

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Replay: Why Leonard Cohen Ran Toward War

My brother-in-law died suddenly and now my sister and her kids have to sell their home. That's why I told my husband we could not put off getting life insurance any longer.

An agent offered us a 10-year \$500,000 policy for nearly \$50 a month.

Then we called SelectQuote. SelectQuote found us identical coverage for only \$19 a month, a savings of \$369 a year.

Whether you need a \$500,000 policy or a \$5 million policy, SelectQuote could save you more than 50% on term life insurance.

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SelectQuote, we shop, you save. Full details on example policies at SelectQuote.com slash commercials.

I'm Barry Weiss and this is Honestly. In a little over a week, Jews around the world will celebrate Yom Kippur, otherwise known as the Day of Atonement. We pray, confess our sins, we don't eat for 25 hours. It's a spiritual cleansing of sorts and it's the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. But this year's Yom Kippur also marks the 50th anniversary of the bloodiest war in Israel's history. 50 years ago, on the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, Israel was surprised attacked by Egypt in the south and Syria in the north.

A lot has been written about that horrific 19-day war that the Jewish state very nearly lost, but none quite as surprising and meaningful as a book by the award-winning author and journalist Mati Friedman last year. The book is called Who by Fire? Leonard Cohen in the Sinai.

Mati joined me on Honestly last year to share this unusual story and I'm thrilled to replay it for you today.

Mati's book tells the previously untold story about the unlikely meeting between the musician Leonard Cohen and the young Israeli soldiers fighting an existential war in the desert, many of whom had just witnessed their friends die and some of whom would die in the days ahead. When Leonard Cohen set off for Israel in 1973, he was a musician that said he was done with music for good. But after those days in the desert, he would go on to write some of his masterpieces, including Who by Fire and Hallelujah. What was it that happened in the desert during October 1973 between this Canadian Jewish musician and those Israeli soldiers?

How did it transform Leonard Cohen? And how did it transform the men and women who heard him play?

What did it mean for him to just show up? And how did the war remake Israel entirely?

Those are just some of the questions that Mati

tackles with me in this conversation. I have to say it's one of the best episodes we've ever done on this show, full stop. And in part it's because of the story it tells about the war, but also because of Leonard Cohen's music, which I've always loved but never really had understood the context for. And by putting it in this historical context, it allowed me to rehear it or hear it actually again for the very first time.

Leonard Cohen once called Israel his myth home. And I think for a lot of people, both lovers and haters, Israel's exactly that. It's a myth. It's a symbol. It's a projection. But Mati Friedman's work shatters that idea. If there is a theme to his books and to his essays, it's that Israel is not a litmus test or a symbol. It's a real place, a place where sometimes people run to bomb shelters in the middle of the afternoon at the beach, where sometimes a terrorist tries to kill someone on the bus home from work. The roots of that reality of a country used to living on the brink were arguably born in 1973, 50 years ago on Yom Kippur in the story that we're replaying for

you today. We'll be right back. If my dogs could order what they want for dinner, they would choose pillows and my sneakers 10 times out of 10. But their second choice, I'm sure, would be food from the farmer's dog. The farmer's dog is fresh, healthy food with wholemeat and vegetables cooked in human-grade kitchens to preserve its nutritional value. Say goodbye to those dry stale pellets. It's 2023. If your dog isn't on a custom meal plan, you're doing it wrong.

The farmer's dog recipes are developed by vets and personalized to your pet.

Provide your dog's details and for as little as \$2 a day, they'll receive customized meals delivered right to your doorstep. Meals arrived in pre-portioned, ready-to-serve packs and they're delivered on your schedule. Now for the fun part. My listeners get 50% off their first box of fresh, healthy food at [thefarmersdog.com](https://thefarmersdog.com) slash berry. Plus, you get free shipping. Just go to [thefarmersdog.com](https://thefarmersdog.com)

slash berry to get 50% off your first box and free shipping.

Mati Friedman, welcome to Honestly. Thanks so much for having me.

Congratulations on this new book of yours, *Who by Fire*, which I'm so excited to talk to you about in person here in LA. So I want to set the scene of 1973 a little bit. So take us back to that year, both in terms of Leonard Cohen's life in his career and also in terms of Israel as a country. So let's start with Leonard Cohen. Who was Leonard Cohen in the fall of 1973?

Cohen is a really unique figure in the folk-rock scene of the late 60s and he begins as a poet in Montreal as kind of a small-time Canadian poet and then becomes a musician and he's part of the village scene with Nico and John Baez.

The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind.

Judy Collins. He's a kind of guy puts on a motorcycle jacket and he weighs about 105.

Until in.

But he's never quite, he's part of the scene, but he's never quite of the scene. He's always seen as a bit different than all of the other stars of that of that time and he's a bit older than everyone else. Everyone's wearing jeans. Leonard Cohen wears a suit. People change their names to things like Bob Dylan from Robert Zimmerman, of course, but Leonard Cohen never changes his name. He stays Leonard Cohen, so he's kind of stubbornly pursuing a different path and he's a unique figure and he has major hits. Like Suzanne.

And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China.

And so long, Marianne.

Before I let you take me home.

Now so long, Marianne.

It's time we began.

Bird on the Wire.

Like a bird on the wire.

Like a drunken egg midnight choir.

I have tried in my way to be free.

And he has a lot of success. He plays at the Isle of Wight Festival, which is a year after Woodstock and it's much bigger than Woodstock. It's a half million people, so he's a major, he's a major star.

But by 73, he really feels like he's hit a wall. He felt trapped. He felt trapped in his personal life.

He was pursued by depression for much of his life and he was in a dark period at the time.

He announced that he's retiring from the music business, that he had nothing left to say,

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that he couldn't find the words anymore. He tells one interviewer that year that he just wants to shut up and that's published in the music press in the U.S. and Europe.

So it's known that Leonard Cohen has announced that he's retiring. So he's in a rut and he's 39. So it would make sense that he hit a wall. I mean, most rock stars don't make it to 39, let alone pass 39. So it wouldn't have surprised anyone if Leonard Cohen had just kind of flared out in 1973. But that's not what happens.

So let's go to Israel in 1973. You know, most people today think of Israel, it's the start-up nation, high-tech capital on the Mediterranean, unbelievable success story, both in terms of technology, militarily, economic powerhouse. That is not the Israel of 1973. What was the country like back then and what was the mood of Israel? So Israel is a pretty strange place in the early 70s. It's a really small place. It's barely 3 million people. Today, it's about 9 million people. It had existed for barely 20 years. And the people who lived there were largely refugees, people who had been torn from other places. A lot of people were kind of screaming in their sleep as they dreamed about things they didn't want to remember during the day. People who'd been torn from their homes in Eastern Europe and a greater number of people who'd been torn from their homes

across the Islamic world. So it's a kind of a very energetic refugee camp.

