In Search of the Broken Self: Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's Teachings in the Context of His Life and Work*

by Rabbi Nehemia Polen

THERE ARE TWO TROPES SHLOMO CARLEBACH WOULD OFTEN EMBED IN his teachings: "Everybody knows..." and "you'll never know."

"Everybody knows..." typically introduces a personality, text, or practice that in fact is not likely known by most of the audience; the phrase functions much like the Hebrew "*yadu'a*" or "*ka-yadu'a,*" used with reference to a kabbalistic or esoteric idea.

"You'll never know" is the refrain for stories from the genre of the hidden *zaddik,* the holy beggar, the marginal, outcast, or even wicked person who turns out to have a noble side, or perhaps is even a *lamed-vavnik.* It suggests that we have missed perceiving the great virtue of the individual under discussion.

As I begin this exploration of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, it strikes me that our task is framed by these two points of reference. There is the Shlomo Carlebach that "everybody knows," and the Shlomo Carlebach

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who, I suspect, "we'll never know." It is in that indeterminate space that this exploration must proceed.

Shlomo was a man of paradoxes and contradictions, a person whom some called the first hasidic rock star, but who in his own heart never left the world of Talmud, who retained the aspiration to be not a rock star but a Rosh Yeshiva. He was a melodic genius who seemed effortlessly to channel *niggunim* from some higher plane, who sparked a new wave of hasidic musical creativity. Yet this same person could not notate his own melodies and could barely tune his own guitar. He was a peripatetic teacher and musician who trumpeted the virtues of the Holy Beggars, who nevertheless had a deep aristocratic streak, a dignity and royal bearing, a sense of *noblesse oblige.*

Yet with all these paradoxes, it would be wrong to call him a mystery man. He was not a shamanistic cipher in the mold of Carlos Castaneda, about whose life little is known for sure, whose basic biographical particulars — date of birth, death, marital status — are blurred or in dispute.

No, we know the basic facts of Carlebach's life — his birth in Berlin in 1925 to Rabbi Naftali and Pessia Carlebach, the move to Baden bei Wien in Austria; the escape to America in 1939, his attendance at Torah Vodaas and study with Rabbi Shlomo Hyman, and later with Rabbi Aharon Kotler in Lakewood, his association and later break with Lubavitch, and finally — the launching of his independent career as spiritual troubadour, composer, performer, teacher. We know about the House of Love and Prayer, Moshav Meor Modi'im; the continual international travel and touring; the marriage, children, divorce; lingering questions about personal lifestyle; death in 1994; the posthumous popularity and belated lionization; the emergence of something resembling a "Carlebach movement."

I am thinking rather of his inner life, his motivation, how he saw his own work, what he saw as his life's mission, what sparked it, what kept him going. The wealth of hagiographic reminiscences — and I do not question their essential accuracy for the most part — shed little light on these issues. Of course he loved Jews, all people, of course his music touched hearts and spirits in a deeply moving way; of course he was a master storyteller and expositor of hasidic teachings — but the inner life remains unexplored.

Why, for example, did he leave Lakewood for Lubavitch, and what was behind his subsequent break with Lubavitch? The story one hears is that the issue was mixed seating for men and women at concerts. This has a certain plausibility, but even if true, in all likelihood the identification of such a flashpoint only masks more deep-seated tensions.

Unlike other New Age or Neo-Hasidic teachers, he remained an Orthodox Jew in belief: *Torah min Hashamayim* in the traditional sense; the documentary hypothesis was anathema to him, as indeed was the entire field of academic Jewish Studies. He had little interest in secular studies at all; Western modes of reasoning were not his forte. And his appearance at ecumenical gatherings was based on something other than serious study of other religious traditions. All of this makes his departures from traditional lifestyle and practice even more intriguing and in need of understanding.

Our inquiry is not made easier by the proximity that many of us have to Shlomo Carlebach and the debt of gratitude that we owe him. I am pleased to acknowledge that debt myself. If R. Pinhas Koretzer said, *"der Zohar hat mir gehalten beim Yiddishkeit,"* I can say, quite honestly, "Shlomo Carlebach *hat mir gehalten beim Yiddishkeit."*

We all recall his brilliant associative mind, his gifts as expositor and adapter of Hasidic teachings, his creative appropriation of those

teachings and tales and his popularization of them in the service of his Judaism of the open heart.

