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TOUCHING THE PERFECT, EMBRACING THE REAL: LEONARD COHEN AND THEODICY

For a theologian and melomaniac, a volume on the problem of pain and suffering almost begs for a paper on Leonard Cohen. The world of Cohen's experience, as recorded in his songs and poems, is beautiful but broken. Throughout his life he grappled with the brokenness we experience in our own lives, in our relationships with God and with other human beings. He never presumed to solve the problem of evil and suffering or pretended that he could. Rather, he sought a way to live with the brokenness.

Cohen grew up in Montreal, where his family belonged to the Jewish elite.¹ He drew inspiration from Sufism (Rumi), Lurianic Kabbalah and Zen Buddhism, yet his primary spiritual framework remained Judaism enriched by the widespread use of Christian images and concepts. Among many compelling perspectives on Cohen's thought, two recent books are particularly helpful regarding theodicy. In *From this Broken Hill I Sing to You: God, Sex and Politics in the Work of Leonard Cohen*,² Pally highlights Cohen's search for intimacy with other human beings (in particular, with women) and with God. In *Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of*

¹ Among the many biographies of Cohen, a good place to begin is: Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* (Harper Collins: New York, 2012).

² Marcia Pally, *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You: God, Sex and Politics in the Work of Leonard Cohen* (London: T & T Clark, 2021).

Genius,³ Freedman's analysis of Cohen's use of religious metaphors and allusions deepen the reception of Cohen's thought, including his theodicy.

Cohen considered (sexual) union and (spiritual) communion to be complementary paths to intimacy, and these paths continually intersect and overlap in his thought and practice. Although he approached intimacy from many directions, behind them all lies the biblical idea of covenant, understood as a reciprocal, committed union where each partner seeks to enjoy and bless the other(s).⁴ From the Bible's teaching that human beings are in God's own image, Cohen concludes that we are made for covenant relationships, yet he struggles with the fact that we prove so easily and often to be faithless.⁵

Freedman highlights Cohen's frequent references to "Babylon", which he also referred to as "Boogie Street". Babylon is a metaphor for materialism, sin and corruption, for the world of power, pleasure, and possessions.⁶ Cohen laments our propensity to forsake "Jerusalem", a metaphor for deeper connection with our cultural roots and the experience of spiritual reality. The desire to escape intimacy which Pally highlights is a key aspect of our perpetual return to Boogie Street.

Cohen's theodicy does not defend God's goodness, but rather questions it. It is as though he asks, "Why do we to break covenant when it is inscribed in our very being? When we've stood on the Holy Mountain, why do we hasten to return to Babylon?" Cohen takes almost perverse delight in confessing his own shortcomings as a covenant-keeper. Nevertheless, he argues that God too is culpable. Why did the One who designed us for covenant make us so prone to break it? As Pally argues, with corroborating evidence from Freedman, this strikes at the heart of the theodical question Cohen wrestled with throughout his life.

The Theodical Cohen: A survey of major approaches

Pally provides a helpful overview of classical theodical strategies as they relate to Cohen's thought, which I will briefly summarize and develop here.⁷ Cohen is critical of some theodical strategies, including evil as the absence of good, suffering as punishment for wrong-doing, and "soul-making" theodicies. His thinking and experience resonate better with the so-called free-will defense, cruciform theodicies, and theodicies akin to open theism and process theology. Yet to the

³ Harry Freedman, *Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

⁴ Marcia Pally, *Between bond and breach: The covenantal theology of Leonard Cohen*. ABC Religion and Ethics, <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/marcia-pally-covenant-theology-of-leonard-cohen/13579374>>, 2 [accessed 12 December 2021].

⁵ Cf. Pally, *From this Broken Hill*, chapters 3, 4.

⁶ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 81.

⁷ Pally, *From this Broken Hill*, chapter 1, 15-32.

extent he employs such approaches, they remain at best partial answers; they do not “solve” the brokenness of the world and of those who live in it.

Regarding non-moral evil, Cohen rejects the argument that nature is simply following the physical laws of the universe.⁸ If God is the source of everything, he is ultimately responsible for the second law of thermodynamics, for natural disasters, and for physical death and decay. Cohen has more sympathy for the free-will defense, which argues that beings who are incapable of moral choice would lack the capacity for loving, reciprocal relationships. The benefits of possessing free will, it is claimed, outweigh the suffering that results from its misuse. Cohen admits to human culpability yet refuses to absolve God of guilt. If evil is a by-product of free-will, Cohen would add that freedom is a by-product of the capacity for love and intimacy, for there is no love without the freedom to choose. But why are we such unfaithful lovers? Cohen argues that God shares the blame, for he made us this way knowing we would fail.

Is evil then the absence of good? In his idiosyncratic, poetic way, Cohen brings us back to the source. Along with the gift of freedom and the innate capacity for love came a fatal flaw in human nature. If we fail at love, the very thing we were designed for, then God as the source of everything is morally and metaphysically responsible for this state of affairs. The same argument applies to the view that suffering is divine punishment for wrongdoing.⁹ Here too, Cohen focuses on the paradox of our nature. In an *ex nihilo* world, it's no use appealing to faulty design parameters or the use of inferior materials. Facing the world's brokenness and the darkness in our souls, Cohen concludes that ultimate responsibility lies with the architect and creator of the universe. He also dismisses “soul-making theodicy”. Although we do learn through life experiences, there is far more suffering than growth. The argument that soul-making theodicy does not absolve God of ultimate responsibility for evil and suffering gained new strength and potency following the Shoah.¹⁰ Cohen's effort to ground not only spirituality but life itself in something other than an omniscient, all-powerful God who does all things well has some affinity with process or open theology. Cohen cannot escape the thought that God is ultimately responsible for the tendency of those he created for love and intimacy to break covenant. As Pally summarizes,

If the propensity to pride and bolting is human nature, it cannot be only humanity's sin. It is also God's. He is the source of humanity's covenantal breaches and his return to Boogie Street as he is the source of humanity.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Ibid., 74.

