Leonard Cohen’s Mystical Midrash

The Montreal-born singer-poet—who turned 80 last year—recently released his most successful album to date and shows no signs of stopping.

By Seth Rogovoy

Artist of the year, album of the year and “fan choice” of the year. Sarah McLachlan? Justin Bieber? Think again. Impossibly, a gruff-voiced Jewish grandfather by the name of Leonard Cohen went into the Juno Awards—Canada’s version of the Grammy Awards—in March with nominations in these three categories. (He won album of the year.) In some ways, it is no surprise, as Cohen has been on a roll these past few years, selling out theaters, arenas and stadiums around the world and releasing some of the best-selling albums of his nearly 50-year recording career. Along the way, he has had personal and professional ups and downs. At one point seen as one of the greatest voices of his generation, he was consigned to the back shelf by the next, then championed by a later generation, only to leave it all behind and live in a Zen monastery on a California mountain top for five years.

Upon his return to civilization around 2004, Cohen discovered that his longtime manager and erstwhile friend had stolen all his money, and once again he had to hit the road to earn a living.

Fortunately for Cohen, he was always something of an oddity—an elder statesman of pop music even when he released his first album at age 33. Never having dealt in fads or trends, always sticking to his straightforward style, never having dumbed down his lyrics, he could never be accused of betraying himself. And his subject matter—love, sex, God, depression, ecstasy and spirituality—have made Cohen something of a latter-day prophet, one whose work holds healing, even life-changing, properties for his fans.

Take Liel Leibovitz. When he was 13, Leibovitz’s world collapsed when his father was revealed to be the Ofno bank, or motorcycle bandit—Israel’s celebrity criminal who robbed nearly two dozen banks in a two-year spree. At bar mitzva age, Leibovitz saw his father go to prison and suffered the notoriety that came with the case, since his father was a scion of one of Israel’s wealthiest and most powerful families.

His friends tried to comfort Leibovitz with gifts of music, mostly forgettable mixes of bad pop on cassettes. But one tape was a complete album called Songs of Leonard Cohen. Intrigued, and figuring it might be something Jewish, Leibovitz played the tape, and what he heard changed his life.

“I didn’t understand the lyrics, because my English was shaky. But something about the voice was telling me truth, and it had a rabbinic presence throughout my life,” says Leibovitz, now 37, a senior editor for the online Jewish magazine Tablet. Over the years, the lessons imparted through Cohen’s songs, writings and biography got Leibovitz through tough times.

The Montreal-born rock poet who was president of...
the Jewish fraternity at McGill University in Montreal remains Leibovitz’s touchstone, culminating in the publication last year of A Broken Hallelujah: Rock and Roll, Redemption, and the Life of Leonard Cohen (W.W. Norton). Leibovitz’s midrashic exploration of Cohen’s life and work draws from a wide range of sources and is filtered through the author’s keen understanding of Cohen’s own relationship to his Jewishness.

Cohen’s name offers merely a hint of his yikhes—on both sides of his family he is descended from rabbinic scholars, and his ancestors were integral to the founding of Montreal’s modern Jewish community. Like his contemporary and fellow rock-poet, Bob Dylan, Cohen grew up at the very center of his town’s Jewish communal life, with a strong Jewish home life that included a grandfather who studied Talmud every day and, in Cohen’s case, quizzed him on the Book of Isaiah.

Those lessons stuck with the budding poet, and the legacy of that youthful education in the Bible and the prophets infuses his work, giving it the extra power and gravitas that comes from being immersed in the prophetic. “The prophet understood that humankind’s spiritual and sexual yearnings were intertwined,” writes Leibovitz, and this equation gave Cohen the basic thematic material for a lifetime’s worth of poems and songs.

Cohen told an interviewer in the mid-1980s, “I think that I was touched as a child by the music and the kind of charged speech that I heard in the synagogue, where everything was important. The absence of the casual has always attracted me.” The “absence of the casual” may well be one of the singular characteristics setting Cohen’s work apart from his contemporaries.

Cohen came to songwriting relatively late, at a time when the countercultural catchphrase was “Don’t trust anyone over 30.” He first made his mark as a poet and novelist in Canada in the early 1960s, with poetry volumes titled The Spice-Box of Earth, a reference to the Havdala besamin, and Flowers for Hitler, which in poetry did for Adolf Eichmann what Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem did in prose—made Eichmann out to be a pathetic but ultimately banal cog in the wheel of destruction. Frustrated by his lack of an audience beyond the Canadian literati, however, and inspired by the example of Bob Dylan, Cohen saw a more efficient way to get his work across, and so he picked up his guitar and set his poems to music. One of his very first songs, “Suzanne,” was recorded by Judy Collins and included on an album of songs by Dylan, the Beatles and Randy Newman. In short order, Cohen found himself near the top of the singer-songwriter pecking order.

Cohen’s songs are intensely personal and introspective; he draws deep from the well of Torah for themes, symbols and inspiration, although much of this aspect may have been lost on the majority of listeners. Cohen’s midrash-in-songs works in several ways: It can be a paraphrase of a Bible story, such as with “The Story of Isaac,” in which he sings, “You who build these altars now/ To sacrifice these children/ You must not do it anymore.” Or it can be a hymn-like recitation of key biblical lines, for example, “Whither thou goest I will go/ Whither thou lodgest I will lodge/ Thy people shall be, My people” from the song “Whither Thou Goest,” based on the Book of Ruth.

