LEONARD COHEN

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The Mystical Roots of Genius

Harry Freedman

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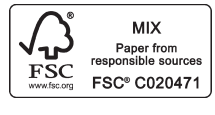
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For Dylan Lev, welcome to the world

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FOREWORD

Few contemporary songwriters have had their work dissected as minutely as Leonard Cohen. His lyrics have been picked apart innumerable times, in books and articles, on film and TV, in pubs, around dinner tables and on internet forums. PhD theses have been submitted exploring his philosophy, his impact on culture, his image as prophet and priest and much more. His work has been analysed from many different perspectives: psychologically, mystically, philosophically, spiritually, religiously and, not infrequently, incomprehensibly.

I have tried to do something different in this book. I have not attempted to guess what was going on in his mind when he wrote a particular song. He was said to be reluctant to encourage that. Nor have I dwelt in any greater depth on what motivated him. Rather, I have focused on his extensive use of biblical and religious traditions – ideas drawn from Judaism and Christianity that helped shape his identity and the way he made sense of the world. I have tried to demonstrate what his sources were, what their original context was, what the stories and ideas that lay behind them were and how Cohen harnessed them for his own purposes. The book is as much an exploration of his sources as of his work itself.

Leonard Cohen's work is so multifaceted that many of his songs are capable of more than one interpretation. Few of his pieces reflect a single theme, and hardly any originate from one idea alone. Most contain a wide range of images and allusions. Because this is a book about what lies behind his work, rather than an analysis of his compositions in their totality, I only look at those bits of his work which draw on the religious traditions the book explores. I skip lines or verses in the songs I am discussing if they do not contain this kind of material. The lines and verses that I discuss are printed in the text in bold type.

Cohen's knowledge of the Bible and religious folklore was profound: nearly everything he wrote contains something that touches on a religious idea, even if the song is in no way religious. It hasn't been practical to include all such glancing references. For example, *Tower of Song*, on the 1988 album *I'm Your Man*, is a humorous piece about a musician who is losing his mojo. There is nothing particularly religious about the song, other than the title, which refers to an obscure kabbalistic legend about seven towers in heaven, one of which was called the Tower of Song. King David was permitted to enter it, so long as he was singing.[1] We can assume that Cohen is referring to this legend, because he mentions twenty-seven angels who tie him to a table in the tower. But since there is nothing else to interest us mystically or religiously in the song, I haven't included it in the book.

For reasons of space I have not included any of the many poems that Cohen wrote. Not even *Book of Mercy*, his collection of psalms. I have concentrated on his music because that is

what most people know him for. Maybe one day someone may decide to do something similar with his poetry.

Because it is possible to interpret so much of Leonard Cohen's work in more than one way, the opinions I state in this book can only be my personal view. You probably won't agree with everything I write. In fact I hope you don't; his work always holds out the likelihood of new insights. But hopefully some of what I have written will strike a chord, encouraging you to think about Leonard Cohen's music in a novel fashion.

After an introductory chapter on Leonard Cohen's influences I have divided the book into four parts, with a certain amount of overlap between them. The first, 'Bible as Allegory', explores songs where he has reshaped a biblical narrative to give it a new meaning, often with a contemporary relevance. 'Ideas from the Bible' is where he challenges the Bible, or our understanding of it, compares different approaches and attaches new meanings to biblical themes we often take for granted. In 'Heaven and Earth' I look at the mystical traditions that evolved out of the Bible, to the mechanics of Creation and the mysteries of the human soul. And finally, 'Prayer' is just that: conversations with whatever we conceive of as above, whether that be a conventional idea of God or something more ethereal.

For reasons of copyright I have not been able to print every song in full as I discuss them. However, Leonard Cohen's lyrics are freely available in many different places on the internet, for example at Jarkko Arjatsalo's superb website leonardcohenfiles.com. You may wish to refer to it as you read this book.

