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## ALICE HILDEGARD SHALVI

b. 1926

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Alice Shalvi.  
Doctor of Philosophy, *honoris causa*.  
Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot,  
Israel, 2001.  
Credit: Private collection

by [Charlotte  
Wishlah](#)

“You’ve got to have a dream./If you don’t have a dream/How’re you going to have your dream come true?” These lines from Rogers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*, with which Paula Weiman-Kelman chose to end her film portrait of

Alice Shalvi, *Rites of Passage* (1997), provide an apt epigraph for the life of one of Israel’s leading feminists, a pioneer in the area of women’s education and women’s status in general.

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Shalvi was born in Essen, Germany on October 16, 1926, the youngest of the three children of Benzion (1890–1955) and Perl (1893–1962) Margulies, who were first cousins. Benzion was an open-minded, tolerant Orthodox Jew and a devout Zionist. Born in Skalat, Galicia in 1890, one of the nine children (six sons, three daughters) of Mordecai and Feige (née Kesten) Margulies, he was an autodidact, well versed in Jewish and secular literature, fluent in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, German and, eventually, also English. He studied commerce and bookkeeping at commercial colleges in Vienna and in Eger, Hungary before immigrating to Germany. By the time World War I broke out in 1914 his parents and all his siblings had moved to Mannheim, where he and several of his five brothers engaged in wholesale merchandising. Together with all but the youngest of his brothers, he served in the Austro-Hungarian army. In contrast, Perl’s family had remained in Huyzhatyn, Galicia, where her father, Ze’ev (Welwel) was a [hasid](#) of the town’s rebbe and her mother kept a grocery store. The three daughters studied at a German-language school, while the sons received a traditional Jewish education. Living on the border of Russia and Austria, the family suffered severely during the war, in the course of which both Welwel and one of the daughters,

Sarah, died. The youngest son, Avraham, an avowed communist, had emigrated to Russia to participate in the revolution. There he was later joined by the oldest daughter, Rebecca. Another brother, Lazl (Elazar) was killed by the Germans in World War II.

Benzion, who was taken prisoner by the Russians in 1916, stopped in Huyzhatyn on his way home in 1919. On his return to Mannheim he sent for Perl and her mother. The couple married in August, 1920. Their son Ze'ev (William) was born in June 1921 and a daughter, Edith, in 1923 (died 1929). Alice was born in 1926. All three of the children attended the Jewish elementary school in Essen, where several of the Margulies brothers had moved in the early 1920s.

In Essen Benzion was active both in the community of Jews from Eastern Europe and in the religious-Zionist Mizrachi movement. A delegate to Zionist Congresses in the 1930s, he was elected a member of the WZO Actions Committee after World War II. It was in all likelihood because of his public activities in the Jewish community that the family's home was searched soon after the Nazis came to power. In August 1933 Benzion traveled to London, joining his youngest brother, Alexander, who had lived there since 1931 and had opened a small wholesale business in imported clocks and watches. Their mother also immigrated to the U.K. early in 1933, but it took several months before Benzion was able to obtain the entrance visas that enabled Perl, her mother and the two children to leave Germany. They arrived in London in May, 1934, only four days before William's *bar mitzvah*.

Both William and Alice continued their education in England. Alice, who soon excelled in English, was a voracious reader. Unlike her brother, who completed his studies at the Jewish Secondary School, she attended state schools but received private lessons in Hebrew and imbibed her Jewish knowledge from her home environment and its practices. In later life she would say that her parents instilled in her practical *mitzvot* such as *zedakah* (charity) and *hakhnassat or<sup>h</sup>im* (hospitality) by setting an example, rather than by preaching. She was profoundly influenced by her father's energetic involvement in Jewish and Zionist communal affairs, which made the family home one in which leaders of the Jewish community from all over the world were often guests at the *Shabbat* or holiday table. During World War II Benzion's activities on behalf of refugees from war-torn Europe acquainted her with a number of artists and writers whom he supported, including the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger and the artist Mané Katz. It was surely not by chance that Shalvi's earliest career choice was philanthropy, which she thought was a profession!

During World War II the family lived in Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire, and Shalvi completed her schooling at the Aylesbury Grammar School, from which in 1944 she gained entrance to Newnham College, Cambridge—one of only two colleges of the university at which women could then study. She received her B.A. degree in English literature but also followed in the activist footsteps of her father and brother (who studied at the London School of Economics while it was evacuated to Cambridge). She served in various capacities—secretary, treasurer and president—of the Cambridge University Jewish Society which, unusually, ran the city's synagogue. Here she made history by successfully moving that women be permitted to lead the singing of *zemirot* (table hymns) after the society's weekly Friday night Sabbath-eve suppers and by being the first woman invited to do so.

