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JACOB FIGURES AND THEMES IN THE NOVELS OF CHAIM POTOK

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Abstract

The twentieth-century novelist Chaim Potok made central to his fiction what he called “culture war”, juxtaposing his Jewish-American characters’ inner spiritual lives with key elements of Western secularism. In five of his novels- *The Promise* (1969), *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davitha’s Harp* (1985) and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990) --the protagonist comes under the influence of a character who can be styled “the Jacob figure”. This research paper argues that these characters not only echo various aspects of the biblical narratives about the Hebrew patriarch, thereby turning him into a meta-character in the novels, but also embody particular facets of the central culture clash in the individual books.

Keywords: culture war, spiritual lives, Western secularism, Jacob figure, biblical themes, Hebrew patriarch

Discussion

Despite the monumental stature in Jewish history of the patriarch Abraham and the lawgiver Moses, the Jews have not historically been known as Abrahamites or the children of Moses. Rather, they are the Israelites--the descendants of Abraham's grandson who originally was called Jacob and later was renamed Israel. In the Genesis narratives, Jacob is a multifaceted figure--father, rogue, husband, mystic--who most famously sires the sons who become the progenitors of the traditional twelve tribes. And in the work of the twentieth-century Jewish-American novelist Chaim Potok, Jacob reappears, although not in his biblical persona. Beginning with the 1967 bestseller *The Chosen* and continuing with a number of other novels. Potok

creates a series of young Jewish protagonists whose conservative religious culture clashes with elements of the broader Western society. In five of these books--*The Promise* (1969), *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davitha's Harp* (1985), and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990)--the main character comes under the influence of an older man, often a teacher of some kind, named Jacob (or Jakob) who has a powerful effect on the protagonist's life. In *The Promise*, he is Jacob Kalman, a staunchly traditionalist teacher who threatens to block a student's path to rabbinic ordination. In the *Asher Lev* books, he is the modernist sculptor-painter Jacob Kahn, the artistic mentor of the young Hasidic title character. In *The Book of Lights*, he is the cool-minded academic Jakob

Keter, who draws seminarian into the esoteric world of the Kabbalah and in *Davita's Harp*, he is the frail Jakob Daw, a war wounded teller of cryptic stories who befriends the young daughter of American Communists.

This paper will argue that the "Jacob figures" are marked by two distinct characteristics - the first related to their name, the second related to their literary-philosophical function in the individual novels. In the first aspect, these characters and the plotlines in which they are involved echo various facets of the biblical Jacob narratives to such a degree that the patriarch becomes something of a meta-character for Potok. (Indeed, critic S. Lillian Kremer sees *My Name is Asher Lev* as "overlaid with biblical allusion" ["Dedalus" 28].) In the latter aspect, the Jacob figures act as representatives or embodiments of the worldviews that clash in the individual books. According to Potok, his consistent theme is "culture war": the face-off between the West's secular humanism, with its lack of absolutes, and subcultures (specifically traditionalist Judaism) that possess unalterable givens (Ribalow 4). "*The Promise* is about the confrontation with text criticism," he says. "*My Name is Asher Lev* is about a confrontation with Western art. *Davita's Harp* is about the utilization of the human imagination as a way of coming to terms with unbearable reality" (Kauvar 69). Thus, in *The Promise*, Kalman embodies the ultra-Orthodox Judaism that rejects the intellectual tools that Western secularism brings to the study of religious texts; in *My Name is Asher Lev* and its sequel, Kahn is the man whose ultimate concern is the art of the goyim, not the God of Israel; in *Davita's Harp*, Jakob Daw crafts for the title character a series of stories that attempt to deal with upheaval in his personal and philosophical world. (And in *The Book of Lights*, Jakob Keter is a representative of religion and its possibility of spiritual illumination over against the science whose quest into the realm of nuclear physics is responsible for the lethal light of Hiroshima.)

