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Should We Still Be Singing Shlomo Carlebach's Songs In The #MeToo Era?

By [Laura E. Adkins](#)

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Though Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach has been dead for nearly as long as I've been alive, his music and ethos still echo throughout American Jewish communal life and liturgy.

Carlebach's music is almost childishly simple, often utilizing only a few easy chords and repeating a few short verses in Hebrew. In the right environment, it can also be hauntingly beautiful.

By now, Carlebach's thousands of melodies have taken on a life of their own; often those singing them don't even realize the source of the tunes. From Haredi to Reform, many congregations in the United States and Israel have adopted his tunes as the go-to Friday night Shabbat service music. In his 69 years on this earth (he died in 1994), he traveled the globe, inspiring communities and serving as a spiritual leader for thousands of Jews across the world.

[It's Time To Stop Singing Shlomo Carlebach's Songs](#)

[Sharon Rose Goldtzvik](#) December 7, 2017 [Edit](#)

Carlebach also championed women, pushing for them to have leadership roles in the Orthodox community long before it was fashionable. And yet, he is also alleged to have committed numerous acts of sexual impropriety.

Four years after Carlebach's death, in 1998, Sarah Blustein interviewed dozens of women for Lilith magazine about their experiences with the rabbi. They run the gamut from late-night phone calls to hugs that turned into sexual rubbing. One woman recalled being a teenager when Carlebach asked her for a hug; when she agreed, "he wouldn't let go. I thought the hug was over and I tried to squirm out of it. He started to rub and rock against me." She says she tried to push him away while he "was dry humping me. Until he came."

"Sexual impropriety doesn't really cover what he did," Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, who was quoted extensively in the Lilith piece and has been a leader in the effort to share the stories of Carlebach's accusers, told me this past September. "His victims were mostly young and vulnerable. That's not improper. It's a crime."

How The Jewish Community Can Make #MeToo Into #WeToo

Jane Eisner November 20, 2017 Edit

As more and more women have begun to speak out about sexual assault, some believe it's time to retire Carlebach's songs. As one commenter wrote in the Facebook group ANYTHING but Carlebach in late November, "When any known abuser is publicly praised, his Torah and/or achievements discussed, his songs sung, etc., then this confirms that abusers as a class are safe and, by contrast, that their victims, who know how easily victimization occurs, are unsafe."

If a collective trauma occurs in a community associated with a pioneering reformer, should that community still sing his music? Is blacklisting Carlebach's music the best communal response to the allegations made against him?

I think it's the wrong response. The right one can be found by examining and championing precisely the reforms that Carlebach himself advocated during his lifetime.

Shlomo Carlebach and his twin brother, Eli Chaim Carlebach, were born into a prominent German rabbinic family on January 14, 1925, in Berlin, to Paula (Pesse) Cohn and Rabbi Hartwig Naftali Carlebach. Shlomo Carlebach left Germany before the Holocaust by way of Switzerland, then Lithuania, and finally ended up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where his father became the rabbi of what is today The Carlebach Shul (back then it was Congregation Kehilath Jacob).

Carlebach, who grew up speaking Yiddish, did not learn English or Hebrew until he was in his mid-20s. He was one of the first emissaries of Chabad's most recent spiritual leader, or rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He married Elaine Neila Glick in 1972, and they had two daughters, Nedara and Neshama.

Neshama Carlebach Isn't Just Shlomo's Daughter

Karen Skinazi February 13, 2014 Edit

As Shaul Magid wrote in Tablet magazine in 2012, Carlebach “changed the way many Jews related to their tradition and their world, arguably something that only an itinerant — whose fleeting influence carries its own power — can accomplish.”

Carlebach let the American counterculture serve as a framework for his new spirituality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his music, which mimics the folk songs of the 1960s.

Take, for example, a song Carlebach wrote that will be familiar to any Jewish summer camper, synagogue-goer or Zionist event attendee, “Od Avinu Chai.” The song consists of only three chords, and the lyrics, in totality, are “Am Yisroel Chai,” meaning “The nation of Israel lives,” sung 12 times, followed by “Od Avinu Chai,” “Our father still lives,” repeated 10 times. Then the whole thing begins again, louder and louder, faster and faster, until the crowd collapses in a fit of Jewish ecstasy or grows tired of circling round and round the room.

