

Renowned educator Alice Shalvi captivates at Times of Israel Presents event

Shalvi, 92, relates the life experiences that powered her evolution from Orthodox girl in Germany to Cambridge student to Conservative feminist icon in Jerusalem

By **JESSICA STEINBERG** ✓

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Alice Shalvi, a professor, educator and thinker, charmed and prodded a packed audience in Jerusalem Tuesday night at an event hosted by Beit Avi Chai and The Times of Israel Presents.

Shalvi, 92, spoke with Times of Israel Jewish World editor Amanda Borschel-Dan at the 90-minute event, in a conversation that reviewed her early life in Germany and England along with the substantial accomplishments of her adult life in Jerusalem.

Shalvi was born in Germany, and her family moved to London in 1934 after Hitler's rise to power. She studied English literature at Cambridge University, and later earned a degree in social work at the London School of Economics, but nevertheless she "never really felt British."

In fact, Shalvi's latest book is a memoir titled "Never a Native" (2018).

Shalvi told Borschel-Dan that she never felt at home in England, probably because she was Jewish. Her life at Cambridge was pervaded by the "genteel anti-Semitism" of the time, she said, relating anecdotes.

When she moved to Israel in 1949, she said she felt she belonged but was looked at as an Anglo-Saxon, the term often used in Israel for native English speakers.

“The question is, when do I belong in the eyes of a native-born Israeli?” she asked. “When does that happen?”



Amanda Borschel-Dan (left), with professor and educator Alice Shalvi at the Times of Israel Presents event Tuesday, January 15, 2019 at Beit Avi Chai (Dana Bar Siman Tov)

In spite of that, Shalvi moved into her Israeli life with an energy that has remained with her for all of her life. When she had a tough time finding a job in social work, she started teaching in the English department at Hebrew University, where she earned a PhD in 1962.

“I discovered that teaching was a wonderful profession,” she said.

Shalvi eventually headed the English literature department at the Hebrew University and founded the same department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. She later headed Pelech, an experimental school for religious girls that, at the time, was the first in Israel to require girls to learn Talmud. She later was the founding director of the Israel Women’s Network, becoming one of Israel’s most prominent feminist advocates.

Those paths were not easy, said Shalvi, describing various obstacles she faced as a woman in academia.

She pondered the role of her husband, New Yorker Moshe Shalvi, whom she married in 1950 and with whom she had six children.

“I would never have been able to accomplish what I did without the incessant support and dedication of Moshe,” she said. “I don’t think every couple has that kind of relationship.”

It's tough for women who wish to dedicate themselves to work, family and community, lamented Shalvi. "It should be more feasible," she said. "We need a change in the paradigm."

The other focus of their discussion was on Shalvi's religious evolution.

She was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and remained religiously observant her entire life, but it was only when she was 53 that Shalvi first went up to the Torah in an American synagogue to recite a blessing. It sparked a profound change.

"I was in a kind of daze," said Shalvi of that experience. She agreed to accept the honor of a Torah blessing only after checking to see there was no one in the sanctuary who would report back in Israel and jeopardize her standing as the principal at Orthodox girls' school Pelech, where she said she would have been "condemned as a heretic."

"I went up and suddenly I saw the Torah scroll for the first time in my life, open in front of me, legible, the black letter on the white parchment. And I said the *beracha* [blessing] and then I burst into tears," she recounted. "They were tears of rage: I was 53 years at the time. Had I been a man, I would have had that experience 40 years earlier."

They were also tears of profound emotion, gratification and gratitude, she said.

"That was a critical moment in my life," she added. "I'd been feeling for a long time of not belonging in Orthodoxy."

Shalvi ended up moving from Orthodoxy to the Conservative Masorti movement and later served for four years as the rector of the movement's Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies.

She described the "extraordinary elation" of being in her Jerusalem Conservative synagogue and holding a Torah scroll. "But then, even that was not enough," she said.

Today, she said in conclusion, she is still searching for language in which to pray to her idea of an ineffable, non-gendered deity.

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