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THE SACRIFICE OF MEANING:  
LEONARD COHEN'S RETELLINGS OF ABRAHAM'S TRIAL\*

1. *Within and beyond: the art of retelling Biblical stories*

The art of adding details to reveal hidden senses of Biblical narratives and actualize them is a constant in Jewish cultures throughout the ages. The earlier instances are attested in the Bible itself, with its multiple versions of the same events seen from different angles (already in the first two chapters of Genesis). Such retellings are also part and parcel of the haggadic *midrashim* in rabbinic hermeneutics, of philosophical interpretations, and of many literary works.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) interspersed several of his literary texts and song lyrics with references to Biblical, Talmudic, or synagogal sources. In interweaving Jewishness, poetic ingenuity, and autobiographical traits, he practiced a highly personal *midrash*, adding new particulars and aggregating different stories. In the lyrics of his song *Hallelujah*, for instance, Bathsheba is no longer the mere object of David's lust (as in 2Sam 11,2-5) but takes upon herself the traits of Delilah (cf. *Jdg* 16). Thus, the new, uninhibited Bathsheba initiates an ero-

tic domination of the male partner that leads to total surrender and a paradoxical recognition of the holiness of the Name:

I've heard there was a secret chord / that David played, and it pleased the Lord, / but you don't really care for music, do you? / [...] // Your faith was strong but you needed proof, / you saw her bathing on the roof, / her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you. / She tied you to a kitchen chair, / she broke your throne, and she cut your hair / and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah.<sup>2</sup>

But there is another Biblical episode that has long obsessed our author, i.e., the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, near-performed by his father Abraham. In many places of his *oeuvre*, starting from his poetry collections from the 1950s and, later, in the lyrics for *Story of Isaac* (1969) and *You Want It Darker* (2016), Cohen transposed many facets the Biblical narrative into his own writing, giving them unexpected, paradoxical, and provocative interpretations.

Indeed, the Biblical story of the *akedah*, i.e. the "binding" of Isaac, has been the subject of reinterpretation in every age.<sup>3</sup> Examples ran-

\* This article evolved from my 2018 Manfred Vogel Lecture *Songs of Praise in a Broken World*, held on April 24 at the Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies (Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois). I wish to thank the organizers Claire Sufirin and Nancy Gelman and all the participants. My most heartfelt gratitude goes to Kenneth Seeskin, *amico fraterno*, to whom this text is dedicated.

<sup>1</sup> A vast scholarly literature exists on *haggadah*. A good starting point could be D. STERN, *Aggadah*, in A.A. COHEN - P. MENDES-FLOHR (eds.), *Twentieth Century Jewish Religious Thought*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2009, pp. 7-12; see also L. CUSHING STAHLBERG, *Sustaining Fictions. Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible*, T&T Clark International,

New York - London 2008, especially pp. 8-12 and 92-135. Rewritings and retellings of Biblical motifs in the literatures in English (with references to other traditions, too) are explored with great insight in P. BOITANI, *The Bible and its Rewritings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010 (see also, ID., *Ri-Scrittura*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1997). William Blake's idea that the Bible is the "great code" of Western literatures was subsequently appropriated by the now classic N. FRYE, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1982.

<sup>2</sup> L. COHEN, *Hallelujah*, in the LP *Various Positions*, Passport, South Plainfield (NJ) 1984 (copyright later acquired by Columbia Records, New York 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography is immense. Suffice here to refer to E. NOORT - E.J.C. TIGCHELAAR (eds.), *The*

ge from the *Book of Jubilees* (17), the New Testament (e.g. *Heb* 11,17-19; *Jas* 2,21), the Church Father Origen (*Homilies on Genesis*, 8), and early rabbinic *midrashim*, such as *Genesis Rabbah* (56,8), up to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and contemporary literary works, passing through Maimonides (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.24) or even the Quran (37,100-111). To this, one might add the visual exegesis of painters such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Chagall, or even the underground cartoonist Robert Crumb. Each of them offers a subtly different interpretation of what it means *to be put to the test*, *to cooperate*, and to give proof of *extreme faith*.

The Anglo-Canadian literature of Jewish inspiration from the 1950s too, in which Leonard Cohen debuted, had its appropriations and transformations of the narrative of Abraham and Isaac. In the same year in which Cohen issued his first poetry collection,<sup>4</sup> 1956, Adele Wiseman (1928-1992) published *The Sacrifice*.<sup>5</sup> In this «novel of fathers and sons» (as subtitled on the original dust jacket), the Biblical figures of Abraham and Isaac are transfigured into the story of a Jewish family that, to escape the Ukrainian pogroms, settles in Canada, experiencing the tension between ancient values, recent traumas, and the dynamics of the new world. When Abraham, the father, loses both his only surviving son Isaac and his wife Sarah, he ends up slipping into a

tragic spiral of violence and madness. The unexpected redemption comes when the grandson Moses Jacob, son of Isaac, visits his grandfather in the asylum and, overcoming the sense of dishonor, perceives in the old man a paradoxical coexistence of madness and sanctity.<sup>6</sup>

