

# MAHZOR COMPANION

## Book of Mercy

Leonard Cohen's classic book of contemporary psalms is a courageous attempt to grapple with ultimate truth, brimming with praise, despair, anger, doubt, and trust.



**Feel free to turn to these words at any point throughout our services for:**

- Inspiration
- Challenge
- Reflection
- Longing
- Trust
- Doubt
- Help
- Praise
- Comfort
- Mercy

# 6

SIT DOWN, MASTER, ON this rude chair of praises, and rule my nervous heart with your great decrees of freedom. Out of time you have taken me to do my daily task. Out of mist and dust you have fashioned me to know the numberless worlds between the crown and the kingdom. In utter defeat I came to you and you received me with a sweetness I had not dared to remember. Tonight I come to you again, soiled by strategies and trapped in the loneliness of my tiny domain. Establish your law in this walled place. Let nine men come to lift me into their prayer so that I may whisper with them: Blessed be the name of the glory of the kingdom forever and forever.

# 8

**I**N THE EYES OF MEN HE falls, and in his own eyes too. He falls from his high place, he trips on his achievement. He falls to you, he falls to know you. It is sad, they say. See his disgrace, say the ones at his heel. But he falls radiantly toward the light to which he falls. They cannot see who lifts him as he falls, or how his falling changes, and he himself bewildered till his heart cries out to bless the one who holds him in his falling. And in his fall he hears his heart cry out, his heart explains why he is falling, why he had to fall, and he gives over to the fall. Blessed are

you, clasp of the falling. He falls into the sky, he falls into the light, none can hurt him as he falls. Blessed are you, shield of the falling. Wrapped in his fall, concealed within his fall, he finds the place, he is gathered in. While his hair streams back and his clothes tear in the wind, he is held up, comforted, he enters into the place of his fall. Blessed are you, embrace of the falling, foundation of the light, master of the human accident.

# 9

**B**LESSED ARE YOU WHO HAS given each man a shield of loneliness so that he cannot forget you. You are the truth of loneliness, and only your name addresses it. Strengthen my loneliness that I may be healed in your name, which is beyond all consolations that are uttered on this earth. Only in your name can I stand in the rush of time, only when this loneliness is yours can I lift my sins toward your mercy.

## IO

**Y**OU HAVE SWEETENED  
your word on my lips. My son too has heard the song  
that does not belong to him. From Abraham to August-  
tine, the nations have not known you, though every  
cry, every curse is raised on the foundation of your  
holiness. You placed me in this mystery and you let me  
sing, though only from this curious corner. You bound  
me to my fingerprints, as you bind every man, except  
the ones who need no binding. You led me to this field  
where I can dance with a broken knee. You led me  
safely to this night, you gave me a crown of darkness  
and light, and tears to greet my enemy. Who can tell of  
your glory, who can number your forms, who dares  
expound the interior life of god? And now you feed my  
household, you gather them to sleep, to dream, to  
dream freely, you surround them with the fence of all  
that I have seen. Sleep, my son, my small daughter,  
sleep – this night, this mercy has no boundaries.

**T**HIS IS THE WAY WE SUMMON one another, but it is not the way we call upon the Name. We stand in rags, we beg for tears to dissolve the immovable landmarks of hatred. How beautiful our heritage, to have this way of speaking to eternity, how bountiful this solitude, surrounded, filled, and mastered by the Name, from which all things arise in splendour, depending one upon the other.

# 16

**R**ETURN, SPIRIT, TO THIS lowly place. Come down. There is no path where you project yourself. Come down; from here you can look at the sky. From here you can begin to climb. Draw back your song from the middle air where you cannot follow it. Close down these shaking towers you have built toward your vertigo. You do not know how to bind your heart to the skylark, or your eyes to the hardened blue hills. Return to the sorrow in which you have hidden your truth. Kneel here, search here, with both hands, the cat's cradle of your tiny distress. Listen to the one who has not been wounded, the one who says, 'It is not good that man should be alone.' Recall your longing to the loneliness where it was born, so that when she appears, she will stand before you, not against you. Refine your longing here, in the small silver music of her preparations, under the low-built shelter of repentance.

**D**ID WE COME FOR NOTHING? We thought we were summoned, the aging headwaiters, the minor singers, the second-rate priests. But we couldn't escape into these self-descriptions, nor lose ourselves in the atlas of coming and going. Our prayer is like gossip, our work like burning grass. The teacher is pushed over, the bird-watcher makes a noise, and the madman dares himself to be born into the question of who he is. Let the light catch the thread from

which the man is hanging. Heal him inside the wind, wrap the wind around his broken ribs, you who know where Egypt was, and for whom he rehearses these sorrows, Our Lady of the Torah, who does not write history, but whose kind lips are the law of all activity. How strangely you prepare his soul. The heretic lies down beside the connoisseur of form, the creature of desire sits on a silver ring, the counterfeiter begs forgiveness from the better counterfeiter, the Angel of Darkness explains the difference between a palace and a cave – O bridge of silk, O single strand of spittle glistening, a hair of possibility, and nothing works, nothing works but You.

