

Grapevine: Writing about the Singing Rabbi By GREER FAY CASHMAN 11/09/2013 17:47

AUDIENCES AT Carlebach concerts are almost always of a wide-ranging age group, with the younger generations in the majority. Last Saturday night at the OU Center in Jerusalem, in contrast, there were a few young people, but the overwhelming majority were senior citizens, some of them members of the peer generation of Carlebach – who was born in 1925 and died in 1994.

The reason for the gathering was the official launch of the most recent of Carlebach biographies – this one by Dr. Natan Ophir (Offenbacher), published by Urim Publications whose founder Tzvi Mauer was present to help with sales. Also helping out were photographer and graphic artist Michael Horton who illustrated the cover and photographed the evening's proceedings and singer-accordionist Howie Kahn, who for five years in the first half of the 1970s was Carlebach's accordionist and appeared with him in concert halls throughout North America and Israel. Ophir was pleasantly surprised to find a full house well before starting time, and Kahn commented that if the evening had been billed as a Carlebach concert rather than a book launch, it would have started at least an hour late. Ophir spent years amassing, verifying and researching material for the book which he described as a micro history in that so many of the anecdotes about Carlebach's life and events in which he participated were supplied by people whose lives he had touched. Carlebach's daughter Neshama, believes it to be one of the most comprehensive biographies about her father that anyone has written to date, and writes in a foreword that Ophir's portrayal will now enable others to fill in the spaces.

Constantly afraid that he'd missed out on an important story or that he had included material that might be inaccurate, Ophir was en-

couraged by his parents Prof. Eliezer and Dr. Esther Offenbacher to go ahead and publish and make whatever corrections might be necessary in the second edition or in the Hebrew one which is due to come out in a few months.

Ophir asked how many people in the audience had personally known Carlebach and nearly all the hands shot up.

Throughout the evening, people eagerly interrupted Ophir's power point presentation to contribute anecdotes related to the material on screen. In fact, he was inundated with so much material that he said he might have to have another evening in which he would simply record what people remember about their personal relationships with Carlebach. There were people present who said that it was because of Carlebach that they had become religiously observant. Towards the end of the evening, Kahn again mounted the stage to sing and play a series of Carlebach medleys, and admitted to owning every Carlebach long playing record that had ever been distributed. He held up some of the record covers, two of which were autographed. He still goes back to the old country to perform and said that Carlebach has become a bigger phenomenon in death than in life and even has an impact on people who never knew him. Quite a few of the people who did know him, did not allow advancing age to stop them from dancing when Kahn was playing. From the expressions on their faces it was easy to guess that they were back in the 1960s and 1970s. Ophir credited Carlebach with inventing the spiritual weekend retreat known as a Shabbaton, and was adamant that there were none until Carlebach introduced them. Many of the contributors to stories in the book also supplied Ophir with photos. Others he took from the Government Press Office including one

taken of a Carlebach audience in Ariel on Israel Independence Day, 1981. Sitting in the front row alongside each other and applauding are Menachem Begin and David Levy.



*Howie Kahn provided the musical interludes.
Photo: Mike Horton*