

# "I am the little Jew who wrote the Bible"

--a conversation between Leonard Cohen and Arthur Kurzweil<sup>1</sup>

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This conversation, between Leonard Cohen and Arthur Kurzweil, took place on the morning of Tuesday, November 23, 1993, in a conference room of the New York office of Random House Publishers, on the occasion of the



publication of Leonard's book, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*. At the time, Arthur was editor-in-chief of the Jewish Book Club and he selected Leonard's new book as an offering to the book club's over 20,000 members. Arthur requested an interview for *The Jewish Book News* with Leonard through Leonard's publisher. An abbreviated and edited version of the following conversation was published in *The Jewish Book News* in January, 1994, and appears on the web in various places. This is the complete conversation.

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AK: I want to tell you at the outset that I'm a big fan...

Leonard Cohen: Oh, thank you very much.

AK: ...and have been for years.

Leonard Cohen: That's very kind of you.

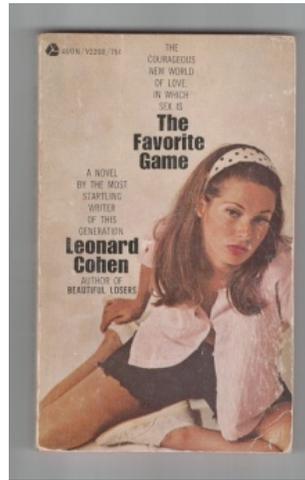
AK: I have more memorabilia about you than I'm willing to admit to most people. For example, this particular book: there was a time when I wouldn't let anyone else touch it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Kurzweil is a writer, teacher, and publisher. [www.arthurkurzweil.com](http://www.arthurkurzweil.com)

<sup>2</sup> I was 18, and it was my paperback copy of *The Favorite Game*, purchased in 1969, published by Avon Books, with a cover price of 75 cents.

Leonard Cohen: (laughs)



AK: It was just a crazy thing. But I just wouldn't let anybody touch it.

Leonard Cohen: Oh, so you know my background?

AK: I know...lots about you, I think, or at least, I know what they say. And I also want to let you know I saw you in concert in New York not long ago.<sup>3</sup>

Leonard Cohen: Thank you very much for coming.

AK: It was a great night. I'm interested in your grandfather who I understand wrote some books.

Leonard Cohen: Both my grandfathers were distinguished. My mother's father, "Rabbi Solomon Klonitsky-Kline" is the way that they transcribed his name in the publications that were printed here. He was known as Sar<sup>4</sup> HaDikduki, the Prince of Grammarians. And he wrote a thesaurus of Talmudic interpretation<sup>5</sup> and a dictionary of synonyms and homonyms. They

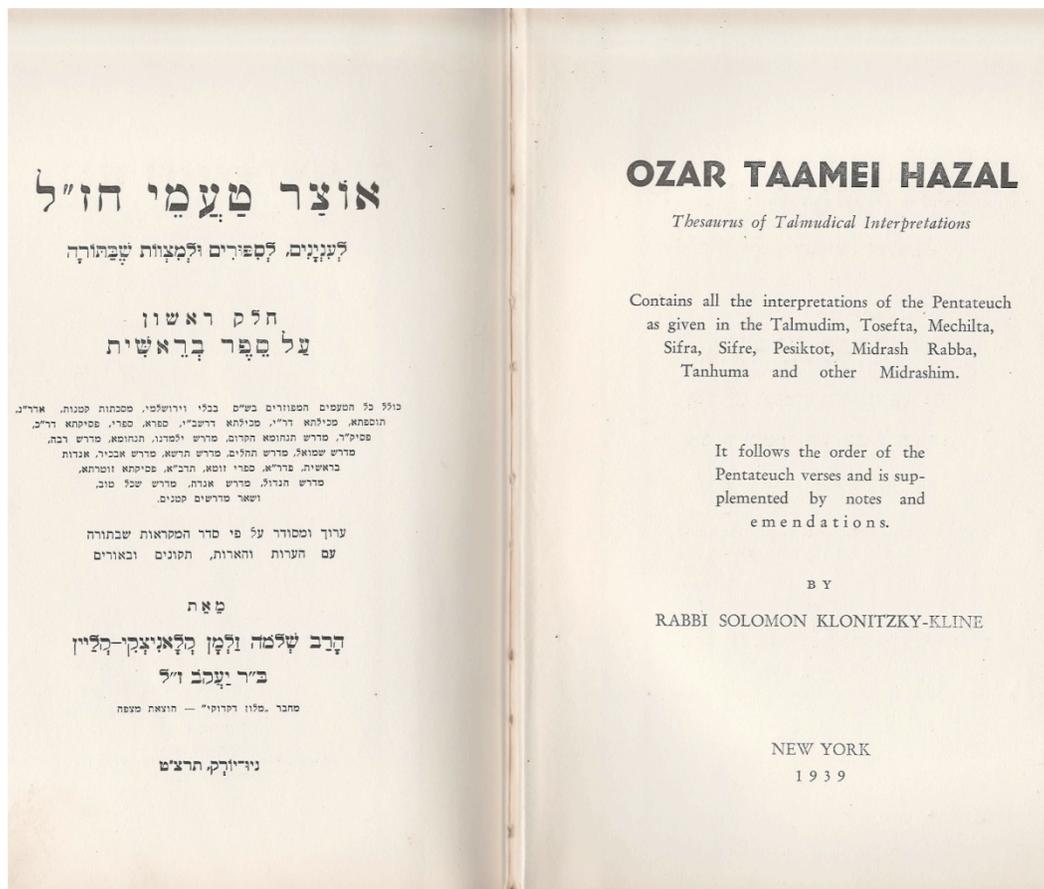
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<sup>3</sup> It was June 14, 1993, Paramount Theater, NYC; I was also in Leonard's audience in Forest Hills, NY on July 25, 1970 (I sat in a box seat directly behind Bob Dylan and his wife, but that's another story) and December 12, 1970 at the SUNY Stony Brook gymnasium.

<sup>4</sup> "Sar" is Hebrew for "prince" and is a well-known honorific.

<sup>5</sup> A five part book, each treating a book of The Five Books of Moses, Ozar Taamei Hazal (Thesaurus of Talmudical Interpretation) by Rabbi Solomon Klonitzky-Kline, was published in New York in 1939.

were used in institutions of higher learning until Israel took over the grammatical institution.