This brings us to cruciform theodicies, which were popularized in the 20th century by such figures as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann, who argued that God participates in the suffering of the world. When Christ suffered on the cross, his suffering became an integral, internal experience of the triune God. If Judaism was Cohen's spiritual home base, how are we to understand his many references to Jesus? Is there a place in Cohen's thought for a cruciform theodicy? The answer, I would argue, is yes. To see how that can be true, it's time to look at Cohen's own texts.

The Theodical Cohen: The Texts

Cohen produced 15 studio albums and 8 live albums. The songs discussed below were chosen to represent his thoughts on theodicy throughout his career, with a special emphasis placed on his last album, "You Want It Darker".¹² The commentary that follows is a way to read Cohen; no claim is made it is the only way or the best way. Yet to this writer it feels true to Cohen even when it goes beyond him, in ways he may or may not have recognized as his own.

Cohen's poetry and lyrics draw on rich and diverse traditions. He incorporates images and metaphors from sacred and secular literature and weaves them together in ways that move freely from the physical to the spiritual, from the secular to the sacred, and back again, connecting and integrating and dissecting these seemingly diverse realms of existence and experience. We will begin our reading with "Suzanne", which according to Spotify is listened to more often than any other of Cohen's songs.

Suzanne (1967)

Suzanne is about Cohen's life in Montreal. He was writing the song when into its vision came Suzanne Vaillancourt, the wife of his friend Armand Vaillancourt. As he explained in a 1994 BBC interview, "I bumped into her one evening, and she invited me down to her place near the river. . . She served me Constant Comment tea, which has little bits of oranges in it. And the boats were going by, and I touched her perfect body with my mind, because there was no other opportunity."¹³ 2008 Cohen later described "Suzanne" as "a kind of doorway. I have to open it carefully, otherwise what's beyond is not accessible to me. It was never about a particular

¹² Limitations of space precludes including Cohen's lyrics in this paper. They can be readily accessed at several websites.

¹³ Interview with Kevin Howlett, *Leonard Cohen: Tower of Song*, BBC Radio One, August 7, 1994. Cited in: Simmons, *I'm Your Man*, 128-129.

woman. It was about the beginning of a different life for me, my life wandering alone in Montreal."¹⁴

Cohen invites us into Suzanne's world, where thoughts are as real and tangible as physical bodies. In doing so, he raises an important question concerning the nature of subjective experience and reality. In contrast to the reductionist account offered by materialism, Haliburton argues that Suzanne's world, like Cohen's, is teleological.¹⁵ Though our access to and experience of the world is subjective, Suzanne, along with Jesus, remind us that there is meaning and purpose waiting to be discovered, or at least glimpsed in Suzanne's mirror. Lacking direct access to other people's subjective experience, we nevertheless share consciousness with them, which creates possibilities for shared meanings. Those who share consciousness can and do construct meanings together, just as Suzanne does when "she gets you on her wavelength".¹⁶ In "Suzanne" Cohen tell us that love cannot be defined and possessed, it can only be shared and experienced. So too God as the source of all things is at once beyond knowing and able to be known, for intimacy and communion is something we create as we experience it together.

Suzanne is described as "half-crazy" for she sees beyond physical reality. The tea and oranges transport us to China, or more accurately bring China to us. Yet it is Suzanne's vision which enables us to see beyond the horizon of our physical world. Suzanne offers more than afternoon tea; she offers intimacy and connection through the stories we tell that create shared meanings. Step by step, she draws us in, capturing our attention and igniting our imagination. Such intimacy feels threatening, so we try to withdraw, to deny the connection between us. Despite our unspoken declaration that we "have no love to give her", Suzanne stays with us. She continues to draw us in until we acknowledge, at least for this moment, the intimate connection that we share here and now. We have "touched her perfect body" *with our mind*, and as a result have lost our fear of intimacy and open ourselves to love. We want to follow her in blind trust, not knowing where she is going. Suzanne knows she can trust us too, for we have connected at the level of consciousness, as persons with embodied minds.

In the second verse, Cohen jumps from Suzanne to Jesus. Realizing that we are all "drowning men", Jesus invites us to sail the sea of life with him, for only by sharing his journey can we learn to "see" him. Yet he meets resistance from his enemies and potential disciples alike. The river may whisper that we have always

¹⁴ Interview with Brian D. Johnson, *Maclean's*, June 11, 2008. Cited in: Simmons, *I'm Your Man*, 129.

¹⁵ Cf. Rachel Haliburton, *Can You Touch Someone's Body with Your Mind?*, in J. Holt, ed., *Leonard Cohen and Philosophy: Various Positions* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2014), 191-201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 198-199.

loved Suzanne, but the sea is not so kind to Jesus. He sinks beneath our “wisdom”, a victim of our reason, our rationalizations and fears, of the excuses we use to keep him at a safe distance from his friendship and his love. Dying on the cross, Jesus cited David in Ps. 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Cohen turns these words on their head. God was not alone in turning his back on Jesus, for we also turned our backs on him. Both God and humans withdraw from Jesus, just as lovers withdraw from each other. Yet Jesus stays the course, he goes down with his ship, and in so doing shows us the way to live and to die. Although we fail and break covenant, although even God forsakes his beloved Son, Jesus remained faithful. Now it is Jesus who gets us on his wavelength, who touches our perfect body with his mind. In love, he has accepted suffering, and by suffering for us and with us he showed us the way to maintain covenant. He, the faithful one, has touched us and we, the faithless ones, have touched him and his faithful love. As Jesus’ beloved disciple John writes, there is no fear in love. We can trust Jesus, we want to travel with him in blind faith, for we know he will not use or abuse us.