Before exploring the obvious analogy with the parents/children relationship in his 1969 song *Story of Isaac*, Cohen had applied the Abraham/Isaac archetype to the master/disciple relationship in his poem *To a Teacher* (from *The Spice-Box of Earth*, 1961). Here, his ideal mentor, the poet and intellectual Abraham Moses Klein (*nomen omen*), is portrayed as an unattainable master, who could terrify the interlocutors, multiplying the terror with which the Biblical patriarch had paralyzed his son on Mount Moriah:

Who could stand beside you so close to Eden,  
when you glinted in every eye the held high  
razor,  
shivering every ram and son?<sup>7</sup>

In the same collection, the poem *Prayer Of My Wild Grandfather* can be found, where Cohen imagines the Talmudic dictionaries compiled by his rabbi grandfather as children offered to God («He gave you his children / opened on a table».)<sup>8</sup> But this time the Lord let the sacrifice

*Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, Brill, Leiden - Boston - Köln 2002; E. KESSLER, *Bound by the Bible. Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004; O. BOEHM, *The Binding of Isaac. A Religious Model of Disobedience*, T&T Clark International, New York - London 2007; K. SEESKIN, *Thinking about the Torah. A Philosopher reads the Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia - University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 2016, pp. 56-70; A. VAN DER HEIDE, «Now I Know»: *Five Centuries of Aqedah Exegesis*, Springer, Berlin 2017.

<sup>4</sup> L. COHEN, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, McGill Poetry Series & Contact Press, Montreal 1956; 2nd edition, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 1966.

<sup>5</sup> A. WISEMAN, *The Sacrifice*, Macmillan, Toronto 1956. It is worth mentioning that Wiseman participated along with Cohen to the *Symposium for English Language Jewish Writers*, held June 7, 1964, at the

Jewish Public Library of Montreal. The digitally restored audio of the event is available on the website *Yiddish Book Center Multimedia Library*: <http://archive.org/details/nationalyiddishbookcenteraudio/>.

<sup>6</sup> See J. COLDWELL, *Wiseman, Adele*, in E. BENSON - W. TOYE (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Oxford University Press, Toronto 1997<sup>2</sup>, pp. 1183-1184.

<sup>7</sup> L. COHEN, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto 1961, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> His maternal grandfather was Rabbi Solomon Klonitzky-Kline, a talmudic scholar of Jewish-Lithuanian origin; he compiled an anthology of talmudic interpretations of the Pentateuch and a dictionary of homonyms, both in Hebrew: *Ozar Taamei Hazal. Thesaurus of Talmudical Interpretations*, Shulenger Bros., New York 1939 (in Hebrew, except for the title page which is in English); ID., *Milon Dikduki. Lexicon of Hebrew Homonyms*, Mizpah, Tel Aviv 1941 (Hebr., except for the title page which is in English).

be accomplished, «and if a ram / ambled in the garden you whispered nothing / about that, nor held his killing hand». The holocaust, though, was neither an animal nor a son, but the rabbi himself, old and in the throes of dementia. His mind was tested by God and, ultimately, made «mad and honey-combed».<sup>9</sup>

The songwriting of the Sixties knew a first episode of re-appropriation of the Biblical test of Abraham when Bob Dylan (born Robert Zimmerman) in 1965 recorded the song *Highway 61 Revisited* (from the album of the same name). By retelling the moment in which God tests Abraham, the song opens in a question-and-answer exchange, voiced in an expressionist street slang:

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"  
 Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"  
 God say, "No". Abe say, "What?"  
 God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but  
 The next time you see me comin' you better  
 run"  
 Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin'  
 done?"  
 God says, "Out on Highway 61".<sup>10</sup>

The divine order is brutal and direct ("Kill me a son"), with no reference to a sacrificial holocaust and no mention of Isaac being Abraham's beloved son. Abraham is puzzled and, for a while, tries to resist, although not with the dialectic sophistication he had used to defend those honest among the inhabitants of Sodom in *Gen* 18,22-33, but with a street jargon ("Man, you must be puttin' me on"). When God begins to threaten him ("The next time you see me comin' you better

run"), Abraham surrenders and speaks almost like a gangster, "Where do you want this killing done?" Answer: "Out on Highway 61" (the 1,400 mile highway, mostly following the course of the Mississippi River, from New Orleans to the city of Wyoming, Minnesota: the symbolic road that connects Minnesota, where Dylan was born, to the south, the source of his music).<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that Bob Dylan's own father was called Abraham. So it was natural to project the father/son conflict in the graffiti of the ancient Biblical narrative. Abraham Zimmermann, a middle-class tradesman, would have wanted his son in the family business (the Zimmermann Furniture and Electric Company), in the Rotary, in the Congregation Agudath Achim and the B'nai B'rith lodge in the city of Hibbing, Minnesota.<sup>12</sup> Bob, however, preferred to reinvent himself on the road and build new masks.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *Filling the unsaid: Story of Isaac (1969)*

