

# LEONARD COHEN, THE PRIEST OF A CATACOMB RELIGION \*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the poet/prophet as a speaker of the Divine Word. While the gift of prophecy is a very marginal matter among poets of every generation, those who received the gift have been the most important voices of our culture(s). Leonard Cohen reveals himself, at least during certain periods in his career, as being insecure about whether to accept the role of a priest, which he inherited, or a prophet, to which he naturally inclines. On the other hand, some still argue that he only stylizes himself into these roles. The Jewish community had objections to Cohen's literary works, especially in the 1960s, since he honored values that were at odds with the common religious practices. Therefore, he decided to become the partisan of a catacomb religion in which he merged the roles of a priest and prophet together. This experiment crystallized in his later work and may be seen as an achievement of high spiritual as well as artistic merit.

## KEYWORDS

Leonard Cohen; poet; prophet; singer; priest; Judaism; Christianity; Islam

## INTRODUCTION

The Torah, or, in a broad sense, the Old Testament, often speaks about prophets whose words were inspired by G-d. In these texts G-d usually speaks by Himself or through His messengers/prophets and reveals His intentions to the people. In the Book of Deuteronomy, He says: "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" (Deut. 18:18).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, G-d needs prophets to voice His commands. There are other claims in the Old Testament that support this; for example, before he died King David said that his words, and subsequently his acts, were inspired by the Lord: "The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2).

Other prophets, such as Isaiah, knew very well that these inspired words could have a direct effect upon their listeners: "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). Therefore, this word must return to the speaker in a way similar to

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1. All quotations from the Holy Bible, unless stated otherwise, are from the King James Version.

the seed which returns from the soil when ripe. However, one should be aware of the pronoun “I” because a person directed by the Lord is no longer him- or herself when speaking. Such a person could be better characterized as a medium freed from their own self, as was the case with the female oracles in Delphi or Dodona.<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit is believed to dwell within a poet/prophet and may easily abandon him, as in the case of King Saul: “the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him” (1 Sam. 16:14). The Holy Qur’an also speaks about the messengers/prophets sent by G-d: “Already has Our Word / Been passed before (this) / To Our Servants sent (by Us)” (Qur’an 37:171).<sup>3</sup>

The prophets have often expressed their thoughts in poetry, as the Old and New Testaments and the Holy Qur’an affirm. While the majority of poets cannot claim any prophetic gift, they express their thoughts as truly inspired “messengers” as a result of their erudition or well-developed ability to imitate. For this reason, the development of Western poetry may be seen as divided into two branches: while the first one includes the Biblical prophets such as King David, Solomon, Isaiah, and all those who expressed G-d’s commands in verse, the other branch of the European tradition seems to have been based more on erudition and the ability to imitate.

The best Western poets have often been inspired by Eastern thoughts and prophecy in general, and yet they lack a prophetic gift and often have to rely on intellect to make up for its absence. The next chapter endeavors to find whether Leonard Cohen can rightfully be called a prophet, or an imitator as described above.

#### LEONARD COHEN, THE PROPHET

Earlier in his career Leonard Cohen claimed a prophetic gift and said openly that his songs were inspired. In a 1970 interview with Jack Hafferkamp from *Rolling Stone* magazine, Cohen claimed that he was an “instrument for certain kinds of information” and said:

Look . . . the songs are inspired. I don’t pretend to be a guide. I do pretend to be an instrument for certain kinds of information at certain moments. Not all moments, and it has nothing to do with me as a guy. I may be a perfect scoundrel. . . . As a matter of fact, I am . . . just like the guy on the scene. But there are moments when I am the instrument for certain kinds of information.<sup>4</sup>

A striking similarity with the Biblical prophets is obvious. However, the greatest revelation of Cohen’s intention, or, better to say, position, comes as

2. Good research in this field was done by Marguerite Rigoglioso. See Marguerite Rigoglioso, *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

3. All the quotations from the Holy Qur’an are from the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an*, 10th ed. (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2015).

4. Jack Hafferkamp, “Ladies & Gents, Leonard Cohen,” in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 22. The interview originally appeared in *Rolling Stone* on February 4, 1971.

early as in 1964, in his speech called “Loneliness and History: A Speech before the Jewish Public Library,”<sup>5</sup> presented as a defense of a Jewish-Canadian poet, A. M. Klein (1909–1972).<sup>6</sup> When commenting on Klein’s oeuvre, Cohen said that he was often disturbed by Klein’s usage of the pronoun “we” in places where he would expect the pronoun “I.”<sup>7</sup> This play with pronouns clearly suggests that Klein stylized himself into the role of a speaker on behalf of the community—a priest—which disturbed the young Cohen, who was not voicing the thoughts of individual people but some universal message about the state of humanity.

