

RABBI SHLOMO CARLEBACH

Minstrel of the Heart

**HALF A STORY,
HALF A PRAYER**



Shlomo comes into our lives
like a sudden musical note.
The clasp of a handshake,
an embrace, and suddenly we find
that we have always known him . . .

By Michelle Levey

We met Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach on the fifth day of the World Symposium on Humanity in Vancouver, B.C. in 1976. “Hello Brother, Sister . . . How are you?” Shlomo shakes our hands and gently tugs my friend Michael’s beard as he enters the Hyatt Regency Ballroom.

Many of us were seated on cushions on the floor. Some were wearing turbans, many were long-haired. All faiths were represented: Hindu, Sikh, Sufi, Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish seekers were there, along with many who had dropped their faith altogether.

Picking up his guitar reverently he began to strum a few notes. It is gentle, intimate music, yet intense. The sound comes from a man whose heart is open. Listening, your own being opens like a flower.

“We only have a little time together. So let’s give it everything we’ve got,” Shlomo says, and the music fills us. Soon we are on our feet dancing in a circle, our arms around each other, swaying, as the Chasidic music rises to a pitch of shining intensity. Shlomo is singing the flowing, poignant, cantorial melody, eyes closed, in service to God. He sings not only his songs but his words also in the same lilting rabbinical tone. The large Hyatt Regency Hotel Ballroom is charged with warmth as more than a thousand people come together in one compressed mass around Shlomo, a pulsing musical center.

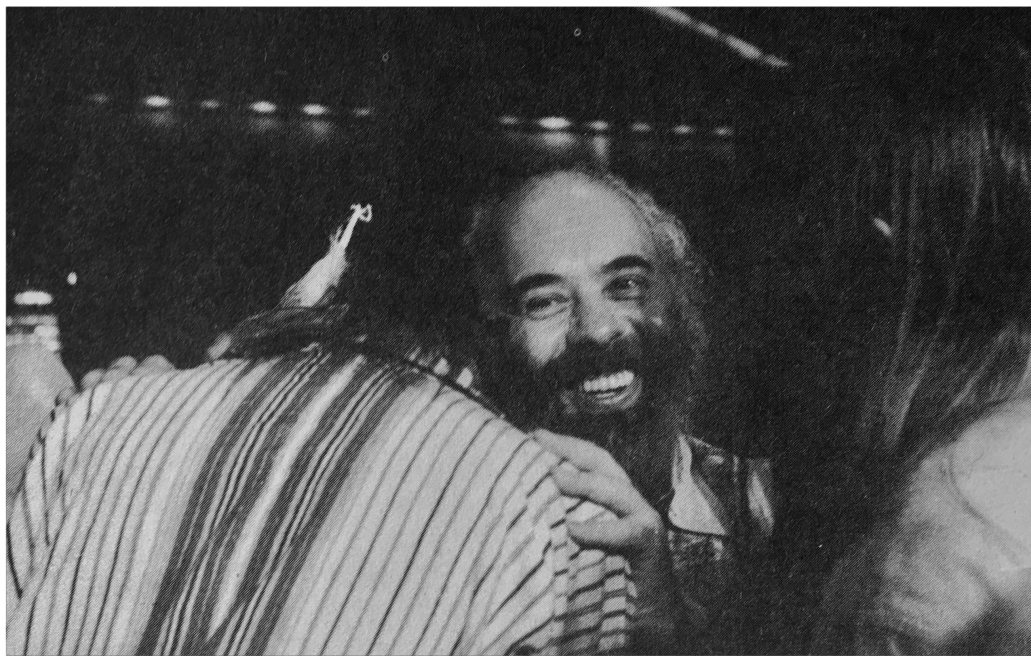
As he sings his head rolls back, eyes lifted as if in supplication to heaven: “Let it be tonight.”

Afterwards, driving through the dark night, the lights of the city whizzing by, you could almost hear the stars singing as they seemed especially close.