Leonard Cohen's retelling of the *akedah* is in a whole different league. In his song *Story of Isaac* (first issued in the LP *Songs from a Room*, 1969, and later in an intense live version in *Live Songs*, 1973), Cohen explores the Biblical episode, filling the unsaid and expanding on it. The lyrics begin by giving the Biblical narrative a quasi-autobiographical twist, but soon the incomprehensible expendability of the son becomes the touchstone for all intergenerational conflicts, eventually including the dialectics between oppressors and victims of all time.

<sup>9</sup> COHEN, *The Spice-Box of Earth*, cit., p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> B. DYLAN, *Highway 61*, in his LP *Highway 61*, Columbia Records, New York 1965.

<sup>11</sup> M. BILLIG, *Rock and Roll Jews*, Syracuse University Press, New York 2001, p. 129, comments on this dialogue: «The joking familiarity with God - the imagining of an argument with the Almighty - is itself very Jewish, to be found in orthodox texts and in Broadway versions of Judaism, such as *Fiddler on the Roof*», whose original Broadway production opened in 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. T. THOMPSON, *Positively Main Street: Bob Dylan's Minnesota*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis - London 2008, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> «If the killing is to be done on that highway,

then perhaps Dylan appropriates Abraham's encounter and trial as a paradigmatic symbol of breaking new ground in poetry and musical creativity»: J.A. DIAMOND, *The Torah as Song and the Rabbinic Sage as Troubadour*, «Milin Havivin» 7 (2013-2014), pp. 95-111: 105. A shorter version has been published as *Dylan, Cohen and the Music of the Akedah*, «The Jerusalem Post», December 29, 2014. Talking about Bob Dylan would take us far. A good starting point - and less obvious for the English-speaking reader - could be: A. CARRERA, *La voce di Bob Dylan. Una spiegazione dell'America*, nuova edizione riveduta e ampliata, Feltrinelli, Milano 2011 (on Dylan's rewriting of the *akedah*, see pp. 257-258).

The need of filling the unspoken in the *akedah* episode has constantly been felt, because *Gen 22* is mostly focused on Abraham, his test, and his silences.<sup>14</sup> Faced with the extreme and incomprehensible demand to sacrifice the very son that is for him a sign of the divine benevolence, Abraham, head down, obeys and makes no comments. He gets up early in the morning, saddles the donkey, takes two servants and Isaac with him, splits the wood for the holocaust, and goes to the place indicated by God (22,3). In their three-day journey to Mount Moriah, Abraham and Isaac remain silent. Abraham's first words are dispositions for the servants («Stay here with the donkey [...]», 22,5). No words yet between him and his son. At the end it is Isaac who speaks, asking: Father, I see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb? (22,7). And Abraham replies with chilling abstraction: God himself will procure the lamb (22,8). Isaac seems unaware, as if ensnared in a story that is beyond his comprehension. There is no real dialogue between father and son. The initial silence and now the vagueness of Abraham's response are disconcerting.

Such aspects are so disturbing and unbearable that the ancient and rabbinical exegesis tried to mitigate their moral implications. For this reason, the *Targum Yonatan* and the *Targum Neofiti*, but also the *midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, imagine an adult Isaac, who voluntarily accepts to be well tied, to avoid pulling back at the sight of the knife, thus invalidating the sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> This way of reading the *akedah* almost neutralizes several disturbing features of the original narrative. Abraham is no longer portrayed in his lonely and silent obedience, on the verge of performing an incomprehensible action, driven by a voice heard only by him. The idea of the voluntary participation of Isaac opens the scenario of an almost-sacra-

mental interaction between the two. From a different exegetical angle, others tried to transform the nature of the responsibilities of Abraham. In the *Book of Jubilees* (possibly 2nd c. BCE and canonical at Qumran) the order does not come from God but from Mastema or Satan (or a *satan*, a “tempter”);<sup>16</sup> in the Talmud, the sacrifice of Isaac is reshaped according to a sort of Joban narrative: God intends to show Satan the fidelity of his servant Abraham also in the extreme test (*TB Sanhedrin*, 89b);<sup>17</sup> an alternative line of rationalization was to put the blame on Abraham, punished for neglecting the duties of charity (as in the midrash *Bereshit Rabbah* and the *Sefer Zohar*).<sup>18</sup>

In *Story of Isaac*, Cohen too starts from the gaps of the Biblical text, from its linguistic and moral silences. He does not try to mitigate its implications, though, but retells the story from the perspective of Isaac-Leonard, adding new particulars: the mysterious entrance of the father in the child's room to announce the mission, his height, his strength, his holiness, and his blue eyes; his stride during the climbing requiring the child to run in order to keep up; the axe made of gold. To make the midrashic appropriation even more intense, the first lines blend the point of view of Isaac with Cohen's own biography, for he had lost his father Nathan at the age of nine, in 1943, so he feels the Biblical command to sacrifice the beloved son Isaac as a reverse narrative of his own juvenile grief.