It was at Cambridge, in the summer of 1946, that Shalvi first encountered a group of teenage D.P.s (Displaced Persons, as Holocaust survivors were then known)—an encounter that profoundly shocked her and led her, just prior to her last year at Newnham, to decide to study social work in order to have a suitable profession once she arrived in Palestine. Her dream of [aliyah](#) had been prompted not only by her immediate family's involvement in Zionist affairs, but also by her admiration for those of her cousins who—like most members of her father's family—had gone from Germany to Palestine and had been among the founding members of their respective [kibbutzim](#). She was further inspired by the first post-war Zionist Congress, held in Basle in December 1946, to which her father was a delegate and which she attended as representative of the UK Inter-University Jewish Federation at the Youth Congress held simultaneously. Here she was privileged to hear the great leaders of Zionism, including Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Goldman and David Ben-Gurion. A further stimulus was her first visit to Palestine with her parents in December, 1947, soon after the UN decision on the establishment of a Jewish state. Excited by the vitality of the people and the beauty of the country, she was also greatly moved by the renewed encounter with her family and particularly with the [kibbutz](#) cousins. Though she wanted to stay on, she was urged by professionals whom she met to return to London and complete the studies she had just begun for a post-graduate diploma in social work at the London School of Economics. During her two years at the London School of Economics she made many friends among the considerable number of Jewish Palestinian students who had arrived after World War II. These, too, became frequent guests at her parents' home.

In November 1949 she traveled by boat from Italy to Israel, her brother accompanying her as far as Naples. After a preliminary few weeks staying with an aunt in Tel Aviv she moved to Jerusalem, which has ever since been her home.

Unfortunately, she soon discovered that social workers were required not to serve the post-Holocaust immigrants but rather to assist in the absorption of the mass immigration from the Arab countries, who were arriving in droves and being housed in *ma'abarot* (transit camps). Though conversant in English, German, French and, to some extent, also in Yiddish, her ignorance of any of the Arabic dialects made it impossible to find employment in the field for which she had trained. By chance she learned that the Hebrew University, which had reopened in November 1949 after its enforced closure during the War of Independence, was in need of teachers of English as a Foreign Language for the American-style B.A. degree which it had just introduced. *Faute de mieux*, Shalvi—who had never considered teaching as a vocation—applied for a position and was accepted to begin what proved to be a highly successful forty-year career in the university's Department of English. Encouraged by the head of the department, A. A. Mendilow, she proceeded to a Ph.D. (her thesis topic was “Renaissance Concepts of Honour in Shakespeare's ‘Problem’ Plays,” 1962) and rose to the rank of Assistant Professor before taking early retirement in 1990.

In May 1950 she met Moshe Shelkowitz (later Shalvi, b. 1929), a new immigrant from New York, like herself from a modern Orthodox home, who had come to Israel intending to study at the Hebrew University but had instead taken a job at Barclay's Bank. They married in October of that year and had six children: Joel (b. 1952), Micha (b. 1954), Ditzza (b. 1957), Hephzibah (b. 1960), Benzion (b. 1963) and Pnina (Perl, b. 1967). Moshe served in the IDF from November 1951 until mid-1954 and then went first into advertising and later publishing, working for the Israel Program for Scientific Translations (later Keter Publishing Company). He was production planner and

illustrations editor for the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971) and the project coordinator for the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (1990).

Between 1969 and 1973 Alice Shalvi was requested by the Hebrew University to establish the English Department at the Institute of the Negev (now the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev). Inspired by her vision of what a university in a pioneering region could be, Shalvi became a central figure in various forums at the university, being repeatedly elected by her peers to represent them on committees, in the senate, on the central steering committee and, finally, also on the board of governors. She was later also a member of the appointments committee, where she advocated for the appointment and promotion of women faculty members. Unfortunately, the dreams of innovation were soon dispelled by the demands of the Council for Higher Education, which insisted that the newly-founded institution abide by all the conventional codes and criteria that applied to the country's older universities. Shalvi was also denied the position of dean of the faculty of humanities and social sciences on the grounds that she was a woman. This led her to compare notes with other women colleagues from whom she learned, to her surprise and theirs, that virtually every one had at some stage suffered some form of discrimination or sexual harassment. This in turn led to a meeting of all women faculty members at the Hebrew University, at which Shalvi and two others were chosen to present a series of complaints and demands to the (male) heads of the institution. To their delight, their demands were all met, after the men had alleged that they were unaware of the reported inequities.