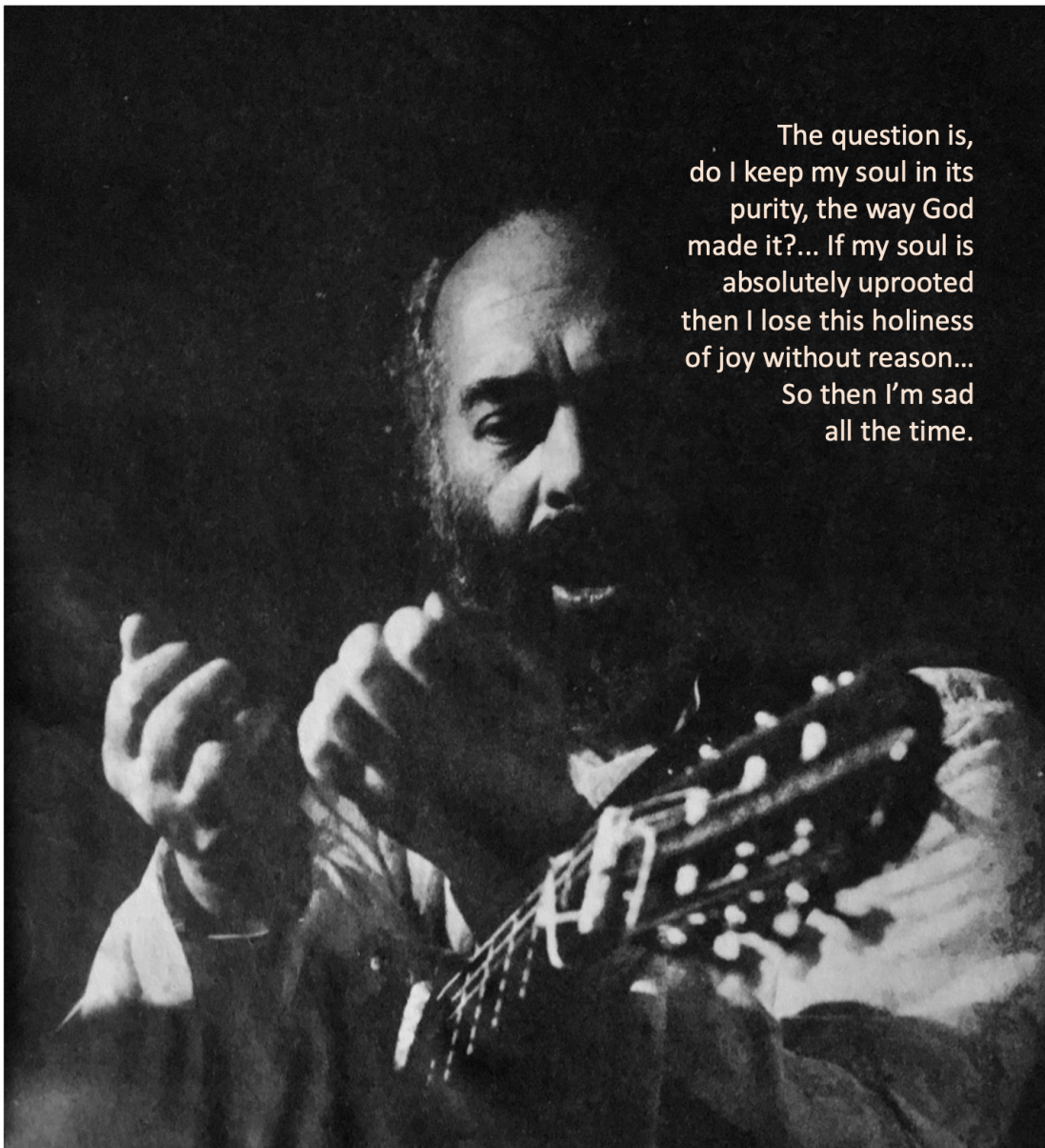
All atremble we wondered: would it be tonight?

