# Professor David Peimer | A Grandchild of Lithuania Leonard Cohen

– Okay, so we're going to focus on Leonard Cohen, and obviously, I'm sure many people know a huge amount about his life and his music and poetry. So what I'm going to do is just focus on what I think are some of the absolutely key poems in terms of the content, the connection to Judaism, and obviously, the sheer brilliance of the poetry, and also some of the songs, which I feel in a way are the ones which maybe will last and I think have such a resonance for us today. There's so much in his work that I think it's crucial we just select the few. And I want to thank... There've been a lot of people who have emailed requesting this and that and all sorts of different songs, and I wish I could play them. But we're going to play a few, and we're going to look at some of the poems, and maybe we'll start a DJ section for another time. Okay, so a grandchild of Lithuania. Obviously, one of his grandparents came out from Lithuania, and we are making a tenuous but a real link to what Trudy and William have been looking at in terms of the historical spine. His life there, as we can see, spans in an extraordinary time for Jews I think throughout the world. What he's obviously covering, the war, Holocaust, post Holocaust, state of Israel, and all the stuff going up to 2016. Here's a couple of pictures, obviously, of a young Leonard Cohen and older. On the bottom left is him with Marianne in Hydra, the island that they lived in in Greece. Top left, that's the house in Montreal where he grew up and his family, et cetera. So we get a sense of the home and a sense of him just at different ages really of his life. I'm going to try and minimise the amount of time on his actual life in terms of biography, because I think many people probably know a hell of a lot. And rather, focus more time on listening and just getting a bit more insight perhaps to some of the songs and the poems. He's born into a Jewish family, orthodox, obviously, in Montreal, and his mother comes from a Lithuanian lineage, Marsha Klonitsky, and immigrated to Canada in 1927. It's important I think that she was the daughter of a Talmudic writer and an important rabbi who, I haven't read it, but wrote books on Hebrew grammar and other things, important rabbinical persona, Rabbi Solomon Klonitsky-Kline. That's on his mother's side. So he's got this rabbinical and orthodox Jewish tradition coming from the mother's side and the Talmudic tradition. And his paternal grandfather was from a family who had immigrated from Poland to Canada and became the founding president of the Canadian Jewish Congress. And his father, Nathan, was a clothing store owner who died when Leonard was nine. And in 1967, Leonard Cohen made an interesting comment about his own childhood upbringing and personal and school and other education. He said, "I had a messianic childhood. I was told that I was literally a descendant of Aaron the high priest." So that phrase I think encapsulates a hell of a lot of the milieu and the immediacy of his own family, his education, and the community that he's growing up in in Montreal with that very powerful traditional heritage and lineage. And also, the neighbourhood is quite Jewish, as well, and his family

is deeply involved in the community. I think this is really important, unlike perhaps some other artists, whichever, but the family involvement in the community. The shul where he had his bar mitzvah, his grandfather had founded, and that's where he's buried today. He identifies, as we all know, he strongly identifies and proudly with being Jewish. And I think this is part of what makes him so exceptional really. And I don't like to ever buy into the myth of any group becoming prey to theories of exceptionalism, because I think there's a danger of the exceptionalism possibly of being English, or being South African, or being Zulu, or being Jewish, or being Catholic, whatever. I think it's a very grey, tricky area to walk, but I think what is important is a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, and a sense of community that he certainly grows up with. And of course, education on a literal level and on a metaphysical level, if you like. This made him I think overall always proud of being Jewish, and this is what I'm trying to link to. And I don't think that is a quick leap to the argument pro the myth of exceptionalism. I think there are other qualities about, as I said, belonging and identity that go in here instead. In 1973, we all know the Yom Kippur War. He went to Israel, travelled with some of the troops, singing his songs, et cetera. There's an interesting short book by Matti Friedman, if anyone were interested, just about that particular part of his life. He goes to McGill University, studies English literature, publishes his first book of poetry. 1956, "Let Us Compare Mythologies" gets really good reviews, but doesn't sell well at all. In 1961, he published his second book of poetry, "The Spice-Box of Earth". I'm going to hold on the religious association with that very phrase, which I'm sure many people who know better than I do in terms of the religious connection there. But what that collection did is that it's established Cohen as a fairly, pretty important new literary figure in Canada, and Word gets out to the states. He tries to join the family business. It doesn't work out at all. He travels, settles in Greece, the island of Hydra, as we all know. That's where he meets Marianne at the bottom left. Obviously, the song. And he constantly, he's writing poetry first. And I think that's really important. "Flowers for Hitler" and other collections are written while he's in Hydra in Greece. And he has four published anthologies of poetry, and then moves into song and with a guitar and singing and music really. And I think it's important. Perhaps similar a little bit to Dylan. Although, Dylan combines both in a way. But he starts as a poet, and I think that holds all the way through with some of the best songs. The lyrics I think are quite remarkable. In the mid '60s, there's the connection with Judy Collins, I'm sure many know, who invites him up to play his song. And she starts to popularise his first song, "Suzanne", and becomes more famous. He makes his real debut in the 1967 Newport Folk Festival. And Dylan is there, Benny Goodman, Billy Holiday, and other luminaries. In 1968, this is important, he wins Canada's highest literary award for poetry. So by then, he's already, he's building a reputation clearly and the craft and art and sweat of writing poems, but also, starting the whole

songwriting career. And by '68 and the end of the '60s, he's already part of the rock and roll scene in New York City. He's staying at the Chelsea Hotel. We all know the song, his own song, "Chelsea Hotel", about his brief fling and possible infatuation with the remarkable Janis Joplin. I'm going to jump here, because in 2005, he filed a suit against his business manager, longtime business manager Kelley Lynch over the theft of over five million dollars, which were taken during his time in the years he spent in and out of the Buddhist retreat around LA. And he has to go on tour to make money, basically. Necessity sometimes being the mother of invention, so many remarkable songs happen, and it's almost like a second performance career trajectory begins. Quite incredible. 2008 world tour alone covered 84 performances, sold nearly a million tickets worldwide.

