

CAN WE STILL SING CARLEBACH?

HOW DO WE RESPOND TO PUBLIC DISCLOSURES OF ABUSE?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Buchdahl examines God's instruction to the Israelites to mark their doorposts:

Exodus 12

(3) Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household. (4) But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat. (5) Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. (6) You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. (7) They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. (8) They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. (9) Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted—head, legs, and entrails—over the fire. (10) You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it. (11) This is how you shall

ג (דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר)
 בַּעֲשֹׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שְׂגֵה
 לְבֵית-אָבִת שְׂגֵה לְבֵית: ד (וְאִם-יִמְעָט
 הַבֵּית מִהֵלֶת מִשְׂגֵה וְלָקַח הוּא וְשִׁכְנוֹ הַקָּרֵב
 אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִכְסֹת נִפְשֹׁת אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוֹ
 תִּכְסּוּ עַל-הַשְׂגֵה: ה) (שְׂגֵה תְּמִים זָכָר בֶּן-
 שָׁנָה יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם מִן-הַכֹּבָשִׁים וּמִן-הָעִזִּים
 תִּקְחוּ: ו) (וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת עַד אַרְבַּעַה
 עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וְשִׁחֲטוּ אֹתוֹ כָּל קֵתֶל
 עַדְת-יִשְׂרָאֵל בֵּין הָעֶרְבָיִם: ז) (וְלָקַחוּ מִן-
 הַדָּם וַנִּתְּנוּ עַל-שַׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וְעַל-הַמַּשְׁקוּף
 עַל הַבְּתָיִם אֲשֶׁר-יֵאָכְלוּ אֹתוֹ בָּהֶם: ח)
 וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה צְלִי-אֵשׁ
 וּמִצּוֹת עַל-מְרָרִים יֵאָכְלוּ: ט) (אֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ
 מִמֶּנּוּ נָא וּבָשָׂל מִבָּשָׂל בְּמַיִם כִּי אִם-צְלִי-
 אֵשׁ רֹאשׁוֹ עַל-כַּרְעֵיו וְעַל-קַרְבּוֹ: י) (וְלֹא-
 תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר וְהַנֶּתֶר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר
 בָּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרְפוּ: יא) (וְכִכָּהֵן תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ
 מִתְּנִיכֶם חֲגָרִים גַּעְלִיכֶם בְּרִגְלֵיכֶם וּמִקְלַכֶּם
 בְּיַדְכֶם וְאִכְלֵתֶם אֹתוֹ בְּחַפְזוֹן פֶּסַח הוּא
 לִיהוָה: יב) (וְעִבְרָתִי בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלָה
 הַזֶּה וְהִפִּיתִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם

eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly: it is a passover offering to the LORD. (12) For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the LORD. (13) And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

וְעַד-בֹּהֶמָה וּבְכָל-אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם אֲעַשֶׂה
שְׁפָטִים אֲנִי יְהוָה) יִג (וְהָיָה הַדָּם לְכֶם לְאֹת
עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׁם וְרָאִיתִי אֶת-
הַדָּם וּפָסַחְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא-יְהִיֶּה בְכֶם נֶגֶף
לְמַשְׁחִית בְּהַכְתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם::

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What sacrifice is required of the Israelites in this passage? What do they have to gain? What do they have to lose?
- (b) What does it mean that the blood on the houses “shall be a sign for you”?
- (c) Why do the Israelites comply with God’s command? What enables them to do so?

Rabbi Buchdahl highlights that it is not for God’s sake that the Israelites are asked to do this:

Rashi, the famous 12th-century commentator asks why this signaling is necessary--Isn’t God all-Knowing and All-Seeing? Does God really need blood on a doorpost to know where the Israelites lived? Rashi answers this question by saying that the blood was not a sign for God--but rather a sign for the Israelites themselves.

The slaves needed to mark *themselves*. *To be brave enough to identify as one of the oppressed*. Only then could there be hope for liberation. Imagine how risky it must have felt to do so--making their resistance public. The Israelites had been enslaved and abused. How could they trust that if they identified themselves, that this would truly free them? And what if they marked themselves and nothing happens--and the powerful Egyptians wake up the next day and take note of this rebellion in their midst and punish them?