In the final stanza, Cohen sings about Suzanne and Jesus together. We have broken covenant with Suzanne and with Jesus, but they remain faithful to us. Pally highlights the many connections between our two “lovers”.¹⁷ Suzanne walks by the river beneath the gaze of our “Lady of the Harbor” – the “Star of the Sea” statue of the Virgin Mary that stands atop the Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel facing the old harbor in Montreal. Like Jesus, Suzanne wears rags “from Salvation Army counters, a not-so-subtle reference to salvation. We have travelled with Suzanne to China, now she takes us to where Jesus walked with his disciples “amidst the garbage and the flowers”. As she holds her mirror up to the “children” who, like Cohen and like us, are leaning out for love, we see at last what Suzanne and Jesus both see when they touch our “perfect body”; a reflection of the divine, for we too are in the image of God.

You Know Who I Am (1969)

“You know Who I am” speaks paradoxically of the unknowable knowability of God. In the refrain, God declares, “You know who I am”, and Cohen does know. “I AM”, the Tetragrammaton, is the name by which the one God revealed Himself through Moses to his people Israel. What is more, Cohen himself has “stared at the sun”, a reference to his experience of God while high on LSD.¹⁸ Yet as Co-

¹⁷ Marcia Pally, “Leonard Cohen’s Jewish Theodicy: We Are Waiting for Godot, But It Is We Who May Never Arrive.” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 32.2 (2020), 121-143, <<https://marciapally.com/2021/03/>>, 13 [accessed 12 December 2021].

¹⁸ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 133.

hen knows from Lurianic Kaballah, God is “nothing”, that is beyond definition, beyond human comprehension, beyond our attempts to describe the source of everything in words.

The source that fills everything, the I Am and the what is, God and creation, the unity of all things which we perceive as “one”, is *ein sof*. It is without end, pure light without differentiation, at once everything and hence “nothing”. Cohen recapitulates this teaching in God’s self-description: “I am the one who loves changing from nothing to one”. Pure, undifferentiated light withdrew to make room for creation to be filled with its light. As Freedman explains, the process of creation, which moves “from the infinite nothingness of *ein sof* to the unity of God in the world” is implicitly circular, from one to nothing and back to one again.¹⁹

God declares in the first stanza, “I cannot follow you, my love, you cannot follow me.” According to Lurianic cosmology, we are separated from the pure light of God. As broken vessels, we cannot contain God’s pure light any more than that light could exist on our plane without blowing it all to smithereens. Though we may be estranged from God, God did not leave us. In the words Cohen puts in God’s mouth, it is we who fail to “track him down”, we who “put the distance between” us. In a startling paradox, this very distance which separates us is that which unites us. God declares, “I am the distance between all of the moments that we will be”. In between those moments when the veil is withdrawn and we experience union with God, God is still present. As Pally writes, “This “I” is the stuff “between” the discrete moments of our lives; it is their structure and ground.”²⁰ Cohen suggests that existence and communion are possible because God stands behind the structure of our lives and of the very universe, connecting and mediating between all things. We may be estranged from the source, but we are never far from it, for if God were not present we would not merely be alone, we would in fact cease to exist.

In the second stanza, God tell us that he needs us, both “to carry my children in” (a reference to Moses and/or Noah), and to “kill a child” (the story of Abraham and Isaac). Like it or not, our lives have purpose and we have tasks to do, for good and for evil. But do we have any choice in the matter? The answer in the next stanza is a tentative “yes”. As Freedman argues, God needs us just as we need God. We find that despite the distance between us, a relationship, indeed a partnership with God, is still possible.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰ Pally, “Leonard Cohen’s Jewish Theodicy” [accessed 20 December 2021].

²¹ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 135.

In Jeremiah 29:13 God told his people, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." In the final stanza, God tells us that if we succeed in "tracking him down", he will "surrender" to us, he will make himself known to us. The task of "tracking down God" requires great perseverance. Cohen considers Moses, Jesus and Jacob to be among those who wrestled with God and who persevered. Yet, the cost of tracking down God is high. Jesus was broken on the cross, and Jacob walked the rest of his life with a limp. Nevertheless, we can learn from them to persevere in covenant and become healers, for that is what those in covenant do for each other. As Pally writes, "The broken man will be repaired by us because God will teach us to repair the broken among us."²²

The Window (1979)

"The Window" is one of Cohen's most complex, intertwined songs. As Doron Cohen (no relation) notes,²³ it incorporates and reflects the influence of the myriad of literary and religious sources that the artist drew on. D. Cohen presents two plausible readings of the poem. The first reading, drawing on such diverse sources of inspiration as Rumi and Dante, Jung and Yeats, concerns the mystical ascent of the soul. From a state of introspection and indecision, the soul recognizes that it is lost and begins its upward climb. In the next stanza, a key stage in the journey is leaving behind "the cloud of unknowing" (a reference to the 14th century mystical work of the same title), where knowing as well as unknowing remains a barrier to experiencing union with the divine. The soul has travelled far, reaching the "moon", but it ascends still higher, climbing on its own tears and suffering (like a rose climbing its thorns) until it lays its life (the rose) on the blazing fire of the sun. Finally, even the allegorical light of the sun gives way to "splendour in the arms of the High Holy One". The soul's mystical ascent is complete; it has returned to rest in its divine source.

Leonard Cohen called the story of Christ's crucifixion the "blood myth" of our culture²⁴, and as D. Cohen goes on to show, "The Window" can also be read as a song about Jesus. In this reading, the refrain's repeated appeal to the "chosen love" is directed towards Jesus. "The tangle of matter and ghost" alludes to the incarnation, which is fitting since Cohen often refers to the body as the locus or meeting place of the union between the human and the divine.²⁵ Jesus could be

²² Pally, *Leonard Cohen's Jewish Theology*, 8.

