

Leonard Cohen

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Congregation B'nai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

It was sometime during my years in high school in the early 1970's in Rochester New York that I first heard of Leonard Cohen, the singer and songwriter from Montreal. Of course I was interested, since he had the same last name as I did. That meant a number of things. First, on some level it meant that maybe we were distantly related. Secondly, it meant that he was Jewish. And third, that he wasn't bothered by having a very Jewish last name; he didn't change his name as most Jewish performers did even in those days.

While his name interested me, though, what little I heard of his music really did not. His most famous song back in those days was Suzanne, which basically sounded deeply depressed....and had lines like "Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water." And I thought to myself, "what kind of Jew writes songs about Jesus?" I was similarly bothered by Paul Simon's line "Well here's to you Mrs. Robinson, Jesus loves you more than you will know...." But there was so much that I loved about Simon and Garfunkle that I could overlook that line. Leonard Cohen, though, just sounded depressed and kind of pretentious when he sang: "You've touched her perfect body with your mind." So I didn't really pay any attention to him.

Then I went to Israel in 1979 as a rabbinic student and in a conversation with my cousin Benny....who is an Israeli about my age, raised in Tel Aviv....Benny asked me if I liked Leonard Cohen, and declared that in his opinion, Cohen was a navi, a prophet. And I thought to myself, "Typical Israeli! There's one singer/songwriter with a Jewish name and so of course they decide he's a prophet!" I just replied that I thought Cohen's music sounded depressing. And many more years passed....during most of the 1980's and 1990's, in fact, Leonard Cohen more or less out of view in the United States and in the late 1990's spent five years in a Zen monastery near LA.

A few years ago my daughter Rachel introduced me to an Israeli song with a reggae beat and mostly English words, called "Hebrew man," by Ehud Banai. It's an interesting song encouraging Jews around the world to learn to speak Hebrew, which talks about how God created the universe using Hebrew, and Moses said "Let my people go!" in Hebrew, and then has the following surprising line: "Speak up! The language of the Hebrew Man! You know Abraham spoke the language of the Hebrew Man, and also Jesus from Nazareth and Mary Magdaleine. Einstein, Jeremiah, the Dylan and the Cohen. They know something about the language of the Hebrew Man!" When I first heard that line, I thought to myself, "OK....I can see grouping Einstein with Jeremiah. And I realize that lots of people of a certain generation probably agree that Bob Dylan is sort of a prophet, but Leonard Cohen?!" Yet another Israeli who, like my cousin Benny, had latched on to this pop singer as a prophet because of his Jewish name!

The a couple of years ago Marian, my wife, went to a movie which was showing at Campbell Hall called "I'm Your Man"....a tribute film to Leonard Cohen, who is now 75 years old, in which dozens of famous singers sang songs that Cohen had written....and one after another of them declared him to be the most important musical influence in their life. And Marian, who had not listened to Cohen for the past 30 years, went right

out and bought the soundtrack of that film and also the two disk set “The Essential Leonard Cohen,” and went through that phase of not listening to anything or anybody else.

Somehow, she and Armando Quiros...our resident theologian and mystic...discovered that they were each going through this phase simultaneously and they started obsessively sharing Leonard Cohen music and lyrics with each other. One song in particular, “If it be your will,” written by Cohen and sung in the film by the singer Antony, had completely taken over our household and Marian would turn off all the lights and turn the stereo up loud and just sit in our big armchair and let that song fill the house and her body.

Now Marian and Armando are two of the deepest and wisest people I know and I realized that if they were this captivated there must be something I needed to reconsider. (Play “If it be your will”)

Now I know everyone has different tastes in music. Most of you either already know of Cohen, and either like him or not, or do not know about him and really have no need or desire to know more. But there are at least three of his songs which I think an American Jew should know about...whether you like them or not....and especially as Rosh Hashanah approaches. Because these are three Jewish songs written by Leonard Cohen the Jew, drawing on ancient Jewish language and ideas...and which have become popular with millions of people around the world, young and old, most of them not Jewish.

In 1974, this 40 year old singer from Jewish Montreal wrote a song that begins “Who by Fire? Who by water? Who in the sunshine? Who in the nighttime? Who by high ordeal, who by common trial....and goes on, with each verse ending with the wonderful question “and who shall I say is calling?” Almost one thousand years ago, according to Jewish legend, Rabbi Amnon of Mainz in Germany was punished for not converting to Christianity by having his hand and feet cut off, and as he was dying from his wounds, he had a vision of God sitting and writing in a book. In his dying hours, Rabbi Amnon wrote the prayer: Mi ba-esh umi-ba-mayim? Who by fire? And who by water? Those words entered the heart of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy and they entered the heart of young Leonard Cohen growing up in Montreal in the 1940’s...and he brought them to the world in his song “Who By Fire?”

Ten years later, in 1984, Cohen wrote a song that eventually was sung by more other artists than any other. It begins like this: “Now I’ve heard that there was a secret chord that David played, and it pleased the Lord. But you don’t really care for music, do you? It goes like this the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the major lift, the baffled king composing Hallelujah. Hallelujah. “Your faith was strong but you needed proof, you saw her bathing on the roof, her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you. She tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne and she cut your hair and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah. You say I took the name in vain; well I don’t even know the name, but if I did well, what’s it to you? There’s a blaze of light in every word, it doesn’t matter which you heard, the holy or the broken Hallelujah!” In his imagery of King David composing the secret chord, and seeing Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop...and mixing of the story of David with Samson and Delilah...and his blasphemous reflections on the hidden mysterious name, and the blaze of light in every word.....all of this language, and all this imagery,and the image of our beloved king David who sang

more than beautifully than any man but who was deeply flawed and broken. All of this could only have been written by a Jew, steeped in the stories of the Bible, and in the distinctively Jewish understanding of the divine light hidden in all words.

Finally, in 1992, Cohen wrote a song called Anthem in which the chorus echoes directly the ancient midrash about what God wants from us. Everything which God desires in animals, says the midrash, God does not care about in human beings. The ancient sacrificial animals had to be perfect, the Torah tells us...over and over again. But in human beings, the midrash quotes the Bible saying "God wants the person broken. A broken heart. A broken spirit." This is the essential message of this season, in which we remember that God does not expect us to be perfect...only to admit our imperfections. And in Anthem Cohen wrote "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There's a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Last week, on Thursday night, my family and I were driving home from Sequoia National Park, barreling down Route 5 and across on the 126 at night, in the dark, singing along with Leonard Cohen...all these songs and more. Marian, Rachel, Ari and I each have our own, very different views of God, and Judaism. Our kids are now 19 and 21. But the four of us were there together in the dark...singing Who By Fire, Hallelujah, If it be Your Will, Ring the Bells. It was one of the nicest moments we have had with our children in recent memory.

On Shabbat morning last week, I came into the small chapel at 9:00 for Torah study and found Armando waiting and I told him, "Armando, we sang Leonard Cohen driving home from our camping trip." He smiled and replied "There's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."

Shabbat Shalom.