The next day, deeply impressed by the Rabbi's open warm heart and the effect he had on all of us at the World Symposium, Michael and I arranged an interview with him in the Media Room, set up for just such a thing during the conference.

We asked Shlomo how he began to use singing as a medium of communication. He explained that God put him on the road. He was always hoping to become a great Rabbi, a great scholar, and he was always singing to himself, but he never thought anybody was listening to his singing. And then one day in the Village, he met somebody who was playing a guitar who only knew two chords. "So I thought, I may not be the greatest genius in the world, but two chords . . . So I got myself a guitar and I began composing some melodies, and out of nowhere people began inviting me to sing. Then slowly, slowly, I realized that now in the world, the singing and the words are not together. The heart and the mind are not together. But if you *sing* the words it becomes complete."



Gathering with Shlomo is experienced in the universal language of the heart. He strums a few chords, so imbued with love, that they sound the sympathetic strings within the heart of us all.



The question is,
do I keep my soul in its
purity, the way God
made it?... If my soul is
absolutely uprooted
then I lose this holiness
of joy without reason...
So then I'm sad
all the time.

**“Do you know what blessing means?
To bless someone, you get right up there,
and push holiness to them...
If you love someone enough
to bless them, then it raises you
to the highest place
where blessings come from.
When you feel alone, unwanted,
walk out and put your hands
on the first person's head,
bless them....”**

Shlomo agrees that a New Age is coming about in the world.
“It is even more clear than daylight that God is opening up gates for us that He never opened up before. For generations,” he explains, “people thought that scientific knowledge was the highest knowledge: one and one is two, three and three is six . . . Then suddenly the world realized that there is a higher knowledge—a heavenly knowledge . . . It’s absolutely amazing to meet young people today and see how much they know without being taught.”

“In the New Age,” he said, “as always, it is the role of the Jewish people to remember that they are chosen to remind the world that there is one God.”

“If I meet a non-Jew who doesn’t believe in God, then I have to tell him there is one God. But I don’t have to tell him to become a Jew . . . If God wanted the whole world to be Jewish He’d make it this way. But God wants the whole world to know there’s one God.”

**“Again, my holy friends,
Give me permission to say a few
more words,
It’s a prayer, but it’s half a story
half a prayer**

**Everybody knows the first tragedy
in the world
Cain and Abel
Cain and his brother Abel**

**And now the truth is
Cain never wanted to kill Abel
He just got angry at him**

**But he didn’t know that there was
such a thing as killing somebody
It’s the truth**

**He didn't know
He didn't even know there was
such a thing as dying**

**Now listen what the holy rabbis
tell us—
Abel fell to the ground
And Cain regretted already that
he hit him**

**He fell to the ground next to his brother
And he began to cry
From one corner of the world to
the other**

**And he said:
My dear brother,
My most precious brother,
I'm begging you
Please open your eyes
Please forgive me
I'm begging you
I'm begging you a million times
Please come back and open your eyes**

**And our holy rabbis tell us
That for three days
For three days
Cain was lying next to Abel begging him**

**And the holy rabbis tell us
That all of Nature
The whole world
Was crying with him.**

**And now my most darling friends
On the great day
On the great day we are waiting for
The most unbelievable thing will happen**

**All the Cains of the world
Will lie next to the Abels they killed
And they will begin to cry
And they will say:
My precious brother
Forgive me, forgive me
I am begging you, forgive me
Forgive me for being angry at you**

**I am begging you
Come back
I am begging you
Come back**

**So on the great day
The miracles will happen
Abel will open his eyes....**

**The world has not been privileged
To feel the love between brother and brother
Between one human being and the other
As it will be on that day
Then Cain and Abel will begin to dance
And the whole world will join them
And all the creatures of the world
will begin to dance**

LET IT BE SOON!"

There is much talk today of a world cataclysm coming about. Some say the world will end in atomic holocaust, others that mankind will pollute itself out of existence. Yet, Shlomo's view is totally optimistic. His message is that "someday the world will be one." He looks forward to a day when "There will be peace in the world, the most beautiful peace. The world has never been yet the way God wants the world to be. And the only thing is that God created the world and gave us a choice: that we should do it. But obviously finally we'll do it. We've got to do it."

