



Reb Shlomo

"The hardest thing as a Jew is all the contradictions. Everything is a contradiction, which is a sign of truth. Because only liars never contradict themselves. People who tell the truth are full of contradictions."

—RABBI SHLOMO CARLEBACH

Jewish Soul Man

A few days ago, the night before I was to begin the final writing of this article, I dreamed a dream, and in it my father died.

Now my father, of blessed memory, died over twenty years ago, in June 1976.

But Shlomo Carlebach—who, I discovered in my research, may even have been related to me and who died, at the age of 69, on October 20, 1994—was my father too. As he was an adoptive father and mother to every person who needed one.

Dreams speak, of course, in the language of paradox and contradiction. And was there ever such an “embodied paradox, a bundle of contradictions” (in the words of writer Charles Caleb Colton) as Rabbi

The music man of American Judaism, Shlomo Carlebach was both Yeshiva trained scholar and Jewish Bible-thumper. His daughter Neshama has followed in his musical footsteps, singing his songs in concert.

Shlomo Carlebach?

The most prolific composer of liturgical folk melodies in this, perhaps any, century,

he is not recognized as the composer of most of his own songs.

A thoroughgoing traditionalist, with Orthodox yeshiva education and rabbinical ordination, he outraged the Orthodox; a man for whom “pluralism” was an alien, ill-fitting concept, he was an implicit pluralist—teach-

ROBERT L. COHEN

COURTESY OF NEILIA CARLEBACH

ing and singing everywhere, honoring rabbis of every denomination and encouraging others' unorthodox paths.

He was a giant of learning, considered a potential successor to his teacher at the renowned Lakewood Yeshiva but his "jive talk" made him sound at once "like a hipster, a Hasid, and a Baptist preacher," according to writer Yossi Klein Halevi, and obscured his intellectual mastery.

A product of European Talmudic and Hasidic learning who spoke always with a noticeable accent, he was nonetheless very much a product of, and a response to, America: in his musical style, his innovative style of outreach, and his profound individualism.

Deeply Hasidic in style and orientation, he came from a German-Jewish, not Hasidic, family; a charismatic leader who carried himself with the bearing of an aristocrat, he insisted on being known as "Shlomo" to everyone and stood in the back of his synagogue, the better to greet every person.

His entire life's course was shaped by the Holocaust—its wholesale destruction of Jewish teachers and religious leaders directly impelling his own frenetic Jewish-soul-searching mission. He yet refused to make the Holocaust the focus of his teaching and disdained the Jewish establishment's obsession with memorializing: "He responded to Auschwitz by screaming that it is forbidden to hate," wrote educator Shaul Magid.

In many ways a supremely otherworldly *luftmensch* (dreamer), almost triumphantly impractical regarding money and oblivious to time, he yet possessed a phenomenal intuitive sense of what each person or audience needed from him and a shrewd grasp

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—YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

of public relations (of the House of Love and Prayer, his Jewish outreach center in late 1960s San Francisco, he often said, "I could have called it Temple Israel, but no

one would have come").

A divorced man, he adored his ex-wife, Neila ("What's a piece of paper between married people?" he told her); a frequently absent father, he doted on his daughters, Neshama and Nedara.

A man of deep and abiding faith in the fundamentals of Jewish belief, he could live with uncertainty and doubt. "Who knows?" he mused often. "Who really knows?"

Who indeed *could* have known?

Schooled in Lithuanian-style analytical Talmud study, Shlomo Carlebach was groomed from the age of four to be a rosh yeshiva, a master teacher of Talmud. Born an identical twin in Berlin in 1925, he moved with his family to Baden, Austria, in 1931, then briefly to Lithuania in 1938. The family emigrated to New York's Upper West Side in 1939, a year after Shlomo's bar mitzvah. In 1945 his father, Naftali, became the rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Jacob on West 79th Street in New York, today known as the Carlebach Shul.

He spent most of the next ten years studying with Rabbi Shlomo Heiman at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn and with the renowned Rabbi Aharon Kotler at Lakewood. He also began immersing himself in various Hasidic worlds—Bobov, Moditz, and Lubavitch—the last especially attractive because of its emphasis on outreach. The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, sent Shlomo and Zalman Schachter (today the most prominent rabbi of the Jewish renewal movement) out to college campuses in 1949, to do *kiruv*, outreach.