He was blessed with a genuine love of people, and an extraordinary sense of humor. He projected delight at being alive, at being Jewish. He was totally self-confident in his Judaism, emphasizing love of Jews, of Torah, of Eretz Yisrael, of Yerushalayim, of the Holy Wall — especially after the Six-Day War. He was part of the post-1967 revival of Jewish spirit.

But there is an aspect of this work that is not often recognized. His best teachings were extended improvisational creations — entirely unplanned expositions of tropes and themes which spun biblical, rabbinic, and Hasidic motifs in a sinuously winding yet coherent tapestry of text, tale, melody, silence, and personal encounter.

If not for Shlomo, I would probably never have seen the channeling of teaching from a higher place, as the *Or Ha-Meir* describes the Maggid of Mezritch, "When you begin to hear your own voice, you must stop." Shlomo would sometimes say after a teaching, "What did I say? Did someone tape it?"

There was a strong performative aspect to the "learnings" after a concert; for the inner circle, the Shlomo *cognoscenti*, as it were, they were the center of a Shlomo appearance, so that rather than "learnings" being tacked on to concerts, it could be argued that concert bookings were ways of arranging and funding learnings.

In his world there was a spirit of openness; he never took a proprietary interest in his teachings. He empowered others and did not wish to create spiritual clones. Unlike with many charismatic spiritual leaders, there were no loyalty tests. People related to Carlebach in a diversity of ways — student, friend, admirer of the music — and it was all fine with him. I never felt pressure to move to a more intense

mode of association, to join a cult of devotees. He was not entrepreneurial; he willingly, joyfully, perhaps too naively and impractically, gave away what he had.

Shlomo exemplified a robust, full religious aesthetic that included music and story. He would say, "Make Yiddishkeit even more beautiful" — meaning, do the observances, the mitzvos, in an ever-more beautiful, meaningful, tunefully evocative manner; this involved the creation of new ritual frameworks for old practices (e.g., *Kiddush Levanah* as done at Moshav Meor Modi'im).

He also embodied an ethic of interpersonal engagement: in the middle of a concert with hundreds in the audience, he would pause in mid-sentence to greet someone who had just walked through the door. His eyes having espied the new arrival from a distance, Shlomo's face would pulsate with beaming joy, a gasp of delight would emerge from his mouth, and the person would be greeted, usually by name, with "Holy brother/sister, I've been waiting all night for you to come!" And the recognition was genuine: he had an uncanny memory for names and faces, almost preternatural. Even if he only met you once, in a crowd, and years ago, he would remember you and address you by name — often your Hebrew or Yiddish name!

When someone would say goodbye, he would say, "Call me for no reason."

As my friend the late Betzalel Hamilton put it, "He sure knew how to work a room!" That is, he would walk through the concert hall starting from the back and greet every person.

This all relates to Shlomo as a master of blessing, in the sense of acknowledging and honoring the other. He emphasized the importance of honoring and acknowledging children, blessing children, especially

one's own. It was especially meaningful for me to hear him say to one of his children, "Thank you for being my daughter." And he meant it.

His practice of non-judgmental, absolute love was undoubtedly shaped in part by the Holocaust (he and his family were hounded out of Germany, and subsequently from Austria; many of his family were killed in the Shoah). I recall him speaking about his first concert tour in Germany. When he came back, he gave a teaching at Boston University Hillel, during which he was asked how he could travel to Germany (at a time when many Jews were not buying German products or traveling to Germany). He replied, "If I had two hearts, I would use one for loving and one for hating; but I only have one heart, so I must use it for love...."

The practice of non-judgmentalism was deeply refreshing and uplifting for those of us disheartened by a culture of the perpetual gaze, the evaluative stare. On the other hand, we also know that non-judgmentalism can slide into a state of non-discrimination, an inability or unwillingness to set personal limits or interpersonal boundaries. And even this was not without its noble aspects, for at times the effect was courageous and redemptive, but at other times it was troubling, dangerous, corrosive. Shlomo was a teacher who did not conceal his appetites under the guise of holiness.