Shlomo supports his belief that the world will not be destroyed, by this story in the Midrash that "God, before He created the world, covered himself by a tallis with the four corners of the world and He began to pray." This prayer, Shlomo teaches, God's prayer, is still in the earth.

"Let's put it this way. If you believe that God is praying, then you know that the world will not be destroyed. Because isn't God praying the whole time? Praying to us: Don't destroy my world."

And for Shlomo, not only does God listen to *our* prayers, but we listen to God's prayers also. We find the key to Shlomo's approach in this quote by Reb Nachman, the holy Baal Shem Tov's grandson: "The greatest sin is to be sad." Because, as Shlomo explained, "When you're sad you're dead." Your spirit is dead.

"My soul is part of God, right? And my soul absolutely does not know of sadness, only of joy, because heaven is joy. And the joy in heaven is not because of a reason. It's for no reason. You know, when you love somebody, if you love them for a reason, it's already not so good. We always think we need a reason to be sad, we need a reason to be happy. For sadness you need a reason because it's not real. It's only superimposed. For joy I don't need a reason. The question is, do I keep my soul in its purity, the way God made it? If my soul is absolutely up-rooted then I lose this holiness of joy without reason. So then I'm sad all the time."

To give us a taste of joy he shared this story about Reb Zwolef Kosnitz, one of the holiest rabbis:

“During the Second World War some people were taken to concentration camps. Sometimes they would take a whole city, two or three thousand Jews, and bring them straight to the gas chambers without going through the whole thing. So this Koznitze Magid, he and his whole city of 3,000 Jews, were locked up in cars, came to Auschwitz and straight to the gas chambers. This is told by somebody who *miraculously* survived. He said that somebody asked the rebbe: ‘What are you thinking? What are you thinking now?’

“The sun was still shining even while they took people to the gas chambers ... He looked up at the sky and he said: ‘You see the sun? Color so beautiful ... What a world ... what a wonder ...’
“And then he says to this person: ‘You know what a privilege—our ashes will clean the whole world.’

“And then he said to the people: ‘Prepare yourself for the highest moment in your life—to give your life to God.’ So you see that he was absolutely untouched by the evil behind all this.”

And to communicate this joy that is untouched by evil, Shlomo sings.

We wanted Shlomo’s insights on reincarnation according to Jewish mystical tradition.

“You walk on a street and you meet people and you know that you know them from before, yet you haven’t met them in this lifetime.

He then shared something very deep and beautiful with us:

“When you marry you put a ring on your beloved’s finger. And a ring in Hebrew is called *galgal*, (גלגל) a wheel, and this finger is like the letter vov (ו). In Hebrew, vov is just a straight line, so when

you put a *vov* into *galgal*, then it becomes *gilgul* (גלגול) —which means reincarnation.

“So according to the holy rabbis, the woman, when she holds out her finger, is telling her husband: if by any chance you have to come back again, I want to be your soulmate again.”

He elaborated further with an illustration from the holy Zohar.

This Kabbalist text says that when two people fight it didn’t always start in this lifetime. For instance:

“Today couples get married and they get divorced and you can’t put your finger on it. Why did they get divorced? They had a fight last time and they’re still angry with each other. So if someone would be holy enough to direct them: ‘Forgive each other, not for what you did this time, lift yourself up and forgive each other from last time’... maybe they would make it...”

“You see, heaven is high, according to this, but this world is higher. Because this world is so covered up. You see, in heaven, everything is holy but it’s not covered. No secrets. This world is the holiness of secrets. It’s so deep, you know. This makes this world holier and much deeper than heaven. The God-revelation in this world is higher than in heaven. Let’s put it this way—maybe in heaven God reveals Himself to you 2,000 tons of revelation and here maybe God gives you just 1 pound of revelation. But this 1 pound—I’ll tell you something—imagine you’re not hungry and I invite you for a meal. How much of a favor do I do you?