The functions of a priest and a prophet differ. While a priest speaks as a representative of the community and therefore uses the pronoun “we,” a prophet comes as an individual and addresses the community with the pronoun “I.” He is entrusted by G-d to speak as His messenger. The manifestation of these thoughts appeared in Cohen’s song “You Know Who I Am,” which refers to the passage from the Book of Exodus in which G-d urges Moses to address the children of Israel under the name “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14) and reveals that Cohen played the role of a prophet in this song.

He says that the community “is marked with the fossils of the original energy” and that it has always had a priest as its representative to maintain “the fossils.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, according to Cohen, “Klein chose to be a priest though it was as a prophet that we needed him, as a prophet he needed us and needed himself.”<sup>9</sup>

The prophet has always been unwelcome in the community since he is far closer to the original idea and far closer to the original community than today’s community is to itself. Cohen says that the prophet “continues to pursue the idea as it changes forms. . . . He follows it into regions of danger, so that he becomes alone. . . .”<sup>10</sup> The prophet is then forced to live on the margin of a society, looking for the “original idea” of G-d and His influence upon the world. For this reason, Cohen stated that “the God worshipped in our synagogues is a hideous distortion of a supreme idea—and deserves to be attacked and destroyed,”<sup>11</sup> which must have provoked many of the defenders of “the fossil.”

Cohen has been shifting from one extreme to another throughout his career when his poetry had distinctly prophetic qualities (such as when he was totally divested of his self and voicing divinely inspired messages) or when he consciously performed his priestly office. He believed that in the beginning,

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5. The speech is reprinted in the book edited by Michael Fournier and Ken Norris. See Leonard Cohen, “Loneliness and History: A Speech before the Jewish Public Library,” in *Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*, ed. Michael Fournier and Ken Norris (Ste. Anne de Bellevue: Muses’ Company, 1994), 143–53.

6. See Leonard Cohen, *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961; London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 29. Much later he recorded this poem for his album *Dear Heather* (2004).

7. See Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” 146–47.

8. Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” 150.

9. Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” 147.

10. Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” 150.

11. Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” 153.

when the Judaic religion was established, people could hold both the functions of a priest and a prophet at once but later these two functions inevitably split:

I believe that at the beginning of an idea, each of the men who hold it is both a prophet and a priest, but that as the energy of the idea diminishes it, the functions of priest and prophet tend to differentiate and soon no one man can perform both offices.<sup>12</sup>

Cohen saw Klein as a prophet striving to be a priest. Earlier, in 1961, Cohen published a poem, "To a Teacher," in which he expresses his admiration for Klein, who by then had lapsed into silence and had been confined to an asylum. Cohen reveals that Klein was a prophet and that he is also willing to become one. Such a person becomes the personification of the Messiah and, according to Cohen, Klein did regard himself as being "the Messiah in a mirror." When Cohen called Klein his Teacher, he also admitted that he, too, "entered under this dark roof," that is, transformed himself into the same kind of person.

Who could stand beside you so close to Eden,  
When you glinted in every eye the held-high  
razor, shivering every ram and son?

.....  
Did you confuse the Messiah in a mirror  
and rest because he had finally come?

Let me cry Help beside you, Teacher.  
I have entered under this dark roof  
as fearlessly as an honoured son  
enters his father's house<sup>13</sup>

Cohen's statements, and not only the ones in the speech and the poem, were questioned by the Montreal Jewish community, which could not accept Cohen's views. That is why they publicly questioned him on his beliefs. In an interview reprinted in the songbook accompanying his album *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971), there is a short questionnaire (originally printed in the *Jewish Telegraph*), interrogating Cohen on his Jewishness.<sup>14</sup> It is supplemented by the commentaries of several psychotherapists and a Dr. Judah J. Slotki, then a Director of the Central Hebrew Board. Cohen shows his deep knowledge of the Torah and also the scope of his synthetic thinking.

Cohen finds a fascinating way to give his answers through the words of the Tanakh. He confirms not only that he is respectful of the tradition but that he also understands the history of the prophets and their deeds. As far as the first question is concerned, the answer is taken from Psalm 137:5. The full quotation is: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning," or, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp."<sup>15</sup> He is saying that his Jewishness cannot be forgotten; otherwise his musical abilities would be gone. With regard to the second answer, the verse comes from Psalm

12. Cohen, "Loneliness and History," 149–50.

13. Cohen, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 29.

14. See Leonard Cohen, *Songs of Love and Hate* (London: Wise Publications, 1972), 11.

15. Cited from the New Living Translation.

1. Do you manage to retain your Jewish teaching in spite of your fame?

**If I forget thee**

2. Do you ever find that your Judaism is a hindrance? Do you come across any anti-semitism?

**Let them be ashamed and confounded together that seek after my soul to destroy it**

3. Does your Jewish background influence any of your writing?

**from the roof he saw a woman washing herself**

4. Does your Jewish background in any way help your writing?

**and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.**

5. Where were you born? Was your Jewish upbringing strict?

**Montreal**

**Just balances, just weights**

**Leinaw Cohen**

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35:4, in which King David begs G-d for help against his enemies. Dr. Slotki comments that “this could certainly be applied to Jewish identity.”<sup>16</sup> The third response relates to 2 Samuel 11:2, referring to David glimpsing Bathsheba bathing from the roof of his palace. Another psychotherapist says that the woman represents Cohen’s “Jewish youth and his Jewish background.”<sup>17</sup> I do not understand how this fact could be inferred but I would rather relate this to sexuality and lust permeating the Tanakh and ultimately Cohen’s work. The last quotation comes straightforwardly from Moses’s mouth in Leviticus 19:36, in which he was laying down commandments concerning justice and proper behavior to the Israelites.

