

Facing a Mixed Legacy

First Carlebach conference to grapple with issue of abuse head on; opposition to street naming.

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As the 10th anniversary of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's death nears, his family and followers are working on a tribute to the charismatic man whose guitar-strumming, story-telling and bear-hugging approach to Judaism inspired a worldwide spiritual outreach movement that continues to thrive.



But the first international conference on his legacy may be tempered by past allegations — some dating back decades — that the pioneering rabbi harassed or abused women, although no such accusation was brought publicly while he was alive.

The Awareness Center, a Baltimore-based advocacy group for Jewish victims of sexual abuse, has issued a "call to action" against efforts to rename an Upper West Side street Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach Way.

And in planning the three-day international conference here in late October to commemorate the rabbi's teachings, Carlebach followers seem to be tackling the issue head-on by scheduling a session on boundaries between rabbis and their disciples.

Rabbi Naftali Citron, leader of the Carlebach Shul in Manhattan, which is organizing the conference, would not say if the session stemmed from the allegations, but cited increasing attention to the issue of relationships between clergy and their flocks.

"This is more the reality of what is going on in the last few years," Rabbi Citron said. "Sometimes people get very close to their spiritual leaders."

He said other sessions at the conference would include workshops on spiritual activism, how to start a Carlebach minyan, and new and old chasidic teachings.

Rabbi Citron said it was unfair to allege improper behavior after Rabbi Carlebach's death.

"Reb Shlomo was a great man, and it pains me that different things are being said about him when he is not here to defend himself," Rabbi Citron said. "People could have come forward when he was alive to talk about what he did or didn't do."

Amy Neustein, a sociologist who studies abuse in the Orthodox community, said until recently a perception of futility has kept such abuse victims from speaking out, as in the case of many religious communities.

"They tend to hide their victimization because the community has hitherto been unresponsive to their plight," said Neustein, who contacted The Jewish Week in response to an e-mail from the Awareness Center. "What they often do is sacrifice their victims on the altar of shame."

Allegations of impropriety by Rabbi Carlebach first became public four years after his death in a 1998 story in the feminist journal Lilith. The article claimed that he "sexually harassed or abused" women over the course of a Jewish outreach career spanning four decades.

In the article, several women spoke of encounters with Rabbi Carlebach involving inappropriate contact or behavior. Others said they heard from other women about such experiences.

According to Lilith, a group of Jewish women confronted the rabbi about his behavior in a private meeting in Berkeley, Calif., in the early 1980s and, after initially denying a problem, he declared, "Oy, this needs such a fixing," said participants.

Rabbi Carlebach split from the Lubavitch movement in the 1950s, rejecting the strict separation of the sexes, and forged a brand of celebratory Judaism that encouraged the participation of women. Across the country today, his presence is felt in rousing Carlebach Shabbat ceremonies rich in song and dance at Modern Orthodox and other congregations.

He was known for literally embracing his followers, male and female — an untraditional practice among Orthodox rabbis.

"It was a different time, a different way, a hippie kind of generation," said Rabbi Citron, a former student of Rabbi Carlebach. "It was no secret that he hugged and kissed women, and got plenty of flack from the religious community. From what I know of him he would never knowingly ever hurt somebody."

But Vicki Polin, director of the Awareness Center in Baltimore, which is dedicated to addressing childhood sexual abuse in Jewish communities around the world, believes that renaming a street in honor of Rabbi Carlebach would be insensitive to those who have made allegations against him.

"They also deserve to have a voice," Polin said. "It would be very difficult for them to walk down a street and see that it was named after him."

Polin's Web site features a page on Rabbi Carlebach's history, including the Lilith article.

Penny Ryan, district manager of Community Board 7 in Manhattan, which must approve the name change before it is submitted to the City Council, said Tuesday that she had received several calls on the matter.

"We asked them to come to the committee meeting when it will be discussed," Ryan said.

The meeting will be held Tuesday night at the community board's office.

City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, whose district includes the Carlebach Shul on West 79th Street, where the street would be renamed, said she had been unaware of the allegations against the rabbi until Tuesday, when she heard from the community board about the calls.

"I will go to the hearing and listen," Brewer said. "There will be discussions. I'd like to hear what everybody has to say. I know the daughters and the rabbi and I know they are good people."

Carlebach's daughters, Neshama and Dari, have started an online petition to support the name change.

"We have been given the opportunity to rename West 79th Street from Broadway to Riverside Drive in his name, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach Way," reads an introduction on the petition. "It is only too appropriate to honor him in this way, to forever remember how he changed lives as he walked up and down this street."

A call to Neshama Carlebach, who has followed in her father's footsteps as an inspirational singer, was returned by a family friend, Corey Baker.

"It's too early, on such a sensitive issue, to be giving a comment," Baker said.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram, one of the women who told Lilith she was molested by the rabbi — in her case at a summer camp when she was 14 — said she would not oppose the street renaming in his honor.

"There are many public figures who had significant shadow sides," said Rabbi Milgram, an author and teacher in Woodstock, N.Y. "It is not for us to remove the places they have earned with their work but to rejoice in the good they have done, to provide opportunities for healing those who were hurt and not denying their pain."

Naomi Mark, a Manhattan psychotherapist and longtime student of Rabbi Carlebach who will participate in the boundaries panel at the conference, said the rabbi "never wanted to be a flawless guru."

As the 10th anniversary of his passing approached, Mark said she hoped Rabbi Carlebach would be remembered for his ability to empathize and inspire.

"He really understood our lives and the sense of alienation people sometimes feel living in the modern world, trying to juggle spirituality and Judaism in the context of the many contradictions they feel," Mark said. "He understood what those struggles are like and that's what made him different from other traditional rebbes."