This is an ancient story of oppression and the yearning for freedom. But it’s also a modern one--playing out in our day. For many generations, the plagues of sexual harassment, violence, degrading comments and assault have oppressed women and men in our society. Frequently, it was the most powerful people in the land who

perpetrated this abuse. But too often, when a brave person “marked her doorpost,” came forward and sought her liberation, we passed over her. Or worse, we didn’t believe her. We called her a liar. Or we believed her and *still* did nothing. For too long, those who were willing to step forward did not find freedom or justice, but indifference and sometimes even ridicule and punishment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What sacrifice is required of those who come forward to report sexual abuse? What do they stand to gain? What do they stand to lose?
- (b) What do you think has enabled women to come forward in greater numbers in recent months?
- (c) What role does belonging to a community of others who will also “paint their doorposts” play in the ability to come forward?

In her sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl acknowledges that the Jewish community has not always responded to claims and assertions of sexual misconduct. In speaking about the conversation that has begun at Central Synagogue, she talked about the influence and omnipresence of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s music and her evolving position with regards to singing his music:

[T]here is probably no songwriter more ubiquitous on our cue sheets, than Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. He wrote the melodies [we use for] Shiru Ladonai. L’Cha Dodi. Return Again. Am Yisrael Chai. Literally hundreds of songs. And not just at Central Synagogue, but every kind of Jew, from Reform, to Orthodox to secular, sings his music. Carlebach was a larger-than-life charismatic spiritual leader who championed women in Orthodox Jewish leadership and wrote the soundtrack of the Jewish world of the last century.

He also sexually molested dozens of women for decades, some as young as 12 years old.

Even in college I had heard talk of his behavior. And twenty years ago, a few years after Carlebach’s death, Lilith magazine published a well-documented report of his history of sexual abuse with testimonies from many women. I read this. Was horrified. And did nothing. I kept singing his music.

I justified it: Great art often comes from very complicated, flawed people. You can separate the art from the artist. And once created, art has a life of its own. I remember Rabbi Carlebach, whom I saw perform when I was a college student, would always correct the audience if they sang even *one note* in his melodies incorrectly. He would say, “If it were MY melody, I wouldn’t mind, but this is not how I *received* it from God.” You may hear that as the statement of an enlightened prophet or an egotistical false-

messiah. But I agree with his fundamental point: *that he was merely the messenger*. A divine gift flowed through Carlebach in his music. So I felt comfortable singing his music for decades, even as I knew his past, because his songs were bigger than him.

But this #metoo moment shook me from my certainty. I recently read an article from a woman whose mother had been molested by Carlebach as a young woman. She shared what it felt like to walk into any synagogue, any Jewish camp and to *always* hear the music of the man who sexually assaulted her. Carlebach's misconduct was well known and the indifferent response of the Jewish community communicated: "It's not that we don't believe you. It's that we don't care." She said this inaction fundamentally damaged her trust in Jewish institutions.

Al Cheyt. I too am responsible. She had stepped forward, put blood on her doorpost and I felt we could not pass over her again.

And yet, I still believe that art and the artist can be separated. And that we would impoverish our culture if we banned or silenced all the great art that came from people who behaved badly. So what to do?

This discussion was not just about Carlebach but the larger principle. Our clergy team began this conversation in earnest last month. And we brought it to our Board of Trustees and had a vigorous conversation which did not lead to a consensus, but did surface many important views. I had this conversation with Mishkan, our new intimate Shabbat morning service in December and with our livestreamers who were very engaged. And I also discussed this with Neshama Carlebach, Shlomo Carlebach's daughter, whose life's work has been intimately connected with her father's legacy and who supports this conversation and our efforts to heal some of these wounds.

In the end, our senior leadership felt that our responsibility in this moment was education, not erasure. We decided to take a year moratorium on singing any Carlebach melodies at Central Synagogue. And that we would speak and teach about why we are doing so. We hope this communicates to those who have been victimized by Carlebach, that we hear you, and we are not indifferent. In this coming year, we will see what new music emerges in the vacuum that is created with Carlebach gone. And when we bring his melodies back to Central, it will feel different, because our sound will have changed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you believe that "the art and the artist can be separated"?
- (b) Does it matter that Carlebach is no longer alive? That many of his victims are still alive?