The door it opened slowly, / my father he came in, / I was nine years old. / And he stood so tall above me, / his blue eyes they were shining / and his voice was very cold. / He said, “I've had a vision / and you know I'm strong and holy, / I must do what I've been told”. / So he started up the mountain, / I was running, he was walking, / and his axe was made of gold.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See SEESKIN, *Thinking about the Torah*, cit., pp. 56-59.

<sup>15</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 55; 56 (see *Midrash Rabbah*, M.A. MIRKIN (ed.), Yavneh, Tel Aviv 1957, vol. 2, pp. 260, 273). Cf. KESSLER, *Bound by the Bible*, cit., pp. 24-25 and 125. For further references see VAN DER HEIDE, “*Now I Know*”, cit., pp. 2-3; C. BAKHOS, *The Family of Abraham. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) - London 2014, pp. 192-200.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. VAN DER HEIDE, “*Now I know*”, cit., p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. REEG, *The Devil in Rabbinic Literature*, in I. FRÖHLICH - E. KOSKENNIEMI (eds.), *Evil and the Devil*, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London - New York 2013, pp. 71-83: 75.

<sup>18</sup> References and discussion of these passages in D. BROWN, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*, Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 1999, pp. 245-246.

<sup>19</sup> L. COHEN, *Story of Isaac*, from the LP *Songs From A Room*, Columbia Records, New York 1969.

As observed by James Diamond, a distinguished scholar and a personal friend of Cohen's: «Abraham's weapon in Cohen's hands is elegant, and is also reminiscent of the midrashic uniqueness of Abraham's knife signified by the rare and unusual term *ma'akhelet*. [...] Abraham's axe is said to be "made of gold". [...] Axes used as weapons or tools are normally made of copper, bronze, iron, or steel, and so the preciousness of Abraham's axe of gold almost certainly indicates ornamental use rather than weaponry».<sup>20</sup> In Cohen's retelling, Abraham's golden axe is a dignified metamorphosis of the original crude *ma'akhelet*, which the Scripture usually associates with non-normative slaughter.<sup>21</sup>

In the second stanza, the two continue their silent dialogue, made of gestures alone. But there is no tension. They drink together, Abraham puts his hand on Isaac's and he is sure that his son will not try to escape and avoid the sacrifice. There is a spirit of sharing and partnership.

Well, the trees they got much smaller, / the lake a lady's mirror, / we stopped to drink some wine. / Then he threw the bottle over. / Broke a minute later / and he put his hand on mine. / Thought I saw an eagle / but it might have been a vulture, / I never could decide. / Then my father built an altar, / he looked once behind his shoulder, / he knew I would not hide.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> DIAMOND, *The Torah as Song*, cit., p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> The word *ma'akhelet* recurs only four times in the Tanakh, twice in the *akedah* narrative (*Gen* 22,6 and 10), once in the violent story of the concubine offered to the rape of hosts by the Levite and, subsequently, slaughtered by him (*Jdg* 19,29), and once in *Prv* 30,14, as a metaphor for the teeth of those who oppress the poor. «Abraham's knife is thus linked with non-normative slaughter as an instrument that signals a person's violation of societal strictures»: J.L. KANAREK, *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2014, pp. 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> Several details of this second stanza seem to mirror, perhaps by chance, the opening lines of the poem *Yitzhak*, published in 1950 by the Israeli author Amir Gilboa: «At dawn the sun strolled in the forest / together with me and my father, / and my right hand was in his left» (A. GILBOA, *Isaac*, in T. CARMİ (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, Penguin, London 1981, p. 560). On the overall me-

By saying «Thought I saw an eagle / but it might have been a vulture, / I never could decide» Cohen alludes to the indecisions of Biblical translators on the Hebrew word *neshet*. Understood by most as "eagle", most probably it denotes the "Griffon vulture" (*Gyps fulvus* in Linnean nomenclature).<sup>23</sup> It is a sophistication by Cohen to emphasize this ambiguity of the Biblical language. Meanings are layered and things can be different than they seem. The "semantics through images" in a vision sent by God is not as clear and distinct as the logic of an objective event.

