

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://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/secret-chord-leonard-cohens-hallelujah>.

Introduction

Leonard Cohen (ז"ל) 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

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



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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.

Suggested Activity: After listening to the entire song as a class, focus on this excerpt. What story does Cohen tell in this song? What is Cohen's archetype of a woman?

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.

Suggested Activity: In the song, the narrator speaks of seeing a beautiful woman bathing on a roof. What are the connections between Leonard Cohen's song and the Biblical text? Does reading the story affect your response to the song? Explain.

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" first appears in Psalm 150 as part of a series praising God's glory.

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?

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 Daniel Kahn, Jeff Buckley, and Pentatonix

The song "Hallelujah" has been covered so many times, some people forget that it was originally written by Leonard Cohen.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the excerpts as a class. In essay format, compare each singer's tone and interpretation. Is it loving? Angry? Forgiving? Sad? Does translating the song into Yiddish change its tone? Support your response.

Sources: Buckley, Jeff. *Grace*. Columbia Records. 1994; Kahn, Daniel. "Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' - in Yiddish" YouTube video, 4:42. Posted November 9, 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH1fERC_504; Pentatonix. "A Pentatonix Christmas." RCA Records, 2016.

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

This scene from the very popular White House drama television series depicts the murder of a police officer who is trying to stop a crime from being committed.

Suggested Activity: Do you think "Hallelujah" is an appropriate soundtrack for the scene? Explain your answer.

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