Prior to the academic year 1973–1974, Shalvi was elected head of the Institute of Languages and Literature at the Hebrew University, a position in which she also introduced such innovations as an inter-departmental staff seminar in which faculty members presented and studied a common topic (e.g., the Epic).

However, beginning in the spring of 1975, Shalvi had another major claim on her time. Pelech School for Haredi Girls (see Pelech Experimental Religious High School for Girls), at which two of her daughters were currently studying, was threatened with closure due to the decision of its principals, Rabbi Shalom Rosenbluth and his wife Pnina, to cease running and funding the school that they had founded some eight years earlier. Shalvi offered to serve on a temporary and voluntary basis until a replacement could be found. This temporary period lasted for fifteen years, during which the student body grew from sixty pupils to a maximal two hundred and forty and Pelech attained the rarely granted status of an officially-recognized experimental school—a status resulting from the innovative curricula and teaching methods introduced by Shalvi, as well as the development of a democratic mode of school management that maximally involved pupils and staff in decision-making. Shalvi's motto at the school was that no area of knowledge should be closed to women solely on grounds of their sex. Both by precept and example, she succeeded in inculcating feminist ideas and ideals in her pupils, many of whom have become leaders in the modern-Orthodox feminist movement of recent years. One of the most important innovations at Pelech was the demand that pupils serve for at least two years either in the IDF or in the National Service framework for which religious young women may opt. As a result, the IDF established special units which not only exploited the Pelech alumnae's gifts to the full, but enabled them to maintain a religious lifestyle throughout the period of their service. Pelech was awarded the Ministry of Education's prestigious Education Prize in 1991, shortly after Shalvi's retirement from the post of headmistress.

In 1984, in the wake of a US/Israel Dialogue on Jewish Women organized by the American Jewish Congress—a conference that proved an unexpected catalyst for energetic and hitherto non-existent feminist activity—Shalvi and other Israeli participants in the event decided to establish a non-partisan advocacy group that, uniquely on the Israeli scene, brought together feminists with varied political and religious outlooks. Unlike the established women's organizations, such as Na'amat, WIZO and Emunah, the Israel Women's Network (IWN) did not provide services such as child-care, but in the course of a relatively short passage of time it brought about a remarkable improvement in the status of Israeli women. Working through consciousness-raising, litigation and legislation, it played a critical role in increasing the number of women in elected government on both the local and national level. It was also responsible for some of the most progressive legislation on women's status and rights, some of it (such as a change in women's pension age and their service in combat units) the direct result of legal successes in cases the IWN represented in the High Court of Appeals. Shalvi, who was twice re-elected chairwoman of IWN, retired from the organization in 2000.

In the summer of 1997, just as she was looking forward to a more leisurely way of life, Shalvi was invited to serve as rector of the *Beit Midrash* (now the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies) which had been established as a graduate school of Jewish Studies and a rabbinical school by the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York. During her three years in this position she introduced a number of significant innovations in the curriculum, including a unique M.A. track in Judaism in the Arts, which in turn spawned an equally unique Beit Midrash for artists in various media. After serving for one year (1999–2000) as president as well as rector, Shalvi became the chairperson of the institute's executive board, from which she retired in December 2003. She then joined the staff of the *Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, serving as assistant editor.

Well known as a public speaker and a social activist, Shalvi's contribution to Jewish education, to Israeli culture and to Jewish feminism has been widely recognized.

## HONORS AND AWARDS

### HONORARY DEGREES

Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, University of Judaism, Los Angeles, 1996; Doctor of Hebrew Letters *honoris causa*, Gratz College, Philadelphia, 1998; Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1999; Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, Brown University, Providence, RI; Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2000; Doctor of Philosophy *honoris causa*, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel, 2001.