He was a wonderful man, and my mother always used to tell me that "people came from 100 miles" to hear him speak. My grandfather was the principal of a yeshiva in Kovno<sup>6</sup>. He was a disciple of Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan and, in fact, my grandfather closed his teacher's eyes when his teacher died.<sup>7</sup>

He had a very strong secular side to him. He rode, for instance. He liked to ride horses. He was a kind of confrontational teacher, especially when he got to New York, where he ended up. He came first to Atlanta, where his daughter married into the Alexander family of Georgia, who were Jews who arrived in 1708, and he originally moved to Atlanta. But there was nothing

<sup>6</sup> Now Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city. During the Holocaust the Jewish population of Kovno was destroyed.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan, a.k.a. Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spector (1817-1896). From 1864 until his death, he was the chief rabbi of Kovno. The rabbinical school of Yeshiva University is named after him.

there for him in Atlanta, so he moved to New York and he became part of the Forward and that group of Yiddish writers, although I don't think he contributed to any of the newspapers. But he kept on with his grammatical and Talmudic studies.

AK: And your other grandfather?

Leonard Cohen: My other grandfather, Rabbi Lyon Cohen, was also a very distinguished man who helped found many of the institutions that defined Jewish life in Canada. He was a vice president of the first Zionist organization in Canada. He made a trip to the Holy Land.

AK: A trip to the holy land at that point would have been a pretty interesting journey.

Leonard Cohen: Yes, a very interesting journey. He met Baron de Hirsch and he planned and helped establish, for Canada, the Jewish Colonization Association,<sup>8</sup> which was to settle Jewish refugees in the prairie provinces and on farms. He was the founder of the first Anglo Jewish newspaper in North America. It was called the Jewish Times<sup>9</sup>, published in Montreal. He was also one of the founders of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim<sup>10</sup> in Montreal.



**Baron Maurice de Hirsch**

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<sup>8</sup> The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) was a philanthropic association established to assist Jews in depressed economic circumstances or countries of persecution to emigrate and settle elsewhere in productive employment, founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1891.)

<sup>9</sup> The Jewish Times was founded in 1897. Rabbi Lyon Cohen was also an important leader in the Young Men's Hebrew Benevolent Society (eventually becoming the Baron de Hirsch Institute). Rabbi Cohen was also a leader of United Talmud Torahs.

<sup>10</sup> Congregation Shaar Hashomayim (lit. "the Gate of Heaven") was founded in 1846 and originally used a rented room on St. James St. Located today in Westmount, Quebec, it is Canada's oldest traditional synagogue.

AK: Was he involved in The Jewish Public Library in Montreal?

Leonard Cohen: The Jewish Public Library? Yes, he was involved in that, although that was a different branch, a different expression of Montreal Jewry.

I remember reading speeches of his where he spoke with great pride that the Jewish community of Montreal had absorbed its refugees from Kishinev<sup>11</sup> without ever asking the municipality or the government for a single cent. Montreal Jewry was very well organized.

And I am proud to say that he was one of the organizers of these institutions. Baron de Hirsch Foundation was one of his undertakings. Also B'nai B'rith and the Jewish General Hospital<sup>12</sup>. And the Hebrew Free Loan Association<sup>13</sup> was a very special interest of his. And of course all the institutions connected with Shaar Hashomayim.

AK: Both grandfathers were immigrants?

Leonard Cohen: They were both born in Europe; I think my grandfather came here when he was three. His father, who was also a very interesting man, Lazarus Cohen, came in 1860.

AK: To Canada?

Leonard Cohen: Yes, with his son.

AK: Are you named after him?

Leonard Cohen: Oh there's a tradition of L's. Lazarus, Lyon, Leonard.

AK: One of the reasons I'm asking you about your grandparents is that Jewish family history and genealogy is a personal interest of mine. In fact

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<sup>11</sup> Kishinev, today, is the capital and largest municipality in Moldova. On April 6-7, 1903 a pogrom (anti-Jewish riot) lasting three days killed or severely wounded hundreds of Jews and destroyed hundreds of Jewish homes and businesses.

<sup>12</sup> In 1927, Jewish community leaders gathered and agreed there was a need for a Jewish hospital. The hospital opened in 1934 with 150 beds, open to all faiths and cultures. In the early 1900's a few precursors included the Herzl Dispensary and the Hebrew Maternity Hospital.

<sup>13</sup> Founded in 1911, it has helped over 95,000 people with interest-free loans ("If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, do not act towards them as a creditor; take no interest from them."--the Torah, Exodus 22:24).

there's a book on the shelf behind you that I wrote called From Generation to Generation<sup>14</sup>...

Leonard Cohen: Oh, yes?!

AK: which is a guidebook for people who want to learn how to do Jewish genealogical research.

Leonard Cohen: Ah, that's interesting!

AK: So I did a lot of genealogical research in my own family.

Leonard Cohen: Yes?

AK: I went to Eastern Europe a number of times to the towns where my grandparents had come from. A couple of my trips to Eastern Europe had a connection with you. I'd like to tell you about both of them.

Leonard Cohen: Yes?

AK: I researched my mother's family and discovered she had a first cousin she thought was killed during the Holocaust, who was living in Budapest with his wife, children, and grandchildren. So not that long ago I discovered...

Leonard Cohen: Family!

AK: Yes, family in Budapest, and it was wonderful. I have a second cousin, Zsuzsa, who lived in Budapest. She's now in Australia, but she grew up in Budapest. I met her for the first time in Budapest. We were speaking in English and I said to her, "Where did you learn English?" and she said to me "Cohen."

Leonard Cohen: Ah! (then laughs).

AK: I said, "What do you mean 'Cohen'?" and she showed me your albums and she said, "This is how I learned English."

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<sup>14</sup> A division of Random House published a soft cover of the first edition of *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Family History and Genealogy*. A division of Random House also published Leonard's current book at the time, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs*.

Leonard Cohen: Ah, that's very nice! Thank you!

AK: Extraordinary.

Leonard Cohen: Yes! Thank you! Thank you for telling me that!

AK: That was in Budapest. Then I went to Warsaw, Poland, where I also discovered a cousin of my father, who I also didn't know existed, who also survived the Holocaust and is living in Warsaw with his wife and daughter. One afternoon they introduced me to an actress, a young woman, who was a friend of theirs, with whom we spent the day. As we were walking through the streets that were once the Warsaw Ghetto<sup>15</sup>, I said to her "What music do you like?" She said "Cohen."

Leonard Cohen: (laughs with pleasure)

AK: So, my question is this: why do you think it is that you have this following in Eastern Europe?

Leonard Cohen: I did a tour of Poland before the government changed, before the solidarity government was established, and I discovered--I had known, but I had known without a great deal of data--I found that Poland was probably my largest audience in the world. Unfortunately they paid me in zlotys which, as you know, are non-transferable.

But I discovered a huge audience there, and at times, when my so-called career in the West almost evaporated in most places, there was always this following in Poland and in Eastern Europe generally, but Poland specifically. I don't know why.

