

A Paradoxical Legacy:

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's

Shadow Side

by Sarah Blustain

In 1989 the feminist group Women of the Wall defied the Orthodox Jewish establishment and read from their own Torah scroll at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Shlomo Carlebach, steeped in hasidic tradition but committed to the spiritual rights of women, was the only male rabbi present.

An Orthodox rabbi by training, Rabbi Carlebach took down the separation between women and men in his own synagogue, encouraged women to study and to teach the Jewish texts, and gave private ordination to women before most mainstream Jewish institutions would. Described as a musical genius, Rabbi Carlebach's melodies—including *Adir Hu*, *Am Yisrael Chai* and *Esa Einai*—are sung throughout the world in hasidic *shteibels* and Reform temples alike; they have sunk so deeply into Jewish consciousness that many don't realize these are not age-old tunes. And Rabbi Carlebach encouraged women to sing out loud—a challenge to the Orthodox teaching that women's voices should not be heard publicly lest they arouse men.

Shlomo Carlebach also abandoned the Orthodox injunction that men and women not touch publicly. Indeed, he was known for his frequent hugs of men and women alike, and often said his hope was to hug every Jew—perhaps every person—on earth.

It is an alarming paradox, then, that the man who did so much on behalf of women may also have done some of them harm. In the three years since Rabbi Carlebach's death, at age 69, ceremonies honoring his life and work have been interrupted by women who claim the rabbi sexually harassed or abused them. In dozens of recent interviews, *Lilith* has attempted to untangle and to explain Rabbi Carlebach's complex legacy.

“He was the first person to ordain women, to take down the *mechitza*, and I think he thought all boundaries were off,” says Abigail Grafton, a psychotherapist whose Jewish Renewal congregation in Berkeley, California, has spent the last six months trying to cope with the allegations.

While Rabbi Carlebach was never formally connected with the Jewish Renewal movement, which encourages spiritual and mystical expressions of Judaism, his teachings and music have had a deep impact on many Renewal congregations, and on institutions of other streams of Judaism as well. For this reason, he was a frequent guest at synagogues, youth conventions, Jewish summer camps and other gatherings.

Among the many people Lilith spoke with, nearly all had heard stories of Rabbi Carlebach’s sexual indiscretions during his more than four-decade rabbinic career. Spiritual leaders, psychotherapists and others report numerous incidents, from playful propositions to actual sexual contact. Most of the allegations include middle-of-the-night, sexually charged phone calls and unwanted attention or propositions. Others, which have been slower to emerge, relate to sexual molestation.

The story appears to date back to the 1960’s, when Rabbi Carlebach had moved away from his Lubavitch hasidic practice and was exploring ways to bring aspects of Judaism to a mixed-gender, secular Jewish community. But it begins for our purposes in the days after his death, in 1994, when a memorial service on Manhattan’s Upper West Side was attended by a multitude, and the blocks in front of his synagogue, the Carlebach Shul, had to be closed off to accommodate the gathered crowds. In pouring rain, men and women wailed as their religious leaders articulated their grief. “The air around here is sanctified,” one passionate speaker told the crowd. “If I were you, I would breathe the air. . . . It will fix something.”

Such idealization was only the beginning of a process of canonizing Rabbi Carlebach, a process that has continued over the three years since his death. A number of his followers have reminded us that Rabbi Carlebach, when alive, “walked with the humblest of the humble” and “never said he was a holy man.” But with his death came an outpouring of love, and a degree of idolization that did not easily allow followers to recognize what others gently call his “shadow side.”

“I hear people say or imply it over and over again, ‘He was bigger than life,’” remarks Patricia Cohn, a member of the Berkeley Jewish Renewal community and a women’s rights activist who has been centrally involved in her community’s

effort to grapple with the allegations that women both in Berkeley and elsewhere were injured by Rabbi Carlebach. “He touched many people on a level that they have rarely been touched in their lives.”

It was at one ceremony, at an ALEPH gathering in Colorado, that an assembly of more than 800 honored his life with songs and stories on the first anniversary of his death. ALEPH is the central institution for the Jewish Renewal movement; its preeminent rebbe, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, had been a friend of Rabbi Carlebach since the 1950’s, when both were sent by the Lubavitcher rebbe to do outreach in the secular world.

Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, a pioneer Jewish feminist who was at that ALEPH kallah, says she “first became aware of his glorification at the gathering, when it was announced that this [memorial] was going to happen.” Right after the announcement, three or four people “jumped me,” she says, and told their stories: “‘Shlomo molested me, Shlomo was very abusive to me,’” is how she summarizes their words.

It was going “overboard to not acknowledge the problematic side of the man when there were members of the community there who were hurt by him,” says Rivkah Walton, an ALEPH program director, who reports that she walked out of the memorial.

In 1997, through the Internet and in public forums, the stories of inappropriate behavior began to be more widely discussed. The messenger was Rabbi Gottlieb, who since the ALEPH gathering had been distressed by continued murmurings about Rabbi Carlebach. Understanding the pain and confusion her revelations might stir up, but concerned with what she saw as “the deification of Shlomo Carlebach,” Rabbi Gottlieb wrote a tell-all essay.

“These are difficult words to write,” she began, in an essay sent to Lilith and presented by Rabbi Gottlieb at Chochmat HaLev, a Berkeley Jewish center for meditation and spirituality, in late 1997. “I have a responsibility to the women who have confided in me. They deserve a place on the page of the collective memories about Shlomo Carlebach.”

She wrote of Rabbi Carlebach’s molestation of one of her congregants, Rachel, as a young woman. As Rachel* told Lilith in a subsequent telephone interview, she was in high school in the late 1960’s when she attended a Jewish camp where, for the first time in her life, she felt “safe and uncriticized. . . . Every talent that I had was encouraged.” Music was everywhere, and it was to this “safe” environment that Rabbi Carlebach—who spent much of his life

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—Abigail Grafton

* This woman’s name has been changed on her request to “prevent further trauma.” She has stated that she is willing to come forward with her name if need be.

traveling to bring his music and prayers to communities world-wide—was invited as a guest singer. “We had heard that someone fabulous was coming, a star,” she recalls of the visit. “The rabbis [at the camp] really seemed to honor him—like a god.” Rabbi Carlebach, with his warmth and charisma, was like the Pied Piper, she remembers, and his singing was wonderful; Rachel recalls it as “the first time in a Jewish context that I could feel that I was having a spiritual experience.”

When he asked her to show him around the camp, Rachel says she felt “what an honor [it was] to be alone with this great man.” They walked and talked of philosophy and Israel, of stars and poems, and she remembers being “just enchanted.” He asked her for a hug, and 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.” So unsuspecting was she, she says, “that at first I thought, ‘was this some sort of davening?’” She says she tried to push him away, while he “was dry humping me. Until he came.” And though she does not recall the words that he spoke, she remembers his communicating to her that it was something special in her that had caused this to happen. “It felt cheap, but he had said thank you.” The next day, he didn’t even acknowledge her presence.

Rachel’s responses, she reports, were varied in the days after this incident. At first she wondered, “Was I his special friend?” Then, when he ignored her, she wondered, “Did I displease him? . . . Was he considering me a whore?” She also blamed herself for causing the event—was there something special in her, as he said, that made this happen?—and “for not having the chutzpah to . . . kick him in the shins.”

However, he was a special rabbi, and those she had looked up to had looked up to him. Rachel, today an artist and martial arts teacher in New Mexico, told almost no one what had happened. Those she did tell said he was “just a dirty old man.” Thirty-five years later she was jogging with Rabbi Gottlieb, both her friend and her congregational rabbi, when they began talking about Rabbi Carlebach. Hearing that others were claiming experiences similar to hers, Rachel broke down in tears. Only then, she recalls, did she get very angry. “I felt acknowledged. It wasn’t a dream, it really happened.”



Other stories have begun to emerge, suggesting that Rachel’s experience was not unique. Robin Goldberg, today a teacher of women’s studies and a research psychoanalyst on women’s issues in California, was 12 years old when Shlomo visited her Orthodox Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, community to lead a singing and

dancing concert. He invited all the young people for a pre-concert preparation. And it was during the dancing that he started touching her. He kept coming back to her, she reports, whispering in her ear, saying “holy *maidele*,” and fondling her breast. Twelve years old and Orthodox, she says she didn’t know what to think. Her mother, that afternoon, told her she must have been mistaken and that she must not have understood what was going on. But when she was taken to a dance event led by Rabbi Carlebach years later, while she was in college, she reports that the same thing—dancing, whispering, fondling—happened to her again.

