



**W**hen most people start a new job they are met with encouraging words like “knock ‘em dead,” “the best of luck,” “go and get ‘em.” But things were a bit different for Ambassador Gabriela Shalev when she assumed her post in September of 2008 as Israel’s fourteenth Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Before her bags were unpacked, many told her to go back home. And that advice came not from opponents, but rather from friends who feel it is a waste of time for Israel to make its case before the canting resolution makers at the United Nations.

But Shalev was never one to turn her back on a challenge. And it is precisely because she loves her homeland that she can’t go home. Determined to pitch her own resolve against the biased resolutions, she fights Israel’s opponents with the same vigor she once did as a soldier, this time using polemics as her ammunition and wearing pants suits instead of military garb.

# GABRIELA SHALEV

## *'Taking on the World'*

By: Aliza Davidovit

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Indeed, Shalev's wardrobe is very important because she will go down in history as the first Israeli Ambassador to walk onto the General Assembly floor in high heels. Appointed by Kadima leader Tzipi Livni, Shalev is the first woman to hold this post and was meant to serve as a significant role model to the many other Middle East and African countries that regard woman as second-class citizens and offer them no place in the political arena. (Since her appointment she has forged a close friendship with Susan E. Rice the United States' third woman ambassador to the UN.) Ironically, many of the representatives of Arab countries, including those who don't even recognize Israel, have greeted Shalev with friendship and respect, a civility that does not always translate beyond the diplomatic contrivances and Alice in Wonderland reality of the UN.

What makes Shalev ever more effective is that she is not a career politician and has never officially been involved in politics at all. Hence, she is not honed in bombast or in artful rhetoric but rather shoots from the hip in a frank, logical, believable and passionate manner. She also has the trained ability to cut through craftily delivered malarkey. What came before her appointment to Israel's second-highest foreign post (the first being Ambassador to the United States), was an extraordinary career as an attorney and professor of contract law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She was also formerly the president of the Academic Council and Rector of Ono Academic College in Israel, and has taught in universities in the United States, Europe, and

Canada. As a leading expert in Israel in the fields of contract law and procurement contracts, she has provided legal advice and written legal opinions for public institutions, arbitrators, and lawyers around the world. Though short on rhetoric, she is not short on words, and has written nine books and over 100 legalistic articles.

With forward-looking optimism, Shalev entered the United Nations with the determined agenda to highlight Israel's agriculture technologies for developing countries and its innovation and contributions in many fields. But just four months into her tenure a shadow was cast on her plans when Operation Cast Lead was launched in retaliation to Hamas's incessant firing of rockets into Israel. Although Israel compromised its own military edge by pre-warning Hamas operatives where they were going to hit and urging them to vacate citizens from the premises, the United Nations Security Council deemed Israel's actions inexcusable and rubber stamped the Operation as "disproportionate use of force"—unabashedly flouting Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which affords every nation the right to engage in self-defense against armed attacks. On a daily basis, Shalev was receiving less than friendly letters from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon demanding Israel cease its operation. Even then, an undaunted Shalev did not regret ignoring her friends' earlier

advice to turn around and go home. When Israel's Chief of Staff General Gabi Ashkenazi told the ambassador she has a very difficult job, she replied: "My job is not difficult. It's difficult for our soldiers fighting in the Gaza, it is difficult for their families wondering if they will ever come home again, it is difficult for the children in Sderot who are drilled on a daily basis to run to bomb shelters as their homes and schools are being bombed—for me it is challenging yes, but not difficult."

Shalev's is a brave statement seeing that in her case alone the paranoid claim that "the whole world is against me" is actually true. The UN has made more resolutions against Israel than against all the world's other countries combined.

The question thus still stands for many: Should Israel remain in the UN?

John R. Bolton, former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, tells Lifestyles exclusively that as difficult as it may be, "I don't think Israel has much choice except to be a UN member, even though that means that the bulk of the work that must be done is damage control. That makes for a very hard job for Israel's UN Ambassador, so it must be someone who is really dedicated and patriotic." Herb London, president of the Hudson Institute, a non-partisan policy think tank, also feels that there is little choice.



"The Israeli ambassador is the representative of a free people in a space populated by many tyrants. Like our biblical history she must stand against a formidable force, maintain her composure and speak truth to power." Shalev herself says, "Seeing that the world is an imperfect place, how can the 'parliament' of the world representing 192 countries [i.e., the UN] be perfect?"