²³ Doron Cohen, "Speaking Sweetly from 'The Window': Reading Leonard Cohen's Song," *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions* (June 2011), 106-133.

²⁴ Pally, *Leonard Cohen's Jewish Theology*, 16.

²⁵ Bernard Wills, "Clouds of Unknowing," in Jason Holt, ed., *Various Positions* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2014), 231-240.

said to “climb on [his] tears and be silent” when he, silent as a lamb being led to slaughter, was lifted up on the cross. In the final stanza, Cohen employs well-known Christian imagery for Jesus’ crucifixion, as Jesus lays his life (the rose) on the fire and dies “in the arms of the high holy one”. As Pally writes, “These lines draw on the Christian tradition where the rose, symbolizing Christ’s blood on the cross, is offered in a trial of “fire” before reaching the “splendour of the “holy one.”²⁶ Pally draws out what Cohen acknowledges and respects in Moses and in Jesus; their faithfulness to God and to other people:

In grappling with why we are on the cross, at Golgotha again—why we maim and maraud—Cohen saw that Jesus and Moses do not brutalize. What grabs Cohen about these two is that they—fully human, riddled with the same fears and temptations that filled him, forsaken by their people and at moments seemingly by God—abandon neither God nor people. They persist in commitment.²⁷

In Cohen’s work metaphorical windows represent the boundary between two states, in this case between body and soul.²⁸ As is often the case with Cohen, multiple allusions are made and possible meanings intertwine. In Freedman’s reading, “Windows” is addressed to someone standing at the boundary, wanting to cross yet hesitating. It is this state of hesitation, or in-betweenness, where body and soul meet but are not truly connected, which leads to suffering. Where will relief come from? To answer this question, Cohen calls on Jewish and Christian and Sufi mystical traditions, on Kabbalah and the Gospel of John, on *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Rumi. His answer comes in the refrain: “Oh chosen love, Oh frozen love Oh tangle of matter and ghost... Gentle this soul.” Love is the great healer that can lead to the integration, the interdependency of body and soul.²⁹ This healing can take place, Cohen tells us, if we will only “Climb upon your tears and be silent Like a rose on its ladder of thorns.” These words can refer to Jesus’ crucifixion, but Cohen also calls on *The Zohar*, the classic text of Kabbalah, where the rose “is a metaphor for Israel or, as Cohen chooses to understand it, the soul.”³⁰ Roses and thorns are also found in Rumi, and Cohen acknowledged that “Windows” was influenced by the Persian poet and mystic. To focus on the process and not the details of these respective traditions, the rose rises up, transcending its own thorns, such as pride and the untamed cravings of the flesh, to reach mystical union with the High Holy One.

²⁶ Pally, *Leonard Cohen’s Jewish Theology*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 158.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

What then are we to make of the Cohen's final words: "For the holy one dreams of a letter / Dreams of a letter's death / Oh bless thee continuous stutter, / Of the word being made into flesh"? This calls to mind the incarnation of Jesus, whom Christians know as the *logos*, the Word of God made flesh. Cohen of course knows this story and this theology well, yet he understands the uniting of the divine and human in one incarnate soul as a universal process that all people can experience, a process that is never complete in this life and which proceeds by fits and "stutters". As Freedman puts it, Cohen

sees it as an ongoing dynamic: initiated by the desire of our soul to ascend, causing a corresponding descent from above. The two parts of the soul, the human and the divine, reaching out in a state of creative tension towards each other, joining together interweaving, communing as one. The transformation of the earthly soul into a divine being. 'Oh tangle of matter and ghost...Gentle this soul.'³¹

This is a mysticism where heaven and earth meet, where the human and the divine mingle and join, where they learn to travel together through life. Theodically speaking, there is struggle, there is suffering in this journey, and this is accepted as natural. It is by moving this process into everyday life that Cohen moves from the perfect to the real. We suffer needlessly, however, when we resist the process, when we hesitate to begin, when we choose to remain in Babylon and to walk down Boogie Street.

Hallelujah (1984)

Hallelujah has become one of Cohen's best-known songs, ranking only behind Suzanne in hits on Spotify. Part of its broad appeal is that Cohen intentionally allowed for religious and secular readings. Wherever we put the accent, here the sacred, secular and sexual worlds intertwine, and the "Hallelujah" encounter with God is pushed into our mundane, secular world. Or to approach it from the other end of things, sexual intimacy between lovers is declared to be sacred and holy.

The song begins with King David, the "sweet singer of Israel". Freedman, who suggests that the first three stanzas of "Hallelujah" parallel Cohen's own life as a musician, lover and poet, notes how few songs appeared in the Bible before David.³² The "baffled king" may well have wondered if his God cared one way or another about his music!

The second stanza of "Hallelujah" flows from one biblical image to another, addressing David in one line and Samson in the next, even as their stories merge

³¹ Ibid., 164.

³² Ibid., 64.

into one with Leonard's own. Like David, Cohen was "overthrown" by the beauty of the female body. Like Samson, he felt trapped in relationships he feared would curtail his freedom. Babich is not wrong when she writes, "Plainly, the song is only incidentally about David; it's really about Cohen and his lovers, and it lets them know his singer's disappointment, a lover's resignation."³³ Nevertheless, here in the bedrooms and backrooms of forbidden sex, despite the seemingly inevitable disappointment, Cohen joins David and Samson in singing the Hallelujah.

