

# On an Extended Visa

*Making herself  
indispensable to the mission*

Estie Florans



## *The inspiring story of Rebbetzin Basyah Barg, whose near-death experience became the catalyst for a new lease on life.*

“I stopped buying green bananas and only buy ripe ones,” she says, explaining that she doesn’t know if she’ll be around tomorrow. After all, the memory of what happened when she was declared dead 15 years ago is still very much alive.

I’m speaking with Rebbetzin Basyah Barg, author of *Voices in the Silence*, an inspirational narrative about her family’s harrowing experiences keeping *Yiddishkeit* under the Communist regime. My Yiddish is not as strong as I’d like it to be, and I don’t want to rely on conducting the interview in Hebrew; therefore, Mrs. Tirtza Puritz, daughter of Harav Hirsch Feldman, zt”l, *Mashgiach* of the Mirrer Yeshivah, and a *limudei kodesh* teacher at Yeshiva of Brooklyn, and Mrs. Malkie Obstfeld, beloved teacher at Machon High School, are helping to translate for me and Rebbetzin Barg.

But it’s interesting. Rebbetzin Barg’s summer hostess in Monroe told me when arranging this interview, “You’ll see, Estie, language won’t be a barrier when speaking with Rebbetzin Barg. Her *kedushah* and connection to others reaches beyond language...”

And she’s right. As Rebbetzin Barg speaks, it becomes apparent that when it comes to spirituality, there is a bond that successfully penetrates all language barriers.

**S**hortly before a scheduled trip to America to speak about her book in 1997, Rebbetzin Barg developed a fever. Her doctor advised her to have some blood work done in the hospital. She was misdiagnosed, given antibiotics she was allergic to, lapsed into a coma, and pronounced clinically dead.

The doctor advised Reb Avraham Barg, great-nephew of Harav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt”l, “You never had children. Donate your wife’s organs, so she can live on in others.”

“That day, 19 Tammuz, was my mother’s *yahrtzeit*,” Rebbetzin Barg tells me. “Accompanied by a *minyán*, my husband went first to the *Kosel*, and then to my mother’s *kever* on Har Hamenuchos to *daven* for my recovery.

“That is what was happening in this world... But I was in another world...”

“There was a sudden, piercing light. I saw myself lying in the bed... tiny, from a distance. I could see many men with black beards standing around my bed, clutching papers, and reading off my sins. I felt myself shaking from fear. A

*pachad!*”

I interrupt. “How do you know that this wasn’t a dream?”

“*Zeh lo chalom! Hirgashti, zeh amiti. Haguf hayah kan, v’haneshamah hay’tah sham... hirgashti hakol...* (I felt, this is true. The body was here, and the soul was there... I felt it all.)”

Rebbetzin Barg continues. “I heard them reading my *aveiros*, the *bein adam laMakom...*”

“I protested, ‘But, I have a Russian passport! Every *mitzvah* that I did was like *Krias Yam Suf*, risking my life.’

“You’re right,’ was the response. ‘For the *mitzvos bein adam laMakom* we’re going to give you a pass, because you came from Russia. But what about the *mitzvos bein adam lachaveiro*? Once, you were asked information about a friend. You remained silent, but the expression on your face prevented the *shidduch* from happening. What should be done now? If you want to be forgiven for *mitzvos bein adam laMakom* you must be equally careful about your *mitzvos bein adam lachaveiro.*’

“Unexpectedly, a small door opened and my mother emerged, screaming, ‘What’s going on here?’

“We are judging her...’ they answered.

“My mother cried out, ‘Seventeen times I was expecting and I lost nine babies! Seven of my children were killed in the war! I lived 91 years and I never became a grandmother. It can’t be that you’ll take my one surviving daughter... Give her a chance!’ my mother shouted, ‘A chance... chance... chance...’

“Suddenly, the light was gone and I was enveloped by *choshech*.

\*\*\*

“I opened my eyes.

“The doctor closed my eyes. The medical staff had already pronounced me dead... and I’m opening my eyes?

