

## PROFILE Ben Bornstein

One would need to search far and wide to come across someone more dedicated to Jewish values and tradition than Benjamin J. Bornstein, a native of Vermont who has lived with his family in Bethesda, Maryland since 1989. Ben's philosophy of life—creating community, caring for those in need, striving to make a difference in the world—was seeded and nurtured through his formative years in the heart of the Green Mountains, and he returns often, though Bethesda and Burlington are some 500 miles apart.

Ben estimates that he has made the nine-and-a-half-hour drive about 55 times within the past six years, mainly to comfort his ailing mother and sister, both of whom have since passed away, and also to visit the land acquired by his father years ago in Westford, 160 acres in a forestry preserve. He'll do some maple sugaring with a neighbor there in March, continuing a family tradition. Here in town Ben sees friends with whom he has kept in touch for decades, and he often spends between 4:00 pm and late at night blowing glass at AO!, a friend's glass studio located on lower Pine Street. Though he stayed with friends the first several times he came back to help care for his sister and mother, five years ago his family purchased a condo in South Burlington.

Having maintained his membership in Ohavi Zedek, Ben always signs up to lend his glorious, expressive voice to the week's Torah reading if he plans to be here over Shabbat. In the synagogue that was so central to his upbringing he has made new friends among Shabbat services attendees. Vivien Brown, one of the regulars, says, "Listening to Ben Bornstein's wonderful *leyning* voice gives me chills. It reminds me of the cantorial albums my parents used to listen to and brings me so many wonderful and warm memories." And Aaron Goldberg adds, "Whether singing Haftorah trope or *leyning* Torah, Ben reads with great precision and dramatic flair! One can tell he has spent years studying these materials to share his good works."

Early on, the Bornsteins lived in Essex Junction. When Ben was a fourth grader they moved to upper North Street in Burlington, a stone's throw from Rabbi Wall's family and across the street from the home of Heather Woodworth, Ben's high school English teacher. (Prior to his having a place in South Burlington, the Woodworths were among those who housed him, sometimes for weeks at a time.) Next door lived the Orthodox rabbi, Mordechai Hecht. Ben fondly recalls the delicious honey cakes the *rebbitsen* would bake every Friday and share with the Bornsteins. "The Hechts are a wonderful and caring family," he says, "and we're still in touch after all these years."

Ben's father, Joseph, was an agricultural engineer and an adjunct instructor at the University of Vermont. A modest, quiet man, Joe had served heroically as a bombardier in World War II, though he never talked about his wartime experiences. Only when Ben was a teenager did he learn about his father's participation in the Allied humanitarian food drops over Nazi-occupied Holland, when huge areas were flooded and tens of thousands of people were stranded on their rooftops. Joe was a role model for his children—active in the synagogue and involved in desegregation and other civil rights and political causes, both at home and abroad. An ardent supporter of Israel, he was once described in *Seven Days* as "a pugnacious champion of Israeli politics." A beloved parent, Joe died in December 2003 at the age of 82.

Ben's mother, Clara, was a dedicated educator who held a series of jobs, including teaching English as a second language and working with people studying for their GED. Known to have a firm hand, she was nevertheless admired and respected by her students, despite suffering from illness that often made interpersonal relationships difficult. Ben acknowledges that home life could be challenging, especially for his older sister, Lise Bornstein-Malter, who worked hard to navigate her mother's illness. Lise, a graduate of UVM, was employed by Digital Equipment and VSAC, and served our community as a

teacher in the OZ Hebrew School and through her active participation in Hadassah, Meals on Wheels, the Joint Urban Ministries Program (JUMP) and the Shalom Shuk. She also was a valued volunteer in several organizations in Waterbury, where she lived with her husband, John Malter. Lise had one son, Daniel, who served for many years in the US military. In December 2017, when she was 65, she lost a valiant two-and-a-half-year struggle with glioblastoma, an aggressive and devastating brain cancer. Ben notes that both Lise and Joe died on the second night of Chanukah: "It was almost like he was calling her home." Clara lived until 2019, passing just a few days before her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Now 66, Ben was a toddler when the synagogue moved 'up the hill' from Archibald Street to its current location, around the corner from the Bornstein home. The OZ institution and community had an immense impact on Ben's life. "I remember being in shul all the time," he says. "We went to Hebrew School three days a week, either Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday, depending on the grade, and Sunday. Then there was Junior Congregation on Saturday." He took to it like a duck to water, immersing himself in learning about Israel and Jewish heritage, the Hebrew language and the lessons of Judaism. Looking back, though, Ben notes that there was so much that Ohavi Zedek had to offer that was not fully appreciated at the time. "Rabbi Wall gave us world-class oratory every weekend in his philosophical and theological discussions; we also had cantors that were Holocaust survivors who spoke five or six languages, but with whom many failed to connect or try to understand."

It wasn't long after his own bar mitzvah that Rabbi Wall entrusted Ben with working with other bar and bat mitzvah students. At 14 he worked with a learning disabled student in Montpelier....."the beginning of a long avocation," he says. "I've often helped teach 20 to 30 students a year."

At Burlington High School Ben was a strong student, often taking many more courses a semester than required. He was a member of the high school debate team, along with OZ President Jeff Potash. Ben also ran cross-country for four years. "I was terrible," he admits, "but we had an antisemitic coach and I refused to give up. I insisted on going to synagogue on Shabbat and wouldn't show up for Saturday morning practice. I took a lot of grief for that. It was painful, but it taught me perseverance." There was little time for other extra-curricular activities during his high school years when Ben mowed lawns, shoveled snow, painted houses and worked at KFC and burger joints to earn money to pay for college and finance a summer in Israel. He also volunteered for the Hoff for Vermont Senate political campaign.