**L**IKE AN UNBORN INFANT swimming to be born, like a woman counting breath in the spasms of labour, I yearn for you. Like a fish pulled to the minnow, the angler to the point of line and water, I am fixed in a strict demand, O king of absolute unity. What must I do to sweeten this expectancy, to rescue hope from the scorn of my enemy? The child is born into your world, the fish is fed and the fisherman too. Bathsheba lies with David, apes come down from the Tower of Babel, but in my heart an ape sees the beauty bathing. From every side of Hell is my greed affirmed. O shield of Abraham, affirm my hopefulness.

**Y**OU WHO POUR MERCY INTO hell, sole authority in the highest and the lowest worlds, let your anger disperse the mist in this aimless place, where even my sins fall short of the mark. Let me be with you again, absolute companion, let me study your ways which are just beyond the hope of evil. Seize my heart out of its fantasy, direct my heart from the fiction of secrecy, you who know the secrets of every

heart, whose mercy is to be the secret of longing. Let every heart declare its secret, let every song disclose your love, let us bring to you the sorrows of our freedom. Blessed are you, who opens a gate in every moment, to enter in truth or tarry in hell. Let me be with you again, let me put this away, you who wait beside me, who have broken down your world to gather hearts. Blessed is your name, blessed is the confession of your name. Kindle the darkness of my calling, let me cry to the one who judges the heart in justice and mercy. Arouse my heart again with the limitless breath you breathe into me, arouse the secret from obscurity.

**B**LESS THE LORD, O MY soul, who made you a singer in his holy house forever, who has given you a tongue like the wind, and a heart like the sea, who has journeyed you from generation to generation to this impeccable moment of sweet bewilderment. Bless the Lord who has surrounded the traffic of human interest with the majesty of his law, who has given a direction to the falling leaf, and a goal to the green shoot. Tremble, my soul, before the one who creates good and evil, that a man may choose among worlds; and tremble before the furnace of light in which you are formed and to which you return, until the time when he suspends his light and withdraws into

himself, and there is no world, and there is no soul anywhere. Bless the one who judges you with his strap and his mercy, who covers with a million years of dust those who say, I have not sinned. Gather me, O my soul, around your longing, and from your eternal place inform my homelessness, that I may bring you forth and husband you, and make the day a throne for your activity, and the night a tower for your watchfulness, and all my time your just dominion. Sing, my soul, to the one who moves like music, who comes down like steps of lightning, who widens space with the thought of his name, who returns like death, deep and intangible, to his own absence and his own glory. Bless the Lord, O my soul, draw down the blessing of authority, that you may invite me to uncover you, and hold you precious till I'm worn away, and we are refreshed, soul and shadow, refreshed and rested like a sundial standing in the night. Bless the Lord, O my soul, cry out toward his mercy, cry out with tears and song and every instrument, stretch yourself toward the undivided glory which he established merely as his footstool, when he created forever, and he made it-is-finished, and he signed the foundations of unity, and polished the atoms of love to shine back beams and paths and gates of return. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Bless his name forever.

**T**HOUGH I DON'T BELIEVE,  
I come to you now, and I lift my doubt to your mercy.  
Under the scorn of my own pride I open my mouth to  
ask you again: Make an end to these harsh prepara-  
tions. I made a crown for myself with your blessings,  
and you locked me down to self-mockery. You said,  
'Study the world that is without me, this wild degree of  
solitude.' I covered up the path of desire and I over-  
threw the bridge of tears, and I prepared the wilderness

on which the Accuser walks. The Accuser has no song, and he has no tears. Speak to me again. Speak to my words. Give this ghost the form of tears, that he move from nothing to sorrow, into Creation, even winter, even loss, that he have weight, that he be placed. Discover him in tears and make a place for his longing. Behold him in your court, one who upholds the throne of praises. Where have I been? I gave the world to the Accuser. Where do I go? I go to ask for pardon from the Most High.

I LOOK FAR, I FORGET YOU  
and I'm lost. I lift my hands to you. I kneel toward my heart. I have no other home. My love is here. I end the day in mercy that I wasted in despair. Bind me to you, I fall away. Bind me, ease of my heart, bind me to your love. Gentle things you return to me, and duties that are sweet. And you say, I am in this heart, I and my name are here. Everywhere the blades turn, in every thought the butchery, and it is raw where I wander; but you hide me in the shelter of your name, and you open the hardness to tears. The drifting is to you, and the swell of suffering breaks toward you. You draw me back to close my eyes, to bless your name in speechlessness. Blessed are you in the smallness of your whispering. Blessed are you who speaks to the unworthy.