That was going to say a country of orphans. Yes, it's a country of orphans on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. And in the middle of the country is Tel Aviv, where there are the first glimmerings of a Bohemian scene. So the culture in Israel at that time is very much the culture of official kind of Zionist ideology. The government dictates what music is on the radio. The Beatles try to come to Israel in the 60s and the government will not let them come because they're afraid that the Beatles would corrupt the youth. So the country that Cohen comes to is a backwater. It's not a country like today where you can find nice hotels and have a vacation. It's a pretty rough and traumatized place that's only beginning to develop its own culture.

So Israel at that point, it's just coming into being. But the things that it is defined by, I would say, are wars. And the last war that Israel had fought prior to 1973 is the Six-Day War of 1967, which is this ultimate David-Beating-Goliath story. What was the Yom Kippur War six years later?

So I think many Israelis would say that the Yom Kippur War of 1973 is a kind of penance for the way Israelis misunderstood the victory of 1967. In 1967, you have this incredible victory on three fronts. The Israeli army, despite being outnumbered, defeats the Syrians in the north and the Jordanians in the center of Israel and the Egyptians in the south. Israel increases the territory under its control by vast amounts and many people get swept away by the euphoria of the victory and they forget the limits of force. And they think that maybe Israel's problems in the Middle East have been solved. And there are a few years that Israelis refer to as the euphoria after 1967. And what 1973 is, is an incredible slap in the face that brings Israel back to a realization that many problems remain and that the limits of force are very, very real. But the trauma of the 1973 war, which persists in many ways to this day, comes from its position immediately

after the euphoria of 1967. So you have this euphoric moment followed by an absolute catastrophe. And that is really the heart of the trauma as it's remembered to this day in Israel.

So basically, in the 1967 war, Israel gets this territory from Syria. It gets the Golan Heights in the north. From Egypt, it gets the Sinai Peninsula. And from Jordan, it gets the West Bank.

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Do I have that right, basically? Right.

So is the point of the 1973 war, at least from the perspective of Syria in Egypt, to regain that territory? At the very least, it's to regain that territory.

Some Israelis interpret the war as an attempt to annihilate the state of Israel.

What it really is, I think, is an attempt to restore Arab honor after a great humiliation.

And there's a great humiliation in 1967. Previous to that, there'd been a great humiliation in 1948.

The Jews are a small minority. They're not supposed to be defeating Arab armies, and they do repeatedly. And it's hard to swallow. And I think the Arab world needs to restore its honor with a military victory. Even if it's a limited military victory, I don't think they were actually out to annihilate the state or didn't believe. I don't think that they believed that that was possible. But they wanted to restore a sense of dignity to their army and inflict some kind of defeat on Israel. And they do it by launching this surprise attack on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, which is Yom Kippur. Right.

Mati, describe for us the first few hours of the war and the sort of confusion and panic that you described so powerfully in the book that ensued, because it doesn't seem to me like the Israeli military had any sense that this war was coming and certainly not coming on that day. Because of the arrogance and confusion, after 1967, many Israelis believe that there would be no war

in the near future, that the victory in 1967 had been so conclusive that we had nothing to worry about in the near future. And people were really not thinking about the possibility of an attack. And on Yom Kippur in Israel, even people who aren't religious for most of the year, on that particular day, they tend to fast and go to synagogue. So it really is a day that you feel in Israel. There's no cars on the road. There are no flights. The whole country shuts down. There's no TV broadcast. There's no radio. It's really kind of, the country goes quiet for that day. And people are largely in synagogue contemplating their fate and looking forward to the coming year as we are required to do on Yom Kippur. And at 2 p.m., sirens go off across the country while people are in synagogue. And if you're Israeli, you know the sound of the siren because it's something, unfortunately, we still experience. Fair bit. It's this wine that starts very low and then raises in an octave after over a few seconds. So it goes, you know, it kind of clenches your stomach and it gives you a moment as the pitch of the siren rises. You have a moment to understand that something very bad is happening and to kind of wonder what it

means for you. And that happens at 2 p.m. Everyone's in synagogue and men of military age start disappearing from the synagogues as call-up orders are read over the radio, which comes back to life.

People are being told to join their units and it becomes clear that something very bad has happened and what has happened is that the army, which was completely unprepared, has been caught

off guard on two fronts, the Syrian front on the Golan Heights in the north and the Sinai front to the south where the Egyptians managed to cross the Suez Canal and kind of destroy all of the Israeli defenders who were supposed to be able to hold off an attack and fail to do so. So the first couple days of the war are very bad for Israel. So when the siren goes off, do people have a sense that it's going to be a major war? Initially, some people think that it's just going to be a raid or a day of fighting, but very quickly it becomes clear that this is something

big and it's so bad in the first couple days. The casualties are so high that the government hides it from the people. So it takes a while before the public really realizes that it's a major crisis and that the army actually might lose. That doesn't cross people's mind initially, but when it becomes clear that the air force, for example, is being shredded on both fronts by these new Soviet missiles that had been given to the Arab armies, it becomes very possible that Israel is not going to win the war. In the book, you tell a story that I had never heard about the first casualties in the first hours of the war, this incident of friendly fire.

Can you describe what happened? So there's a radar base which is near a place called Sharm al-Sheikh at the very tip of Sinai and it's described by people who serve there as a kind of laid-back kind of thing. I was going to say the word stoner comes to mind when I hear Sharm al-Sheikh.

Right, it's a base for stoners basically and they fish in the Red Sea and fry the fish and smoke and play guitars and nothing really happens there and people want to be posted there just because it's fun. And let's be clear, there's mandatory conscription then and now. That's right, Israelis serve in the military after high school, so there are men posted to Sharm al-Sheikh, there are women down there and everyone who served there before the 1973 war describes it as being

pretty awesome and you see their pictures and as I read in the book, it looks kind of like Charlie's Angels but shot in the landscape of the book of Exodus. It's this weird kind of 70s biblical epic look and everyone looks really, really happy. So there's a radar station next to Sharm al-Sheikh that's staffed in large part by 18 and 19 year old women who run the radar screens and at the opening of the war, that station is hit by two Egyptian missiles. Some of the people at the station are killed and other soldiers in the vicinity believe that the station has been conquered by Egyptian troops so they send tanks to recapture the station. The tanks go up to this radar station, open fire, killing more of the defenders of the radar station until it turns out that the position had not been captured by Egyptians and that Israelis were fighting other Israelis and this is a very traumatic experience for the people who were there. This is really one of the first incidents of the Yom Kippur war and I met a few of the soldiers who were there that day. It takes them about 30 years to talk about what had happened but that's the way the war started. It was clear this was not going to be some great victory, it wasn't going to be 1967, this was a different kind of war and it was not going to go very well, certainly not initially.