Cohen's Isaac has gone through an extreme experience, and maybe his descendants will carry a permanent trace of it (as the Israeli poet Chaim Gouri wrote in 1960, «But that hour / he bequeathed to his offspring. / They are born / with a knife [*ma'akhelet*] in their hearts»).<sup>24</sup>

When pondering what Isaac may have learned from this experience, it can be useful to recall, at least for comparison, Kierkegaard's multiple interpretations. In *Fear and Trembling (Frygt og Bæven)*, 1843, the Danish philosopher, too, fills the unsaid of the Bible and sketches four possible psychological outcomes: [i] In the face of the incomprehension and dismay of his son, Abraham pretends to be mad, in order to deface his paternal image; so Isaac can keep his faith in God; [ii] eventually, God spares Isaac, who is not aware of what could have happened. But

aning of Gilboa's *Yitzhak*, see D.C. JACOBSON, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-century Hebrew Writers*, State University of New York Press, New York 1987, pp. 3, 137-139; Y.S. FELDMAN, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010, pp. 134-136.

<sup>23</sup> See R.L. EISENBERG, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 725-726; N. SLIFKIN, *The Identity of the Neshet*, in <http://zootorah.com/essays/the-identity-of-the-neshet>. Forthcoming in ID., *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. 2, The Biblical Museum of Natural History - Maggid Books - Orthodox Union Press, West Hollywood (CA) - New Milford (CT) - New York.

<sup>24</sup> C. GOURI, *Yerushah* ("Inheritance"), in *Shoshanat Haruchot* ("Windrose"), Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad, Tel Aviv 1960; English trans. in CARMİ (ed.), *The Penguin Book*, cit., p. 565.

«from that time on [...] Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he knew joy no more»; [iii] Abraham does not perform the sacrifice, but asks God to be forgiven for thinking of sacrificing Isaac and continues to think about Hagar and of the son conceived with her, whom he drove out into the wilderness; [iv] Abraham cannot go through with killing his son; Isaac, after seeing that his father's hand «was clenched in despair», comes home alive, but «had lost his faith».<sup>25</sup>

Unlike Kierkegaard's second and fourth interpretation, in Cohen's retelling, Isaac is neither unaware nor has he lost his faith; and Abraham's hand is not "clenched" at all. Isaac/Leonard reminds us that we were not there to see, and we can hardly imagine that his father's hand «was trembling / with the beauty of the word». As the third stanza makes clear, all this does not apply to the behavior of today's fathers, who – devoid of inspiration, love, and perspectives of redemption – send their children off to die in contemporary wars. They do it just for a political plan (*scheme*), as opposed to the divine inspiration, the *vision* sent by God that animated the ancient patriarch: «You who build these altars now / to sacrifice these children, / you must not do it anymore. / A scheme is not a vision / and you never have been tempted / by a demon or a god».<sup>26</sup> Mentioning the alternative between a demon and God as a source of Abraham's inspiration – an option well-attested in midrashic literature – is another rabbinical subtlety. James Diamond rightly points out that in either case Abraham's «temptation to murder [*sic*] at least reflects a relationship with the Transcendent»; on the contrary, the «parents of Cohen's Vietnam era have no such excuse, no temp-

tation other than their own self-interest. [...] Their willingness to sacrifice their children [...] bears no resemblance to Abraham's passionate and all-consuming love for Isaac, as the midrash understands the implications of the heightened Biblical multi-phrasing "your son, your only one, the one you love, Isaac"».<sup>27</sup>

Further, it is to be noticed that their «hatchets» are «blunt and bloody», as opposed to Abraham's golden axe: «It was neither "blunt," nor crafted to cause the most excruciating pain, nor "bloody," since at the end of the trial, Abraham in fact does not sacrifice his son».<sup>28</sup>

But ultimately the song does not propose a generic pacifist solution, which neutralizes conflicts. In fact, the last verse opens with hard and bitter lines, whose meaning might hide at a first listen: «And if you call me brother now, / forgive me if I inquire, / "just according to whose plan?" / When it all comes down to dust / I will kill you if I must, / I will help you if I can». The easy pacifist solution, with its indiscriminate appeal to brotherhood, does not belong in this picture. This song, first recorded by Cohen in 1969, could refer to the campaigns against the Vietnam War, but also to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

We must remember the spirit of that period. In the first decade of the State of Israel, the narrative of Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac was appropriated by several Israeli writers. Many from the founders' generation considered the *akedah* a symbol of their own sacrifices to establish the State (such position was held by authors like Moshe Shamir, Avraham Shlonsky, and Chaim Gouri).<sup>29</sup> Later, in the period of the 1967 Six-Day War, when the founders were too

<sup>25</sup> S. KIERKEGAARD, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. and with notes by W. Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013, pp. 38-43.

<sup>26</sup> COHEN, *Story of Isaac*, cit.

<sup>27</sup> DIAMOND, *The Torah as Song*, cit., pp. 104-105.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p. 105. Diamond also points out that «Cohen exquisitely blends the Biblical narrative, rabbinic midrash, and his own midrashic accretions to evoke first the nightmarish terror in the murderous movement of Abraham's hand over Jacob's throat. But it also resonates paradoxically with a type of "beauty" in Abraham's gesture that starkly contrasts to the cruel, crude, and barbaric draf-

ting of Cohen's contemporary children to the foreign battlefield. Cohen's music itself annotates the "trembling" of the *akedah* with "beauty"».