My great grandfather came from Vilkaviskis<sup>16</sup>, which was part of Poland at the time, and I was very pleased to be able to say that I came from Poland, although they didn't really think of me as Polish. But it was very interesting,

I don't know. Of course, there's something--I grew up out of that world in some way. It was not hidden from me. Actually when I arrived in

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<sup>15</sup> The Warsaw Ghetto, the largest ghetto during the Holocaust where Nazis and Nazi sympathizers crammed over 400,000 Jews in just over one square mile in Warsaw. At least 300,000 Jews died there or were sent to extermination camps where most were murdered.

<sup>16</sup> Vilkaviskis, today in southwest Lithuania, had a large Jewish community until 1940 when it was destroyed by the Nazis. The entire Jewish population was murdered in one single day.

Greece, in '59 or '60, I really did feel that I had come home. I felt the architecture was familiar, I felt the village life was familiar, although I had *no* experience with village life.

AK: Some of the articles I've read about you over the years have indicated that you dabbled or more than dabbled in various kinds of spiritual paths. Can you tell me if I'm right in thinking the line "Did you ever go 'clear'?" from "Famous Blue Raincoat"<sup>17</sup> was a Scientology reference?

Leonard Cohen: Well, it was a Scientology reference. I did look into Scientology. I looked into a lot of things when I was a young man. Scientology was one of them. It didn't last for long.

But it was very interesting, as I continued my studies in these matters, to see, really, how good Scientology was from the view point of their data, of their information, of their actual knowledge, their wisdom writings, so to speak. It was not bad at all. I know it's scorned. I don't know what the organization is today, but it seems to have the political residue of any large, growing organization. But, I was surprised to see how well organized the studies were. Yeah, I did look into that.

AK: There were others?

Leonard Cohen: Well, from the Communist party to the Republican Party. From Scientology to delusions of myself as the High Priest rebuilding the Temple.

AK: How do Jewish things fit into all of that?

Leonard Cohen: Well, I became a very serious student of a Zen monk. Although, I think "dabble" can describe anybody's activity in these matters, because who of us can say that we have fully embraced this material. But, I remember Allen Ginsberg<sup>18</sup> saying to me at a certain point, "How do you reconcile this with Judaism?" because he was a student of Chogyam Trungpa<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> A song by Leonard on the album *Songs of Love and Hate*.

<sup>18</sup> Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), American poet, was a practicing Buddhist.

<sup>19</sup> Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), Tibetan Buddhist master, author, and founder of Naropa Institute.)



Allen Ginsberg

Leonard Cohen: I said that I find no conflict myself. But the organization, or the man that I was in contact with, was a very different order than Trungpa. Much less organized.

As you know, there are Jewish practitioners in the Zen movement--very serious ones. In fact there is a succession holder, there's a dharma<sup>20</sup> teacher, an actual successor to a roshi<sup>21</sup>, in Los Angeles, who I think is married to the daughter of an Orthodox Rabbi. And he maintains a Jewish practice in the midst of the zendo<sup>22</sup> regime, very much the way some Trappist<sup>23</sup> monks maintained a zendo in the mists of their monastic discipline. I don't think these are necessarily mutually exclusive, depending on your position. In Japan itself, Shinto, the family religion, and Zen, are often practiced side by side. The fact is that Zen was often not accorded the status of a religion in various periods in the East, and as I've received it from my teacher, there is no conflict because there is no prayerful worship and there is no discussion of a deity.

AK: In Zen?

Leonard Cohen: In Zen.

AK: So there's room for it?

Leonard Cohen: It's not even that there's room for it. One of the patriarchs, when asked "What is the essence of Zen?" replied "Vast emptiness and nothing special." So there's not only room for it, there's boundless space available for whatever mental constructions you happen to wish to establish.

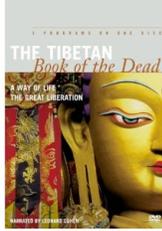
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<sup>20</sup> Dharma is a Buddhist term and refers to "Law" in the widest sense, including natural law, and Buddhist teachings are often concerned with living in harmony with the Law.

<sup>21</sup> Roshi is an honorific title used in Zen Buddhism to indicate a spiritual guide.

<sup>22</sup> A zendo is a Zen Buddhist meditation hall.

<sup>23</sup> Trappists are a Roman Catholic religious order of cloistered contemplative monks.



I've inherited an extremely good religion, I have no need to change it. For instance, in the *Hollywood Reporter*<sup>24</sup> recently there was a notice that I was going to narrate a film of The National Film Board of Canada on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>25</sup> And they said something like, "we had expected that Richard Gere would have been asked, but Cohen, a Buddhist, was...".

And I wrote them. I don't know if the letter has been published yet, because this appeared a couple weeks ago. I said "My mother and father of blessed memory, would be very disturbed to hear me described as a Buddhist." I said, "I am a Jew," and I said "Sometime ago I became intrigued with the incoherent ramblings of an old Zen monk<sup>26</sup> who just recently said to me 'Leonard, I've known you for twenty-five years, and I've never tried to give you my religion, I've just poured you Saki.' And I lifted my glass to him and I said "Rabbi, you are indeed the light of your generation."<sup>27</sup>



**Kyozan Joshu Sasaki**

And that's the way I feel. I've met some very impressive young Jewish men around him. For instance, the leader<sup>28</sup> of the Ithaca Zen Center comes from

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<sup>24</sup> The October 12, 1993 issue of the *Hollywood Reporter* said, "Cohen, who is also a Buddhist, was the natural choice because he is Canadian."

<sup>25</sup> A Tibetan text that is intended to guide one's consciousness after the death of the body.

<sup>26</sup> Kyozan Joshu Sasaki, b. 1907, founder and head abbot of the Mount Baldy Zen Center, near Mount Baldy in California.

<sup>27</sup> "My father and mother, of blessed memory, would have been disturbed by the Reporter's description of me as a Buddhist. I am a Jew. For some time now, I have been intrigued by the indecipherable ramblings of an old Zen monk. Not long ago he said to me, Cohen, I have known you for 23 years and I never tried to give you my religion. I just poured you sake.' Saying that, he filled my cup with sake. I bowed my head and raised my cup to him crying out, Rabbi, you are surely the Light of the Generation." From Leonard's letter to the editor of the *Hollywood Reporter* published on October 25, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Yoshin David Radin, abbot and founder of the Ithaca Zen Center.

seven generations of rabbis. And his feeling is that he's found a real rabbi. That's my feeling also.

In other words, there's something that is not negotiable about the absolute, some refusal to name qualities about the absolute that fits in with my most rigorous, or I would say my deepest appetites, about the matters of which I was taught or were indicated to me.

So this young man's idea is that this old man is the real thing, that this is the purest expression of that reality that is expressed in the Shema<sup>29</sup>: there is only one thing going on, and don't even suggest that there is something else going on. There is an absolute unity that is manifesting on this plane, and on all planes, and that nothing can compromise this understanding.

