

Broken Hallelujah  
The Theology of Leonard Cohen  
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Even though Leonard Cohen never identified as a Unitarian Universalist, many of us UUs identify deeply and in an almost visceral way with him. Cohen, who died in 2018, was a post-modern hyphenate – a Jewish-Buddhist-Hindu-Jesus-loving seeker. Yet, this unparalleled poet was, at his core, unabashedly Jewish; so much so that the former Chief Rabbi of the UK, Lord Sacks, devoted a homily to Cohen’s final album, “You Want It Darker,” pointing out its deep roots in the Hebrew Bible, the rabbinical traditions of midrash, and Jewish liturgy itself.

Yet, Cohen’s Judaism (according to scholar Philipp Rosemann<sup>1</sup>) was no less broken than his Christianity. Both for him were mythologies. What resonated for Cohen, as his lyrics show us, is that Christ (unlike the God of the Hebrew Bible), submitted himself to the pain of the world. This rendered him deeply attractive to Cohen.

We can detect this inspirational modeling in Cohen’s own personal attempt to submit himself and the listener to the pain (and the joy) of this world, as he mines theology and spirituality and how they reside in a tense matrix with secularism in the human realm.

All of the selection we’ve chosen for the service this morning quiver to their core with this central project for Cohen – how does God or what we consider sacred walk with us or abandon us; in what ways do we forsake God in a modern world by *killing the flame?*; how do we steer the way past the ruins of faith and society? what is love – sacred and human?; and can we abide in hope, believing that there is a crack in everything, that place where the light gets in? Is there enough hope in the possibilities of a human life to sing a cold and broken hallelujah, to the last?

If we begin with the song *Hallelujah*, our starting point is Cohen’s tribal roots in Judaism. “Hallelujah” is a rich and ancient Hebrew word of prayer, used to express gratitude and praise for the Lord.

The story arch of the song, in fact, traces elements of the Biblical story of King David (and his secret chord), his love affair with Bathsheba (you saw her bathing on the roof), with further allusions to Samson and Delilah (she broke your throne and cut your hair). Cohen reveals his keen understanding of Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemann, Philipp. Leonard Cohen: Philosopher, Maynooth University, Philosophical Papers, October 23, 2018

structure with the concluding line of this verse, “and from his lips she drew a Hallelujah;” a nod to the praise that typically follows lamentation in David’s Psalms.

Cohen has explained that he was trying to get at the way religion, intimacy, and music connect and how they can each be healing activities worthy of praise.

Over the years, Cohen himself tried to understand what motivated him to write this meaningful and now famous song in 1984. Here are some quotes from him on this subject:

“I wanted to write something in the tradition of the *Hallelujah Chorus* but from a different point of view. I had a desire to affirm my own faith in life, not in some formal religious way, but with enthusiasm, with emotion.”

He wrote: “There is a religious Hallelujah, but there are many other ones. When one looks at the world and his proper life, there is only one thing to say, even if it’s a cold and broken Hallelujah.” He exposes his Buddhist leanings in adding: “It is to praise the energy that manifests both good and evil.”

Cohen’s own interpretation is resonant of a frequent humanist theme at the core of Unitarian Universalism and in my sermons, in particular. Namely, how to sing a cold and broken Hallelujah, through the inevitable joy and sorrow, shadow and light of the human journey, without leaning into traditional religious expectations, doctrines, or formulas.

Cohen lifts this up, when he tells a journalist that “Look, I don’t understand anything at all – Hallelujah! That’s the moment that we live here fully as human beings. Hallelujah - it is a very invigorating word to sing just to affirm our little journey here.” (invigorating and comforting and inspiring – as we may discover when we sing the chorus together later this morning.)

Cohen offers a more upbeat reprise in his beloved song, “Anthem” written in 1992. In the chorus, which we will also sing together, Cohen acknowledges this perfectly imperfect world and human life, the suffering, the shadow, the holy wars fought and the doves who will be caught. He asks us to be awake and in that *wokeness*, to keep faith:

“Ring the bells that still can ring,  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.”

Where is that crack for you? Where the light might get it?

Light, generally speaking, can be hard to find in Cohen's later work, especially in the two spoken word pieces, "Steer Your Way," and "You Want it Darker," both written in 2016. The pieces are brutally honest and stunningly vivid in their bleakness about current culture and the state of humankind. Yet, Cohen is admonishing us, not to lay down and die, or to submit to the decay, but to steer our way.

*'Steer your way past the ruins / Of the altar and the mall'*. The scholar Philipp Rosemann notes that: "the poem immediately opens on a disenchanted note, introducing us to a landscape of ruins. Both the altar and the mall have fallen into decay. The symbolism is not hard to read. The altar serves as the center of divine worship, while the mall is the place where modern man worships consumption, together with the money that is necessary to indulge in it."

"God and mammon are old enemies; one may recall the passage in Luke where Jesus declares, 'No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon' (Luke 16:13)"

The fullness of what God is meant to offer us is mirrored by the empty promise of material consumption and the belief that we can buy anything, perhaps even love. Later in the poem, Cohen lifts up this dichotomy in the lines, "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make things cheap. And say the mea culpa which we gradually forgot."