So this is way after he's made it, and he's become famous and his songs and other things. This is 2008 where all the different generations, similar to perhaps Dylan and some others, the different generations are able to respond to Leonard Cohen. That is a remarkable achievement. He carried on working on new material even though his health is declining. And 2016 is his 82nd birthday. And of course, the great album "You Want It Darker", which for me is the greatest song of all. I know many people love "Hallelujah" and many of the others, but "You Want It Darker" I think it just transcends, which is produced by his son Adam. So he had published four anthologies of poetry and 14 albums of music, plus all sorts of other things, as well. And these are the only, the most significant pieces. Okay, we're going to jump from here, we're going to move, because I'm going to hold that in terms of his life. Just a very brief summary of, if you like, the highlights, 'cause I think many people know it. Let's go into the poetry. One of, for me, it's not necessarily his best poem, but I think it's one of the most important, "Song of the Hellenes". And I'm sure many people know far more than I do about the Hellenists, but this is an era in Jewish history, and in fact world history, which captures a theme which I think everybody grapples with today and over centuries since. And in essence, this is around the time of the 167 to 160 BCE. So 150, 170 years before the birth of Christ. This is the period you're looking at where the Greeks have conquered Judea. And the song for the Hellenists is directly related to this historical period where Leonard Cohen as the poet takes on an ironic and satirical attitude towards Jewish persons who had become Hellenists, if you like. What was a Hellenist? A Hellenist was a person who was Greek in language, in culture, way of life, way of thinking, but not Greek in ancestry or religion or traditional heritage. So the phrase Hellenized Jew comes about. And of course, it begins... I'm not going to go into all the details of the battle with the Greek King and all the nuances of what happened. It's a fascinating story I'm sure many people know. Judea is basically under occupation by the Seleucid Greeks. And this is the time of the Maccabean Revolt, 167 to one 160 BCE. And the Seleucid Greeks led by the King Antioch, in that period, had forbade the practise of Judaism. In the previous period, the same

king had not, and there was no revolt. But when the actual practise of Judaism and certain things happened, then it was forbidden. The Maccabean Revolt happens, overthrows the Seleucids in Judea. And what is going on for Leonard Cohen and in the story of ancient times is that a large number of Jews looked at the Greek culture, which at the time was seen as absolute highlight of world culture, and sophistication, and superiority, edification, et cetera, and everybody else inferior to that superior. The classic ancient binary which we have today and every century ever since. So, ah, this is a much better culture. This is a more advanced, a more civilised, more sophisticated culture, the Greek. So let us try and be more Greek than Greeks. And of course, this goes straight to the belonging and assimilationist debate we all know only too well. Let us try and be more English than English. Let us try and be more South African than South African. Let us try and be more American than Catholic or Irish or Jewish or whatever. The Maccabean revolt, this era is, and this phrase of the Hellenistic times, Hellenist Jews, becomes for me a story and a metaphor. Of course, everybody knows it's linked to Hanukah, et cetera. But it becomes a story and metaphor, not only of militant revolt and, if you like, war, but it becomes a story in our times I think of assimilation and belonging. And I think that it's haunted and that has ridden on the wave of Jewish history with every single Jewish person throughout the centuries. Because we got to look at some of his words here, but the small people. Look at the Greeks with their magnificent art, their Olympic games, their culture. Are we primitive? Are we inferior? Is that superior? Can we belong to the bigger culture? Do we fit in? Are we envious of this greater, more powerful, more civilised culture or not? Should we try and be like that or not? Fantastic story by some Somerset Maugham a short story called "Alien Corn" where Somerset Maugham really tries to get in and understand this. Fantastic short story. I'm not going to go into it now, but Jews who are embarrassed or ashamed of being Jewish in terms of trying so hard to fit into the host culture as it were, which is seen as greater, bigger, more civilised, and superior. There's no right or wrong answer. It's an eternal creative tension I think. In Hannah Arendt's great phrase, one is either the parvenu as the Jew, the upstart made good, or the pariah who is the pariah on the host nation. And the Jew is perceived or categorised by the non-Jew in those ways in Hannah Arendt's argument.

