Jesters of the King: Leonard Cohen z”l and King David
The Midrash and Kabbalah Behind Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah”

“He was the King’s jester, badchana d’malka, and even though he was in pain, since he found himself before the King, he turned to his joking and clowning to amuse the King.”

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
Hallelujah [x4]

Baby I’ve been here before
I’ve seen this room and I’ve walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew you
I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch
But love is not a victory march
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah
Hallelujah [x4]

Maybe there’s a God above
But all I’ve ever learned from love
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you
It’s not a cry that you hear at night
It’s not somebody who’s seen the light
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah
Hallelujah [x4]

Well I heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord
But you don’t really care for music, do you?
Well it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth
The minor fall and the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah
Hallelujah [x4]

Your faith was strong but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty in 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 [x4]

I did my best, it wasn’t much
I couldn’t feel, so I learned 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
Hallelujah [x4]

There’s a blaze of light in every word. It doesn’t matter which you heard, the holy or the broken Hallelujah

neohasid.org, R. David Seidenberg ~ Jesters of the King: Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah”
Jesters of the King: Leonard Cohen z”l and King David, Shavuot 5777

Hallelujah – first two verses

Well I heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord
But you don’t really care for music, do you?
Well it goes like this: the fourth, the fifth
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Our story in scripture (2 Samuel)

(2 Samuel 11:1-5) And it was the turning of the year, the time when the kings go out (to war), and David sent Yoav and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the children of Amon and besieged Rabbah. And David continued living in Jerusalem. And it became the time of evening, and David arose from off his bed. And he went walking on the roof of the king’s house and he saw a woman bathing atop the roof and the woman was a very beautiful sight. And David sent and sought for the woman. And he said, “Is this not Bath-Sheva daughter of Eliam, the woman of Uriah the Hittite?” And David sent messengers and took her and she came unto him and he laid with her; and she was sanctified from her impurity and she returned to her house. And the women conceived and she sent and told David, and she said “I am pregnant.”

The story according to the Talmud (b.Sanhedrin 107a)

1) “The baffled king composing” — David doesn’t understand why he isn’t as great as the Patriarchs

R. Yehudah said in Rav’s name: A person should never deliver himself to the test, since David King of Israel delivered himself to the test and failed. He said before [God]: Master of the World! Why do we say [in prayer], “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” but not “God of David”? He replied: They were tested by Me, and you were not tested by Me. He said: Master of the Universe, examine and test me – as it says, Examine me, Hashem, and test me. (Psalms 26:2)

2) “Your faith was strong but you needed proof” — God agrees to test David

[God] answered: I will test you, and I will do something for you; for I did not make known to them [what their test would be], but I will make known to you that I will test you in a sexual matter. Immediately: And it happened at the time of evening, and David arose from off his bed, etc. R. Yehudah said that he turned over his night bed to a day bed, but the rule was hidden from him: There is a small organ in man—if he satisfies it, it is starving; if he starves it, it is satisfied.
3) "Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you" — David fails the test but draws his Hallelujah

And he went walking on the roof of the king’s house and he saw a woman bathing atop the roof and the woman was very beautiful to see—Bat-Sheva was toweling her hair behind the screen. Satan came appearing to him like a bird, He shot an arrow at him and shot through the screen—she was revealed and he saw her. Immediately: David sent and sought out the woman and he said, "Isn't that Bat-Sheva...Uriah the Hittite's woman?"...And David sent messengers and took her and she came unto him and he laid with her...