Much of his knowledge of Hasidic tradition came from the years 1933-1938 when his father was rabbi in Baden bei Wien, Austria. Some notable East-European hasidic rebbes had relocated to Vienna from the time of the First World War, and others came throughout the nineteen-thirties for medical consultations. It was there that Shlomo met the Tchortkover Rebbe, other rebbes of the Ryzhin dynasty, and many others. In 1936, when Shlomo was eleven, he had a special meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn. As he later recalled it, the Rebbe told him and his brother (a) *Ir zult zein*

Chassidishe Yiden, nisht kein Deitche yinglach; (b) always sleep in a *talis koton*; and (c) always *bentsh* from a Siddur. In fact, there was a way in which Shlomo did remain that *"Chassidishe Yingel,"* a hasidic young person, his entire life. [Based on an interview with Emunah Witt]

When he involved women in religious life in ways that outraged some other Orthodox Jews, he had no global theory of halakhic change, nor did he act, I believe, on the basis of some ideological commitment to feminism, but rather in response to the personal needs of individuals he knew and whose spiritual aspirations he nurtured. As he once said, "Maybe the Satmar Rebbetzin doesn't need an *aliya* to the Torah — that's great; but some of our ladies need to personally relate to the Torah...."

He once spoke of the great piety of one of the matriarchs of his family (I don't recall if it was a grandmother or his great-aunt). A question came from one of the women in the audience, "So perhaps we should live Judaism as your grandmother did?" He replied, "Why would you want to do that? God already has my grandmother...."

Shlomo told stories of Rebbes from long ago, of nearly forgotten Rebbes, of Rebbes murdered in the Shoah, but very seldom of Rebbes alive today or Rebbes with large contemporary followings — such as Ger or Lubavitch. Nor did he generally give over torahs from *Sefas Emes* or *Likkutei Sichos*. His favorites were perhaps Rabbi Nachman, Ishbitz, Reb Leibele Eiger. He introduced us to many rebbes and their stories, whom we might otherwise never have heard of, and their sacred practices — Reb Shaye Kerestirer; Rabbi Yisroel of Vilednik; Rabbi Shimon Yareslover. The less known the rebbe, the more marginal in the world of Hasidism, the greater devastation the lineage had suffered in the Holocaust, the more likely Shlomo was to talk about the rebbe; his project was in large measure a post-Holocaust effort of recovery, memorialization, re-awakening.

He was more likely to tell a story from the Alexander than of the Gerer; he spoke of the Piaseczner when almost no one in America had heard of him. I first heard Shlomo tell the story of the Holy Hunchback in (I believe) 1979.

For some analytic perspective, I found helpful an article by Robert Sharf entitled "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism."* Sharf focuses primarily on the work of D. T. Suzuki and notes that the idea of Zen not being a religion but a "pure experience" is a relatively recent construction, influenced by Western concerns and interests. Sharf observes, "Like Narcissus, western enthusiasts [of Zen] failed to recognize their own reflection in the mirror held out to them." Sharf notes that most of the Japanese teachers who played a key role in the establishment of Zen in the United States held a "relatively marginal status within the Japanese Zen establishment." These men were genuine mavericks, deeply dissatisfied with the current state of Buddhism in their own country and eager to establish what they saw as "true Zen" in a new domain.

Building on Sharf's research, Jan Nattier writes that we might divide all missionaries into two types — the "company man" and the "free agent," who moves to a new country of his own accord, disseminates his religion as he sees fit, and is constrained only by his own need to make a living.

Now I suspect that all of this rings a bell to those of us familiar with the literature and figures of Neo-Hasidism. Scholem's critique of Buber is

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* Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33:1 (1993), pp. 1-43.

See Jan Nattier, "Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65:2, p. 469 ff; review essay of *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., University of Chicago Press, 1995.

well known; and one could argue that what Martin Buber did for Hasidism was not unlike what D. T. Suzuki did for Zen, or the way Idries Shah presented Sufism. Employing Nattier's terms, one way to think about Shlomo Carlebach's career is that he moves from "company man" to "free agent."