Cohen sometimes bases a lyrical riff on liturgy, such as in “Who By Fire,” based on the Yom Kippur prayer U-netaneh Tokef, which he renders as, “And who by fire, who by water/ Who in the sunshine, who in the night time/ Who by high ordeal, who by common trial.../ And who shall I say is calling?” His 1984 collection of 50-odd poems, Book of Mercy (McClelland & Stewart), can be read as a contemporary rewrite of King David’s Book of Psalms.

Sometimes Cohen’s Jewish allusions can be so subtle that not only his audience but also fellow singers miss his
His well-known tune “Dance Me to the End of Love” has sparked numerous cover versions, with its infectious waltz-like rhythm and Central European-inspired cabaret melody. There is a deeply mordant irony underpinning the song, however; when Cohen sings, “Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin,” he’s talking about Auschwitz as much as the dance hall.

Then, of course, there is Cohen’s most famous song, “Hallelujah,” which begins, “I’ve heard there was a secret chord/ That David played, and it pleased the Lord....” Cohen’s “Hallelujah” has pleased over 300 other artists who have recorded versions of the tune since it debuted on his 1984 album Various Positions. The song has also been the subject of a BBC Radio documentary and a full-length book—one wit called it “the ‘White Christmas’ of dark and moody songs.” In some sense, Cohen’s entire career can be seen as a lifelong attempt to find that secret chord about which he sings.

For the most part, Cohen has been seen, somewhat correctly, as the bard of gloom and doom—his recordings have even been called “music to slit your wrists to.” But there’s something much deeper than depression—from which Cohen has suffered throughout his life—buried in his songs. There is an exploration of the human predicament—brokeness or, as the mystically inclined Cohen put it in “Anthem,” a song on his critically acclaimed 1992 album, The Future, “There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in,” an allusion to the Creation story of Lurianic Kabbala.

This darkness, this sense of all-pervasive gloom, has stood in the way of mass popularity in his adopted home of the United States. The rest of the world, and Europe in particular, however, has always embraced Cohen and understood that he speaks with the authority of one who must be heard. This is true in Israel, too, where Cohen has been immensely popular ever since he flew to Tel Aviv and enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Leibovitz ventures an explanation for the disparity between Cohen’s popularity at home versus the Old World.

“America’s a teenager” compared to Europe, says Leibovitz. “When they hear reference to ‘a broken hallelujah,’ they say, ‘Well, then, let’s fix it.’ When they see the moon, they say, ‘I want to go there.’ America is not built for a statement like, ‘There’s a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in,’ which is so spiritual and antithetical to everything it’s about.... On the other hand, it’s easy to see how a continent recovering from catastrophe would embrace a man like that, whereas America says ‘That’s depressing.’”

One thing Cohen has never done is change his approach.

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His sound has slowly evolved to include more keyboards, rhythms, harmonies and other musical colors, but, ultimately, the song remains the same. Cohen never went disco, new wave or Las Vegas, nor has he ever dumbed down his material.

And, surprisingly, as he has aged—Cohen turned 80 last year, making him by far the oldest continually touring and recording pop star—his voice has gotten better and his comfort level onstage has drastically improved, to the point that he now sells out multiple dates not only in European cities but even in the United States. (In earlier years, Cohen dreaded giving concerts almost as much as touring itself and, reportedly, could only do so with the aid of copious quantities of drugs or alcohol.) Through sheer...
persistence, it seems, Cohen has finally found an American audience that appreciates seeing things his way—the old way, the biblical way, the prophetic way.

Cohen shows no signs of stopping. Last year’s album, Popular Problems—which includes songs with titles such as “Samson in New Orleans” and “Born in Chains”—was his best-selling ever. Released two days after his 80th birthday, it reached No. 1 in 29 countries on the iTunes chart, garnering Cohen his first-ever No. 1 album in Austria and Switzerland, becoming the best-selling album of the week in Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands and Portugal. (It peaked at No. 15 in the United States.)

Nor does the man who once wrote “I’m the little Jew who wrote the Bible” show any sign of giving up his particular kind of prophecy—highly personal, self-mocking yet apocalyptic all the same, as in the new song “Almost Like the Blues”:

Though I let my heart get frozen
To keep away the rot
My father says I’m chosen
My mother says I’m not

I listened to their story
of the gypsies and the Jews
It was good, it wasn’t boring
It was almost like the blues

There is no G-d in heaven
There is no hell below
So says the great professor
of all there is to know

But I’ve had the invitation
that a sinner can’t refuse
It’s almost like salvation
It’s almost like the blues.

Cohen himself has always identified his work as a kind of spiritual mission. As he told Arthur Kurzweil in a 1993 interview (collected in Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters, edited by Jeff Burger; Chicago Review Press):

“When they told me I was a Kohayn, I believed it. I didn’t think this was some auxiliary information. I believed. I wanted to wear white clothes, and to go into the Holy of Holies, and to negotiate with the deepest resources of my soul.”

Cohen’s American moment might finally have arrived. Explains Leibovitz, “His voice is what we’ve been waiting for because his message is one we’re finally ready to hear. A triumphalist young nation in the throes of perpetual orgasm doesn’t listen to Leonard Cohen; a middle-aged nation having gone through several painful wars, a breakup, awakenings, licking its wounds after 9/11… It’s finally ready to hear Leonard Cohen, and to listen.”

Seth Rogovoy is the author of Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet (Scribner).