Hallelujah: How Leonard Cohen looked to the Bible and Kabbalah for inspiration

‘Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius’ by UK author Harry Freedman shows how Judeo-Christian theology and rabbinic roots shaped the writer and musician’s worldview

By **JP O’ MALLEY** Today, 3:10 am

Since Leonard Cohen’s death five years ago at the age of 82, the Canadian singer-songwriter’s monumental five-decade musical and literary career has been analyzed and dissected in numerous books, newspaper articles, films, and documentaries.

Cohen’s identity and ideas seem to change and transform depending on how you read him. There is Cohen the prophet of doom; Cohen the romantic; Cohen the serial seducer and womanizer; Cohen the ambitious but mediocre novelist; Cohen the wanderer.

Now we can add one more to the list: Cohen the unlikely Bible scholar.

In “Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius,” author Harry Freedman focuses on one element of Cohen’s work: the ideas drawn from Judaism and Christianity that helped shape Cohen’s identity and the way he made sense of the world.

Freedman, Britain’s most prominent author of popular works of Jewish culture and history, keenly stresses how Cohen harnessed biblical and religious traditions for his own artistic purposes.

“Cohen grew up in a very religious environment and saw the Bible as a common definition of truth that everybody could relate to,” the 71-year-old Freedman tells The Times of Israel via Zoom from his home in London. “So when he wanted to write metaphors, or write about life in general, he always returned to the Bible as a [primary source].”

A Bible unbound

Cohen was always reluctant to describe his work as having a religious or theological purpose, says Freedman, but a spiritual quest for meaning clearly exists in his music and poetry.

The author claims Cohen's religious outlook was not bound up in formal ritual observance, nor did he make a point of publicly advocating virtues such as justice and charity. Rather, Cohen's religion "was introspective and experiential, and used as a way of engaging with the yearnings of his soul, and as a space for self-examination," Freedman says.

"Cohen had a very different attitude from [most Jews] who see Judaism and Christianity as two separate [spiritual entities]," he adds. "He didn't see a division between Christianity and Judaism — he saw it all in one continuum and was prepared to write and sing about it in that way."

"Cohen [once called] Christianity 'the great missionary arm of Judaism,'" says Freedman. "And he was sufficiently familiar with the New Testament to recognize that an awful lot of its content comes from the Old Testament."

Musical mysticism

Freedman divides his book into four parts. "Bible as Allegory" explores songs in which Cohen reshaped a biblical narrative to give it new meaning, often with contemporary relevance. "Ideas from the Bible" looks at how Cohen attached new meanings to biblical themes. "Heaven and Earth" demonstrates how Cohen incorporated the mystical traditions that evolved out of the Bible into his own work. "Prayer," the book's concluding section, then analyzes how Cohen defined God in poem and song — whether that be a conventional idea of God or something more ethereal.

Freedman says Cohen applied his deep understanding of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah to explore this latter topic especially. "Cohen had certainly read the Zohar, which is the basic book of Kabbalah," he says.

The author also points out how Cohen closely studied the works of two important 20th-century Jewish philosophers and thinkers: Martin Buber, the Austrian theologian who argued that the fundamental premise of all spirituality is not about religious dogma but everyday human experience, and Gershom Scholem, the German-Israeli philosopher who was the first to seriously study Kabballah from an academic angle rather than a mystical one. Freedman, whose previous books include "Kabbalah: Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul" and "The Talmud: A Biography," speaks briefly about the fundamental tenets of Kabbalah, an esoteric method, discipline, and school of thought in Jewish mysticism. He notes how the kabbalists maintain that the cosmos, the spiritual universe, is composed of two halves, each mirroring the other. The dominant half, the one that will ultimately prevail, is on the right-hand side; this contains all that is good. Its opposite is the domain of evil, which kabbalists refer to as "the other side."

Freedman stresses how in both life and art Cohen was fascinated by the latter dimension, which accepts that a certain amount of suffering and chaos is an inevitable part of the human condition.

"Cohen understood the soul in kabbalistic terms, and the unification of the soul, which is taking the soul up to the infinite," says Freedman.

He points to Cohen's 1974 album "New Skin For Old Ceremony" as an example of Cohen incorporating kabbalistic ideas into his art.
"In Kabbalah, sex is seen as a form of unification. It's unifying the male and the female, and the spiritual and the material," Freedman says. "On that particular album cover there is a picture taken from [the alchemical text 'Rosarium philosophorum'] of a couple flying through the air copulating — so for Cohen the idea of sex and unification was always deeply spiritual."

Broken, and driven to fix the world

The book also contains a brief biography exploring Cohen's family background. Freedman highlights the connection between Cohen's ancestral Jewish roots and the religious tradition he drew on for his song lyrics, novels,

and poems — his mother's father and his father's grandfather were rabbis who moved to Canada from Europe.

Cohen was born in Montreal in 1934 into one of the oldest Jewish families in Canada. His paternal grandfather, Lyon Cohen, founded the first Jewish newspaper in the country, The Jewish Times, in 1897.
"Cohen's family were clearly leaders in their community who ran things," he says. "And so there was always this expectation resting on [Leonard Cohen's] shoulders about success and achievements, and this idea that within your community, you can't be a follower, you've got to lead."

When World War I broke out, the staunchly patriotic Lyon Cohen set up a recruitment drive to encourage young Jewish men to enlist in the Canadian Armed Forces. Among the first to enroll was Lyon's son, Nathan, Leonard Cohen's father. Nathan Cohen returned from the war in poor health.

He died in 1943, when Leonard Cohen was nine years old. Leonard Cohen's mother, Masha Cohen, found the death of her husband difficult to cope with. Left to bring up Leonard, and his older sister, Esther, on her own, Masha Cohen suffered from bouts of melancholy, which transmuted into depression as she grew older — a trait that Leonard Cohen also shared in later life.

The book also focuses intensely on a subject the author considers to be an important recurring theme in Cohen's music: repairing a broken world. Hearts, hills, nights, thrones, banjos, people, feelings, families — they are all broken at one time or another in Cohen's songs, says Freedman.

"Cohen saw the world as broken, and in need of repair, although that was also probably a reflection of his own melancholic tendencies," he says.

"Cohen was clearly using the idea of Jewish redemption in his work and drawing on the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, which is about repairing of the world," Freedman says. "But the reason why he saw the world as dark and broken was more about his own [state of mind] than it was about religion."