

# PROBING THE CARLEBACH PHENOMENON

BY AVRAHAM ARIEH TRUGMAN

**A**lthough Rav

Shlomo Carlebach passed away in 1994, his legacy continues to inspire thousands. Jerusalem is home to 13 Carlebach Shabbat *minyanim*, while over 50 exist throughout Israel. The greater New York area boasts more than 10 *minyanim* and across America there are nearly 50, with new ones cropping up each month. And that is not all.

From South Africa to Australia, Amsterdam to Uruguay, Canada to London, the Carlebach phenomenon is not only gaining strength, but is confounding many as to its growing influence and lasting power. Concerts everywhere

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advertise being “in the *ruach* [spirit] of Rav Shlomo.” *Shabbatonim* are promoted as Shlomo Shabbatot; wedding bands universally play his songs; Shabbat services from Reform to Orthodox have incorporated his melodies. Shlomo web sites and e-mail lists are active, repackaged tapes—spanning years of recordings and concerts—line Jewish bookstores, and books on his teachings, stories and life are ubiquitous.

When Rav Shlomo released his first record in the late 1950s, the Jewish world, still reeling from the horrors of the Holocaust, was preoccupied with the survival of the new State of Israel. Assimilation and intermarriage figures rose as Jews began leaving the fold in record numbers. Jewish education was dominated by obsolete methods and had little impact on the escalating assimilation. In fact, for many of this generation, who were educated in a superficial Judaism, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah marked the end of their Jewish education and commitment, instead of the beginning. By the 1960s and 1970s, these trends reached such alarming proportions that it brought the very sur-

vival of Diaspora Jewry into question. Thus, Rav Shlomo’s music, charisma, and tolerance were sorely needed. He spoke to the hearts of Jews all over the globe with his message of Jewish pride and joy.

Over a music career that spanned nearly 35 years, Rav Shlomo touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and brought a highly eclectic group of them back to the fold. To these *ba’alei teshuvah*, he served as a spiritual leader and “*rebbe*.” His teachings revealed a dimension of spirituality and joy. Although Rav Shlomo had an enormous influence in his lifetime, nothing compares to the enthusiasm surrounding his teachings now. This is due to a number of factors. From the time he left Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood (where he had been handpicked to join the very first class) and immersed himself in the world of *Chassidut* and Chabad, Rav Shlomo was surrounded by constant controversy. His first music recording in the late 1950s was greeted with praise but also accusations of his abandoning Torah and the yeshivah world for mundane pursuits. His groundbreaking efforts at *kiruv* were not universally appreciated. His opening of the House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco during the hippie heyday in 1967 was seen by many, not as a revolutionary approach to *kiruv*, but as final proof that he had “lost the way.” His appearances at spiritual gatherings attended by a wide range of religious leaders were seen by many, not as a daring way to bring back Jewish souls entangled in other religions and cults, but as acts bordering on heresy. The more people he brought back to the fold, the more people he seemed to alienate. In many of his teachings and personal discussions, he made clear his great pain at being rejected by many in the religious world. Nonetheless, he was convinced he was fulfilling his life’s mission.

In addition to the controversy, there was a paradox about Rav Shlomo: his charisma actually prevented a great movement from developing around him during his lifetime. On the verse, “And Jacob left Be’er Sheva and went to Charan,” Rashi comments: “The Torah only needed to say that Jacob went to Charan, why did it mention his departure from Be’er Sheva?” Rashi continues: “It intended to tell us that the departure of a righteous person from his city leaves an impression. As long as the righteous person is in the city, he

is its glory, splendor and beauty; when he leaves it, its glory, splendor and beauty also depart.” Rav Shlomo dedicated much of his energy to create a deeply meaningful mode of prayer that was true to tradition while being spontaneous, joyous and most important, an uplifting personal experience. He traveled the world celebrating Shabbat in his unique, yet traditionally Chassidic manner, yet except for a few places, as soon as he departed, everything went back to “normal.” This was because many believed that only Rav Shlomo could create such special experiences. His overpowering presence made people dependent on him to create what they thought only he could.



