

## A SOLDIER FOR SEXUAL EQUALITY

By Aviva Lori Haaretz 17 07 2011

As long as the army has such a central influence over life in this country and Orthodoxy is dominant, asserts Prof. Alice Shalvi, there won't be equality between the sexes. Despite this, at 85, the Israel Prize laureate is still energetically working toward achieving that lofty objective. What else would you like to do, for instance?

Shalvi: "I've never been to Sheikh Jarrah. I'm told that it's too risky for me, that I could fall." Sitting in the garden of Shalvi's charming home in Jerusalem's Beit Hakerem neighborhood, one finds that there are actually two Alice Shalvis: the institution and the woman. The institution everyone knows, more or less: the feminist activist, social leader and fighter for equal rights, recipient of dozens of awards and honorary doctorates in Israel and abroad, and 2007 Israel Prize laureate for her special contribution to society and the country. The private individual is less well known. Shalvi the woman is married to Moshe, a mother of six, grandmother of 21 and great-grandmother of three. She is relaxed and gentle, and the strength of the intimate bond between her and Moshe after 61 years of marriage is quite evident. They caress each other with looks of longing and affection to the point that one could easily forget that behind this petite and smiling woman with the charming and mischievous sense of humor, who radiates such confidence and calm, hides an active volcano that could erupt at any moment. A volcano of words that align themselves into sharp sentences and deep insight, and into industrious and uncompromising action and public service. Activity that it's hard to imagine Israel functioning without.

Shalvi - whose surname (from the Hebrew word for "tranquillity" ) so well suits her personality - is known primarily as the founder and chairperson of the Israel Women's Network (or IWN, also referred to as the Women's Lobby ). Thanks to her and her colleagues, who were often referred to as "those pests from the lobby," Israel can today hold its head up and at least think it is a democracy like any other in the Western world when it comes to women's status and gender equality. But not nearly in the full sense of the word, as Shalvi stresses with more than a tinge of frustration.

"We're very far from being a democracy," she says. "We do not have true equality between men and women or social equality. People tell me that men and women are not the same. Obviously, the whole issue of equality concerns differences between people. I'm talking about equality before the law, as is written in the Scroll of Independence. That does not exist and will not exist as long as there is Orthodox control over so many aspects of personal status. And that's a scandal."

Israel is still too macho a country for your taste?

"Now so many things are taken for granted that no one looks for the places where there is still no equality - in religion or in the army. As long as the army has such a central influence on our life and the dominant religion is Orthodoxy, there won't be equality between the sexes. On the one hand, there's the security paranoia. They terrify us with talk of the end of Israel and this is a very serious matter because it's political. The mixture of religion, army and politics is a disaster. And the public lacks sufficient political awareness. People don't take to the streets on behalf of any basic principle. They're ready to kill over cottage cheese but not over what will happen in September.

"It used to be that when I talked with people about the situation, they would say: 'Everything will be okay.' Today the common response is: 'There's nothing we can do about it.' This is a big difference that's indicative of terrible despair. There's a feeling that nothing will change."

Do you have a creative idea for what can be done?

"I think the election system has to be changed. The ordinary citizen doesn't feel he has any real effect on his life. [Benjamin] Netanyahu will stay here forever. The polls say that we want one thing, while he keeps on going his way and doing what he feels like. The lack of any opposition is a huge problem. Without an opposition, there's no democracy."

And there's no democracy with a theocracy - which is the real Achilles' heel, the soft underbelly of the country, in Shalvi's view. And this is where her pain and frustration are especially acute.

Shalvi was born and raised in Orthodoxy. She and her family, all of whom are religious, observe the commandments naturally and easily. Her relationship with God, whether male or female, is clear, simple and two-directional. Her relationship with the Orthodox establishment, however, ran aground many years ago.

"I want a Jewish state, a Hebrew calendar, Shabbat as a day of rest and Hebrew as our language," she says, "but the parties that say openly and in their platforms that their goal is a theocracy and not a democracy should be outlawed. And then they come and tell us that it's the Muslims who are like that. Religion must be separated from politics."

The messiah will come before that happens.

"The messiah will come. May she come soon."

Despite, or perhaps because of, her hard-hitting comments, Shalvi has received a lifetime achievement award this week from the New Israel Fund for promoting women's status and Jewish pluralism in Israel.