By the end of the 60s, he had found Lubavitch strictures too confining (men and women sitting separately, women not allowed to sing) and had begun charting his own path and composing folk song settings for verses from the Torah and the *siddur*





FRED KAPLAN/BLACKSTAR

An alfresco wedding at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, in the mid-60s. Shlomo reveled in the counterculture community flourishing in the Bay Area. He felt a strong connection with the flower children, and their search for spiritual transcendence. "I made them into my rebbes," he said. "They really really loved the world, and they really loved God."

(prayer book). By the end of the 70s he had founded the House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco. To the disappointment of Rabbi Kotler and his own family, he had left the world of the yeshiva behind. He was firmly entrenched in the New World—and was soon to be part of the New Age.

Early in his outreach career (though he himself preferred the term "inreach" because he wanted to arouse the soul), Carlebach organized a learning group at his father's shul, tagged with the awkward acronym TASGIG, from the words in Psalms 34:9, "Taste and see that God is good." As Shlomo set out on his life work, to reach wandering Jews and share the Torah's message with the world, he sought to give people a taste of the sweetness and spiritual depth of Jewish life.

He went everywhere: Carnegie Hall and the St. Petersburg Opera Palace; the Berkeley Folk Festival in California and the Village Gate nightclub in New York; synagogues in Moscow, Prague, Sydney, and South America; New Age centers and yoga retreats; coffeehouses and convents. He sang and taught for Christians in churches and Buddhists (many of them Jewish) in ashrams; for Sufis and Hindus; for blacks in South Africa and blacks and Jews in Crown Heights; for the children of light in San Francisco and the children of darkness, children of Nazis and/or Nazi sympathizers, in Germany and Poland; for Israeli soldiers and Palestinian

prisoners. On one legendary occasion, for Jewish and Arab prisoners and prison guards, singing and dancing together at the Women's Prison in Ramallah. "We had a rebbe who was willing to walk in the gutters," says his student Miriam Feivelson. "A spiritual streetwalker."

Shlomo embraced beggars, like those in the Hasidic stories he told, but some of them were

college-educated beggars, hungry, in the words of the prophet Amos, "not for bread nor ... water, but to hear the words of God" (8:11). He sensed that hunger for the spiritual, for something beyond lox-and-bagels Judaism, long before others did (as psychologist Rollo May points out, artists always anticipate their generation's needs) and responded with soul food: fervent singing, dancing, and prayer, along with intellectual substance, in an atmosphere of communal rejoicing. "For those who had pursued nirvana with drugs," wrote Yitta Halberstam Mandelbaum, "he offered the rapture of a transcendent davening."

He believed, said Rabbi Perry Berkowitz, himself ordained by Shlomo, "in a Yes! Judaism, a Yes! Synagogue, a Yes! Shabbos." Those for whom Shabbos was only No! Shlomo taught, leave Judaism because they never see its beauty and holiness.

Blessed with a luminous countenance and ebullient personality, Shlomo offered what Berkowitz called "an outreach of presence." He was, for thousands, the ultimate Jewish healer, decades before Jewish healing became a phenomenon, healing with a greeting, a phone call, an embrace (embracing women was enough to make Shlomo a dubious, if not disreputable, figure in many Orthodox circles), healing with a melody or a teaching—or just by honoring each person.

Rabbi Micha Odenheimer saw him as "the rebbe of longing," filmmaker Menachem

Discovering Shlomo

Tapes and CDs

Shlomo Carlebach made over two dozen recordings in his lifetime; a number of new collections have been issued since his death. Older recordings include *Hanshomah Loch* and *Sing My Heart*. *In The Palace of the King* and *At The Village Gate* have been reissued.

Shlomo Carlebach Live is the best mature Shlomo issued in his lifetime. *Sweetest Friends*, a two-cassette set put out by the Carlebach family, is a treasure. *Shabbos in Shamayim* also has some satisfying stories and songs.

Neshama Soul is Neshama Carlebach's first recording of her father's melodies; *HaNeshama shel Shlomo* will follow shortly.

Echoes, issued by the Jewish Renewal Community Ruach Hamidbar (602-420-1700), features over a dozen performers singing Shlomo's melodies. *Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach Tribute*, issued by the Orthodox Union (800-972-6694), showcases a variety of West Coast musicians. And *Give Me Harmony* (888-372-6322) is a collection of little-known Carlebach songs.

Rabbi David Zeller has issued three tapes of Shlomo melodies: *Ruach/Spirit, Let Go*, and *Good Night My Sweetest Children*. C. (Shimon) Lanzbom's *Beyond This World* presents instrumental versions of Carlebach tunes.

Sheet Music

The Shlomo Carlebach Anthology, compiled and edited by Velvel Pasternak, Tara Publications.