Carlebach followers celebrate a Brit Milah at Moshav Modiim.

Then there was Rav Shlomo’s antipathy to structure of any kind and being tied down too long in any given place which prevented a great movement from developing during his lifetime. His whole being shouted spontaneity and constant movement. Moreover, he had an aversion to telling people what to do. Therefore, the attempts to organize him were, in many cases, frustrated.

When Rav Shlomo passed away, all the impediments to spreading his teachings were removed. It is said that when a great person leaves this world, his influence actually increases. No longer bound by the limitations of a physical body, human frailties and the controversies that may surround him, a great person’s light and message is freer to manifest itself. This is most certainly the case with Rav Shlomo.

After the initial shock of his death, an almost telepathic occurrence took place among Rav Shlomo’s closest followers. It became clear that if Rav Shlomo’s teachings, music and style of prayer were to survive, it would depend on those closest to him carrying on his tradition.

Throughout the *sheloshim* and the first year following his death, his students around the world organized concerts, memorial services, and probably most important, *Kabbalat Shabbat* with “*nusach Shlomo*.” Buoyed by the initial successes of these events, they continued their

We live in paradoxical times. On one hand, due to the incredible changes brought about by technology, the world is becoming smaller, a virtual world village. At the same time, with a culture of materialism pervading all sectors, people are feeling more isolated, spiritually dissatis-

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efforts and things began to take on a momentum of their own. Rav Shlomo became a rallying point for those seeking to express a new vision of what a Torah experience could be.

fied and in need of meaning.

As an NCSY director and educator of many years, I have seen the frustrations of young people firsthand. They are fed up with the divisions that are ripping many Jewish communities apart, the religious/secular rift in Israel as well as the loss of idealism that once characterized Zionism. Most of all, young Jews today want a type of Judaism that merges heart and mind, ancient and modern, and speaks to the issues that most directly affect them. They want a deeply personal, spiritual Judaism that speaks to the soul and creates a sense of community and belonging. To a growing number of people, Rav Shlomo represented these ideals.

One small incident from an NCSY national convention in the early 1990s illustrates the younger generation's search for spirituality. On Shabbat, convention participants divided into discussion groups. One was a group of 12<sup>th</sup> graders, “cream of the crop” NCSYers—all with day school and yeshivah backgrounds—who served in regional and national positions. The discussion turned to the state of prayer in Orthodox *shuls*. Although all of the NCSYers were committed to attending services regularly, they—without exception—expressed frustration at the lack of singing, spirit or feeling of community in their *shuls*. (Attending the session, coincidentally, was the president of the Orthodox Union. When the discussion ended and the students dispersed, the OU president confided that while he knew young people tended to be restless in *shul*, he never realized the depth of the problem.)

It is students such as those who today flock to Carlebach *minyanim*, where prayer has become something to look forward to. But Carlebach followers are not only changing the way people *daven*. Bringing Rav Shlomo's style to religious events of all kinds, they are introducing a whole new way to conduct a *chuppah*, *Kiddush Levanah* or *Brit Milah*, and turn them into deeply moving experiences.

It was not just Rav Shlomo's music, spirit and approach

to prayer that drew people to him; his major teachings caught the imagination of many as well. Though it is hard to encapsulate in just a few paragraphs the essence of his teachings, I think the following captures many of the themes he emphasized.

Rav Shlomo was continually pushing all those around him to strive for the fullest Jewish experience at every moment, never accepting rote performance of any mitzvah. At concerts and on Shabbat he would urge everyone to “get deeper—reach higher.” I remember him, on more than one Shabbat, stopping the *davening* when the singing was lacking in enthusiasm and telling everyone that it didn't matter that we kept Shabbat last week or last year, what matters is that *this* Shabbat had to be the best Shabbat ever. Through his example—the way he lit the Chanukah candles, made *Kiddush*, shook *lulav* or gave a blessing—he taught that every moment is a unique opportunity to connect to God and to each other. He was

son's holy spark once again.