So this story of the Hellenist period is important, and he takes it on here. "Song of the Hellenes. O cities of the Decapolis across the Jordan, you are too great." It's completely ironic and satirical. "Our young men love you, and men in high places have caused gymnasiums to be built in Jerusalem." It's all the Greek references, gymnasium. "I tell you my people the statues are too tall. Beside them we are small and ugly, blemishes on the pedestal. My name is Theodotus. Do not call me Jonathan. Call me Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor. Have you seen my brilliant scholars with dirty fingernails standing before the marble gods? Among straight noses, natural and carved, I have said my clever

things, jested on the protocols," protocols of Zion, "the cause of war," of his reference, "quoted, 'Bleistein with a Cigar.'" That's a direct reference to TS Elliot's poem "Prufrock". TS Elliot was a well-known anti-Semite. It doesn't for a second mean anything less about his poems. Brilliant, remarkable poet. But one has to acknowledge inside TS Elliot as a person is anti-Semitism. And this is one of the phrases from the poem, which is the rich, fat Jew with the cigar, Bleistein. "My children were boast of their ancestors at Marathon." So my children will boast that their real ancestors are Greek in the city of Marathon. We all know the connection of Marathon to the Olympic games and the prowess. "And under the wall of Troy and Athens, my chiefest joy. O call me Alexander, Demetrius, Nicanor." So it's ironic, it's satirical. I'm perhaps reading it with a bit more sarcasm than Leonard Cohen intended. It's an early poem. It's not necessarily one of the best, but I think it shows Leonard Cohen's identification with Jewishness totally. And the fact that he's using this ancient biblical story is really important, because he's I think finding a metaphor and a story which resonates with our times. And he's saying this resonates all through the history. I want to go on to this other poem, which in a way is a slightly more mature but a really powerful and deceptively simple poem. "For you, I will be the ghetto Jew and dance and put white stockings on my twisted limbs and poison wells across the town. For you, I will be an apostate Jew and tell the Spanish priest," Spanish inquisition, "of the blood vow in the Talmud and where the bones of the child are hid." Killing of Christ. "For you, I will be a banker Jew and bring to ruin a proud, old, hunting king and end his line." I control the world. I'm the banker. I can ruin any king. "For you, I will be a Broadway Jew and cry in theatres for my mother and sell bargain goods beneath the counter." So it's I will be the Jew on the stage, da-da-da, dazzle and cry and make you cry. Watch me and write it, but I'll also sell and make money. "For you, I will be a doctor Jew and search in all the garbage cans for foreskins to sew back again. For you, I will be a Dachau Jew and lie down in lime with twisted limbs and bloated pain no mind can understand." When we read those earlier stances and we come to the last one, it's such a punch in the guts where whatever dripping sarcasm may be in the earlier parts, or let's call it more kindly satirical wit, that last is just an absolute punch in the gut. And the seriousness dawns on us from the ironic wit and satire of the earlier part. For me, it's deceptively simple because it's just, he's now really maturing as a poet. He's getting the words to the absolute minimum. He's getting a rhythm. He's getting his own voice in his writing. I want to mention what a very close friend of mine who... I used to love Bob Dylan much more to be really honest. And my friend Jeff Cohen, who lives in Australia now, has always loved, been obsessed with Leonard Cohen, and we used to have debates to put it kindly from the time we were tiny little kids growing up in Durban. Jeff once said to me, and I think this does make resonant sense, he said that when he reads Shakespeare, the Shylock, or when he reads even perhaps Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill", many, many others who are

writing about assimilation, belonging, or Jewishness or not, et cetera, he can hear the voice of the writer. But when he reads Leonard Cohen, the poet is saying his feeling. And that's a debate, 'cause my friend Jeff and I have had this debate going on and on for decades and decades. Who is the writer, who is the poet that can articulate what we feel, which is a history, which is a tradition, which is maybe an outsider, an insider, the belonging or not belonging? It may be love and the end of a love, of a marriage, of a child, a family, an ethnic group, a religious whatever. Who speaks so powerfully inside? And I think with Leonard Cohen he does I think speak... I think he says the word. I think he's speaking one's own voice as a Jewish person. And this I think does differentiate him from Dylan and many of the other remarkable Jewish and other poets. I think Dylan tries to combine, but Dylan is more like a restless searcher. Whereas, Leonard Cohen is much more a believer. It is him, it is his call. He has doubts and questions, but it is his call. Okay, I want to go on to here. Okay, a song. And we're going to start with "Dance Me to the End of Love".

(An audio clip of the song "Dance Me to the End of Love" plays)

♪ Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin ♪ ♪ Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in ♪ ♪ Lift me like an olive branch, be my homeward dove ♪ ♪ And dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Yeah, dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone ♪ ♪ Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon ♪ ♪ Show me slowly what I only know the limits of ♪ ♪ And dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to the wedding now ♪ ♪ Dance me on and on ♪ ♪ Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long ♪ ♪ We're both of us beneath our love ♪ ♪ Both of us above ♪ ♪ And dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Yeah, dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to the children who are asking to be born ♪ ♪ Dance me through the curtains that our kisses have outworn ♪ ♪ Raise a tent of shelter now ♪ ♪ Though, every thread is torn ♪ ♪ And dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin ♪ ♪ Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in ♪ ♪ Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove ♪ ♪ Dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to the end of love ♪ ♪ Dance me to the end of love ♪

– Okay, I'm going to hold that there 'cause the song almost finishes from here. Obviously, the burning violin is a reference to the Holocaust, but contrasting with that is the simple love stories, weddings, traditions, ceremonies, and identification with quite a few things which are coming from his Jewish roots but transcended, as well. Okay, I'm going to go on to the next one to play. And this is really for the early part, for some of the great lines that we all know from the song "Anthem".

