

THE JEWISH BOOK NEWS INTERVIEW
By Arthur Kurzweil and Pamela Roth

LEONARD COHEN
Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs

This interview was originally posted to alt.music.leonard-cohen by Martin Grossman (tgg@bronze.coil.com) on 31 Oct 1994. Formatted in HTML by carter page (page@pobox.com)

Kurzweil

Tell us about your grandfathers. We understand they wrote some books.

Cohen

Both my grandfathers were distinguished. My mother's father, Rabbi Solomon Klinitsky-Klein, was known as Sar haDikdook, the prince of grammarians. He wrote a thesaurus of talmudic interpretations and a dictionary of synonyms and homonyms.

Kurzweil

Are they still available?

Cohen

They are, at least they were, used in institutions of higher learning until Israel took over the grammatical institutions. My grandfather was a wonderful man. My mother always used to tell me that people came from a hundred miles to hear him speak. He was a disciple of Yitzhak Elchanan. In fact, he closed his teacher's eyes when he died. He was the principal of a yeshiva in Kovno. He also had a very strong secular side to him. He was a confrontational teacher, especially when he got to New York. He became part of The Forward and that group of Yiddish writers.

Kurzweil

And your other grandfather?

Cohen

My other grandfather was also a very distinguished man who founded many of the institutions that defined Jewish life in Canada. He was vice president of the first Zionist organization in Canada. He also made a trip to the Holy Land. He met Baron de Hirsch, and planned and established the first Colonization Society for Canada, whose aim was to settle the Jewish refugees in the prairie provinces and on farms. He was also the founder of the first Anglo-Jewish newspaper in North America. I think it was called the Anglo-Jewish Times in Montreal. And he was one of the founders of the Shaar Shamayim synagogue in Montreal.

Kurzweil

Was he also involved in the Jewish Public Library?

Cohen

Yes, he was although that was a different branch of Montreal, a different expression of Montreal Judaism. I remember reading speeches of his where he spoke with great pride that the Jewish community of Montreal had absorbed its refugees from Kishinev without ever asking the municipality

or the government for a single cent. Montreal Jewry was very well organized, and I'm proud to say he was one of the organizers of these institutions. The Baron de Hirsch Foundation was one of his undertakings, as well as the Zionist Organization, the B'nai B'rith, the founding of the Jewish General Hospital, the Hebrew Free Loan Society, and all the institutions connected with Shaar Shamayim.

Kurzweil

I have a second cousin who grew up in Budapest. when I met her for the first time, in Budapest, she spoke English to me. I asked her where she had learned it and she said, "Cohen." She showed me your albums and said that was the way she learned English. Then I went to Warsaw, where I met a young woman whom I spent the day with. I asked her, "What kind of music do you like?" She said, "Cohen." Why do you think it is that you have this following in Eastern Europe?

Cohen

I did a tour of Poland before the solidarity government was established. I discovered that Poland was probably my largest audience in the world. Unfortunately, they paid me in zlotys, which were, as you know, not transferrable. At times when my so-called career in the West almost evaporated in most places, there was always this following in Poland and Eastern Europe. I don't know why. My great-grandfather came from Wylkowyski, which was part of Poland at the time. I was very pleased to be able to say that I came from Poland, although they really didn't think of me as Polish. It was very interesting to go there. I grew up out of that world in some way. Actually, when I arrived in Greece in 1959 or 1960, I really did feel I'd come home. I felt the village life was familiar although I'd had no experience with village life.

Kurzweil

Some of the articles about you over the years have indicated that you've dabbled or more than dabbled in various kinds of spiritual paths. Is the line, "Did you ever go clear?" from Famous Blue Raincoat a Scientology reference?

Cohen

It was a Scientology reference. I looked into a lot of things. Scientology was one of them. It did not last very long. But it is very interesting, as I continue my studies in these matters, to see how really good Scientology was from the point of view of their data, their information, their actual knowledge, their wisdom writings, so to speak. It wasn't bad at all. It is scorned, and I don't know what the organization is like today, but it seems to have all the political residue of any large and growing organization. Yes, I did look into that and other things. from the Communist Party to the Republican Party, from Scientology to delusions of myself as the High Priest rebuilding the Temple.

Kurzweil

Where does Judaism fit in?