The land of Israel, and especially Jerusalem, was a central focus of his songs and teachings. He truly fulfilled Rav Nachman's statement that wherever he is going, he is going to Jerusalem. Although he advocated doing everything possible to achieve peace with our Arab neighbors, at the same time, he felt that the Jewish people had but one small homeland and we should not feel ashamed to proclaim it to the world.

Rav Shlomo felt strongly that women should take a more active role in the Jewish community. He encouraged them to learn and teach publicly and provided opportunities for women's religious expression whenever possible.

In countless stories of Chassidic *rebbe*s, he stressed that learning Torah was the key to Jewish spirituality and survival. Through his extensive knowledge of both the revealed and hidden Torah, he showed the incredible depths contained in every word, every prayer, every

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a unique blend of tradition and spontaneity, *halachah* and creativity. Once, late on Hoshanah Rabbah night, he invited everyone for *Hallel* and *hakafot* the next morning. Off the cuff, he asked everyone to bring instruments. Suddenly, as if overwhelmed by the very idea, he said with great excitement that maybe since the time of the Temple no one had sung *Hallel* with full musical accompaniment. The next day's *Hallel* and *hakafot* lasted hours and was an experience never to be forgotten.

His tolerance of every Jew was legendary. He emphasized the importance of overcoming the superficial differences among Jews. His acts of charity knew no bounds and he treated everyone who came into his presence with love.

Rav Shlomo felt strongly that the time had come for Jews to be a real “light unto the nations.” In scores of interfaith gatherings, he was the “token” Jew. He represented Judaism without apologetics, portraying it as a spiritual path that had something to say to every human being. He used to say that perhaps the whole world is angry with us because we have something very special and yet are so reluctant to share it.

With the escalating rise in assimilation and intermarriage, he urged everyone to actively reach out to every Jew to expose him to the beauty of our heritage. He did this in a non-judgmental way, never pressuring or cajoling, rather relating to all with respect and love. He taught that “every Jew is the Holy of Holies” and that by relating to each Jewish soul in this manner we can rekindle that per-

law. It was clear to all that the source of his inspiration to sing, teach and be joyous was deeply rooted in our holy Torah.

The teachings and practices of Rav Shlomo are now finding fertile ground in which to grow and flourish. In many ways Rav Shlomo was ahead of his time and his ideas about spirituality were simply too controversial for many of his generation. Unhampered by his own frailties, his pure spirit is now free to do its work.

What will be the future of the Carlebach phenomenon? Similar to other “movements,” this one is experiencing growing pains. Who “owns” Rav Shlomo? Who can legitimately pass on his teachings? Questions about what Rav Shlomo did or didn't say regarding a host of subjects, and other points in need of clarification have surfaced among his followers, leaving, in some cases, bitterness and disagreement. The lack of a centralized leadership may weaken the Carlebach movement in the future. Yet, at the same time, it may be the very secret of the phenomenon's great vitality. Individuals are inspired by his example to exercise their own creativity and actualize their own leadership abilities. One thing, however, is certain: the surge of interest in Rav Shlomo's music and teachings shows no sign of abating.

It is my hope that the wellspring of Jewish spirituality and wisdom that Rav Shlomo uncovered for so many will continue to vitalize all those who drink from its waters until “the knowledge of God fills the earth like the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). **JA**



A young boy mourns on the day of Rav Shlomo's burial in Jerusalem.

Although those leading the Carlebach phenomenon in many cases are Rav Shlomo's oldest students and their children, it is clear that it is mostly young people who are attracted to the spirituality of his music and teachings. And the attraction is across the board, from the unaffiliated to the fervently religious. In Israel, his popularity is as strong among the Hebrew-speaking Bnei Akiva and *hesder* yeshivah youth as it is among Anglo youth. Black hats and even *shtreimels* are seen at many Carlebach *minyanim* as well.