<sup>29</sup> Contemporary actualizations of the *akedah* in Israeli literature are extensively examined in FELDMAN, *Glory and Agony*, cit.; see also ID., *Scripture and Modern Israeli Literature*, in B.D. SOMMER (ed.), *Jewish Concepts of Scripture. A Comparative Introduction*, New York University Press, New York - London 2012, pp. 280-298: 283-297; R. KARTUN-BLUM, *Isaac Rebound: The Aqedah as a Paradigm in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, in R. WISTRICH - D. OHANA (eds.), *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory and Trauma*, Frank Cass, London 1995, pp. 185-202.



old and sent their children to fight in their place, many writers from the *Palmah* generation still invoked the willing participation of Isaac as a sort of venerable model for intergenerational cooperation. But there were also younger authors who rejected this rhetoric as it obliterates that eventually the angel stayed Abraham's hand and it was the ram and not Isaac to be sacrificed.<sup>30</sup> Echoes of such debates may well have reached Cohen's perceptive ears.

In Cohen's lyrics the clash seems incurable and likely to escalate up to a scene of almost eschatological devastation («When it all comes down to dust»), in which the outcomes of power relations remain open and modulated by considerations of expediency: «I will kill you if I must, / I will help you if I can». But what level of conflict are we talking about? Political, ethnic or inter-generational?

In an interview given in September 1974 (thus exactly one year after the Yom Kippur War, in which he had participated, playing for Israeli troops), Cohen declared what follows:

The song doesn't end with a plea for peace. It doesn't end with a plea for sanity between the generations. It ends saying, "I'll kill you if I can, I will help you if I must, I will kill you if I must, I will help you if I can". That's all I can say about it. My father died when I was nine, that's the reason I put that one of us had to go.<sup>31</sup>

Logical connections in this statement are rather convoluted, but they reveal a profound psycho-biographical nexus, that probably acted as a thematic thread: the early loss of the father is a paradoxical figure in reverse of the sacrifice

of Isaac.<sup>32</sup> This Biblical theme pushes to a comparative reading of inter-generational sacrifices; the hardness of the original loss eventually leads to understanding conflicts among peoples in a dry and realistic outlook.

### 3. *The sacrifice of meaning: You Want It Darker (2016)*

As if to close the circle, forty-seven years later, in 2016, Cohen returns to Abraham in the title track from the last album issued in his lifetime, *You Want It Darker*. The song bursts out with "*Hineni*, I'm ready my Lord". *Hineni*, "here I am" in Hebrew, is the response uttered by the patriarch when God summons him to sacrifice his son Isaac (*Gen* 22,1).

*You Want It Darker* was released on October 21, 2016, two months before Cohen's death. At first, the lyrics seem to express preparation for death. *Hineni* is not only the answer of Abraham to God in *Gen* 22,1 (one of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy readings), but also the title of a prayer of preparation and humility, addressed to God, that the cantor of the Ashkenazi synagogues intones in the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, just before the *musaf* (the additional prayer for the more solemn occasions).<sup>33</sup>

In the liturgy «*Hineni* is followed immediately by the *Kaddish*, the sanctification of God's name, sung in a melody that is used only on the Days of Awe.<sup>34</sup> The majestic tone of this melody captures the solemnity of the moment when we proclaim God's sovereignty. It also reflects the trepidation of human beings who know they are to be held accountable for their actions, and

<sup>30</sup> D.C. JACOBSON, *Does David Still Play Before You? Israeli Poetry and the Bible*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1996, p. 94; A. MENDELSON-MAOZ, *Borders, Territories, and Ethics: Hebrew Literature in the Shadow of the Intifada*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette (IN) 2018, pp. 80-83.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Robin Pike, formerly issued in the UK musical magazine «Zig-Zag. The Rock Magazine» (October 1974), now collected in J. BURGER (ed.), *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago 2014, pp. 57-73: 70.

<sup>32</sup> The illness and death of his father, already

evoked with dramatic power in *Rites*, a poem of Cohen's first poetry book *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, Contact Press, Montreal - Toronto 1956, also dominate the opening pages of his novel, *The Favorite Game*, Secker and Warburg, London 1963.

<sup>33</sup> R. HAMMER, *Entering the High Holy Days. A Complete Guide to the History, Prayers, and Themes*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2005, pp. 75-76; M.I. GRUBER, *Love Conquers Anger: The Aqedah in the Rabbinic Liturgy*, in M.M. CASPI - J.T. GREENE (eds.), *Unbinding the Binding of Isaac*, University Press of America, Lanham 2007, pp. 1-6.

