

# 19

## Fixing the Heart

*House of Love and Prayer – June 1968*

*I watch Shlomo's lips moving* and try to understand what he's saying.

In the dancing light of a hundred candles, people are pressed together in the prayer room with arms around each other, two hundred of us, swaying like leaves on a single tree, blown gently back and forth by the winds of heaven. We seem to be dancing with the candlelight. The room is filled with the silence, punctuated only by the sounds of breathing, and an occasional creak from the floor. Young men with long hair, young women with longer hair, dancing waves of color, kippahs, shawls, panchos, serapes, beads, rainbows, and tie-died mandalas.

I can see Moishe and Maxine, and Marv and Bernice dressed more conventionally, with all of their kids, standing in the outer circle.

Efraim is on my right. His eyes are closed as he sways from side to side with great intensity, shoulders tight, slightly hunched over, dancing to a different rhythm. I touch his shoulder lightly, so I can connect with him even as my body is swaying with the rest of the circle. He smells like patchouli oil, the way Shlomo smells on *Shabbos*.

Shlomo, standing on Efraim's right, is rocking forward and back, his hands clasped in front of him, lips moving very rapidly, silently. He is wearing a freshly starched white shirt, accented with several strings of colorful beads around his neck, and dark suit pants. His eyes look out through half-closed lids, rapidly scanning the room.

I see Sarah standing in the wide doorway at the entrance to the prayer room. Ever since we met last fall there's been a spark between us. I've been trying my best to pretend that what I feel for her is the same as what I feel for the other women at the House. She smiles at me and then looks away.

It's only been two months since I moved in and we opened our doors, seven weeks since Ruthie joined me, and six weeks since Efraim and Leah arrived. Everything's been happening so quickly. Shlomo has added the House of Love and Prayer to his business cards. He hands them out wherever he goes and invites everyone to come for *Shabbos*.

We've just been singing and dancing *Lekha Dodi* for the holy Shabbos Bride. Her spirit is here in the room, filling us with love as we all hold each other. We don't need prayer books, because Shlomo is saying the prayers for all of us. He doesn't need a book because all of it is engraved in his memory. The prayer book, and the entire Torah, is inside Shlomo and pours forth from him effortlessly. Maybe if we stay with him and open ourselves enough, the Torah will pour into us, and will be inside of us too.

"Rabbi Carlebach!" Even more jarring than the sound, even more than the loudness breaking the silence, is the accent. Businesslike, demanding, intrusive, like the cold light of a policeman's flashlight startling a young couple in a car.

I look up toward toward the doorway in the back. There is a man in his fifties, just a little older than my father, slim, medium height, with grey hair, wearing a dark business suit, glasses, and a black knit *kippah*. The contrast between this dark figure and the rainbow of people in the room couldn't be starker. He is standing very still and straight, looking right at Shlomo. The room is quiet.

Moving himself between worlds, as though being dragged out of a dream, Shlomo stops davening and looks up. "Yeah?"

"Rabbi Carlebach, what are you doing?"

Shlomo looks at him uncomprehendingly. "What do you mean?"

The man waves his arm, gesturing at all of us in the room, as though the transgression were too obvious, and too grievous, to even be mentioned. "This! You're an Orthodox rabbi. You should know better!"

The swaying of the circles has stopped. All eyes are on Shlomo. The room is silent.

"What is your name?" he asks the man. He sounds genuinely interested, curious.

"My name is Irving Solomon," he says, "and I'm president of an Orthodox *shul* here in town. Rabbi Carlebach," he says, gesturing again at all of us, "you know that boys and girls, men and women touching each other like this—this isn't really Judaism. You know

that men and women have to be separated during prayer! Why aren't you showing them the real thing?"

Shlomo's eyes are open very wide. I've been learning how to lead services by watching him, and by watching Efraim. It's about working with the energy in the room so people can experience oneness with each other. It's not so hard when everyone is with you, supporting you. But how do you bring forth the spirit of love and harmony and oneness when someone is challenging you? Everyone is looking at these two men.