“Do you recognize me?’ My husband asked. ‘Do you know who I am?’

“I couldn’t speak. But with my eyes, I sent him the message. Yes... I recognize you.

“I was hooked up to an I.V. and many other machines. Fluids were going in and out... my body was unable to function on its own. But my brain was working. I told myself that the old Basyah died, the new Basyah is lying in this bed... a new person. Now, I’m going to have to do new things... things I’ve never done before.

“But what could I do? I was lying there, helpless, unable to move, but I could think.

“I never had children. But my husband often said *tzaar gidul banim* is a ticket to *Gan Eden*, and none of us are

*patur* from this. My children, your children... everyone is the *Eibershter’s kinder*, so it’s the same thing. A child can’t grow by himself. If you help him, give him a sandwich, teach him *alef-beis*, he becomes yours.

“I considered which children my *neshamah* is connected to. As a child, I

“A child can’t grow by himself. If you help him, give him a sandwich, teach him *alef-beis*, he becomes yours.”



suffered from hunger. So I thought to myself... this is my chance! Being involved with hungry children, because this is something I understand, and can feel.

“My father always told me, ‘Basyah, everyone has a job and a visa. It comes to a point when the visa expires; however, if someone is valuable to the job, and the job remains unfinished, there’s a chance that the visa will be extended. Everything you do, you have to do your best, with your whole self. Become indispensable to the job, Basyah, and maybe your visa will be extended!’

“So, I decided that when I recovered, I’d go to one of the Beit Yaakov Chinuch Atzmai schools in Yerushalayim where I had once lectured. It’s a religious Sephardic school for underprivileged children. I’d talk to the children, give *chizuk*, do some therapy... after all, I know hunger...

“I went there and began talking. A six-year-old girl called out, ‘I can’t hear you! My stomach is empty. Give me a sandwich; then I’ll listen!’

“So I gave her a sandwich.

“But then I realized I need 150 sandwiches. I gave my *maaser*, my social security, my husband’s social security. But it wasn’t enough. I asked my relatives, my friends.

“The school consisted of 150 children, ages 6-14. Chinuch Atzmai gives the building, the teachers, and so much more. The children are there from eight in the morning until one in the afternoon. And then what?

“What do they have to go home to? Many of the children come from broken homes; all the homes are poverty-stricken.

“So I gave what I could, bothered friends and relatives, and then I realized, I soon won’t have any friends left.

“That’s why I started going to *chutz laAretz* to raise money. And that’s what I’ve been doing these last 15 years. Building and maintaining *Ohr Batya*, where the children get to stay in an

after-school program instead of going home to... to nothing. They stay until 5:00 p.m., and are given a hot meal, tutoring, computers, music lessons, dancing, singing, sewing, and so much more.

"Their school hours are extended," Rebbetzin Barg says with a steely determination. "And I'm trying to extend my visa."

\*\*\*

Who is this woman who speaks before a wide variety of audiences: Syrian Sephardim in Deal, Satmar women in Williamsburg and Monroe, Chassidish, Litvish — all types of women in Lakewood, Boro Park, and Flatbush? Who is this woman who has friends in every *frum* community, whether in Eretz Yisrael, Europe, or the U.S., ready to do anything to help her collect for her cause? Who is this woman who, despite a demanding practice as a marriage and family therapist, travels the world and is willing to share her life's story and her "after-life" story and who has the encouragement and backing of *Gedolei Hador* so she can fund-raise to feed her hungry Jewish children?

"Who is a *gibbor*?" she recalls her father saying to her. "Stalin? Because, he kills people? No, Basyah. You're the strong one. That man, Stalin, doesn't let you keep Shabbos, and you, Basyah, you keep Shabbos. His strength is by murder; your strength is by living!"

"This is why *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created *gaavah*. So that when you go out in the street, a proud *bas Yisrael*, a representative of Hashem, that *gaavah* carries you and helps you move forward. This is *gaavah d'kedushah*!"

