He spent several years as a Buddhist monk and some of his most powerful songs are rooted in ancient biblical or kabbalistic sources. A Benedictine monk and a Jewish writer discuss a musician and poet who saw the Jewish and Christian faiths as each containing the essence of the other / **By LUKE BELL**

Songs for a broken world

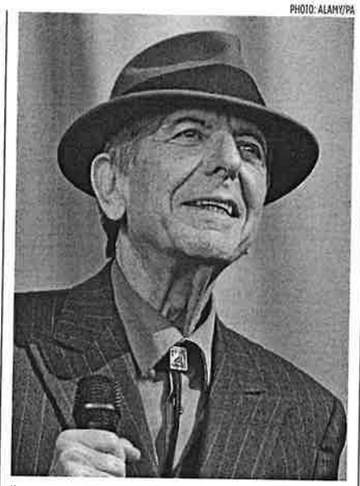
"**YOU CAN'T** miss it," said the old man in the flower shop in the centre of the Jewish cemetery in Montreal. Moments later I was kneeling at the grave of Leonard Cohen, six months after his death on 7 November 2016. Now we approach the fifth anniversary of his passing. This is marked by the publication of a new book about him by Harry Freedman, a Jewish writer who interprets his people's history and culture for the British public. In an hour of conversation, he and I discussed Leonard Cohen and his legacy.

The singer had brought us, Jew and Christian, together and we remarked upon his ability to transcend confessional divides. "Faiths," said Freedman, "sit in silos, and you do not look from one silo to another."

It follows that there is a barrier, not necessarily hostile, between them and "one of the things Leonard Cohen did so well was to see Judaism and Christianity as a continuum." The title song on the album he released just 17 days before his death, "You Want It Darker", is an example: "He sings the Kaddish in there, the prayer we recite for people who have died – 'Magnified and sanctified / Be thy holy name' – and then he turns it into Jesus ... 'Vilified and crucified'." In "Story of Isaac", from his second album, *Songs from a Room*, Freedman pointed out, "He starts off effectively giving you a reworking of the story in Genesis where Abraham takes Isaac up the mountain and it ends up with the Crucifixion and it's all one story."

In return, I alerted Freedman to a further dimension of the words, "Help me roll away the stone" in "Show Me the Place", which he interprets in his book as alluding "to Jacob's feat at the well in Haran" of rolling the stone off its mouth and so setting himself "on the path to his pre-ordained destiny". In John's gospel, this is where Jesus meets the woman of Samaria and identifies himself as the source of living water; he becomes this of course through the Resurrection, when the stone on his tomb is rolled away and his destiny is fulfilled. We brought complementary interpretations to "Heart with No Companion", Freedman seeing the opening lines, "I greet you from the other side / Of sorrow and despair", as referring to the kabbalistic explanation for evil as from "the other side" and me seeing what follows – "With a love so vast and shattered / It will reach you anywhere" – as the love Christ offers to all after undergoing his Passion.

PHOTO: ALAMY/PA



Leonard Cohen at Glastonbury in 2008

Freedman's exposition in his book of the song "Different Sides" illustrates how Leonard Cohen saw "no immutable separation" between the Jewish and Christian faiths, each containing the essence of the other. The difference belongs to this world, as the opening words of the lyric make plain: "We find ourselves on different sides / Of a line that nobody drew / Though it all may be one in the higher eye / Down here where we live it is two." Freedman said to me that Cohen is "quite unique in having a profound understanding of both Jewish and Christian traditions and being able to fuse them together."

The singer spent an extended period as a Buddhist monk, so a natural question is how that influence is manifested in his lyrics. Freedman did not see it in them (with a single exception) and answered the question by describing Buddhism as "a state of being" rather than a theology and "so one could say that in a sense he wrote all his music in that state". This is different from the shaping of his emotions and spiritual thought that stems "from his childhood", which involved being "brought up in a very observant Jewish home in a very Catholic city with a nurse or a nanny who took him to church regularly". The latter influence was manifest in his devotion to the Mohawk saint, Kateri Tekakwitha, long before St John Paul II beatified her.

Perhaps more remarkable than his bridging the difference between faiths is Cohen's bridging of the gap between people with faith and those with none. His announcement at the packed London O2 arena in 2008 that he was going to read a prayer that he had written ("If It Be Your Will") was greeted with rapturous applause. "There is no qualitative difference for Cohen between the longing of the heart and the longing of the soul," Freedman writes; Cohen himself said of his work, "When it's really personal, everybody understands it." His heart is in it and he is open at a costly level.

Yet there is more to Cohen's ability to communicate to an audience disconnected from a sacred tradition of which he is very conscious and about which he has thought deeply. "In the early albums," Freedman told me, "people were listening to the music," and as we talked we realised that both of us were captivated by the sound of the songs before we had really understood their depth or related them to the ancient teachings.

To my observation that "the genius is to harness the music to the spiritual truth", he responded, "There is something in the music that appeals to people as much as the words," and concluded: "Somebody who is capable of writing spiritual poetry the way Cohen does probably has the same talent for writing spiritual music." The appeal is that the same thing is being communicated in two different ways.

