

Jewish Ideas Weekly

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FRIDAY, MARCH 9

Old-New Leonard

By Peodair Leihy

When the filth of the butcher
Is washed in the blood of the lamb
Tell me again
When the rest of the culture
Has passed thru' the Eye of the Camp
Tell me again . . .

—"Amen," Old Ideas (2012)

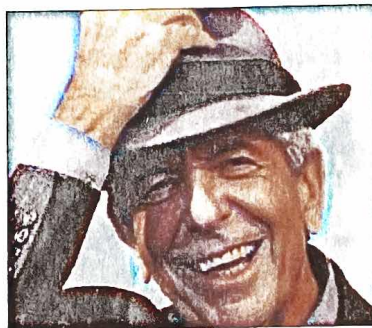
After 60 years of publishing and recording, seventysomething Leonard Cohen has something else to say; and, lo and behold, the "Camp"—the Bergen-Belsen of the remembered newsreels of his childhood—comes up. He also gets the "Eye"—Jerusalem's Eye of the Needle—in there, a Jewish metaphor from the Talmud and the New Testament. Add in the "butcher" and the "lamb," which appeared on his 1968 second album, *Songs from a Room* (where we also heard about ritual sacrifice in "Story of Isaac"), and he manages to get a lot of morbidity out of the era of the internet and reality TV. But does the man have an edit button?

Actually, editing is a defining thread through Cohen's career. He claims to write very slowly, and his images appear and fade like recurring characters. Cohen's latest album is *Old Ideas*. This piece is not a review of the album; there have been plenty of those, all positive, if sometimes showing a little bit of special pleading for a grand old trooper. Rather, it tries to suggest the pleasures of tracing some of Cohen's evolving ideas back to the source.

Old Ideas is typical of Cohen's constant recycling of his *oeuvre* and experience. When he was a graduate student at Columbia in

the 1950s, he arranged a course for himself consisting of a study of his own first book of poetry. Early on, Cohen said he only wanted to be a "minor poet." He wrote both poetry and novels to critical acclaim, but they didn't pay the bills. In mid-1960s, inspired by Bob Dylan, Cohen decided to become a singer-songwriter.

His success was instant. His material was wordy and well-announced, largely secular yet conspicuously Jewish, as opposed



to, say, Dylan's Americana. Cohen's song writing has been uncommonly substantial (his first hit "Suzanne" contains perhaps the most comprehensive four-note theme since Beethoven's Fifth) and his songs now increasingly play out the overtly Jewish themes—including his pioneering Ju-Bu attachment to Zen, covered perhaps more substantially in his poetry and books.

Poems or songs, Cohen lends himself to close analysis. You could sit in a Jewish studies seminar in most English-speaking universities—and many more besides—and analyze the rich content of Cohen's lines as if they were Kafka's or Bialik's. People do. You could also do this with Paul Simon or Carole King or Gene Simmons or Serge Gainsbourg or David Broza or Bob Dylan; but as exemplary as these individuals' Jewishness is, they're not

exactly *poets* (I'd duel Christopher Ricks with maddened bifold album covers over that, should he accept). Cohen is good like that; accessible but not too obviously lightweight.

And Cohen has engaged in such a study himself, a lifelong task the fruit of which is largely available on the public record.

Cohen has continually worked and reworked his songs—and his old poems as songs—in palettes of images and themes. Cohen's 1970 recording of "Joan of Arc" is what he called a palimpsest, made up of overlaid edits, spoken word, and singing. He slipped out of fashion somewhat in the 1970s (although his 1975 *Greatest Hits* album was an instant classic), with his 1977 Phil Spector collaboration *Death of a Ladies Man* pitched well beyond marketability. His 1979 album *Recent Songs* is loved in those places, like Scandinavia and Israel, that really "got" him; but by then there was a sense that his career was faltering.

Today, Cohen's most famous song is "Hallelujah," from his 1984 *Various Positions*; but the song became a pop culture fixture only after it was featured in *Shrek*. The album contains more Jewish content than his previous recordings, with references to his entertaining the Israeli Army during the Yom Kippur War and his *Kol Nidrei*-like song "If It Be Your Will." The album's immediate success was modest. Around this time, the hippie character Neil on the BBC series *The Young Ones* lamented, "I feel like a Leonard Cohen record. Nobody listens to me." Cohen's real comeback came with his 1988 *I'm Your Man*, in which Cohen assumes the role of Jeremiah to the MTV generation. In doing so, he went very Jewish indeed. The hit "Everybody Knows" lifts its chorus from *Oliver!*; the Cockney-Yinglish "That's how it goes/Everybody knows," embroidered with

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Ma'amin b'Adam ("God Believes in Man"), edited by Dror Bondi, a young scholar and activist, with a lengthy afterword by Heschel's daughter Susannah, is the latest effort to bring Heschel to Israelis. It includes Hebrew translations of many of Heschel's English writings along with essays and some letters and poems that he wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew. Bondi's book follows two other Hebrew translations of Heschel in the past decade, his magnum opus *God in Search of Man* and his brief, powerful classic *The Sabbath*.

