

Secret Chord: Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/secret-chord-leonard-cohens-hallelujah>.

Introduction

Leonard Cohen was a Jewish-Canadian poet/singer/songwriter whose work first became popular in the 1960's. While Cohen recorded his own songs, singers ranging from Judy Collins to Rufus Wainwright have also covered them and continue to offer their interpretations of his works today. Cohen's poetry and songs explore themes of love, loss, redemption, and the longing for union.

With its recurring religious allusions, the song "Hallelujah" reflects Cohen's preoccupation with the complexities and contradictions of love while at the same time exploring the powerful connection between the sacred and the carnal, the body and the spirit. This kit offers students the opportunity to examine the use of biblical allusion in contemporary music and to familiarize themselves with Cohen not just as a singer/songwriter, but as an important commentator on spiritual matters.

Subjects

Canada, Music, Performance, Religion, Tanakh, Translation

Reading and Background:

- Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah" first appeared on his 1984 album *Various Positions*.
- In *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Fifty Interviews with the Songwriter Between 1966 and 2012*, Jeff Burger brings together some of Cohen's most important interviews, all of which give an intimate look into the way he viewed his life and his music.
- In *The Holy or The Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of Hallelujah*, Rolling Stone editor Alan Light explores the history of "Hallelujah" and its coverage by hundreds of artists.
- Leonard Cohen's final [interview](#) appeared in the New Yorker on October 17, 2016.

Resources

1: Song excerpt, "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, 1984.

This song originally appeared on Leonard Cohen's 1984 album *Various Positions*. It has appeared in numerous television shows and films as the soundtrack to celebrations and funerals alike. You can listen to the full song [here](#).

Suggested Activity: After listening to the entire song as a class, have students read the excerpt of the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba presented in resource #2 of this kit. Then focus on this excerpt of the song. How does Cohen use and transform the Biblical characters? In what ways is the power relationship between David and Bathsheba different in the Biblical excerpt and the song excerpt? Is the meaning of either excerpt clear to you? Muddled? Mysterious?

Source: Cohen, Leonard. *Various Positions*. Columbia Records. 1984.

2: Excerpt of the story of David and Bathsheba, Samuel 11:2 – 11:5.

An excerpt from the biblical story that depicts the relationship between David and Bathsheba. In [the story](#), David sees Bathsheba bathing on the roof, impregnates her, and arranges for her husband to die on the battlefield.



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Suggested Activity: See resource #1. If you have more time, ask students to choose another Biblical story they are familiar with, to re-read it, and to compose a poem or song using characters from that story. Like Cohen's song, the piece they compose does not have to remain true to the original story – it should use the story as a starting place and transform into something new.

Source: Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane. 2004. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3: Biblical verse, Psalm 150, "Hallelujah."

The word "hallelujah" appears plentifully throughout the Book of Psalms, usually at the beginning or end of an individual psalm. The Book of Psalms, traditionally ascribed to King David, is a Biblical collection of songs dedicated to the Lord and perhaps once used for services by the Levitical choir in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Hebrew name for Psalms, *Tehilim*, comes from the same root, meaning "praise," as the word "hallelujah." While *tehilim* are "songs of praise," "hallelujah" is a command to a group of people: "Praise ye God!"

Suggested Activity: Compare and contrast the use of the word "hallelujah" in the psalm and in the song. In the Old Testament version, David is praising the Lord. What is Cohen doing in his version? In what ways might Cohen's song be considered a prayer?

Source: Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane. 2004. *The Jewish study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4: Song excerpts from covers of "Hallelujah" by Jeff Buckley, Pentatonix, and Regina Spektor.

The song "Hallelujah" has been covered so many times, some people forget that it was originally written by Leonard Cohen. Cohen himself thought the song was overused and, in a 2009 interview, said that he thought too many people sing it.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the excerpts as a class. Compare each singer's tone and interpretation. Is it loving? Angry? Forgiving? Sad? Does a particular version strike you as more or less religious? More or less Jewish? Why? How would you describe the tone of Cohen's original recording compared to each of these covers? What do the covers add or take away from the original?

Sources: Buckley, Jeff. *Grace*. Columbia Records. 1994.