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

There is a story, it may be apocryphal, certain things may be apocryphal but the facts are not--some of the details would need to be checked: when this same young man was at Cornell, he began to study with this old teacher. The leader, or whoever it was, of the Chabad house, said to one of the other Jewish students "Now that you know your studies and are progressing well, and your understanding has matured, go up to the mountain and bring David back." David was the errant student who had embraced these other teachings and was living a life of what you might call "biblical purity." He was very passionate, a very passionate heart.

So, the other David--they are both called David--the other David, prepares himself and goes up to the mountain and sits with him and says "What's going on here? Enough is enough. You've taken enough acid, you've eaten enough mushrooms, you whored after enough false gods. Now, come back and take up your burden."

So the first David says, "Stay with me for a little while."

Well the upshot of the story was that the second David abandoned Chabad and began to study with the first David, feeling that this was indeed the real thing.

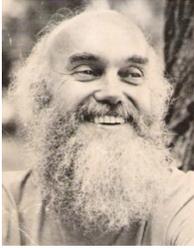
You know, we're in a period when, I think, a radical approach to these matters, if not affirmed, is at least tolerated. And I think we *are* in a period when these relationships will be redefined radically.

AK: I grew up in a Jewish household with parents who were quite respectful toward Judaism, and I attended a Conservative Hebrew School for a few

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<sup>29</sup> The Shema is a central part of Jewish prayer, and is recited a minimum of twice a day. Its well known first line is, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

years before my Bar Mitzvah. But it was not until I stumbled across Ram Dass<sup>30</sup>...



**Ram Dass**

Leonard Cohen: So you understand the trip completely.

AK: I always felt that stuff opened me up to Judaism.

Leonard Cohen: I understand that.

AK: Now, "There's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."<sup>31</sup>  
This, to me, is such a Jewish idea...

Leonard Cohen: I think so too.

AK: Is it also a Zen idea?

Leonard Cohen: I can't even *locate* a Zen idea.

AK: (laughs)

Leonard Cohen: As I said, I don't know really know that much about Zen or Buddhism because I was never really interested in a new religion. When I was young, I investigated various forms around, stuff, because it was there. You know, you met a girl or you met somebody, you went on the trip.

I was never deeply...you know, I had a good Jewish education. I remember sitting with my grandfather, studying the book of Isaiah. He was already well along in his years, and he'd read a passage, and he'd speak about it, and nod off, and his finger would go back to the beginning of the passage

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<sup>30</sup> Ram Dass, born Richard Alpert, is a spiritual teacher best known for his book, *Be Here Now*, and for his association with Timothy Leary, both of whom were fired on the same day from the faculty of Harvard University in 1963.

<sup>31</sup> From Leonard Cohen's song, "Anthem."

as he moved his body, and he'd start fresh, with that same verse again and read it again and expound it again, and sometimes the whole evening was spent on the exposition of one verse.

So I had a clear idea of the implications of what a Jewish life was. I saw my family was deeply involved in the organization of a community. It was no joke.

AK: Yes!

Leonard Cohen: This was not like a theoretical thing. The Hebrew Free Loan Society--people could borrow money free! That's a translation of a Jewish idea into action. I saw this all the time, all around me.

And also found my family's businesses conducted at a level of ethics and honor that you couldn't help but be impressed by.

So I saw the thing. So as I say, the ideas in Zen, I'm not sure what they are, because I've only known one old man. I don't know how authentically he represents his tradition. I just know that he's provided a space for me to kind of dance with the Lord, that I couldn't find in a lot of the other places I went to.

AK: Why do you think that so many of us young Jews went to the East. Since you observed Jewish communal life and organizational life up close, what was it about it that was bankrupt or that was a turn off in some way?

Leonard Cohen: I was brought up in the Conservative tradition, which I have the deepest respect for. I'm a member of my synagogue, I light the candles Friday night. And I feel very close to the whole trip. I don't think that we developed, I don't think we were able to develop a meditational system that could seize and address the deep appetites of our best young people, the people who really had to have an experience with the Absolute. We didn't take that seriously.

I think our faith is full of atheists and agnostics. I think that there are lots of nominal Jews around. But I think there are people who really believe, who have really had an experience, who have really been embraced, who have felt this embrace, who have felt themselves dissolve in the midst of a prayer. And felt that the prayer was praying them.

I think these things exist in our literature; we pick up a book by Buber<sup>32</sup>, a Chassidic tale, or something, and these things are hinted at. But in

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<sup>32</sup> Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a Jewish philosopher, well-known for his book, *I and Thou*, as well as *Tales of the Hasidim*.

the main stream, these things had the status of superstition. So I think that was a very unsatisfactory condition and many of our brightest and best looked in it, look for it, but simply couldn't find it.

Also, I think there is the prophetic element in Judaism, the Prophets, that world vision articulated, let's say, by Isaiah. I think that's also not taken seriously.

In other words, we don't take it seriously. We have the stuff, but we don't take it seriously. 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--I began practicing Judaism, practicing a Judaism that I had never practiced. Laying tefillin every morning, and going through the *Shemoneh Esreh*<sup>33</sup>, 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.

While starting from a very low place, you could put your chin up over the windowsill and actually see a world that you could affirm.

Well, nobody had ever talked to me that way about anything. The actual use of the liturgy, of our wisdom books, the actual use of them as a real thing, as a thing that is written with white fire on black fire or black fire on white fire, which is the way they say the Torah was written--that idea, of something passionate and not negotiable, that atmosphere, did not touch me at all in my education. And it *has* to.

Now it does touch other groups, but those other groups seem to have forgotten the messianic implication, which is that we all are part of a brotherhood under the Almighty. And the exclusive elements, the nominal elements, seemed to be emphasized and a kind of scorn for the nations, for the goyim. A kind of exclusivity that I found wholly unacceptable, and many people I know find it wholly unacceptable. That has also precluded a number of our best from affirming their connection with groups that at least have the fire going. I don't want to get specific, because I don't want to mount criticism against any group that is passionately involved in that kind of destiny.

But you ask why some of our brightest and best have not been able to embrace the tradition. It's because the tradition itself has betrayed itself, because the messianic unfolding has not been affirmed. And the meditational systems have not been affirmed. And we don't have teachers who are warm in their invitation. There's something punitive about the invitation. You

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<sup>33</sup> The *Shemoneh Esreh* (literally "the Eighteen") also known as the *Amidah* ("The Standing Prayer") is the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, recited three times a day. It originally consisted of eighteen blessings; a nineteenth blessing was then added.

know: "Do this or else." The Mercy of the Lord is not affirmed, One side of the tree is affirmed, justice or judgment is affirmed, very, very strongly, but the other side is not affirmed and I don't think it's known. I don't think it's experienced. So we need a system that will provide experience in these matters, an experience that is not within the confines of an exclusive vision, that affirms one element in humanity and scorns the rest.