As he himself confessed, Cohen idealized women, and this ideal image got in the way of his relationships with real woman. Ironically, his adoration of women left him open to charges of being a misogynist. Babich compares him with Nietzsche, concluding that for both "the projection, the supposition, the fantasy that women could constitute the fairer or as Goethe supposed the 'higher' sex, is also a way of dis-imagining their humanity."³⁴ But since this paper focuses on theodicy, not on gender constructions, it seems more relevant to note that Cohen is singing in the shadow of more esoteric offshoots of Lurianic Kabbalah, where sexual ecstasy is considered a pathway to spiritual union with God. Cohen's problem is not with sex *per se*, and certainly not with sex as a spiritual discipline that draws us closer to God. Sexual intimacy between lovers and the experience of spiritual union with God can be at once intimate and mind-blowing. But in this world things never go as smoothly as we expect, dreams die hard, and deep disappointment awaits those who grasp at exalted visions at the cost of more tangible outcomes. In our mundane lives, love often turns cold, confining or controlling, and there are those days when, as Don McLean sang in "American Pie", even the holy ghost seems to have gone and "caught the last train for the coast".

In the third stanza, when Cohen confesses that he doesn't know the name, is he thinking about God or about his very human lovers? Cohen certainly has not forgotten the Tetragrammaton. To the extent he is talking to God, he is really asking whether God can be known and trusted. What good does it do to know God's name, when God seems both caring and distant, all-forgiving and yet punishing? So Cohen again sings the holy and the broken Hallelujah. It is left to the hearer, human or divine, to determine which one he is singing. With Cohen, the answer might well be "both at the same time".

Cohen treats the holy and the broken Hallelujahs as equally valid. Since they both point at the same thing, it doesn't really matter which one you sing. He ends "Hallelujah" with a confession: "I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch." As Jiří Měšíc

³³ Babette Babich, "Hallelujah and Atonement," in Jason Holt, ed., *Various Positions* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2014), 124.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

writes, Cohen declares that “when he could not ‘feel’ – feel the divine love – he had to ‘touch’ the female body.”³⁵ Yet despite his confession that “it all went wrong”, Cohen still stands before the lord of song and sings the Hallelujah.

In an alternate stanza from the album “Live in London”³⁶, Cohen seems to question whether God exists, yet for once stops short of accusing God of causing the mess we’ve made of things. Cohen’s lover no longer talks to him, even God no longer speaks to Cohen as he once did. Things don’t seem to make sense like they used to. Why is there so much brokenness, why is it so difficult to understand the purpose behind it all? Cohen makes no accusations, no claims to enlightenment, he just sings the “cold and broken Hallelujah”.

Life and love are messy, and in “Hallelujah” Cohen acknowledges the impossibility of figuring it all out. In an interview in 1988, he explained that “there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms and you embrace the thing and you just say ‘Hallelujah! Blessed is the name.’ And you can’t reconcile it in any other way except in that position of total surrender, total affirmation.”³⁷ This surrender and affirmation applies to the Hallelujah at the end of every stanza. When Cohen speaks like this of beauty and brokenness, of how they coexist and feed off each other, he distances himself from theodical “solutions”, preferring to embrace the moments of exaltation and disappointment that make up the context and content, the warp and the woof of our holy and broken Hallelujahs.

If It Be Your Will (1984)

Prayers in the Jewish Prayer Book often begin with the words, “May it be Your will”. Cohen, who was a priest to many in more than name alone, chose a different vocational path. Nevertheless, this song is a prayer, composed at a time when Cohen had been struggling with writer’s block.³⁸ The subtle shift of words to “If it be your will” indicates the uncertainty he feels regarding both his request and his worthiness to make it. Instead of asking expectantly, he humbly offers back to God what he held most dear; his creative gift with words. Like Jesus in the garden, who facing the horror of the cross prayed, “If it be your will”, Cohen too declares that he will be silent or that he will sing – “if it be your will”.³⁹

³⁵ Jiří Měšic, „The Nature of Love in the Work of Leonard Cohen,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (JPRS), October 2018. <http://www.jprstudies.org> [accessed 25 March 2022], 15.

³⁶ Of the many stanzas Cohen wrote for this song, only some were included in the recorded version from 1984, and those selected varied in subsequent performances and his live albums.

³⁷ Leonard Cohen, Interview by John McKenna, “How the Heart Approaches What It Yearns”, 1988. <<https://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/rte.html>> [accessed 23 March 2022].

³⁸ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 200.

³⁹ Pally, *Leonard Cohen’s Jewish Theology*, 8.

As the prayer goes on, Cohen begins to sing with more confidence. Regardless of whether the “broken hill” alludes to Golgotha or to the general brokenness of the world, Cohen will sing from that hill, “if it be your will”. He has prayed for inspiration, he sang a hymn of praise, now he offers a prayer of blessing, a prayer that God’s mercy would bring healing to our burning hearts in the little hells we have made here on earth.

Cohen closes his prayer by asking God to “draw us near” and “bind us tight”, in our “rags of light”. In Lurianic Kaballah, the perfect, divine light enters the cracked human vessels of our very real lives and brings healing and reconciliation. As Freedman notes, a variant reading of the Torah says that when God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden he clothed them in clothes of light, rather than clothes of animal skin. The Zohar understands this to mean that prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve were indeed clothed in light. Cohen goes further, declaring that after the Fall human beings are still clothed with rags of light, suggesting that they still seek God despite the brokenness of their own lives.⁴⁰ He closes his song with a prayer for peace and healing: “And end this night, if it be your will.” For this moment, Cohen has found repose. Theodicy fades into the distance. Instead of questions, accusations and defences, we find the sense of acceptance, submission, or least accommodation that surfaced again in his final two albums.

Anthem (1992)

“Anthem” is at once a religious hymn and an exercise in existentialism, in which Cohen asks (and answers?) how we can survive and perhaps even dare to thrive in this world. The song is a mixture of Zen, Judaism and Christianity, along with a healthy dose of existential philosophy, all of which are grounded in and informed by Cohen’s personal experience.