Twenty-seven years after his “Loneliness and History” speech, in 1990, Cohen was interviewed by Winfried Siemerling on his previous statements. Cohen had changed his views by then and acknowledged that he could no longer attack the community and that he preferred to uphold it:

16. Quoted in Cohen, *Songs of Love and Hate*, 11.

17. Quoted in Cohen, *Songs of Love and Hate*, 11.

Community is a lot more fragile than I understood then, and a lot more valuable, and to undertake the defence of a community is a high call and in no sense a betrayal of a personal destiny. That is more my position today, I would say. But I was a young man then, confronting, I suppose, the same problems as A. M. Klein, but choosing a radically different path than A. M. Klein had chosen.<sup>18</sup>

However, the feeling that he is an outcast from the Jewish community permeates even his latest poetry. The poem below appeared in 2006 in the collection of poems *Book of Longing*:

Anyone who says  
I'm not a Jew  
is not a Jew.  
I am very sorry  
but this decision  
is final<sup>19</sup>

As we know, some biblical prophets, such as King David, Solomon, or Isaiah, are generally regarded as being poets. Cohen himself acknowledged an oracular function in artists: "Well, I think that there is an oracular function in any artist. In other words, generally if he's good, he's working on a level that is better than he knows and better than himself."<sup>20</sup> A prophet is an instrument of G-d rather than a person concerned about his immediate needs. Since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam venerate the same prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Aaron, Miriam, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, or Ezekiel), whose deeds do not differ in the respective religious books, I will present a few instances of the function of a poet/prophet in the Old Testament and Qur'an.

David's Psalm 105:15 explicitly says that the Lord gives orders not to touch them or do any harm to them: "Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm." However, communities living from "fossils" of the old religion have always pushed the prophets from their ranks and despised them. The Surah Ash-Shu'ara ("The Chapter of the Poets") 26:16 in the Qur'an describes G-d advising Moses and Aaron how they should present themselves to the Pharaoh: "We have been sent / By the Lord and Cherished of the World." However, the Pharaoh and his advisers think that these apostles were mad: "Truly Your apostle who has been sent to you is a veritable madman!" (Surah Ash-Shu'ara 26:27). This description is not so much different from the Old Testament description of the visit of Moses and Aaron to the Pharaoh described in Exodus 7–10.

However, these messengers were often treated as liars by the community.<sup>21</sup> The Qur'anic chapter, Mecca 23:44 ("The Chapter of Believers") describes how

18. Winfried Siemerling, "A Political Constituency That Really Exists in the World: An Interview with Leonard Cohen," in *Take This Waltz*, 157.

19. Leonard Cohen, *Book of Longing* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), 158.

20. Valerie Pringle, "TV Interview," in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, 433. The interview was aired on CTV (Canada) on October 28, 1997.

21. See the Surah Ash-Shu'ara 26:185–89, which reveals deep disdain for the messengers of G-d among the people of Al-Aika.

prophets have always been attacked by violent crowds for being liars. These liars were described in “The Chapter of the Poets,” too, which says that evil descends upon every sinful liar and an uninspired poet:

221. Shall I inform you, (o people!), on whom it is that the evil ones descend?  
 222. They descend on every lying, wicked person,  
 223. (Into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars.  
 224. And the Poets,—it is those straying in Evil, who follow them:  
 225. Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley?—  
 226. And that they say what they practise not?—  
 227. Except those [poets] who believe, work righteousness, engage much in the remembrance of God, and defend themselves only after they are unjustly attacked. And soon will the unjust assailants know what vicissitudes their affairs will take!

The uninspired poets, imitators, and fakers are the enemies of the community and the servants of evil. Cohen portrays how it feels to be condemned by the community in the song “A Singer Must Die” (from *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, 1973). The song speaks about a courtroom in which he is put on trial for his words. He is accused of being a traitor and is awaiting his death. The singer addresses the tribunal as “the keepers of truth” and “guardians of beauty” and sings: “Your vision is right, my vision is wrong, / I’m sorry for smudging the air with my song.”<sup>22</sup> In Hanover, on November 11, 1979, Cohen, in the prologue to the song, explained that he had the feeling of “being on trial,” not only by the community but by his closest family and friends as well:

[T]his next song I wrote from the feeling of being on trial—everyone is on trial—. In every living-room there’s a trial going on, in every bedroom there’s a trial going on, not just in the courtrooms, not just in the jails, but in the most private places of our lives, yeah we subject each other to judgement and to trial.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen also stylizes himself into the role of a prophet in his last album so far, *Popular Problems* (2014), without distinguishing to which religion he belongs. In the song “Nevermind,” on three occasions there appears a female voice singing the word “Salaam,”<sup>24</sup> which is used as a greeting in the Arab world and advised by G-d Himself.<sup>25</sup> By presenting biblical references and suggestions concerning the tradition of the prophets, Cohen pays respect to the Abrahamic religions without giving priority to any of them.

