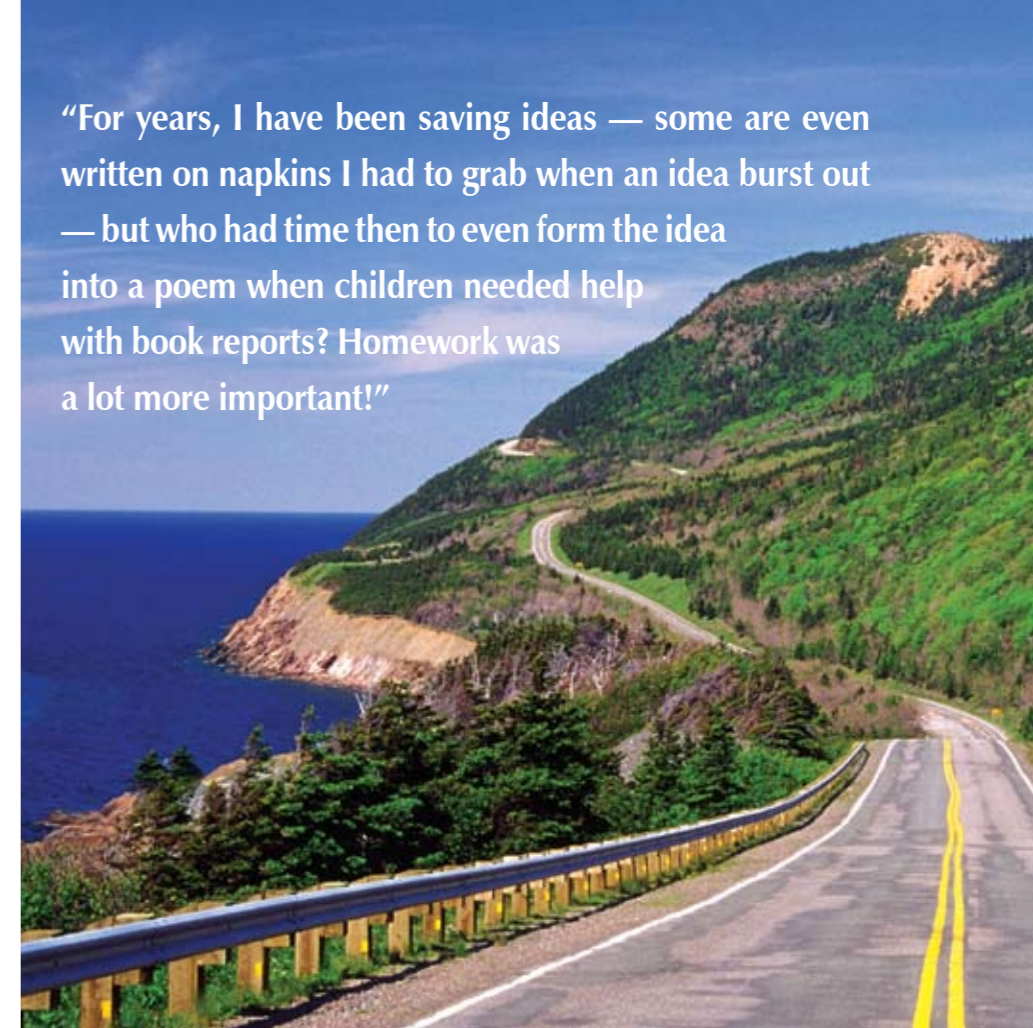
used to being questioned by those who find it hard to believe that she prefers the seemingly less glamorous career of child rearing to medicine. "Even when I was in medical school, an important part of me still felt like it was suffocating; that part of me, I later found out, was the intrinsic me, my *neshamah*," admits Bracha. "I was still strongly seeking a deeper meaning to life — I needed to know why life was worth living. Even though I was on this demanding career track, my inner core was continuing to search spiritually, while my outer self was not going in that direction."

"When I found this framework of Yiddishkeit, I was thrilled because it validated my true desire," continues Bracha. "This is what I always wanted, to devote myself to raising my family — something that was not so acceptable in the women's lib world with which I was associated. My *neshamah* was celebrating when I found this. Even though I did not understand everything they were saying in class at Ohr Somayach, my *neshamah* said, 'Yes! This is what I really want.' I was always, and still am, interested in health care and science, and in the interaction between the mind and body, but since I am a person that likes to deeply concentrate on what I'm doing, I did not want to split myself up. And I really believe that there is nothing that requires more intelligence than bringing up children."

Bracha's disenchantment with the "bagels and lox" Jewish secular world in which she grew up led her to search for the meaning of life at Harvard. But, in her poem, "Meeting G-d at Harvard," Bracha reveals the turning point of her lifelong spiritual journey. In 1977, the spring of her junior year at Harvard, she attended one of Harvard's most exclusive WASPy garden parties with her boyfriend, Christopher, who had been doing a lot of "power-seeking" and making friends in high places. Rubbing elbows with Caroline and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Abby Rockefeller, and Tim Moynihan, to name a few, she felt as if she had finally made it in life.