– Thank you so much for your warm hospitality this evening. We are so grateful to play for you. I heard that. Thank you so much, friends.

We're so privileged to be able to gather in moments like this when so much of the world is plunged in darkness and chaos.

(An audio clip of the 1992 song "Anthem" plays)

♪ So ring the bells that still can ring ♪ ♪ Forget your perfect offering ♪ ♪ There is a crack in everything ♪ ♪ That's how the light gets in ♪

– I wanted to play that just for the opening, the sheer link to me with the previous clip, "Dance Me to the End of Love". I think it's the sheer humanity of the man that comes through. And I think it's an extraordinary, it's not even spiritual, it's just sheer humanity. Some spiritual, the wisdom gone through life lived, but no anger, no bitterness, no rage, no fury, no petulant, barbed thoughts. There's a certain, and I'm not saying it's he's a saint, certainly not, but there is a certain humanity I think ultimately. And he captures it in the poetry. This is part of what he brings to poetry, to hugely popular music and music. And it's coming from those traditional roots that I spoke about before. Okay, I want to go on to here. This is, of course, the key line from the song "Anthem". "There is a crack in everything, and that's how the light gets in." And so many people have said to me, and I've said it to myself over many years those two lines when in moments of whatever difficulty or darkness or fear or horror or worry, those two lines somehow just they burn in so powerfully. And they're such contemporary way of writing poetry. Simple words with not too many syllables, which is exactly necessary for writing songs or lyrics. But eminently simple but burning the way he puts words together. And it's testament to how hard he works on writing, and I'm sure many will know the hours, the months, the years sweating to get the phrase spot on. Just to extend, it's a fascinating question. Whose voice do we hear when we read someone? Do I hear the voice of the writer, or are they actually saying my voice? And I think it's a fascinating challenge for a writer and for an audience or a reader or listener in this case. And I think we hover between the two. We look for those who express our voice, and we look for those who their voice gets in very powerfully, incredibly close. It's a very subtle but I think important distinction.

Okay, I want to go on to the next song, and this is one that everybody will know.

(An audio clip of the 1967 song "So Long, Marianne" plays)

♪ Won't you come over to the window, my little darling ♪ ♪ I'd like to try to read your palm ♪ ♪ I used to think I was a little Gypsy boy ♪ ♪ Before I let you take me home ♪ ♪ Now, so long, Marianne ♪ ♪ It's time that we began to laugh and cry ♪ ♪ And cry and laugh about it all again ♪

– You sing so pretty. ♪ You know that I really love to live with you ♪ ♪ But you make me forget so very much ♪ ♪ I forget to pray for the angels ♪ ♪ And then, the angel forgets to pray for us ♪ ♪ Oh, so long, Marianne, darling ♪ ♪ It's time that we began to laugh and cry ♪ ♪ And cry and laugh about it all again ♪ ♪ For now, I need your hidden love ♪ ♪ I'm cold as a new razor blade ♪ ♪ You left when I told you that I was curious ♪ ♪ I never said, I never said ♪ ♪ I never said that I was brave ♪ ♪ So long, Marianne ♪ ♪ It's time that we began to laugh and cry ♪ ♪ And cry and laugh about it all again ♪ ♪ So long, Marianne ♪ ♪ It's time that we began to laugh and cry ♪ ♪ And cry and laugh about it all again ♪

– Okay, I wanted to get up to that violin section, because the violin always just brings an extraordinary emotional impact I think. What's he trying to do here? And even in the performance, for me, it's not just a sad lamentation of some love lost and remembering back decades and so on. But there's a bit of an energy, there's a bit of a fun, a lightheartedness to look for the crack where the light will get in. No matter what, always look for the crack. And it's that paradox, that combination of the two. I think he's really misunderstood so often as a sort of very depressing and dark and, oh my god, sort of existentially wrought character. You're going to pull our hair out. But if we see the wit and we see the irony and the paradoxes, there's always a crack. It's that combination. And I think he does capture it in the poetry and in the music, as well, and certainly in this version. He's got the other singers. So long, okay. It's not life or death, it's so long. It's okay, let's move on, let's laugh. Let's see it for what it really was. It's a very different kind of lyric with lamentation and loss. That's really what I'm trying to get at. And that brings me to a point, which is if one looks at the beginning of Homer's "Odyssey", in the early part, there are three main gods. There's a god and the young lover Paris can have. Do you want the god of beauty and passion? Do you want the god of wealth and money and power? Do you want the god of wisdom? Choose and then we will find the woman for you, to Paris in the myth. And in that, I think in the ancient Greek philosophy, in the ancient Greek thinking is that no matter what you choose, there's always a Faustian bargain. There's always a price to pay. Choose the beauty and the passion. Love. Love madly as the Spanish say, but there'll be a price. Choose wealth and power and money. Well, go for that partner, but there'll be a price. Choose wisdom. There may be a loss, a price, passion, et cetera. So it is ironically quite a Greek way of seeing that there's always a paradox, there's an irony, there's a conflict which is inner and outer built into human nature and choice. And I think he gets it, that no matter what, it's an end, it's a lamentation of a love, of a love story, and a lover. But let's laugh, let's enjoy, let's see it in different light. And it's what Jonathan Sacks called, in that fantastic little interview with him on YouTube, he in the end says that Leonard Cohen has something of Job in him. The doubting, questioning. It's that constant sense of irony, conflict, and paradox.

