

The Prayers of Leonard Cohen: If It Be Your Will

Doron B. Cohen

Prayers occupy an important place in the work of LC, be they in the form of poem, prose or song. The significance of prayer in his life goes back to his childhood experience, when he participated regularly in the public prayers at the synagogue erected by his ancestors in Montreal, *Sha'ar Hashomayim* (Gate of Heaven). His need to relive that experience, find refuge in it and contribute to it in his own way found its most distinctive expression in *Book of Mercy*, a book of prose poems which he published when he turned 50, in 1984. Surprisingly perhaps, when referring to the book in interviews he expressed some ambivalence about his prayer writing, as in the following quote from 1986: "It is that curious thing: a private book that has a public possibility. But it's not my intention to become known as a writer of prayers." Still, many find his prayers profoundly touching and use them to channel their own feelings.

I would like to recount briefly part of my own experience with BoM. Shortly after joining the Forum almost ten years ago (November 2006), I initiated an open discussion of the book in which dozens of participants took part, regularly or occasionally. It turned out that the discussion spread over a period of three and a half years, much longer than anticipated. Sometimes it went at a breakneck pace, other times it seemed as if it was dying out, but we hung on to it. I benefited greatly by many of the contributions, and what I experienced and learned on the Forum made it possible for me to fulfill an old dream, which was to translate and annotate BoM in Hebrew. After several long delays the translation was finally published in Jerusalem in December 2015. In it I strove to identify and bring back to their Hebrew origin the numerous expressions borrowed by LC from the Bible and the Prayer Book, as well as the writings of the Kabbalah, Hassidism and other Jewish sources. I also indicated his allusions to the Christian tradition, as well as to Zen Buddhism, which he practiced for many years, although, as he often indicated, he did not regard it as a form of religion.

For the front cover of the Hebrew edition I picked a painting by Rembrandt, "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" (1659), now housed in the Picture Galerie in Berlin. There are several references to this biblical scene in the book, and I found Rembrandt's rendering of it especially appropriate because it seems to convey both struggle and love, a combination which is central to the work of LC, including BoM. Naturally, I could not do without his "unified heart" emblem, so strongly associated with the book, on the cover of which it appeared for the first time, so requested that it be printed on the back cover.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank once again all the participants in the discussion and the other Forum members who assisted me in various ways; I thanked some of them by name in the book, but I also appreciate the help of many others whom I could not name. I couldn't have done it without you, so in a sense, this is a joint achievement, made possible thanks to the Forum and the international community of Cohenites.

However, BoM was not the first occasion on which LC wrote or published prayers. A distinct prayer can already be found in his first novel, *The Favourite Game*, book IV chapter 15. Since our time is short, I shall quote only the first few lines, but those of you who are familiar with BoM will see the similarities, as well as the differences:

Friday night. Sabbath. Ritual Music on the PA. Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts. The earth is full of your glory. If I could only end my hate. If I could believe what they wrote and wrapped in silk and crowned with gold. I want to write the word. [...]

That was an early example, but many others were to follow. Besides his prose books and poetry, LC's prayers can be found in his songs as well. The same year he published BoM, he also recorded his seventh album, *Various Positions*. One of the things which became clear to me during the Forum discussion was how the book and the album reflect each other in myriad ways, like the two halves of a diptych. And when speaking of prayers, one song from the album stands out conspicuously. I'm probably not the only one to regard "If It Be Your Will" as one of LC's most profound prayers and one of his most beautiful songs, with words and music singularly matched. It seems to be a favourite of LC himself; when asked in an interview in 1994 which song he wished he had written, his answer was: "'If It Be Your Will'. And I wrote it" (Simmons, p. 340).

As I'm sure often happens to many of us, I've been pondering over the lyrics of this song for years, trying to figure out what stood behind each expression, image and line. Although I cannot claim to have solved all its mysteries, I would like to share with you today some of my observations and thoughts concerning this song.