Pentatonix. "A Pentatonix Christmas." RCA Records, 2016.

Spektor, Regina. "Regina Spektor - Hallelujah (Leonard Cohen cover 2005) indie pop anti folk." YouTube video, 5:32. Posted March 2015.

5: Video performance, "Hallelujah" in Yiddish by Daniel Kahn, 2016.

American musician and songwriter Daniel Kahn uploaded this video to YouTube in November 2016, right around the time that Leonard Cohen passed away. In the video, Kahn—who lives in Berlin, where he's the frontman in a klezmer-punk-folk band—strums an acoustic guitar and sings his Yiddish adaptation of Cohen's "Hallelujah," while looking straight into the camera. English subtitles make apparent the gaps and overlaps between Kahn's Yiddish version and Cohen's original English.

Why translate an English song from the 1980s into Yiddish? **Kahn says**, "'Hallelujah' is essentially a Yiddish song Leonard Cohen wrote in English, by which I mean it's Jewish. It's like the Song of Solomon, the double working of devotion to God and devotion to a lover, the juxtaposition of eroticism and spirituality. These are all, to my opinion, very Jewish themes. To do it in Yiddish made sense."

Suggested Activity: Listen to Kahn's Yiddish adaptation of "Hallelujah" with your class and discuss: Is there anything that surprised you about this version of the song? What does Yiddish do for the song? And what does the song do for Yiddish? What changes did Kahn make to the tone and structure of the song? Compare his lyrics to the original lyrics – do you think his adaptation stayed true to the meaning of the original lyrics or did it distort the original? Defend your answer with examples from the lyrics. What audience do you think Kahn had in mind when he adapted, performed, and posted this song?

Source: Kahn, Daniel. "Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' - in Yiddish." YouTube video, 4:42. Posted November 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH1fERC_504.

6: Excerpt, episode of "The West Wing," Season 3, 2001.

In a 2009 [interview](#) with *The Guardian*, Leonard Cohen said, "I was just reading a review of a movie called *Watchmen* that uses ["Hallelujah"], and the reviewer said 'Can we please have a moratorium on Hallelujah in movies and television shows?' And I kind of feel the same way."

Although Cohen himself agreed with those who thought the song was overused, it continues to appeal to diverse artists and audiences since its original release in 1984. It's used in a wildly diverse array of contexts—from the animated children's movies *Shrek* and *Sing* to the silver medal-winning Chinese figure skating routine at the 2018 Olympics to this scene from the popular White House drama series *The West Wing*, in which a police officer who is trying to stop a crime from being committed has just been murdered.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students why they think the producers of this *West Wing* episode may have chosen to use "Hallelujah" in this scene. What does the song do to the scene? And what does the scene do to the song? Why do you think Cohen expressed a desire for a moratorium on the song in movies and television? And why do you think this song, written by a Canadian Jew, continues to appeal to a universal audience?

Source: *The West Wing*. "Posse Comitatus" Season 3, Episode 21, Directed by Alex Graves. NBC. May 22, 2002.

7: Quotation by Leonard Cohen.

In this undated quotation, presented in a book devoted entirely to the history and impact of "Hallelujah," Cohen suggests that the song's refrain is about accepting and embracing contradictions. This explanation may reflect [Cohen's Buddhist practice](#); he was ordained as a Zen monk in the 1990s. It may also be tied to his inherited Jewish understanding of the world, which, according to Psalms 24:1, "is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof," including, it might be supposed, the good and the bad together.

Suggested Activity: Read Cohen's quotation aloud with students and discuss: what "irreconcilable conflicts" might Cohen be referring to in this quotation? What might he mean by moments in which one can "reconcile and embrace the whole mess"? How is Cohen's use of the word "Hallelujah" different from the Biblical use of that word? What exactly is he praising, if anything at all?

Have students do some free-writing and reflecting about how these concepts of "conflicts" and "reconciliation" relate to their own lives. Then ask them to write a poem comprised of a series of statements followed by the word "Hallelujah." They can use the word traditionally, non-traditionally, religiously, secularly, straight-forwardly, ironically, or in any other way that they choose.

Source: Alan Light, *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of "Hallelujah,"* (New York: Atria Books, 2012), 30-31.