But is it true, as we might conclude from Sharf, *mutatis mutandis*, that Carlebach merely reconstructed Hasidism in his own image? Indeed, this is consistent with the views of Joseph Dan as presented in a seminal article entitled "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism."* Dan distinguishes between the "historical Hasidism of the Baal Shem Tov" which — from the third generation — hinged largely on the hasid's relationship to a particular rebbe; and on the other hand, "Frumkinian Hasidism," essentially invented by Michael ha-Levi Frumkin, with the subsequent support of literary figures, including Y. L. Peretz, Scholem Asch, Judah Steinberg, and Martin Buber. Frumkinian Hasidism, according to Dan, involves a nostalgic evocation of an idealized culture of Jewish Eastern Europe, which bears little if any resemblance to the actual Hasidism of history. While at the end of the essay Dan is compelled to give a grudging "bow" to this movement in light of its success in capturing the Jewish imagination in the West, one is left with the conclusion that the Hasidism evoked by hasidic tales is not really Hasidism at all.

Dan notes that Frumkin (who also used the name Rodkinson) was a descendant of Rabbi Aharon ha-Levi of Staroselya, the great disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who vied for the succession with the latter's son after Rabbi Shneur Zalman's death. Rabbi Aharon ha-Levi had a luminous mind, was a powerful and creative expositor of his master's teachings, and exercised a charismatic pull on many

* Joseph Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism," *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), pp. 175-193; reprinted in Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism: General Characteristics and Comparative Studies* (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1999), pp. 87-110.

hasidim, but the principle of biological lineage was affirmed as Rabbi Shneur Zalman's son Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch gradually emerged as the successor to the founder. While noting this history, Dan does not comment on its significance. If Frumkin/Rodkinson was indeed a central figure in the emergence of Neo-Hasidism, it is reasonable to see his role not as an interloper or literary fabulist, but as reviving his grandfather's struggle for charismatic succession untethered from biological lineage. Frumkin's promotion of a Hasidism not linked to one rebbe or family line might have been his way to vindicate his grandfather. If so, Neo-Hasidism can on one level be seen as a legitimate return to leadership models of early Hasidism, such as Rabbi R. Aharon ha-Levi, R. Avraham Kalisker, Reb Zusia of Hanipol, Reb Hayyim Hayke of Amdur, indeed the Baal Shem Tov himself, based on personal illumination, wisdom teaching, and ecstatic experience — not necessarily dependent on biological lineage. By focusing on the forgotten rebbes, the truncated lineages, on hasidic books not reprinted or not widely known, it can be said that Shlomo Carlebach embodied and exemplified the Neo-Hasidic return to early Hasidism of the first two generations, before the ascendancy of the principle of hereditary succession. And unlike Dan's depiction of Neo-Hasidism, Carlebach's Hasidism did feature Torah and *mitzvot*; with all its innovations and deviations, it had a recognizably Orthodox face. While Carlebach often spoke against hypocrisy and hyper-punctilious observance at the expense of interpersonal sensitivities, it is nevertheless true that the central features of traditional life: Shabbat, *Kashrut, mikvah,* daily prayer based on fixed liturgy, etc., were pivotal in his communities, especially Moshav Meor Modi'im. At the same time, in good hasidic fashion, there was some boundary-testing and category-bending.

What I'm arguing, then, is that some aspects of the Carlebach legacy — especially Moshav Meor Modi'im in its early days — may legitimately

be seen as reawakening the spirit and communal ethos of early Hasidism.

As Tibetan leaders spoke of some American teachers, Shlomo Carlebach's Hasidism was "spontaneous transmission arising without lineage,"* though Carlebach's intuition and creativity were undoubtedly nurtured and augmented by broad and deep text study as well as personal contact with many hasidic masters and hasidim over his entire lifetime.

He not only told stories of masters, but he modeled the life of early Hasidism. If I have some idea of what it might have meant to be in the circle of the Besht or the Great Maggid, it is by being in the chevre of R' Shlomo, at the Moshav — the idealistic, impractical, romantic egalitarian community held together by love alone, circling around one cherished figure whose true charisma and effortless gravitas bent the shape of space-time around his presence.

We are now in a better position to understand why R. Shlomo got *s'mikha* from Rabbi Yitzhok Hutner, and not from Rabbi Aharon Kotler in Lakewood, where he studied for seven years, or at Lubavitch, which was his home for at least three years after leaving Lakewood (or even at Torah Vodaas for that matter). We are told that he left Lakewood for Lubavitch because he felt the pull of Hasidism, and that later he left Lubavitch because of the Rebbe's insistence on separate seating at concerts. This has the ring of truth, but one suspects that another reason may have been Shlomo's inability or unwillingness to subordinate himself to institutional structures or the leadership directives of other powerful individuals. He was too much of an individual himself to be constrained for long by the regulations and procedures of others. So when it came time to get *s'mikha*, he sought out Rabbi Hutner for a private *s'mikha*.