I have tried as much as possible to avoid using technical language when describing the sources that lie behind Cohen's religious work. But there are a few terms that need to be explained. We will refer occasionally to the Talmud, or Talmudic stories. The Talmud is the ancient, 2-million-word, multi-volume repository of Jewish law, belief, customs, history, legend and folklore. It is the primary text of *rabbinic* Judaism, the Judaism found in synagogues today. Some rabbinic legends and folklore are contained in literary collections other than the Talmud; these collections are known as *midrash*. Finally, Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical tradition that goes back to biblical times but which reached the peak of its development between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Its most important text, compiled in twelfth-century Spain, is the Zohar. Kabbalah also found its way into Christianity and gained a new popularity in the secular New Age of the late twentieth century.

HALLELUJAH
Various Positions (1984)

Now I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord …

Leonard Cohen described *Hallelujah* as a song about a conflicted world, in which there are things that cannot be reconciled. Nevertheless, 'regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms … and you just say "Hallelujah!"'[16]

Far and away his most famous song, recorded by over 300 artists, *Hallelujah* took Cohen five years to write, during which he composed and discarded dozens of verses. He recorded it in 1984, on his album *Various Positions*, but the song didn't really have much of an impact until Jeff Buckley released a version ten years later. Then, in 2008, Alexandra Burke's gospel version won the ITV talent show *The X Factor*, and her record shot to number one in the UK charts. Jeff Buckley's version was immediately reissued, displacing the Burke version at the top, and Cohen's original 1984 recording came in at number 36. So, nearly 20 years after he began writing it, Cohen's own *Hallelujah* finally made the charts, accompanied by two cover versions.

The opening verse of *Hallelujah* is based on a biblical story about King David. David occupies an exalted place in Cohen's pantheon: in a 1994 interview Cohen described him, along with

Homer, Wordsworth, Milton and Dante, as 'the embodiment of our highest possibility'.[17] There are elements of self-identification here. King David and Leonard Cohen have much in common – both consummate musicians, players of stringed instruments, accomplished lovers and garlanded poets. The one thing they don't share is royalty; David may have been a king, but Cohen knew that, as a *cohen*, a member of the priestly Hebrew tribe, he could never sit on Israel's throne. Too much power may not be concentrated in one man's hands.[18]

A shared identity, then, as musicians, lovers and poets. In *Hallelujah*, Cohen addresses each of these aspects of their shared identity in turn and draws our attention to the irreconcilable conflicts they present.

Despite a career stained by extra-judicial killing, adultery and many fierce, bloody battles, King David is described in the book of Samuel as the 'sweet singer in Israel'. He is the progenitor of the eternal royal line in Israel; his throne, Jewish tradition declares, will one day be restored for all eternity. The Messiah – may he come speedily, but not before you finish this book – will be a direct descendant of David. The gospels of Matthew and Luke both trace Jesus' lineage through the male line back to David.

David is a complex and contradictory character. He makes his entrance onto the biblical stage when Saul, Israel's first king, begins to exhibit signs of instability. God tells the prophet Samuel, the nation's spiritual leader, to secretly anoint David, a Bethlehem shepherd, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, as Saul's successor. But Samuel is not to depose Saul yet.[19]

Shortly after this, Saul suffers a breakdown. He was never really cut out for leadership; he could not cope with the pressures of being king. His servants, believing he is troubled by an evil spirit, suggest that he get himself a musician, to play to him and soothe his nerves. One of his attendants tells him of a shepherd he has seen in Bethlehem, 'a musician, a mighty soldier, a man of war, intelligent, good looking and God is with him'. He means David.

Saul, who, with hindsight, should probably have paid more attention to the 'mighty soldier, man of war' bit, is enraptured by David's musical prowess, his charm and his good looks. David plucks his harp, Saul listens, and his terror of the evil spirit departs.

David joined Saul's court, killed Goliath and became best friends with the king's son Jonathan. The women loved the young, handsome warrior–musician David, they sang songs in his praise, and Saul grew increasingly jealous. Eventually David felt he had no choice but to flee the court. He lived for some years as a rebel chieftain with a band of followers. Adventure followed adventure until Saul and Jonathan were both killed in battle by the Philistines, Israel's long-standing enemy to the south. David emerged from hiding, the people acclaimed him and his destiny was fulfilled. He became king.

