



בית העם

שיג ושיח ציוני

Bird on the Wire

Beit HaAm pays a tribute to Leonard Cohen

“There is a crack in everything, That’s how the light gets in” Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”



On November 7th, 2016, Leonard Cohen, one of the greatest and most beloved composers and singers has passed away. Cohen left an extremely rich legacy of songs and poems – filled with deep emotional expressions, complex metaphors and powerful thoughts.

Leonard Cohen (September 1934 – November 2016) was born to a Jewish family in Montreal, Canada. In his extensive work, one can clearly identify his Jewish roots and his deep attachment to Jewish heritage and the people of Israel.

During one of his interviews he mentioned his Judaism –

“We all live lives that are tethered to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, so in a certain sense everyone is born in chains. There are moments of liberation and moments of captivity. Life seems to move between those two polarities.” ... “I grew up in a very conservative, observant family, so it’s (Judaism) not something I ever felt any distance from, neither something I’ve presented or felt that I had to present. It is essential to my own survival. Torah values are the ones that inform my life.”

- “It’s (Judaism) not something I ever felt any distance from neither something I’ve presented or felt that I had to present.” – and you?
- “Torah values are the ones that inform my life” – what are the values that inform your life? What are their sources?

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Leonard Cohen volunteered to perform in front of IDF soldiers in the Sinai Peninsula. Influenced by his experiences from the war, and inspired by the prayer “Untaneh Tokef” said during the Yom Kippur service, he wrote the song “who by fire”-

Who by Fire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bntot9LAY08>

And who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time,
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
Who in your merry merry month of May,
Who by very slow decay,
And who shall I say is calling?

And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate,
Who in these realms of love, who by something blunt,
And who by avalanche, who by powder,
Who for his greed, who for his hunger,
And who shall I say is calling?

And who by brave assent, who by accident,
Who in solitude, who in this mirror,
Who by his lady's command, who by his own hand,
Who in mortal chains, who in power,
And who shall I say is calling?



In an interview that he gave in 1974, a year after the Yom Kippur War, he said -

"I've never disguised the fact that I'm Jewish, and in any crisis in Israel I would be there...
I am committed to the survival of the Jewish people"

- "...and in any crisis in Israel I would be there", is this the responsibility of every Jew living in the Diaspora?
- How do you understand the saying: "I am committed to the survival of the Jewish people"?

About one of his all-time favorite songs, Hallelujah, Cohen once said:

"The word 'Hallelujah' itself is a great word to sing. It is so powerful and rich and people have been singing it for thousands of years. I feel like it carries the right energy, energy that is extremely needed when facing the catastrophes we see all around us. Singing it is a very refreshing thing to do, it reaffirms the way we live, the path we are all taking."

The Hebrew word 'Hallelujah' means: 'god shall be praised' (Halelu-Yah). It is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (The Tanakh) 24 times and from there it made its way to dozens of languages and became a very popular word.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrLk4vdY28Q>- Leonard Cohen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsyaehWs4T0>- Hebrew version, translation: Kobi Meidan, performance: Eran Tzur, Avigail Roz, Ivri Lider, Shlomi Shaban.

In his song "Story of Isaac" Leonard Cohen addresses the Binding Of Isaac from the Book of Genesis and gives it a modern interpretation-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtdYnhnoGI0> – Leonard Cohen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4Gz6PbrQuo> Hebrew version, translation: Kobi Meidan, performing: Shlomy Shaban

The door it opened slowly,
My father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
His blue eyes they were shining
And his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
And you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
And his axe was made of gold.

Well, the trees they got much smaller,
The lake a lady's mirror,
We stopped to drink some wine.
Then he threw the bottle over.
Broke a minute later
And he put his hand on mine.
Thought I saw an eagle
But it might have been a vulture,
I never could decide.
Then my father built an altar,
He looked once behind his shoulder,
He knew I would not hide.

You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god.

You who stand above them now,
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
You were not there before,
When I lay upon a mountain
And my father's hand was trembling
With the beauty of the word.

And if you call me brother now,
Forgive me if I inquire,
"just according to whose plan?"
When it all comes down to dust
I will kill you if I must,
I will help you if I can.
When it all comes down to dust
I will help you if I must,
I will kill you if I can.
And mercy on our uniform,
Man of peace or man of war,
The peacock spreads his fan.



- What is the modern interpretation given by Leonard Cohen to the Binding of Isaac?
- Which line in the song can you identify with? Why?



Excerpts from an article about Leonard Cohen, written by Sivan Rahav Meir, which appeared in the Yedioth Ahronoth weekend magazine section on November 18, 2016.

"A lot was said this past week about the drugs, the Buddhism and the women in Cohen's life. And also about the Yom Kippur War, when he came to Israel to support the soldiers and sing to them. But here's a little-big story about a different Yom Kippur in his life: Leonard Cohen was supposed to perform at a big concert in London in September 2013. Because his agent and the British producers didn't check the Jewish calendar first, they didn't notice that the concert had been scheduled for Yom Kippur. When Cohen found out, he informed them that it wasn't going to happen. The 20 thousand (!) people who had bought tickets received a notification in which Cohen apologized, told them the concert had been rescheduled for the following day, and expressed hope that they would understand why he had to make the change.

In one of the interviews he gave, Cohen said:

'My grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klonitsky, raised me. In my eyes, he embodied the deepest Jewish ideal, of a life that finds meaning in the love for books and never-ending learning. He would reread the Torah with the same enthusiasm that characterized the first time he read it, and would then reread its commentary. It would sometimes take a whole evening for him to read and study just one or two passages.'

Leonard Cohen may have distanced himself from those childhood places, but ten days ago, at the age of 82, he was buried in the Shaar Hashomayim cemetery in Montreal, alongside his parents and alongside that very same grandfather."

- Modern life and the need to make a living often clash with faith and religious dictates (as described in the short passage about postponing the concert in London). Have you ever experienced a similar clash in your life? When, for example?
- What do you think about Leonard Cohen's decision to be buried in a Jewish cemetery next to his parents and grandfather?
- As Cohen saw it, "the deepest Jewish ideal is a life that finds meaning in the love for books and never-ending learning." Do those values still have relevance to the members of the younger generation and do they adhere to them? Or have other values replaced them? Which ones? What significance have the changing values had over the years?