Cohen

Well, I became a student of a Zen monk. I remember Allen Ginsburg saying to me at a certain point, "How do you reconcile this with Judaism?" I said that I find no conflict myself. As you know, there are Jewish practitioners in the Zen movement. I don't think the two are necessarily mutually exclusive, depending on your position. As I have received it from my teacher, there is no conflict because there is no prayerful worship and there is no discussion of a deity in Zen.

Kurzweil

So, there is room for it.

Cohen

One of the patriarchs, when asked, "What is the essence of Zen?" replied, "Vast emptiness and nothing

special." So there is not only room for it. There is boundless space available for whatever mental construction you happen to wish to establish.

Some time ago I became intrigued with the incoherent ramblings of an old Zen monk who just recently said to me, "Leonard, I have known you for twenty-five years and never tried to give you my religion. I've just poured you saki." And I lifted up my glass to him and said, "Rabbi, you are indeed the light of your generation." And that's the way I feel. There is something nonnegotiable about the absolute, some refusal to name qualities about the absolute that fits in with my most rigorous, or I'd say my deepest, appetites about the matters of which I was taught. This is the purest expression of that reality that is expressed in the Shema -- that there is only one thing going on and don't ever even suggest that there might be something else going on. There is an absolute unity that is manifesting itself on this plane and on all planes and nothing can compromise that.

So Zen seems to be able to provide, at least the lineage of this particular teacher seems to provide, a landscape on which Jewish practitioners can manifest their deepest appetites concerning the absolute.

Kurzweil

In one of your recent songs you write, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." This seems like such a Jewish idea.

Cohen

Yes, I think it is.

Kurzweil

Is it a Zen idea also?

Cohen

I can't even locate a Zen idea. I don't know very much about Zen or Buddhism because I have never been interested in a new religion. When I was young I investigated various forms that were around, you know, stuff, because it was there. You know, you'd meet a girl or someone and go on their trip.

I remember sitting with my grandfather studying the Book of Isaiah. He would read a passage, speak about it, and sort of nod off, and his finger would move back to the beginning of the passage as he slept. Then he'd awaken and start fresh with that same verse again, and he'd read it again, and expound on it again, and sometimes the whole evening was spent on the exposition of the verse.

So I had a good education. Not only that but I had a clear idea of what the implications of a Jewish life were. I saw my family was deeply involved in the organization of a community. It was not a theoretical thing. At the Hebrew Free Loan Society, people could get money for free. That's the translation of a Jewish idea into action. I saw this all the time, all around me. I also saw my family's business being conducted at a level of ethics and honor that I couldn't help being impressed by. So I saw it. As I say, the ideas in Zen, I'm not sure what they are because I've only known one old man and I don't know how authentically he represents his tradition. I just know that he has provided a space for me to do the kind of dance with the Lord that I couldn't find in other places.

Kurzweil

Why do you think that so many of us young Jews went to the East? What was it about Jewish life that was bankrupt or a turn-off in some way?

Cohen

I'm a member of my synagogue, and I light the candles on Friday night. I feel very close to the whole trip. But I don't think we were able to develop a mediational system that could seize and address the

deep appetites of our best young people, the people that really had to have an experience with the absolute.

We didn't take that seriously. I think that our faith is full of atheists and agnostics. I think there are a lot of nominal Jews around, but I don't think they really believe. Not enough of them have really had an experience, have really been embraced, have really felt themselves dissolve in the midst of a prayer and felt that the prayer was praying them. I think these are things that just exist in our literature now, and we pick up a book by Buber or a hasidic tale and these things are hinted at, but in the mainstream these things had the status of superstition. I think that was a very unsatisfying condition. Many of our brightest and best looked for it but simply couldn't find it.

It was only after studying with my old Zen teacher for many years, when I broke my knees and I couldn't practice in the meditation hall, that I began practicing Judaism. I began laying tefillin every morning and going through the Shemoneh Esrai and really understanding that there were these eighteen steps and that they were a ladder and that these were a way of preparing yourself for the day if you really penetrated each of those paragraphs. It was like starting from a very low place; you could put your chin up on the window and actually see a world that you could affirm. Nobody had ever talked to me that way about anything, that idea of something passionate and nonnegotiable, that atmosphere did not touch me in all my education. And it has to. It does touch other groups, but those other groups seem to have forgotten the messianic implication, which is that we are all part of a brotherhood under the Almighty. The exclusive elements, the nominal elements, seem to be emphasized and a kind of scorn for the nations, for the goyim, a kind of exclusivity that I find wholly unacceptable and many young people I know find wholly unacceptable, is expressed. A confident people is not exclusive. A great religion affirms other religions. A great culture affirms other cultures. A great nation affirms other nations. A great individual affirms other individuals, validates the beingness of others. That has also encouraged some of our brightest and best into affirming this connection with groups that at least have the fire going. The tradition itself has betrayed the tradition. The messianic unfolding has not been affirmed and we don't have teachers that are warm in their invitation. The mercy of the Lord is not affirmed. One side of the tree, justice or judgement, is affirmed strongly but the other side is not affirmed. So we need a system that will provide experience in these matters and that is not within the confines of an exclusive vision that affirms one element of humanity and scorns the rest.