**H**OLY IS YOUR NAME, HOLY is your work, holy are the days that return to you. Holy are the years that you uncover. Holy are the hands that are raised to you, and the weeping that is wept to you. Holy is the fire between your will and ours, in which we are refined. Holy is that which is unredeemed, covered with your patience. Holy are the souls lost in your unnamings. Holy, and shining with a great light, is every living thing, established in this world and covered with time, until your name is praised forever.

**T**HE MEDITATIONS OF THE great are above me, and the entwining of the letters is beyond my skill. I cannot climb down to the vehicles of holiness, and my dreams do not ascend. But you have taught the heart to search itself in simple ways, with broom and rag, and you do not abandon my heart to the dust. I come to you for mercy and you hear my cry, and you shelter me in my portion, and you make my deeds a warning. Blessed are you who hears the cry of each man's portion. You cast me away to draw me

back, you darken every expectation which is not you. You have taught me with a voice, you have rebuked me with a cheap reward. I cry from my defeat and you straighten my thought. It is your name that makes the cry a healing, it is your mercy that guards the heart in the panic of yes and no. Let the heart speak to its friend, you who decipher the world to a child. Let the heart speak of the love that humbles it for wilder love, and let my whispered gratitude uphold me through this day. In the hopelessness of every other thing, you make your place, you strengthen your presence, and I ask to bow down before the lord of my life.

**N**OT KNOWING WHERE TO go, I go to you. Not knowing where to turn, I turn to you. Not knowing how to speak, I speak to you. Not knowing what to hold, I bind myself to you. Having lost my way, I make my way to you. Having soiled my heart, I lift my heart to you. Having wasted my days, I bring the heap to you. The great highway covered with debris, I travel on a hair to you. The wall smeared with filth, I go through a pinhole of light. Blocked by every thought, I fly on the wisp of a remembrance. Defeated

by silence, here is a place where the silence is more subtle. And here is the opening in defeat. And here is the clasp of the will. And here is the fear of you. And here is the fastening of mercy. Blessed are you, in this man's moment. Blessed are you, whose presence illuminates outrageous evil. Blessed are you who brings chains out of the darkness. Blessed are you, who waits in the world. Blessed are you, whose name is in the world.

**H**ELP ME IN THE RAIN,  
help me in the darkness, help me at my aimless table.  
Bend me down to the rain, and let the darkness speak  
to my heart. Blessed are you who speaks from the dark-  
ness, who gives a form to desolation. You draw back  
the heart that is spilled in the world, you establish the  
borders of pain. Your mercy you make known to those  
who know your name, and your healing is discovered  
beneath the lifted cry. The ruins signal your power; by  
your hand it is broken down, and all things crack that  
your throne be restored to the heart. You have written  
your name on the chaos. The eyes that roll down the  
darkness, you have rolled them back to the skull. Let  
each man be sheltered in the fortress of your name, and  
let each one see the other from the towers of your law.  
Create the world again, and stand us up, as you did be-  
fore, on the foundation of your light.

**A**WAKEN ME, LORD, FROM the dream of despair, and let me describe my sin. I would not fall into the bewilderment to which your name invited me. I established a court, and I fell asleep under a crown, and I dreamed I could rule the wicked. Awaken me to the homeland of my heart where you are worshipped forever. Awaken me to the mercy of the breath which you breathe into me. Remove your creature's self-created world, and dwell in the days that

are left to me. Dissolve the lonely dream which is the judgement on my ignorance, and sweep aside the work of my hands, the barricades of uncleanness, which I commanded against the torrents of mercy. Let your wisdom fill my solitude, and from the ruin raise your understanding. Blessed is the name of the glory of your kingdom forever and ever. What I have not said, give me the courage to say. What I have not done, give me the will to do. It is you, and you alone who refines the heart, you alone who instructs mortals, who answers the trembling before you with wisdom. Blessed is the name of the one who keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust, who has saved me again and again. To you is the day, and the conscious night, to you alone the only consecration. Bind me, intimate, bind me to your wakefulness.

**I** LOST MY WAY, I FORGOT to call on your name. The raw heart beat against the world, and the tears were for my lost victory. But you are here. You have always been here. The world is all forgetting, and the heart is a rage of directions, but your name unifies the heart, and the world is lifted into its place. Blessed is the one who waits in the traveller's heart for his turning.