But imagine if you’re starved to death and I give you a meal—I’m giving you life, right? You see, if God reveals Himself to you with 2,000 tons of grace in heaven, it doesn’t compare to the 1 pound of revelation here. You know, it’s more life-giving, it comes from a higher place.”



Some Westerners regard meditation as something strange and exotic imported from the East by gurus and enthusiastically espoused by the young. But according to Shlomo (who admits he is not an expert on Eastern traditions) meditation is basic and intrinsic to the Jewish tradition since the time of Abraham. He defines meditation as “feeling the aloneness with God.”

“For us meditation is like sitting down somewhere, or standing maybe, being alone with God. One holy rabbi says: ‘I could not live without at least every three hours having two minutes with God alone.’ Like imagine you love somebody very much—you want to be alone with them sometimes.”

Shlomo adds that when you’re on a high level you can sit with 2,000 people and still be alone with God. He told us there are three levels of meditation: “When I begin there is the world, there’s I, and there’s God. I reach a higher level of meditation—there is just me and God. Then I reach the level where there is only God.”

We asked Shlomo to explain the difference between prayer and meditation: “Praying is: I am there and I am asking God. It’s still “I”, a little bit of “I”, a holy “I”.... Meditation is like slowly, slowly, you’re not asking, you’re not begging, you’re just being with God.”

For Shlomo, the important thing is union with God. We realized that many of today’s Jewish youth are seeking meditation in other traditions because they, too, are longing for oneness with God, but have found that the Judaic tradition they grew up in seemed to hold itself more important in itself than as a vehicle for union with God. The rituals had become mechanical and without immediacy.

Shlomo quotes Maimonides, who says that “Any person in the world—the lowest, the highest—if he wants to turn to God he is the holy of holiest already. So God’s gates are always open; just *our* gates are sometimes closed.”

**“You know, there are three kinds
of friends in the world.
An ordinary person sees
only what you are;
for that you don’t need a friend.
Then there’s a friend
who sees in you what you can be.
And then there’s
the real holy Friend, and the
presence of this Friend
you are already.”**

We questioned Shlomo about the spiritual life of modern Israel. He replied, “Right now whatever is going on in Israel on the spiritual level is absolutely underground.” Shlomo explained that unless you are living on the underground you won’t feel it.

“It’s very strange that everything holy, when it’s growing it’s covered, like an apple tree, till it comes out from the earth.”

He gave as an example the activity around the holy wall.

“Absolutely the holiest people are coming down there, but not when the establishment goes... They are there at 4:00 in the morning. He told us of the great Kabbalist, Reb Gedalia Kenick, one of the holiest people Shlomo knows. But you wouldn’t know of him unless someone took you to him.

Shlomo spends his summers in Israel and his winters in New York and traveling around. To him: “Israel has not really been taking its place on the level of the New Age... I always say San Francisco is the land of tomorrow and Jerusalem is the land of the day after tomorrow. Israel’s real spiritual life is still on the underground, but it’s becoming more and more open. The people who talk in the name of Israel only talk in the name of politics and outside unimportant things. And even religion... the rabbis should forgive me, I would pay them off and they should go to Bermuda and leave Israel in peace.... But inside there’s a whole generation growing up who are ready for the highest and the deepest. More and more kids are coming to Israel and they’re looking for their spiritual roots. And they’re finding them.”

Many young people today, in Israel and elsewhere, feel that you don’t need any religion, and that in the New Age all religions will be transcended. Shlomo doesn’t believe this is true. “I don’t believe you can be a total human being without feeling God.”