Another story comes from Rabbi Goldie Milgram, 43, today a teacher and an associate dean at the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York City. Rabbi Milgram was 14 when Rabbi Carlebach was a guest at her United Synagogue Youth convention in New Jersey, and was invited by her parents to stay at their home. Late that night they passed in the hallway. “He pulled me up against him, rubbed his hands up my body and under my clothes and pulled me up against him. He rubbed up against me; I presume he had an orgasm. He called me *mammele*.”

Rabbi Milgram says she didn’t tell her parents at the time and wasn’t able to work through the incident until three years later, when she was 17 and on her first trip to Israel. Approaching the Kotel, she saw Rabbi Carlebach leading singing there, and she fled. Her companion saw her distress and suggested that she “pretend I’m him,” recalls Rabbi Milgram. “All I remember is screaming ‘Who are you? Why did you do that? I was so excited that you came to my house *and then . . .*’” (Today, Rabbi Milgram says, she has come to terms with this event and feels very connected to Rabbi Carlebach’s positive work, from which she had been alienated by her early experience with him.)

For the past 15 years, Marcia Cohn Spiegel, of Los Angeles, has studied addiction and sexual abuse in the Jewish community and has spoken to some 60 groups through Brandeis University, the University of Judaism, the Havurah Institute, along with many Jewish women’s organizations, synagogues and Jewish community centers. She doesn’t mention Rabbi Carlebach at all in her talks, she told Lilit. Following such talks, women come up to her—even in the women’s bathroom—to pour out their own stories, she says, “not seeking publicity or revenge, but coming from a place of shame and isolation.” Consistently through the years, women have come forward to share their stories explicitly about Rabbi Carlebach, Spiegel says.

This Fall, Spiegel summarized the stories she had heard regarding Rabbi Carlebach in a letter to Yaakov Ariel, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who is studying Rabbi Carlebach’s

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spiritually innovative California synagogue, the House of Love and Prayer. In the letter, which Spiegel made available to Lilith, she states that in the last few years, a number of women in their 40s have approached her “in private and often with deepseated pain” about experiences they had when they were in their teens. “Shlomo came to their camp, their center, their synagogue,” she wrote. “He singled them out with some excuse . . . [G]etting them alone, he fondled their breasts and vagina, sometimes thrusting himself against them, and muttering something which they now believe was Yiddish.”

The other typical story, she says, is recounted by women who had gone to Rabbi Carlebach “for help with problems, or who met him when they studied with him. They were in their 20s or 30s when it happened. He would call them late at night (two or three o’clock in the morning) and tell them that he couldn’t sleep. He had been thinking of them. He asked,

Where were they? What were they wearing?”

A woman who attended services conducted by Rabbi Carlebach in California in the 1970’s, and who asked not to be identified in this article, recalls precisely this second scenario. After meeting her once or twice, she says, Rabbi Carlebach called her in the middle of the night several times. “It was very creepy. I seem to remember him breathing heavily on the phone and panting.” Though at first she was confused, once she realized that “something surreptitious” was going on, she told him not to call her in the middle of the night anymore. He did not.

Rabbi Carlebach’s sexual advances to adult women were apparently well known. Rabbi Gottlieb herself recounts Rabbi Carlebach’s request that she pick him up at his hotel when he was visiting her Albuquerque community. When she got there, “he refused to come down,” asking instead that she come up to his room. Rabbi Gottlieb “went up and stood out-

Why It’s So Hard to Talk About This

Rachel’s story of her summer camp experience was particular to her, but themes in it may be common to many relationships between charismatic leaders and their followers, and may help us understand why these stories did not come out until after Rabbi Carlebach’s death.

■ When a leader who is held in such high esteem pays special attention to someone, she may feel so privileged to receive it that she doesn’t look out for her own best interests.

Members of the clergy, says Reverend Marie Fortune, executive director of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, “have access to people in ways other people don’t, and we’re fulfilling a role for them that is very intimate. . . . They’re making themselves more vulnerable than they ordinarily would.” Reverend Fortune says she is now working to make women more “careful about the automatic nature of the trust” that they experience with a clergy member. It should not necessarily be unconditional, she warns, because of the possibility—however remote—of encountering an unethical clergy person.

