

Yom Kippur 5784 - Study Session: Should we Sing Carlebach? - 25th September 2023

BLESSING BEFORE STUDY

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציונו לעסוק בדברי תורה :

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

- **Who was Shlomo Carlebach?**
- **What is the QUESTION we are trying to answer?!**
- **Why is this not just about Carlebach?**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (1)¹

Shlomo Carlebach was born in Berlin in 1925, into a rabbinic dynasty. His family left Germany in 1931. He studied at yeshivot in North America and received semicha.

In the early 1950s he became involved in Chabad-Lubavitch and was one of the first emissaries for the 7th rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, but he left the movement after a few years.

He started composing in the late 1950s, mainly writing songs based on verses from Torah and familiar liturgy. He probably wrote hundreds, perhaps thousands of these: typically easy to learn, using relatively short melodies and traditional lyrics. He gave many public performances and became known as "The Singing Rabbi."

His tunes and musical style have been incorporated into the services of many synagogues, including Alyth.

CARLEBACH AT ALYTH (there are probably others)

Essa Einai (Psalm 121)

Tov L'hodot (Psalm 92 – Erev Shabbat)

V'Ha-eir Eineinu (blessing before Shema)

Pitchu Li (Psalm 118:19 – part of Hallel)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (2)

Even during Carlebach's lifetime, concerns were voiced about 'impropriety', some of which he acknowledged. Since his death however, there have been multiple allegations about inappropriate behaviour including sexualised contact and misuse of power.

He is now widely regarded as having been a serial and prolific abuser.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

On the One Hand.....

- Carlebach wrote great music and can be directly and indirectly credited with helping hundreds of people to discover and connect with a living Judaism.
- His music continues to be popular and inspiring.

On the Other Hand.....

- He hurt many vulnerable people.
- Some people feel re-traumatised by hearing his music, and even more so when he is spoken of as a sort of guru...

¹ For further details see for example Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shlomo_Carlebach_\(musician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shlomo_Carlebach_(musician))

ISSUES FOR POSSIBLE DISCUSSION

- We are all flawed. We don't need 'perfect' leaders & role models – BUT are there “red lines”?
- How do Carlebach's 'sins' compare with, say, financial misdemeanours?
- How can we ensure that our synagogue community is both Inclusive AND a 'Safe Space'.

WHAT DO THE RABBIS OF THE TALMUD SAY?

1 Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 17a

There was a certain Torah scholar who gained a bad reputation. Rav Yehuda said: What should be done? To excommunicate him [is not an option]. The Sages need him. Not to excommunicate him [is also not an option, as then] the name of Heaven would be desecrated.

He said to Rabba bar bar Hana: Have you heard anything with regard to this? He said to him: Rabbi Yohanan said as follows: What is the meaning of that which is written: “For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah at his mouth; for he is a messenger [*malakh*] of the Eternal of Hosts” (Malachi 2:7)? This verse teaches:

If the teacher is similar to an angel [*malakh*] of the Eternal, then seek Torah from their mouth; if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth.

הָהוּא צוֹרֵבָא מִרַבָּנָן דִּהוּוּ סָנוּ שׁוּמְעָנִיָּה
אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה הִיכִי לִיעֲבִיד לְשִׁמְתִּיהָ צָרִיכִי
לִיָּה רַבָּנָן לֹא לְשִׁמְתִּיהָ קָא מִיתְחִיל שְׁמָא
דְּשָׁמְיָא

אָמַר לִיָּה לְרַבָּה בַּר בְּרַחְמֵי שְׁמִיעַ לָךְ
בְּהָא אָמַר לִיָּה הִכִּי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מַאי דְּכָתִיב
כִּי שִׁפְתֵי כֹהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ דַּעַת וְתוֹרָה יִבְקְשׁוּ
מִפִּיהוּ כִּי מַלְאָךְ ה' צָבָאוֹת הוּא

אִם דּוֹמָה הָרַב לְמַלְאָךְ ה' יִבְקְשׁוּ תוֹרָה מִפִּיו
וְאִם לֹא אֵל יִבְקְשׁוּ תוֹרָה מִפִּיו

2 Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 2

When Rav Dimi came, he said: In the West [Eretz Yisrael], they say: Rabbi Meir ate a half-ripe date and threw the peel away. Rava taught: What is the meaning of that which is written: “I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley” (Song of Songs 6:11)?

Why are Torah scholars compared to nuts? To tell you: Just as this nut, despite being soiled with mud and excrement, its content is not made repulsive, [as only its shell is soiled]; **so too a Torah scholar, although he has sinned, his Torah is not made repulsive.**

כִּי אֶתָּא רַב דִּימִי אָמַר אֶמְרִי בְּמַעְרְבָא רַבִּי
מֵאִיר אָכַל תַּחְלָא וּשְׂדָא שִׁיחָלָא לְבָרָא
דְּרֵשׁ רַבָּא מַאי דְּכָתִיב אֶל גִּנַּת אֶגְזוֹ יֵרְדֹתִי
לְרֹאוֹת בָּאֲבִי הַנֶּחֱל וְגוֹ'
לָמָּה נִמְשְׁלוּ תַלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים לְאֶגְזוֹ לֹוֹמַר לָךְ
מָה אֶגְזוֹ זֶה אֵף עַל פִּי שְׁמִלּוּכְלָךְ בְּטִיט
וּבְצוֹאָה אֵין מָה שֶׁבְּתוֹכּוֹ נִמָּאס; אֵף תַּלְמִיד
חֲכָם אֵף עַל פִּי שְׁפָרַח אֵין תּוֹרָתוֹ נִמָּאסֶת