Shalev is hardly naïve to the "imperfections" of the world and the malevolence that hate can brew. Her maternal grandparents were deported from Kiel, a town in northern Germany, to Theresienstadt and from there to Auschwitz, where they shared the same cruel fate as over one million victims who were herded into gas chambers as human beings and exited as smoke and ash. Comparatively, her paternal grandfather, Siegfried Manheim, once a successful lawyer in Berlin and a columnist for one of Berlin's largest newspapers, and her father, Bernhard, a medical student, and his brother, a judge, were lucky. With the rise of Hitler, her grandfather was banned from practicing law and decided to flee Germany and settle in Palestine, then under the British Mandate. They left everything behind to begin

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anew. The judge ended up a farmer; the medical student became a cook. But by their hands, along with the calloused hands and broken hearts of so many at the time, the Jewish homeland was rebuilt one seedling at a time until the Promised Land flourished into a land of promise. But even in the safety of their biblical homeland, their enemies hate was not abated. And Israel has found itself fighting existential threats since its inception 61 years ago. "Israel is the only country in the world whose existence is challenged on a daily basis," Shalev says.

In her address to UN at the Holocaust Memorial Ceremony in January, Shalev delivered a beautiful and passionate speech speaking out strongly against the propagation of hatred. "We have the responsibility to condemn those who educate children to murder and kill in the name of God," Shalev said. "We

*"I get a lot of strength knowing that Israel is the best and most moral place on the world"*

have the responsibility to condemn any member state of the United Nations that calls for the destruction of another member state and engages in Holocaust denial." It seemed somewhat sardonic that a disclaimer tails her speech on the UN website which reads: "The views expressed by private individuals do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations."

The war which hit Shalev herself the hardest was the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Moshe Dayan, the Minister of Defense at the time, said the war is going

to be the destruction of the Third Temple. General Ariel Sharon had said: "I have been fighting for 25 years, and all the rest were just battles. This was a real war."



Approximately 2688 Israeli soldiers were killed. Among that devastating statistic was a hero named Shaul, who saved 35 people before he, too, became a casualty. At the age of 32, with two small children, Gabriella Shelev, became a widow. Her husband Shaul Shalev fell on the third day of the war just when things were beginning to turn around. Perhaps it is symbolic that the number 32 is the numerical value for the word "heart" in Hebrew—for it was that year that her heart was truly broken. To this day it aches over the fact that her beloved Shaul never lived to see his children grow up or to know his grandchildren. Shalev was 12 years old when she first met Shaul and their paths had crossed again when she began studying at the Tel Aviv Municipal High School A. They married in October 1964 and were inseparable until his death. His picture hangs

alongside that of her grandfather's in her New York office today. "These two people are for me the landmarks in my life," she shares. "My grandfather



represents the revival of the Jewish homeland and my husband our ongoing war for existence."

Shalev's predecessor, the well respected Dan Gillerman, gave his replacement a word of advice before she assumed her post. "Don't forget to enjoy New York," he said. But, Gabriella Shalev, a Jewish mother, now not only goes to sleep worrying about her own children and grandchildren but also those of an entire nation. As such, she is finding it a bit difficult to balance enjoying the treats of New York while attending to her mammoth responsibilities. "I think maybe it's a bit easier for the men to go the General Assembly during the day and to the opera at night," she says with a laugh.

What gives the ambassador the strength to keep fighting even in the darkest hours is her conviction in what she is fighting for. "I get a lot of strength knowing that Israel is the best and most moral place on the world," she says. "From our justice system to our army we have a code of ethics and morals that people around the world can learn from. I know for a fact that Israel is not what people are saying."

Shalev also gets a lot of support from her second husband Uzi Levy, to whom she's been married for 23 years. Uzi once CEO of Migdal, the largest insurance company in Israel, advises her not to care what the media or any of her detractors might say about Israel, but rather to keep fighting for what she believes in and to be confident of her cause.

Shalev hopes to get back to her initial goal of promoting Israel's accomplishments in various fields and to show how it can help developing countries and the world at large. But staying focused is difficult when Israel continually finds itself on the defense in an arena that much resembles action-packed video games where new threats keep materializing with greater velocity and dodging them becomes evermore daunting. But if Shalev has to look back to her life as a precedent, "I have succeeded at everything I set my mind on," she says with confidence. With dignity and strength, she has prevailed despite the challenges and heartaches.

As the UN postures itself behind the slogan "A stronger UN for a better world," Israel has its own modification to that phrase: "A stronger Israel for a safer world." With an iron-clad "resolution" of her own, Ambassador Gabriela Shalev says she will fight relentlessly for her homeland, her nation, her heritage and for the future of the Jewish people. 