The Shlomo Carlebach Songbook II

Books

Shlomo's Stories: Selected Tales, Shlomo Carlebach with Susan Yael Mesinai.

Holy Brother: Inspiring Stories and Enchanted Tales about Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, Vitta Halberstam Mandelbaum.

Videotapes

Secrets of the Deepest Depths and *A Celebration of Life and Peace*, both from Ruach Hamidbar, 602-420-1700.

Web Site

<http://www.shamash.org/judaica/rebshlomo/> Carlebach teachings and music, plus news of Carlebach communities.

The Carlebach Shul

Congregation Kehilath Jacob, 305 West 79th St., New York, NY, 10024 (212-580-2391). Information: 212-721-SHUL. —R.L.C.

Daum as "a rebbe for imperfect people." He healed people by telling them how precious they were and how unconditionally he and God loved them—a mode of outreach that evangelical Christians have found phenomenally successful over the years but that most Jewish professionals have strenuously avoided.

There was a dimension of the infinite to him: Friday night meals that could last until three or four in the morning; weddings that could go on for eight to ten hours. He might invite "the whole world" (sometimes literally, on invitations) to a Shabbos or a

wedding. His life goal, he said, was to "hug every Jew [sometimes it was every human being] in the world."

He routinely emptied his pockets for poor people and signed over checks to people in need. He often gave down-on-their-luck people the money to buy a ticket to his concerts, and his student Naomi Mark remembers, "would put ten- and twenty-dollar bills in people's pocketbooks when they weren't looking." "The greatest thing in the world," he used to say, quoting Kalonymus Kalman, the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, "is doing someone a favor."

"When does a Jew sing?" asked the Hebrew/Yiddish writer Mendele Mokher Seforim. "When he's hungry." Music for Shlomo Carlebach was a means of feeding the spiritual hunger of this generation ("If you tell people things between songs," he told me in a radio interview, "they're more ready to hear it. Their heart is more open").

His melodies comforted people. Through them people expressed joy and felt close to God, the touchstones of spiritual life according to Hasidic thought. "What the world needs most now is harmony," he often said. His songs united men and women, Jews and non-Jews, and as he himself said, "those who have a voice, those who think they have a voice, and those who would like to have a voice."

Shlomo inspired an entire generation of Jewish musicians—from yeshiva-bred composers of so-called neo-Hasidic Orthodox folk music (the style Shlomo originated) to Jewish Renewal musicians, to products of Conservative and Reform youth movements and summer camps—to set verses from the Bible and the siddur, as well as original liturgy, to their own melodies.

In a sense, Shlomo's music was like the rest of his life work, impelled by the Holocaust. In Rabbi Alvin Wainhaus's words, "He taught the post-Holocaust generation how to sing again." But as with his outreach work, his music, while retaining a strong European, Hasidic flavor, was also very American: in its folk styling, complete with guitar (which Shlomo introduced into Jewish religious music inspired by the 1950s Greenwich Village folk music scene), and in

its accessibility, perfectly suited to a participatory, anti-elitist generation. Jews in modern America didn't want to be sung down to, as musicologist Velvel Pasternak puts it, in the manner of old-style cantors.

We wanted to sing *with* Shlomo—and we did: Jews in America and Israel, Jews in Moscow and Mexico. “When we daven,” eulogized Rabbi Avi Weiss, “we daven with Shlomo’s tunes.” Something in their warmth and spirituality, in what musician David Nulman calls their elegant simplicity, speaks directly to Jewish souls—so much so, in fact, that we now sing them as part of our “traditional” Jewish music and accept them as legitimate “folk” melodies. Songs like “Esau Einai,” “Pischu Li” and “Borcheinu Avinu” have “lost their composer,” as folk music historians say—ultimately, the highest compliment, though with a serious practical downside: Carlebach tunes are recorded by other artists without credit, ascribed to “traditional” or “Anonymous” or even to Hasidic

also been adopted by cantors. His melodies have entered the “folk” repertoire of the Jewish people—though standard works on Jewish music still do not acknowledge, or even mention, his contribution.

What are his *niggunim*, his melodies, like? They are a poignant cry or a dance of great joy; they are sweet or exultant; they are sighs of yearning or anthems of liberation (like “Am Yisrael Chai,” commissioned for the Soviet Jewry movement by Yaakov Birnbaum in 1964). Or they are all in one. “Anything real,” said Shlomo, “has all the emotions.”