■ After abuse, both the victim and those who hear about her abuse may

feel very betrayed by the perpetrator, particularly if he or she is a leader.

“On the part of most people, regardless of their relationship with the person who is the alleged victimizer, the sense of [being] betrayed is really very high,” explains Patricia Cohn, interim director of the Bay Area Harassment Clinic, editor of the Jewish Women’s Newsletter and peer counselor at the Berkeley Women’s Center, about why the stories might not have come out sooner. “It becomes even more complicated when someone has a close relationship with that person or places [him or her] in a position of authority and see them as someone they revere.”

■ A victim may not believe that a beloved person could do a bad thing. She may therefore ask herself how *she* may have been to blame for this, in order to spare him the shame.

“Women walk away asking themselves, did that really happen, did it happen the way I think it happened, was he thinking what I thought he was thinking when he did x, y, or z,” comments Cohn. Unless the perpetrator confirms what has happened, which rarely occurs, these women “walk around for the rest of their lives with a level of their own confidence . . . taken away.”

■ Revealing a revered person’s wrongdoing may also be difficult because of the psychological pressures internally and from others to protect his good name.

Psychotherapist Abigail Grafton likened the silence around allegations against some religious leaders to that which occurs in an incest family. There is an assumption, she said, “that the father has more value than the child, and the child learns that she is worth nothing. . . . There is a tremendous force to give this privilege to the patriarch. . . . There is a deep feeling that you get protection and support from the patriarchy if you are a good girl, and that the world will go into disorder if the patriarchy is brought down.”

■ Particularly in a non-violent attack, by someone apparently benign, a victim might be very confused by what has happened. A victim and those around her may not know how to respond. In the case of Rabbi Carlebach, noted Grafton, “There is a tremendous polarity between the people who have to deny it . . . and those who agree that this happened and it’s a crime.” But, she adds, “If you assume that a young girl is a person and not an object then [the reactions] are not overblown.”

side the threshold and said, 'I am not coming into your room and you are not going to touch me.'" Another woman recalls, "His manner was, 'God loves you, I love you,' and then he'd come on to you out of 'love.'"

If these allegations were so widely known, why were so many people, in so many communities in the United States, Canada, Israel and elsewhere, able to ignore or squelch such serious concerns to preserve the myth of a wholly holy man?

The ideal time to confront Rabbi Carlebach about these allegations would have been during his life. Though that opportunity has passed, there are a number of reasons why these allegations need to be acknowledged in public even after his death.

First, silence. A silence protective of the man and damaging to the women has been maintained for years, sometimes decades, since the alleged events. Perhaps these women were cowed by Rabbi Carlebach's living presence, but his posthumous increase in stature cannot have made the speaking easier. Those who have encouraged the women to come forward say they hope that breaking these silences will help other women to speak as well, and that such speaking will allow them all to begin to heal.

Second, power. It is important to underscore just how powerful and intimate an impact any spiritual leader—but particularly a charismatic and revered rabbi like Rabbi Carlebach—may have on followers. Unfortunately, according to experts on clergy abuse, it is not uncommon for extremely charismatic leaders to take advantage of this power in order to make sexual contact with congregants. It is the rabbi's responsibility, these women's stories suggest, to recognize his power, and to use it only to his congregants' benefit and not their detriment.

Finally, communal responsibility. In cases where a rabbi's self-restraint fails, perhaps the Jewish community needs to look at its own responsibility for protecting its members—and for helping its rabbis as well. If Rabbi Carlebach's sexual advances indeed spanned decades and continents, as has been alleged, and were indeed as well known as it now appears, then we must ask: What might have been done on behalf of the women who may have been hurt by him? What can be done for them today? And why did the legions who revered him not do more to help *him*, since there appears to be some evidence that Rabbi Carlebach was himself troubled by aspects of his own behavior?