This is the biblical background to Cohen's song. It all took place before David played the secret chord.

A legend in the Talmud describes how, when he was king, David would wake up at midnight to play his harp. There is no mention of this in the Bible, but the legend crops up in

several early Jewish sources.[20] When they heard David play, all the sages in his kingdom would arise and gather together to study God's word. It is this secret chord that David played which '**pleased the Lord**' in the opening stanza of Cohen's *Hallelujah*.

In another version of the legend the north wind blew each midnight, plucking the strings of a harp hanging at the head of David's bed. As soon as he heard the chord, David awoke to study. When Satan, the angel of temptation, asked David why he didn't indulge himself by lying in bed until mid-morning, as kings were apparently supposed to do, he replied that his honour was nothing compared with that of his Creator. It was his duty to arise and study the divine law. No wonder the Lord was pleased.

None of this is in the Bible. The only important mention of David's harp playing is when he is first summoned to play for Saul, to ease his terror of the evil spirit that plagues him. The legends that Cohen draws upon for his song are all in the ancient folklore tradition that expands and elaborates on the biblical text, providing us with the story behind the story.

The Hebrew word *Hallelujah* means 'praise God'. It occurs only in the book of Psalms and indeed appears in only 15 of that book's 150 odes. So, although it is very familiar, cropping up over and again in both Christian and Jewish liturgy, *Hallelujah* is, biblically speaking, quite an unusual word. It's one of very few words in the Hebrew language made up of two words run together. Strictly speaking we should translate it as one word: 'PraiseGod'.

David's career as king was marked by warfare, strife and intrigue. But he never lost his affinity for poetry and music. He wrote many psalms. Several are attributed to him, and the book of Psalms, roughly half-way through, declares: 'Here end the Psalms of David son of Jesse.' But he did not write the word *Hallelujah*. All 15 psalms containing the word *Hallelujah* occur in the second half of the book, after we have read that the psalms of David have concluded. Yet, although the book of Psalms itself does not consider David to have written the word *Hallelujah*, the religious tradition disagrees. The Talmud declares that David wrote all the psalms, even those that clearly refer to events after his time. When Leonard Cohen writes about David composing 'Hallelujah', he is drawing on the Talmudic tradition.[21]

As a musician David is painfully aware, despite God's many ethical and legal commands, that there is no religious injunction to play or sing music. Shakespeare's 'If music be the food of love' seems to have little place in the early biblical narratives; there are only a handful of songs in the Bible before David came along with his psalms. God, it would appear, in biblical times was not partial to being worshipped through music. Hence the words that Cohen puts into David's mouth: '**But you don't really care for music, do you?**'

David, urged on by his musical spirit, is baffled. He knows that his secret chord pleases the Lord, yet he can find no evidence in the Israelite tradition that music is the medium through which his God wishes to be worshipped … '**The baffled king composing Hallelujah**'.

Cohen draws on another Talmudic legend for his second verse:

Your faith was strong but you needed proof.
You saw her bathing on the roof.

The setting is the episode of David and Bathsheba, the occasion of David's most egregious offence, as a result of which he suffers calamity upon calamity.[22] Constantly at war, David had sent his troops to besiege the city of Rabbah, capital of the neighbouring tribe of Ammon. He remained behind, attending to affairs of state in his Jerusalem palace. Finding the heat of the autumn evening oppressive, David went up to his roof and gazed out over the city. From his vantage point he saw a woman bathing. He could see her beauty even from the distance of his roof. He asked his servants who she was; they told him that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Unconcerned that she was a married woman, David sent for her and slept with her. The Bible does not give us any detail of the seduction, if that is what it was, and we do not know her feelings on the matter. A few weeks later she sent a message to David telling him she was pregnant.

Unwilling to disclose his adultery to the world, David recalled her husband from his service at the siege. The king's excuse was that he wanted to find out how the troops were faring. His real reason, however, was to have Uriah go back home to spend some time with his wife, so that when the baby was born he would assume that it was his. But Uriah did not

go home. He remained in the palace, in the servants' quarters. He told David that he could not possibly go back to his wife and enjoy himself while his comrades were still at war.

