

And now, Shlomo Carlebach the Musical...

To many of his fans, **Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach** was a great musician. To others, he was a gifted storyteller. To many of his followers, his music and stories were mere vehicles for teaching Torah. But what really mattered to Carlebach was people. To him, music and Torah and God and Hasidic tales were vehicles for reaching hearts—of Jews and non-Jews alike.

Such is the message of “Soul Doctor,” the musical bioplay about Carlebach’s life, written by **Daniel Wise** and starring **Eric Anderson** in the title role, which opened on Broadway in August. Carlebach, who died in 1994, was an Orthodox-trained rabbi from an illustrious rabbinic family in pre-World War II Germany. His melodies are now standard in synagogues and at Jewish weddings throughout the world. During his lifetime, however, Carlebach was far from mainstream. The show chronicles his tumultuous early years: fleeing from Austria to America as a child in 1938, his days as a yeshiva student and young Hasid of the Rebbe of Lubavitch, his evenings of exploration, tentatively stepping away from the study hall to play music in bars and music clubs, until finally establishing his outpost of “holy hippelch,” as he called his followers, at the House of Love and Prayer, in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco.

Along the way, he is taught to play guitar by a blind, homeless woman; develops a friendship with **Nina Simone** (played spectacularly by **Amber Iman**) from whom he learned about, and drew inspiration from, gospel music and revival meetings; and finally, is banned by the Orthodox establishment. The rabbis excoriate him for his unconventional ways: hugging and kissing women, allowing women to sing along with him, and imbibing the free-love, hippie spirit of the 60s, all of which was anathema to Orthodoxy.

And yet, his influence seeped back in through the cracks.

I remember when I first heard Carlebach. It was during the early 90s, and I was a teenage yeshiva student studying among the Skver Hasidim of New Square, N.Y. I was in my room in the yeshiva dormitory, when a friend slipped me an audiocassette. “Listen to this,” he said quietly. “You’ll like it.”

The tape was “Shlomo Carlebach’s Greatest Stories,” and I stuck it into my Sony Walkman, on which I ordinarily listened to Torah lectures and an occasional cantorial album. Over the next week, each night after the dormitory monitor left, I would listen to the stories of Chatzkele Lekuvid Shabbos, and the Holy Miser, and the

Blind Beggar, and the Heiliger Kotzker Rebbe and the Sea of Jewish Tears.

These were Hasidic tales like I’d never heard before—and this in a world where Hasidic tales were all the tales you got. There was something about how Carlebach told them, the music of his voice, the German-Yiddish inflections with the soft accompaniment on guitar, the folksy, rambling diction that gave it all the world’s charm, and, most of all, the pain and the joy his stories conveyed.

I hadn’t heard any of Carlebach’s albums before, although I’d been aware of him. Every now and then it was whispered that one popular Hasidic melody or another was composed by him—“*ah kahlbach niggun*,” some zealot would hiss furiously—but the song would be sung anyway, since, really, who was to know for certain, if no one could publicly admit to listening to the records?

It was in that first tape that I was struck by one line, which would come to define Carlebach for me. It was a Yiddish quote from Rab Kalmishel of Piasetzna: “*Di greste zach in di velt iz tihnenem a toiveh.*”

The greatest thing in the world is to do someone a favor.

Not Torah study, or prayer, or keeping the Sabbath, or any of the other commandments. Not even to perform some monumental good deed.

Just do someone a favor. Pass the peas. Hold open a door. Keep the light on.

This was not just a good thing, but *the greatest thing in the world.*

Mamesh, a gevald. The deepest depths.

That was Carlebach’s standard description for his stories and the people in them—“the deepest of the deep, the sweetest of the sweet, the holiest of the



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When **Bill Gates** and **Warren Buffett** convened dinners for billionaires to discuss philanthropy, **Melinda Gates** made sure that wives were invited, too. “Even if he’s the one that made the money, she’s going to be a real gatekeeper,” she said. “And she’s got to go along with any philanthropic plan because it affects her and it affects their kids.”

from “Why Men Need Women,” by **Adam Grant** in the New York Times, July 20, 2013.



holy”—although in the strictest sense, “deep” wasn’t what his messages were, exactly. Sometimes they were quite superficial, if counter-intuitive, and more than a little sentimental, but Carlebach was a genius at knowing what stirred people, and he found hints within the tradition for those feel-good vibes.