AK: Do you know the work of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz<sup>34</sup>? He's been translating the Talmud into English.



Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

Leonard Cohen: Yes. I love it. I love it. I've only looked at a few of the volumes, but I've studied them. When I couldn't practice in the zendo, I began to study these things. I had a Jewish education, but it didn't have the real taste and the real juice. Yes, English! It says we can pray in seventy languages, we can study in seventy languages!

AK: One of Rabbi Steinsaltz's mottos is "Let my people know."

Leonard Cohen: Wonderful.

AK: You're echoing what the Rabbi often says, that we shouldn't take somebody else's word for what Judaism is. We should find out for ourselves. And we discover we didn't know the treasures that we have.

Leonard Cohen: Wonderful.

AK: You made a comment earlier that reminded me of one of my trips to Eastern Europe. I visited Eastern Europe a number of times. On one of my trips to Eastern Europe all I did was go to old Jewish cemeteries. I went

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<sup>34</sup> Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, b. 1937, is best known for his translation of and commentary on the entire Babylonian Talmud. Author of over 60 books, Rabbi Steinsaltz is one of the most influential rabbis of our time.

from town to town, from Jewish cemetery to Jewish cemetery to Jewish cemetery, for weeks. I couldn't get enough of them. At a certain point, in the cemetery of the town where my great-grandfather was born, I had this experience--in the cemetery--of feeling, as vividly as can be, that I had been killed as a child in the Holocaust.

Leonard Cohen (ambiguous "uh-huh")

AK: In my dabbling with books on Eastern religions, reincarnation was always a "given." Without it, nothing made sense, and with it, everything started to make some sense. I later learned that many of the most illustrious Jewish sages throughout our history taught about the reincarnation of the soul. I then learned that a lot of people have had these similar kinds of experiences that I had. What do you think about reincarnation? Does it make sense to you?

Leonard Cohen: I don't really think about these things very deeply. It seems to be part of a conceptual point of view that you can develop, and develop a very legitimate argument. When I say "conceptual," I don't mean that scornfully. I mean that it involves the mind and an idea and an experience. And I can get into a whole number of very fascinating conceptual propositions, and reincarnation is one of them.

It doesn't have the urgency of the present demand, that we get right with ourselves and with our Maker. The absolute demand, from moment to moment, that we not violate the birthright and the position that we have as human beings.

These Tibetans, this book that I'm supposed to be narrating, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is a very, very careful examination of these various states. And in Chasidism it is, for example, very, very clear how long the spirit hovers above the body. There are people who are very sensitive.

You know, the same people who said "You shall not kill" also talked about shellfish, and I think we have to accord a certain respect for these matters. If somebody can pick up very clear ideas about human behavior, and also mention shellfish and cooking the lamb in the milk of its mother, I think we should take these things a lot more seriously than we might, because the same minds are perceiving the absolute importance of both of these possibilities. Very delicate and subtle minds tell us the spirit of the individual is hovering over the body, so I don't think there's any reason to discard that notion.

My old teacher, when I say, "What about reincarnation?" He says, "Tibetan fairytale." That's his point of view. It's not that he wishes to denigrate or degrade that position. It's more like, "Don't you have anything better to think about?" Your position in the cosmos is at stake at this moment. How do you want to deal with it? How would you like to be with me in this room? I tend to feel that way.

AK: A moment ago we were talking about how they spoiled Judaism for many of us. They also spoiled poetry for many of us.

Leonard Cohen: I have to exclude myself from this "us," because they didn't spoil Judaism for me.

AK: Nor for me either.

Leonard Cohen: There was something in it. Yes, I 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...people have their stories: I grew up in a Catholic city and my Catholic friends have horror stories about what Catholicism was, and my Jewish friends have horror stories about what Judaism was. I never had them. I never rebelled against my parents, even when I was taking acid<sup>35</sup> and living in the Chelsea Hotel. It never occurred to me once to blame my family, my city, my religion, my tribe, my destiny, my position, on who they were. I always thought it was great! I always thought my family practice was great, and I've tried to keep it up--in my half ass way.

Leonard Cohen: but poetry...

AK: Yes, poetry. I run the Jewish Book Club.<sup>36</sup> We sell books of Jewish interest to 22,000 households. We sell a lot of books. But poetry never sells, no matter who it is. And, as you can see I am ignoring that data by offering your new book.

Leonard Cohen: (laughs)

AK: Why do you think that is? I know my own horror stories in high school, the murdering of poetry! What are your thoughts on this?

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<sup>35</sup> Lysergic acid diethylamide, commonly known as LSD, is a psychedelic drug, colloquially known as acid.

<sup>36</sup> Kurzweil was editor-in-chief of the Jewish Book Club from 1984 to 2001.

Leonard Cohen: I don't think it's for everybody in its pure form. It's like bee pollen, you know. It's nice to have honey in your cakes, but there are purists who like the pollen and the propolis. There are bee cultists.

I feel that way about poetry. The honey of poetry is all over the place. It's in the writing in the National Geographic, when the thing is absolutely clear and beautiful. It's in movies. It's all over. The taste of significance is what we call poetry. And when something resonates with a particular kind of significance, we might not call it poetry, but we've experienced poetry.

It's got something to do with truth and rhythm and authority and music. It's all over the place. For the few cultists and purists who like to look at a page where the words don't come to the end of the line, I think that's a very specific kind of interest and a very specific kind of appetite, and I really don't think it's for everybody.

So, I've never been dismayed. My feeling is, I was completely hooked on this stuff as a kid. I loved it when I first came across it--in the songs my mother sang, in the liturgy, in the pop music. There was a certain resonance when something was said in a certain kind of way, it seemed to embrace the cosmos. Not just my heart, but every heart was involved, and loneliness was dissolved, and you felt like you were this aching creature in the midst of the aching cosmos and the ache was OK. Not only was it ok but it was the way that you embraced the sun and the moon.

I went into pop music. I felt that 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! And I didn't want to live it in poetry readings, although there's nothing wrong with that. I just felt that there was a lute behind it, there was a ten stringed instrument behind it. That was the way that I got the stuff. There was a ten stringed instrument behind all this, so I naturally moved into this kind of expression that I got lost in.

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

Leonard Cohen: It's the life that you want to lead. You can be the subject and poetry can be the object, and 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 lift up the Torah, "*Etz chayim hi l'mah chazikim bah.*"<sup>37</sup> That kind of thing

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<sup>37</sup> Literally, "It is a tree of life for those who grasp it." In the synagogue Torah service, after the Torah has been read publicly, the Torah scroll is raised for the congregation to see. This verse is sung as part of the response from the congregation upon seeing the raised Torah scroll.