Let me start with two quotes from LC himself about the song, courtesy of the wonderful "Diamonds in the Line" website, where you can find many quotes from introductions to his songs made over the years by LC during his concerts. The first quote is from a concert in Linz (8 March 1985):

"This is an old prayer it came to me to rewrite. It's about surrendering."

So according to him, this prayer is not original, but a rewrite of an older one; he also indicates the prayer's theme, which is surrendering, probably meaning surrendering to a higher will. Can we identify which was the old prayer that "came" to him? Some of you may have done so already; I will offer a possible candidate in a few minutes.

The second quote is from Warsaw, made about two weeks after the previous one (22 March 1985). Here he does not say much about the meaning of the song, mainly referring to the volatile political situation in Poland at the time, when Solidarity was being repressed by the regime:

"I don't know which side everybody's on any more, and ...I don't really care. There is a moment when we have to transcend the side we're on and understand that we are creatures of a higher order. It doesn't mean that I don't wish you courage in your struggle. There is on both sides of this struggle men of good will. That is important to remember... on both sides of this struggle. Some struggling for freedom, some struggling for safety. In solemn testimony of that unbroken faith which binds a generation one to another, I sing this song: "If it be your will"."

You may read more about that very special concert in Warsaw in the article by Daniel Wyszogrodzki, "Freedom Soon Will Come: Leonard Cohen in Warsaw, 1985", printed in the wonderful booklet from the Krakow Event; it can also be found on the Files.

*

Let me now take you through the lyrics of the song, one verse at a time:

If It Be Your Will

If it be your will
That I speak no more
And my voice be still
As it was before
I will speak no more
I shall abide until
I am spoken for
If it be your will

The first thing that struck me about this song is the use of “if”, which is unusual in a prayer. “If” is a conjunction used in conditional sentences; “may”, on the other hand, is a modal verb expressing possibility, so phrases such as “May it be your will” are more common in prayers. For example, here is the text of the traditional Jewish Traveler's Prayer (*Tefilat HaDerekh*), uttered before embarking on a trip:

May it be Your will, Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace. May you rescue us from the hand of every foe, ambush along the way, and from all manner of punishments that assemble to come to earth. May You send blessing in our handiwork, and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us. May You hear the sound of our humble request because You are God Who hears prayer requests. Blessed are You, Lord, Who hears prayer.

In fact, there *are* some biblical prayers which include a conditional clause, but they do not refer to the will, perhaps with one exception. Searching for a prayer which opens with “if” and includes “will” it seems that the inevitable candidate is Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. According to Luke 22:42, he said: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.” And later, according to Matthew 26:42, he added: “If this cup cannot pass by, but I must drink it, your will be done! ”

This certainly sounds like the “surrendering” which LC referred to when introducing the song in Linz; it may well be the “old prayer” which he rewrote, combining the common “May it be your will” of Jewish prayers with the “if” uttered by Jesus in his anguish, to create a new formula.

As we are all aware, Jesus is an important figure for LC. He appears by name in only 3 or 4 recorded songs, but his presence is felt even in some other songs where he is not named, as I showed some years ago in my article on “The Window”. LC, although being a committed Jew, adopted Jesus as a figure of both love and human suffering. Let me quote some of his words on this subject, from a rare occasion, a chat he held on the Internet back in 2001:

[...] Last year I tried to put it this way: Was looking at the crucifix. Got something in my eye. A Light that doesn't need to live and doesn't need to die. What's written in the Book of Love is strangely incomplete, 'til witnessed here in time and blood a thousand kisses deep.

[...] As I understand it, into the heart of every Christian, Christ comes, and Christ goes. When, by his Grace, the landscape of the heart becomes vast and deep and limitless, then Christ makes His abode in that graceful heart, and His Will prevails. The experience is recognized as Peace. In the absence of this experience much activity arises, divisions of every sort. Outside of the organizational enterprise, which some applaud and some mistrust, stands the figure of Jesus, nailed to a human predicament, summoning the heart to comprehend its own suffering by dissolving itself in a radical confession of hospitality.

Here he hints delicately that you don't have to belong to the Church in order to be welcomed by the hospitality offered by Jesus.

