

NEVER A NATIVE by Alice Shalvi

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Reviewed by Jack Riemer

What is it like to live in Israel?

That is a question that every serious Jew who lives in the diaspora has asked himself or herself more than once.

Alice Shalvi's beautiful memoir gives two answers to this question.

The first is that it tough---terribly tough---to live in Israel. It is a country with a rocky terrain, and, although it says that it wants newcomers, it resists the new ideas and the new ways of doing things that they bring along with them. Alice Shalvi could have been, and should have been, the first dean of the Ben Gurion University in the Negev, but she did not get the post, even though she was eminently qualified for it, because she was a woman. Alice Shalvi was the founder of the Israel Women's Network, which is one of the most effective agents that fights for the rights of women in Israel, but she lost her position in the organization that she had founded, because of politics. She created Pelach, which was a model school in which girls were allowed to study Talmud, and in which secular and Jewish studies were integrated, something that Israel had never seen before, and then she was fired from the school because her ideas were considered too radical. And so the first answer that comes out of this book is that to be a newcomer in Israel is tough---very tough.

But the second answer that comes out of this book is that to be a newcomer in Israel can be very exciting and very fulfilling, if you bring a new vision with you, and if you stay committed to your goals, no matter what. So Alice Shalvi who meant to be a social worker and who ended up teaching Shakespeare and English Literature at the Hebrew University, knows in her heart that she had a profound influence on that school, and on the Ben Gurion University as well and on the culture of the country. I imagine that she must still feel the pain of having been fired from Pelach, but she has the joy of knowing that she turned out a number of girls from that school who are now attorneys and doctors and leaders in many different fields, and who are also leaders of Modern Judaism all over Israel. I imagine that she bears the indignity of having been pushed out of the Israel Women's Network that she founded, but she has the satisfaction of knowing that a grateful nation has given her the Israel Prize, which is the highest award that Israel can give anyone. And she now has the satisfaction of being the president of one of the most innovative synagogues in Jerusalem, whose rabbi is a woman who was her student at Pelach.

So the two answers to the question of what it is like to be an olah in Israel that come out of this book is that it can be hard, but that it can also be very satisfying, sometimes even at the same time.

A harder question to answer for all feminists, whether in Israel or in America, is how can you balance the demands of a career with the demands of being a parent? Many feminists have reluctantly concluded, as she has, that you can't do it all--at least not at the same time. Alice Shalvi says that she carries a burden of guilt for having been away from her children so often, although I suspect that, if they were asked, her children would say that she has been a role model and a guide to them, and that they are only grateful.

You do not have to be a Zionist or a feminist to love this book, for Alice Shalvi writes with such grace and with such insight and such honesty that any and every reader gets caught up in her story. And therefore, I recommend this book heartily, not only to those who want to understand what life in Israel is like, and not only for those who want to follow the story of one woman who has made a real difference in her society, but to all those who love a good story, very well told.

Rabbi Jack Riemer is the author of two new books of Jewish Thought: Finding God in Unexpected Places and The Day I Met Father Isaac at the Supermarket, both available from Amazon.com