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<sup>38</sup>, 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.

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.

AK: Were you making the point before that there was some connection between your breaking your knees and your adopting of Torah observance? How did you break your knees?

Leonard Cohen: I fell. I was running across a mountain at night and I ran into a wall. A low, stone wall. I tripped over it and I badly damage my knees and I had to have microsurgery. Fortunately, I just tore the meniscus in both knees. It was painful but not catastrophic.

And so I couldn't practice. I was used to sitting straight, in silence, with my knees crossed and my back straight, which were the instructions of that teacher called Shakyamuni or The Buddha. He didn't say that much about anything except to sit, fold your legs carefully under you and sit with your back straight. And that's it. Then figure it out for yourself. That's basically the instructions he gave.



AK: And suddenly you were in a situation where you couldn't do that?

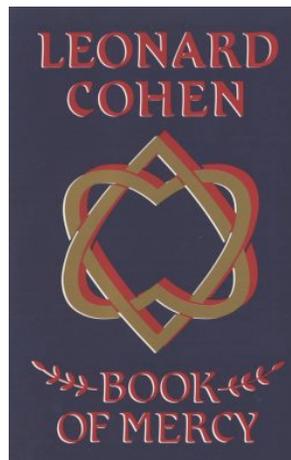
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<sup>38</sup> This is the Hebrew word for "priest" and the source of the name "Cohen." Direct paternal descendants of Aaron, they performed daily and holy day duties in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Today's descendants, despite the destruction of the Temple, still have some private as well as communal responsibilities.

Leonard Cohen: Yes, I couldn't do that. I had some friends who were rabbis, and one particular friend, Simcha, was the head of the Chabad<sup>39</sup> at McGill. And we used to meet and talk--and drink actually. And I had been interested, but I never really led a formal Orthodox life. And I felt the appetite, I felt, "What is this tefillin<sup>40</sup>?" I inherited my grandfather's tefillin. I had the bag. And I wondered, "What is this? What is this thing? What are these morning prayers?" And I began to look into them, and to study them, and to say them and to try to penetrate them. And to try to make sense of them, in the deepest way.

And it was my studies with this old Zen monk, it was my experience in the zendo, that opened it for me for the first time. I saw I really could use this material, and I saw how exquisite and skillful these prayers were, how they had been designed by minds that you have to incline your heads towards. These minds who designed these prayers or received the inspiration to design these prayers--these are incredibly subtle and exquisite prayers for lifting the soul.

So I began to practice this form that was such a happy homecoming. And out of that I wrote *The Book of Mercy*, out of that period. I tried to make my tiny homage to a tradition that had somehow been withheld, not deliberately withheld, but had been lost to me, let's say, and lost to my own family practice.



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<sup>39</sup> CHABAD, literally an acronym for the Hebrew Kabbalistic terms Chochma, Bina, and Da'at meaning Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge, in general use, it refers to the Chasidic group known as Lubavitch.

<sup>40</sup> A set of two small black leather boxes containing verses from the Torah. During morning prayers they are traditionally worn around the arm and on the forehead.

AK: I keep thinking, as you're talking, of that image of your grandfather going back to that verse, and again, back to that verse. Somehow he saw something and achieved something.

Leonard Cohen: Oh yes! Well, he was a wonderful spirit. He *swam* in it. It wasn't that he could ever leave it.

He happened to be in a confrontational, belligerent stance regarding the rabbinical vision. Somehow, he didn't like it. There was something about it that he didn't like. But he was in it, and there was no way that he could be anything else but Rabbi Solomon Klonitsky-Klein.

Incidentally, when he died, he was writing a dictionary without reference books. He was little gone, but nevertheless he felt confident enough to sit: A...B...C...He was really one of those people who could put the pin through a page and know the letter it touched on the other side<sup>41</sup>. You know what I mean! He was one of those minds.

AK: Is it true that your father gave you a leather-bound book of poetry that made an impact on you?

Leonard Cohen: My father left me a library of poetry. When it was his Bar Mitzvah, which was around 1907, it must have been the custom in Montreal to give these leather-bound books of English poetry. When he died I inherited his library. And I don't even know if I made this up now, because it seems highly unlikely, but he gave me a book called *The Romance of the King's Army*. He was an army man, a patriarch, an Edwardian kind of gentleman.

He wore a monocle. He had spats and a cane. He would go out with his service medals on his tuxedo. That kind of thing. A very distinguished, wonderful figure. Very disciplinarian.

So he gave me this book before he died, and the quotation in the beginning of the book, and that was what really struck me--was, "You would be surprised, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed." The quintessential religious position is that this world, the world that is governed without God, is a world of folly. "You would be surprised, my son, with how *little wisdom the world is governed.*" To give that to a kid of eight..it was a very, very strong message from someone. And he died shortly afterwards.

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<sup>41</sup> In 1917, in the journal *Psychological Review*, psychologist George Stratton documented a group of Talmudic scholars from Poland who memorized all 5,422 pages of the Talmud so when a pin was stuck through any page they could tell you what word was stuck on the other side. Rabbi Solomon Schechter, founder of the Conservative movement in America, claimed to have witnessed this amazing feat of memorization.

But that seemed to undermine the whole secular position. That there was no wisdom in the world. You had to turn elsewhere.

(note: We sat in silence for a long moment.)

AK: Why the monocle? Was that a style?

Leonard Cohen: I think it was for peering at your inferiors. I think they were designed to peer at your inferiors. (laughs; we laugh together)

AK: Your Hebrew name is Eliezer?

Leonard Cohen: Eliezer.

AK: And your father's Hebrew name?

Leonard Cohen: Nissan

AK: So, Eliezer ben Nissan

Leonard Cohen: Nissan, Nathan. Natan it would be today, isn't it?

AK: Nissan is Natan which is Nathan, Yes Na-**tan**.

AK: As we are talking about these things, I keep on thinking about that line, "I'm the little Jew who wrote the Bible."<sup>42</sup>

Leonard Cohen: Exactly. That line, you know, was spontaneous, and I asked myself whether I wanted to keep it there. But it *is* the way I feel. I do feel that this *is* my position. *This is where I am situated*.

AK: I have to admit that I wondered, when I thought about inviting you to have this conversation and I chose your book to be a selection of The Jewish Book Club, not knowing you personally, if you want to be "the little Jew who wrote the Bible" or "the Jewish poet." But, obviously, I am hearing something very different...

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<sup>42</sup> From a song by Leonard Cohen, "The Future."

Leonard Cohen: Oh, I *am* the little Jew who wrote the Bible. *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..."

AK: "...heard them all..."

Leonard Cohen: "...heard them all. But love's the only engine of survival."

