ALICE SHALVI

by STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF

Seated in the living room of her Jerusalem home – every flat surface but the floor covered by neat stacks of papers and books, the room lit softly by small lamps, and a breeze blowing gently through open windows facing gardens she loves to tend – Alice Shalvi explains making peace with the conflict between her love for and observance of traditional Judaism and her objections to gender discrimination in many areas of Jewish life.

Shalvi looks at the ceiling for a moment, the fingertips and palms of her hands resting lightly upon each other as she pauses to think. Then she lowers her hands, smiles, and says, "The time has come for someone to do an *Ethics of the Mothers*."

For more than half a century, Shalvi has confronted contemporary challenges to women, serving in prominent leadership roles in an array of major Israeli institutions – forty years as a professor of

English Literature at the Hebrew University, fifteen years as principal of the Pelech Religious Experimental High School for Girls in Jerusalem, sixteen years as the chair of the Israel Women's Network, and seven years successively as rector, president, and then chair of the executive committee at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, the Conservative movement's academic center in Israel.

Having juggled the equivalent of two, if not three, full-time jobs at every stage of her career, Shalvi, now semi-retired as an institution builder and leader but still working full-time on her own writing, was awarded the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement and Special Contribution to Society and the State of Israel in 2007, the nation's highest academic honor.

Immersed for so long in the often onerous tasks of navigating, restructuring and enlivening Israeli and Jewish trends that resisted the expansion of women's roles, Shalvi notes a reflective spiritual creed that naturally supports her activism: "The Jewish enterprise," she says, "lies in the social, human application in our everyday lives of divine, spiritual inspiration."

Yet the resistance Shalvi has encountered while seeking to empower women has deep roots in ancient Jewish divisions between the sexes. "When a man speaks often with women he brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Torah, [and] winds up in Gehennom [Hell]," says Yossi ben Yochanan in the Mishnah's *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:5, a text believed to be the first fully recorded in written form in the second or third century. The Mishnah continues: "And don't talk too much with the wife."

Formal Jewish study "just wasn't available to me," says Shalvi. "What I learned was from home." Learning from home meant a mixture of religious Zionism and humanism, represented most strongly by her father, whom Shalvi considers the key teacher in her life.

Born in Essen, Germany in 1926, Shalvi was eight when she and her family moved to England in 1934. She describes her mother as a "typical Jewish mother and homemaker," distinguished by her commitment to taking care of guests and giving charity despite fi-

nancial difficulties during and after the Depression. When beggars knocked on the family's door, "I don't recall an instance when my mother didn't invite them into the house. If she had anything that she could give she would do it" – food, clothing, linen, whatever she could find. "No one ever left empty-handed." Shalvi's father represented a figure of immense wisdom to his daughter – compassionate, a resource of information and advice for neighbors, family and friends, and a committed Jew.

Restricted from directing her intellect and curiosity towards Jewish academic subjects, Shalvi invested herself in receiving both a B.A. (1947) and an M.A. (1950) in English from Cambridge University as well as a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work from the London School of Economics.

She made aliyah in 1949, a decision driven by a combination of Zionism and lack of available Jewish learning opportunities, and a move she says she had an inkling of from the age of six. "The matter was clinched," she says, "when I first visited the country in December 1947." Shalvi moved to Israel alone, traveling by boat from Italy. In 1950, she joined the Department of English Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where she earned her PhD in 1962 with a dissertation later published in book form as *Renaissance Concepts of Honour in Shakespeare's Problem Plays*. She has co-authored Hebrew and English editions of *The World and Art of Shakespeare*, as well as a range of articles in the fields of literature and theater.

Though she has written extensively on feminism and the Hebrew Bible, it is Shakespeare's canon that girds her intellectual foundation, playfulness and sense of wonder. Her husband, children and grandchildren, with whom she holds informal Shakespeare study sessions, are known to stop her in the middle of day-to-day conversations, reminding her that she is quoting "him" again. More than mastering a subject of academic discourse, Shalvi has applied Shakespeare to access the channels of spirit, inspiration and wisdom that have animated her life as a Jewish leader.

Shalvi says Shakespeare's plays are filled with *hochmat hayyim*, "the wisdom of life." Employing the language of the Jews to explain

the impact of Shakespeare illustrates one of Shalvi's core beliefs about the life of the spirit. "Great art can, I think, be inspiring and elevating. Great art can bring us closer to God, as can nature. For me the greatest sources of spiritual elation come from nature on the one hand and great art on the other," she says. "Is a belief in some superhuman force necessary in order to be a good human being? No. The proof is nature and art." Spiritual inspiration encountered in Shakespeare or Mozart (another one of her favorites) or sitting in the garden meditating – increasingly Shalvi's practice on Shabbat and Jewish holidays – need not be definitively Jewish at its source. Jewish spirituality emerges when a person filled with what Shalvi calls "the essence and spirit of the divine" gives this emotion a Jewish context through Jewish learning and action.