Cohen here is fighting the ideal, which is the great enemy of the real. As in “Waiting for the Miracle” (from the same album) he declares that success does not equal perfection. Everything is broken, imperfect, yet this is not cause for despair. The solution is not to mend the cracks, for they are part of life and an integral part of the healing process. In Lurianic Kaballah, which is lurking in the background of this song, it is the very cracks that let in the light which alone can heal our brokenness. When we resign ourselves to the fact that we, like this world, are broken, when we accept the brokenness and suffering that characterizes the human condition, we find great reserves of compassion, goodness, grace and joy.

Following in the footsteps of Kierkegaard, or at least the path he laid out which many have since followed, Cohen moves from the ethical to the religious realm to

⁴⁰ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 201.

embrace knowledge, or rather a different kind of knowing, which is beyond reason.⁴¹ This of course aligns with Jewish Kaballah, as well as with Zen and the Christian mystical tradition of apophatic theology. The challenge here is not simply to let go of reason, or even of the felt need for everything to be reasonable. In the end, you must let go of yourself.⁴²

Is the “Hallelujah” we sing broken or holy? When all is said and done and sung, does it matter? We can’t separate them, at least not here and now. So what’s left for us but to “ring the bells that still can ring”. Cohen tells us that we have a choice, that there is something we can yet do. And he tells us to “forget your perfect offering.” Forget it, for there is no such thing. Instead, learn to stand broken but proud. In suffering, learn compassion, which as Christ showed us through his suffering teaches us how to live and love in solidarity with our fellow-sufferers. When accept our brokenness, when we embrace suffering, they can connect us to other broken, suffering people.⁴³

Traveling light (2016)

If traveling light means discarding any excess baggage, what baggage is Cohen leaving behind? Is Cohen denying the existence, or at least the goodness, of God? Or as he sings in the same album in “On the Level”, is he saying goodbye, with some regret, to the game of love? Perhaps he is merely stating the obvious; he is dying and you can’t take anything with you. Cohen’s bitter-sweet relationship with God lurks in the background, but here his relationships with women take center stage.

In the final stanza, he repeats his chosen mantra, “I am traveling light”. He has discarded his excess baggage. What does he find when he “travels light”? A life of solitude, aloneness? Perhaps so, but perhaps not. Cohen asks a loaded question; “But if the road leads back to you / Must I forget / The things I knew / When I was friends / With one or two / Travelling light like / We used to do”. Who is this “you”? A friend, a lover, God? Given this is Cohen writing, the likely answer is “all the above”. At any rate, he asks what the implications would be if, after all is said and sung, there is another chance at the “me and you”? Does picking up the baggage of intimacy and commitment mean forgoing the ability to “travel light”? Or could it be possible, could we be so bold, as to travel light *together*? Cohen leaves this question open.

⁴¹ August Magnusson, “The Existential Cohen,” in Jason Holt, ed., *Various Positions* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2014), 23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴³ Pally, *From this Broken Hill*, 97.

Though Cohen did not make this explicit, I suggest that the implied answer is a tentative yes, or at least a definite – maybe. What must he forget in order to find the “me and you”? He must forget the illusion that it’s possible to find the perfect woman, the perfect relationship, the perfect God who jumps in every time to save us when our bacon falls in the fire, or we have jumped in it ourselves. If this is the case, then the baggage Cohen now leaves behind is not cloying, controlling commitment, but rather the fear of commitment. In this reading, this song reprises Cohen’s thesis in songs such as “Windows” and “Waiting for the Miracle”. What if the baggage we carry and the needless suffering we experience is a result of keeping flesh and spirit at odds with each other, of holding the human and divine at arms’ length, of running from the other (Suzanne, Jesus, a friend, a lover) who has touched our perfect, embodied soul? Traveling light would then mean shedding the burden of barren idealism, leaving behind the suffering that results from clinging to the illusion of the perfect, the complete, the unattainable ideal, which as Cohen learned the hard way, comes at the cost of touching the real. The window remains open. We too stand by the window. Will we hesitate, or pass on through?

You want it darker? (2016)

In the title track of his final album⁴⁴ Cohen reprises the story of his life. This song is darker than “If I didn’t have your love”, but it speaks in the same vein. As in “Leaving the Table”, Cohen begins by declaring, “I’m out of the game”. Once again, he pours out his anger, his frustration, his rebellion. One last time, he declares that God is co-culpable for evil and suffering. And what is worse, he gets us to do his dirty work. God, who wants it darker than dark, placed us here as dark players in his dark game. We are made for covenant and destined to be covenant breakers, we are created for Jerusalem but choose instead to live in Babylon. God left it to us to make the darkness darker, to “kill the flame”.

God may be doing just fine in heaven, but we find ourselves here on earth with Moses and Jesus, with Cohen and Suzanne. With Cohen we ask, “Why did help not come when Christ was hanging on the cross? Why did not God not intervene to stop the Holocaust? Why has God allowed so much brokenness in my life? We long for intimacy, for love, yet we prove faithless on many counts. Why did God make us so prone to failure?” This litany sounds familiar, and it should. We have heard this all before, repeatedly, throughout the course of Cohen’s life in song.

⁴⁴ Not counting “Thanks for the Dance”, which was produced by his son and released posthumously in November 2019.

Cohen introduces one subtle yet profound change in the final refrain. Instead of declaring, "I'm out of the game", he asks God to "let me out of the game". There is no solution or resolution. The house rules still suck, the dice are still loaded, the cards are still stacked against us. But what if we have been playing the wrong game? What if we were waiting for the miracle instead of engaging in reality? What if we missed the real though imperfect love we can experience in our here and now lives by engaging in an endless search for some perfect, unattainable ideal of love? What if the rules do not promise that "help will come", but rather call on us to come of age, to accept (as Bonhoeffer wrote) our freedom and responsibility as both privilege and opportunity rather than as a burden and a curse? What if we stop trying to play God or replace God, and get on with the business of being ourselves?