In “Soul Doctor,” Carlebach is seen first getting those vibes from a revival meeting he is invited to by Simone, where he watches worshippers whipped into an ecstatic frenzy through one of his own songs. This inspires him to do something similar at his father’s synagogue, where his task is, literally, to “wake up the shul president.”

His father (**Jamie Jackson**), however, is not pleased. “You can’t make up your own Judaism!”

But that’s precisely what the real-life Carlebach intended to do—although not without precedent. He

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would ultimately be drawn to the hippie counter-culture, but even more, he was drawn to the counter-culture within the Hasidic tradition, the schools of Breslov and Izhbitz, where sinners are saints and saints are fools, and God, well, God, too, just wants love, because He too is just alone in His Great Oneness and desperate for a kind word and maybe a hug.

“Soul Doctor,” it must be said, omits mention of Carlebach’s more shadowy side. In 1998, this magazine reported on allegations of sexual harassment and abuse by Carlebach made by a number of women, along with attempts by some of Carlebach’s devotees to suppress what they saw as the tarnishing of Carlebach’s memory. Certainly, this was not quite the Carlebach of “*mamesh, gevald*, the sweetest of the sweet.”

In an interview with the New York Times, Mr. Wise, the show’s creator, disputed the allegations. “He hugged and kissed everyone,” the Times quotes Mr. Wise as saying. “He was a puppy dog, not a predator.”

According to others, however, the allegations are consistent with Carlebach’s personality. “None of this was surprising to people who knew him well,” says **Shaul Magid**, professor of Modern Judaism at Indiana University in Bloomington, who has written considerably about Carlebach’s work. “He was a charismatic person, and also a man with very strong feelings, but with not a lot of self-control.”

While the show doesn’t touch on these issues, perhaps it sheds light on the subject in a roundabout way. As Magid said to me, “Shlomo was basically a yeshiva *bachur* [student] who transitioned to a very unfamiliar world, and very quickly found himself in a position of tremendous influence. He probably never developed a proper sense of boundaries.”

“Soul Doctor,” indeed, gives us a portrait of Carlebach in those early years as a sheltered, diffident young Hasid, comfortable in the study hall with his religious texts but completely flustered when so much as offered a handshake by a woman. In fact, what is perhaps the greatest accomplishment of “Soul Doctor” is the glimpse it

offers into Carlebach’s formative years, and the context in which the man, rather than the myth, was created. While thousands considered Carlebach a friend, few of them knew him as a young adult. By the time he established The House of Love and Prayer, Carlebach was well into his 40s, far removed from his ultra-Orthodox origins. “Soul Doctor” opens a window into that early, chaotic transition from a life of Torah study and piety to the heady atmosphere of free love and psychedelics and the Summer of Love.

“Soul Doctor” might strike some as uncomfortably hagiographic, as it studiously avoids an honest examination of the man and his complex legacy. But it succeeds in its intentions: stirring audiences with its message of music and love. The musical numbers are mostly made up of Carlebach favorites, both soulful and exuberant tunes adapted to new, English lyrics. The result is a happy-clappy crowd-pleaser.

SHULEM DEEN

VISIT LILITH.ORG for Sarah Blustain’s groundbreaking article on the singing rabbi’s paradoxical legacy to women: “Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s Shadow Side.”

Aware that she is seen as a role model to other young Arab women, **Mais Ali-Selah** also knows that she is breaking common misperceptions and stereotypes. “The media emphasizes negative things about Muslims and does not emphasize the positive,” Ali-Selah said... “There is nowhere in the Koran that states women should not study,” Ali-Selah explained. In fact, she said that the Koran emphasizes that women must learn because they are the ones to educate the children. The same is true of women’s dress. Women are supposed to dress modestly, but there are no Islamic laws stating that women need to wear long robes or cover their faces.

MAIS ALI-SALEH, quoted by **Diana Bletter** in “Guess Who’s Valedictorian at Israel’s Top Medical School?,” the Huffington Post, July 16, 2013.