Another song from the same album, “Almost like the Blues,” is in many respects the confirmation of a prophet provoking the community by attacking “the fossil” when he sings “there is no G-d in Heaven / And there is no Hell

22. Leonard Cohen, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (1973; Sony, 1995), compact disc.

23. Leonard Cohen, “A Singer Must Die (1974–1993),” in *Diamonds in the Lines: Leonard Cohen in His Own Live Words*, ed. Patrice Clos and Olivier Mory, [http://www.leonardcohen-prologues.com/a\\_singer.htm](http://www.leonardcohen-prologues.com/a_singer.htm).

24. This word, meaning “peace” in Arabic, is sung by Donna de Lory (\*1964), a California-based singer and songwriter who did Madonna’s backup singing from 1985 to 2007. She is a close collaborator of Patrick Leonard, the producer of Cohen’s last albums so far, *Old Ideas* (2012) and *Popular Problems* (2014). See *Popular Problems* (Columbia, 2014), compact disc.

25. G-d directs the believers to address one another with the word “Salaam” on several occasions. See, for example, Al-Anaam (“The Chapter of Cattle”) 6:54.

below,” which is not so much blasphemy as an acknowledgement that G-d lingers within. The lyrics continue: “So says the great professor / Of all there is to know,” which sounds like boasting, but then Cohen sings: “I’ve had the invitation / That a sinner can’t refuse,” which is a statement that once and for all confirms that Cohen speaks from the position of a prophet.<sup>26</sup>

#### NOTES ABOVE THE LINE

Leonard Cohen has always regarded the three Abrahamic religions in unity. Both the Bible and Qur’an speak about “the other” as about brethren. Everyone with a basic knowledge in this field knows that Isaac and Ishmael were brothers. It was stated in Genesis 16:12 that Ishmael (إسماعيل), a patriarch for the Arabs, would not have an easy life: “And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.” With a little ingenuity we may say that he is predestined to live in the presence of the Jews and Christians on constant alert. The Book of Genesis also specifies his coordinates when saying that he “dwelt from Havilah unto Shur, that is before Egypt, as thou goest toward Assyria: and he died in the presence of all his brethren” (Gen. 25:18).

Mohammad, as a follower of Ishmael, may already have been mentioned in the Old Testament. When G-d chose prophets “from among their brethren” (Deut. 18:18), He did not specify if they would come from the line of Isaac or Ishmael. In addition, Leonard Cohen blesses Ishmael in his collection of psalms *Book of Mercy* (1984). In Psalm no. 14, Cohen writes: “Blessed be Ishmael, who taught us how to cover ourselves. . . . Blessed be Ishmael for all time, who covered his face with the wilderness, and came to you in darkness.”<sup>27</sup> In Psalm no. 27, Cohen criticizes the modern state of Israel and praises Ishmael’s persistence (the persistence of the Muslims?): “Ishmael, who was saved in the wilderness, and given shade in the desert, and a deadly treasure under you: has Mercy made you wise? Will Ishmael declare, We are in debt forever?”<sup>28</sup>

We may see a constant shift in Cohen’s work between being an “instrument” and being a solitary priest. The song “Death of a Ladies’ Man” from the eponymous 1979 album suggests that this solitude is caused by sexual union:

She beckoned to the sentry of his high religious mood  
She said, “I’ll make a place between my legs,  
I’ll show you solitude.”<sup>29</sup>

What else could the outcome of the carnal act be? What else could deprive one of the gift of prophecy/sainthood? Is Leonard Cohen a priest, if he has been abandoned by G-d?

26. Cohen, *Popular Problems*.

27. The book even offers an explanation of whom Ishmael was: “Ishmael, first son of Abraham and his hand-maiden Hagar, is traditionally considered the father of the Arab nation.” Leonard Cohen, *Book of Mercy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984), Psalm no. 14.

28. Cohen, *Book of Mercy*, Psalm no. 27.

29. Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 227.