He was inspired by the melodies of the Moditz and Bobov Hasidic sects, by the communal singing of black churches; by the waltzes of Strauss and the improvisations of Dizzy Gillespie.

He was blessed not only with the gift of melody but with a photographic memory (for everyone he had ever met, it seemed, as well as for pages of Talmud) and an encyclopedic knowledge of rabbinic and Hasidic

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dynasties; royalties are often not paid. The tunes have, in many cases, lost their words as well. The melodies are attached to other verses or, as in Hasidic tradition, sung with no words at all. “A Shlomo melody,” wrote Yossi Klein Halevi, “could be so compelling, so obvious, that after a single hearing one seemed to have always known it.”

Jews today daven to Shlomo’s tunes, meditate with them, dance to them at weddings, sing them as lullabies or around Shabbos tables—Jews in Hasidic *shtieblach* and Ramah summer camps, in New Age retreats and synagogues of every denomination, in the yeshiva world and the havurah world, and at virtually every wedding and bar mitzvah celebration. His music provided the score for the Jewish counterculture from the 60s through the 90s, yet it has

sources and halachic precedents and decisions. He made Hasidic teachings and music, and the stories of Rabbi Nachman and other masters, accessible and meaningful to modern Americans.

In a country that reveres individual choice, Carlebach respected the diverse paths taken by his students and followers. He wanted Jews to be Jewish (the world, he taught, is waiting for Jews to be Jews), but he honored, in classic Hasidic fashion, whatever brought people close to God.

What brought Shlomo close was study. He was always immersed in Jewish texts; his luggage on his endless travels was said to consist almost entirely of *sefarim* (holy books). Learning opened his soul to rapture. “He made love to the Talmud,” says student and former colleague Rabbi Myer Fund.

His “heart learning,” in Zalman Schachter’s beautiful phrase, conveyed complex ideas in language and metaphor that the unlearned could understand but the more learned could appreciate even more. Both would come out of the encounter changed.

In Hasidic fashion, Shlomo could extract layers of spiritual depth and meaning from Jewish symbols and observance. The shaking of the lulav on Sukkos freed one from the past. The wine and challah of Shabbos conveyed ties to old and new: as wine is best when it’s old, so this Shabbos should be connected to every Shabbos that came before; as challah is best when it’s new and fresh, so this Shabbos should be unlike any that has ever been.

Reinterpreting a text in the same Hasidic manner, he could even deliberately misconstrue a traditional Jewish verse to produce a more loving, more universal interpretation. “Pour out your wrath on the nations that know you not” from the Haggadah he read, for instance, as “Pour out your warmth”! And his reworkings of Hasidic stories illuminated the paradoxical side of life.

He also encouraged his students to believe in their own spiritual creativity, in their own capacity to extract something new and worthwhile in their understanding of a text. “Despite his own vast learning,” notes Rabbi Tzvi Blanchard, “he never made you feel overwhelmed or inadequate.”

And he empowered women in particular—to serve, to lead, and to teach.

Shlomo’s Torah was about fixing—fixing our souls, according to the Hasidic understanding, in order to fix the world. But he believed, as well, that “our generation collectively has to fix two things: the relationship between Adam and Eve, and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews.”

Shlomo gave women *aliyot* (reciting blessings over the Torah reading); allowed them to put on a *tallis* or *tefillin*; and, in his own shul in Manhattan, to carry the Torah on Simchas Torah. (“If our women are good enough to carry our children for nine months, they’re good enough to carry a Sefer Torah for a few minutes,” he told one skeptic.)

More radically, he ordained women as rabbis and teachers and encouraged others to be cantors and rabbis—as he encouraged his daughter Neshama to sing his

melodies in concert.

Shlomo also welcomed the teachings of women. “What is so terrible if our sisters want to add Torah?” he asked. “The new doesn’t have to conflict with the old; it can enrich it.” In his San Francisco shul he dispensed with the *mechitzah*, the divider between men and women. In one of his favorite Hasidic stories, a student asks where in the *Shulhan Aruch* (the standard code of Jewish law) can be found the authority for certain departures from halachic practice. His rebbe answers calmly, “It’s in *my* Shulhan Aruch.”

Shlomo was always hardest on the Orthodox, his own. He inveighed constantly against their misplaced religious priorities, while at the same time lambasting American Jewish institutions generally for their lack of depth and spirituality. “The most important thing my parents gave me [was] that we’re responsible for the whole world,” he said. “We have to become God’s messengers to the world—and the message is that there is one God, we’re one world, and we’re all brothers and sisters.”