The Sabbath shows why Heschel has had a hard time traveling. Published in 1951, it declares and revels in Judaism's "sanctification of time." Presented as a protest against technological civilization's "conquest of space," it also reflects ambivalence about Zionism, for which there is no Jewish life in the absence of space. (In an earlier volume of his, Bondi observed that, taken together, *The Sabbath* and *The Earth is the Lord's*, Heschel's 1948 elegy to Eastern Europe, suggest that the land is God's only in exile.)

In 1957 Heschel visited Israel for the first time. The transformative experience impressed on him Israel's centrality to Jewish existence. Yet the "rebirth of religion," he

said in a speech he delivered during his visit,

will come only through the renewal of inner perplexity, through the travails of thought standing before the hidden and obscure in each and every thing, including in thought itself. . . . [F]aith is none other than the individual's response and answer to God's voice proceeding through the Garden and asking, "Where are you?"

This powerful critique of 1950s American Jewish Babbitry could not be appreciated by the Zionist ideology of the time. Heschel was calling for a dissolution of the bounded concepts of religious and secular but was speaking to a polity that defined itself precisely in terms of that dichotomy, which it deemed necessary to the pressing business of nation-building. Heschel was here decrying secularism's emptiness, not to bourgeois all-rightniks, but to socialist revolutionaries for whom secularism was a prophetic religion of its own.

Today, Heschel's savage critiques of post-war American Jewish complacency and the religious establishment might fall on more fertile ground in Israel, where the moral

obtuseness and spiritual vacuity of the religious establishment become clearer by the day, younger activists seek to link their passion for justice with Jewish spirituality, and the secular religion has largely exhausted itself.

In an introduction to Bondi's anthology, Micah Goodman writes that Heschel simply dissolves familiar Israeli antinomies: social and political activism, Zionism, or *ahavat Yisrael*; all, to him, are expressions of piety. Goodman adds that Buber's description of the historical task of Hasidism—to teach the secular world that holiness exists and teach the religious what holiness is—could be Heschel's potential role in Israeli society.

The Jerusalem Talmud says that the heavenly Torah was written in fires, black inscribed on white. The former was the Oral Torah, which we can read and which we ourselves speak; the latter was the Written Torah, ultimate and eternal, and unknowable without the medium of human words. The heavenly Torah that abides must be in Hebrew, the linguistic canvas on and out of which the responsive Torah will emerge, speaking and singing in many tongues.

THURSDAY, MARCH 15

Ron Silver's Risk

By Adam J. Sacks

Three years ago today, Ron Silver—actor, director, producer, radio host, and political activist—died of esophageal cancer at the age of 62. Today he is sorely misremembered; but his legacy is worth fighting for.

He began his public career as an actor; and his successes in theater, film, and television were unparalleled. He had three Emmy nominations, including one for his celebrated role in *The West Wing*. His memorable performance as Alan Dershowitz helped Jeremy Irons win an Oscar for *Reversal of Fortune*. Silver's definitive depiction of Charlie Fox in David Mamet's play *Speed-the-Plow* won him a Tony Award in 1988, when he beat out the great Derek Jacobi. Silver did not rest on these particular laurels. Instead, what he called his "marquee moment" gave him the hunger to make his mark in the world beyond acting.

Silver was a true child of New York City. He grew up on Avenue A and attended the East Side Hebrew Institute, then Stuyvesant

High School. His proximity to Chinatown set him to learning Mandarin at an early age; he was also fluent in Spanish. An intellectual in the enlightened European Jewish mold, he once put his acting career on hold for a couple of years to immerse himself in the oeuvre of Freud for a one-man show that would never materialize.

Silver served three terms as president of the Actors' Equity union, spanning the decade from 1991 to 2000, and had plenty of liberal bona fides. The AIDS crisis crystallized his unwavering support for both universal health care and equality for gay men and women; he was talking about gay marriage before most people had even heard of the idea. Alec Baldwin, with whom Silver founded the Creative Coalition, an entertainment industry political action group, credited Silver with saving the National Endowment for the Arts when it came under assault by conservatives in 1989.

But Silver belongs in the illustrious com-

pany of those who—like George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Christopher Hitchens—underwent what Gramsci called a "transformiso." He supported the first Gulf War; he relayed that Susan Sarandon said it was just because he was a Jew. After Sep-

tember 11, 2001, Silver finally left the Democratic Party and became what others called a "9/11 Republican" (Silver's own term was "revolutionary liberal"). He was fiercely attacked by his fellow entertainers. Silver, after all, was no Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood, or Kevin Costner: This was "one of us"—a big-city neurotic Jewish intellectual—abandoning ship.

When Silver was denounced for supporting the "War on Terror," he never felt the need to tout his considerable liberal credentials.