To return now to the contents of the first verse, the speaker in it says that he will keep silent until spoken for. Somewhat paradoxically, the song opens in a declaration of silence and in listening, just like BoM, which opens with the words: "I stopped to listen"; years later he would write in the song "Amen": "We're alone & I'm listening / I'm listening so hard that it hurts". So the first step in a prayer according to him is not speaking, not uttering one's own wishes, but rather listening and awaiting acknowledgment. And let us not forget that this is coming from a writer, a singer, a public figure whose materials are words and sounds. [For more on this point see Stephen Scobie's article: "The Counterfeiter Begs Forgiveness: *Leonard Cohen* and Leonard Cohen"]

*

Second verse:

If it be your will
That a voice be true
From this broken hill
I will sing to you
From this broken hill
All your praises they shall ring
If it be your will
To let me sing

The motif of the voice continues in the second verse, this time with singing rather than speaking. The speaker in these lines says that if he can find the true voice he will praise the one whose will allows this. So, like in some of the Psalms, and some chapters of BoM, here he would offer a prayer of praise, rather than of suffering and supplication.

The expression which stands out here is the broken hill from where his song shall ring. As you are all probably well aware, "broken" is a word that often appears in LC's songs; in fact, I counted more than 15 such cases, which means this word appears in more than 10% of his

recorded songs, and that's apart from many other forms of the verb "to break". A few examples: "the broken hallelujah" in "Hallelujah"; "the broken hearted few" in "The Guests"; "the whole broken hearted host" in "The Window"; "my broken night" in "The Future"; "But he himself was broken" in "Suzanne", and so on. Being broken is a fundamental state of existence for LC, but he does not give in to it and is constantly in search of mending (*tikkun* in Hebrew).

In BoM, forms of "break" appear 17 times, of which "broken" appears 10 times. Each one is significant in its own way, but I'll quote only a few examples:

"You led me to this field where I can dance with a broken knee" (10)

"Broken in the unemployment of my soul, I have driven a wedge into your world, fallen on both sides of it" (12)

"Why do you comfort me? Asks the heart that is not broken enough" (40)

"All my life is broken unto you, and all my glory soiled unto you. Do not let the spark of my soul go out in the even sadness. Let me raise the brokenness to you, to the world where the breaking is for love. Do not let the words be mine, but change them into truth [*a parallel to the song*]. With these lips instruct my heart, and let fall into the world what is broken in the world. Lift me up to the wrestling of faith. [...]" (49)

So the appearance of something "broken" in this song comes as no surprise, but can we identify a specific broken hill? Perhaps like in the first verse we can find here a concealed allusion to Jesus if we refer to Matthew 27:50-54, where it says that the moment Jesus died the earth shook and "the tombs broke open". Even without this hint of breaking we may think of the hill of Golgotha, where Jesus ended up after being arrested at Gethsemane, as the hill referred to in the song.

To round up the picture I should mention that years ago on the Forum, Geoffrey made a reference to Isaiah 55:12: "For you shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." This may or may not be relevant to the song, although the late and lamented Greg Wells wrote one of his distinctively elaborate posts in support of this connection.

*

Third verse:

If it be your will
If there is a choice
Let the rivers fill
Let the hills rejoice
Let your mercy spill
On all these burning hearts in hell
If it be your will
To make us well

I have not discussed yet the most outstanding word in this song, which is "Will"; this word also

has an important place in BoM where it appears 14 times. LC referred to it extensively in some interviews, and here I'm quoting from the one he gave *The Malahat Review* in 1986:

Well, we sense that there is a will that is behind all things, and we're also aware of our own will, and it's the distance between those two wills that creates the mystery that we call religion. It is the attempt to reconcile our will with another will that we can't quite put our finger on, but we feel is powerful and existent. It's the space between those two wills that creates our predicament. [...] Somehow, in some way, we have to be a reflection of the will that is behind the whole mess. When you describe the outer husk of that will which is yours, which is your own tiny will – in all things mostly to succeed, to dominate, to influence, to be the king – when that will under certain conditions destroys itself, we come into contact with another will which seems to be much more authentic. But to reach that authentic will, our little will has to undergo a lot of battering. And it's not appropriate that our little will should be destroyed too often because we need it to interact with all the other little wills. From time to time things arrange themselves in such a way that that tiny will is annihilated, and then you're thrown back into a kind of silence until you can make contact with another authentic thrust of your being. And we call that prayer when we can affirm it. It happens rarely, but it happens in *Book of Mercy*, and that's why I feel it's kind of to one side, because I don't have any ambitions towards leading a religious life or a saintly life or a life of prayer. It's not my nature. I'm out on the street hustling with all the other wills. But from time to time you're thrown back to the point where you can't locate your tiny will, where it isn't functioning, and then you're invited to find another source of energy.

So the question of the will is a central one for LC, in particular the clash of the two kinds of will: the small, personal, inner one, and the other, more “authentic” one. It should be emphasized that one cannot do without that tiny, personal will, one cannot give it up all together, but an encounter with the “authentic” will makes a difference.

In this third verse we can once again find allusions to biblical expressions; for example, “Let the rivers fill” alludes to verses such as Isaiah 41:18: “I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water”; while “Let the hills rejoice” alludes to Psalm 65:12: “and the little hills rejoice on every side”; also Amos 9:13: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt”. Biblical verses are always at the back of LC's mind, and find expression in his writing.

*

Final verse:

And draw us near
And bind us tight
All your children here
In their rags of light
In our rags of light

All dressed to kill
And end this night
If it be your will

If it be your will.

“Bind” goes back to the binding of Isaac in the Book of Genesis, about which LC recorded “The Story of Isaac” in his second album. Binding is also a frequent theme in BoM, and the speaker there often asks for it, for example: “Bind me to your will, bind me with these threads of sorrow” (35); “Bind me, ease of my heart, bind me to your love” (41); “Bind me, intimate, bind me to your wakefulness” (48).

Perhaps the most intriguing expression in this verse is “rags of light”; where did it come from, apart from the poet’s imagination? I believe that it may allude to a certain tradition in the Jewish Midrash, and this will require a somewhat elaborate explanation. “Midrash” refers to interpretations of the Bible by the Jewish sages of old, who could not confine themselves to the literary meaning of the text, but kept searching for ways to extract various meanings from the words of every verse, which for them were, after all, God’s words and therefore contain endless possibilities. The ways of Midrash were numerous and it left a huge body of writings. In one case the rabbis dealt with Genesis 3:21 where it says, soon after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden: “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them”. The words “garments of skin” in Hebrew are: *kutnot ‘or*; the ‘o is the transliteration of the Hebrew letter ‘Ayin, a consonant which does not exist in European languages. The rabbis say that in one certain Torah scroll they found a different spelling: *kutnot or* (with the Hebrew letter Aleph, or A), which means “garments of light”. This Midrash was further developed centuries later in *Sefer HaZohar* or *The Book of Splendor*, the major book of the Kabbalah, where it says: “To begin with these were garments of light, now that they’ve sinned – garments of skin”, which means that before the Fall the human body was spiritual in nature and wrapped in light, but having sinned became corporal and needed a cover of skin. Now comes LC and takes the Midrash a step further, replacing “garments” with “rags”, and adding the poignant expression “dressed to kill”, which also has various meanings obviously. And naturally, BoM also contains similar allusions, such as: “Blessed are you who dressed the shivering spirit in skin” (14), and “We stand in rags” (15).

The final image in the song is the long night, for the end of which the speaker is yearning. As often with LC this image combines the actual, in this case the night, with the symbolized, which here refers to the soul’s suffering and yearning, alluding to the “Dark Night of the Soul”, the long poem by St. John of the Cross, or *San Juan de la Cruz* as he is known in his native tongue, whose poetry and quest must have held a special meaning for LC.

All along my talk today I often referred to BoM and its strong ties to the album *Various Positions* and to our song, so let me conclude with one more quote: “If it be your will, accept the longing truth beneath this wild activity” (35). Apt words.

Finally, after so much talking, it’s time to hear the song.