The war years

She was born in Essen, Germany as Alice Hildegard Margolis. Her parents, Perl and Benzion were cousins - Ostjuden who came to Germany from Galicia in the early 20th century. They spoke Hebrew, German and English, "and when they didn't want us to understand, they spoke Polish."

Her father was active in the community of Jews from eastern Poland and in the Mizrahi stream of religious Zionism. They had a wholesale business in linens and household products. Shalvi and her brother William, five years her elder, were raised by their grandmother. In 1933, shortly after Hitler's rise to power, their house was searched, and the family took it as a sign. Alice's father moved to London and spent the next 10 months trying to obtain visas for his family.

Shalvi: "One of my earliest memories is of a winter day, my father was standing by the window and I joined him, and on the snow we saw red drops and he said to my mother: 'They're seizing the Bolsheviks.' He was politically involved and very smart, and he left right away. His brother had moved to London a year and a half before for financial reasons. After 10 months, Father got permission to bring us there, too. The months of waiting were very difficult and neither I nor my brother went to school. In May 1934, we arrived in London."

In London, she began attending school regularly and soon became something of an attraction. "We were among the first refugees and I remember how they introduced me at school: 'Children, this is our little refugee.'"

The Margolises settled in north London and her father and brother started a business importing watches and jewelry. When the Blitz started, they moved to Aylesbury, a small town 50 kilometers north of London. "A town without Jews," Shalvi recalls today. "We actually lived in Waddesdon, a village that was all part of the estate of James Rothschild - 1,000 families lived there and all worked on the estate. When the war broke out, many refugees from London came to the area. We bought a small house on the main street and my uncle also bought a house there. That's where I discovered the crude and unexpected anti-Semitism of the English. You'd hear things like 'You killed Jesus' and 'Where do you keep your horns?' The British were not at all fond of strangers."

Her father and brother worked in Aylesbury on behalf of the war effort, building a factory for ammunition-calibration devices, from which they became rich. Shalvi is reluctant to admit it, but the war years in the village were the happiest years she recalls from her childhood: "I feel ashamed that I was so happy. I went to school and the sun was always shining in the sky. We played tennis, I rode my bike, I studied late-18th-century Romantic poetry, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, and thought about how this related to village life, where nature played such a central role."

In 1944, she began studying English literature at one of the two colleges for women (there were 26 for men ) at Cambridge University. These were also very happy years for her. Particularly the first year. Cambridge maintained its secluded atmosphere and the reports from Europe didn't find their way in.

"At the end of the first year, soldiers who served in Europe started coming home and that's when we first started to hear about what was happening. My father knew about it through all the years, but he didn't talk about it. He was involved with the Polish federation in London and opened a house for the Polish-Jewish soldiers who returned from the war. He was in touch

with Shmuel Zigelbaum [leader of the Bund in Poland who committed suicide in London in 1943 in protest over the superpowers' inability to save Polish Jewry]. I learned about it from the people who came to Cambridge. When we lived in the village we didn't know anything. We were focused on the war. It was a time of fear and great tension. Refugees like us who fled from Germany were fearful of what would happen if Hitler invaded England.

"Virginia Woolf, who was married to a Jew, writes in her journals that they prepared cyanide for themselves, just in case. The adults had their ears pressed to the radio all day. I remember Churchill's speeches and Chamberlain's."

At Cambridge a significant turning point occurred in Shalvi's life. The news coming from Europe, and the stories brought back by the refugees and discharged troops, suddenly thrust her into a different reality. She became active in the Jewish students' union and was elected its chairperson.

"I neglected my studies a bit in favor of the social issues," she says. "And there was anti-Semitism at Cambridge, too. The upper class, the aristocratic class, was very exclusive. They didn't want strangers messing things up for them, and the British Jews from the upper class didn't treat Jews like us that nicely either."

Her time at university included a dramatic encounter with Holocaust survivors: "They brought a group of teenagers age 14-17 from the camps and put them up in a hostel in London and we, the Jewish students at Cambridge, invited a group of 20 of them one summer day in 1945. They came on a Sunday and we had planned to take them on an outing, to show them the river and the town, but they didn't know English and we couldn't communicate with them. It was a catastrophe. We discovered very quickly that they didn't want to see Cambridge, they wanted to eat. And we had strict food rationing at the time.