And what do we know about how all of this hit Leonard Cohen?

So in the fall of 1973 Leonard Cohen is living on the island of Hydra, kind of a, you know, idyllic setting and sunshine and on the same day of that attack on the radar station, he's listening to the radio and he hears a report about this war and he does something quite unexpected and I think he even surprised himself which is that he gets on a ferry from the island to Athens and then he boards a flight from Athens to Tel Aviv and he inserts himself into this Middle Eastern catastrophe that we would later call the Yom Kippur war and I'm not entirely sure he knew at the time why he was doing it but there are two parallel reasons I think and I get into them in the book. One is a desire to be in Israel and the other is a desire to escape his own life, his own crisis by running away to another crisis. So he's trying to get out, he's trying to get off the island. An island can be a place where you vacation but an island is also a place where you're stranded and I think he felt stranded and he needed to get out. The second part of it is that he felt deeply connected to Israel and to Jews and he understood in some

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visceral kind of internal way that if the Jewish people was in danger, he needed to be there and he went. Now how do we know what Leonard Cohen was thinking or what was going on with him at the time? It's thanks to this manuscript, this very strange unfiltered Leonard Cohen manuscript that I managed to find hiding in a box in a university library in Hamilton, Ontario of all places. One of the weird things about this story when you realize how important the war was to Cohen and how deep he went into the war and how big the impact was on him and how

great an impact he made on the people who heard him. One of the strangest things is that he almost never mentions it afterward. So it was very hard to find out what he saw or how he experienced it or when he decided to go and then I found this manuscript which tells the story immediately after it happens. He's back from the war, he's on the island and he obviously sits down with his typewriter and cranks out this 45-page manuscript that's completely raw, unedited and eventually unpublished. He shelves it and sticks it in a drawer. So the manuscript doesn't say exactly on what date he hears the radio broadcast and why he decided to go but it's pretty clear from the manuscript which seems largely to be factual if not completely factual. He hears the radio broadcast, he goes down from this little white house where he lives on Hydra, he walks down the stairs to the port and he gets on a ferry that's headed for Athens and he recounts the conversations he has with people on the boat including a Greek landowner who's very impressed that this guy is going off to war, he's going off to join his people at war in Israel and he gets to Athens, gets on a plane, it's hard to get seats on the planes to Israel because so many Israeli men are trying to get back to join their units. Somehow Leonard Cohen gets on a plane and inserts himself into this you know completely crazy situation in Israel. And what did he plan on doing when he got to Israel? Was he going to play music? Looking at the events is pretty clear that he did not intend to sing for soldiers because he doesn't take his guitar and of course he had just announced that he was retiring from music so I don't think he went to Israel as Leonard Cohen the rock star. He went as Leonard Cohen the Jew. I think he went as a pilgrim, he was going there as an individual who just needed to be there because something was going on and he told people who he met that he wanted to volunteer on a kibbutz on a communal farm like to replace the men who had been called out to the front right which which many American volunteers had done in 1967 that makes sense I think that that's pretty pretty credible explanation but he never gets to the kibbutz because he's sitting in a cafe in Tel Aviv when he's recognized by a group of Israeli musicians who happen to be in the cafe they're sitting at another table and one of them you know looks over and says I think that's Leonard Cohen and the other musician says no way that's there's no way that's Leonard Cohen and to prove you know the second musician wrong this one singer walks over to the table and says are you Leonard Cohen and when the answer turns out to be yes they basically force him to come with

them to play for troops they say we're about to head down to the front which in Israel you know it's hard for Americans to understand but going off to play at the front doesn't mean you get on a military airplane and fly a thousand miles away to you know Iraq or Vietnam going to the front in Israel means you get in your car and you drive for an hour to the front and that's what they were planning to do so they pile Cohen into into a Ford Falcon and they set off to find the war after the break Leonard Cohen's very strange and very extraordinary music tour on the warfront we'll be right back

freelance work is booming with so many people taking the leap and starting their own businesses

or deciding to work part-time but how do you maximize your earnings minimize your taxes and ensure that you're compliant with the law it's overwhelming confusing and let's just say it not fun to figure out the business side of your small business that's why you should talk to the experts at [collective.com](https://collective.com) collective was specifically built for single person businesses making over \$60,000 in profit a year they handle all your back office work so you can focus on what matters collective is the all-in-one financial solution for businesses of one they handle all of your taxes your bookkeeping your accounting even your payroll plus if you're already in LLC collective can retroactively elect your s-corps status back to July 1st which could save you thousands on your 2023 taxes collective members save an average of \$10,000 with this structure and it's a hundred percent tax deductible check out [collective.com](https://collective.com) slash berry before October 31st to potentially save thousands of dollars on your 2023 taxes they'll even throw in an extra \$100 off when you use my link but you got to do it before October 31st that's [collective.com](https://collective.com) slash berry to get started with your personal team of self-employed tax experts collective focus on your passion not your paperwork. So Mati let's go back to that Ford Falcon who were these musicians

that run into Leonard Cohen in the cafe? So one of the first things that I did when I was trying to figure out the story was I went to the IDF archive the Israeli military archive and I tried to find a list of concerts or the arm of the army that would have organized concert tours during during the war no such thing exists there's no list of anything I spoke to one of the musicians who was with Cohen a pretty famous Israeli singer named Oshik Levy and when I asked him who organized

it when I said the word organized he cracked up because nothing nothing was organized it was completely ad hoc and anyone who knows Israel understands that that's the way it works no one was in charge and the artists were just kind of going around the front accompanied by these very young officers who were in charge of taking artists to units in the field no one was keeping track of them which is probably why Leonard Cohen could cross the Suez Canal at the very tip of the front in Sinai a day or two behind the Israeli army so Cohen is really at the very edge of the front I think people might imagine that this was a kind of Bob Hope situation where he's playing at a base in the rear and things are safe or that famous scene from apocalypse now with the Playboy bunnies and it wasn't like that at all it was a jeep in the desert driving along stopping when you know when they would see a few artillery pieces parked in the sand they'd get out of the jeep and they'd say hey do you guys want to hear some music and if the soldier had said yes then they would make a stage out of ammunition crates and they would use the jeep headlights as spotlights

and often they didn't have an amp and they would just stand on the ammo crates and play Suzanne I mean I'm looking right now at the picture on the cover of your book and it's literally people soldiers sitting in the sand just gathered around and Leonard Cohen with an open shirt playing a guitar bent on one knee is this representative of what the shows look like yes and I think that photograph is of a concert that was relatively organized

the the descriptions are quite incredible it was very very raw and that's one amazing thing about this tour no one's selling records no one's selling tickets no money is changing hands everyone's sober so it's not a night out and you can see in the photographs that the audience is very intent and Cohen seems uplifted and it's more than an ordinary gig what was the music that the other Israeli performers were there to play and how did it sound different or not from Leonard

