

Shlomo Carlebach: sweet singer of American Jewry

By Robert L. Cohen

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"When does a Jew sing?" asked the Hebrew and Yiddish writer Mendeley Mokher Seforim. "When he's hungry." The generations of "Jewish renewal" Jews that have energized American-Jewish life since the sixties—from Orthodox *ba'alei t'shuvah* to havurah activists and "New Age" seekers—have been hungry, as the prophet Amos foresaw, "not for bread or water, but for the words of God." And for much of the last 35 years, they, along with Jews around the world, have been singing God's words to the Chasidic-style melodies, or *niggunim*, of Shlomo Carlebach, the most prolific composer of Jewish liturgical music in the history of American Jewry.

Rabbi Carlebach's *shloshim* (traditionally, the 30th day after a death, though it was commemorated here several weeks after that date) was observed—with singing, learning, and shared memories of the Rabbi—Saturday night at Boston University Hillel.

As a product both of Vienna (where, as a child born in 1925, he was saturated with the music of *hazanim* and Chasidim alike) and of 1950s and 1960s America—he was inspired to learn the guitar in Greenwich Village, in 1958, and composed one of his best-known melodies on a subway platform on the Lower East Side—Carlebach

provided the transition between European and American Jewish music by making music with a Chasidic flavor accessible to Americans, and by singing religious songs (usually musical settings of verses from the Psalms, the prayerbook, or the Bible) with a guitar—an instrument heretofore unknown in Jewish music.

"The best of his melodies," remarked Rabbi Nehemia Polen, associate professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew College, "grasp the hands of the notes of the melodies of Eastern Europe and say, 'Come, let's dance together.'"

The result—a new style of warm, intimate, easily singable liturgical folk melodies—evoked so intense a response among the masses of American Jewry that many of his melodies ("Pitchu Li," "Esau Einai," "Borcheinu Avinu," and two versions of "Od Yishama") are now the definitive, standard settings of their (liturgical) texts, sung by Jews around the world: at religious services of every denomination, from the yeshiva world to the Jewish counter-culture; at *simchas* and Shabbat tables; and even at political demonstrations. (He composed "Am Yisroel Chai" at the express request of Yaakov Bimbaum, the founder of the Soviet Jewry movement, to be the anthem of the movement.)

Indeed, in creating an accessible, participatory style of liturgical music Carlebach was re-enacting the agenda of the original, 18th-century

Chasidim, for whom egalitarianism in worship was a defining theme. Shlomo, suggests Rabbi Joseph Polak, B'nai B'rith Hillel Director at B.U., "took Jewish music from the domain of High Church Judaism and gave it back to the people."

His voice was inviting, warm, and embracing, and his melodies conveyed both the yearning and the joy of Jewish life. "Shlomo," observed Rabbi Polak at the *shloshim*, taught us how to sing in the night...in the darkness. He was the post-Holocaust poet of consolation."

Carlebach sang—on over 30 albums and at perhaps 2,000 concerts—for Jews and non-Jews, in the U.S., Europe (including Germany and Poland), the Soviet Union, and Israel. And so pervasively did his melodies take root that many of those singing them do not know whose melodies they are singing; the songs have "lost their composer," as folk music historians say, and are often simply identified as "traditional."

And where Shlomo did not himself provide the score for American Jewish life, the gaps were filled by his spiritual and musical children; the *niggun* composers of this generation—from Baruch Chait (of the Rabbis' Sons), Shmuel Brazil, and other composers of so-called "neo-Chasidic" Orthodox folk music to the Reform movement's Debbie Friedman and Safam's Robbie Solomon, cantor at Brookline's Temple Ohabei Shalom. Carlebach taught a generation of Jews that they

could set traditional verses from the prayerbook to their own, new melodies; he *democratized* Jewish music.

"I wouldn't have conceived of writing Jewish music for guitar," says Solomon, "if not for Shlomo." "Almost everyone of us who plays the guitar and sings a *niggun*," remarks New York's Cantor Sherwood Goffin, "does so on the wings of Shlomo Carlebach."

For Carlebach, his music was very much a means of outreach to alienated Jews; "music opens people's hearts," he once explained in a radio interview, "and then, between songs, you can teach them a little Torah." "What (Abraham Joshua) Heschel did in this generation to open up the treasures of Judaism to people in prose, Shlomo did in music," remarked Rabbi Polak—who, years ago, he reminisced at the *shloshim*, used to concertize with Reb Shlomo.

Carlebach understood, notes Brooklyn musician and arranger David Nulman, that at its most authentic, "Jewish music is never just entertainment; it's a form of prayer." Perhaps that is why the Zohar, the Bible of Jewish mysticism, teaches that "in the highest heavens, there is a certain Temple with gates that can be opened only by the power of song." Shlomo Carlebach's melodies, which opened so many Jews' and others' hearts during his lifetime, are surely, now, opening Heaven's doors.