MODERN RESPONSES

3 Rabbi Marc D. Angel — Thoughts on the “Carlebach Controversy”²

For those women who feel that they were maltreated by R. Carlebach, it would be difficult (impossible?) for them to separate between the musician and his music. It would be painful for them to attend a “Carlebach Shabbat” or to hear soulful Carlebach melodies—when they personally feel such antipathy to him. These women, and their families and synagogues, should not be subjected to Carlebach music—since the music carries painful memories about the composer.

But for the wider Jewish community that has little or no personal connection with R. Carlebach, the music should stand on its own merit. To banish his music from our homes and synagogues would be a self-inflicted wound. It would deprive us and future generations of a powerful source of religious inspiration.

² Marc D. Angel, 'Thoughts on the “Carlebach Controversy”', *Jewish Ideas* (2018) <<https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/thoughts-%E2%80%99Ccarlebach-controversy%E2%80%99D-blog-rabbi-marc-d-angel>>

4 Rabbi Alan J. Yuter — The Music of Shelomo Carlebach: To Sing or not to sing?³

- i) Carlebach's behavior remains intolerable, and must be condemned.
[He] violated unambiguous Jewish law and, from a strictly legal perspective, he would be punished by lashes if judged by a court in a Halakhic polity [Maimonides, Issurei Bi'ah 21:1]
- ii) His music is not impugned by his behavior according to the letter of Jewish law.
At Responsum n. 224, Maimonides has more difficulties with secular Arabic singing than the applications of Arabic melodies to Jewish liturgical words. Once composed, musical melodies seem to have a Halakhic life of their own. [...] Therefore, the guilt that was created by Carlebach's misdeeds does not necessarily attach to his music.
- iii) People who have been sexually or otherwise victimized by Carlebach do deserve and ought to be accorded reparative consideration.
- iv) Carlebach's "Torah" is not Torah and should not be cited, venerated, or presented as if they are "holy words."
- v) This being said, if Carlebach's music enhances Jewish life, it may be used in the synagogue, the table, the school, and the wedding canopy. King David's Psalms were canonized; Carlebach's "Torah" was not. Elisha ben Avuya's Torah was absorbed by R. Meir, but because Elisha's behavior was bad, he was not mentioned by name, but as Aher, i.e. the "other."
Maimonides also maintained that music that empowers the individual to pray with joy must be encouraged. [Lulav 8:15]. On these grounds alone, Carlebach's melodies should be permitted for use if they enhance the prayer experience.
- vi) It would therefore be appropriate to apply the Oral Torah's response to Elisha's apostasy to Carlebach's debauchery, to retain the fruit and cast away the husk.
- vii) We should therefore be allowed to use Carlebach's music while avoiding his name, which like Elisha's, carries with it the taint of shame.

5 Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Central Synagogue (New York)

In the end, our senior leadership felt that our responsibility in this moment was **education, not erasure**. We decided to take a year moratorium on singing any Carlebach melodies at Central Synagogue. And that we would speak and teach about why we are doing so. We hope this communicates to those who have been victimized by Carlebach, that we hear you, and we are not indifferent. In this coming year, we will see what new music emerges in the vacuum that is created with Carlebach gone. And when we bring his melodies back to Central, it will feel different, because our sound will have changed.⁴

We did a lot of Carlebach, but we stopped for one year, and that will be over [this month]. It is not my job to do teshuva [repentance] for him. My job is to listen to victims and to the many Jews in my community, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, who say: I could not go to a single synagogue or single Jewish camp and not hear the music of the person who assaulted me. I felt my responsibility was to hear those victims and say, I hear you. And while I can separate the artist from the art, and I am going to sing Carlebach music in the future, I want you to know that I hear you. I am not punishing Carlebach. I don't want to get rid of the art of Picasso or Wagner. I actually feel like some of the most incredible contributions to the art world came from the most flawed, complicated people. **There is a spark of divinity even in the most corrupt soul.**⁵

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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³ Alan J Yuter, 'The Music of Shelomo Carlebach: To Sing or not to sing?', *The Union for Traditional Judaism*
<<https://utj.org/viewpoints/responsa/music-of-carlebach/>>

⁴ Angela Buchdahl, 'Why My Synagogue Is Taking A Break From Singing Carlebach', *The Forward* (2018)
<<https://forward.com/community/393164/why-my-synagogue-is-taking-a-break-from-singing-carlebach>>

⁵ Angela Buchdahl and Yair Ettinger, 'Judaism Shouldn't Have to Stay Alive Only Because Jews are Afraid', *Shalom Hartman Institute* (2019)
<<https://www.hartman.org.il/judaism-shouldnt-have-to-stay-alive-only-because-jews-are-afraid-of-everything-else/>>