Okay, I want to move on to what for me is the greatest song of all, "You Want It Darker". "If you're the dealer, I'm out of the game." This is talking to God. "If you're the healer, I'm broken and lame." I'm going to play it first. Let's listen to it and then come back to a couple of the lyrics.

(An audio clip of the 2016 song "You Want it Darker" plays)

♪ If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game ♪ ♪ If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame ♪ ♪ If thine is the glory, then mine must be the shame ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ We kill the flame ♪ ♪ Magnified, sanctified be the holy name ♪ ♪ Vilified, crucified in the human frame ♪ ♪ A million candles burning for the help that never came ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ Hineni, hineni ♪ ♪ I'm ready, my Lord ♪ ♪ There's a lover in the story ♪ ♪ But the story's still the same ♪ ♪ There's a lullaby for suffering and a paradox to blame ♪ ♪ But it's written in the scriptures ♪ ♪ And it's not some idol claim ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ We kill the flame ♪ ♪ They're lining up the prisoners ♪ ♪ And the guards are taking aim ♪ ♪ I struggle with some demons ♪ ♪ They were middle class and tame ♪ ♪ I didn't know I had permission to murder and to maim ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ Hineni, hineni ♪ ♪ I'm ready, my Lord ♪ ♪ Magnified, sanctified be the holy name ♪ ♪ Vilified, crucified in the human frame ♪ ♪ A million candles burning for the love that never came ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ We kill the flame ♪ ♪ If you are the dealer, let me out of the game ♪ ♪ If you are the healer, I'm broken and lame ♪ ♪ If thine is the glory, mine must be the shame ♪ ♪ You want it darker ♪ ♪ Hineni, hineni ♪ ♪ Hineni, hineni ♪ ♪ I'm ready, my Lord ♪ ♪ Hineni ♪ ♪ Hineni ♪ ♪ Hineni ♪ ♪ Hineni ♪

For me, it's an extraordinary song with extraordinary lyrics and cadences, obviously, of Jewish history and Jewish stories, but so powerful. And I want to, here, just look at a couple of the lines "If you are," oh. This is a reference to the story of Abraham and Isaac and sacrifice the son for the Father, for God. "If you are the dealer," God, "I'm out of the game." "If you're the healer, I'm broken and lame." What do you want? You want me to sacrifice or not? Why are you doing this to me? "If thine is the glory, then mine," ours, "must be the shame." And then, "You want it darker. We kill the flame." If you want darker history, you want darker life and experience or what cultures are doing, societies, war, and so on, okay. The depths to which human depravity and cruelty can go, well, we've seen it, we know it now from the Holocaust and obviously. "Magnified, sanctified," the obvious references to the Kaddish, "be the holy name." "Vilified," et cetera. "A million candles burning." Well, that's obviously the holocaust. But then also, the next line, "For the help that never came." Nobody else ever did a thing. A lesson to never be forgotten, and he gets it in two lines completely. Again, it's the Jewish voice and the Jewish writer coming out so powerfully. "Hineni," I'm sure everyone knows the reference to the Abraham-Isaac story. Again, "I'm

ready, my Lord," yeah, okay. I'm here. "There's a lover in the story and a paradox to blame," et cetera, "and it's not some idol claim." Going to the next one. "They're lining up the prisoners, and the gods are taking aim." So many echoes of the Holocaust and many other events in those two lines. What do humans do to each other? How dark do they go? And will they go? "They were middle class." "I struggle with some demons. They were middle class in tame." And suddenly, a total change being so honest. Yeah, he's middle class and tame. What are his demons compared to the horrors, unspeakable horrors that people have suffered in the Holocaust and in other, in so much? He's middle class and tame from Montreal. "I struggle with some demons." What are they? Extraordinary, searingly honest two lines. "I didn't know I had permission to murder and to maim." Hm. Okay, and then it goes on repeating there again. I think it's an extraordinary poem. What he also does, which Dylan does and others, he links historical events with mythology and his own personal experience. And that's an extraordinary achievement of a great poet. And for me, that's why this is doing so many things with the language and poetry that Dylan and some others, Saul Bellow in novels, Philip Roth, et cetera, And singer, they try to get to. But he gets it. This is the remarkable level of poetry coming to at the end of his life where all of this is pulled together. And when one takes myth with human experience and historical stories and makes them somehow work together in the language and the rhythm, in this case cadences with music, I don't think you have exceptionalism. I think you have a remarkable writer who understands his roots and where he comes from and what he's doing and why with the character of (indistinct). Okay, I want to go on to, yeah, to "Hallelujah", and I'm going to play it first, most of it. And then, let's have a quick look at some of the lyrics.

