

# And now for something completely different:

# HEEBONICS

## Author brings

# humour to solving the Mideast conflict



**Gregory Levey, 32, is the author of *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*.**

By Miriam Cross  
Special to The CJN

Gregory Levey can't seem to escape the Middle East.

The bizarre events of his 20s, that saw him apply for an internship at the Israel Mission to the United Nations and end up in Jerusalem writing speeches for prime minister Ariel Sharon, are far behind him.

His 2008 memoir about his experiences, *Shut Up, I'm Talking: And Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government*, was meant to be a lighthearted account of a job that saw him go from law student to quasi-diplomat during a tumultuous two years in the region's history.

But it also turned him into a sounding board for anyone with a view on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Since I got back from Israel, with all the journalism I've done, most of it on the Middle East, and then with that book, I get so many people harassing me," he says in his office at Ryerson University in Toronto, where he now works as a professor in the school of professional communication.

"Everyone needs to give me their opinion on the Middle East, whether they're Jews, non-Jews, Arabs, political types, right wing, left wing. I get e-mails, phone calls – people have shown up here looking for me," he says, gesturing down the quiet hallways snaking past his office – the antithesis of the daily chaos he faced in the Israeli prime minister's compound.

Whatever it is that makes people so eager to talk about the conflict, Levey, 32, says he's sick of it, and has decided to take matters into his own hands the way he knows best: through humour and writing.

His new book, *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*, which was released on Sept. 7 by Free Press, is the result.

"The premise of the book is that fine, I'm going to escape this whole thing by just solving the conflict myself," he says. "And I don't mean writing about how it should be solved, I mean actually going out and trying to solve it."

That meant making approaches to the White House, diplomats, spies and alleged terrorists, trying to get the former adviser to ex-Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat and friends of the Israeli prime minister in the same room and spending weeks on the phone to Ramallah.

But it also meant going undercover as an evangelical Christian, partying with a mysterious figure who calls himself the Peaceman and recruiting his neighbourhood Palestinian grocer as his adviser, so clearly, Levey is having a bit of fun with his peace process.

His levity was partly an effort to keep his own sanity – the whole book is about a topic he is trying to escape, after all – and partly to offer a different perspective on the hostilities.

"There's enough tragedy, and it's serious enough, and I don't need to contribute to that," he says. "I just thought that I could bring a different voice we don't normally hear, which is a humorous voice, to the extent that's possible."

That isn't always easy to gauge, as Levey has discovered. *While Shut Up, I'm Talking* was reviewed largely positively, thanks to his flair for finding laughs in his fish-out-of-water experiences, a tongue-in-cheek article he wrote for *Newsweek* in 2009, where he suggested that President Barack Obama make George W. Bush his Middle East envoy, saw him deluged with angry letters and called "the stupidest person on earth" by a former Bill Clinton aide. The incident still makes him roll his eyes when I bring it up.

For his second book, balancing the "super-funny, goofy parts" with more substantive material was harder. "I had to craft the narrative," he explains.

In contrast to his laugh-out-loud style of prose, Levey is quiet and unassuming in person, friendly but reserved during our interview. He grew up in Toronto and attended Hebrew day school, but his interest in religion waned and he's now a firm atheist. After composing speeches for world leaders (and just scraping through his law degree at Fordham

University), Levey secured a job at Ryerson in 2006 and is now finishing his PhD in creative writing at St. Andrew's University in Scotland.

With closely cropped black curls that he occasionally lets grow into long spirals and a slim, wiry frame, Levey looks (and is) closer in age to his students at Ryerson than his colleagues. But after two years of "complete insanity," as he describes his tenure with the Israeli government, this didn't faze him. "Really, it would have been hard to find something that would have been too strange after that," he says.

Levey rarely misses his old world, though speechwriting did have one unexpected benefit: it helped give him a voice.

"I think that really taught me how I wanted to write, which is a much more conversational, sharp, to-the-point kind of writing," he says.

He applied the same concepts to a screenplay that is currently being shopped around by a Hollywood producer. According to the observations of Susan Cody, former chair of his department, he also follows that sensibility in his day-to-day work life.

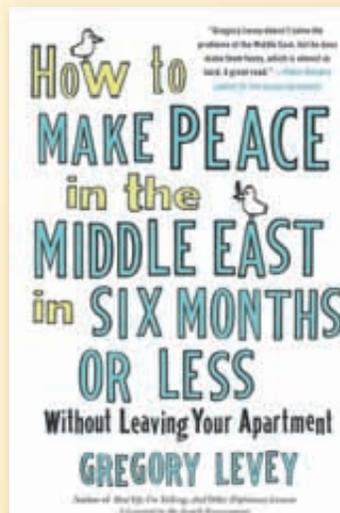
"He speaks, I think, only when he can make a distinct contribution," she says. "He knows what

he can bring to a problem-solving meeting and brings that, but does not talk to add quantity, to make an impression or to socialize."

What contribution, then, will his new book make? He's up-front about its contrivances and that its primary purpose is simply to entertain. So does he think *How to Make Peace* can actually make a difference?

"Well, you don't know if I made peace or not yet," he asserts with a smile, and the way he says it, you almost wonder.

"Leaving that aside, no, nothing ever makes a difference. But maybe people will see the opposing sides as a little more human – which is sort of the point."



### Correction

The Heebonics story "Brandeis graduate new camp director at Kadimah" (Sept. 22) contained incorrect information. Eve Rudin is the director of camp excellence and advancement at the Foundation for Jewish Camp. We apologize for the error.