4) "She broke your throne" — David kills Uriah and takes Bat-Sheva — Natan comes to accuse him, prophesying catastrophe

(2 Samuel 11:6-25) And David sent unto (his general) Yoav, “Send unto me Uriah the Hittite.” And Yoav sent Uriah unto David. And Uriah came unto him, and David asked about the peace (well-being) of Yoav and the peace of the people and the peace of the war. And David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet”...And Uriah lay down at the entrance of the king’s house with all the servants of his lords, and did not go down unto his house....And David said, “Why did you not go unto your house?” And Uriah said unto David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are living in sukkot (field tents), and my lord Yoav and the servants of my lords are encamped before the field, and I, would I come unto my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? (I swear) by your life...lest I would do this thing”...And it was in the morning, and David wrote a scroll unto Yoav that he sent by Uriah’s hand. And he wrote...“Have Uriah face the fiercest battle, and turn from backing him, so he will be struck and die”...And Yoav sent and told to David all things of the war...And the messenger said unto David, “When the men overpowered us and came out unto us [on] the field...also Uriah the Hittite died.” And David said unto the messenger, “So will you say unto Yoav, 'Don't let it be bad in your eyes, this thing, for like this one so that one does the sword consume. Strengthen your battle against the city and tread it down’.”

(2 Samuel 11:26-7) And when Uriah's woman heard that her man Uriah died, she lamented over her husband. And the mourning time passed and David sent and gathered her unto his house and she became his woman, and she bore for him a son. And evil was this thing that David did in Hashem's eyes.

(2 Samuel 12:1-10) And Hashem sent Natan (the prophet) unto David and he came unto him. And he said, “Two men were in one city, one rich and one destitute...And someone going came to the rich man and he had pity (on his wealth) to not take from his flock for the guest...And he took the (only) sheep of the destitute man and made that (cooked it) for the man who came unto him.” And David’s anger burned at the man, very much, and he said unto Natan, “(I swear as) Hashem lives, that the man who did this is a dead man!”...And Natan said unto David, “You are the man!...You struck down Uriah with the sword, and his woman you took for yourself, and you killed him with the sword of the children of Amon. And now, sword will never be removed from your house forever...So said Hashem, I am setting evil over you, from (within) your house...before the eyes of this sun. For you acted in secret, and I will do this thing in front of all Israel...”

5) A little backtracking: “David played and it pleased the Lord” — two ways David played before God

(2 Samuel 6:14, 21-2) And David leapt/twirled with all strength before Hashem...and David said...I will laugh/play before Hashem and make myself even more light/trifling.

(1 Samuel 16:23) And it was, when God's spirit would be (coming) to Saul, then David took the harp and played with his hand, and it gave Saul spaciousness and was good for him and the evil spirit was removed from him.

neohasid.org, R. David Seidenberg, p. 2 ~ Jesters of the King
Hallelujah – next verses (two different versions of the song are combined below)

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I learned 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
Hallelujah [x4]

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
Hallelujah [x4]

6) "I did my best, it wasn't much" — failing the test, David comes up with a reason why that sounds like a jest or a trick — (Talmud b.Sanhedrin 107a, cont'd)

Raba expounded: What is meant by the verse, Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your word, and gain merit through Your judgment? (Psalms 51:6) David said to the Holy One, blessed be: It is revealed and known before You that if I wanted to repress my impulse, I would have repressed it. But I said, “Let them not say, ‘The servant out-merited his Master’.” Raba expounded: What is meant by the verse, For I am right for limping, and my pain is in front of me always? (Psalms 38:17) That Bat-Sheva, the daughter of Eliam, was predestined for David since the six days of Creation, but that she came to him with sorrow. And so did the school of R. Ishmael teach: She was worthy (i.e., predestined) for David from the six days of Creation, but he consumed her unripe.

7) “And even though it all went wrong, I’ll stand before the Lord of Song” — as David does here, with all the vulnerability and honesty he can muster — from our story in scripture and from Psalm 51

(2 Samuel 12:7, 13) And Natan said unto David, “You are the man...” And David said unto Natan, “I have sinned to Hashem.” And Natan said unto David, “Also Hashem will make your sin pass away and you will not die.”

