

# ONE WOMAN'S FIGHT

for Women's Inclusion in Israeli Peace Talks

by LISA KEYS

For Israeli activist Sarai Aharoni, feminism and peace activism are like hummus and pita — natural complements.

“Feminism and peace are interconnected,” says Aharoni, speaking by telephone from her Haifa home. “Feminism is a movement that is meant to eradicate and end most forms of violence that we know and to change the power structure. By the same logic that the women’s movement is fighting violence inside the home and in the personal sphere, it should be committed to ending violence in the public sphere, like crime or war.”

For years, this was a radical position that put Aharoni, 34, too far left of an already leftist Israeli feminist movement — with many of its members keeping their distance for fear of getting “too political.” But since successfully lobbying for a 2005 law in the Knesset that states that women have a place at the table when it comes to peace talks, the issue has slowly but increasingly seen the light of day.

Aharoni points to the leadership of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in orchestrating the Israeli-peace summit in Annapolis, Maryland, in November as a possible outcome of her activism. “In a way, we have more women involved in the attempt to revive the peace process,” says Aharoni, ever the realist. Aharoni’s interest in the peace process evolved as she found herself increasingly drawn to the feminist movement. As a student at Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the 1990s, where she received her master’s degree in European history, Aharoni was surprised to find that the university didn’t offer a single course in feminism or gender studies. “In my 20s, my identification as a woman and as a Mizrahi woman in Israel became very important to me,” says the Haifa native, who was born to an Iraqi father and American mother. “All the teachers, all the faculty, were Ashkenazi men.”

With such issues on her mind, in 1999 Aharoni returned to her hometown, where she “accidentally discovered” Isha L’Isha, the Haifa Feminist Center. There, she connected with women from a variety of backgrounds, united in the campaign for civil rights and equal opportunities for all of Israel’s women.

The following year, 2000, was a turning point in Aharoni’s life. Concurrent with her increasing involvement with Isha L’Isha, Aharoni and her husband, David Gottesman, had their first child, Hillel. (Second son Avinon came along in 2003.) That same year also saw the outbreak of the second intifada and the violence that ensued.

The combination of motherhood and feminism during a time of political unrest proved a powerful one for Aharoni. “That was the evolution of my social consciousness,” she says. “It was very intense, and very quick.”

Aharoni began to see connections between her feminist activism and her growing interest in the peace movement, and felt that women, in particular, had a significant role to play. And yet she often felt she was standing out on a limb.

“I was frustrated when I understood that many feminist organizations didn’t feel the same way I did,” she says. “The tendency of the women’s movement in Israel was to avoid dealing with the issue of the conflict because of the fear of becoming politicized.”

While her views may have alienated her inside Israel, the kinship between feminism and peace activism were simultaneously being explored on the world’s stage at the United Nations. Though Aharoni didn’t know it at the time, in 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. The resolution states that, due to “the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.”

Aharoni didn’t learn of the resolution until 2002 when, as a staff member at Isha L’Isha, she attended an international women’s conference in Guadalajara, Mexico. There, at a panel discussion featuring women from Sudan to Ireland, she heard about the resolution and its global ramifications. “I was really amazed,” she recalls. “I said, yes, it’s not my imagination. There are other women doing things in this direction.”

Inspired, Aharoni returned to Israel and raised money to hold a conference in Israel about the resolution, which she distributed in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. She also initiated a study that assessed the effects of war on Israel’s women. The results were startling: Women, as primary caretakers, were the group most affected by war, as the responsibility of caring for children and the elderly falls on their shoulders. Women also endured the greatest financial impact, as many held domestic jobs that were put on hold throughout the conflict.

By 2005, having generated a buzz about women’s needs in times of war and responsibilities in establishing peace, Aharoni and her colleagues changed tactics and sought to bring about political change. Partnering



**A WOMAN OF VALOR**  
Sarai Aharoni joined NCJW on October 16 to participate in its Women of Valor Advocacy Panel at Hebrew University, one of the many activities comprised by the 2007 NCJW Mission to Israel.



Photographer/Getty



UN Resolution 1325 stresses the impact war has on women and urges greater participation by women in peace efforts.

### Resolution 1325 (2000)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 5418th meeting on 31 October 2000

The Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 1261 (1999) of September 1999, 1296 (2000) of 19 April 2000 as well as relevant statements of its President,



From right to left: Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Palestinian Legislative Council Member Hanan Ashrawi, and Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik at a women’s leader conference for peace and security in the Middle East, Vienna, 2007.

Photographer/Associated Press



with Knesset Members Yuli Tamir and Eti Livni, Aharoni and her Isha L'Isha colleagues succeeded that year in passing an amendment to the 1951 Law for Women's Equality that states, roughly, "In every team that will be set up to negotiate peace contracts there will be adequate representation from women from a variety of groups in the population." (Unfortunately, a proposed stipulation that at least 25 percent of negotiators be female did not make it into the amendment.)

The result of the legislation wasn't earth-shattering, nor did it enable women to bust through glass ceilings en masse. But the law did turn the public eye's attention to the role women can play in the peace process. "The immediate influence was the fact that women are doing much more networking in terms of exchanging information and knowledge with regard to peace and war," says Aharoni. "This process has reached various and diverse communities and organizations."

**A**haroni's personal response was to turn to academia. Having left her Isha L'Isha staff job in 2004, since 2005 she has been pursuing a doctorate at Bar-Ilan University, where she's writing her dissertation on

women's formal involvement in the Oslo peace process. "Being an activist, you always have to give up something — and many activists can't afford to stop and think about what they're doing," she says. "I realized I could contribute by being able to think about issues more deeply, to give complex questions more time and the respect that they deserve."

Between her studies, her activism, and her family, Aharoni says she has "no spare time," though she does admit to enjoying her back garden at her Haifa home, where she's currently harvesting organic peppers and pumpkins.

And though she's proud of the change she's accomplished, she's nothing if not practical. "Although I personally wish for some kind of peace resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I'm very much afraid of another outbreak of regional violence," she says. "If this happens, then many of our efforts, the small victories we've gained over the past decade or so, might be endangered." She's conscious of the challenges ahead, too. "It's a big responsibility to work not only to promote peace but in order to stop and prevent political violence and war," she says. ≧