I *know* what it takes to survive.

I *know* what a people needs to survive and as I get older I feel less modest about taking these positions because I realized 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.

For these things, for the burning bush, for those experiences. Those are the experiences that we have the obligation to manifest. That 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, unless we really take up that invitation to walk onto that biblical landscape. That's where we are.

Now what *is* the biblical landscape? It is the victory of experience. That's what the Bible celebrates. The victory of experience, So the experience of these things is absolutely necessary, as well as a teaching that enables the student to manifest, to experience these episodes that are burning through the Bible, that are now relegated to the realm of miracles or superstition, or something that can't happen to you.

AK: The story of Isaac. We read it every morning.

Leonard Cohen: Yes, that binding! So that's what I learnt from my old teacher, my old rabbi. And when I brought that writer Leon Wieseltier up Mount Baldy--he wrote about it in the *New Yorker*<sup>43</sup>, I don't know if you saw the article...

AK: Yes I did.

Leonard Cohen: I said to him, I'm going to shul, do you want to come with me."

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<sup>43</sup> "The Prince of Bummers" by Leon Wieseltier, *The New Yorker*, July 26, 1993

I meant it.

Harry Rasky, a Canadian filmmaker, a wonderful Canadian filmmaker, he did a wonderful movie on the Holocaust, when he got in trouble I said, "Come to shul. I'll bring you here."

He came, and he sat, and he studied with my old teacher.

That's what it's like. That's how I imagined what a Chassidic court would be. That's what it's like to me.

I think that we can bring this experience back to our traditions. I see these like training centers. It used to happen. There were Jews who used to study with Sufi masters, at a certain great period in our history, and bring it back, and the opposite.

But this kind of exclusivity! 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 being-ness of others and the vitality. That's the way I feel about this thing.

AK: Yes! By the way, another uplifting line of yours, "I haven't been this happy since the end of World War Two."<sup>44</sup>

Leonard Cohen: Right! (laughs) I know. As I've said before, If I knew where those lines come from, I'd go there more often.

AK: I have so many things I've collected, just to give you an indication of the extent to which I've gotten involved with your work. I have so many things. I even once sent for this stuff...

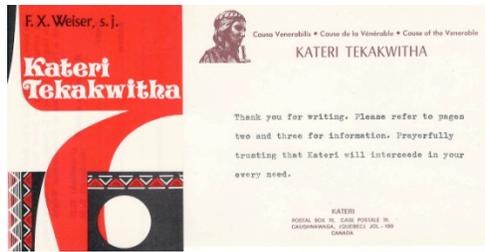
Leonard Cohen: Oh, yeah!

AK: ...I've never even read it. I don't think I ever read it. But there was something just so intriguing to me about it.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> From "Waiting for the Miracle" by Leonard Cohen

<sup>45</sup> Leonard's novel, *Beautiful Losers* includes many references and details about Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680), an Algonquian Native American who converted to Roman Catholicism. She was beatified on June 22, 1980 by Pope John Paul II. I showed Leonard some literature from an organization publishing her biography, including her teachings and miracles.



Leonard Cohen: Yes, well she's buried just outside of Montreal. They've changed their name now, to Kahnawake<sup>46</sup> from Caughnawaga.

AK: How do you pronounce her name?

Leonard Cohen: Tekakwitha (tee-kahk-wee-tah). She's wonderful, She's in the soil around Montreal. It's not remote. I always loved her, and I always loved the Indians. My father used to take me to this reservation.

AK: Oh, really?

Leonard Cohen: All the time. Before I ever heard of Kateri Tekakwitha. I used to go with him Sunday afternoons and we'd watch the dances of the Indians. Strange that I found out later that Kateri's remains are buried there. I'm sorry I forgot what you asked.

AK: I wasn't really asking, I was just confessing about sending for these pamphlets about Kateri Tekakwitha!

Leonard Cohen: It's amazing, It's amazing. Well, you're absolved. You know there's a statue of her on the doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral here in New York.

AK: I'll have to go over there.



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<sup>46</sup> Kahnawake Mohawk Territory is a reserve of the Iroquoian-speaking Mohawk nation. It is located on the St. Lawrence River, across from Montreal, on its south shore.

Leonard Cohen: Sometimes when I've been in New York, there's a flower store nearby, and I'd go and buy a lily and I'd put it with a rubber band on her braid because the braids come out of the door. It's a very beautiful statue of Kateri Tekakwitha.



*(Without missing a beat, Leonard changes the subject...)*

So, when the second David came up the mountain to the first David, he came into the zendo and sat down with the first David and said to him, "Look, this is wonderful. I feel this is the real thing. But, there's a statue of the Buddha. This is really intolerable. To have an idol!"

So the first David said "Really?" And then he picked up the statue and threw it out.

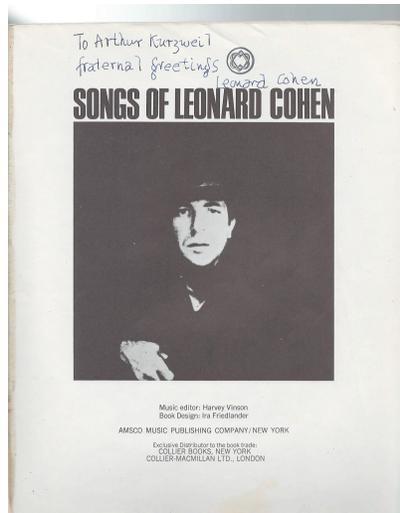
AK: *(laughing with Leonard)* That's great. I think we've done it!  
Thank you very much for this conversation!

Leonard Cohen: Thank *you* so much for coming, It's very, very kind of you.

AK: Well it's my pleasure. When I graduated from college, in 1971, I bought a one way ticket to Europe and traveled around. I had my guitar with me, and I figured I only had room for one song book. This was the song book that traveled with me in Europe.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Songs of Leonard Cohen, Amsco Music Publishing Company, (c)1969 Stranger Music



Leonard Cohen; Ah, great. That's very kind!

AK: It's been to Spain, and to Yugoslavia, and to Morocco, and to Italy, and to Israel. All over the place.

Leonard Cohen: Tell me, if you have a moment or two, what was your story? So you heard Rabbi Ram Dass, and then what was your trip? Where were you at the time? Just tell me a little about your own trip.

AK: I was in high school and college in the 60's.

Leonard Cohen: What college? What high school?