### AWARDS AND HONORS

Outstanding Lecturer, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1969; Woman of the Year award for contribution to the quality of society, on the occasion of Israel's Thirtieth Anniversary, 1978; Beacon Lighter at Eve of Independence Day ceremony at Mount Herzl, marking Israel's Year of Democracy, 1986 (the citation referred to contributions to education and to equality of the sexes);

Emil Grunzweig Human Rights Prize, awarded by the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, 1989; Rothfield Education for Peace Prize, awarded by the International Centre for Peace in the Middle East, 1991; Woman of Distinction Award of the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, 1993; First recipient of the Israel Women's Leadership Award, awarded by the New Israel Fund (thereafter designated the Alice Shalvi Award), 1994; Award of the Oskar Schindler Center for Democracy Studies, 1996; International Lion of Judah Leadership Award, Women's Division, UJA/IUA/Keren Hayesod, 1996; Named Worthy of Jerusalem (Yakir Yerushalayim), 1997; Women's League for Conservative Judaism, Kol Ha-Kavod Award, 1998; Hundred Heroines Award, 1998; Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America Women of Distinction Award, 1999; National Council of Jewish Women's Women Who Dared Award, 1999; Union of American Hebrew Congregations Maurice N. Eisendrath Bearer of Light Award, 1999; First recipient of the Alice Salomon Medal, awarded by Alice Salomon School of Social Work, Berlin, 2001; Samuel Rothberg Prize for Jewish Education, awarded by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006.

## SELECTED WORKS BY ALICE SHALVI

### BOOKS

*The World and Art of Shakespeare* (with A. A. Mendilow). Tel Aviv: 1966 (Hebrew), Jerusalem: 1967 (English). *Renaissance Concepts of Honour in Shakespeare's Problem Plays*. Salzburg: 1972; *Women in Israel*. Monograph published by the New Israel Fund. Washington, D. C.: 1993.

### SELECTED ARTICLES

"The Geopolitics of Jewish Feminism." In *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*, edited by T. M. Rudavsky, 231–243. New York: 1995; "Women, Leadership and *Tikkun Olam*." "Another Mountain, Another Reading." In *Lifecycles*, Vol. 2, edited by Debra Ornstein, 287–292 and 294–302. Vermont: 1997; "Repentance, Responsibility and Regeneration: Reflections on Isaiah." In *Beginning Anew*, edited by Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, 269–275. New York: 1997; "My Body, My Self: Waning and Waxing." In *A Heart of Wisdom: The Jewish Journey from Mid-Life through the Aging Years*, edited by Susan Berrin, 178–182. Vermont: 1997; "From Generation to Generation." In *Jewish Mothers Tell Their Stories*, edited by Ellen Cole, Susan Steinberg Oren and Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, 13–18. New York: 1999; "Women's Wisdom Has Built Its Home: A Highly Personal Account of the Pelech Experiment." In *Studies in Jewish Education*, Vol. 7, edited by Walter Ackerman, 81–97. Jerusalem: 1995; "Re-Thinking and Reform: Education for the Future." In *Essays on the Role of Private Philanthropy in Israel, to Mark the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Dorothy de Rothschild*. Jerusalem: 1995, 82–96; "Renew Our Days as of Old': Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change in the Modern Jewish State." In *The Freedom To Do God's Will: Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change*, edited by Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil, 75–87. London: 2002; "Transformed by Joy." In *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*, edited by Nahla Abdo and Ronit Lentin, 199–206. New York: 2002; "The Burden of Eve." In *Nothing Sacred. Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism*, edited by Betsy Reed, 31–41. New York: 2002.

### FILMOGRAPHY



Weiman-Kelman, Paula. *Rites of Passage*. Jerusalem: 1997.

IMAGES:



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En route to demonstrate at the King David Hotel, following the historic US/Israel dialogue in July, 1984. (L to R, front row): Nitza Shapiro-Libai (who later became the Prime Minister's advisor on women's status); former MK Tamar Eshel; Alice Shalvi; and Janet Sherman of the American Jewish Congress, who served as Israel Women's Network's first treasurer. It was this demonstration which led directly to the establishment of the Israel Women's Network.

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DISCUSS

This encyclopedia was first published in 2005. Do you have updates to this person's life? Links to online resources of interest? Are there areas of this person's life you feel should be mentioned in the article, or mentioned in more detail? Let us know.

ANOTHER PRIZE

Mon, 12/07/2009 - 10:53 — jrosenbaum

On November 30, 2009 the Yesh Gvul Organization awarded the Yeshayahu Leibowitz Prize to Alice Shalvi for her public activism in the spirit of his political and philosophical teaching.

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RECENT HONORS

Thu, 11/05/2009 - 12:31 — jrosenbaum

Since this article was written, Alice Shalvi has received additional honors, including the Honorary Fellowship of the Open University of Israel, May 2009 (the equivalent

of an Honorary Doctorate which the Open University can not issue because it does not have a doctoral program); and  
Doctor of Philosophy honoris causa, Honorary Doctorate, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, November 2009.

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