One enormous influence on his life was BHS's Total Immersion French class, in which students met in private homes and courses were taught in French for an entire semester. Ben was so taken with the program that he enrolled for a second semester. "We don't appreciate the study and mastery of foreign languages in this country," he believes. The love of language, which started with Hebrew and French, in both of which he is fluent, has propelled Ben to study German, Japanese, Russian, Amharic and even some Navajo; Mandarin Chinese with his eldest daughter during five of her middle and high school years; and to become conversant in Spanish, which he has been studying in semi-retirement in connection with his pro bono work with asylum seekers.

Ben enrolled in Boston University's College of Liberal Arts in 1973, earning a BA with Honors in 1978. During that time, he spent one academic year at the University of Grenoble in France and one year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. From 1980-82 he lived on a kibbutz in Israel as a dairy farmer and welder; then served in the Israeli Army for two years, stationed on the northern border near Lebanon. He applied and was admitted to Tel Aviv University's six-year legal studies program. "At the time there were only three law schools in Israel. It was hard work," he recalls, "very competitive." In 1986 he successfully completed written and oral national bar examinations (in Hebrew).

Back in the States to care for his grandfather, Ben completed course requirements for admission to the bar in Washington, DC and graduate studies at Georgetown University Law Center, focusing on international agreements and accords, federal administrative practice related to international and transnational issues, and US federal regulatory enforcement and oversight.

And his law career took off. He holds several bar memberships, including to the US Court of International Trade and the US Supreme Court; he served as Assistant Counsel in the Inspector General for the US Department of Agriculture, Attorney-Advisor in the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the US Treasury Department, and in 1996/97 in the White House Office of Counsel to the President in the Clinton Administration. From 1998 to 2016, in the final years of his legal career in federal government, he was a Senior Attorney-Advisor with US Customs and Border Protection in the Office of International Trade.

Throughout his active and productive life, Ben has epitomized the concept of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, and his family has followed suit. His wife, Dr. Ellen Sidransky, is a pediatrician involved in human genome research at the National Institutes of Health. She is a world-renowned expert in Gaucher disease, a rare genetic disorder. Dr. Sidransky discovered and identified links between Gaucher and Parkinson's disease. Gaucher (pronounced *Gow-shay*) affects, among others, Ashkenazi Jews. Along with many other awards, Dr. Sidransky won a prestigious award for outstanding achievement in Parkinson's disease research in 2019. In 2020 she was chosen to deliver the US Department of Health and Human Services, NIH Director's, "Astute Clinician Lecture."

Ellen and Ben are the parents of four high-achieving offspring, each in their own way finding a path to making the world a better place:

Ethan (Eitan), a graduate of the University of Michigan and the Emory School of Medicine in Atlanta, completed his residency in internal medicine at the University of Colorado. He is currently on a fellowship with the CDC in Portland, Oregon. He and his wife, also a physician, worked on the Navajo Nation reservation for four years, where the COVID pandemic took a terrible toll. They have a 7-month-old son for whom Ben recently served as "assistant daycare provider" when Eitan was called up for extended travel by the CDC.

Michelle (Michal) is a Wellesley graduate who cares passionately for the underserved population in the US and elsewhere in the world. She has worked with IsraAid and CARE International, both leading humanitarian aid organizations. A glassblower like her father, she is married and the mother of two young children.

Aaron (Ari), the 'techie guru' of the family, earned a double undergraduate degree in computer science and history from Goucher College near Baltimore, and successfully completed his graduate studies in computer science at Bar-Ilan, a research university in the Tel Aviv District city of Ramat Gan. He is head of developer advocacy for Grid.ai. Ari, who has lived in Israel for six years, aspires—in his spare time—to hike Shvil Israel, the 637-mile trail that runs the length of Israel, starting at Tel Dan near the Lebanese border and extending to Eilat.

Maya, the youngest of the Bornsteins, earned her undergraduate degree with High Honors at Emory University. When Fulbright scholarships were canceled due to COVID, she got a fellowship with a Jewish non-profit in the Pittsburgh area, addressing issues of hunger, urban 'food deserts,' community relations and illiteracy. She now holds the title of Senior Engagement Coordinator at Food Bank for New York City, which provides support to 1.5 million New Yorkers in need.

Since Ben 'retired' in 2016 he has been studying Spanish to better enable him, as a pro bono volunteer attorney with a number of charitable immigration aid organizations, to better represent individuals seeking asylum in the US. "There's a huge backlog of cases," he says. "Many people are in dire straits." He also spends time glassblowing in a small home studio, and regularly biking and hiking. He's an alpine skier and has a 1<sup>st</sup> degree brown belt in the Korean martial art of *t'ang soo doh*.

Ben will be traveling north again in early March, when he'll go to shul, tap some maple trees in Westford, visit his friends at AO! Glassworks, and connect with longtime and new friends at OZ.

The author Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, "You can't go home again." Clearly, he didn't know Ben Bornstein!

~ Judy Hershberg



*A photo of the family (from left to right):  
Ellen Sidransky, Ben, Eitan, Ari, Maya and Michal Bornstein*



*Ben in glassblowing mode, working on a kiddush goblet.  
His specialty is creating goblets out of shards of the glass  
that is broken in wedding ceremonies.  
He also makes glass apples for Rosh Hashanah.*