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Cohen's music are the people who knew about the Cohen tour joke that they sent Leonard Cohen off the sun eye to depress the troops the Israeli pop charts at the time were dominated by this very kind of upbeat on message Zionist music heavy on the accordion songs about making the desert bloom

so  
and Zionist agriculture and you know glorious battles and things like that  
so  
one famous song is called ammunition hill and it's about a famous battle in 1967  
so into that sound steps Leonard Cohen  
what was he playing when he was sort of driving around in this jeep  
finding some troops who might want to hear his music so what he was playing as far as we can tell and i guess i should say that none of these concerts were filmed there are a few fragments of audio that i managed to find but they're very very rare so it's not like we have a concert that we can sit down and watch but it's pretty clear that he played his hits because there were certain songs that people knew  
and when you listen to the lyrics of susanne  
it's really hard to imagine lyrics that were farther from the reality of the sonic desert in 1973  
but that's why you want to be there and she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from china here are these guys in like dirty uniforms who'd they who just seen you know their friends killed and who had had to do terrible things themselves and the desert is full of charred tanks like blackened tanks and these figures and burned coveralls lying in the sand and  
and here's cohen singing about tea and oranges that come all the way from china and a beautiful woman at the port of montreal  
all with her and you want to travel blind and you know that she will trust you for you've touched her perfect body with your mind  
it's just so far away and i think that's part of what made it work i think there's a misconception that soldiers want to hear about war so you know if you go off to play for soldiers you're gonna have to play like some martial music that's gonna get the soldiers all riled up for battle but of course soldiers don't buy that bullshit and they also won't buy it if the songs are too distant from their own reality so you can't come in with comic numbers that make fun of the terrible things that they're doing cohen comes in with this very serious music and something about that touch the soldiers having many of them didn't understand english  
i came upon a butcher he was slaughtering a lamb  
and Leonard Cohen did not know hebrew but there's a great line from ts alia who says that poetry when it's good can communicate before it's understood  
tortured lamb  
he said listen to me child  
i am what i am  
and you you are my only son  
there's a kind of non-verbal communication that goes on and Leonard Cohen was a master of that the way he presented himself the way he performed the way he sang his songs it almost didn't matter if he couldn't quite get the lyrics you understood that this guy understood you that he had compassion for you that if you're a person on the edge or maybe going over the edge which is true of many soldiers that Leonard Cohen had also been



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there and he knew something about that right before the umki poor war Leonard Cohen had been playing at mental hospitals in the uk and there are incredible descriptions of those concerts which seem very similar to his concerts in the war he shows up at at these hospitals with his band and there's something about Leonard Cohen and this particular audience that that works and someone once asked Leonard Cohen what he thought was going on and he said you know these people understand something that i

understand and often a regular audience in a you know in a stadium or in an auditorium doesn't necessarily understand how fragile everything is some people think that they haven't yet surrendered and he says people in a mental hospital have already experienced a kind of surrender so they're closer to my truth than the average listener and there's an incredibly strong connection that's formed in those concerts and i think something similar happens in the war concert soldiers aren't mental patients but they're they're appearing into a darkness they're appearing into a darkness they're yes they're standing at the brink and Leonard Cohen

knew the brink i saw some flowers growing up where that lamb fell down was i supposed to praise my lord make some kind of joyful sound he said listen listen to me now i go round and round and you you are my only child

so i spent a couple years trying to find soldiers who'd seen Cohen and Sinai just to try to figure out what had happened to them before the show what had happened to them after the show where these concerts met them in their lives it turned out pretty early in my work on this book that it couldn't be just a story about the concert tour that wasn't enough it had to be a story about the war and the concert tour and where those two things coincided so the you know the book is as much about the soldiers as it is about Cohen and many of the people who who saw Cohen never forgot it and it became one of the most powerful memories of the Yom Kippur war which is so strange

because it's not a battle it's not you know it had no impact on the final outcome of the war it's not really a war story but for many Israelis the fact that Leonard Cohen was at the front that's become one of the most most known most powerful stories about the Yom Kippur war and anyone who saw Cohen and Sinai never forgot it why any meeting of art and war is is hallucinatory but it's much more weird when it's an artist who's not even from Israel so i think the soldiers kind of knew that when you're in war artists come and most of the greatest singers and performers in

Israel came to Sinai to play for troops but Leonard Cohen wasn't from Israel he was from the great world beyond Israel he was an international star and the dissonance of that guy in the desert in Sinai was so striking that i think that that's one reason that people never forgot it you know beyond the quality of his music and beyond you know the love that Israelis have for Leonard Cohen i think it was just so weird there's a line that you recount from Cohen's unpublished manuscript

where he says i said to myself perhaps i can protect some people with this song what do you think he meant by that you can also look at a line in in the song lover lover lover where he he says may this song be a shield for you against the enemy so he says it in his manuscript he also actually puts it into music that he has this idea that his songs can somehow protect the people he's is performing for and i'm not exactly sure what to make of that whether he really

believed

that if people heard this song it would it would protect him but i think it comes from his desire to help you know he's facing an audience you know let's say he's playing at an air force base as he did at the very beginning of the war and he's looking at an auditorium full of Israeli men and women some of whom will be dead by the end of the week and he knows it and they know it and he plays

for them knowing that this might be the last thing they hear so i imagine that among many other emotions that that would trigger one is an emotion of helplessness like what can i offer these people i'm just a singer with a guitar what can i possibly give them and he has the idea that maybe the song could be a shield maybe he can give them some kind of protection maybe he can give them some kind of blessing that they can take with them as they leave the auditorium get in their fighter jet and you know head out to risk everything amid the anti-aircraft batteries over the Golan so you mentioned the song that the song would be a shield that lyric it comes from the song that cohen started writing in the desert which is called lover lover lover tells about the origins of that song and what that song was about so the very first stop on this very strange concert tour is an air force base called khatzor which is in central israel and that is a base where the crews were flying missions over Sinai and over the Golan and the air force was getting shredded in the first week of the war it was the worst week in the history of the Israeli air force which had a lot of bravado and it had basically won the six-day war in a matter of hours and they were not expecting the first couple days of the omkipur war when losses were really really high and and people were very traumatized by it so cohen chose up at khatzor with this improvised band of israeli musicians and they play a show in the auditorium at the base and it's so successful that not everyone can fit in the auditorium and the officers beg the band to play another show so that more soldiers can get a chance to hear them so and they agree and in the break between those two concerts cohen sits down and writes a new song and one of the amazing things about researching this book was spending time with the notebooks that cohen kept in his pocket cohen always kept a little notebook and in this notebook they had with him in his pocket during the war you see the draft of lover lover lover taking shape in his in his own handwriting and he's at an air force base and he writes he writes this song which is recognizably the same song he polishes it throughout the war and when you understand that it was written for an audience of israelis who are fighting you know a desperate war then the song starts making more sense it's kind of a hard song to to understand