Rabbi Carlebach's approach to Jewish learning and spirituality developed in an era when social boundaries were being broken. Born in Germany

the son of a rabbi, Shlomo Carlebach moved with his family to the United States in 1938, and began his schooling in strictly Orthodox institutions in New Jersey. In 1949, as an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he was sent by the Rebbe to reach out to lapsed Jews, but he objected to Orthodoxy's strict separation of men and women, and he left the Lubavitch fold, according to a recent article in *Moment* magazine.

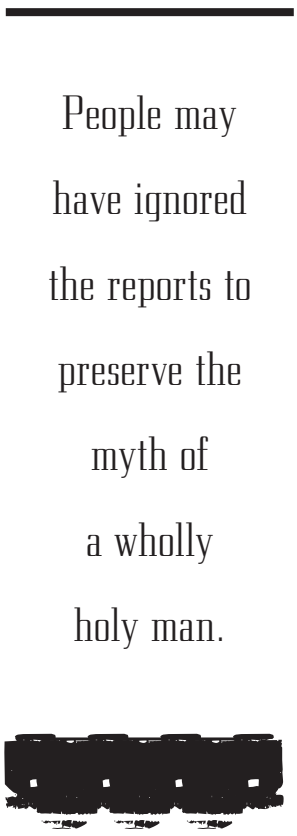
By the 1960's, Rabbi Carlebach was maintaining the musical style and spiritual fervency of hasidism, but had rejected the constraints—and gender segregation—it demands. Among the ultra-Orthodox, wrote Robert Cohen in a recent, generally positive memoir in *Moment*, "embracing women was enough to make Shlomo a dubious, if not disreputable, figure in many Orthodox circles." Instead, he established his base of spiritual operations from the mid-1960's to the mid-1970's at San Francisco's House of Love and Prayer, a commune-style synagogue that catered to a young, hippie community.

"Shlomo joined the counter-culture," notes Reuven Goldfarb of a Berkeley Jewish Renewal congregation, the Aquarian Minyan, defending "Shlomo" (as the rabbi asked people to call him) from opprobrium. "The norms in that subgroup were very different, and he was subject to all sorts of temptation."

In addition to an increasing sexual openness in American culture generally, Rabbi Carlebach had developed his own belief that the healing of the world would come through unconditional love. He was known for calling friends "holy brother," "holy sister," "holy cousin." "His life goal," Cohen, writing in *Moment*, recalled his saying, "was to 'hug every Jew [sometimes it was every human being] in the world.'" One woman, telephoning Lilith from Jerusalem in horror that any negative story about Rabbi Carlebach might appear, recalled, "he hugged many many people and he also saved so many people with those hugs." Another told us, "He hugged into each man, woman, child what each of us needed." Another man remembers a synagogue concert in the late 1960's when Rabbi Carlebach kissed every

person who greeted him there on the mouth.

Despite their support of some of Carlebach's spirituality and egalitarianism, there were even those in the forefront of challenging Judaism's traditional hierarchies who viewed Rabbi Carlebach's alleged sexual behavior as wrong. In the early 1980's, a group of women in the Berkeley area decided to express to him their concerns about his behavior toward women. Among them was Sara Shendelman, a cantor who holds a joint ordination from Rabbis Carlebach and Schachter-Shalomi and who sang with Rabbi Carlebach for 15 years before his death. Specifically, says Shendelman,



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her Rosh Hodesh group of 15 to 20 women was concerned that Shlomo Carlebach did not observe proper boundaries with women, that he called them in the middle of the night, and sometimes invited them to his hotel.

“We were going to study Judith, supposedly, but what we were really going to do was confront him,” she recalls of the planned meeting. The day came, and members of the group began to get cold feet. They felt he just had “too much light” to be confronted, Shendelman recalls. (Shendelman told Lilith she heard later that someone had told Rabbi Carlebach the purpose of the meeting in advance. He came nonetheless.) The group, along with Rabbi Carlebach, began to study. Rabbi Carlebach, according to Shendelman, sat wrapped in his *tallit* and spoke of *tshuva*. Not one of the women spoke up, until Shendelman announced, “Shlomo, we came here because we need to talk to you about how you’ve been behaving toward the women in the community. . . . And the whole room froze. . . . Nobody was willing to back me up.”

The dialogue between Shendelman and Rabbi Carlebach continued in a private room, where Rabbi Carlebach at first denied any problem, says Shendelman. Then, she reports, he said over and over, “Oy, this needs such a fixing.”