I ask her to share the story that shows her *gaavah d'kedushah*; the one from her book of how she kept Shabbos by dancing in the snow...

After taking a sip of tea, she places the mug on the table and begins to speak, transporting us back in time to Communist Russia.

"School attendance was required every day of the week except Sunday. If



**“My father replied, ‘Basyah, what are you so worried about? Where’s your emunah? Don’t you know Moshiach is coming?’”**

a child failed to attend school, it demonstrated poor patriotism, and the government surmised that since the parents are not doing a good job, the child can no longer remain at home with them.

"The only thing that would excuse an absence from school was a doctor's note."

Rebbetzin Barg tells us that her mother taught her all possible sicknesses that could be used as excuses for not coming to school on Shabbos. Once she deliberately cut her finger with her sharpener so she would not be compelled to write.

"And they didn't suspect anything?" I wonder.

"No, because I had a doctor's note," Rebbetzin Barg states matter-of-factly.

But then it came to a point where she used up all the illnesses they could think of. Her mother told her one surviving child, "Tantz oif'n shnei... Dance in the snow and declare: 'I am being *mekayem* the mitzvah of *shemiras Shabbos* and the *Eibershter* should help me that I should get sick so I shouldn't have to be *mechallel Shabbos*!'"

Rebbetzin Barg continues, "I danced in the snow for two years, constantly getting sick, *baruch Hashem*." As soon as she'd heal, she'd start jumping again, getting sick again. But then she became so ill, she needed two surgeries on her throat, requiring her to remain silent for a few months.

"It was the summertime. The Education Minister said that since I was too sick to return to regular school in September, they would do blood work on me, and then they'd send me to a 'hospital school.'

"It was unthinkable for me to be forcibly separated from my parents. When school would resume in September, we knew I'd have to 'heal' and return.

"But what will I do about Shabbos?" I anxiously asked my father.

"My father replied, 'Basyah, what are you so worried about? Where's your *emunah*? Don't you know Moshiach is coming?'"

"September came and school resumed. I was concerned. Moshiach hadn't come... what will be with Shabbos this week?"

"I was a little girl up against the Soviet system, wanting my father to give me a *psak*, telling me what I should do. I knew that if a person is missing his arms, he can't don *tefillin*. If a person is blind, he's unable to do *mitzvos* requiring vision. I wondered if maybe I was supposed to write on Shabbos, to save my parents from losing their one surviving child."

She knew her father would never tell her to write on Shabbos. She also knew he could never tell her not to write, because that would mean death or Siberia, if upon interrogation by her

## Give L'iluy Nishmas Basyah Barg Shetichyeh

Yes, you read this correctly, and no, this is not an advertorial; it is a human-interest story. But how could I share this story about Rebbetzin Barg without sharing Rebbezin Barg's own words (translated into English) with you?

"...When I come and I say I'm collecting *l'iluy nishmas Basyah Barg*, and people respond, "But you're alive," I say, "So, what's your problem that I'm alive? When everyone gives money for this cause, they are helping me extend my visa. This is my chance. I've been extending my visa for the past 15 years..."

I can't help but interject, "And you should continue extending it until 120."

"Hope doesn't help," she quips. "Please give to our cause."

teacher she would fall into a trap and reveal this secret.

"So what did my father do?" Rebbetzin Barg continues. "He said: 'Basyah, you stood at Har Sinai like I did. You received the same Torah as I and you learned about *shemiras Shabbos* like I did. So, just as I get help from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, you, too, will be helped. What you have to do, I don't have to tell you. And how you will be helped, I don't know. But you will be helped..."

We all fell silent.

And then Rebbetzin Barg told us something that is not written in the book.