(Psalms 12:7, 13) A song of David, when Natan the prophet came unto him, after he came unto Bat-Sheva. Show me grace God according to Your love, according to Your multiple mercies forgive my transgressions; for I, I would know my transgressions and my sins are continually in front of me. To You, to You alone I sinned and the evil in Your eyes I did—for so that You will be justified in Your speaking, and gain merit through Your judging, Make me hear joy and rejoicing... Hide Your face from my sins... A pure heart create for me, God, and renew within me a true spirit. Don't send me from Your presence, and Your holy spirit don't take away from me...I would teach transgressors Your ways and sinners unto You will turn...My Lord, my lips may You open, and my mouth will tell Your praise...

neohasid.org, R. David Seidenberg, p. 3 ~ Jesters of the King
Hallelujah – next verses

Baby I’ve been here before
I’ve seen this room and I’ve walked this floor
I used to live alone before I knew you
I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch
But love is not a victory march
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah
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Maybe there’s a God above
But all I’ve ever learned from love
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you
It’s not a cry that you hear at night
It’s not somebody who’s seen the light
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah
Hallelujah [x4]

8) “It’s a broken Hallelujah” — did David sin for God or for a joke? It’s not David the king, but David the jester of the King, who breaks himself and his honor to protect God’s honor, says the Zohar (2:107a)

So that You will be justified when You speak, and gain merit through Your judging (Psalms 51:6)—and I would have no opening to speak before You. Come and see: Every artisan when he speaks, speaks through his artistry. David was the King’s jester, and even though he was in pain, since he found himself before the King he turned to his jokes/clowning to amuse the King. He said, “Master of the world, I said, Examine me, Hashem, and test me, and You said that I would not able to withstand Your test. So I sinned, so that You will be justified when You speak, and Your word would be true. For if I did not sin, my word would be true and Your word would be empty. Now that I sinned, in order to make Your word true, I have created a place for Your word to be justified. Because of this I did it, so that You will be justified in Your speaking, and gain merit in Your judging.” David turned to his art, and he spoke out of his pain with words of clowning to the King.

9) “It’s not somebody who’s seen the light” — David knows God’s face not because he’s “seen the light” but because he knows the face of adversity and absurdity. His true purpose was not to justify God out of piety, but to open wide a place for sinners to say Hallelujah according to the Zohar (2:107a-b, cont’d)

We learned: David did not measure up (in evil) to that deed, for it was he who said, And my heart is empty within me (Psalms 109:22)—...David said, “In the heart are two palatial chambers, in one blood, and in the other breath. The one that fills with blood is the dwelling place of the evil impulse, and my heart is not like this, for it is empty, and I have left no dwelling place... where the evil impulse could settle...” And since this is the case, David did not measure up to that sin that he sinned. It was only in order to provide an opening for sinners: they will say, “King David sinned and returned, and the Holy One, blessed be, forgave him—all the more [for] the rest of humanity.” About this it says, I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn unto You (Psalms 51:15).
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ה QUEUE
Supplement — all the Hebrew texts unabridged, followed by all the English texts unabridged

And every breath we drew was Hallelujah. But remember when I moved in you, you never show that to me, do you?

Suggestions for further exploration:

“How Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' Brilliantly Mingled Sex, Religion”

“60 Versions of Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah, Ranked”

Leonard Cohen, live performance — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrLk4vdY28Q

Another important verse included in many performances and covers is:

There was a time when you let me know/ What's really going on below
But now you never show that to me, do you?/
But remember when I moved in you/ And the holy dove was moving too
And every breath we drew was Hallelujah/ Hallelujah [x4]

neohasid.org, R. David Seidenberg (cc) 2017 ~ supplementary texts, Jesters of the King
(2 Samuel 11:1-27) And it became the turning of the year, the time when the kings go out (to war), and David sent Yoav and his servants with him and all Israel, and they ruined the children of Amon and besieged Rabbah. And David continued living in Jerusalem. And it became the time of evening, and David arose from off his bed. And he went walking on the roof of the king's house and he saw a woman bathing atop the roof and the woman was a very beautiful sight. And David sent and sought for the woman. And he said, “Is this not Bat-Sheva daughter of Eliam, the woman of Uriah the Hittite?” And David sent messengers and took her and she came unto him and he laid with her, and she was sanctified from her impurity and she returned to her house. And the women conceived and she sent and told David, and she said “I am pregnant.”