We cannot know what Rabbi Carlebach did toward “such a fixing.” Certainly the reluctance of the women of the Berkeley community to approach him en masse—and the reluctance of others in the wider Jewish community—must have made it easier for him to avoid addressing the problem. Perhaps, if he had received greater guidance in seeing that his behavior needed repair, Rabbi Carlebach might have welcomed an opportunity to do *tshuva*, repentance.

We do know that certain segments of the progressive Jewish world, until the day Rabbi Carlebach died, distanced themselves from him because they were aware of reports of his sexual behavior. Leaders at ALEPH, and its sister organization, a retreat center called Elat Chayyim, told Lilith that during Rabbi Carlebach’s life they refused to invite him to teach under their auspices or sit on their boards.

“It was definitely an issue for me,” said Rabbi Jeffrey Roth, director of Elat Chayyim, who says that he had hoped to invite Rabbi Carlebach to teach before his sudden death. “My intent was . . . that I was going to have to have a serious discussion about [the] innuendos. . . . In retrospect, when I heard the [seriousness] of the stories, I think that even my thinking that maybe I would invite him and lay down the law would have been a cop out.”

“He didn’t have a relationship with ALEPH, and that [his sexual advances toward women] was a serious impediment,” Susan Saxe, chief operating officer of ALEPH, told Lilith, emphasizing that Rabbi Carlebach was “one of several distinguished teachers with whom we might have wished to be closer, but could not, in keeping with our Code of Ethics.” ALEPH’s Code of Ethics proscribes the abuse of power in interpersonal relationships as well as discrimination in other forms.

A Code of Ethics

Leaders of organizations ALEPH and Elat Chayyim emphasized to Lilith that a code of ethics are presented to each student and teacher under their auspices, including bans on sexual relationships between teachers and students.

“As ALEPH is committed to creating a community which is increasingly aware of the dynamics of power and potential abuses of power in spiritual community, we agree not to misuse our leadership role,” reads the ALEPH code. “This includes, but is not limited to, refraining from beginning a sexual relationship with any participant in our class, group, workshop, prayer group or healing session during the period of the ALEPH sponsored event.” At Elat Chayyim, students and teachers are asked to sign a similar code.

Rabbi Daniel Siegel, executive director of ALEPH, was the first rabbi ordained by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. He was introduced to Rabbi Carlebach by his wife, Hanna Tiferet Siegel, to whom Rabbi Carlebach “had been very kind during a difficult year in her life,” Rabbi Siegel recalls. “She always loved him for his support and encouragement.”

“Shlomo was never my rebbe,” Rabbi Siegel says, “though I have a love both for his music and many of his teachings. In spite of the disagreements I had with his politics and his very ethnocentric view of reality, I brought or helped bring him for concerts several times. I was also aware of his reputation for indiscretions with women, though what I heard was vague and filtered through other people. However, it did happen that women I knew began to tell me of conversations they had with him, after concerts I organized, in which he said things which had disturbed or confused them. As a result, I stopped inviting Shlomo, though I never told him why.”



Now, however, the dam of silence has begun to break. Some members of the Jewish Renewal community of Berkeley, California, particularly those active in the Aquarian Minyan and the Jewish learning center Chochmat HaLev, where Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb first presented her account of Rachel’s abuse last Fall, have taken upon themselves the burden of giving voice to the allegations.

“He so deeply wounded many women,” says Nan Fink, co-director of Chochmat HaLev and co-founder of Tikkun magazine. “Communities knew that this was happening, and women were hardly ever protected. . . . I think it is really important for the community to make a gesture of apology to the women.”

Rabbi Gottlieb’s presentation came just eight weeks before a scheduled Shabbat program entitled “Celebrating Shlomo.” According to Reuven Goldfarb, a leader of the

Aquarian Minyan, Rabbi Gottlieb's words so disturbed some members of his community that the event was postponed until after the community could begin "a healing process" and hold a series of events to that end.

A Healing Committee has now been formed by the Aquarian Minyan. On December 7, according to Goldfarb, a confidential meeting dubbed *Mishkan Tikkun*, "a sanctuary for fixing" took place "to provide a listening space for

those who felt they had been injured by boundary violations that occurred within a spiritual context." According to a source who attended that meeting, three people came forward with claims against Rabbi Carlebach: one woman spoke about herself, two spoke about their daughters.