Here Cohen no longer blames God. Instead of asking, "why did help never come", he cries, *hinieni, hinieni*; "Here I am, Lord, I'm ready to do your will". He has not found a solution to the problem of pain and suffering, but he has found acceptance and perhaps, as Pally suggests, a measure of contentment. He seems to say that there remains a future that is yet open to us, in this life and—for all we know—beyond this life.

In the forward to Pally's book, Moshe Halbertal notes that God also says *hinieni* to human beings.⁴⁵ In Isaiah 58:9 God declares, "I will say "Here I am", to those who obey my command to care for the poor and the oppressed." In Isaiah 65:1-2 God promises the same thing to those who are in rebellion against him. God says to them, "If you turn (return) to me, I will say to say, "*Hinieni!* I am here for you"."

So God also waits on us, on human beings. It's as if God tells us, I am waiting for you to reach out to me. In Cohen's words, "You know who I am, and if you track me down I will surrender to you." And I will teach you to heal each other, and to heal the broken bonds between you. For that is what those who are in covenant do. And so with Abraham and with Cohen we may yet learn to say, "*Hinieni*, I am ready Lord." And to add: "I think I can trust you, and I'm ready to travel blind."

Cohen may be ready, but are we ready? I, for one, am still in process. Jesus and Cohen have touched me; along with other fellow travelers, they have helped open my eyes, my imagination, my soul, through the stories we have told each other and the experiences we have shared. What does it mean, though, to travel blind? For Cohen, as for Jesus and Suzanne, "traveling blind" does not mean that we close our eyes to reality, but rather that we begin to see and accept life as it really is. Traveling blind does mean, however, that we don't know where we are

⁴⁵ Moshe Halbertal, "Forward," in Marcia Pally, *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You: God, Sex and Politics in the Work of Leonard Cohen* (London: T & T Clark, 2021), xiii-xviii.

going, that we can't see where the journey will take us, for the simple reason that there are experiences yet to be shared and stories yet to be told.

If I didn't have your love; It seemed the better Way; Steer Your way (2016)

"If I didn't have your love" expresses Cohen's intuition that love lies at the foundation of all things, of the nature of God, the nature of creation, and our nature as human beings. Though we often fail at love, the promise and presence of love remains. Without love, nothing has meaning, life is not worth it, nothing seems real. A world without love is a crime against the very nature of our existence, for it denies our purpose and calling, denies our longing and our only possible fulfillment. Love, however broken and imperfect, however fragile and fleeting it may be, does make it real, even though it can't make it all right. And so Cohen sings, "If I couldn't life the veil / And see your face ... / Well that's how broken I would be / What my life would seem to me / If I didn't have your love / To make it real."⁴⁶

Cohen spent much of his life complaining to God and blaming God. He seems at last to have put that behind him. Here he declares, for God and all the world to hear, that he has known love. He has touched Suzanne and Jesus and been touched by them, he has seen the face of God and therefore that he has truly lived. What is more, even the people he has failed, the people whom he has hurt, have experienced healing. Cohen may have given up on the ideal, but he has known the real. Pally concludes,

Cohen recognizes that God created us with the ability not only to fail covenant but also to heal and sustain it. Pointedly, the people Cohen himself abandoned may have healed, and if they have and are no longer angry at him for breaking commitment, perhaps he need not be so angry at God for making him capable of breaking it. [...] the covenanted Cohen of "If I Didn't Have Your Love" is still the goading Cohen of "Leaving the Table" but also one who accepts frustration, dismay, and hope as part of covenant. There is no other covenant save a flawed one, as humanity is flawed. It may be God's inscrutable plan, but there is no other plan or God.⁴⁷

Pally has it right, though Cohen himself is far more circumspect when it comes to speaking of God. He still has both his intuition and his doubts. In "It Seemed the Better Way", he sings of his early and lasting fascination with the life and message of Jesus, whom he felt offered a simpler, a more direct, a more spiritual and at once more human path than the formalized Jewish traditions and rituals he grew up

⁴⁶ Cohen, *If I Didn't Have Your Love*, from the album *You Want It Darker*, 2016.

⁴⁷ Pally, *Leonard Cohen's Jewish Theology*, 23-24.

with in Montreal. Yet now he declares “it’s too late to turn the other cheek”, adding that what seemed like the truth back then is “not the truth today”. Freedman notes that when Cohen heard of Bob Dylan’s conversion to Christianity, he asked “Why would he go for Jesus at a late time like this?”⁴⁸ The problem is not with Jesus, nor with the Judaism of Moses or the Shepherd-King David or the prophets, but rather the formalized religion that grew up around them all. Back then following Moses or Jesus was a live option. Now it’s too late, at least for those who still seek, for those who dare to question, for those who despite their best and worst efforts fail at love, for those who doubt. Formalized religion has turned Jesus, like Moses and David and the prophets of old, into another religious game, where you hold your tongue and take your place, where you “lift this glass of blood / Try to say the grace”. Cohen still admires Moses and David and Jesus, still follows them in his own idiosyncratic way, but he has thrown in his cards and left the table, he’s out of the religious game. This doesn’t mean, however, that he’s through traveling. As he closes this album, he sings: “Steer your way, O my heart / tho’ I have no right to ask / to the one who was / never equal to the task.” Cohen’s head may not know the name of the idealized, formalized God of religion, but his heart has known God’s love.

So “steer your way, O my heart!”

Conclusion

We asked earlier if there is a place in Cohen’s thought for a cruciform theodicy. The answer, I would argue, is yes. Babich writes, “As a Jew, Cohen reminds us to feel for Christ, not to be a Christian necessarily but to get the point about Christ”.⁴⁹ Pally adds that Cohen considered Jesus and Moses to be among those who kept the covenant.⁵⁰ Cohen’s problem is that we fail to do what they did. We are serial covenant-breakers, and this brings him back to divine culpability. In Jesus (exemplarily though not exclusively) God suffers at the hands of human beings; God suffers with us and for us. Moses and Jesus were faithful, but the rest of us seem destined to fail, and the bloody trail leads back to God whom, as Cohen declares, is the ultimate source both of goodness and its absence. Is there darkness as well as light in God? In “You Want It Darker”, Cohen seems to answer in the affirmative.