i said father changed my name

the one i'm using now it's covered up with fear and filth and cowardice and shame

and he goes on and on and then there's this verse which is very strange unless you understand when it was written and for whom he says and may the spirit of this song may it rise up pure and free may it be a shield for you a shield against the enemy

may the spirit of this song may it rise up pure and free may it be a shield for you a shield

against the enemy which doesn't sound like a love song it sounds like a different kind of song in fact i think lover lover lover is a war song and once you understand it like that it becomes easier to to understand but maybe the most interesting thing about lover lover is that it has a missing verse and the way i found this out was when i interviewed a soldier who'd met koan in very weird circumstances on the other side of the suez canal at the height of the fighting in 73 this guy was part of a kind of improvised commando force that had been in the thick of the fighting and

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they managed to cross the suez canal in the great counter attack that's really the turning point of the war and he's just kind of wandering around the desert trying to scrounge some fuel for his jeep and he comes back to this camp where he and his friends are sleeping and as he comes back to the camp he hears a voice in his description it's like moose in the desert hearing the voice of god that's what this guy says as he gets closer he sees there's someone sitting on an upside down helmet on the sand and it's Leonard Cohen playing his guitar in the middle of the desert and he can't quite believe that this is happening and Leonard Cohen is playing lover lover lover which is a song that no one knew because it had just been written and this soldier Shlomi said that the verse that he remembered most the lines that stood out for him the most were when Cohen called the soldiers his brothers he said I'll never forget it he looked at us and said you're my brothers and for Israelis that was a big deal I mean Israel felt very isolated um you know most European countries weren't allowing resupply flights to land in Europe in order to avoid antagonizing the Arab world and Israel felt lonely as you know it still doesn't Leonard Cohen isn't a transport plane full of weapons but but he's something he's a guy who came from the outside world and is expressing you know sympathy and um kind of familial love for for the Israelis and it meant a lot to them the problem is that there is no such verse of lover lover lover there's no verse of lover lover which he calls the soldiers his brothers and I thought that Shlomi was probably confused you know people's memories change over decades and certainly memories of a war get very fractured and weird and I know that from my own memories so I kind of put it aside and then when I had access to the Cohen notebooks I found the verse and it goes something like this I went down to the desert to help my brothers fight I knew that they weren't wrong I knew that they weren't right but bones must stand up straight and walk and blood must move around and men go making ugly lines across the holy ground but you can see that Cohen after this kind of expressing the same very emotional and very immediate connection with the Israelis I guess I should also mention that he asked the Israeli musicians to call him by his Hebrew name which was Eliezer so they were calling him Eliezer Cohen now Leonard Cohen is a weird name for Israelis but Eliezer Cohen is like every single person in it's like Joe Smith for Israelis so he's going by an Israeli name and he's calling them his brothers he's very much on the Israeli side and then when the fighting ends I think he starts ticking a step back and you can see in the notebook that he's erased the line that says I went down to the desert to help my brothers fight so there's a line drawn through those words help my brothers fight and instead the line says I went down to the desert to watch the children fight so he's taking a step back and then ultimately when the song comes out a few months after the war the verse is completely gone there's no trace of that verse that all the Israelis remembered and by a few years later there's a concert he gives in France in 1976 where he introduces lover lover lover and he admits that he wrote the song in the Six Day War and he says that he wrote it for the Egyptians and for the Israelis in that order and you see Cohen struggling with his tribal affiliations versus his universal job as a poet to be larger than one side in a war and larger than any one war his subject is the human condition at the same time you know what's so interesting about this

story is that it's really happening in a real place at a real time and that's what's interesting to me and it's always been fascinating to me to kind of figure out that moment of interaction between an artist and an event that ends up creating something eternal and a good example is Guernica that famous painting by Picasso by the spanish civil war like there's a terrible event in spain and the spanish artist runs it through his brain and out comes this painting that is a depiction of something happening in the spanish civil war but it's much more than that and it you know it's eternal art you also have in Beethoven's fifth

a few bars of french revolutionary music

hidden in one of the movements of symphony because when Beethoven was writing that there was the Napoleonic wars and Europe was being ripped apart and those events made their way into his music

and i'm trying to get at that aspect of his work i'm not sure how happy Leonard Cohen would be that we're restricting his work in that way but he does use that you know fascinating kind of evocative and very confusing phrase myth home he says i'm going to my myth home and i'm not sure he necessarily understood what that meant but i think a lot of people can identify with it i think certainly for a lot of jewish people they know what that means even if we can't really explain what it is you know it's not for most people it's not their actual home and they might never have even been there but they have this idea that it is the mythical home of the jewish people and that makes it i think very confusing to actually go there and sometimes upsetting because yeah i mean one one line that is from your book that really stuck with me is this idea as you write that Cohen's relationship with israel was powerful and tenuous like being in love with someone you don't really know to me that describes cohen but it also describes so much of diasporic juneism's relationship to israel right it's a very powerful connection that's based on very little actual knowledge and that makes it i think very strange for people to actually go to israel and i've been in israel for 26 years and i often meet people who are coming for the first time and they're coming in with a lot of information with a lot of you know love a sense of a myth home but not a real place but not a real place and then and and the meeting with the real place can be quite jarring because of course it's not a myth it's a real country and it's a real country in the middle east and it doesn't really correspond to judaism in the way that north american jews understand it and it's a country that's you know messed up like all other countries and it has you know short-sighted politicians and traffic problems and sewage problems and you know moral blindness and the usual package of human nonsense

and i think that's quite hard for people to deal with so if you're coming in looking for a myth home or looking for these very elevated ideas about judaism and i think cohen was i mean what cohen really connected to in the jewish tradition was prophecy and you know these really kind of pure ideas of the mission of the jews in the world which was to receive divine transmission and communicate it and then you come to a country which because it's a country has to do all kinds of really kind of including things including have an army and kill people to you know to protect yourself and you know collect taxes and collect the garbage and i don't think that really matched what his idea of the myth home was and i think that's one of the reasons that cohen he doesn't leave at the end of the war waving the israeli flag and seeing the national anthem i think he leaves quite conflicted and upset as you you must be if you're a sensitive person who's just seen a war and i think that's probably one reason that we don't hear a lot about this experience from him

