



## “HALLELUJAH”

“Hallelujah, Hallelujah”

These words have been sung and read by uncounted people since the book of Psalms was written over 2000 years ago. Our prayers, especially our Yizkor service, flow from Psalms, an edited hint at ancient worship. There were doubtless hundreds, maybe thousands, of Psalms composed for the Temple in Jerusalem, but only 150 made it into our Bible.

“Hallelujah, Hallelujah”

For many, these words conjure a more modern work of praise. Leonard Cohen’s song has now been performed by endless musicians, of all stripes. It has been used in movies and TV shows. Rolling Stone labeled the song ‘Hallelujah’ as a “modern day hymn.” (<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/readers-poll-the-10-best-leonard-cohen-songs-20141126/hallelujah-20141125>)

However, this now classic song almost never saw the light of day, like those discarded ancient psalms.

In 1984, Leonard Cohen was at a career low point, as Rolling Stone described:

“Interest in Cohen was so low that Columbia [Records] initially refused to even release [the song], figuring it wouldn’t be worth the effort of printing copies and sending them to the stores.”  
(Ibid.)

Yet, ‘Hallelujah’ and its album was released and eventually spread so much, that I can’t even quote Psalms without some of you hearing Leonard Cohen.

The singer-songwriter died just several weeks after the last Yom Kippur. During this solemn moment of memory, his life and work strike me as relevant on many levels.

Leonard Cohen was born and raised within Judaism, but he explored many religious and philosophical streams, before coming last November to be buried in a Jewish cemetery in Montreal, his hometown. Those we remember today had different levels of connection to Judaism or to other religious faiths. Their journeys may have included exploration, rejection, or doubt. We don’t judge them on some religious scale; rather we embrace their lives and are thankful to have shared in them. We remember our loved ones, regardless of their journeys and even if distance hampers our ability to visit their graves.

Leonard Cohen’s birthday was September 21st, intertwined with our holiest days. One fan described his 75th Birthday, celebrated with a concert.

“When Leonard said goodbye to us that night in Barcelona with a traditional Jewish wish for a sweet new year ‘may your life be sweet as apples dipped in honey’ we were left with a mixture of utter elation and

gratefulness yet also more than a touch of sadness.”  
(<https://lifeisafestival.wordpress.com/2009/09/27/as-sweet-as-apples-dipped-in-honey-leonard-cohen-in-barcelona/>)

That very mixture of emotions and reactions is fitting as we review the lives of those who we have lost: “elation, gratefulness, ... more than a touch of sadness.” Depending on when you took a snapshot of Leonard Cohen’s creative but complicated life, you might capture highpoints or more difficult moments. He may have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but he had far quieter stages of his life as well. While not necessarily making it to international recognition, it was the same for those we remember and mourn today. Some were well known and some not as much. Others experienced differing amounts of notice over time. Their lives ended at different points in their journeys. Yet we mourn them all with gratitude and caring.

During this past year, Baltimore Hebrew Congregation itself seems to have lost an inordinate number of lay leaders and very active members. It is not only our clergy who noticed the pattern, but congregants have mentioned it to us as well. Throughout the year, I have been pondering words from our old Yizkor service.

“There are some who have left a name behind them, whose remembrance is as honey in the mouth.”  
(Gates of Repentance, p.487)

There are undoubtedly those whose presence is noticed more than others; those who have left a louder mark on the community. We remember them, yet we don’t let their contributions overshadow the sweetness left by all members of our community and families. Our hearts and prayers have space for all, the well-known and the quieter. A couple of sentences later, we are reminded regarding all our loved ones, that

“...the goodness of their lives has not be lost and their work cannot be blotted out.”  
(Gates of Repentance, p.487)

Some left a sweet reminder for many, but we do not judge by quantity. Each of us has touched the lives of others.

Finally, I am aware at any Yizkor service; some of those we remember left us simple and clear memories. Others were more flawed in their interactions and impact. Yizkor is a time for memory, but Yom Kippur is about judging ourselves, not others. May this moment of memory be one that allows us, as much as possible, to open our hearts to the imperfections of those we have loved and lost. Leonard Cohen’s song ‘Anthem’ reminds us that our relationships and lives can be meaningful, even as they can be bumpy.

“Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in”

It can be hard to declare Hallelujah regarding all our relationships. However, we can be encouraged in our memories of the deceased and, equally so, in our interactions with the living. Let us take what steps we can to reach for the positive. Let us not judge by overly harsh scales, but seek out the blessings with the imperfections. As we head towards a darkening time of day, may we cherish the cracks that let in the light of memory and of shared life. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will.