(An audio clip of the 1984 song "Hallelujah" plays)

♪ 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 ♪ ♪ It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth ♪ ♪ The minor fall, the major lift ♪ ♪ The baffled king composing hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ 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 ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Now, maybe there's a God above ♪ ♪ As for me, all I ever learned from love ♪ ♪ Is how to shoot at someone who outdrew you ♪ ♪ But it's not a cry that you hear at night ♪ ♪ It's not some pilgrim who claims to have seen the light ♪ ♪ No, it's a cold and it's a very broken hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪

Okay, just because time is a bit short because we had that blackout at the beginning, I'm going to hold it here and just look at a couple of

things here with this. What I said earlier about linking personal experience with mythology, with history, not in a fruit salad post-modern way in the jargon, but in a way of trying to make some real meaning with amazing singing. "I've heard there was a secret chord that David played." So it's King David, biblical reference. Music, "The minor falls, the major lifts, the baffled king," et cetera. And then, there's two stories, great stories of love that Jonathan Sacks talks about. In the Bible, the Sampson-Delilah, tell me your secret strengths. And then, he wakes up the next morning and cut your hair. And David looking at Bathsheba dancing. "Your faith was strong, but you needed proof." So you were like me. You were Job, you doubted. "You saw her bathing on the roof." The beauty in the moonlight overthrew her, Bathsheba. And then Delilah, "She tied you to a kitchen chair. She broke your throne and she cut your hair. And from your lips she drew the hallelujah." Took your strength and your power. Totally different sense of love or infatuation or romantic love. "Well, maybe there's a God above," I don't know. This is Job, the doubter, the questioner, the thinker, the poet or the artist coming in in Leonard Cohen. He believes and he's centred in Jewish identity, but it doesn't ever exclude. In fact, it must include Doubting Job. "Now, maybe there's a God above. As for me, all I've ever learned from love is how to shoot somebody who outdrew you." Incredible line. He has the ability to create a feeling and then just punch in the guts. "Well, I've seen your flag on the marble arch. But listen, love is not some kind of victory march." And that phrase has resonated with so many people that I know, just that phrase. Is it? Is love a victory march or not? And then, it goes on in different ways. So it's that combination again and he ends up with the song, with the lines that I want to thank Sandra for emailing me earlier today and reminding me the power. "Now, I've done my best. I know it wasn't much. I couldn't feel so I tried to touch. I've told the truth. I didn't come here just to fool you. And even though it all went wrong, I'll stand right here before the lord of song, with nothing on my tongue but hallelujah." Amazing lines for the end of a life, but for the end of the song, which is written much earlier in his life. Such a remarkable understanding. It's rooted in Jewishness. It's rooted in biblical, in scriptures tradition, the cadences, the music, the cantor singing in "You Want It Darker", "Hineni." But it's also about love. It's about personal experience. It's about mythology. And put it all together, and if it's not a mishmash, it's poetry's ability to rise above. And like Homer in "The Odyssey" again, "Sing O muse, sing my story." It's through stories we live, through stories we remember. Memory comes alive. Imagination is mobilised. Through stories, we have human interaction, society, community. It's through stories we began to create something vaguely human, which wasn't just to slaughter each other, drop of a hat. We tried to understand through naming, through language, through words, through what Harari calls collective fictions, but it's through stories. Ultimately, the poet's job, capture the story in the most brilliantly economic way with language. In his case, music, singing, and so on. Okay, I want to end with the

letter that he wrote to Marianne, as we all know, when they were both basically dying. "Well, Marianne, it's come to this time when we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart, and I think I'll follow you pretty soon. Know that I'm so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine. And you know I always loved you for your beauty and your wisdom. But now, I just want to wish you a very good journey. Goodbye, old friend, endless love. See you down the road." How many of us can say that at any stage of our lives, put aside revenge, bitterness, anger, despair, whatever, "Okay, I won some, I lost some"? Not to be an , a magnanimous sort of Buddhist sitting on the top of a mountain. Everything's fine. Yeah, not at all. Gone through hell, gone through the thorns of life, the joys and sorrows, the highs and lows, the terrors, but there's a crack where the light gets in. It's again, the paradox, the contradiction for me in Leonard Cohen, which is ultimately something very Jewish. And it's rooted in that outsider, not insider dilemma, assimilation or belonging debate. It's rooted in something I think profoundly Jewish. And at the end maybe it's, "Okay, I wish you a good journey. Goodbye, old friend, endless love. See you down the road," or not . So I wanted to hold on this here, because there's obviously so much with Leonard Cohen, but to try and tease out some of the main ideas that come through his poetry, his songs, and his life. Thank you.

– [Judi] Thank you, David. Do you have time to take some of the Q and A?

– Yeah, sure, thanks, Judy.

## Q & A and Comments

Ralph, "You're making my day listening to his songs. Keeping a copy of his poem next to me." That's amazing, Ralph. Thank you so much and enjoy. This is from 8509.

Q: "How can we relate Cohen to Lithuania as a child of Lithuania? As a Jew, he would've been murdered by his fellow Lithuanians. The Jews were Jews, not Lithuanians. The present government continues to deny the Holocaust and honour the murderers without pretext of the anti-Russian..."

A: Yes, I mean, you're absolutely right and that history is terrifying and absolutely riddled with extreme cruelty. I agree entirely. I think the connection is, obviously, others far more knowledgeable than me are looking at Jewish history and the history of the Baltic states. All I would say is that if we accept that Leonard Cohen is part of, is a kind of writer who is invested in his Jewish and historical tradition, what is emerging from that, that feeds into him consciously or unconsciously today that can perhaps resonate with us who come from grandfathers, great-grandfathers, grandmothers from Lithuania, Latvia,

wherever? That perhaps there's something that can resonate the minute we look at the story of our own tradition and the broader Jewish story.

