

Selections from a spiritual singer's soul

Leonard Cohen, *The Mystical Roots of Genius*

By Harry Freedman
Bloomsbury Continuum, £18.99
 Reviewed by Jenni Frazer

I THOUGHT to be admitted that, even for a hard-core Leonard Cohen fan like me, yet another book on an aspect of his life makes the heart sink a little. So I approached Harry Freedman's new book, marking the fifth anniversary of Cohen's death, with some trepidation. Not least because Freedman bills himself, with no sense of irony, as "Britain's leading author of popular works of Jewish culture and history", which did rather leave me wondering about where Simon Schama, Norman Lebrecht or Simon Sebag Montefiore come in the pecking order.

Nevertheless, *The Mystical Roots of Genius* turned out to be a well-nigh perfect book to read over the High Holy Days, as Freedman carefully analyses some of the choicer lyrics in Leonard Cohen's vast back catalogue. And he doesn't just choose the better-known songs — *Who By Fire*, for example, or *Hallelujah* and *If It Be Thy Will*, songs in which Cohen appears to be directly in dialogue with the Lord. *Who By*

Fire is, of course, Cohen's singular reworking of the famous *Unetanahtokef* prayer in the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services.

But — perhaps for copyright reasons, because Freedman was unable to access all of Cohen's prodigious output — there are examinations of other, less well-known songs. In 1969's *Story of Isaac*, for example, Cohen recreates the Akedah, the binding of Isaac — beginning with the words: "The door it opened slowly, my father he came in, I was nine years old".

This was the great test by God of Abraham's faith, whether or not she would sacrifice his son.

Freedman takes us through the story and then reminds us that when God called Abraham, he replied with the word "Hineni". — "Here I am".

Freedman writes: "The word... is used rarely in response to a call, but when it is used it is invariably at a moment of high drama. It is a word that Leonard Cohen will make his own in his final years, one from which he will wring every last drop of emotion". And that, of course, is an allusion to Cohen's last album, *You Want It Darker*, in which the

chazan and choir of Montreal's Sha'ar Hashamayim sing the word, "Hineni". In the same song, Cohen uses the first line of the Kaddish, "Magnified and sanctified be Thy Holy Name".

Freedman freely acknowledges both Christian and Buddhist influences on Cohen's writing, though, curiously, he has nothing to say about Scientology, with which Cohen flirted for a time.

The lyrics of *Famous Blue Raincoat*, including the phrase "Did you ever go clear", are often cited as coming from Scientology tropes.

But the book mainly focuses on the biblical and Jewish influences on which Cohen drew throughout his life.

Its main stepping stones — his upbringing in the heart of Montreal's Jewish community, his Hebrew grammarian grandfather, his early poetry, and his move to the Greek island of Hydra, where he met the famous "Marianne" who inspired *So Long Marianne* — are well-known and parsed to pieces by Cohen-ites.

Freedman doesn't get everything right in this book. There's a certain amount of surmise as to what Cohen might have learned at Hebrew school in Montreal. But for the most part, this is a charming and compelling walk through Leonard

Cohen's spiritual life. The back cover features an admiring quotation from Cohen fan, the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: "Leonard Cohen taught us that even in the midst of darkness there is life, in the midst of hatred there is love, with our dying breath we can still sing *Hallelujah*". Amen.

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 writer

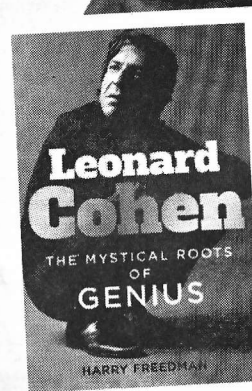


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