Unable to extricate himself from this dilemma, David compounded his sin by telling Uriah's commander to send him into the front line of battle, knowing that he would almost certainly be killed. With Uriah dead, Bathsheba will be a free woman, able to sleep with whomever she likes. Sure enough, Uriah is killed and David takes Bathsheba into his harem. It is not until the prophet Nathan rebukes him, informing him that he has brought disaster upon himself and his household, that David begins to comprehend the magnitude of what he has done.

This is the background to Cohen's line '**You saw her bathing on the roof**'. But it is the preceding line that should interest us: '**Your faith was strong but you needed proof**.' The Bible makes no mention of David's faith in this story, or of his need for proof. But the Talmud does. Like many Talmudic legends, the story it tells has no historical basis; this legend is an allegory on the dangers of hubris. David, in the Talmud's story, has asked God why, when Jews pray, they speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but never the God of David. God explains that he had tested the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and that they had proved themselves to be upstanding and worthy. David asks God to test him so that he may prove himself. God, knowing that David cannot control his sexual desire, says that he will test him with a married woman. David, of course, fails the test. This proves, says the Talmud, that we

should never willingly subject ourselves to an ordeal that we are likely to fail.[23]

The verse continues:

She tied you to a kitchen chair
She broke your throne, and she cut your hair.

The Bible is rarely predictable. We might think that biblical morality would guarantee that David and Bathsheba's adulterous union would be cursed, that no good could possibly come of it. And on one level this turns out to be the case: David is plagued by misfortune for the rest of his life. But of all David's many children, born to several different wives, the one who wins the fraternal struggle to succeed his father on the throne is Bathsheba's son, Solomon.

Solomon, like his father, was a figure of complex ambiguity. Wise yet foolish, he consolidated the Hebrew faith by building the Jerusalem Temple, yet he accumulated wealth to excess, growing lustful in his old age, worshipping foreign gods and sowing the seeds of the nation's decline. After his death the kingdom he ruled fell apart. '**She broke your throne**.' David's eternal throne was broken due to the excesses of Solomon, the son he had with Bathsheba, the woman with whom he committed adultery, whose husband he had sent to his death in war.

One of the many catastrophes of David's reign in the years following his 'seduction' of Bathsheba was the rebellion of another of his sons, Absalom, against his father. Absalom, young, good-looking and extremely long-haired, seized power

and proclaimed himself king. David, by now an old man, was forced to flee Jerusalem. But David was shrewder and more experienced than his vainglorious son. He planted agents in Absalom's camp, confounded the rebels' plans and won a decisive battle against them. As Absalom fled, his mule passed under a low-hanging terebinth tree and his hair was caught in its branches. The mule carried on, and the young pretender was left hanging, exposed to David's forces. They slew him. Absalom met his doom through his ambition and vanity: another way in which David's throne was '**broken**'.[24]

'**She cut your hair**.' Absalom's hair caused his death, but not because it had been cut. The shorn hair that Cohen sings of may allude to Absalom, but it fits Samson far better. Living several generations before David, Samson was another conflicted character who allowed his passion to overcome his reason. Samson is the strongman of the Bible, a legendary hero who scraped honey out of the belly of a lion and slew a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. His strength lay in his luxurious growth of hair. Before he was born, an angel had appeared to his mother commanding her that the hair of the son she would bear was never to be cut.

Samson lived during a period of continual skirmishes between the Israelites and their southern neighbours, the Philistines. His great strength enabled him to terrorize the enemy; they in turn were desperate to capture him. As with David, desire proved his downfall. He fell in love with Delilah, a Philistine woman, who found herself torn between loyalty to her people and her love for him. She urged him daily to reveal

the source of his strength, and although he resisted, her will was stronger than his. When he finally told her that his strength was due to his uncut hair, she lulled him to sleep on her knees and handed him over to the Philistines. When he awoke, he found that his hair had gone, and consequently his strength. The Philistines chained him, threw him in the dungeon and put out his eyes. Samson's downfall, like Absalom's, came about through his hair.