Estelle, "I have been a fan for a very long time. Went to the concerts." Whoa, one second. Yeah. "Went to the concerts at Albert Hall. Saw him on his 80th birthday in the tour at Wembley. Waited to speak to him. He was very generous with his time, kind to his fans. Even invited a young person who said he was doing a thesis on his poetry to visit." Yeah, I think it does come through. I do feel that sense of humanity is going side-by-side in him, and he's trying to connect that I think with his Jewish roots and in that way.

Mariana. "My lucky day, too. Live in Canada. Very religious grandparents. Best to all , Mariana." Thank you so much, Mariana. Marcia.

Sorry, just one second here. Let me get it up again. Marcia. Okay, "Been reading a wonderful, interesting book about Leonard Cohen, his songs, "The Mystical Roots of Genius" by Gary Friedman." Thanks very much. Great book if anybody wants to have a look. "The Mystical Roots of Genius". Gary Friedman's book on Leonard Cohen. "Is what is popular in the West today," yep.

And then, Sarah. "Belonging, not exceptionalism." Yeah, Sarah, I thought about this very hard as a framing thought for today's talk. The distinction between belonging and exceptionalism. And I think that's for me the essence of where the assimilationist debate can go forward. I think it's stuck a bit in this binary superior, inferior, the binary of marginal outsider, belonging to the insider culture. It's been going on for thousands of years, centuries. And it struck me thinking for today, the distinction is actually more fruitful for our times if we think of the myth of exceptionalism and how that is created and perpetrated and propagandised compared to a reality of belonging. And I think there is a subtle but important distinction philosophically and culturally between those two ideas. Where do I feel I belong? What do I feel I belong to? And what do I feel is exceptionalist? And of course, it's a grey area and they overlap, and this is not a pure philosophical, trying to be a purist in a philosophical debate, but I think it provokes interesting ideas of the grey areas between the two. I want to, we all want to be exceptionalists, but is it rooted in belonging, or is it more rooted because I want to be exceptionalist? And I think that's the distinction, and I think he's rooted more in wanting to belong. Sarah, thank you. It's a great point to make.

Sandra. "I don't think Leonard's parents were orthodox." Ah, okay. "They were members of the synagogue in Montreal, which was conservative. My grandparents are also members," amazing, "and Leonard is buried near their grave site. Certainly, there was a strong sense

of community, but very different from the orthodox." Thank you for that. I stand corrected, Sandra. Appreciate.

Romain. "The Song of the Hellenes". Yeah, I don't think... And Romaine, thank you for nbringing this up. It's not necessarily his best poem. It's a bit crude in a way, but the idea, and he's writing it young, the idea that he's trying to grapple with, I think that is what echoes through the centuries. Rose. "The song as I listen for the hundredth time, it brings me goosebumps," yep. 8509, "Marital status and history." Big, thank you.

Clara, thank you, kind comments. Brenda. "Leonard Cohen has the good fortune to have been born into the Montreal Jewish community, which at the time was big and largely Ashkenazi, culturally rich, immersed in Jewish tradition, proud, unafraid to be Jewish. The overt anti-Semitism of both the anglophone and French communities influenced the cohesiveness of Montreal's Jewish community. This turned out to be a blessing for Leonard Cohen and all of us have benefited from his contribution to poetry in music." Beautifully put and thank you for that. That's really helpful, Brenda.

Louise. "Both Dylan and Cohen were searching for significant periods of time for community, identity, and a spiritual belief outside of, and sometimes, alongside Jewish identity." Absolutely. I think Dylan, Louise, is more of the restless searcher. In is Nobel Prize speech, he speaks about three books primarily. "All Quiet on the Western Front". Most importantly, "Moby Dick" and Homer's "Odyssey" as having the biggest influence on him as a young guy. And it's Homer's "Odyssey" and the "Moby Dick" are books about searching, some in different ways, obviously, but totally searching for something. And I think that's Dylan. He's searching endlessly, and that's that magnificent restless spirit. Leonard Cohen is searching, but I think he's much more rooted in that belonging I was talking about earlier in Jewish tradition, Jewish history, and the cadences of Jewish music, song, literature, scriptures.

Stephen. Andrea writes, Andrea Nigel writes, "Leonard Cohen himself has said that the song is about the musicians who were forced to play music," yes. Exactly, in the gas chambers, absolutely. "Profoundly sad and not as many people imagined a song to be played at weddings." I understand that and I get that completely. It's absolutely, it's the references, the Holocaust, the gas chambers, and the absolute horror of the woman and the people who had to play in the so-called orchestra for Mengele and others in the camps. But at the same time, what is Leonard Cohen doing with it? He's doing that and he's counterpointing it with love and relationships and weddings. And that's what I'm trying to say all the time. He doesn't just give us one thing or the other. He always gives us the paradox, the contradiction, the questioning. And that's what makes him profoundly Jewish in what... You know, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls him Job at the end, that he does

have a quality of the doubting, questioning spirit. But of course, it's absolutely linked to the Jews who were forced to play the violin and other instruments as others were being lead to the gas chamber.