## LEONARD COHEN, THE PRIEST

As early in 1967, in an interview with Sandra Djwa, Leonard Cohen said that he was living in his own “capsule” as a priest:

Everybody has a sense that they are in their own capsule and the one that I have always been in, for want of a better word, is that of cantor—a priest of a catacomb religion that is underground, just beginning, and I am one of the many singers, one of the many priests, not by any means a high priest, but one of the creators of the liturgy that will create the church.<sup>30</sup>

The name Cohen means “priest” in Hebrew. All Cohens are believed to be the descendants of Moses’s brother Aaron, the First High Priest of the Israelites. While Moses is more of a prophet, Aaron is the priest. The priest differs from the prophet; both are intermediaries between G-d and his people but while the prophet interprets G-d’s will, the priest interprets the wishes of the people and offers oblations. The line of priests in Judaism started earlier, with Adam, when he and Eve were given garments (Gen. 3:21). Judaism elaborated on this story and defined Adam as the first priest, who passed his priestly garments to his third son Seth.<sup>31</sup> A similar legend is offered in Numbers 20:23–28, where Moses strips Aaron of his garments and passes them on to his son Eleazar, which signifies that priesthood is inherited.

Leonard Cohen confirms this in the poem “Lines from my Grandfather’s Journal” from the collection of poems *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961):

All my family were priests, from Aaron to my father. It was my honour to close the eyes of my famous teacher.  
Prayer makes speech a ceremony. To observe this ritual in the absence of arks, altars, a listening sky: this is a rich discipline.  
I stare dumbfounded at the trees. I imagine the scar in a thousand crowned letters. Let me never speak casually.<sup>32</sup>

The priest may establish a connection with the Lord through his prayers. Prayer has, according to Joscelyn Godwin, the potential to reawaken the original archetype or “idea” through the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, or *spiritus*, which is “the breadth of the archetype: that is the element of Memory.”<sup>33</sup> Theoretically speaking, this *spiritus* could enable the priest to feel that his words are heard by G-d. His language is a “ceremony” since it is a celebratory language. The priest may become a prophet if he hears the response and becomes the medium about which I wrote in the previous part.

The Lord is believed in the Qur’an to listen to all the prayers addressed to Him: “I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me” (Surah

30. Sandra Djwa, “After the Wipeout, a Renewal,” in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, 11. The interview was originally published in *Ubysey*, a Vancouver magazine, on February 3, 1967.

31. See Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101.

32. Cohen, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 63. The “famous teacher” is his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Klinitsky-Klein.

33. Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: Mysticism in Music from Antiquity to the Avant-garde* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 77.

Al-Baqarah ["The Cow"] 2:186). Hadith Qudsi no. 51, from the book of sacred sayings of the Prophet, reveals Allah saying: "I am with My slave when he remembers me and moves his lips (with remembrance)."<sup>34</sup>

The fact that a prayer could obtain for a supplicant the gift of prophecy has always been exploited by martyrs or mystics who added to it interesting and sometimes even sadistic methods to attain prophetic heights. To name a few Medieval Christian mystics whose shadows can be seen in the work of Leonard Cohen: San Francesco d'Assisi (1182–1226), Richard Rolle of Hampole (1290–1349), whose works were more popular in fourteenth-century England than those of Geoffrey Chaucer,<sup>35</sup> Walter Hilton (1340–1396), and Julian of Norwich (1342–c. 1416). There are references in Cohen's work to the fourteenth-century book *Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work which could be described as a manual for how to get rid of one's ego. There is a shadow of other medieval mystics in the work of Cohen, for example of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) from Germany, Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591) from Spain, or Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), the Algonquin-Mohawk, who is so vividly portrayed in Cohen's book *Beautiful Losers* (1966).<sup>36</sup>

The young Cohen must have struggled with the urge to become a priest against very business-oriented family interests. He started criticizing his family openly as early as in 1957, when he described his uncle, father, and cousins in the poem "Priests 1957" as sad and unhappy people consoling themselves with materialism. It is suggested in the poem that they have given up on their priestly duties:

Beside the brassworks my uncle grows sad,  
 discharging men to meet the various crises.  
 He is disturbed by greatness  
 and may write a book.  
 My father died among old sewing machines,  
 echo of bridges and water in his hand.  
 I have his leather books now  
 and startle at each uncut page.  
 Cousins in the factory are unhappy.  
 Adjustment is difficult, they are told.  
 One is consoled with a new Pontiac,  
 one escapes with Bach and the folk-singers.  
 Must we find all work prosaic  
 because our grandfather built an early synagogue?<sup>37</sup>

In his first novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963), which is considered to be partly autobiographical, the main character, Lawrence Breavman, described

34. Syed Masood-ul-Hasan, trans., *110 Ahadith Qudsi (Sacred Hadith)*, rev. Ibrahim M. Kunna (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2006), 64.

35. See Rosamund S. Allen, introduction to *Richard Rolle: The English Writings*, ed. and trans. Rosamund S. Allen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 33.

36. See Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

37. Cohen, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 78.

his family in similar terms: he blames them for losing faith and observing the religious ceremonies only in name:

Uncles, why do you look so confident when you pray? Is it because you know the words? When the curtains of the Holy Ark are drawn apart and gold-crowned Torah scrolls revealed, and all the men of the altar wear white clothes, why don't your eyes let go of the ritual, why don't you succumb to raving epilepsy? Why are your confessions so easy?<sup>38</sup>

His disenchantment is portrayed in another passage in the same novel in which he criticized his uncles for their money and prestige, which were their only interest.