"There was only one kosher restaurant in Cambridge and we persuaded the owner to open it up on Sunday afternoon and serve us a meal. I never saw anything like it. They ate without cutlery, with their hands. They wolfed down the hot dogs and French fries, and then they wanted to know where to get women and cigarettes. I saw the faces of our boys; they were red with embarrassment. At that moment I decided that I wanted to study social work in order to help people like them."

False myths

In 1946 Shalvi was sent to the Zionist Congress in Basel as the representative for Jewish students in Britain, she says. "My father was in the Zionist General Council (Vaad Hapoel) of the Zionist Congress and I remember all the weeping and mourning there over those who were murdered."

In 1949, after completing her social work degree at the London School of Economics, Shalvi immigrated to Israel. "I looked for a job as a social worker but then I saw that at the time, the people who needed social workers were the immigrants from Arab countries and not from Europe, and unfortunately I didn't know any of the languages that they spoke."

Shalvi knew Hebrew from home, but had two private tutors, refugees from Russia. One taught her grammar, which she hated, and the other Hebrew literature, which she admired. She happened to hear that they were looking for lecturers in the newly founded undergraduate English department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which had opened after the War of Independence. She was hired and began what would become an impressive 40-year-career there.

In 1950, she met Moshe Shelkowitz (they Hebraicized their last name), a handsome student from New York who'd just immigrated, and they went to London to get married.

"I always felt that I was short," she recalls, "but on that visit to London, when I went shopping before the wedding and people asked me where I came from, I said Israel, and I suddenly felt taller."

In 1962, Shalvi finished her dissertation for her doctorate in English literature. It was adapted into a book, "The World & Art of Shakespeare," published by the Hebrew University Press (1966).

In 1969 Shalvi was asked to found and head the English literature department at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva. She had six children by then, but jumped at the chance, dividing her time among the family and the universities in Jerusalem and Be'er Sheva.

"Behind every successful woman is a supportive man," she says. "Without Moshe's help and support and encouragement, I never could have done it."

Who cared for the children?

"Moshe was a partner in everything I did, but we always had help at home."

Moshe Shalvi, an expert in computerized graphics and printing, who is responsible for the publication of the Encyclopedia Judaica for Keter Press, gazes affectionately at his wife and says, "She's a force of nature. I work in a linear fashion, both when I cook and when I eat. She eats everything together, with phone calls in the middle. She can take responsibility for many things at once. And on top of it all, she's an optimist. There aren't many like her."

The Be'er Sheva period was one of the most significant chapters in her career, she says now: "That was one of the things that I learned only belatedly. I thought that I was immigrating to an egalitarian and pioneering country. I thought army, kibbutzim, Golda Meir. We all thought that here there was equality everywhere but that was a myth that turned out to be untrue."

But women pioneers say they paved roads alongside the men.

"So they say, but it's not true. It was a myth. Equality was a dream. As soon as they started having children they went to be caretakers, nursery school teachers - and all the rest is self-deception. The critical moment for me was when I didn't get a job for which I was the most qualified candidate and the reason for the rejection was 'But you're a woman.' They were looking for a dean of the humanities and social sciences faculty in Be'er Sheva, which at the time was till an extension of the Hebrew University.

"I'd been very successful there and was popular with my colleagues in both places. I was always chosen for all the positions in the senate. All sorts of names were being suggested of people who had no connection to Be'er Sheva. I came home and told Moshe about it and we looked at each other and he said: 'You're the most qualified.' What was even more astounding to me was that no one thought that I was suitable for the job. I had to go to several male colleagues and ask them for recommendations, and the first thing that each one said to me was, 'But you're a woman,' before correcting himself and saying: 'But you'll have to move to Be'er Sheva and your husband works in Jerusalem.' And when I said that my husband was ready to move to Be'er Sheva, they were stunned.

"In the end I didn't submit my candidacy, because it was clear that I had no chance. In the meantime, I was asked to head the Institute of Language and Literature at the Hebrew University, a much less prestigious position. At the time, I'd been talking with women friends and found out that nearly all of them had experienced sexual discrimination and harassment at work, but no one had talked about it."