"When I got to the party," remembers Bracha, "all I kept thinking was, This is it. I have made it. I'd thought I had made it to the top before, but, wow, way up here you can really get light-headed. I was at the garden party people don't even dream of attending. Me! A onetime frizzy-haired,

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middle-class Jewish girl from Queens. Me!! Brushing shoulders with the sons and daughters of the most powerful people in the world ... I fit in!

"I just stood there, thinking," continues Bracha, "How did I get to be here? Then the answer hit me: by running away... There, atop the peak of fame and fortune, was nothing. The ice cubes clinking in the glasses everyone was holding seemed to have more warmth than the people holding them. Everybody at this elite party was bored through and through. And it was exhausting having to look expressionless for so long."

"Suddenly I felt that a gigantic cloud had lifted. It was really odd that I felt that way, because actually more and more storm clouds were suddenly filling up the sunny sky. There is nothing special about the big shots in the world, I kept thinking. I've been given the chance to see that they also have nostrils close up — but no special breath of life inside. And a half hour ago, I would have sold my soul to be one of them."

"Right then the clouds burst! A terrific thunderstorm came pouring down on all the white dresses and the perfectly spread tea sandwiches. The whole shebang instantly became one big sloshy mess. All

the guests frantically ran off the manicured lawn to find shelter, so their naturally styled hair wouldn't get ruined. The privileged garden party had just collapsed before my eyes! Not bothering to find out to where Christopher had run off, I skipped all the way back to my dorm, singing out loud, splashing in puddles, and thinking, There is something more. Something more than being rich or famous or beautiful. Something even more exclusive than Harvard's Porcellian Club. The next generation's potentially most powerful had been at the party. And even they couldn't stop the rain from falling down."

Bracha's spiritual search deepened when she got to medical school. There were very few Jews who attended her school, and the students were drinking just not on the weekends, but every night. "I began to question what I was doing there," recalls Bracha. "This is not my culture; this is not me. I tried Reform Judaism, but was disconcerted with the lack of spiritualism. It was more political than spiritual at the bagels and lox brunches. I had explored other religions, like Christian Science and Buddhism. There were aspects of each of them that resonated with me, but they weren't me. When I would go to church

"There, atop the peak of fame and fortune, was nothing. The ice cubes clinking in the glasses everyone was holding seemed to have more warmth than the people holding them. Everybody at this elite party was bored through and through"



If there is any one theme song poem that defines Bracha Goetz, it is her poem entitled, “Between the Braids.”

BETWEEN THE BRAIDS

by Bracha Goetz

What’s in the spaces between the braids
Of these new challahs I just made?
How much of me is hidden there?
Between the braids my thoughts appear.

First I sifted the flour through,
Thinking of what else I could do.
Who wants to be here, baking bread?
I could write my first book instead.

I added each ingredient,
And wondered why my soul was sent.
I cracked two eggs, and then two more.
Is this what I was created for?

“Shabbos Kodesh ... Shabbos Kodesh,”
My lips whisper, hands knead the dough.
Let me see my work is holy,
Raising high what seems so low.

Does the challah absorb frustration?
Does the challah hear my voice, so shrill?
Does the challah absorb my confusion,
As it rises for hours on the windowsill?

I’ve heard that Sarah, our first mother,
Once had the right recipe.
What happened to it through the years —
Is there a copy left for me?

Stuck here in the kitchen,
And still longing for fame.
When did simple giving
Get such a bad name?

“Shabbos Kodesh ... Shabbos Kodesh,”
Open up my eyes.
Let me see my work is holy.
Let me stop chasing lies.

On Friday night, my husband
Makes a blessing, and I know
Just what’s inside those challahs
— Though I wouldn’t tell him so.

He cuts them up, we eat them,
And I can’t help but smile,
For all that work, I used to think,
They last such a short while.

But this time — I see what’s left
— I know what’s hidden there.
In the empty spaces between the braids
— That’s where my thoughts appear.

When every crumb has vanished
From the challahs that I made,
What will remain?
Just my secret struggles.
Offered up between the braids.

and they were kneeling, I was thinking,
Now what I am supposed to do? I felt
like the word ‘Jewish’ was stamped on
my face; I would stand there, shaking.

“I always wanted and yearned for
Torah-true Yiddishkeit,” continues
Bracha, “but I didn’t know where to
find it, until I went to Israel. Even when
I went to the beach with Christopher, I
would take a book of chassidic tales to
read ... I was always a very goal-orient-
ed person; I just wasn’t sure what it was
that was missing. Now I realize that it
is all a spiritual quest.”

Fast Forward to Grandparenthood.
Today, married close to thirty
years, Rabbi Aryeh and Mrs. Bracha
Goetz are the proud parents of six
grown children and grandparents to a
number of grandchildren. Their old-
est, married son is part of the Phoenix
Community Kollel. Two of their three
married daughters’ husbands learn in
the Ner Yisroel Kollel in Baltimore,
and the third is married to a *yunger-
man* who learns in the Beis Medrash
Gevoha Kollel in Lakewood. Their
youngest daughter studied in Binah
Institute of Baltimore and is study-
ing ultrasound; their youngest son is
a student in the Beis Medrash of Ner
Yisroel Rabbinical College.

