

Leonard's songs alluded to Judaism and Christianity

BY SIMON YAFFE

FOR Harry Freedman, Leonard Cohen's religiosity lies at the heart of his work. Through his words and lyrics, the iconic poet, novelist and singer-songwriter alluded to his Judaism, as well as Christianity and Buddhism.

"So much of what he wrote came from his Jewish background and also his exploration of Christianity," Harry told me from his London home.

"Someone once said that Cohen never came across a religion he didn't like. I found that fascinating."

Harry's new book, *Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius* (Bloomsbury, £18.99), looks deeply into the imagination of one of the greatest singers and lyricists in history.

"I was listening to *Hallelujah*

‘Cohen never came across a religion he didn't like’

on the radio and realised that it was full of Bible stories, such as King David," he said.

"I obviously knew about Cohen, but was not particularly engaged with him at the time.

"There are references to the Talmud and the Kabbalah, as well."

In other songs, such as *Suzanne*, Cohen refers to an ancient Christian legend about Jesus rowing the apostle Andrew to a city, performing miracles and converting everyone from cannibalism to Christianity.

And *So Long*, *Marianne* has a mystical, spiritual element, evoking Cohen's constant search for spiritual meaning.

Who By Fire, from his 1974 album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, was his version of *Unetanneh Tokef*, which is said on Yom Kippur.

Harry, a former executive director of Masorti UK, wrote his first book, *The Talmud: A Biography*, in 2014.

That was followed by *Kabbalah*:



SEEKER OF SPIRITUALITY: Leonard Cohen

Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul, and *The Murderous History of Bible Translations*.

His first biography, *Reason To Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs*, was published last year.

"It was the first time that I had written a biography and I realised it was a really interesting thing to do," Harry recalled.

He also explained how Cohen — who died in September, 2016, at the age of 82 — was imbued with Jewish traditions from a young age.

Raised in an observant home in Montreal and of Polish and Lithuanian descent, Cohen's maternal grandfather, Solomon Klonitsky-Kline, was a rabbi, while his paternal grandfather, Lyon Cohen, was a founding president of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

"Cohen also had a nanny who was Catholic and took him to church on Sundays, so he was well aware of Christianity," Harry said.

was known as the Jewish poet of Montreal and Canada, but who could never really make a living from it.

"That led to Klein having a nervous breakdown, which Cohen felt was the Jewish community's fault because they hadn't valued him.

"At this talk, he attacked them, telling them that they had made a mockery of God, and that they were more interested in making money than spiritual matters.

"However, in 2016, the choir from his childhood shul, Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, performed on his album, *You Want It Darker*."

Cohen married once, to Suzanne Elrod, with whom he had two children, Adam and Lorca.

But he had numerous relationships, including with Marianne Ihlen, who was, arguably, the love of his life.

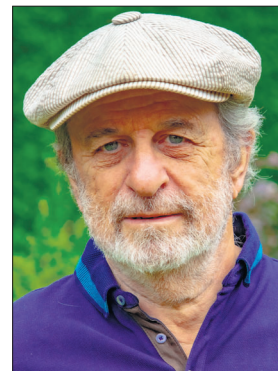
And Harry also covers Cohen's love of women and view of sex as a sacred act.

"Cohen believed that sex and the union of two people was an earthy metaphor for the union of the soul with God," he explained.

"He realised that sex is holy and a mitzva, and he loved being with women — he had a lot of them in his life.

"Interestingly, he was never criticised by the #MeToo movement and nobody said a bad word about him in that way.

"Cohen also had an obsession with Joan of Arc because she was a strong woman, a warrior and a leader.



EXPLORING LEONARD: Harry Freedman

"You also get a sense that he saw Marianne, who was a single mother when they met, as some kind of Virgin Mary.

"There was something in his psyche that made him look for that mystical goddess woman."

A regular visitor to Israel, Cohen performed for Israeli soldiers in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and played numerous times in the Jewish state.

Harry said: "He regarded war as a pinnacle of human endeavour, as in nothing can beat war because it demands the best of everybody.

"He went to Cuba in 1962, at the time of the Missile Crisis, to see what was going on.

"The Cuban soldiers saw him and went to arrest him, but he talked to them about poetry and gave them a cuddle, and they let him go.

"When he went to Israel during the Yom Kippur War, he said, 'I'm

‘Cohen questioned God in his song The Butcher’

going to stop Egypt's bullet', but the Israelis would not let him fight, so, instead, he was part of a musical troupe around the Sinai.

"Cohen was never a political Zionist, but he always believed in Israel and saw it as the Jewish homeland."

Being a Cohen was important to him, as well, Harry explained, but he also condemned God on occasion.

"That is what a lot of Jews do — argue with God," he said.

"Abraham did it and Tevye did it in *Fiddler on the Roof*."

"Cohen questions God about the Holocaust in his song, *The Butcher*."

"The Butcher is God and the lamb is Jesus, and Cohen is saying 'you're slaughtering Jesus and millions were slaughtered in the Holocaust, so do you expect us to say thank you? Why did you let it happen in the first place?'"

Harry's next book, tentatively called *Britain's Jews*, will be about what it is like being Jewish in Britain today, what it means and how communities are organised.

He expects it to be published in 2023.



Kweller uses his Ed for Sheeran album song

SUPERSTAR Ed Sheeran has been singing the praises of Ben Kweller, pictured left, for a number of years.

And he is now also singing the words of Jewish musician Kweller.

Sheeran's new album, = (Equals), features the song *Collide*, which was co-written with Kweller.

"@teddysphotos (Sheeran's

Instagram name) and I have had a cosmic connection since we first met in 2015," Kweller wrote on social media.

"Not only is he one of the greats in the game, but he's one of the most humble, gentle souls on the globe."

Two years ago, Kweller — who supported Halifax-born Sheeran on his 2019 tour — performed at

Sheeran's wedding in Suffolk to Cherry. He sang his own song, *Thirteen*, for their first dance.

"I've only performed at a few weddings and each one is unique and magical. The power of music continues to blow me away every day," Kweller wrote. "Even without having a chorus, I still consider *Thirteen* the best love song I've written.

"So glad that it continues to live strong and inspire love — super grateful that it came out of me!!! so, YAY!!!"

San Francisco-born Kweller, now 40, first found fame as a 12-year-old in the rock band Radish.

His latest solo album, *Circuit Boredom*, was released last year.