Her mother said, "You are entering the enemy camp. Your teacher hates you. Your friends don't like you. Everyone is going to put obstacles in your path. I'm not going to go to your school and tell the teacher, 'Please don't harass my daughter.' I'm not going to tell the other students, 'Don't bother Basyah.' We know that won't work; they won't listen. In spite of everything, you

have to be *matzliach*. And you will be *matzliach!*"

Rebbetzin Barg elucidates: When mothers go to school trying to remove the stumbling blocks for their children, those children are never successful. They're always making excuses. Her mother was saying to her, "Don't look at anyone else. You have to take responsibility." This, Rebbetzin Barg emphasizes, is how she battled the Soviet Union, with her mother giving her the confidence to come up with her own schemes of how to keep *Shabbos* from when she was nine years old until 16 years old — seven years of fighting a constant *milchamah*.

"So what happened with that specific *Shabbos*?" I persist.

"I just got away with it."

With this combination of the self-confidence her mother gave her, and the spiritual *gevurah* and *gaavah d'kedushah* from her father, she explains, Hashem enabled her to triumph over the Soviet Union. When her father told her "Shabbos will take care of you," it worked. It worked, she stresses, because it wasn't merely words, but a part of her.

It was her daily diet, the "food" her parents fed her. The book is filled with their tremendous *mesirus nefesh* of keeping *mitzvos* against all odds, and with the threat of death and Siberia looming: baking *matzos*, *shemiras Shabbos*, *hachnasas orchim*, *kashrus*, *mikveh*, and so much more. But what's even more incredible is their pure, unadulterated *emunah* and *bitachon* in the face of the harshest challenges, illnesses, and tragedies. It's no wonder that a person growing up on this "diet" experienced amazing *siyatta diShmaya*, and that her every sentence is filled with wisdom and faith.

And that's why it is not surprising that when I ask this veteran of suffering and triumphs to give advice to today's parents and educators on being *mechanech* children, she replies immediately...

"*Emunah*. But you can't teach it — you've got to model it. Today we don't

need so much *mesirus nefesh* for *bein adam laMakom*. Today's generation has a difficult time with *bein adam lachaveiro*." She specifies, "*Kin'ah iz choser emunah*... Jealousy is a lack of *emunah*. You have a *chassan*, you didn't take mine. You have a diamond, Hashem can give me one. But you didn't take mine."

This is a message that is integrated

“What you have to do, I don't have to tell you. And how you will be helped, I don't know. But you will be helped...”



into her inspiring speeches and through her counseling sessions as a family and marriage therapist. At first she is hesitant when I ask her about her profession. She does not want to talk about herself, just about the girls, and their needs. But then I glimpse at the Israeli cell phone sitting on the table near us that she takes along on her travels, in order to stay in touch with her clients.

“Rebbetzin Barg has two full-time jobs...” I comment.

“The school is not a job,” Mrs. Puretz

the air for a moment.

“Baruch Hashem,” Rebbetzin Barg responds. “I have more than 24 hours to my day.”

“So can you advise us how to make our days stretch?” I ask.

“The important thing is to use every minute,” she responds.

“Do you ever do anything to relax?”

“When I’m working, I’m working, trying to utilize every minute. But when I take *chofesh*, I also try to use every minute, but with a goal... never just lying around purposelessly. Reading is

### *Psychology and Tznius*

During our interview I mentioned to Rebbetzin Barg that I’m working on an article for *Binah Magazine* about an organization called Peninim, where women gather together to learn and support each other while growing in *tznius* (“Inside Out,” Issue #292).

Her eyes light up, and in a voice full of enthusiasm she shares:

“My mother used to say, a simple doctor gives you a painkiller, but a good doctor tries to find the source. A lack of *tznius* comes from a lack of self-esteem. When a person feels like he isn’t being heard,” Rebbetzin Barg explains, “he screams.”

She tells a true story.

“I live in Talpiyot and as I stood at the bus stop one day I saw *ah sheine bachur* standing nearby with an earring in his ear.

“He turns to me, ‘Why are you staring at me?’

“I tell him, ‘I’m a psychologist. I see that you’re a nice, tall, good-looking fellow. If you weren’t such a fine-looking fellow then maybe... But someone as nice-looking as you wearing an earring?’