And David sent unto (his general) Yoav, “Send unto me Uriah the Hittite.” And Yoav sent Uriah unto David. And Uriah came unto him, and David asked about the peace (well-being) of Yoav and the peace of the people and the peace of the war. And David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet.” And Uriah went out from the king's house and after him went out a portion (fit for) the king. And Uriah lay down at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lords, and did not go down unto his house.....And David said, “Why did you not go unto your house?” And Uriah said unto David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are living in sukkot (field tents), and my lord Yoav and the servants of my lords are encamped (before) the field, and I, would I go unto my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? (I swear) by your life and the life of your soul, lest I would do this thing...And it was in the morning, and David wrote a scroll unto Yoav and he sent by Uriah's hand. And he wrote in the scroll, saying, “Have Uriah facing the fiercest battle, and turn from backing him, and may he be struck and die.” And it was when Yoav watched over the city, and he put Uriah at the place which he knew where the men of valor were...and there fell from the people, from David’s servants, and also died Uriah the Hittite. And Yoav sent and told to David all things of the war...And the messenger said unto David, “When the men overpowered us and came out unto us [on] the field...and they died from the servants of the king, and also Uriah the Hittite died. And David said unto the messenger, “So will you say unto Yoav, Don’t let it be bad in you’re your eyes, this thing, for like this one so like that one does the sword consumes. Strengthen your battle against the city and tread it down...

And when Uriah's woman heard that her man Uriah died, she lamented over her husband. And when the mourning time passed, David sent and gathered her to his house and she became his woman, and she bore for him a son. And evil was the thing that David did in Hashem's eyes.

(2 Samuel 12:1-15) And Hashem sent Natan (the prophet) unto David and he came unto him. And he said, “Two men were in one city, one rich and one destitute...And someone going came to the rich man and he had pity (on his wealth) to not take from his flock to make it for the guest that came to him, and he took the (only) sheep of the destitute man and made (cooked) that for the man who came unto him.” And David’s anger burned at the man, very much, and he said unto Natan, “(I swear as) Hashem lives, that the man who did this is a dead man!”...And Natan said unto David, “You are the man...you struck down Uriah with the sword and his woman you took for yourself, and you killed him with the sword of the children of Amon. And now, sword will never be removed from your house...Here I am erecting over you evil from your house, and I will take your women before your eyes and give them to your friend and he will lie with your women before the eyes of this sun. For you acted in secret, and I, I will do this thing facing right at Israel and facing right at the sun.” And David said unto Natan, “I have sinned to Hashem.” And Natan said unto David, “Also Hashem will make your sin pass away and you will not die.”

(Talmud b.Sanhedrin 107a) R. Yehudah said in Rav’s name: A person should never deliver himself to the test, since David King of Israel delivered himself to the test and failed. He said before [God]: Master of the World! Why do we say [in prayer], “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” but not “God of David”? He replied: They were tested by Me, and you were not tested by Me. He said: Master of the Universe, examine and test me – as it says, ‘Examine me, O Lord, and test me’ (Psalms 26:2). [God] answered: I will test you, and I will do something for you; for I did not make known to them [what their test would be], but I will make known to you that I will test you in a sexual matter. Immediately: ‘And it happened at the time of evening, and David arose from off his bed,’ etc. R. Yehudah said: He turned over his night bed to a day bed, but the rule was hidden from him: There is a small organ in man—if he satisfies it, it is starving; if he starves it, it is satisfied.
(Talmud b.Sanhedrin 107a, cont’d) And he went walking on the roof of the king’s house and he saw a woman bathing atop the roof and the woman was very beautiful to see – Bat-Sheva was towelng her hair behind the screen. Satan came appearing to him like a bird, He shot an arrow at him and shot through the screen – she was revealed and he saw her. Immediately: And David sent and sought out the woman. And he said, ‘Is this not Bat-Sheva daughter of Eliam, the woman of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers and took her and she came unto him and he laid with her, and she was sanctified from her impurity and she returned to her house.