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afterward shortly after he leaves israel he writes this song who by fire and who by fire it comes this song very much based on a play of the most famous liturgy in all of judaism which is this prayer we say on yom kippur um which the soldiers who were going off to war surely heard the night before the battle started which is called unatana toke and it's this very haunting prayer that describes the way our fates will play out in the coming year so the words go like this

and yom kippur it is sealed how many will die and how many will be born who will live and who will die who will reach the end of their days and who will not who buy water and who buy fire who buy sword and who buy wild beast who buy famine and who buy thirst and it goes on and on like that a lot of people are really uncomfortable with the prayer and the idea that your fate is going to sort of be decided on that day if i got cohen song goes like this

and who buy fire who buy water who buy water who in the sunshine who in the night time time who buy high or deal who buy high or deal and who buy common trial and who shall i say is calling shall i say

is calling

and as far as i understand it mati cohen never spoke about this song in connection to his experience in the war but it's impossible as a listener not to see that connection

so that that prayer is really at the heart of of yom kippur in my opinion not just a yom kippur the holy day but a yom kippur the war you know you have this this prayer that's really weirder and weirder and it's kind of if you you're expecting like a typical prayer the the text is kind of bonkers it keeps going on you know who buy strangulation who buy stoning who buy earthquake

it kind of very specifically lays out the many ways you could die in the coming year and then a war breaks out and many people die in just those in a fire in just those ways so if you're a novelist writing about this and you made that up you would be a ridiculous writer you know and you'd get rightly you know criticized for heavy handedness but it actually happened and that prayer and the most solemn day of the jewish calendar and the war they're all wrapped up with each other and cohen experiences it with the israelis and then if you look at his notebooks you'll see the text of this song appear and all we can say is that he goes through the yom kippur war comes back home very rattled the song appears in in his notebook and it comes out on this incredible album that he puts out after the war called new skin for the old ceremony so the ceremony is referring to his circumcision and he goes within a matter of months from desperation retirement to rejuvenation and you know the release of one of his best albums and after the war he's he's back on the horse and his career continues in the most incredible way you know until he's a man of 80 so something happens in the war and he never tells us exactly what it is and he never says you know i was you know my creative life was saved right and you'll never he'll never say that all we can do is look at the chronology and infer that something like that happened so the war for Leonard Cohen is a catalyst but the kind of solemnity that is in the song who by fire and that is in the prayer and when unatan atoke that to me seems to be the legacy of the war in israel reading your book i was shocked sort of to remember how devastating the war was it was 2600 fatalities in under three weeks israelis described it as a national catastrophe and it really was a kind of hinge moment for for israel in terms of its national mood also in terms of its culture you know you described to us israel at the outbreak of the war what was israel after the war israel after 1973 is really a different country the confidence in the founding generation is is shattered and this is this is the kibbutz

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generation this is the generation of people who left eastern europe people that changed their names from these eastern european shtetl names to hebr names and built the country right and the 67 war was seen as proof of their genius because things were going according to plan and then in 73 there's this incredible reversal golda meir who's really a member of that generation she's the prime minister and she's never forgiven for it israeli still see her as a very ambiguous character people think that the government should have seen this coming there were signs that it was going to happen the army was unprepared these poor you know infantrymen and tank crews were left exposed on the borders

and the number of fatalities in that war was for such a small country just shocking and unbearable so i think that's one part of what's going on in 1973 is this realization that these wars are not going to stop war is kind of going to accompany the life of the country indefinitely and that's part of the depression i think of the 1973 war and by the way it's something that koan knew right he has a song called anthem where he explicitly says that he writes yeah the war they will be fought the wars they will be fought again the holy dove she will be caught again the holy dove she will be caught again bought and sold and bought again the dove is never free bought and sold and bought again the dove is never free so he got to that was the world and i think that it pretty close to the israeli realization after 1973 and kind of optimism of the country up to that point really changes it's not that optimistic kind of horror dancing you know kibbutznik country people say the 1973 war killed the accordion it kills that vibe the vibe that would have used the accordion in these kind of upbeat kibbutz type songs goes and the kind of music that will come to the four after the 73 war is very much it's not music written in the collective we the use of like the of we goes out of style and now it's going to be i it's going to be the individual it's going to be people you know thinking about their soul and not about the collective and a different kind of artist is really going to come to the four after the 1973 war and israeli music after 73 is going to sound a lot less like the military entertainment troops that were popular before the war and it's going to sound a lot more like Leonard Cohen my favorite and in my opinion the only one who's really the only Israeli artist who's really cohen's equal in terms of of lyrics and originality is an artist named mayor ariel it's interesting to see what happens to ariel after the war he starts out he comes from a secular kibbutz and he starts out like everyone like everyone else and after the war he finds a very different voice and he talks about the individual he talks about himself and he draws closer to religion right one aspect of Israeli music before the war was that it was completely secular people you know had no interest in traditional Judaism and thought that that was old-fashioned and that it would soon be gone and that the old wisdom had very little to teach us because we were you know now we're the new Jews which meant we were socialists and we went to the

beach and we weren't part of that whole you know old world god and synagogue thing and and that too

is discredited and people realize that the the new stories about Zionism are just not not going to be enough and we're going to have to access the old wisdom and people start becoming religious explain to me if you would why like what is it specifically about this war that leads to a kind of reinvigoration of traditional Judaism maybe even mysticism things that the earlier generation of Israelis thought were you know in the historical dustbin I think people realized that the stories that they'd been told weren't enough like the story of Zionism and the story of you know agriculture and life without God that wasn't going to be enough to get us through a