But for him there are three levels of religion:

“There is one level, the lowest level, that says: my religion is the only one and you’re a pagan—you’re bad. Then there’s a higher level that says: All religions are one. But in the third level, which is the highest, they’re not one. On the contrary, they’re completely different. You see, the world, until the last few years, was on the level where every person says: Your religion’s ridiculous. So slowly, slowly, the world gets to this second level, and a lot of kids think that the Aquarian level is to reach the second level: that all religions are one so we don’t need any religions. But as far as I’m concerned, the real Aquarian Age is to reach the third level—that everybody is really doing it the way it was handed over from their roots

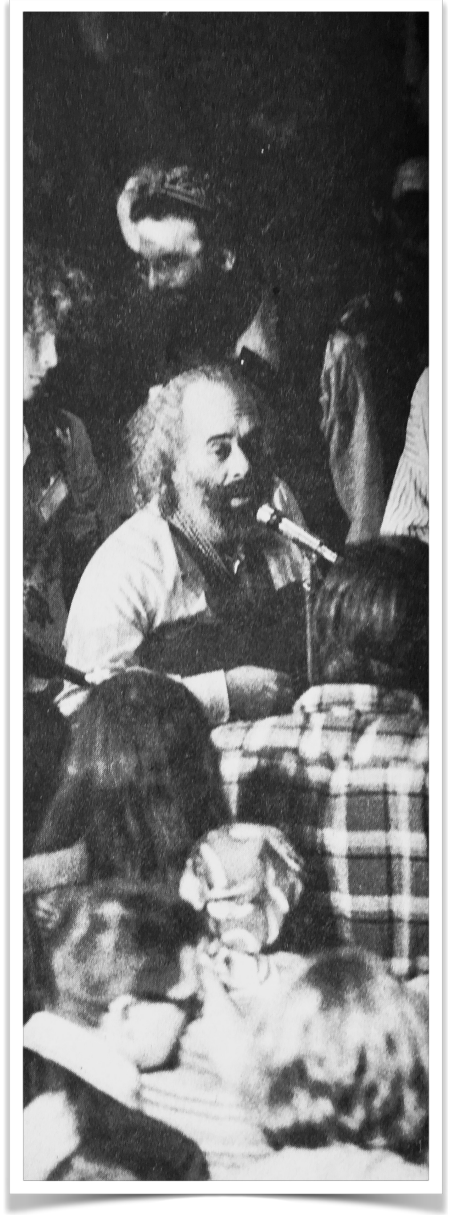
—and the holiness is that we’re building God’s palace from all four sides. Maybe I will build the south side and somebody else will build the west side, but between all of us we are rebuilding the world.”

The last time Michael and I saw Shlomo was in a friend’s apartment immediately after the Symposium had ended. We had managed to skip out on the numerous other parties that began to bubble spontaneously, but we somehow found ourselves drawn to the small apartment overlooking the Vancouver shoreline.

Shlomo was telling story after story about the Jewish rabbis. It was 3:00 o’clock in the morning. He was surrounded by young, eager faces. They longed to understand, as we did, what their Jewishness meant in the context of what the other speakers were saying; in the context of macrobiotics, Hopi prophecy, the Living Love Center, Stephen Gaskin’s communal Farm, Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome, Findhorn, and the Sufi Order...

The stars were dancing in the space beyond the sparkling city lights. We felt the vast distance of empty space between the stars inside of ourselves. And through the large picture window, Shlomo’s reflection came back superimposed over the image of the lighted city and the dancing stars, and the young faces, including our own, hungry for a taste of God.

And as I fell asleep that night, I seemed to hear Shlomo’s voice singing again through the veil that sleep was laying over my soul:



**“Let it be in our lifetime
Let it be in the lifetime of our children
Let it be today
Let it be tonight
Let it be!
Let it be!
Let it be for the glory....
for the honor... of one God...”**

I found myself praying.... The next thing I knew the light was creeping through my window.





Credits:

Photos of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: Guru Sangat Singh and Steve Thomas

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May this offering bring inspiration to all who meet or remember Reb Shlomo's teachings through these pages. May his wisdom, joy, and love come alive in your hearts, and his memory be for blessing.

In gratitude,
Michelle Levey, co-founder, WisdomAtWork
<http://WisdomAtWork.com>