The Mishnah, the third-century Jewish text which the Talmud expands, links Absalom and Samson explicitly: 'Samson went after [the desire of] his eyes; therefore the Philistines put out his eyes … Absalom was proud of his hair, therefore he was hanged by his hair.'[25] This is the connection that Leonard Cohen is drawing on when he links David's broken throne to Delilah shearing Samson's hair. From David seeing Bathsheba bathing to Samson losing his strength, the whole verse is about the conflicts in men who find themselves unable to control their desires. Ultimately, all that is left to them is the singing of '**Hallelujah**': '**And from your tongue she drew the Hallelujah**'.

Words are both sacred and mundane. Their potency is deeply rooted in both Christian and Jewish traditions. Having dealt in his first two verses with the conflicted musician and lover, Cohen completes his ode with a meditation on the paradoxical nature of words.

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name …
There's a blaze of light in every word.

The third of the Ten Commandments, the injunction against blasphemy, declares: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.'[26] Several people in the Bible are charged with committing blasphemy. Among them are Jesus, who is accused by Caiaphas the High Priest, and the anonymous son of an Egyptian, who blasphemed in the wilderness. However, David is not accused of blasphemy, either in the Bible or in folklore. The closest he gets is when, after his adultery with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan enters David's chambers to deliver an excoriating rebuke. He tells him that the sword will never depart from his house, because he has spurned God.[27]

But spurning God is not blasphemy, and Cohen's second line, '**I don't even know the name**', doesn't seem to apply to any of those accused in the Bible of blasphemy. The biblical character who doesn't know God's name is Moses, at the Burning Bush. As we saw in *The Butcher*, he asked God how he should refer to him when the Israelites asked who had sent him. Moses didn't know God's name, the Name that is not to be taken in vain.

There is no hint of blasphemy in Moses' protestations at the Burning Bush. Indeed, Moses doesn't take the Name in vain anywhere in the Bible. But a story in the Zohar, the primary text of Kabbalah, tells us otherwise. According to the Zohar, Moses did take the Name in vain, or at least made vain use of it.

The Zohar's claim comes in the course of a discussion about Moses' staff, the wondrous rod he carried with him, with which he performed his miracles. When Moses first

met Pharaoh and needed to demonstrate his power, he cast his staff to the ground. Immediately it turned into a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians, not to be outdone, did the same with their staffs, but Moses' serpentine staff swallowed them all up. Later, whenever he was commanded to bring a plague on the Egyptians, Moses would wave his staff towards the heavens, whereupon the plague would descend. And, in the most demonstrative of all his miracles, when the fleeing Israelite slaves were trapped between the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind them, Moses stretched out his staff over the waters. The Red Sea parted, and the Israelites marched through on dry land.

But the Bible tells us that on one occasion Moses misused the staff. Towards the end of their journey through the wilderness the Israelites were complaining that they had no water. It wasn't the first time they had made this complaint. Previously God had shown Moses a rock, telling him to strike it with his staff. Moses did so, and water flowed out. Now, with the Israelites complaining again, God showed him another rock. He told Moses to take his staff, but he wasn't to do anything with it. Instead he was just to hold it in is hand while speaking to the rock. Water, he was assured, would once again gush out.

Moses was frustrated. He was an old man, and for 40 years he'd patiently put up with the Israelites' complaints. The weather was hot and, to cap it all, his sister Miriam had just died. He was in no mood to speak to rocks. He took his staff and, as he had done the previous time, he struck the rock.