He had thought that his tall uncles in their dark clothes were princes of an elite brotherhood. He had thought the synagogue was their house of purification. He had thought that their businesses were realms of feudal benevolence. But he had grown to understand that none of them even pretended to these things. They were proud of their financial and communal success. They liked to be first, to be respected, to sit close to the altar, to be called up to lift the scrolls. They weren't pledged to any other idea. They did not believe their blood was consecrated. . . . They did not seem to realize how fragile the ceremony was. They participated in it blindly, as if it would last forever. They did not seem to realize how important they were, not self-important, but important to the incantation, the altar, the ritual. They were ignorant of the craft of devotion. They were merely devoted. They never thought how close the ceremony was to chaos. Their nobility was insecure because it rested on inheritance and not moment-to-moment creation in the face of annihilation.<sup>39</sup>

The business-like family, which is, according to Cohen, no longer following the line of priests and prophets, carries on its back a long history of religious devotion. Cohen's Canadian ancestry might be traced back to the Jewish immigration from Lithuania in the nineteenth century. Lazarus Cohen, Leonard's paternal great-grandfather, came to Ontario as early as in 1869 and finally settled in Montreal in 1883. From being a man of letters and a rabbi he soon changed his profession and became a successful entrepreneur in brass founding as the president of W. R. Cuthbert & Company.<sup>40</sup> His eldest son Lyon Cohen, Leonard's grandfather, was also in business and established the first Jewish paper in Canada, the *Jewish Times*. Moreover, he became the president of the largest Canadian congregation, *Shaar Hashomayim*, and the founder of the Freedman Company, at one time the biggest Canadian clothing manufacturer. He instilled in Leonard Cohen's father Nathan the necessity of observing *mitzvot* and broadening his knowledge of the Tanakh. Nathan Cohen was a respected businessman who represented an important source of inspiration for the young poet.<sup>41</sup>

Leonard Cohen's maternal ancestry in Canada dates back to a rabbi, Solomon Klinitsky-Klein, who was a respected scholar and often called "HaDikduki," or "the Prince of Grammarians" for his work *A Treasury of*

38. Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (1963; London: Blue Door, 2009), 77.

39. Cohen, *The Favourite Game*, 140–41.

40. See Ira B. Nadel, "The Root of the Chord," in *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 9.

41. See Nadel, "The Root of the Chord," 11.

*Rabbinic Interpretations*. He escaped the pogroms in Lithuania by departing to England, and later, in 1923, he moved with his family to Canada. He frequently corresponded with Lyon Cohen, who helped him to settle down in the new country. In 1927, his daughter Masha married Nathan Cohen.<sup>42</sup> Leonard Cohen was born a few years later, in 1934. Cohen's mother is said to have been in sharp contrast to his father, who was, according to Nadel's writing, very conservative, strict, and hardworking. The mother, on the other hand, was "melancholic, emotional, romantic and vital."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Nadel claims that "she was quite musical and often sang European folksongs in Russian and Yiddish around the house,"<sup>44</sup> which might have inspired her young son. As regards the family, the poet must have searched for a way to escape materialism and pursue his original religious interests. Then there were many years of fierce attacks by the poet against the contemporary Jewish community—not only in Montreal, his native city, but worldwide.

In a November 1983 interview with Arthur Kurzweil, Cohen acknowledged that he stylized himself into a priest when he was young:

I wanted to *live* this world. When I read the Psalms or when they lift up the Torah, "Etz chayim hi l'mah chazikim bah." . . . That kind of thing sent a chill down my back. I wanted to be that one who lifted up the Torah. I wanted to say that. I wanted to be in that position. 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.

So I took the whole thing seriously. I was this little kid, and whatever they told me in these matters, it resonated. I wanted to be that figure who sang, "This is a Tree of Life; all that you hold on to." So I tried to be that. I tried to become that. That world seemed open to me. And I was able to become that.<sup>45</sup>

The excerpt proves that Cohen was aware of his religious responsibilities and also shows his erudition when he mentions the white clothes, since the ancient priests wore white garments (*bigdei lavan*) upon entering "the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement."<sup>46</sup> Cohen's work often suggests that the role of a priest would suit him well but there is a constant incertitude in his poems, especially in the 1960s, when it seems that he is wavering between accepting the role of a speaker on behalf of the community and a prophet. A poem from *Parasites of Heaven* (1966) may illustrate this supposition:

42. See Nadel, "The Root of the Chord," 8.

43. Nadel, "The Root of the Chord," 8.

44. Nadel, "The Root of the Chord," 8.

45. Arthur Kurzweil, "I Am the Little Jew Who Wrote the Bible," in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, 383. Kurzweil's italics. The interview appeared in January 1994 in *Jewish Book News*. The literal translation of the Hebrew verse is: "It is a tree of life for those who grasp it." This verse is sung as part of the response from a congregation upon seeing the raised Torah scroll.

