



SIEBENQUELL

For my friend, Joachim

Hineni, hineni



SOURCE: SCHWABENVERLAG

At the end of the liturgical year, I find myself with a heavy heart. It was a year of great personal loss for me with the death of my beloved friend Joachim. It is a loss that has battered my heart and bruised my spirit and left me aching with longing next to a gaping emptiness. I miss him sorely beyond the words that I can muster.

Earlier this month, my countryman Leonard Cohen died. Revered in my homeland for his words, his songs and his inimitable smoky voice, I personally revered him as a man who seriously and intensely wrestled with the biblical stories of the First Testament and, therefore, with God.

In his last album he published a song called »Hineni, hineni«. The Hebrew word simply means, »Here I am.« It is used by Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel. Yet, its most famous speaker was Abraham. He speaks it three times in Genesis 22, the story in which he struggles to sacrifice his son Isaac.

In Genesis 22,1 he answers God's call with »hineni«. In verse 7 he answers the call of Isaac, wanting to know where the animal is for the sacrifice, with the word »hineni«. And when the angel calls out his name to stop his hand, he replies »hineni«.

Leonard Cohen mirrors the structure of that narrative in the structure of his song. In three refrains he calls out, »hineni, hineni«. In one verse of the song, Leonard Cohen literally reveals his great, yearning heart, wrestling with God and his story.

»There's a lover in the story.«

Here he refers to Abraham, to whom God says, "Take now your son, your only one, whom you love..." It is the first time the word love appears in the Hebrew Bible.

»But the story's still the same«

Here Cohen points out that God writes love stories, and yet there is sacrifice, and killing and death.

»There's a lullaby for suffering«

Deeply rooted in his Jewish tradition, Cohen knew that many songs of the Bible are songs of lamentation. Where there are lovers in the story, their also mourners.

»And a paradox to blame«

The God who created such a world of beauty and grandeur, also created the people whom we so love on the one hand, and the people who are so brutal, callous and deadly on the other. Yet, Cohen is not alone with this paradox. Abraham wrestles with it on that mountain. In one midrash (a Jewish story of interpretation) Abraham calls out to God, »What is it to be? First you tell me to sacrifice him, then you tell me to stop.« This is the true and abiding greatness of heart in Abraham and Leonard Cohen and every living, breathing human being who wrestles with the mystery and Word of God. You stay for the struggle. You don't just shrug your shoulders and slouch off to other, easier pastimes. You wrestle with your emotions and anger, your grief and your rage, your despondency and fear *with* God and never let him go until you have squeezed a little more light, a little more meaning from life.

Leonard Cohen once wrote, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. He takes the image from a teaching of the Kabbalah. There the story is told, that the light of God was originally contained in ten vessels, but they could not hold it and were eventually cracked and shattered. So, the story tells us, everything in the world also has a crack in it, but this is how God's light flows into the world.

I write these words with tears in my eyes. There was a crack in everything this year, including my heart and hearts of so many of my beloved people. And I miss my friend Joachim so painfully. I write and dedicate these words to him, because he knew so many of those cracks and still could praise the Lord of Song. While most people only know the first verses of Leonard Cohen's most famous song »Hallelujah«, Joachim taught me to love and live the last two.

You say I took the Name in vain
I don't even know the Name
But if I did, well really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah

I did my best, but it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch

I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.

And even though it all went wrong, I, too will stand with Joachim and Leonard before the Lord of Song, with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah. I wish us all a good start into Advent and a new liturgical year. As our Jewish brothers and sisters say at the start of a new year, »Leshana tovah tikatev v'tichatem«: May you be written and sealed in the book of life for a good year.

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