While her work choices and opportunities over the years guided her into public positions as a Jewish professional and role model, her transitions between Jewish and non-Jewish content, inspiration and expression have always been fluid and open.

Hamlet and *King Lear* are Shalvi's most constant sources of raw wisdom ultimately refined by practice. Reflecting on the lessons in moral leadership these plays granted her before she even knew that she would inhabit such roles in the Jewish world, Shalvi describes *Hamlet* as "the prime example of the dilemmas that are involved in seeking to combat evil in life without employing the weapons that evil itself employs." She calls *King Lear* a play that "powerfully and painfully encapsulates the tragic misunderstanding of the failure to express our feelings – particularly of love for each other."

The applications of these lessons to Shalvi's Jewish feminist practice are clear: Just as Hamlet, her favorite Shakespearean character, is challenged to avoid becoming the shadow of his own enemy, Jewish feminists must create practices that filter out the oppression they have absorbed from society, lest they project this pain and negativity back on themselves and others. And just as *King Lear*'s Cordelia sparks tragedy because she cannot express love for her father – the symbol of her roots and the ultimate bearer of her past – Jewish feminists must create identities that embrace the constructive elements

of Jewish tradition while disposing of elements deemed obsolete or damaging.

Even while serving solely as an academic, Shalvi developed a pedagogical style that supported teaching the "wisdom of life," emphasizing "the interaction between life experience and text that is where, dare I say, women are better than men," she says. Shalvi encouraged all of her students – men and women – to "bring one's own life experience to bear on the text."

Holding that any process of learning must not only connect students with new knowledge but also guide them towards forms of expression and wisdom demanding *tikkun olam* – the repairing of the world – Shalvi modeled this lesson herself late in her career. After decades as perhaps the most widely known modern Orthodox feminist in Israel, Shalvi lost patience with teaching about innovation within tradition, not only identifying personally with the Conservative movement's more liberal approach to *Halacha* – Jewish law – with regard to women, but taking on key leadership roles at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, the movement's flagship institution in Israel.

Shalvi's teaching, her example, and even her presence had an impact that still resonates for many of her students. Tami Biton, an Israeli educator and activist who studied at Pelech High School in the 1980s while Shalvi was principal, recalls a morning when one of her classmates jokingly sang a traditional Israeli children's song during recess in which a girl winds up crying. "The song stopped when Alice came into the classroom," she says. "So did the class. Alice lectured for forty-five minutes about how a simple song – a text you would never even think twice about – could teach young women to hold themselves back. None of us ever forgot that."

Another former student at Pelech, Tamar Eyni-Lehman, recalls the confidence Shalvi imparted to the young women around her. "She was probably too busy to teach as much as she wanted by the time I was there, but we knew she believed so much that our education mattered. And as girls in a religious high school that was pretty different than the others around us at the time, that really

meant something. She made us feel like we were part of something important."

"Only God could create a Shakespeare," Shalvi enjoys telling students. "But he was a self-made person!" It is no wonder that Shalvi's Jewish value holding that learning leads to action – famously discussed by Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Kiddushin* 40b – found an intellectual, inspirational home in the work of Shakespeare.

Shalvi's "self-made" Jewish feminist activism emerged publicly at an unexpected turning point in her life. She jokes that it has always been "providence and chance" rather than careful plans that have led her to major life changes. She met her husband Moshe, a translator and writer, at a Hebrew University event. "On my part, it was love at first sight!" she says. They married in 1950 and Shalvi is currently collaborating with her husband on his magnum opus, a reference tool entitled *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia.*

Unexpected circumstances also helped form her commitment to feminism. "In the 1970s," she says, "I became increasingly aware of discrimination against women in Judaism and began to study that particular area more." At the same time, Shalvi was passed over for a dean's position at Ben-Gurion University because she was a woman. "In fact," she remembers, "all four of the men who had to decide on the appointment specifically mentioned this. It was an eye-opener for me, since I'd always believed that there was gender parity at the universities."