Rosemann, in his paper, "Leonard Cohen: Philosopher," pursues this idea further. He writes: "The world has been disenchanted as God is pushed to the edge. We no longer pray for a good harvest, but invest in fertilizers and pesticides; we do not hope for a better life in the hereafter but strive to make this life pleasant."

The "palaces that rise above the rot" in the poem are monuments to the decadent, superficial culture that does not even grasp its own groundlessness. The "blunted mountains" weeping represent environmental degradation. This is why God is dead. We ourselves have killed him. (or "killed the flame," as Cohen puts it in the poem "You Want It Darker.")

To save ourselves, returning to the old world of traditional religions is not an option. Cohen doesn't desire that any more than we do, although he grieves what has been lost with these touchstones. He writes (referencing Genesis): "Steer your way through the fables of creation and the fall." In the well-loved song, "Suzanne" (which we will also hear this morning), he laments a loss of Christian faith, in these lines: "Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone."

Steering our way is not a one-time deal, either. It requires an almost monastic devotion – “Year by year, month by month, thought by thought,” as Cohen’s refrain reminds us.

The stanza that speaks deeply to me is the second one – “Steer Your Heart past the truth, that you believed in yesterday, such as fundamental goodness, and the wisdom of the way.” In this verse, I hear Cohen lifting up a fundamental religious belief that God is fundamentally good. This is surely what distinguished early Unitarians from their Calvinist brethren who preached original sin and inherent depravity.

Cohen, as a Jew, cannot overlook the evil in history that has been personal for him, but he can continue to have an examined and questioning faith. In “You Want It Darker,” these lines allude to the Holocaust, in which millions died, forsaken one might argue, by their God. Where was the fundamental goodness? The poem reads:

“They’re lining up the prisoners.  
And the guards are taking aim.  
I struggled with some demons  
They were middle class and tame.  
I didn’t know I had permission  
To murder and to maim  
You want it darker  
We kill the flame.”

*And in the next stanza:*

“A million candles burning for the love that never came.  
You want it darker  
We kill the flame.”

These verses are searing and calls out for comfort. In this vein, the introduction of the heart in that second stanza of “Steer Your Way” struck me as poignant and significant. The heart is the Universal symbol of affection and love, themes which Cohen explores in many of his works. In “Suzanne,” for instance, human and divine love are intertwined, mirroring each other.

I had never considered before (as Rosemann points out) that as it is situated between the brain and the stomach, the heart symbolizes the place in-between reason and desire where human beings make the fundamental decisions regarding the direction of their lives.

“Putting one’s heart into a task means really taking it seriously, with passion and devotion. One can be open-hearted, or one’s heart can be “bent

back into itself,” according to a famous expression attributed to the theologian, Augustine. One can be heartless and another can be heart-full. Which way will we each steer? “Day by day? Month by month? Thought by thought?”

The way of the open heart is also an important Buddhist concept that Cohen would have been intimately familiar with as a practitioner of meditation and student of Buddhist thought, including the Heart Sutra, which encourages an enlightened acceptance of impermanence.

Cohen takes us deeper into feeling as his message of despair becomes even more insistent: “Steer your way through the pain. That is far more real than you. That smashed the cosmic model. That blinded every view.” Pain is not abstract, and we have all experienced it. It cuts to the bone. It is far more real than you (the “you” here referring to God).

Notice that he admonishes us to steer “through” the pain, not *past* it. We cannot avoid pain, cannot master it. We can only go through the fire. And then the poet’s voice stands in for us when we are in our darkest places, pleading, “and please don’t make me go there.”

As Cohen wrote in one of his earliest works, “Beautiful Losers,” in 1966 (and his words still ring so true today), “Please make me empty, if I am empty than I can receive and I will not be alone.” Speaking to the Divine in some form, Cohen tells us in Hallelujah, “I used to live alone before I knew ya.”

In “You Want It Darker,” we can detect Cohen lifting up Christ alone and forsaken on the Cross and making more allusions to genocides, holocausts, and the void left by an absent God.

“Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name  
Vilified, crucified, in the human frame  
A million candles burning for the love that never came  
You want it darker  
We kill the flame”

Yet, one could also argue that as Cohen prepared for death, he was engaging in the long-standing Jewish tradition of confronting God, putting him on trial and asking him: “You Want It Darker, God? You got it. Look around.....We kill the flame...and we can keep it up.” Is he asking the Jewish God to show himself? Or, is he channeling dharma about craving, suffering, and impermanence?

In the end, it will ever be *our* calling to fuel the flame of faith, tend the flame of goodness, and quench the flame of evil. Leonard Cohen is our model – authentic and prophetic in asking the important existential questions.

And like all prophets, he hears the call and answers: "Hineni, Hineni (here I am)." It is what *all* Hebrew prophets answer after three attempts at calling them into service. Despite the darkness of these later works, Cohen is not a fatalist. So, we wonder: What is he ready for? Death? Despair? Joy? Ready to love? And grapple with his shadow and ours? Ready for every cold and broken and warm and beautiful thing?

What about us? What are we ready for? This planet and those who inhabit it alongside us -- Can we steer our way and save it, o precious hearts?

In our brokenness and in our wholeness, may we praise it and sing:  
*"Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah."*

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