No one moves for what seems like a long time. Finally Shlomo steps toward the man. "Why are you standing so far away, my friend?" he says. "Why don't you come a little closer?" The people standing near him step back, and a path appears between him and Shlomo. Irving Solomon looks around a little hesitantly, and then steps forward. The two of them are standing in the middle of the room, facing each other. We're all standing still. The room is silent.

Shlomo looks at everyone around the room. "Listen to me my friends," he says. "This is very important. I want you to meet my friend Irving Solomon. And I want you to know that this is *mammash* the sweetest *Yid* in the world." Irving Solomon, alone and isolated in his dark suit, looks at the rainbow sea around him, then back at Shlomo.

"You know, you're right," Shlomo says to him. "But some things are more important than being right."

"Imagine if a patient comes into the emergency room, God forbid, with a heart attack, and the doctor says, 'His toenails are crooked; I better straighten them out.' What would you say? Stupid, right?" Shlomo's voice gets higher and louder. His eyes are bulging. "Today we're losing a whole generation of our children! Their hearts and souls are literally dying. And what does the so-called 'Jewish establishment' say? They want to straighten-out their toe nails!"

He looks around at all of us. We still have our arms around each other. The flickering lights from a hundred candles dance all over the ceiling. Shlomo's voice is softer now. "Maybe some day we'll have time to take our kids and work on their toe nails," he says. "I don't know. But right now we have something more important to do. We have to *mammash* connect with their hearts."

All eyes are now on Irving Solomon. Standing by himself in the middle of the room, he looks around uncertainly. Efraim looks over at me and smiles. The room is silent. Irving takes off his jacket. He carefully folds it over his arm, and looks around for a place to put it. Maxine steps up behind him and says something to him. He hands

her the jacket. He looks again at Shlomo, then around the room at all of us. No one says anything. He takes off his tie, carefully folding it and putting it in his pocket. Now he has on a white shirt with an open collar, just like Shlomo. Shlomo looks at him and smiles. As he steps back toward the circle, a young man and a young woman step sideways to make room for him. Irving Solomon puts one arm around each of them. Leah is standing toward the back of the room, her hands clasped together, her eyes looking upward, sighing.

Shlomo starts a soft melody, and we all begin singing. The melody is slow, gentle. It gradually gets more energetic and faster. Soon we're dancing again. The floor of the prayer room bounces up and down as we jump. The Queen is back in the room, shining, dancing with us all. Oneness and love radiate everywhere. Although it's very late, the room is filled with energy, enough for two hundred people to keep dancing for a long, long time. We dance; then we stop and hum softly, or just stand in silence for a while; then we dance again. Somehow, in a way where I'm only partly aware of it, Shlomo manages to slip in all the Friday night *Shabbos* prayers.

Around 1:30 in the morning Shlomo tells us it's time for *Kiddush*. He asks Irving to stand next to him. Leah makes her way through the crowd carrying a silver tray with a silver wine goblet and a square bottle of Manischewitz wine.

I look up and see Donna standing at the back of the room. How long has she been there? She is by herself, a little detached from everyone else, looking around at people, taking it all in. I wave to her. She smiles and waves back.

The door to the House suddenly opens. Entering in a swirl of color and sparkles, her shawl not quite concealing her nightclub dancer's outfit, as though making a grand entrance and suddenly discovering she's on the wrong stage, Ruthie enters the scene. Irving Solomon looks over at her, his mouth open. Ruthie has just got a job dancing at a club in North Beach. She must be out early tonight. I wave to her. As she takes in the scene and realizes that this is a quiet point in the middle of *Shabbos* prayers, she looks around sheepishly and puts a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle.

Shlomo looks up, recognizes her and smiles. "Sweetest thing, darling," he says. "Why don't you come and joins us for *Kiddush*?" Ruthie, who seems to be half embarrassed, half enjoying herself, smiles back at Shlomo, shakes her head "No," smiles and waves at everyone in the room, and makes her exit. I can hear her lightly running up the stairs.