There was something in it [Judaism] for me. I still had to go whoring after false gods, and maybe I'm still in the bed of one, but there was something about what I saw. I grew up in a Catholic city, and my Catholic friends have horror stories about what Catholicism is, and my Jewish friends have horror stories about what Judaism is. . . I never had them. I never rebelled against my parents. Even when I was taking acid and living at the Chelsea Hotel and feeling miserable about myself, it never occurred to me once to blame my situation on my family, my city, my religion, or my tribe. So, I always thought it was great -- what they were practicing -- and I've tried to keep it up in my own half-assed way.

Kurzweil

In the Jewish Book Club, and in general, poetry is not very popular. Why do you think that is?

Cohen

I don't think it's for everybody. In its pure form it's like bee pollen. I feel that way about poetry. The honey of poetry is all over the place. It is in the writing of the National Geographic, when an idea is absolutely clear and beautiful; it's in movies; it's all over because the taste of significance is that which we call poetry, when something resonates with a particular kind of significance. We may not call it poetry but we've experienced poetry. It's got something to do with truth and rhythm and authority and music.

I was completely hooked on the Stuff as a kid. I loved it when I first came across it. When something was said in a certain kind of way it seemed to embrace the cosmos. It's not just my heart, but every heart was involved, and the loneliness was dissolved, and you felt that you were this aching creature in the midst of an aching cosmos, and the ache was okay. Not only was it okay, but it was the way that you embraced the sun and the moon. I went into pop music. I felt like that's where I could manifest it. Just on the page wasn't going to do it for me because I wanted to live it.

Kurzweil

So there's no difference between a poem and a lyric?

Cohen

It is the life that you want to lead. You can be the subject, and poetry can be the object. You can keep the subject/object relationship, and that's completely legitimate. It is the point of view of the scholar. But I wanted to live this world. When I read the psalms or when they lifted up the Torah, that kind of thing sent a chill down my back. I wanted to be the one who lifted up the Torah. I wanted to be in that position. When they told me I was a Kohen, I believed it. I didn't think it was some auxiliary information. I wanted to wear white clothes and go into the Holy of Holies and 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 resonated, and I wanted to be that figure who sang, "This is the Tree of Life." I tried to become that, and that world seemed open to me, and I was able to become that in my own modest way. I became that little figure to myself. So that was poetry to me, and I think it's available to everybody.

Kurzweil

There is a line in one of your other songs, "I'm the little Jew who wrote the Bible."

Cohen

Exactly. You know that line rose spontaneously, and I asked myself whether I wanted to keep it there. But this is the way I feel.

Kurzweil

When we thought about inviting you to have this conversation and we chose your book to be a selection in the Jewish Book Club, we wondered whether you would object to being identified as a Jewish poet. perhaps you would not want to be "the little Jew who wrote the Bible." But obviously we are hearing something very different.

Cohen

Oh, I am the little Jew who wrote the Bible. "You don't know me from the wind/You never will, you never did." I'm saying this to the nations. I'm the little Jew who wrote the Bible. I'm that little one. "I've seen the nations rise and fall/I've heard their stories, heard them all/But love's the only engine of survival." I know what a people needs to survive. As I get older I feel less modest about taking these positions because I realize we are the ones who wrote the Bible and at our best we inhabit a biblical landscape, and this is where we should situate ourselves without apology. The biblical landscape is our urgent invitation and we have to be there. Otherwise, it's really not worth saving or manifesting, or redeeming, or anything. Now, what is the biblical landscape? It's the victory of experience. That's what the Bible celebrates. So the experience of these things is absolutely necessary.

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- This interview was originally posted to alt.music.leonard-cohen by Martin Grossman (tgg@bronze.coil.com) on 31 Oct 1994.
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