

PROFILE

Jef & Renee Bratspis (Greenberg)

As I looked forward to interviewing Jef and Renee Bratspis, I checked my files and reread the profile of Renee's dad, Marv Greenberg, that appeared in the November 2000 issue of *The Voice*, when Renee and her sister Nichole were teenagers. Marv, a busy veterinarian at the time, and his wife Diane, a physical therapist, headed a household that included their daughters and "the fewest number of pets we've had in a long time": two dogs, two cats, two chickens and a hamster." Today, both Marv and Diane are retired; Nichole, now 37, works as an ICU nurse at the VA hospital in Boston, where she lives with her husband, Jon Lopkin, a project design manager, and two children; and Renee, 36, is a physician in Middlebury, where she and Jef are raising two sons. (They have no pets.)

Longtime members of Ohavi Zedek will no doubt remember the Greenberg sisters as two lively little girls attending services with their parents and scampering down the center aisle on High Holy Days to see and hear the sounding of the shofar – and later, as young women, becoming an integral part of the service themselves. "We've been *leyning* Torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah every year since I was 14," Renee says. Before COVID regulations restricted in-person attendance, it was the four little Greenberg grandchildren skipping in the aisles on holidays as a smiling congregation acknowledged the next generation.

Renee was born in Burlington in 1986. The family lived in Monkton, a small town in neighboring Addison County, and the girls attended Monkton Central School and Mount Abraham Union High School in Bristol.

The Greenberg sisters grew up in the synagogue. Renee says she feels very much at home here, having been named on the bimah, attended Hebrew School, celebrated her bat mitzvah, and married here by Rabbi Joshua. Her dad has served the congregation in many capacities over the years, even managing to juggle his work schedule to allow him to teach the *Kitah Vav* class when the girls were in Hebrew School. Weekly study sessions at home with Dad continued for the sisters well into their teenage years.

Seeking other opportunities for them to immerse in Jewish culture, the Greenbergs sent Nichole and Renee to Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire for four weeks in the summer. "I looked forward to it every year, from the time I was 7 until I worked there as a counselor," Renee says. Yavneh is described as offering 'a state-of-the-art camping experience that makes Jewish tradition come to life and exemplifies the fun of living Jewishly.' Both girls met their husbands-to-be there, and that happy circumstance led Marv and Diane to establish scholarship funds through the synagogue in their names: the Greenberg-Lopkin Camping Scholarship Fund and the Greenberg-Bratspis Israel Youth Trip Scholarship Fund.

Jef was born in Albany, NY, the second of three sons. His father, Ron, who worked as an administrator for New York State, had moved there from Philadelphia, where he'd met Jef's mother, Sally, a social worker and college professor. Jef's paternal family had roots in Prussia, Russia and Germany; his maternal forebears were from England and Wales. His mother, who grew up in the town of Niskayuna, NY, some 15 miles north of Albany, studied theology and is a convert to Judaism. The family belonged to both Reform and Conservative congregations, and the boys were sent to Hebrew Academy of the Capital District, a Jewish day school.

Renee left Vermont upon graduating from high school in 2004 to earn an undergraduate degree from McGill University in Montreal. She met Jef at Camp Yavneh in 2005, when she was an 18-year-old counselor and he, a 25-year-old graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, had signed on to teach ceramics. Having earned his degree in product industrial design, Jef says, “I never would have thought of taking a summer job there, but my younger brother, David, who had gone to the camp for several years, was going back. He was living in Israel and I rarely got to see him.”

Jef moved to Burlington in 2006 and took a job at the Outdoor Gear Exchange to enable his across-the-border relationship with Renee to continue to flourish. There were many trips between Vermont and Canada over the next two years, until Renee graduated in 2008 and returned to enter the UVM College of Medicine. She and Jef were married in October of 2009, while she was a med student. At the end of her schooling in 2012, having chosen family medicine as her field of practice, Renee matched with the Ventura County Family Medicine Residency program in California. (In the match process, residency candidates and residency programs simultaneously ‘match’ to fill post-graduate training positions.) Ventura is a premier site for full-spectrum family medicine.