After reading to her grandchil-
dren, Bracha was inspired to write
children’s books once again. Her latest
eight books, in fact, come after taking
a fifteen-year break during which she
devoted herself almost exclusively to
her children. She has also resumed per-
forming in interactive “presentations.”
On the *yishuv*, these were short skits in
which she acted out scenarios, such as
the life of a mother, and the struggles
and processes involved in becoming a
frum woman. Today, Bracha acts out
her several books, in shul and school
settings. She also leads workshops for
seniors teaching happiness skills, so
they can pass them down to their
grandchildren and great grandchil-
dren, and there are candid programs
about self-expression for women and
teens, involving poetry and song.
Bracha recently gave book talks at
Barnes & Noble, and she has plans to
do interactive programming in kiruv
settings as well.

“This is the first time in my whole
life since I was single that I am able to

devote this much time to writing and oth-
er projects, such as teaching poetry work-
shops and volunteering for kiruv activities
like Partners in Torah,” says Bracha. “It’s
a whole new point in my life right now.
In addition to working three days a week,
nine to five, at my mentoring job, until
recently I had been babysitting for my
grandchildren at least two days a week.
Now that they are all in school, I have
more time for writing and presentations.
It is a new and exciting adventure!”

“For years, I have been saving ideas
— some are even written on napkins I
had to grab when an idea burst out —
but who had time then to even form the
idea into a poem when children needed
help with book reports? Homework was
a lot more important! Now I have a little
time when I’m not working or “bubby-
ing” to share my thoughts and feelings
with others in the world, through writ-
ing and through speaking, and I love it
because it feels like the unmasked me is
expressing itself. The *neshamah* that was
once aching in emptiness is now able to
sing to Hashem!”

Bracha enjoys writing poems and
children’s books because she enjoys
simplifying the deepest concepts, and
getting to the core, or essence, of the
subject matter — as well as the core of
the reader. “I am a person who speaks
and writes with few words,” explains
Bracha. “I think only recently was I able
to discover that as my essence. Maybe
when you get into your fifties, you come
to some kind of understanding that lets
you realize who you really are and what
your essence is. It is a process of distilla-
tion to extract the essence of things. The
autumn leaves become most colorful to-
ward the end, when they have lost their
chlorophyll, and their true vibrant hues

are left. They are no longer all green, but
red, orange, gold, yellow —and every
changing variation in between — so now
I can see that my essence is that I love ex-
tracting the spiritual core of everything in
life; that is my lifelong quest.”

**“It looks like my work involves
matching up Bigs and Littles
to share pizza together, go
bowling, or apple picking,
but really it’s about helping
to create invisible bonds in
relationships that leave a
lasting impact”**

One of Bracha’s most recently pub-
lished children’s books is *The Invisible
Book*. It simplifies the concept of the
invisible, yet the most profound and
meaningful entity in our lives, Hashem.
“How can you believe in Hashem if He
is invisible?” challenges Bracha through
this book. “But, when you think about it,
feelings, thoughts, magnetism, and grav-
ity are all invisible and everybody believes
in their existence without actually seeing
them — we only see their effects. Well,
it’s the same with G-d! The book clearly
shows this on a level that, amazingly, even
very young children can grasp.

“The invisible aspect is what I love
most about my work as a mentoring
coordinator at the Big Brother and Big
Sister Program too,” Bracha explains. “It
looks like my work involves matching up
Bigs and Littles to share pizza together, go
bowling or apple picking, but really it’s

about helping to create invisible bonds in
relationships that leave a lasting impact.
You don’t actually see the impact happen-
ing while the two people are schmooz-
ing or playing basketball, but over time
something very precious and meaning-
ful is being formed. And, invisible seeds
that are planted can go on growing for
years and years, thank G-d. It’s a life-
saving program.

“It is about nourishing souls,” Bracha
continues. “I think in my life I was really
starving for nourishment in my soul.
When I reached that pinnacle of achieve-
ment at Harvard, I knew there had to be
more. I really want to reach a person like
me who is searching. That was also my
main motivation for accepting the po-
sition of mentoring coordinator. It was
astounding to me that so many frum
teens were going ‘off the *derech*’ when
I had yearned so strongly to get on the
derech. I wanted to see what I could do
to understand and alleviate this prob-
lem, as I certainly could relate to what it
was like to be a rebellious teen. What I
found was that even though people can
be brought up in a frum lifestyle, their
neshamos can still go hungry. The life-
style can become rote and disconnected
from its spiritual source if much time
and warmth isn’t invested thoughtfully;
in the mentoring program, Bigs try to
reignite that invisible spark within —
and that can even happen while sipping
Slurpies together!”

All of Bracha’s poems and songs are
steps in her personal struggles, some of
which she admits, are still ongoing. “I
am a work in progress,” says Bracha. “I
live by the saying on the magnet on my
fridge: ‘Here is a test to find out if your
mission on earth is finished: if you’re alive,
it isn’t!’ ” ■