As Silver's brother Mitchell Silver, a lecturer in bioethics and philosophy of religion at Tufts University, pointed out, "Ron's politics were not shared by anyone he knew." But they were consistent, echoing a pre-war



European social democracy that fused the care and inclusion of the most vulnerable with resistance to the most aggressive and pernicious. The link between Silver's support of universal health care and gay equality and his opposition to Islamic fundamentalism lay in his defense of the body of social values underlying the moral strength of a democratic society.

I met Ron Silver in the late winter of 2005-6. He was planning to write a treatise on the Hollywood/D.C. nexus (like his one-man show on Freud, it never materialized) and needed an all-around researcher, editor, and writer, a role that I played for Silver until his death. I was already a fan of his acting; but from our first lunch, I could see that his readiness to part ways with his old Hollywood crowd was due in part to his need for a more highly charged and creative intellectual environment. His eyes were so intense you really did think he was actually *seeing* more than everyone else. His relentless intensity never wavered.

Ron saw politicized Islamic fundamentalism as the successor to the other totalitarianisms of the 20th century, Nazism

and Stalinism. (For his book, Ron wrote a chapter on the Stalinist espionage that successfully infiltrated the United Nations and even the *New York Times*, as well as other highly regarded institutions.) The question is whether Islamic fundamentalism actually deserves this characterization. It may be that Ron's politics resemble those of the German Social Democrats who voted for war credits in 1914 because they saw in the war a chance to end anti-Semitic Tzarist terrors. How could they have known that World War I would unleash the horrors of the 20th century? Ron's position may turn out to be a similar mistake, or it may be too early to tell.

But Ron was a Jew in the fullest sense. His Dershowitz performance alone—*Dayenu!*—would have assured him a hallowed place in the annals of American Judaica. (Dershowitz himself said, "Al Pacino would have been almost as good.") Ron gave the only performances of some of the most fascinating Jews of the 20th century, including Henry Kissinger. He starred in the film adaptation of the Isaac Bashevis Singer novel *Enemies: A Love Story*. He played "Asa Kaufmann," a

composite of the many Jewish screenwriters blacklisted in the 1950s; Ron himself would arguably have a similar experience during the twilight of his career. But he wasn't afraid to point out that Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner had doctored the ending of the film *Munich*: Far from moving to Brooklyn, as in the movie, the real-life character played by Eric Bana went on to lead a tank battalion in the Yom Kippur War.

As Ron's health deteriorated, he said that though he was being denied the last third of his life, he'd had quite a full two-thirds. If he had a notable weakness, it was that his strengths lay in so many disparate places. His political language spoke of moral values without coming from an overtly religious place. He was a model of unconventional and unpredictable thinking. He was not afraid to make mistakes, but he took his leaps with great humility. He made those leaps in a dramatic fashion, to the dismay of many; but we—a "we" that includes Hollywood, the Jewish community, and all who care about politics and art—are poorer without him.

THE WEEKLY PORTION

Vayakhel-Pekudei: Symbols and Sabbaths

Exodus 35:1–40:38

By Moshe Sokolow

The construction and inauguration of the mishkan (tabernacle) that we have been following for the past month comes to an end, along with the Book of Exodus, in this week's double portion. Curiously, it is enveloped by references and allusions to Shabbat at its outset and at its close.

The first portion, Vayakhel, begins right away with a seemingly gratuitous repetition of the laws of Shabbat:

Six days shall work (*m'lakhah*) be done, but the seventh day shall be sacred, a Sabbath of Sabbaths (*shabbat shabbaton*) to the Lord; whosoever does work on that day shall be put to death. Do not kindle a fire in all your habitations on the Sabbath day (Exodus 35:2–3).

According to the midrash (cited by

Rashi), the intrusion of the Shabbat laws upon the enterprise (*m'lakhah*!) of the mishkan (tabernacle) means to inform us that the construction, however important, does not defer Shabbat. More subtly, perhaps, it anal-



ogizes the mishkan with Shabbat whereupon the Sages deduced that the 39 categories of labor prohibited on Shabbat are precisely those that were integral to the building of the mishkan.

On the closing end, the finale of Pekudei, the second portion, bears a striking similarity to the completion of an earlier endeavor:

the creation of the world, in general, and the sanctification of Shabbat, in particular.

Exodus 39:32: All the work of the tabernacle and tent of meeting was completed

Genesis 1:31: Heavens and earth and all their hosts were completed

Exodus 39:32: Moses completed (*va-yekhal*) all the work (*m'lakhah*)

Genesis 1:31: On the seventh day, God completed (*va-yekhal*) the work (*m'lakhah*) He had done

Exodus 39:32: Moses viewed (*va-yar*) all the work

Genesis 1:31: God viewed (*va-yar*) all that He had done and it was very good

Exodus 39:32: And Moses blessed them

Genesis 1:31: God blessed the seventh day and consecrated it

The point, apparently, is to cast the mishkan as a microcosm, a world in miniature. Just as the world embodies a divine design that was handed over to man "to preserve it" (Genesis 2:15), so was the divine design