46. Elliot R. Wolfson, "New Jerusalem Glowing: Songs and Poems of Leonard Cohen in a Kabbalistic Key," *Kabbalah* 15 (2006): 147.

I am a priest of God  
 I walk down the road  
 with my pockets in my hand  
 Sometimes I'm bad  
 then sometimes I'm very good  
 I believe that I believe  
 everything I should  
 I like to hear you say  
 when you dance with head rolling  
 upon a silver tray<sup>47</sup>  
 that I am a priest of God

I thought I was doing 100 other things  
 but I was a priest of God  
 .....  
 I heard my voice tell the crowd  
 that I was alone and a priest of God  
 making me so empty  
 that even now in 1966  
 I'm not sure I'm a priest of God.<sup>48</sup>

The book *Parasites of Heaven* is an interesting collection which maps both facets of Leonard Cohen, both as a priest and a prophet. The collection is permeated by humorous, sometimes even childish, rhymes portraying Cohen's changeability:

Leonard hasn't been the same  
 since he wandered from his name<sup>49</sup>

Wandering "from his name" clearly means "wandering from his priestly responsibilities" or, perhaps, from his origins.

An interesting notion of the priest is offered in the song "Priests," which was written by Cohen and recorded by Judy Collins for her album *Wildflowers* in 1967.<sup>50</sup> The singer mourns the fact that when he becomes the "lord" he will not be able to write love songs. He would lose his priesthood and perhaps achieve the final stage in his spiritual development. His priests will worship a woman's body as if it were "some little highway shrine," but in their actions they are malicious to the shrine and, in the end, make it only a "fossil."<sup>51</sup>

The relationship between such a "lord" and his complementary feminine polarity addressed in this song was already portrayed in Cohen's first collection of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956). In his view, love has always resembled the relation between the Virgin Mary and Christ, which is implicit in these song lyrics:

The naked weeping girl  
 is thinking of my name  
 turning my bronze name

47. A clear reference to Salome dancing with the head of John the Baptist on a silver plate. For the full biblical account see: Matthew 14:1–12 or Mark 6:14–27.

48. Leonard Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), 68.

49. Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven*, 33.

50. It was further recorded by Richie Havens on his album *1983* in 1969 and by Enrique Morente in 1996. Cohen has never performed this song in public. Dorman and Rawlins say: "Its title and contents are so close to him that one wonders if there were not other reasons [for not playing the song]. (He astutely side-stepped our question on this!) Clearly set in Greece, where highway shrines are more regular than milestones, at which the dead are honoured publicly, it dramatises Leonard's more self-indulgent side in a soliloquy of hope and caring concerning himself and his beloved." Lorraine S. Dorman and Clive L. Rawlins, *Leonard Cohen: Prophet of the Heart* (London: Omnibus, 1990), 201.

51. The text is reprinted in Dorman and Rawlins, *Leonard Cohen*, 201.

over and over  
 with the thousand fingers  
 of her body  
 anointing her shoulders  
 with the remembered odour of my skin<sup>52</sup>

#### LEONARD COHEN BETWEEN

My analysis shows Cohen as a person who is between two poles. Sometimes he stylizes himself into a prophet, at other times into a priest. Then we have a Cohen who says that he “became a bad priest,” suggesting that he was not the speaker of the community but the speaker of his own egocentric desires and someone who would be condemned as a liar, according to the chapters from the Qur’an mentioned earlier. In an interview with Elizabeth Boleman-Herring in 1988, Cohen commented on his inheritance:

Elizabeth Boleman-Herring: Why didn’t you carry on your family tradition?  
 Leonard Cohen: I did.  
 EBH: You became a “priest”?  
 LC: I became a bad priest.  
 EBH: There’s no such thing as a bad priest.  
 LC: That’s what Graham Greene thought . . .<sup>53</sup>

Then there is a humble Cohen. In a 1993 interview with Alberto Manzano that was printed in *El Europeo* in the same year, he claims that his life is shaped by other, greater forces:

I don’t have any biblical ambitions and I know that whatever life I’m leading is beyond the control of my personality, beyond the direction of my intentions. I think as you get older you understand that you’re in the grip of forces that are greater than the ones you believe you are commanding. Whatever role you tend to be living is fueled, it’s running on its own, an energy with its own motion. So I don’t pretend to emulate a prophet and I don’t pretend to emulate one that’s not a prophet. I just go to where the energy is in my own landscape.<sup>54</sup>

Then we have Cohen the singing priest, addressing Solomon, whom he begs for consolation:

When I hear you sing  
 Solomon  
 animal throat, eyes beaming  
 sex and wisdom  
 My hands ache from

52. Leonard Cohen, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956; New York: Ecco, 2007), 34.

53. Elizabeth Boleman-Herring, “Dinner with Leonard,” in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, 229. The reference is to Graham Greene’s book *The Power and the Glory* (1940) in which the main character, a cowardly “whiskey priest,” tries to restore his dignity. The book was criticized by the Vatican for harming the priesthood as an institution. See, for example, “Vatican’s Bid to Censure Graham Greene,” *BBC News*, November 3, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1005484.stm>.

