

PROFILE

Dr Aliza Lavie

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

Aliza has spent her life searching for all answers



THE main purpose of Pesach for women is not to clean the house, nor to eat matzo, but to tell their mothers' stories, according to Orthodox feminist and former Israeli politician Dr Aliza Lavie.

Aliza has just published her fifth book, *Iconic Jewish Women — Fifty-Nine Inspiring, Courageous, Revolutionary Role Models for Young Girls*.

But the Pesach haggada is not just full of stories, it is also replete with questions.

And, in the spirit of Pesach, asking questions is something Aliza has been doing all her life.

She is no militant feminist who goes on demonstrations making her demands heard.

In fact, Aliza, who used to be an MK for the now left-wing political party Yesh Atid, told me that she didn't approve of last week-end's anti-government demonstrations.

She said: "I think that demonstrations are not the way. We are in war now. We should not say that we want elections in September and that we are going to

'No rabbis then understood my questions'

make a lot of demonstrations and change the situation."

Aliza's feminism was born from questions about her own family background.

She said: "My paternal grandmother came from Afghanistan in 1920. She became a widow at 36 after her husband died and left her with nine children.

"She didn't know the language. She also had to look after her mother and her mother-in-law. But she didn't lose hope.

"She was a strong woman who knew the halachic code and went to synagogue three times a day. She was amazing."

Bnei Akiva member Aliza also developed into a strong woman.

She became an officer in the Israeli army, studied at Bar Ilan University, wrote her PhD dissertation on Israel Radio and Gender, and became a university lecturer.

But her military and academic status was not matched as a woman in the Jewish religious sphere.

"I asked questions about many issues, but no rabbis then understood my questions," Aliza recalled.

Together with similarly minded women, she founded Kolech, the Jewish Religious Women's Forum.

She explained: "We wanted



ROLE MODEL: Aliza Lavie when she was an MK, with then-Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni, right, at a Committee for the Status of Women meeting in the Knesset

women to be supported in the rabbinical courts, to take on community leadership and to learn Torah.

"Women came to us to ask what they needed from the rabbis in Israel on such subjects as divorce and aguna. We were activists for rights for Jewish women.

"But I couldn't continue with my activism without finding answers to the question of what Jewish women did before me."

She wanted to know, for example, how Jewish girls managed without the Jewish education their brothers took for granted.

So she researched in archives and libraries and spent three years gaining testimonies and ended up with a collection of women's prayers, dating as far back as the 13th century.

It resulted in her best-selling book, *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book*.

She said: "Before we came to Israel some of us were ashamed of

our mothers. They didn't want old Judaism.

"They wanted to live in a new Israel. They changed their names and adopted a new language. My life's mission is to bring back our mothers' legacy."

Following the success of her book and her Bar Ilan University lectures on gender and religion, Aliza was asked to join political party Yesh Atid when it was founded in 2012.

The following year, she was elected as an MK and was appointed chair of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality and headed a subcommittee on Human Trafficking and Prostitution. In 2015 she was named Outstanding Member of Knesset.

She said: "I achieved a lot of revolutionary legislation, giving opportunities for every Jewish woman to gain assistance in the rabbinical courts."

But Aliza left politics when Yesh Atid moved to the left.

She added: "I was told at the time that Yair Lapid established the party that it would be in the centre, with religious and secular members, people from the settlements and from the left.

"Unfortunately, the party has become more left."

Currently, Aliza is concerned that the present political situation has caused disunity among Israeli women.

She said: "We women used to work together, but last year there were fights and there are still fights. Political identity has become much stronger than feminism.

"We were not working together because of ideological differences."

Last year she founded the 120 Women Leadership Council to try to bring more unity.

But, she says: "There has been a huge problem, especially since the war."

Like most Israelis and, indeed, Jews around the world, Aliza has been personally impacted by the war.

Her soldier son was wounded in Gaza.

She said: "Imagine getting the phone call and going to the hospital. All the three months he was in Gaza, I didn't sleep."

Now he has recuperated, her son and her two sons-in-law have dates to return to Gaza after Pesach.

And the war has brought further questions from Aliza.

She asks: "We didn't want this war. So how come that suddenly all the world is against us?"

Aliza used to represent the Knesset on the Council for Youth Exchange and on the United Nations.

But she said: "I realised that my colleagues didn't believe us. How come?"

Her latest book, *Iconic Jewish*

Women, is primarily written for batmitzvah girls.

In her research she found a prayer for batmitzvah girls, which was written in 1860 in Padua.

She said: "When I found this text, I wondered how come I am not familiar with it.

"I didn't celebrate my batmitzvah with this amazing text. I have three daughters and I didn't celebrate my daughters' batmitzvot with it."

The book contains the stories of the lives of 59 Jewish women dating back from biblical figures to the first female rosh yeshiva Osnat Barzani in the 17th century to 20th century American communist and peace activist Bella Abzug and New York Satmar judge Ruchie Freier, to secular Israeli politician Shulamit Aloni and contemporary Holocaust denial activist Deborah Lipstadt.

Aliza says: "All the role models in the book took responsibility for the Jewish people.

"Only they could change the reality and be there for the Jewish people. On Pesach we celebrate the redemption from Egypt.

"We are told that the future redemption will come thanks to women. I say to batmitzvah girls, 'Hey, wake up. You are responsible. Now it's your turn'."

Each story is followed by creative ideas to celebrate a batmitzvah based on the story the girls have just read.

I told Aliza that I thought I knew much about early Jewish female role models until I read this book, most of whose stories I was ignorant of.

Aliza replied with yet more questions: "Why are we not familiar with these women's stories? Why are there so few Israeli street names named after women?"

Poodle skirt designer also performed with Marx Brothers

AN amateur designer who created the poodle skirt has died at the age of 101.

Juli Lynne Charlot was also a singer who appeared in several films – including performing alongside the Marx Brothers.

Born Shirley Ann Agin in New York, her parents, Betty and Philip Agin, were immigrants from eastern Europe.

The family moved to Los Angeles when

she was a young girl as her parents' trades were in demand among the Hollywood studios.

When she was 13, she adopted the name Juli Lynne and sang with the Xavier Cugat Orchestra. Her filmography included *The Red Mill* and *Night in Paradise*.

And she played the 'straight man' to the Marx Brothers when they toured American

military bases.

Charlot designed her own stage clothes, although hired a dressmaker to sew them.

In September 1946, she eloped with Philip Charlot, a former Royal Navy officer, to Las Vegas, where they were married in secret.

In 1947, at age 25, she started the Juli Lynne Charlot California company.

A New York City dress manufacturer invested in the venture, and she began to receive orders from all the leading department stores for what became known as the poodle skirt.

On a visit to Mexico in 1980 she was inspired to create a modern twist on the classic Mexican wedding dress.

She bought a workshop in Mexico City

and exported dresses around the world, although the enterprise was brought down by the 1985 Mexico City earthquake.

Charlot remained in the country, living in Tepoztlá.

In 2020, aged 98, she created a new poodle skirt depicting then-American president Donald Trump as Vladimir Putin's poodle.