AK: I went to East Meadow High School on Long Island, a suburban, public high school. I went to Hofstra University, and then I got a masters degree in Library Science from Florida State in Tallahassee. In reality, I was busy, for a number of years, trying to end the war in Vietnam. Then I graduated college and went to Europe and it was at that time when I was beginning to discover Jewish stuff. And when I got back from Europe I discovered Ram Dass. I knew he was originally Dr. Richard Alpert and was at Harvard University, with Timothy Leary. Then Ram Dass went to India, and he met his guru, and then came back to the States. I started hearing him on WBAI. And then I went to hear him lecture and bought his tapes and just sat for hours. I must have 100 recordings of his talks. I bought myself a printing press, setting the type by hand, and I sat, like a monk, I suppose, in my apartment, for months, printing little poetry cards. I'd find a poem and I'd set it in hand type and I'd just print them....

Leonard Cohen: Ah, it's an old tradition. Beautiful!

AK: ...and listen to Ram Dass tapes. My studio apartment on 101st Street in New York City was a little monastery for me. And at a certain point I realized that Ram Dass, a Jew steeped in Hinduism, was opening me up to Jewish things. And slowly but surely I became more interested in trying some of these things on and realizing, like you were saying, that the Shemoneh Esreh<sup>48</sup> is not just a bunch of words, that it's a spiritual ladder.

Leonard Cohen: Right!

AK: Then there is Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who we were talking about before: he's a brilliant, profound, wise rabbi in Jerusalem, who comes to New York three or four times a year, and who is trying to be a bridge between worlds.

Leonard Cohen: And you began studying with him?

AK: Yes, I began to study his books and study with him. And I looked for every opportunity to go sit with him and bring him my problems, to ask him my questions. And he became a very important person for me.

And my genealogical research was very important to me, too. I was interested in my family tree, and I started tracing. I discovered that I had more in common with my dead ancestors than my living relatives. And, as I have often said, they are sometimes much easier to get along with.

Leonard Cohen: Right.

AK: So I hung around with my dead ancestors, and went to old Jewish cemeteries in Poland and Hungary and Russia, and I did research and discovered who they were--and not only how they died but how they lived.

Leonard Cohen: Is your book available?

AK: I just finished a second edition.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See footnote # 29.

<sup>49</sup> Published originally in 1980, *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History* was published in a revised edition in 1994 and then a new edition in 2004.

Leonard Cohen: I'd like to see this. Can you send me one?

AK: I will send it to you.

Leonard Cohen: Great.

AK: I would love to.

Leonard Cohen: Let me give you an address...

AK: I also wrote a book on the subject of Jewish genealogy for children that has a picture in it of my second cousin, Zsuzsa Barta, who learned English from your records in Budapest. So I'll send it to you, and mark it, so you can see it.



**Zsuzsa Barta, ca. 1978**

Leonard Cohen: Great. Have you written a lot of books?<sup>50</sup>

AK: I wrote three books on Jewish genealogy and family history.

Leonard Cohen: Incredible! That's wonderful.

AK: So when I saw the names of the towns that your family came from, I knew them all. I knew them from maps.

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<sup>50</sup> Note: I have, since then, written several other books including *On the Road with Rabbi Steinsaltz*, *Kabbalah for Dummies*, and *The Torah for Dummies*.

Leonard Cohen: Well, now listen. Let me ask you something. The synagogue in Vilkaviskis<sup>51</sup>, which is also known as Vilkavisk, was wooden. Is it true that it was octagonal?

AK: Have you seen the book *Wooden Synagogues*<sup>52</sup>?

Leonard Cohen: No.

AK: Well I have an album, it's out of print. It was published in Poland right after the Holocaust called *Wooden Synagogues*. I'll look it up and see if there is a picture of it.

Leonard Cohen: Would you? I heard something in my family that it was like that.

AK: That it was octagonal? Some of them were absolutely exquisite. This book is extraordinary: pictures, drawings, and floor plans of wooden synagogues in Poland, of which none exist any longer. There is not a single one which stands. I'll look and see.



The Old Wooden Synagogue in Vilkaviskis

Leonard Cohen: Because I have letters from my great-grandfather to my grandfather.

AK: Really? From the old country?

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<sup>51</sup> See footnote # 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Wooden Synagogues*, Arkady, Poland, 1959.

Leonard Cohen: Yes, yes. They are beautiful letters. I mean they formally started off, "May the Almighty in His Divine wisdom grant you and your family the blessings..." I mean beautiful salutations. And he says, "Thank you for your gift of thirty rubles."<sup>53</sup> I had to ride twenty miles to the post office. And, thank God, I go to the synagogue every morning and every evening."

It was really an evocation of a life there. Wonderful letters.

AK: Well, I'll do a little checking. It would be fun if I found something for you.

Leonard Cohen: Well that's very kind of you. There were a couple of books written, kind of privately, about the family, by a Montreal genealogist.

AK: Is this somebody who is related to you?

Leonard Cohen: No, just because the family was a strong...

AK: A kind of illustrious family in the town.

Leonard Cohen: Well it was illustrious only in the sense that they served. They were not particularly illustrious in any way.

AK: Their reputation as community people...

Leonard Cohen: Yes, they were community people, exactly.

AK: Could I ask you to sign my items?

Leonard Cohen: Of course. I'll even stamp it with my little colophon I developed. I'll show it to you.<sup>54</sup> Maybe you're the man to ask about this. This is my colophon. The two hearts are intertwined in the same way two triangles are intertwined in a Magen David.<sup>55</sup> I never knew this existed until

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<sup>53</sup> A unit of currency in Belarus, Russia, and elsewhere.

<sup>54</sup> A colophon is a printer's mark or a logotype (logo).

<sup>55</sup> Literally "Shield of David," it is a hexagram, the compound of two equilateral triangles. A Magen David has been known, since at least the 17th century, to represent the Jewish People. It also appears on the flag of Israel. Its two triangles are also associated with efforts to illustrate Kabbalistic concepts.

I designed it. When I was reading a book by Gershom Scholem,<sup>56</sup> he curiously enough happened to describe a synagogue, I think 8th century in Asia Minor. And he just happened to mention that there were two hearts interlocked on one of the walls. So I don't know.

AK: I know an essay that Scholem wrote about the Star of David. I have the book at home with that essay in it.

Leonard Cohen: It's wonderful that you're a scholar, among other things. It's wonderful that you have this stuff down like that.

AK: Well, it would be nice to find something.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) is often described as the founder of the modern, academic study of Kabbalah.

<sup>57</sup> I did find material of interest and sent it to Leonard. He sent me a note of thanks as well as several little lapel pins with his colophon, the two embracing hearts looking like a soft version of the Shield of David.

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January 13, 1994

Mr. Arthur Kurzweil  
Vice-President  
Jason Aronson Inc.  
230 Livingston Street  
Northvale, NJ 07647

Dear Arthur:

Thank you for the picture of my family's synagogue and thank you for your fascinating book on genealogy. I have just dipped into it and it is an impressive piece of work.

I hope the year unfolds well for you. It was a great pleasure meeting you.

Fraternally,



Leonard Cohen