The song, like most of Carlebach's tunes, is mind-numbingly simple. But it can move crowds to tears and cause petulant teens to jump onto tables with joy. It's easy to learn and teach and to scream out to and with large groups.

But music wasn't Carlebach's only contribution to the Jewish world. He sought to revolutionize the very fabric of the Orthodox community. It was no easy task. Carlebach was always controversial, and from the start, he was a source of constant consternation for his ultra-Orthodox family.

“He didn't want to water down Judaism, but he wanted to really open it up,” Rabbi Naftali Citron, his grand-nephew and the current rabbi of The Carlebach Shul, told me in late September.

This opening up included loosening the strict separation of the sexes that is mandatory during Orthodox prayer services and many social gatherings. Sometimes Carlebach's services would have a *mechitza*, or barrier, and other times they wouldn't.

An Ultra-Orthodox Jewish man tries to prevent Anat Hoffman (C), the founder and President of the liberal Jewish religious group Women of the Wall, and members of the group, from entering the women's section of the Western Wall while carrying a Torah scroll, in the Old city of Jerusalem on November 2, 2016, during a protest by the group demanding equal prayer rights at the site.

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An Ultra-Orthodox Jewish man tries to prevent Anat Hoffman (C), the founder and President of the liberal Jewish religious group Women of the Wall, and members of the group, from entering the women's section of the Western Wall while carrying a Torah scroll, in the Old city of Jerusalem on November 2, 2016, during a protest by the group demanding equal prayer rights at the site.

Including women in communal life was no small feat in an Orthodox world that even today struggles with female leadership. This radical enthusiasm and inclusiveness did not always go over well with the Orthodox world, and Carlebach was always a bit of an outcast, even within his own family.

“I don't think my father could walk into a family situation and be very honest with anybody,” Neshama Carlebach told me.

He was once barred from entering the family synagogue on Shabbat after briefly being put into *charem*, the Jewish equivalent of excommunication, after he gave a performance in South Africa at a Reform synagogue in the 1990s, she added.

“He had to rebuild his life again and again as he failed to fit into his own communities — his parental community, his yeshiva community, his Chabad community,” Citron told me.

“The wholeness of who he was was really challenging for people,” Neshama Carlebach said. “My father's own family would shut the door in his face when prompted, or when there was any kind of pressure, and that's very painful.”

Nevertheless, he persisted in breaking down barriers, which more often than not involved elevating women. He was the first rabbi to ordain an Orthodox Jewish woman when he gave *smicha*, ordination, to Rabbi Mimi Feigelson. His wife taught Torah beside him. He toured around the world and sang onstage alongside his daughter Neshama.

He was also the only male rabbi present at the inaugural gathering of the Women of the Wall, according to Anat Hoffman, the group's founder. At the event celebrating the dedication of their new Torah scroll in December 1989, Carlebach threw an impromptu concert for the group in a school gymnasium after the women were kicked out of their original venue; the local religious council in Jerusalem threatened to remove the kosher certification of the hotel they had booked if women were allowed to dance with the Torah inside.

“Carlebach, without fee, without pay, stood in front of us and said, ‘You are *nashim tzidikot*’ — righteous women, Hoffman recalled. He told the Women of the Wall that if he were the chief rabbi of Israel, he would be blessing them. “I would say how wonderful that you want to read Torah,” Hoffman remembered Carlebach saying. “If I was speaking for the Torah I would say, thank you, women, for handling me and holding me and wrapping me after all these years of separation.”

“He said the *mashiach* (Messiah) would come when women would bring her,” Neshama Carlebach said. “It comes when the women are strong enough to bring that energy down. He quoted the Baal Shem Tov, but he could’ve been quoting himself, too.”

It makes it doubly ironic that Carlebach, who took political risks to champion inclusivity for women, could also have allegedly taken such brazen sexual liberties against women and minors — liberties that were made possible by the access he had granted them.

When I asked her about this, Hoffman emphasized that Judaism has never shied away from celebrating flawed people.

