

In memory of Leonard Cohen

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By Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Springhill Avenue Temple, Mobile



Gallery: Leonard Cohen dead at 82

A few weeks ago, I had the exciting opportunity to hear Bob Dylan perform in Mobile. It was truly a thrilling experience and the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, as I wrote about in AL.com a few weeks ago. What saddens me now is that I will never have the chance to hear another mythical Jewish troubadour perform live because Leonard Cohen passed away on November 7--just a little over a month ago.

I came to appreciate Cohen's music very late in the game and I really have no idea how his music failed to catch my attention until so recently because it is so haunting at the same time that it is so captivating. Cohen wrote mostly on two themes which are of course closely related: love and spirituality.

I was amazed to find song after song that reflected what in Judaism is called midrash--explanations and interpretations and retellings of biblical concepts and stories. In the title song of his last album, You Want it Darker, released on October 21--a very short time before his death--he seems to be telling God that he's ready to join him in heaven with a chorus which is sung in Hebrew: "Hineni, hineni, I'm ready my Lord," which are the words spoken by Abraham to God in the story of the Binding of Isaac in the Book of Genesis.

His best-known song is probably "Hallelujah," a song that has transfixed me because of its juxtaposition of the story of King David and his writings with a dialogue with a contemporary lover. The song starts, "Now I've heard there was a secret chord that David played, and it pleased the Lord..." But then Cohen interrupts his narrative to speak to someone--possibly a girlfriend, possibly someone sitting at his side as he's describing this scene from the Bible and he says to her, "You don't really care for music, do you?" In an interview in the late 1980s, he explained that, "It's...a desire to affirm my faith in life, not [necessarily] in some formal religious way, but with enthusiasm, with emotion."

I guess what touches me so deeply about Leonard Cohen's music is that he takes the deepest emotions that one can feel and simultaneously presents them in ways that draw me in while shocking me at the same time. Cohen was a lifelong religious seeker. Having been raised in Judaism, he was imbued with the Jewish religion and one can see and hear and feel that in so many of his songs and he wanted to make it clear that he was not planning to convert to any other religion, telling one interviewer, "I'm not looking for a new religion. I'm quite happy with the old one--with Judaism." But he drew imagery from other faith traditions, such as his portrayal of Jesus in his first hit song, "Suzanne." In the late 1970s he became interested in Zen Buddhism and began visiting the Mount Baldy Monastery. Much later, he moved to the monastery to become a Buddhist monk and lived there for quite a few years.

As a rabbi raised in the Jewish tradition, I am of course familiar primarily with Judaism and yet I have come to realize the tremendous spiritual insights that other faith traditions potentially offer. Over the last number of years, I have made friends with clergy from other religions and have enjoyed their friendship and have learned about their beliefs and practices. I think it's been through Cohen's music that I've found a way to access both the beauty and insights of other approaches to life and perhaps most of all Buddhism--or at least Cohen's particular understanding of Buddhism. Particularly touching for me is his song "Anthem," which references the requirement that sacrifices offered in the Temple of Jerusalem to God had to be perfect. With his passing, we've lost a prophetic voice that can help us to see how we need to let go of our obsessive search for perfection and to appreciate all of the good things that God has given to us.