Committee member Patricia Cohn, an interim director of the now-closed Bay Area Sexual Harassment Clinic, told Lilith that the Jewish Renewal community is attempting to

Sex, the Spirit and the Danger of Abuse

by Rabbi Arthur Waskow

These comments by Rabbi Waskow, of ALEPH (part of a longer essay), grew out of his work in writing Down to Earth Judaism: Food, Money, Sex & the Rest of Life, and in response to Lilith's questions about issues raised in this article on Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

The danger that religious and spiritual leadership may slip over into sexual harassment and abuse seems to cut across all the boundaries of different religions and different forms of religious expression within each tradition. In Jewish life, for example, whether we look at the most halachically bound or the most free-spirit leadership, we find some who draw on the deep energies of Spirit and the honor due teachers of Torah, but cannot distinguish those energies and honor from an invitation to become sexual harassers and abusers.

It is easy to confuse the energies of Spirit and of sexuality. That is because they are in truth so intertwined, and so much need to flow together for either to be rich and full. So we must not try to destroy sexuality in the name of spirit. But we must also not treat the two intertwined spiraling energies as if they were exactly the same thing.

How can we encourage this artful dance? We might learn to shape and encourage the basic character pattern of a spiritual leader—since one character-pattern or another can prevent, or ease, or disguise a leaning toward sexual exploitation of spiritual strength.

We can learn from the way in which Kabbalah both celebrates and warns about the different *Sphiroth* or Divine Emanations, which are also aspects of the human psyche. We are most used to manipulation and abuse that can flow from an overbearing overdose of the *sphirah* of *Gevurah*, Power and Strictness. We are less likely to notice the dangers of *Gevurah's* partner, *Chesed*. In the simple sense, *chesed* means loving-kindness. But in Kabbalah, it means overflowing, unboundaried energy.

A spiritual leader may pour unceasing love into the world. May pour out unboundaried his money, his time, his attention, his love. For many of the community around them, this feels wonderful. It releases new hope, energy, freedom. But it may also threaten and endanger. Even *Chesed* can run amok. A *Chesed*-freak may come late everywhere because he has

promised to attend too many people. He may leave himself penniless because he gave his money to everyone else. He may give to everyone the signals of a special love, and so make ordinary the special love he owes to others. And he may use *Chesed* to overwhelm the self-hood of those who love and follow him, and abuse them sexually.

Indeed, this misuse of lovingkindness leaves behind in its victims not only confusion between Spirit and Sexuality, but confusion between love and manipulation. That may make the regrowth of a healthy sexuality, a healthy spirituality, and a healthy sense of self more difficult.

When we learn that a revered, creative, and beloved teacher has let *Chesed* run away with him, and so has hurt and damaged other people, then I think we must both continue to draw on and celebrate the wellspring of *Chesed* that the teacher tapped, and learn for the future with far greater care not to simply wallow in such *Chesed* to meet our own unrealized needs, but learn how to drink from it judiciously. And to teach the teachers who might fall into this danger, challenging and guiding them to achieve a healthier balance.

There are two ways to prevent someone who is aware of being spiritually powerful from abusing those who may feel they can win access to Spirit only from a submissive, even abusive, relationship. One way is to limit the power-holder's actions, making clear that the Spirit is not a property to be "owned" and used to control others, but a temporary tenancy from God. The other way is to empower the one who feels weak. Both are necessary.

One of the most powerful practices for both reminding the powerful of their limits and empowering the "weak" is one I have seen Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi carry out many times. He begins what looks at first like a classic Hasidic Tisch or "table": The Rebbe sits in a special chair and teaches Torah to the assembled multitude, who sing and sway and chant with great intensity. But then Reb Zalman, in his addition to this tradition, stands, instructs everyone to move one seat to the left—and moves himself as well. He nods to the member of the *chevra* who now sits in the Rebbe's Chair, saying: "Now you are the Rebbe. Look deep inside yourself for the Rebbe-spark. When you have found it, teach us."

address the concerns raised by the allegations that have surfaced “by promoting opportunities for members to talk with one another, gain support for dealing with their feelings and reactions, re-establish—or establish a deeper—sense of safety, define appropriate boundary-setting, and educate themselves about the way sexual harassment functions and affects people.” In addition, the committee hopes to offer forums to “explore ethical and moral guidelines for rabbis and people in positions of lay spiritual leadership to bring into focus the power imbalances between someone in a position of spiritual leadership and the person he or she is serving.”