Pelech achievements

Initially, efforts to organize women took place within the universities. "We invited all the women faculty, there weren't so many, and discussed different types of discrimination. Married women who went to do a post-doctorate abroad received a smaller stipend than men did at the time because they said men have to maintain a family, and other ridiculous things like that that go against common sense."

This activism ignited feminist awareness and the recognition that something very basic was lacking in Israeli society. Thus, in 1984, Shalvi and her friends founded the IWN, and she headed it for 16 years.

In 1975, Shalvi was offered the chance to take over as director of the Orthodox girls' high school Pelech, in Jerusalem. She did so on a volunteer basis, in tandem with her work at the university and with the lobby, for 15 years. "At Pelech I discovered the discrimination in the religious sector in terms of Torah learning and observance of the commandments, and discrimination against women in Judaism in general."

What do you mean?

"For example, that girls weren't allowed to learn Talmud because rabbis said that anyone who taught his daughter Torah might as well be teaching her nonsense. The aim was to prevent women from achieving equal status. And why can't a woman read the Torah or lead the prayer service? There is nothing in the halakha (Jewish law) that prohibits it."

So why can't a woman read the Torah?

"Because it means there aren't enough men in the congregation that can be called to the Torah. And why are women exempt from time-linked commandments? Why isn't a woman

obligated to say the Shaharit morning prayer? Because she's supposed to be at home making breakfast for her husband. Somebody once told me that in all seriousness. I was supposed to be interviewed on Israel Radio one day, about the topic of girls in the army, along with Rabbi [Israel] Lau, and when I got there I saw him leaving. I asked to hear what he'd said so I could comment on it and the producer told me he said a woman cannot be under the authority of any man aside from her father and husband - that was his argument as to why women should not be drafted. Come on!

"I was fortunate at Pelech in that I was able to do whatever I felt was right. They had just put through a reform in the Education Ministry and you could introduce new content. I was able to recruit relatively young teachers, male and female, for whom it was their first job, and I let them come with new and creative ideas. We went from being an ultra-Orthodox school to an experimental religious school for girls. I advocated democratic management, but all these experiments aroused a lot of suspicion and discomfort among the Orthodox. People would say to me, 'How can you let the girls decide?' I became a controversial figure in the religious world."

Shalvi was under the illusion that she could foment a revolution and teach religious girls a lesson in democracy and feminism. But it didn't work out that way: She angered too many people in the ultra-Orthodox public and became persona non grata.

Her efforts started with organizing encounters between the Pelech girls and Palestinian girls from East Jerusalem and reached a peak with a trip she made to Brussels in 1988.

"I went there to take part in a conference of Jewish and Palestinian women at a time when it was still not allowed to meet with them [the law prohibited meetings with PLO members]. There was a misleading radio report about [the trip] and when I got back home two of my teachers said they could not keep working for someone who met with the PLO. And then the Education Ministry gave me an ultimatum: Either I cease my feminist and political activity or the school would lose its official accreditation. I wasn't willing to give up my political or feminist activity and so I quite in 1990. I thought that after being there for 15 years I had accomplished something. I planted some seeds. Today I can say with satisfaction that there are a lot of my graduates in the religious feminist movements."

A Conservative 'home'

After the Pelech episode, Shalvi effected a pronounced split with Orthodoxy and joined the Conservative movement.

"From the time I was a child, I didn't feel comfortable in an Orthodox synagogue because there was no role for me and so I didn't go to synagogue often. I even felt a certain degree of opposition. As my feminism grew, so did my opposition. I feel best when I'm praying alone in my garden, and in the Conservative movement I found a home in which there is equality. Moshe kept going to the Orthodox synagogue for a few years until he came to my synagogue one time to try it and stayed. He just loves sitting next to me during the services. Today I am very impressed by what is happening in Orthodoxy. Pelech graduates are leading the way and there is a trend toward [reaching] the maximum equality possible."

Meaning what?

"It's still on the margins, not in the mainstream of Orthodoxy, but it's already begun. At the Shira Hadasha congregation, at some religious kibbutzim and in other congregations - feminist Orthodox women are called to the Torah and read from the Torah, and can also serve as prayer leaders for certain parts of the service. It's starting to become accepted."

Do you regret that you left?

"If women in modern Orthodoxy had been making the kind of progress then that they are now, then I may have given up too soon. It's possible. But when you become the object of so many attacks and threats, you have to choose."