Freedman notes that when Cohen sings about Judaism he often turns philosophical or mystical or even defiant, but his songs about Jesus focus on the carpen-

⁴⁸ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 129.

⁴⁹ Babich, *Hallelujah and Atonement*, 131.

⁵⁰ Pally, *From This Broken Hill*, 96-97.

ter's simple message, on the love and purity of his spirit.⁵¹ In a similar vein, what he found most winsome in Judaism was the spiritual religion of the psalmist and the prophets, not the Rabbinic Judaism of the Talmud and Midrash. Freedman writes that Cohen, "doesn't reject the rabbis – he returns to the stories they tell in the Talmud time and again – but he is not particularly enamoured with their interpretation of the Law. He challenges their formalism, their emphasis on the rigid details of religious performance rather than on the spirituality that lies beneath it."⁵² In this at least he was consistent. In one of his last references to Christianity, in "It Seemed the Better Way", he speaks with nostalgia of that simple message and purity of spirit he found in Jesus, recognizing that this too has been formalized almost beyond recognition by institutional religion.

For Cohen Jesus is more than an example; he was a fellow-traveler. Through Jesus' life and through his suffering on the cross, we can learn how to suffer with and for others.⁵³ As Christians, we might take this further, exploring the brokenness, the estrangement that entered the life of the Trinity when the Father turned his back on the Son. Cohen's Jewish reflections differ, but they lead in a similar direction; God did suffer in and through Jesus, and as we learn to partake in such suffering we become bound together in solidarity with God and Jesus and all human beings in an ongoing, unending process of healing and redemption, of reconciliation and renewal.

Cohen was a practitioner of mundane, or nature mysticism. Mundane mysticism does not require belief in God, or at least not in the way common to the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet a mundane mystic is one who seeks intimate experience with God, the source of all things, here in this world, through creaturely or worldly means. For mundane mystics, the search for spiritual communion and union with God neither requires nor sets as its goal withdrawal from the pleasures and sorrows of this world. Rather, it seeks to experience God, or at least transcendence, in the midst of earthly pleasures and sorrows, and in the imperfect but real "me and you".

Cohen had always recognized the beauty and brokenness we find in our own lives and in the world we live in. In the end, it seems he made his peace with it. He believed that in this broken world, the best we can hope for is to touch love and be touched by it. We long for intimacy, but are unable to possess it, unable to grab hold of it as a constant state or experience. How could we possess love, if by definition it must be given and, if we are lucky and blessed, shared?

⁵¹ Freedman, *Leonard Cohen*, 107.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵³ Pally, *From This Broken Hill*, 28.

As we have seen, Cohen's existential approach to life and spirituality⁵⁴ was shaped by such diverse traditions as Kabbalism and cruciform theodicy. Cohen drew on Lurianic Kaballah when he sang of "the crack in everything" that lets the light get in, and when he wrote of sexual union and ecstasy as a path to experiencing spiritual union with God. Following another path, Cohen's reading of Jesus and the cross, while remaining eminently Jewish, grasps the practical aspect of the gospel better than many Christian theologians. In and through Jesus' suffering on the cross, Cohen declares, we learn how to suffer with and for others. This is an embodied spirituality and hence an embodied theodicy; we can experience love, we can touch and be touched by each other. How? Through sharing the (not only sexual) ecstasy of intimacy, and through suffering in suffering with and for others.

Cohen's body of work provides rich material for reflection on our human condition. As I conclude this article, I would like to suggest that it may be used to great effect as an aid to teaching and discussing theodicy. Cohen's poetry and lyrics touch on all the major classical approaches to theodicy. Some he critiques quite severely, others he employs while yet advancing arguments against them. Regardless of whether one agrees with his take on particular theodicies, reading and interpreting his texts enables students to go beyond easy, surface answers, and invites them to wrestle with the hard questions Cohen raised in his own search for connection and community. His personal journey serves to remind us that while the theodical question is hard to avoid, it cannot be resolved to anyone's satisfaction, at least not this side of the eschaton. Nevertheless, what we learn from our dance with Cohen can help us to better understand God, our world, our relationships, as well as our own selves. In short, Cohen is a promising place to look for insight on how to live in this beautiful but very broken world.

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⁵⁴ Magnusson, "The Existential Cohen", 15-25.

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Touching the Perfect, Embracing the Real: Leonard Cohen and Theodicy

A b s t r a c t

Leonard Cohen is a good *oeuvre* to look for insight on how to live in this beautiful but very broken world. As Pally has argued, Cohen believed that we are created for covenant relationships, yet fail miserably as keeping them. While admitting his and our guilt, he also held God culpable for making us so prone to fail. This article explores Cohen's life-long struggle with theodicy. After reviewing his take on classical theodical strategies, it examines the lyrics of selected songs spanning the length of his musical career. Cohen's theodicy draws on Lurianic Kabbalism and cruciform theology/theodicy. His is an embodied spirituality and hence an embodied theodicy; we can experience love, union and communion through sharing the (not only sexual) ecstasy of intimacy, and through suffering with and for others. Cohen's body of work may be used effectively to teach theodicy. What we learn from our dance with Cohen won't solve the problem of theodicy, but it can help us to better understand God, our relationships and ourselves.

Key words: Leonard Cohen, theodicy, covenant, Lurianic Kaballah, cruciform theodicy

Słowa kluczowe: Leonard Cohen, teodycea, przymierze, kabała luriańska, teodycea chrystocentryczna