“The Jewish world has not really dealt with rabbinic [sexual] abuse,” says Fink. “The Christian world has, the Buddhist world has. The Jewish community needs to say ‘We don’t sanction this.’ The main thing is to have it really be known that every infraction of this kind will not be tolerated.”

Nonetheless, for the many who knew Rabbi Carlebach as a holy guide, hearing allegations may raise a conundrum: “How it is possible that a person who can affect us so powerfully . . . can at the same time be imperfect and do things that we find very, very hard to countenance, indeed cannot countenance,” asks Rodger Kamenetz, author of *The Jew in the Lotus* and, most recently, of *Stalking Elijah: Adventures with Today’s Jewish Mystical Masters*.

This cognitive dissonance echoes through Jewish tradition, which is filled with flawed leaders—Moses and David come to mind—who are appreciated for their greatness and forgiven for their human failings. “It is important for us to be reminded that even our spiritual teachers are flawed human beings,” notes Rabbi Siegel of ALEPH. “I hope that somehow, as time goes on, we will learn how to honor Reb Shlomo’s gifts and, at the same time, to acknowledge those for whom his presence was difficult and even painful. While I cannot predict how this will happen, I know that honest and open discussion of the totality of Reb Shlomo’s life can only help.”

Indeed, the difficulty of holding both parts of Shlomo Carlebach in mind has come into relief as these allegations against him have collided full force with the reverence many still feel for him. Some of his followers have jumped to his defense in the face of claims such as these. Lilith has received both the outrage and prayers of those trying to stop the publication of this article. Coming from as far as Israel, England and Switzerland, comments have ranged from denial that such actions could have taken place to testimonials to his greatness. More than anything, these calls, e-mails and faxes have demanded in various ways that we perpetuate the silence.

“Whatever negative there is to say there [are] a million positives you could choose,” one protester wrote. Another told us, “He alone gave me a sense of the beauty of being a Jewish woman.” A third, even more adamant, suggested that “there is no way you can even think of publishing a negative article about a man like Rabbi Carlebach, if you even began to know of the unending acts of kindness he devoted his life to performing.” Finally, some protested against these allegations coming to light, “regardless of truth or right.” “How dare you sully the memory of such a soul, such a *tzaddik*?” one correspondent asked.

Kamenetz suggests that this need to see only the positive sides of Rabbi Carlebach should be expected. “We want to be moved, we want to be touched, and we project that onto certain individuals,” he said, explaining how such an idealized perspective develops.

Explains Rabbi Julie Spitzer, “It is not uncommon when women come forward with their stories of inappropriate sexual contact with a rabbi or clergy member that the members of the congregation or community so much want to disbelieve those shocking allegations that they vilify the complainant and glorify the alleged abuser.” Rabbi Spitzer is director of the Greater New York Council of Reform Synagogues and for 14 years has served on the National Advisory Board for the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.

In the cacophony of voices expressing doubt, fear, fury and grief, Rabbi Gottlieb asserts, “This is about our relationship to power, rabbinics, patriarchy. This is not about him. It is about the women he hurt.”

The voice of Rachel, speaking of her summer-camp experience more than 35 years ago rings clear for any who wonder why, in the end, her story had to be spoken aloud. “I think in the name of a higher good than one man’s reputation we must talk about this. . . . It’s about truth, and if we keep saying he was a great man . . . and if we don’t name the behavior and don’t hold him and his spirit and his memory accountable, we are colluding in perpetuating that behavior and violence in our most spiritual center.” ■

“I think in the name of a higher good than one man’s reputation we must talk about this. . . . It’s about truth.”

—“Rachel”



Want to Talk?

A volunteer group of women therapists, rabbis and activists has created and staffed a “warmline” for women who would like to speak confidentially about any of the issues arising from this article or to learn about other resources. This service is not provided by or connected to Lilith magazine. Call 800-528-2672.