- (c) Does it make a difference that we use Carlebach's tunes in communal prayer, as opposed to listening to them as "art"?
- (d) What do you think of Central's decision to declare a moratorium on Carlebach's music?

Carlebach's daughter, Neshama, wrote a blog post in the *Times of Israel* about the controversy over the continued use of her father's work:

Human beings are complex, the questions of life are complex, the healing is real, and the pain is real. There is no hiding from all these truths. My father, a soul who saw sisters and brothers cut down by the Nazis, who jumped straight from the insular Yeshiva world of his childhood into the boundaryless free-love world of Berkeley in the late 60s, who revolutionized Jewish music forever and embraced every human being, was complicated too. . . .

Sometime in the late 70s, my father was involved in an intervention staged by women who were hurt by him. He came, even knowing the content of the conversation that was to happen. And when they told him that his actions and behavior had hurt them, he cried and said, "Oy this needs such a fixing." I do believe that the actions, advocacy work and the way he raised his daughters in the last years of his life showed remarkable listening and personal accountability.

I accept the fullness of who my father was, flaws and all. I am angry with him. And I refuse to see his faults as the totality of who he was.

When I talk about my shifting perspective, I believe it must be said that I do not recognize the version of my father that some people describe. To me, he was the kindest, most respectful, most loving person to my friends and me. I myself witnessed him as a deeply passionate supporter of the role of women as leaders. The year my father passed away, he was taken to Jewish court (beit din) by his own synagogue, furious that he had dared to allow me to sing beside him. Before I even knew that it was important, my father was shouting to the world that women must have the place to share their voices and be heard. He was one the first to support Anat Hoffman and the Women of the Wall. He trained and ordained women as rabbis far ahead of any of the recent advances for women we've witnessed during the past decade within Modern Orthodoxy. I don't believe he understood how his voice would change the fabric of women's prayer, but I believe that he hoped and prayed that the tides would shift.

That he did not live to see all that would come from these acts of radical love brings me great sadness. What might he have witnessed during these past 23 years since his death that could have pushed him to translate his public commitments to women's equality into choices he made as a person? Who knows the apologies he might have made, if he might have been granted the chance to offer the public acknowledgements so many only called for upon his passing, if only he had been able to give more years to repair the world around him as a man brave enough to ask for forgiveness. I wish he had had that chance, and that he could have been part of the healing he necessitated, a healing he would have been particularly equipped to offer. I would have had the chance to ask my own questions, and perhaps to hear what he would have said in response. . . .

There is an international debate happening at this very moment over the fate and worthiness of my father's life and work. I wish he could weigh in. I wish he could respond. I can only watch and assess our broken world. As my father himself said, we have to laugh with one side of our heart and cry with the other. That his life, music and actions prompt both laughter and tears will likely not cease in our lifetimes.

We, as human beings, try to strive for closure. That's a natural inclination. But to try to find peace and closure with something that will never be clear nor closed has been – and will likely remain – painful and confusing. My choice is to stand here. To not run away.

And this is why we need to sing and hope even more than before. Finding songs to propel us is essential, now more than ever. If there were no songs, we would sing anyway. We'd find a way. My father's music has been a salve for many and a trigger for others. In the end, those who feel healed by the music I bring – my own and my father's – will be blessed by that. In the end those who feel that they did not want to include it in their repertoire will not include it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Does Carlebach's work on behalf of women alter your perspective on the use of his work?
- (b) How can or should we resolve this issue, given that Carlebach can no longer make amends?

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

The question of what to include in our worship is not a new one. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis discuss whether certain controversial parts of the Torah -- like the account of Judah's illicit relationship with Tamar in Genesis 38 -- should be read in public and translated so everyone can understand. (Some texts are not read at all, while others are read but not translated). With regard to that story, the Talmud says:

The incident of Tamar . . . and Judah is read and translated. . . . Lest you say that one should be concerned for the honor of Judah [which might be harmed by the public reading of this text], there is no such concern. On the contrary, the story is to his credit, as he confessed to his sin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Think back to your answers in the opening exercise. Does your willingness to accept the work of an artist accused of sexual misconduct depend on whether he or she has "confessed"? Is apologizing sufficient? Or should some other amends required?
- (b) If Judah had not confessed, would that make a difference? Does the context matter?