* *Yoga Journal*, July 1985, p. 38.

In Shlomo's words:

> "Anyway, so everything put together, it was time for me to leave, you know. Time to check out. But the hardest thing was, I was not in Lakewood, I was not in Lubavitch, I was nowhere in the world. It takes a long time to stand on your own feet. Between heaven and earth." [Interview with Emuna Witt]

As M. Herbert Danziger wrote, "In the late 1960s, probably the only one on the American scene prepared to deal with [people struggling with their very commitment] was Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, a Lubavitcher chasid. A charismatic personality, he was not an organizer and could not set up an institutional structure to further his work."*

And, I would add, he could not live under one, either.

His teaching was all about the individual and his or her spiritual destiny.

To be sure, community was a part of the picture, but his ideal community had little structure or hierarchy: just a group of individuals around a magnetic leader whose authority did not derive from lineage, and who did not seek to initiate one, either.

The focus on the individual comes out strongly in a lengthy teaching called "The Torah of the Nine Months," actually a conversation between Shlomo and Zalman Schachter (Shalomi) at Tannersville, New York, in 1976. This extended exploration, which went on for over two hours, sets out major themes which Shlomo would return to again and again, and it is as close to a programmatic presentation of Carlebach philosophy as we are likely to find.

* *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 85

It begins with the famous *aggadah* that the embryo is learning Torah in the womb with a lit lamp or candle over its head. Shlomo's *hiddush* is that the baby is not learning the Torah of Sinai, the Torah of law, of rules, of Mishnah, Talmud, and Codes, but the Torah of the Nine Months — the Torah of what I have to do in this world, the shape of my soul, the Torah of the individual.

Since individuation begins only after we've left the Garden of Eden, this Torah is also the Torah of making mistakes and starting over again, the Torah of the Broken Tablets, as Shlomo put it, "my *Tehiyyas ha-Meisim*" Torah, going up and down and not to give up but to stand up again. This is the Torah of "*Ein Adam omed al divrei Torah elah im kein nikhshal bah.*"

"The Torah which I don't need for fixing my soul — I learn it once (and that's enough), [but] the Torah I need the most is the Torah I learn by making mistakes — the things I am failing in, but I don't give up — in that I'm the holiest!

"*Bedikas Hametz* with a candle is the Torah of the Nine Months — looking for my *hametz.* At a wedding, the parents hold a candle to tell the child, on the way to the *Huppa,* I'm giving you the Torah of the Nine Months; and when a person dies, we light candles — giving him his Torah of the Nine Months.

"The Torah of the Nine Months is the Torah of my place in the world. This is the meaning of *Barukh ha-Makom. Barukh Hu* — Blessed is the Place — my place! *Barukh shenosan Torah le-amo Yisrael. Barukh Hu* — the highest revelation [of] Torah is the revelation of my place in the world."

Conclusion:

Before Shlomo Carlebach, no one had ever dreamed of a German-born/ Orthodox/talmudic prodigy/hasidic/American/Israeli/world-traveling/ guitar-strumming/ songster/ story-teller/ indiscriminately

loving/ God-intoxicated/ aristocratic/ hippie/ yeshiva-*bochur.* It simply didn't exist — and if Shlomo Carlebach hadn't done it, no one would have imagined that it could exist.

Having left, in turn, Berlin, Vienna, Williamsburg, Lakewood, Crown Heights, and his own family, the search for one's place in the world had particular poignancy and urgency for him.

Shlomo Carlebach created what it meant to be Shlomo Carlebach. He not only inhabited his own place in the world, but he cleared a place where there was none before. He tried to make the whole world into a House of Love and Prayer so that he too could pray and find love. All of this must have involved enormous pain, enormous courage, inner determination, and faith. For that example alone, we owe him our eternal gratitude.

Wedding of Rabbi Zalman Schachter to Elana Rappaport, Rosh Chodesh Sivan, May 11, 1975, in Hinkel Park, Berkeley, CA. Reb Shlomo was Mesader Kiddushin.
Photo by Rabbi Joe Schonwald.

What Do We Know?

The Carlebach Anthology

Essays about Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach
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