Shalvi drowned her disappointment with Orthodoxy in her intensive work with the IWN, a nonpartisan political organization that expanded its activity and gathered under its wing women from all ends of the political spectrum, like Anat Maor and Naomi Hazan on one side, and Yael Rom on the other.

"Because we had common goals in regard to women's status, we worked wonderfully together. In 1992, out of 12 women who were elected to the Knesset, eight were ours (active members in IWN ). And they passed 40 new laws and amendments concerning women's status. It was

incredible. What's so important in feminism is to create common goals even when there are differences and disagreements. And I think that women for the most part have a greater tendency to seek common ground in order to advance their interest, and are ready to listen. Men are not good at listening. You see it in corporate management."

What caused did you advance?

"Women in pilot training. We represented Alice Miller (the first woman to enroll in the pilot's course ); the Board of Directors Law, which requires that space be made for women. And women in media. How many women presenters were there on television in the 1980s and '90s? None. We did a survey. IWN members examined all the TV programs every evening and counted how many women appeared and in what sorts of roles, and the results were appalling. Remember what happened with [presenter] Carmit Guy? People said she couldn't present the news because she had a gap in her teeth.

"Does anyone scrutinize a man's appearance that way? In the Knesset, too: What would people have said about a woman MK if she were the size of [Benjamin] Ben-Eliezer? But with men appearance doesn't matter. With women it's immediately an issue. So I went to Haim Yavin, when he was the director of the television. We invited him to a conference about the status of women in the media, and one woman asked him why there weren't more programs for women. And he said: 'But television doesn't tailor programs to any particular minority.' We burst into laughter and he asked: 'Did I say something wrong?'"

Why didn't you go into politics?

"I felt that while I was achieving my aims in an organization like the IWN, I wasn't sure I could have the same influence as an MK."

Most of the activity of the IWN was funded by the New Israel Fund; the rest of the support Shalvi garnered from fundraising around the world.

"I was traveling a lot," she recalls. "There were times I would be away on a trip and come home for two days and set out again. We were the first organization that didn't deal with services for women, as did WIZO, Na'amat and Emunah. We understood that politics was the way and we worked on raising awareness. I traveled all over the country, wherever anyone was willing to listen, and found a terrible ignorance among women here. They had no idea what we wanted from them. In recent years a lot of sectoral feminist organizations have sprung up. The market has split and it's each to her own sector. There's something good in that, but at some point it also weakens the lobby and the struggle of women as a whole."

Shalvi says that since 2000 she has been "basically unemployed." But then she wants to add something: "After I retired I said, 'Now I'm going to sit and write,' but then I was approached by the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies; they were looking for a rector, and they asked me to propose a few names. I gave them a list. They came back to me two weeks later and said they hadn't found the right person. I gave them a new list. They came back again and said none of them was suitable, and then they hesitantly asked me if I would be willing to take on the role. I asked Moshe and he said: Why not? And so I found myself as the rector of the Schechter Institute for four years."

Where are you situated on the political map?

"I've been voting Meretz for years because it's the party that most represents me. There were some marvelous people there. I greatly admire [former party leader] Shulamit Aloni."

Shalvi has no regrets and makes no apologies. She says all of her actions were taken honestly and with good intentions. And if she could do it all again, she would do "almost everything" the same way.

Almost?

"Yes. I would have devoted more time to my studies and would have traveled less when the children were small. The children don't blame me, but this is how I feel about it myself. I believe that a child needs two parents in equal measure. Once, at the Shabbat table, I asked the children: 'Tell me: How do you feel about my working outside the home so much?' And one of the boys said: 'You're not always home when we need you.' And then one of the girls said: 'But when you are here, you're a lot more interesting than those mothers that spend all their time cleaning the windows,' and I clung to her words more than to his."

So what do you say to feminists? Pursue a career? Forgo a career?

"Not to give up on equal rights and equal standing at work but to keep on fighting for a full family and community life, alongside the career."

There are voices in the United States that say that feminism has run its course, that gender studies departments are no longer necessary, for example.

"As long as there is inequality, it has to continue. In every area. I care just as much about the status of the Palestinian citizens and of the gay and lesbian community as I do about my own status. There is still much to be done." W