The Washington Post *Democracy Dies in Darkness*

How spirituality shaped Leonard Cohen

By David Kirby

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Do you ever feel that a book should be an essay, an essay a paragraph, a paragraph a sentence? That's not quite the case with Harry Freedman's "Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius," a guided tour of the singer-songwriter's various spiritual influences. But it's one of those good books that, its charms notwithstanding, would have been even better after a little surgery.

Cohen's grandfather was a rabbi, and Cohen grew up in the heart of Montreal's Jewish community. So it's not surprising that his art drew from the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament); the Talmud, that many-volumed repository of Jewish law and custom, legend and folklore; and the commentary on Hebrew scripture known as Midrash. More importantly, he was inspired by the Kabbalah, a mystical tradition that became of greater popular interest early in this century after it was embraced by Madonna and other celebrities.

Every true artist is eclectic, so like his contemporary Bob Dylan, Cohen drew from Christian sources as well, most famously in "Suzanne," which in many ways is a musical rewrite of the life of Jesus. But whereas Dylan changed his name from Robert Allen Zimmerman, Cohen was almost defiantly faithful to his decidedly Jewish identity. He once told a nosy interviewer that, yes, he'd thought of changing his name — to "September" — and when she asked if he meant "Leonard September," he said, "No! September Cohen."

Nevertheless, he grew to think that the Judaism of the synagogues was fossilized and mechanical, and he defined himself in a 1967 interview as "a priest of a catacomb religion that is underground, just beginning."

Cohen spent three years in a Zen monastery in California and was ordained as a Zen monk, but as Freedman points out, Zen is more a way of looking at the world than a belief system and a set of rules like Judaism. Far more impactful on his writing were the poems of Federico García Lorca. The young Cohen wanted to be known for his poetry more than anything else. He said the Spanish poet "led me into the racket of poetry," that "he educated me," as did the medieval Persian poet Rumi and three of Cohen's Canadian contemporaries — the poets Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, and A.M. Klein.

Still nothing, as Freedman rightly observes, shaped Cohen's art more than the key idea of the Kabbalah: that "something went wrong at the moment when the world was created, leaving divine sparks scattered about the earth, embers that need to be gathered up and restored to their rightful place." God himself (or herself or itself, as Cohen said) was fragmented. "Creation is a catastrophe," in Cohen's words, and "there are pieces of him, or her, or it, that are everywhere, in fact, and the specific task of the Jew is to repair the face of God."

You see that in a song like "Story of Isaac," which is based on the biblical account of Abraham's preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac on God's orders. God, of course, provides a lamb for the offering and spares Isaac. But how does one make sense of so horrible a plan while hanging on to one's faith? Not through logic, of course, but art. Cohen shifted the story's point of view, added his own takes and may have drawn, Freedman says, on a fable by Aesop that "found its way into Korean folklore" and may have been discovered by Cohen during his time in the Zen monastery.

Or he may not have used that fable at all, Freedman says. He may have simply been doing what creatives have always done, be they poets, songwriters or Hebrew scribes, which is to tell the great stories that spring from the mind's shadowy corners and find their way to the heart of every culture. Cohen didn't borrow from the Old Testament so much as he echoed it, spinning his version of stories we never tire of turning over in our minds.

Wouldn't all this make a great essay? Freedman is a much-published Judaic and Aramaic scholar whose book brims with insight, but the bulk of it is a song-by-song commentary that is peppered with many valuable observations. Both Cohen and Freedman have a lot to say, but the scattershot approach makes it hard to pin them down.

The content of this book is terrific, in other words. It's the delivery system that could have used a little work.

David Kirby *is the author of "Crossroad: Artist, Audience, and the Making of American Music."*

Leonard Cohen

The Mystical Roots of Genius

By Harry Freedman

Bloomsbury Continuum. 288 pp. $28