Raba expounded: What is meant by the verse, Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your word, and gain merit through Your judgment (Psalms 51:6)? David said to the Holy One, blessed be, “It is revealed and known before You that if I wanted to repress my impulse, I would have repressed it. But I said, ‘Let them not say, “The servant out-merited his Master’.” Raba expounded: What is meant by the verse, For I am ready to halt, and my sorrow is continually before me? That Bat-Sheva, the daughter of Eliam, was predestined for David since the six days of Creation, but that she came to him with sorrow. And so did the school of R. Ishmael teach: She was worthy (i.e., predestined) for David from the six days of Creation, but he consumed her unripe. b.Sanhedrin 107a

(Zohar 2:107a-b) So that You will be justified when You speak, and gain merit through Your judging (Psalms 51:6)—and I will have no opening to speak before You. Come and see: Every artisan when he speaks, speaks through his artistry. David was the King’s jester, and even though he was in pain, since he found himself before the King, he turned to his jesting to amuse the King. He said, ‘Master of the world, I said, Examine me, O Lord, and test me, and You said that that I would not be able to withstand Your test. So I sinned, so that You will be justified by Your speaking, and Your word would be true. For if I had not sinned, my word would have been true and Your word would be empty. Now that I sinned, in order to make Your word true, I have created a place for Your word to be justified, and because of this I did it, “so that You will be justified in Your speaking, and gain merit in Your judging”’. David turned to his art, and out of his pain, he spoke with jests/clowning to the King.

We learned: David did not measure up (in evil) to that deed, for it was he who said, And my heart is empty within me (Psalms 109:22). David said, “In the heart are two palatial chambers, in one blood, and in the other breath. The one that fills with blood is the dwelling place of the evil impulse, and my heart is not like this, for it is empty, and I have left no dwelling place for the bad blood, where the evil impulse could dwell there, truly my heart is empty, without any bad dwelling there.” And since this is the case, David did not measure up to that sin that he sinned. It was only in order to provide an opening for sinners: they will say, “King David sinned, and returned, and the Holy One, blessed be, forgave him—all the more so [for] the rest of humanity.” About this it says, I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn unto You (Psalms 51:15).

(Psalm 51:1-) A song of David, when Natan the prophet came unto him, after he came unto Bat-Sheva. Show me grace God according to Your love, according to Your multiple mercies forgive my transgressions...To You, to You alone I sinned and the evil in Your eyes I did—for so that You will be justified in Your speaking, and gain merit through Your judging....A pure heart create for me, God, and renew within me a true spirit. Don't send me from Your presence, and Your holy spirit don't take away from me...I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn unto You...My Lord, my lips may You open, and my mouth will tell Your praise.

(1 Samuel 16:23) And it was, when God’s spirit would be (coming) to Saul, then David took the harp and played with his hand, and it gave Saul spaciousness and was good for him and the evil spirit was removed from him.

(2 Samuel 6:12-22) And David went and came up with the ark of God with joy....And David leapt/twirled with all strength before Hashem, and David was gird in a linen ephod (tunic)... And David returned to bless his house and Michal Saul’s daughter went out to meet David and she said, “How honored today is the king of Israel who was revealed naked to the eyes of the handmaidens of his servants... And David said unto Michal, “Before Hashem, who chose me above your father and above his whole house, to make me serve in front over Hashem’s people, oner Israel, and I will laugh/play before Hashem and make myself even more light/trifling, and I would be fallen in my own eyes — and with the handmaidens you spoke of, with them I will gain honor.