This incident in particular pushed Shalvi to translate her literary and educational ideas into the realm of activism. Yet a tangible, teachable Jewish feminism had to be created from scratch. Shalvi recognized that the traditional Jewish world offered very few clear resources or role models for the first wave of modern Orthodox feminists. "In my working with other Jewish women – feminists, particularly modern Orthodox women like myself – I learned a great deal. We all learned together. It was a process. A common development for all of us." Acting out of the necessities of her own personal challenges and the needs of others, Shalvi pushed ahead.

And it was chance, she says, that led to the offers to take on leadership roles at all of the institutions where she has served. Her first real role as a Jewish feminist leader became her "day job" when in 1975 she volunteered to take over administration of Pelech High School – an Orthodox all-girls school where two of her daughters were studying – when a new principal was needed. "I was on the parents' committee and when we proved unable to find a suitable candidate I volunteered to fill the gap temporarily." Shalvi pauses. "That lasted for fifteen years."

Focusing on a curriculum and pedagogical style different from most other religious schools for girls in Israel at the time, Shalvi "preferred to take on totally inexperienced younger people [as teachers] and then I encouraged them to do new things." This included giving young women opportunities to study Talmud, traditionally a male-only pursuit. Shalvi's passion for proactive text experiences charged Pelech-style learning with a unique spirit.

"Text study is for me the core of any learning," she says. "Joint learning – listening to each other and using the text as a basis to learn to comment, with everybody giving equal respect and attention to everyone else in the group – became a model of study for the women." The result of what was once considered Pelech's avant-garde approach, which has now become accepted by many other institutions, is a large and heterogeneous cohort of Israeli women alumni – academics, educators, artists, activists and more – with roots and skills in Jewish studies that often surpass those of their male counterparts.

While recognizing an ultimate goal of integrating young women fully into general society, Shalvi affirmed at Pelech that separate gender education makes the most sense for young people until the end of high school. When studying with boys, Shalvi says, "Girls will hold back from demonstrating their own capacities. Women tend to bring their own life experiences" to study and this is much more threatening in a coeducational environment. Still, she says, "Separate gender study is not ideal forever," pausing for a moment and smiling. "Just until we change society as a whole, you know."

While former high school students who participated in the literature classes that made up much of Shalvi's formal classroom time at Pelech describe courses at times overwhelming, the young women digging into material suitable for an undergraduate or graduate students, all recall Shalvi's uncanny ability to guide and shape lives. "She was just this incredible presence for us," says Biton. "We learned about character."

Shalvi traveled often, fundraising, planning and advocating for the school, delegating teaching responsibilities for a dynamic curriculum to her staff. "She was always about leadership and example," says Shalvi's daughter Peninah, a Pelech graduate who recalls sitting on her mother's lap when Shalvi decided to take over leadership of the school. "We kids always knew how hard she was working for what she believed in and we loved it."

During her sixteen-year tenure as chair of the Israel Women's Network – a trans-ethnic, class and religious Israeli advocacy group promoting social, legal and religious support for women's encounters with the workplace, politics, family, violence, sexual harassment, education, health, the military and sports that she helped found – Shalvi claims to have seen "a total turnaround" in the status of women in Israel. Women's issues are now a standard plank on the Israeli national agenda, but Shalvi wants more. She supports expansion of women's roles in Israel not just in order to improve the health and well-being of women, but as a way of benefiting the world as a whole in many areas of gravest concern and sensitivity.

"Having no woman on the peace negotiating teams is a disgrace. The same is true of the teams that craft social policy, which are almost exclusively male," she says. Shalvi believes that life experience makes women "more receptive" to suffering and the needs of others and that they can help establish policies that "make the workplace more human – both for men and women, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives." In the broadest sense, Shalvi holds that "feminist practice teaches society what it could and should be."

As she enters a period when her responsibilities to major institutions fade after the equivalent of four full careers, Shalvi spends

much of her time reading, studying, listening to music and being with her family. Though often asked to speak or write in areas of her expertise, she is attempting to concentrate her creative energies on a memoir she describes as "a midrash on myself" – a project interrupted during her first retirement in the 1990s when Machon Schechter required her leadership.

Reminded that she had begun by saying that the Jewish world required a handbook of ethical practice compiled by wise women – an *Ethics of the Mothers* – Shalvi says that more than anything she could write, the most eloquent expressions of her impact on the world are the living acts of wisdom she and the people she has inspired and trained have institutionalized, taught and lived. Her greatest joy is watching the many young women she has taught and counseled emerge as leaders in their own right.

"It's amazing what you can achieve if you know what your aims are – what ideal you are striving for – if you succeed in enlisting as many other people as you can to join you in the act, in the struggle to bring about the changes," she says.