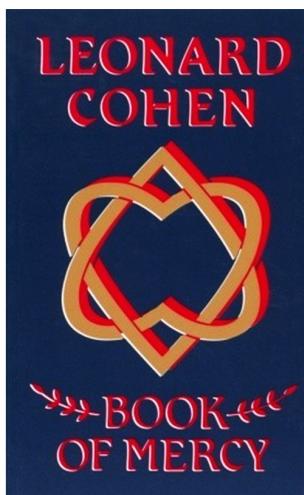
54. Alberto Manzano, “The Future,” in *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, 319.

I left blood on the doors of my home  
 Solomon  
 I am very alone from aiming songs  
 at God for  
 I thought that beside me there was no one  
 Solomon<sup>55</sup>

The ancient myths often portrayed the poet as a musician accompanied by an instrument that served as a carrier of the divine word. For example, King David played to King Saul in order to soothe his strained nerves (1 Sam. 16:14–23).

#### PRIEST OF LOVE

Cohen created the “Order of the Unified Heart” in order to express his position on the unification of both good and evil, masculine and feminine; polarities and antipodes in all imaginable spheres. The symbol is represented by a Star of David made out of two intertwined hearts. These hearts are opposites to each other. The motif appeared on the cover of *Book of Mercy*:



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The two hearts are in a state of mutual dependence, as described in the song “Come Healing” in the album *Old Ideas* (2012): “The Heart beneath is teaching / To the broken Heart above.”<sup>56</sup> The unity of opposites is the state that ends all disharmonies. Cohen has also developed the symbol of the two intertwined hearts as the main focus of the Priestly Blessing. The picture of his seal contains, moreover, the word Shin, which is the twenty-first word of the Semitic alphabet, in translation “teeth” or “press,” or “sharp.” It also represents

55. Cohen, *Parasites of Heaven*, 41.

56. Leonard Cohen, *Old Ideas* (Sony Legacy, 2012), compact disc.

another name for G-d, Shaddai. Shin is formed by the priest's hands, giving the Priestly Blessing, and, besides that, it symbolizes the ventricles of the heart—the Throne of the Lord.

#### CONCLUSION

Cohen's words, lyrics, poems, and novels are well-accepted, appreciated, and even worshiped nowadays. Between the years 2008 and 2013 he did 470 shows in thirty-one countries which attracted around four million fans. Moreover, he received the most important prizes for his literary and music achievements. In 2008, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and in the same year he received the title of Grand Officer of the National Order of Quebec. In 2010, he received a Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement, and in the same year, he was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. The next year, 2011, he received the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature in Spain, which is the highest literary award in the country. In 2012, he received the Inaugural PEN Award for Song Lyrics of Literary Excellence, and in 2013, he won the Juno Award for being the Artist of the Year. His last prize, the Juno Award for the Album of the Year, was given to him for his last album so far, *Popular Problems*. All this testifies that he has become an important member of the music industry and a well-respected *littérateur*.

The singer must have gained a securer footing in the Jewish community recently after all these years, as he decided to perform the Priestly Blessing (*birkat kohanim*) officially on September 24, 2009 at the Ramat Gan<sup>57</sup> concert in Israel to an audience of around fifty thousand spectators.<sup>58</sup> In Numbers 6:24–26, his predecessors, Aaron and his sons, were instructed to bless the community with the following words:

May the LORD bless you and guard you—

בְּרַכְךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ

May the LORD make His face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you—

יָאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיַּחַנְדֵּךָ

May the LORD lift up His face unto you and give you peace

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיִּשְׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹמִים

And so did Leonard Cohen, accompanied by the roaring applause and emotional cries of the Israeli community. With this blessing, he proved, once and for all, that he has not abandoned his priestly responsibilities and has added them to his prophetic role. Earlier, in 1964, when he commented on the oeuvre of A. M. Klein, he claimed that it was impossible to fuse the roles. Forty-five years later, he proved that he could be a priest and a prophet at the same time.

57. A city close to Tel Aviv and included in Tel Aviv District.

58. For the full report see Nathan Jeffay, "Hallelujah' in Tel Aviv: Leonard Cohen Energizes Diverse Crowd," *Jewish Daily Forward*, September 25, 2009, <http://forward.com/articles/115181/hallelujah-in-tel-aviv-leonard-cohen-energizes-di/>. A video of the blessing may be seen on YouTube: Leonard Cohen, "Leonard Cohen Finale in Israel—Priestly Blessing," YouTube video, September 29, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4imJ7wWB9FU>.



Merchandise accompanying Cohen's world tour

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