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real crisis and that in fact we come from one of the oldest and wisest civilizations in the world and it might be a good idea to try to access that and people become more open to it and you can really hear it in the music so like like Leonard Cohen you know as his life goes on Leonard Cohen writes songs that can really only be described as prayers like a song if it be or will which is a prayer and there are other examples of Cohen writing prayers in Ariel, Mayor Ariel too whose Cohen's Israeli counterpart also you know as he ages he begins writing prayers which would have been unthinkable for the pre-Yom Kippur generation and today if you listen to Israeli pop God's everywhere and it's very it's much more religious than American pop music the parallel genre in America is really country music and country music you're allowed to sing about God and that's true in Israel too and I think it's really a factor of post 73 Israel where people become people are really rattled and a lot of the old stories are undermined not that there haven't been surges of optimism since then and when I moved to Israel in the 1990s the country was having another surge of optimism around the peace process and the very real possibility or so it seemed that the idea of a two-state solution it seemed really about to happen and then there was going to be a peace agreement with Syria and Israel's position in the Middle East was going to be normalized and we were going to be you know shopping in the markets in Damascus within a few years that's really what it what seemed to be happening in the 1990s and that also hasn't happened so Israel 2022 is quite a capable place and you think of Israel basically being a refugee camp in a war zone I mean it's remarkably successful but it's a place that's lost its utopian dreams and the utopian juice that drove the country up until 1973 one more break then more with Mati Friedman and Leonard Cullen this broken hill all your praises they shall ring if it be your will to let me sing if it be your will if you're a small business owner the first thing you need is a day off the last thing you need is a lawsuit for an HR violation with Bambi you get access to your very own dedicated HR manager starting at just \$99 per month they're available by phone email and real-time chat so onboarding and offboarding goes smoothly your team members reach peak performance and your business stays compliant with ever-changing HR regulations Bambi's HR autopilot automates your core policies workplace training and employee feedback an in-house HR manager can cost up to \$80,000 a year but with Bambi your dedicated HR manager starts at just \$99 a month schedule your free conversation today to see how much Bambi can take off your plate go to [Bambi.com](https://Bambi.com) right now and type in honestly under podcast when you sign up it'll help the show it's spelled B A M B E E dot com [Bambi.com](https://Bambi.com) and type in honestly Mati you're someone who's been a journalist and a reporter you were a correspondent for the AP in Israel but you've also just reported from all over the region of all the books and all the stories and all the topics why this one why this tiny seemingly tiny story of a forgotten little music tour by Leonard Cohen in the Sinai Desert. I started out as a journalist writing for a magazine called the Jerusalem Report which was a great English language news magazine out of Jerusalem and it was published every two weeks and when you work for a bi-weekly news magazine you can't cover

the news because by the time the magazine is on the newsstand news stories are dated so as a young reporter I was trained to look for stories on the margins of people's consciousness that would still be fresh a week or two later when the magazine came out and that just became part of my DNA as a journalist so I know that if I'm with a herd of journalists I'm in the wrong place because that story is not going to work I need to be alone covering some other story on the margins that can still you know that will have a longer shelf life and I think that that's really when I started having this approach to journalism which is to find some small unknown marginal or seemingly marginal story that's really on the periphery of everyone's vision but that actually says something huge about the country that I write about and if possible about the human condition and here too that I think this is a marginal story right it's not the greatest battle of the Yom Kippur war it's very hard to argue that this concert tour had any you know geopolitical impact of course it didn't this is a story about people at the worst moment of their lives and about what art can do and about how an artist can interact with an event to to create art that then kind of flies over time and you know space and can lodge in our mind 56 years later and kind of not only help us to understand that event but help us rise above ourselves so that I think is really what the book's about it reminds me a little bit of Johnny Cash just a few years before and here's what I mean by that in 1968 really against the wishes of a lot of people around him Cash and his band famously performed in Folsom Prison hello I'm Johnny Cash and that performance and the album that comes out of it I hear the train are coming it's rolling around a bend and I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when I'm stuck in Folsom Prison and time keeps dragging on what made it special was the dynamic between the performer and the audience right it's Cash singing these songs that are from the perspective of thieves and murderers and drug addicts and prisoners in front of people that had done perhaps those things when I hear that whistle blowing I hang my head and cry in 68 people were worried about how prisoners would respond to hearing those songs right would they get depressed as Cohen worried in his case would there be a riot but what actually happened was that they loved it because they felt seen in the songs and I think maybe you could say that they felt some sort of hope of redemption arguably and you can hear that on the album and it's one of the most sort of electric live albums to listen to because of that particular special sort of seeing that happened between Cash and the prisoners in Folsom and I wonder if in the same way that that album has kind of become a feature in the American imagination certainly in the world of American music if there's a comparison between the way that Leonard Cohen and his tour hold in the Israeli imagination and that that special sort of seeing across the darkness the the collective peering into the darkness that happens between a musician who believes that he's at the end of his career dogged by the black dog of depression that they're sort of like seeing each other through the sound yeah I think that's beautifully put I hadn't made the connection between this tour and the Folsom Prison concert I think there's definitely something about taking an artist out of his or her usual context and placing them in a completely different context that's quite extreme and seeing what what happens and that's one of the interesting things for me about this story about Cohen you have this guy who's you know you associate him with Grinch Village or with you know this island this Greek island but you don't think of him in a war so what happens when you take a guy like that and you drop him into a war what happens when you take



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a guy like like Cash and you put him in prison with the people who he you know whose stories he's tried to tell you know from his you know from his imagination what happens and what often seems to happen or what happened in these two cases is is magic it's it's electricity something happens and the audience who you might expect to respond with disdain right who is this guy who thinks he's singing about prisoners in Folsom Prison like who the hell are you but what ends up happening is they appreciate his authenticity and something about Cohen and Son I struck people as authentic he was obviously not there on some kind of ego trip he was sleeping on the ground he was wearing what the soldiers were wearing he was asking for no special treatment he was there with them in the most authentic way and that's what makes it work I think there had even been a whiff of exploitation in it if he'd been you know accompanied by a film crew or accompanied by an entourage of you know of helpers and but he wasn't he was there in the most authentic way and an audience like an audience of prisoners and an audience like an audience of soldiers and those two audiences are similar right their soldiers are kind of prisoners they're prisoners of events they can't leave you can't just get up and leave the war these are people who are trapped and it ends up working in a very interesting way and it should be remember that cash not only goes to Folsom Prison but he goes to Vietnam and I mentioned it in the book because not many artists would go to Vietnam because it would seem like you supported the war and of course no one was supposed to support the war so it took a lot of bravery to go to Vietnam and and cash and his wife June Carter they go to Vietnam around that same time and they play for soldiers thinking about the bravery that it took for Johnny Cash and June Carter to go to Vietnam I'm struck by the fact that even for musicians to play in Israel in peacetime is considered controversial you know it's certainly a safe bet that when Israel goes to war the prominent pop stars and artists in the west are not going to share posts even supporting Israel they're going to share posts that say more likely than not free Palestine talk to me about how the Yom Kippur War and really the wars that followed were not just a turning point for Israel but in terms of its perception in the world so for a few decades after the Holocaust I think Israel had a lot of sympathy in part because people felt really bad about what had happened and wanted to imagine that that the Jews were okay that somehow this had set things right you know that the world had let this terrible thing happen in the 1940s but but it was okay because they have this great country and we're supporting it and look how great they are and they're dancing around in the fields and the keyboards and there's really a celebration of Israel for a few decades after after the founding of the state but that starts to wear thin you know by the end of the 60s in the early 70s and it's kind of ironic that Israel achieves power Israel is really a response to Jewish powerlessness and Israel manages to achieve real power by 1967 that's really an expression of Jewish power this great military victory and it happens precisely at the time when power goes out of fashion in the west 1967 it's the 60s and now it's not good to be powerful and now you know Vietnam is awful and guns are bad and I mean Israel kind of comes into its own precisely at that moment and becomes identified with the wrong kind of country right it's a country that that worships power now like 10 years before that was a good thing you know in Eisenhower America or World War II America power was good and the army was good and you didn't want to be weak you wanted to be powerful but that really changes in the 60s and and as the years go by Israel it really becomes identified on the left almost as the incarnation of militarism and the incarnation of you know