The Zohar, the central text of Jewish mysticism, teaches that at the time of our final redemption, the Jewish people will walk out of exile singing. I have no doubt, myself, that we will be singing Shlomo’s melodies.

But what sort of Jews will be singing them?

We are certainly a different Jewish community than we would have been without him—without his pioneering outreach, his focus on spirituality, music, and dance, and his transmission of Hasidic stories and teaching. All marginal activities when he began them, they are now embraced by the mainstream. “Dismissed as both irrelevant and irreverent,” Reform Rabbi Balfour Brickner points out, “he was neither—just premature.”

Shlomo had a virtually unique ability to unite Jews—at annual Purim festivals in New York, where havurah Jews and secular Yiddishists would dance with organizational machers and Williamsburg Hasidim; at Shabbos meals, where, Ari Goldman wrote in the New York Times, “a woman rabbi might be seated next to a Bratslav Hasid who might be seated next to a 20-something man with an earring.” Even at his funeral, as Jonathan Mark observed in New York’s Jewish Week,

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"Satmar chasidim [were] standing shoulder to shoulder with bikers in studded leather jackets, talmudists in hamburgs, artists, hippie women, Lubavitch, Belz, folkies, New Age, old age."

The funeral over, we are now free, as Rabbi Moshe Waldoks puts it, to "fight over the inheritance." Indeed, it was already being fought over *at* the funeral, when despite Carlebach's history of giving voice to women, no women's voices were heard. While students of Shlomo adamantly insist that he was a religious liberal, since his death many Orthodox, who for the most part wanted nothing to do with him while he was alive, are eager to claim him for their own.

Shlomo's students and followers have, with time, gone off in diverse directions: some becoming ultra-Orthodox Jews (Shlomo used to joke that he had turned people on to Judaism who would now no longer talk to him), others Conservative rabbis, Jewish Renewal activists, and Jewish drop-outs. The ultimate "rebbe of the moment," Shlomo could not always sustain the fires he helped ignite. He was not given to pronouncements, preferring, says Sammy Intrator, his long-time manager and now successor rabbi at the Carlebach Shul, to "tease the process" of change.

Certainly some of his followers, at the Carlebach synagogue in New York and at Moshav Modiin, the community he founded in Israel as something of a successor to the House of Love and Prayer, have become more right wing with time. Yet the shul is thriving, along with other Shlomo-style minyanim from Boston to Los Angeles.

What did Shlomo want? Did he want everyone to become Orthodox? Or, at least, more observant? Or just, or also, more spiritual? Was he out to help create a completely new Jew, as he said? If so, what kind?

He left an ambiguous legacy. He told a German interviewer that he was "one hundred percent, ten thousand percent, ten million percent Orthodox," told an American one that "to be honest, I'm not completely part of the frum community," told a Reconstructionist congregation that "I want you to know I'm a Reconstructionist Jew. I'm reconstructing myself day and night."

He rarely gave direct advice, usually

asking, "What does your heart tell you?" He was someone you learned from "inductively, by being around him," said Perry Berkovitz. But what has been learned? What should be?

Shlomo Carlebach was a charming, very human being who liked luxury hotels and *Honeymooners* reruns and who, in Menachem Daum's words, "did not present himself as a perfected master."

To live with his uncertain legacy and make sensitive choices may be the biggest challenge in an age when, as Tzvi Blanchard puts it, the Torah will have to be freely chosen, if at all—an age for which he thinks Shlomo was exactly the right rebbe. A free Jew, Shlomo taught, was one who could relate to all kinds of Jews and all kinds of people, to all of the "Four Children" (Four Sons) of the Passover Haggadah, each in the way they needed. Who could love every person as they needed to be loved.

So maybe the legacy isn't so unclear, after all.

It means hearing others' tears, eating other Jews' food, and being generous with our time and money.

It means giving honor to poor people and broken people, to Jews of our path and other paths and non-Jews of all paths, to men and women who can teach us and learn from us. It means honoring others: blacks in Crown Heights, Arabs in Jerusalem, Reform Jews, frum Jews, not-so-frum Jews, women rabbis, women who don't want to be rabbis.

It means knowing that, as Jews, we're chosen to teach the world—*not* on account of any special merit or superiority, but for no reason at all.

It means, as Shlomo said often, in the name of King David, to never give up and never stop singing.

Shlomo Carlebach will be honored best, I think, when just as we sing his melodies without acknowledging their source, so we take the idea of honoring others—all others, each on their own path—for granted, not even realizing or remembering: this too was Shlomo Torah. ♫