Freedman sees Cohen's view of the world as perhaps darker than I do, but we agreed that his power to communicate is connected with his sensitivity to its brokenness. His most often quoted words, from the song "Anthem": "There's a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in", articulate how, in Freedman's words, "without the brokenness there would be no light", how (in Christian understanding) we need to know our sinfulness to receive God's mercy, how in Cohen's own words "that's where the resurrection is and that's where the return, that's where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things." This brokenness becomes an offering to God, who seems to speak in "Come Healing": "O gather up the brokenness / And bring it to me now / The fragrance of those promises / You never dared to vow." In "If It Be Your Will", it becomes the brokenness of Christ on Calvary with whom the singer seems to identify: "All your praises they shall ring / If it be your will / To let me sing / From this broken hill." Freedman's singling out of an optimism in the darkness of Cohen's world is perhaps surprising: "Jesus is the great optimism for him." The light in his lyrics is that he can know that he is broken and go on singing praise, as in his most famous song, "Hallelujah": "... even though it all went wrong / I'll stand before the Lord of song / With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah." He sings not the holy, but "the broken Hallelujah".

"The fact that 'Hallelujah' is certainly being sung in some synagogues and, I understand, in some churches as well," said Freedman, "suggests that it is being picked up as a liturgical song." Its tune is even used for the Easter sequence, *Victimae paschali laudes*, his book tells us.

HE CONCLUDES that Leonard Cohen, who "brought comfort to many, smoothed the path to healing and shone a beacon of spiritual light upon the world", is "a liturgical poet". In the Jewish tradition this is "a *paytan*, a scholarly musician and poet, a prayer leader". But Cohen also worked in the Christian liturgical tradition. Just two weeks before he died, he approved the final version of a requiem Mass composed from his poems, music and writings, *Between Your Love and Mine*.

An Irish friend, John MacKenna, had proposed it to bring comfort to the families of three young friends who had died and he and Cohen had worked together on it. "Come healing of the body, come healing of the mind," it prays, "And let the heavens hear it / The penitential hymn." Its ending makes me cry: "You got me singing / Even tho' it all went wrong / You got me singing / The Hallelujah song."

It seems so long ago that I sat in the Royal Albert Hall in London and listened to the words of the spotlit singer, "It's time that we began to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about it all ..." It was 10 May 1970. I didn't even know what liturgy was back then, still less that I would spend my life doing it in a monastery. I didn't think that this was worship. But the songs have stayed with me all those years, reaching my heart and echoing in my mind. They have connected me with others; they have intimated to me what is beyond even when my thoughts remained below; they have been, as so many have found, solace for a broken world.

Luke Bell OSB is a monk of Quarr Abbey. His most recent book, Staying Tender: Contemplation, Pathway to Compassion, is published by Angelico Press at £15 (Tablet price £13.50). Harry Freedman's book, Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius, is published by Bloomsbury at £18.99 (Tablet price £17.09).

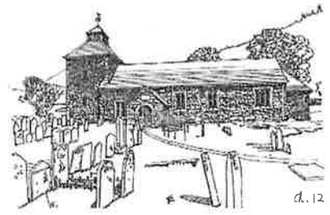
A hare's breadth

Peter Stanford's new book tells the history of Christianity in Britain and Ireland through twenty buildings and spaces. The fourth to be featured in our series is the Church of St Melangell's, in Pennant Melangell, Powys

AT LLANGYNOG on the southern flank of Berwyn Mountains in north-east Wales, a turning off the main road winds through the flat bottom of the sparsely populated valley of the River Tanat to St Melangell's Church. A low, plain, stone Norman building from the twelfth century, put up as William the Conqueror's successors extended their hold on hitherto fiercely independent Wales, it contains what is said to be the finest Romanesque shrine in northern Europe.

The story of its survival is truly remarkable. At the Reformation, the order came from far away in London to smash it to pieces, but those who worshipped in this remote valley lovingly took it apart stone by stone and then concealed them in the church's thick north wall. Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, in the late twentieth they were reassembled and returned to the chancel.

Melangell (pronounced Mel-ann-geth) is said to have been a seventh-century Irish king's daughter, who fled betrothal to live as an anchorite. Her only friends, the legend goes, were animals until Brochfael Ysgithrog from the royal house of Powys was hunting nearby. He was chasing a hare (sacred creatures for the pagan Celts) that, in terror, buried itself beneath Melangell's skirts as she was sitting outdoors in contemplation



(recounted in carvings on the church's fifteenth-century oak rood screen). So struck was the hunter by the scene that he spared the hare and made a gift to Melangell of the land around her anchorite cell.

Other women joined her, living in community, just as men were doing elsewhere in Wales at the same time in the beehive cells of monasteries. Excavations outside the north wall of the church have uncovered six female skeletons, once wrapped in linen. They have been carbon-dated to pre-ninth century. Each had small white stones laid on their shrouds, believed to denote the number of decades they had lived in community.

Their reputation for holiness and healing lived on, whatever the religious temperature of the centuries that followed, making this today a thin place, where boundaries between the visible and the invisible blur. Pilgrims have been seeking out this hidden valley for centuries, the most recent covering what is believed to be Melangell's grave with prayer cards, flowers and rosary beads.

■ *If These Stones Could Talk, with drawings by Stephen Tsang, is published by Hodder at £20 (Tablet price £18).*