Renee and Jef lived in California for four years. Their first son was born shortly after they arrived, and Jef took on the mantle of full-time dad. Just before they left to return to Vermont, their second child was born. They made the trek back with 3 ½ -year-old Gil and baby Ronen in tow. Moving into the Greenberg home with Mom and Dad, they intended the arrangement to be short-term, but it was a full year before they found a house and settled in Middlebury.

Marv and Diane agree that living together for all that time was a great experience. “We would only get to California three or four times a year, so we were very happy that they moved back so that we could help them get on their feet here, and could lend an extra hand with the grandchildren, especially since Ronen was so little. We were not empty nested anymore!” (Not that the nest was completely empty—though they had reduced the animal population in their home, they still have two dogs and two cats, and they loved seeing the children interacting with their animals.)

Returning to her Addison County roots, Renee practiced as a family medicine specialist in Bristol. She currently works in Addison and Rutland Counties as a full-spectrum family doctor, treating patients of all ages, delivering babies at Porter Medical Center, and making house calls. (Yes, house calls!) Jef serves as a member of the infrastructure committee for the Town of Middlebury and on the board of Friends of Roots, a non-profit working to build trust, mutual respect and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis in the Holy Land. He also works as a substitute teacher at the local schools around Middlebury. They are thinking about getting a dog.

Gil, now 9, will be going into fourth grade this year; Ronen, almost 6, has graduated from Kindergarten. They attend Mary Hogan Elementary School in Middlebury, which is now open full-time. Gil’s introduction to Hebrew School was, of course, impacted by the pandemic, but he participated virtually. Inspired by the OZ Shavuot program on Zoom a couple of years ago, the Bratspis family joined the synagogue officially in 2021. Education Director Naomi Barell says, “It was great to get to know Gil and Ronen during our special remote unit on Shavuot back in 2020. I am so glad that Jef and Renee are willing to make the schlep to Burlington for the kids to

attend Hebrew School in person. Their energy and humor are a huge addition to our program.” The family also attends other services and programs whenever they can.

Gil and Ronen love being with their cousins, Ella, nearly 9 and Xander, 6, whom they see from time to time in Boston and when the Lopkins come to Burlington on major Jewish holidays. “Our four grandkids are like siblings,” says Marv. “They love one another, they play like siblings and they fight like siblings.” The two families travel and go on camping trips together, often with the Greenbergs.

The Bratspises enjoy being with Jef’s family as well. His older brother Stephen, a manager of the local bike-share program, and his wife Maggie, an elite hair stylist, live in Niskayuna with their children, Ben, 10, and Lilly, 7. His younger brother David made Aliyah to Israel 20 years ago. A licensed Israeli tour guide/tour organizer, he and his wife Bat-Chen, a lawyer, live in Efrat and have three children, Halleli, 12, Tuvya, 8, and Ziv, 2. Renee and Jef have each been to Israel three times; their first experiences were on Birthright trips prior to meeting one another. They plan to bring Gil and Ronen to Israel this December to celebrate Halleli’s bat mitzvah. Jef’s mother lives in Albany; his father, of blessed memory, passed away in 2015.

In the winter the Bratspis family skis nearly every weekend at the Middlebury Snow Bowl and Rikert Nordic Center. Warmer weather finds them visiting Lake Dunmore, camping (sometimes by canoe), and hiking and biking the trails around Middlebury and in the Green Mountains. And coming full circle, this summer Gil will be going to Camp Yavneh.

The 22-year-old profile of Marv Greenberg ended with the Hebrew words *l’dor v’dor*, *from generation to generation*—the responsibility of passing on spiritual knowledge and cultural traditions in order to sustain the customs, heritage and collective memory of the Jewish people.

L’dor v’dor: A perfect ending for the Bratspis profile as well.

~ Judy Hershberg



Gil (wearing the helmet) Ronen, Jef, Renee, & Jef's brother David aboard the USS Slater