Romain, "Humanity," yeah, thank you. "Crack where the light gets in," thank you. Renee. "The crack refers to basic Hasidic philosophy of how God enters the world, "yep. If we had more time, we would do that, Renee, absolutely. Jonathan. "Apparently, he was pre bar mitzvah when his father died." Yeah, he was nine years old. "On the day of the funeral, he took a tie from his father's drawer and cut it and wore it to the funeral, demonstrating his incredible sensitivity." That's amazing information. Jonathan, thank you so much, fascinating. Carol. "I love that he was a proud Jew and identified with Israel." Absolutely, and I think that does make a very important difference. Bob Dylan, who is brilliant and love him completely, is more of like a proud artist in a way, totally. And I think with Leonard Cohen, it's proud Jewishness, the belonging we were talking about earlier. And pride does not mean purity. The myth of exceptionalism, it's pride.

Tonya, "Please repeat the name of the work of the Greek conquest of Judea." Okay, thank you. Tanya, it was the Greeks who called themselves the Hellenes at the time and, well, the Seleucids really. It was part of the Greek empire I think about 150, 180 years after Alexander the Great, 'cause he was around 330, 340 BCE if I remember. And then, 160 is the Maccabean Revolt, and this is, the Seleucid Greeks have conquered and are implementing their banning of the practise of Judaism and other things in that area. And it's the revolt of the Maccabeans, et cetera. So it's essentially a story of the Greek empire of the times. And we know the stories of Greek and Roman and so many other empires conquer. And then, what do the conquered peoples do? How far do the conquerors push the conquered? And what do they do for pushback if they do? Joel, thank you. Raul, thanks very much.

Q: "Can you begin to compare Dylan?"

A: It'll always be Leonard for me . Raul, Ruth, sorry. Ruth, let's have that debate between Dylan and Leonard. The fascinating debate which I love, and I have it endlessly with my friend I mentioned lives in Australia Jeff, surname is Cohen.

Susan, "Total humanity," yep. "You find a deeper meaning." That is part of what he's doing and part of the poets job. Absolutely, Susan. The more you read it again and again, you find more and more meanings. At the end of Hamlet, Hamlet's Last line is, "Readiness is all." It's extraordinary, coming of age story. Young guy finally gets it together. 21, university student, kills his bad uncle, confronts his mommy who jumped into bed with his uncle. And you find (indistinct) meaning. What is Hamlet in? Readiness is all. When we are ready, we find these deeper meanings in our own lives and in the poetry.

Monty, "Please read the poem of Yehuda Amichai. Give us analysis of a different kind of Jewish poet." Fantastic. "Israeli soldiers went to war with a copy of his poems in their kit." Great. Thanks, Monty, that's really important.

Jerry, thank you, giving kind comments. Monica. "To me, there's something so dark about Leonard, and he's so sensual. He seems to always be sending a message, and his past is a huge influence." It's that past of that tradition, and I think he brings that with him, absolutely. And he's trying to grapple with it in himself, that religious, that traditional, that Jewish tradition, and his personal life story. And it is something dark, but I do think he does have a crack with it. Like it's in always. I don't think it's only, for me, dark.

Q: Tonya, "Please repeat the name of the work. Okay, we mentioned that.

A: Phyllis, "Hallelujah", yeah. That song, I think it's over 200 million hits on YouTube if I remember. More. I mean that's an extraordinary number. It shows you the number of people around the world who love it. And what's fascinating is the number of teenagers and young people in their twenties who love it and listen. It's the power of his poetry.

Rhoda, "The recording was done near his death. The choir is acquired from the synagogue and the cantor from there." Thank you, Rhoda. Marcia, "Hope you're well and have had a good summer." Thank you for your kind comment. Rhonna. "There's a new doc released in Toronto focusing on "Hallelujah" and how long it took him to write." I think it was seven or eight years that he... There's constant discussions with Dylan about it actually. And Dylan raved about that in others.

Grandma. Grandma Lorna. "Poetry sounds good. I'm wondering why I've never heard of him. Is he equally well-known as a singer?" Well, Lorna, it's interesting. The new King Charles here was a Leonard Cohen absolute lover. Almost a great fan I would say. Many people throughout the world, not only people who are Jewish, many people utterly respond to his poetry and music. Judy, thank you. Thank you for your kind comment. Rose, thank you.

Q: Sandra, "Did he write his own music?"

A: Yes, and his lyrics, yes. Dawn, thank you . Caroline, thank you very much. Shirley's all lovely comments. I appreciate.

- [Judi] David, let's take two more, or we'll be on too long.

- Okay, no, "Hallelujah" was written before "Shrek". Katie Lang, okay, thank you so much, everybody there. Okay, let's just go down. These

are very lovely, warm comments. I really appreciate this how this has gone.

The Harry Friedman book, (indistinct) mentioned that and all of there, okay. Tom, thank you. "Grew up in Montreal with my father going to see Leonard Cohen." Yep, it gets so personal, it's amazing. There we are, okay, thank all the lovely comments.

"The gorgeous voice singing hineni was Cantor Gideon Zelermyer of the synagogue in Montreal. Grew up in Connecticut." Thanks for that, Gail.

Okay, then the questions go on here. Okay, should we... There's lots of all these comments. Thank you so much and questions. And thank you, everybody everywhere, and hope you have a great Saturday night, the rest of weekend.