nationalism and power of this kind and it's become so extreme that you can hear voices in this country and others in 2022 really kind of using Israel almost as a symbol of what's gone wrong in the world or the symbol of the values that liberal people are supposed to hate like militarism or racism or colonialism it gets kind of wrapped up in issues that are completely unrelated to Israel but it's become a potent symbol of qualities that you're supposed to condemn which is kind of the flip side of the myth home statement that Cohen makes right if it's a myth it can be any kind of myth it can be a good myth it could be the myth of Jewish summer camp where everyone's you know beautiful and just or it can be this dark myth about you know apartheid or you know the the embodiment of of oppression and evil and it's kind of part of the same package and the solution to it in my opinion is just to try to understand this real country it's a real country on planet earth it's a pretty small place it's not a myth of any kind and the quicker people acknowledge that I think the easier the country becomes to understand Mati you end your book with Cohen's last concert in Israel which is Tel Aviv 2009 he's 75 years old at that point you describe it as one of the best concerts ever held in Israel and one in which people speak about it in almost religious terms tell me about that concert and I was struck by the fact that soldiers who he had met in the war were in there in the crowd right no longer 18 year old soldiers they were all grandparents and at a very different point in their lives than they had been the last time they saw Cohen but when I started hearing about this Cohen concert in 2009 I couldn't quite understand why people were so excited like I grew up with Leonard Cohen because I'm a you know I'm Canadian and if you're a Canadian kid particularly a Jewish Canadian kid then you had Cohen playing in the background when you grew up and of course Suzanne and all those songs I don't even remember when I heard them for the first time because they were always on

but I never quite realized that Israelis love Leonard Cohen he's probably the most beloved foreign artist I mean when the tickets went on sale the phone lines crashed and 50,000 people came out to see Leonard Cohen in a pretty small country and they would have sold 100,000 I think if you know there'd been room in the stadium it was kind of a religious moment for people it was in part because people love Leonard Cohen in part it was kind of a reconnection I think or the closing of a circle that had begun in 1973 when at the darkest moment in the country's history when Israelis felt abandoned he came he didn't have to come but he did and Israelis never forgot it this is his famous resurrection tour where he he goes back on the road basically because having been in the Buddhist monastery for many years he comes out and realizes that his former manager had stolen all of his money so he goes back on the road and discovers that he's ascended to the pantheon of great artists and he's filling stadiums and that's the Cohen that we remember today this kind of elderly gentleman with a fedora

hey

And he ends the concert in a very unique way by reciting the blessing of the priests. The blessing of the priests, or in Hebrew, Birkatkonim, is a 15-word blessing that is said in synagogue by people who are descended from the priests in the Jerusalem Temple, which was destroyed in the year 70 CE.

So this is a blessing that goes back 2,000 years.

Yes.

A version of the blessing was found scratched on a silver amulet that was unearthed in my neighborhood and it dates to about 2,600 years ago, so it's an ancient text.

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And people who are descended from the Temple priests still know the word for priest in Hebrew is koen.

Koen.

Right, koen.

So often the people who have that status are called koen.

It's a certain, it's a small number of families that passed on that tradition.

So if you're a koen, you have this job, which is to recite this blessing.

And Leonard Koen was a koen.

That was part of his identity and it actually surprised me when I was reading this manuscript that he left, how much he was preoccupied by the fact that he was a koen.

He was very much aware that he came from a family of konim, of priests, and that these people had a job and that he wasn't doing his job, that he'd left the community and he didn't want to be part of an organized Jewish community, which he had a lot to say about it.

And he ends up in the village and then on this Greek island and in a Buddhist monastery and he kind of moves throughout his life very far from this synagogue where he grew up in Montreal, but he always knows that he's supposed to be a priest.

And in Israel, he meets a guy who's kind of like a hippie rabbi type who's on his case about being a priest and it really seems to matter to koen to such an extent that he publishes a letter or he includes a letter from this guy in the manuscript that he writes about the war.

And this guy whose name is Asher is saying, listen, man, you're a priest, I don't know what you're doing with this poetry and this bohemian lifestyle, you have a job to do and your job is to bless the congregation and to call down divine protection on the congregation. Maybe we can read the text of it.

Yivarechecha Hashem v'ishmerecha Ya'er Hashem panna velecha v'chuneka Y'sa Hashem panna velecha v'esem lecha shalom Or in English, may God bless and guard you, may God shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you, may God turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace.

And Asher, this rabbi who he meets in Israel, says, Leonard, you have to decide, are you a lecture or are you a priest?

This is in 1973 during the war and koen, you know, here's what he's saying, but of course he's not going to be a priest.

He, you know, goes with the other option and returns to some version of his previous life, but this idea is very much part of his brain and when he comes back to Israel in 2009, he ends his concert with the priestly blessing and I don't think you can understand what he was doing unless we understand the story of this war and how he thought about it and how he wrestled with his own Jewish identity during the war.

So he doesn't choose to be a priest, but at the very end of his life he comes back here and his last communication with the Israeli audience, because this is his last concert in Israel, is the priestly blessing where he stands on stage and he raises his hands in a very specific gesture that the priests are supposed to make and he blesses the congregation and the 50,000 people who come out to hear him in the stadium outside Tel Aviv.

I don't know if he's shmerecha, you are, I don't know if I know if you are bikuncha,

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he's so, I don't know if I know if you are, he's shmerecha, he's shmerecha.

Amen!

Mati Friedman, thank you so much.

Thank you so much for having me.

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 baffle king composing hallelujah, hallelujah.

Thanks for listening.

If you haven't yet already, check out Mati Friedman's book, Who by Fire?

Leonard Cohen in the Sinai.

It's short, but it's also one of the most beautiful books I've ever read about war,  
not just the fog of war, but also the meaning of it.

Really recommend it.

And I promise we're going to be back next time with a brand new conversation of honestly.

We'll also be sharing the incredible debate we hosted in LA on the feed very soon as well,  
so look out for that.

And if you want to support honestly, there's just one way to do it.

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Thanks for listening.

See you next time.

Cool.

And it's a very lonely hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.