Nothing happened. He struck it again. This time water came out. But God was angry. He told Moses that because had shown a lack of faith, because he had not sanctified God in the eyes of the people, he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land.[28]

Many commentators have tried to explain why Moses was punished so severely for this error. The Zohar's explanation seems to be the one that Cohen follows. According to mystical legend, a legend that pre-dates the Zohar, Moses' staff was inscribed with the sacred, secret name of God. It was the Name which gave the staff its powers. The Zohar says that God was angry because, in smiting the rock, Moses had abused the holy Name engraved upon his staff. It quotes God as saying: 'I did not give you the staff for this purpose. By your life it will not be in your hand from this moment onward.'[29]

As a young man, at the Burning Bush, Moses had not known the Name. As an old man he took it in vain, abusing the staff on which it had been engraved. But then, in the third line of the verse, Cohen throws in a twist. Even if he had known the Name, he asks, what was it to God anyway? Names, Cohen seems to be saying, are only words. What does it matter?

Cohen's question is rhetorical. The Name mattered to Cohen, not just in *Hallelujah* but personally as well. He adhered to the Jewish religious tradition that forbids the writing out in full of God's name. Look in any of Cohen's books or lyrics copied from his hand, and you will find he nearly always writes 'G-d' instead of 'God'. Not writing God's name in full protects it against destruction should something happen to the

paper on which it is written. It ensures that the Name cannot be taken in vain.

But if words are only words, why does the Name matter? In the final lines of the verse Cohen explains why. He sings of the blaze of light to be found in every word. It is this blaze of light that explains why taking the Name in vain matters. Names may be nothing more than words. Yet words are the most powerful force in existence. The world came into existence through words. In the first chapter of Genesis, God created the world through speech: 'And God said let there be light. And there was light.'[30] Or, as the Gospel of John formulates it: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'[31]

Names are powerful because they encapsulate our essence. A Talmudic tradition recommends that if someone wishes to change their identity they should change their name.[32] A desperately sick person has their name changed through a prayer in the synagogue. Folklore says that this is so the Angel of Death can't find them, but the deeper reason is that by changing our name we change our fundamental nature.

Cohen didn't approve of name-changing. Growing up in Canada among families who had arrived not so long ago with long, unpronounceable, Eastern European surnames, Cohen knew many people who had anglicized their names. His friend Irving Layton had been born in Romania as Yisroel Lazarovitch. 'I like to see the marks on people,' Cohen said in 1980. 'I never liked the idea of people changing their names. It's just nice to know where you come from.'[33]

Words matter. In the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, the universe was constructed from 32 building blocks: the ten utterances that God spoke at Creation plus the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the language of Creation. Words and letters, imply the Kabbalah, are sacred. Cohen agrees. Discussing his *Book of Mercy*, the collection of psalm-like poems that he published in 1984, he said: 'I always feel that the world was created through words, through speech in our tradition, and I've always seen the enormous light in charged speech, and that's what I've tried to get to.'[34] '**There's a blaze of light in every word**.'

Yet words are also mundane. We throw them around, particularly when our passions get the better of us. The irreconcilable conflict that Cohen highlights in this verse is between the sacred word and the secular, between holy and profane speech. Unable to resolve the dilemma, all we can do is open our mouths, throw up our arms and recite '**The holy or the broken Hallelujah**'.

I did my best, it wasn't much,
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch.

In his final verse Cohen turns the spotlight on himself. He did his best, he sings, even though it wasn't much. Because he couldn't feel, he tried to touch. A perceptive article by Jiří Měsíc understands this line as a confession that because he couldn't feel the divine love he had to be satisfied with touching. Měsíc sees *Hallelujah* as sanctifying the physical act of love: '"The holy or the broken Hallelujah," meaning that God

may be reached either through sacred meditation or through sex, as both lead to the union with Him'.[35] As for Cohen, all he can do is stand before the Lord '**with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah**'.

Cohen spoke about *Hallelujah* when he played in Warsaw in 1985: 'I know that there is an eye that watches all of us. There is a judgement that weighs everything we do. And before this great force, which is greater than any government, I stand in awe and I kneel in respect. And it is to this great judgement that I dedicate this next song: *Hallelujah*.'

Three years later, though, he had rewritten the lyrics, removing the biblical references. He told his audience in Antwerp why: 'It was a song that had these references to the Bible in it, although these references became more and more remote as the song went from beginning to end. And finally I understood that it was not necessary to refer to the Bible any more. And I rewrote the song.'[36]