“Let’s imagine it’s true. I square it by saying that he was no saint. And thank God I belong to a faith that doesn’t promote sainthood,” Hoffman told me. “Flawed as he was, King David was the great writer of Psalms, and he is a hero. Altogether if you look to the heroes of Israel, the issue of sexual conquest has never been a barrier for an Israeli in becoming a hero.”

It’s impossible to know how Carlebach himself would have answered the charges. So I went to someone who knew him better than anyone.

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When I asked Neshama Carlebach about these things in September — long before the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and so many others — she told me that she had never spoken about them before to a journalist.

For those who are hurting, she has nothing but sympathy. “Number one, no human being should be in pain,” she said. “That’s it. That’s the beginning and the end of it. If there are people in the world who are in pain, I’m crying with them.”

But she also asserted that all attacking her father after his death does is hurt the surviving members of his family. “If he was in the world, Bill Cosby him all you want,” she said. “I mean, honestly — if he was here, I would take him to task, too... I wish that he were here to answer. I wish he were here to acknowledge, and to answer, and to comment. But he’s not.”

From her perspective, the focus on her father’s misdeeds overshadows serious instances of sexual misconduct happening in the world today. She is emphatic that there are real and solvable problems that get overlooked in the focus on her father.

“There are rabbis who are looking at women in mikvehs,” she told me. “There are rabbis who are raping their own students. There are people sodomizing their own children. And they’re alive today — and that should be a crusade worth fighting. Once someone is dead, to attack them endlessly, and that is your life’s work, that makes you a coward and a fraud. And I call them out. I say please, please, please, for the sake of our children, if you want to call out sexual impropriety, go after the people who are doing it today.”

Citron has also been grappling with his great-uncle’s legacy. “There are some people who want to insist that we defend Shlomo at all costs,” he told me, “and other people like myself who say: ‘I don’t know the answer. I just don’t know the answer.’”

“And we’d like to give him the benefit of the doubt, because that would be our nature, to try to see things in a way that would make him be as good as possible.... But do we want to go on a war against people making accusations? Not as far as I’m concerned. They’re doing their thing and I can’t really respond; I don’t know that I’m the right person to respond to that.”

Even Gottlieb, who led the charges against him, doesn’t necessarily advocate for silencing Carlebach’s music.

“Whether or not to keep singing Carlebach’s music for me is not the issue, although I appreciate the movement not to sing his songs,” she told me via email. “The issue is whether or not we publicly acknowledge what he did throughout his career and cease and desist elevating him to a kind of sainthood,” and that we institute prevention and intervention programs for sexual and domestic abuse in every Jewish institution.

That said, in her congregation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Gottlieb did not use Carlebach’s music, “because there were survivors in our midst who knew his music, and I did not want to further traumatize them.”

Still, it’s crucial that as we re-evaluate Carlebach’s place in Jewish life, we take into account the role he played in raising up women.

For Carlebach’s encouraging of female leadership was also the very thing — and one of the *only* things — that could have prevented his alleged abuses. [Data show](#) that sexual harassment and assault are much more common [in places](#) where women are [heavily outnumbered](#) and the most powerful positions are disproportionately held by men.

These are, of course, the existing conditions of the Orthodox world, and they are conditions with incredible staying power. And Carlebach’s progressive legacy is under threat today in his family synagogue. After Carlebach’s death, his namesake synagogue has moved to the right, becoming stricter in its Orthodoxy, according to Citron.

“They pay lip service to being open, but it’s not fully open,” Citron told me. “It’s not that open vibe that we had.”

Maybe that’s for the best, he mused: “Maybe we can’t handle it. Maybe we can’t handle that light that also pushes the boundaries on the fences that keep traditional Judaism the way it is.”

And yet, putting that light back behind a partition is disastrous for women. Until women are allowed to become leaders in the Orthodox community and are embraced in those roles, until women’s voices are literally allowed to be heard, until *mechitzas* are used only in prayer services and not as tools of social division, and until women become truly equal citizens in Jewish peoplehood, we’ve failed — and more women will be hurt by serial abusers supported by the very systems of Orthodoxy we refuse to change.

The deepest irony isn’t that a revolutionary spiritual pioneer allegedly abused those who trusted him with their souls. It’s that Carlebach was the rare leader trying to change the world for the better for women — and possibly the only leader of his generation who, if his ideas had become mainstream, could have protected women from himself.

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