“The bus came, and we each got on and went our own way. I forgot about him. Time passed, and once again I’m at the bus stop. I see the *bachur*. This time he wasn’t wearing an earring, and this time, I didn’t say anything to him. He says to me, ‘You don’t recognize me?’

“He then tells me, ‘After meeting you that time on the bus, I came home and looked at myself in the mirror and I said: I see that you’re a nice, tall, good-looking fellow. If you weren’t such a fine-looking fellow then maybe... But someone as nice-looking as you wearing an earring?’

“He smiled at me and said, ‘Of course... I removed it!’”

Rebbetzin Basyah Barg’s book *Voices in the Silence* (Feldheim Publishers, 1992) by S. Z. Sonnenfeld (originally published in 1990 in Hebrew as *Kol Ba’demamah Nishma*) can be obtained by calling 718 252-5759.

clarifies. “Her livelihood is through her position as a therapist.”

“But she’s devoted to both — as though it’s two full-time jobs.” The question of *how does she do it?* hangs in

for the intelligence, swimming and exercise — to build a better and stronger body.... There’s no such thing as not doing anything. Idleness is a terrible thing.”



“Jealousy is a lack of *emunah*. You have a *chassan*, you didn’t take mine. You have a diamond, Hashem can give me one. But you didn’t take mine.”

She uses the Yiddish word, “*biten*” which Mrs. Obstfeld explains means, “exchanging.” Rebbetzin Barg exchanges one task for another task, never merely doing nothing.

Before this current trip to America was to take place, Rebbetzin Barg had been in an accident, suffering several broken ribs.

Rabbi Barg went to Harav Chaim Kanievsky, *shlita*, questioning whether it was advisable for his wife to travel to America to raise money. She was not well, had just been in an accident, did not have specific plans of where she would stay, where she would speak... How could she go?

Reb Chaim said, “*Uber Yiddishe kinder darfen essen* — Jewish children must eat.” And then he gave a *brachah*. “You’ll have *siyatta diShmaya shelo k’derech hateva...*”

And that is what happened. Unlike in the past, where her fund-raising efforts were focused on women, this past summer, a beautiful men's *melaveh malkah* was arranged in Monroe and Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman, *shlita*, spoke about Rebbetzin Barg's history and mission. Rabbi Wachsman has often referred to the book as a *mussar sefer* and is quoted as saying: "This is a book that every Jewish home should have." During the *melaveh malkah*, he recalled incidents from the book, detailing the purpose of Rebbetzin Barg's trip to America. When he finished speaking, and Rebbetzin Barg emerged from the dining room where the women had been sitting, she stood in the vestibule and the Satmar men approached, requesting her *brachos*... "lo *k'derech hateva*..."

Rebbetzin Barg shares a recent story.

Ohr Batyah purchased a new pair of shoes for Rivka,\* a little girl who had

been coming to school with torn shoes. They were therefore surprised and disturbed when she returned to school still wearing her torn shoes. When they questioned Rivka, she did not respond.

So they called her mother.

When Rivka's mother asked her why she didn't want to wear her new shoes, she started crying. "*Lamadeti sheRabi Tarfon natan kavod l'Ima shelo*..." eight-year-old Rivka cried to her mother. "I learned that Rabbi Tarfon honored his mother. I can go to my friend's homes in torn shoes. But you, Ima... you clean homes and need to enter them dressed decently. Take my new shoes and exchange them for a pair in your size..."

Needless to say, Ohr Batyah told the child to keep the shoes, purchasing a new pair for Rivka's mother as well.

And that is why Rebbetzin Barg cannot relax, exchanging one moment of accomplishment for another, traveling all over the world despite her

familial and work-related obligations, and regardless of ill health. She must continue forging ahead. Her children need her!

After all, she's living on an extended visa. [B](#)

*\*Name has been changed*

---

Estie Florans, a writer of fiction and nonfiction, is the author of *Conquer the Darkness*, *Set Me Free*, and the newly released *Lift Me Higher*, a true-to-life, contemporary novel for women and girls of all ages.