<sup>34</sup> The "Days of Awe" (*yamim noraim*) are the

indeed for their lives».<sup>35</sup> And, in fact, another section of Cohen's lyrics («Magnified, sanctified be Thy Holy Name») closely echoes the doxology of the *Kaddish* (*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabba*: "Magnified and sanctified be His great Name"). But the author quickly adds an abysmal identification between crucifixion and human frailty: «Vilified and crucified / In the human frame».<sup>36</sup>

On closer inspection, all the lyrical content of *You Want It Darker* reverses the perspective of traditional prayers and offers a meditation on the dark side of the covenant. In Cohen's wording, it is not the man to be called to take stock of his sins and to account for his actions. Cohen speaks directly to God and does not even ask for an explanation of the meaning of suffering (as Job had done in the central part of the eponymous book). No, Cohen speaks directly to God just to describe before Him the bleak picture of the human condition, of generations and generations who lit their candles «for the help that never came».

«There's a lover in the story, but the story's still the same [...]». The Holy Scripture has a covenant, promises of love, erotic and wedding metaphors. But all these are constantly neutralized in the hardships of history. The fourth verse displays a parade of military violence from all times, but, in particular, evocative of those years in which the "banality of evil" (in Hannah Arendt's words) turned peaceful bourgeois («middle-class and tame») into officials of death who, in the style of Eichmann on trial in 1961, declare to be almost surprised to have received «permission to murder and maim».

ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

<sup>35</sup> HAMMER, *Entering the High Holy Days*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> It is not to be excluded that the hammering reference to the doxology of the *Kaddish* in Cohen's song might have been inspired by Leon Wieseltier's exploration of that prayer in the first chapter of his book *Kaddish*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf 1998, an exploration that oscillates between erudition, existential meditation, and literary experimentalism. This book was well-known to Cohen, who was a friend of Wieseltier (to whom he dedicated *Love Itself* from *Ten New Songs*, 2011). Wieseltier, on the other hand, wrote an essay for the booklet of

Theologies develop their consoling pieces of literature, their «lullaby for suffering»; they speak of a «paradox», of the incommensurability between the divine plan and human understanding, of the redemptive role of suffering, of the eschatological restoration of justice. But the truth «it's written in the scriptures»<sup>37</sup> and it's not some idle claim»: God wants it darker, God wants a darker world.

James Diamond helps us to understand how this take of Cohen on the *Kaddish* can touch a sensitive Jewish conscience:

I will never again recite the *Kaddish* without the maddening, yet somehow reassuring, irreconcilable reconcilability of two planes of reality Cohen infused it with in this last act of his. The first words of that mourning prayer, "Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name", will now always resonate with the next line he appends to it: "Vilified, crucified, in the human frame". We will continue to proclaim the transcendent reality of sanctity, but not at the cost of a flight from human reality. In our horizontal view we must confront evil for what it is, judge it for what it is, resist it, but vertically the divine name remains holy. We can't let go of God or humankind even when the visions of each clash so violently.<sup>38</sup>

*You Want It Darker* and the eponymous album are a masterpiece of essentiality and intensity. Cohen was seriously ill and was about to give up and leave his artistic testament unfinished. The achievement was made possible only thanks to the obstinacy of his son Adam, who took the technical reins of the project, directing the musicians in the studio and helping his father to sing while remaining at home, on an or-

Cohen's CD/DVD *Songs From The Road* (2010) and, more recently, dedicated to Cohen a touching obituary: *My Friend Leonard Cohen: Darkness and Praise*, «The New York Times», November 14, 2016. ([www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/opinion/my-friend-leonard-cohen-darkness-and-praise.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/opinion/my-friend-leonard-cohen-darkness-and-praise.html?_r=0)).

<sup>37</sup> James Diamond suggests that Cohen here could be referring to «God's confessed failure in creating a perfect world when He conceded that evil is an inevitable consequence of human existence (Genesis 6:5)»: J.A. DIAMOND, *A Farewell "Hineni" to Eliezer, the Cohen of Song*, «The Jerusalem Post», November 15, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

thopedic chair.<sup>39</sup> Such a son/father cooperation is particularly moving and adds an intimate and reconciling overtone to Cohen's last revisitaton of the *akedah* themes.

Musically, the song maintains a restless pace, driven by the syncopated *ostinato* figuration of the bass line; the harmony is colored by the churchy chordal work of the Hammond organ played by Pat Leonard and Neil Larsen and filtered through the Leslie rotating speaker. Of course, in the American musical code, gospel traits do not necessarily entail confessional bonds, but more broadly evoke an emotional and universal sense of spirituality and prayer. On the aural foreground, with clarity and projection in the mix, one perceives Leonard Cohen's deep, guttural voice chiseling his final message. The choir of Shaar Hashomayim synagogue of Montreal, that accompanied softly throughout the song, in the *finale* is joined by the soaring melismata of its *hazan* Gideon Zelermyer. Shaar Hashomayim ("The Gate of Heaven") is the synagogue founded by Cohen's grandfather, where a young Leonard had received his Jewish education. The earthly journey is about to end, it is time to go back home.

Cohen died two months after the release of *You Want It Darker*. This prompted many, in retrospect, to project onto the title track a sense of inner prayer, of extreme confession and surrender, almost as if it meant: *Hineni*, here I

am, Lord, I am ready to die. Indeed, although Cohen repeats Abraham's "*Hineni*, here I am", acceptance is uneasy and disenchanting.

The opening stanza still gives voice to a prayer and a confession rooted in a Joban feeling of creatural fragility and dependence.

If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game  
If you are the healer means I'm broken and lame<sup>40</sup>  
If thine is the glory, then mine must be the shame  
You want it darker / We kill the flame.<sup>41</sup>

But the following lines, as we have seen, address the hardships in the history of all times and draw a colorless scenario. It is all shades of gray. The lyrics of *You Want It Darker* provide a further, oblique *midrash* on the *akedah*, a sacrifice which is also a sacrifice of meaning. A painful recognition that the events in history, but also the story of our expectations, may not have the sense we hoped.

*Hineni* means here: I cannot but accept the mysterious dynamics of history; I just want to declare in front of You that I do recognize the ultimate *non sequitur* of our designs of hope. After all, this was also the bitter outlook of *Story of Isaac*. Once again Cohen ruminates on his dark meditations and gives voice to a night-Judaism, a qoheletic bitter outlook on reality devoid of

<sup>39</sup> «Adam turned Cohen's house into a makeshift recording studio, placing an old Neumann U 87 microphone on the dining room table and filling the living room with computers, outboard gear, and speakers. He also brought in an orthopedic medical chair for his father [so that he could bear the recording sessions without straining his back]»: A. GREENE, *Inside Leonard Cohen's Late-career Triumph "You Want It Darker"*, «Rolling Stone», November 2, 2016: [www.rollingstone.com/music/features/inside-leonard-cohens-late-career-triumph-w447921](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/inside-leonard-cohens-late-career-triumph-w447921).

<sup>40</sup> *Broken* is a key concept of Cohen's anthropology of human frailty and *lame* could refer both to *Gen* 32.23-29, where Jacob, after fighting with the angel of God, has his hip put out of joint, and to a ground-breaking episode in Cohen's own biography. Even if keeping with his Jewish faith, Cohen spent long periods practicing zen meditation at Mount Baldy Zen Centre, in California, under the guidance of the *roshi* ("master") Joshu Sasaki. But later, after knee-injury prevented him from continuing seated meditation,

Cohen decided to reacquaint himself with the study of Jewish sources and spiritual practices: see S. SIMMONS, *I'm Your Man. The Life of Leonard Cohen*, Jonathan Cape, London 2012, pp. 314-315. These are Cohen's retrospective words in a 1993 interview: «I began [...] practicing a Judaism that I had never practiced. Laying *tefillin* every morning, and going through the *Shemoneh Esreh* [lit. "The Eighteen," the series of blessings to be recited three times a day], and really understanding that there were these eighteen steps, and that they were a ladder, [...] a way of preparing yourself for the day»: "*I am the little Jew who wrote the Bible*", a conversation between Leonard Cohen and Arthur Kurzweil (November 23, 1993). This interview, formerly issued in an abbreviated version in «The Jewish Book News», in January 1994, is now published in its entirety in BURGER (ed.), *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen*, cit., pp. 369-393: 378.

<sup>41</sup> L. COHEN, *You Want It Darker*, opening track of the eponymous CD, Columbia Records, New York 2016.

messianic redemption. Nevertheless, as Cohen happened to say to a fifth-grade student, à propos of the meaning of his song *Hallelujah*: «I wanted to stand with those who clearly see God's holy broken world for what it is, and still find the courage or the heart to praise it».<sup>42</sup>

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### SUMMARY

The lyrical language of songs, poems and other literary texts by Leonard Cohen, is a space in which textual materials from the Jewish tradition are constantly rewritten by means of breaking the boundaries between Biblical evocation and autobiography. This article examines Cohen's retellings of the narrative of Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac through a path between the songs *Story of Isaac* (1969) and *You Want It Darker* (2016), with detours toward other purely literary texts of Cohen's. The possible influence of contemporary Israeli authors on Cohen is also addressed.

**KEYWORDS:** Retellings of the *akedah*; Leonard Cohen; Anglo-Canadian Jewish literature.

<sup>42</sup> The fifth-grade student asking Cohen about the inspiration and the meaning of *Hallelujah* was Leon Wieseltier's son, who was preparing a school

presentation on that song. Wieseltier tells the episode in his article *My Friend Leonard Cohen: Darkness and Praise*, cit.