In the exploration of these roles, students and critics of twentieth-century U.S. literature will gain fresh insights not only into Potok's literary craft but also into a religious Jewish world that occasionally has been neglected by American writers

and is unfamiliar to many readers. Kathryn Mc Clymond asserts that "the most critically acclaimed Jewish American writers, almost without exception," argue for "either a rejection or a secularization of Judaism" (13). Critics, she says, generally have focused on "a certain kind of Jewish American experience" typical of the works of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth (21); for these literary commentators, the choice is whether to be "a traditional Jew or a secularized American- implying that one could not be both" (18), Kremer somewhat dismissively speaks of "the constraints of the immigration/assimilation theme" and "the popular Roth school of social satire with its cast of stereotypical suburban Jews composed of domineering mothers, ineffectual fathers, pampered daughters, and whining sons" ("Post-alienation" 589), as well as of authors "whose Jewish material enriched only their novels' sociological texture" (575). However, Kremer sees other writers in whose works "Jewish thought, literary precursors, and history" receive pride "A significant portion of place contemporary Jewish-American fiction is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts" (571). Chaim Potok, with his tales in which the study of Talmud and the observance of the commandments are taken as much for granted as eating and drinking, is this kind of writer-but one whose work, despite its frequent bestselling status, has been neglected by the academy Greater attention to Potok's novels will bring valuable nuance to the study of Jewish-American literature and also will help readers to understand communities in which faith is a decisive factor in daily life-an understanding that becomes all the more important in a world in which religion can wield powerful influence on the local, national, and even international levels.

The Promise, Potok's second novel, is notable for its juxtaposition of his sympathetic first protagonist with perhaps the most problematic of all his characters. In *The Chosen*, the young Reuven Malter befriends the brilliant and isolated Danny Saunders and passes a subtle, challenging test of his scholarship and worldview posed by his teacher, Rav Gershenson. As *The Promise* opens, he is in the last year of his studies for smicha (rabbinic ordination) at

Hirsch University. A required class brings him into the orbit of Jacob Kalman—a survivor of Maidanek and a dark star of the Orthodox Jewish academic world who has recently joined the faculty at the Brooklyn school. Kalman is, on more than one level, a study in black and white. A short, compact, dark-eyed man with a heavy black beard and a pale countenance, he dresses in a lengthy black jacket, neatly ironed black pants, black skullcap and black shoes; his shirt is white and starched (105). The crisp shirt and trousers, and their colors, are indicative not only of Kalman's sartorial style but also of his approach to scholarship, religion and life: There was a grimness about him, a wall of stiff, humorless rigidity, an unbending quality of mind that placed everything it came into contact with into immediate and fixed categories of approval or disapproval where I knew they would remain forever. And his criterion of judgment was a rather harsh and inflexible version of Eastern European Orthodox Jewish law, which he applied to everything (322).

Kalman's hard-line nature quickly becomes clear to his students, but the tension turns personal when he discovers Reuven's visits to the non-traditionalist Zechariah Frankel Seminary. Reuven has been helping his father, David Malter, with research for a book on the Talmud, but he also has met at the seminary with Professor Abraham Gordon, whose notoriously un-Orthodox writings have landed him in *cherem* (excommunication). "Gordon destroys Yiddishkeit with his books... Such a man is a danger". Kalman tells Reuven (112). He demands that Reuven avoid Gordon and the institution as well, declaring: "The school is unclean and its books are unclean. My students will not go into their school (114). Thus, the underlying clash between the teacher's entrenched views and those of the more liberal-minded student becomes direct

The publication of David Malter's book, *The Making of the Talmud: Studies in Source Criticism*, exacerbates the conflict. Kalman has Reuven tutor him on the work's technical background without revealing his plans to attack David's views in an Orthodox weekly. Not surprisingly, Reuven is infuriated: "I had never in my life come across a man who was so zealous a guardian of Torah that he did not care whom or how he destroyed in its defense. I

had never thought Torah could create so grotesque a human being" (259). Underlying the clash is the fact that Kalman's approval is necessary for ordination, Reuven feels himself being forced into a choice between Gordon's secularism and Kalman's ultra-Orthodoxy. Yet Reuven demonstrates during his oral exams that the Malter's intellectual tools do not preclude a love for the Jewish tradition, thereby turning the tables on Kalman and leaving him with the options of approving the ordination or losing a dedicated and brilliant mind to the outside. The teacher chooses the former. "Your father's method is ice when one sees it on the printed page." Kalman tells Reuven later. "It is impossible to print one's love for Torah. But one can hear it in a voice" (340). The two part as impending academic colleagues and contenders in the fight for the Jewish soul.

Reuven is an alternate spelling of the more familiar (to English-speakers) name Reuben, known to readers of the Bible as the oldest son of the patriarch Jacob. On the basic level of names, then, Potok casts Kalman as a father figure to the young Malter—but how so? Not literally, of course, and certainly not in the standard emotional sense. The relationship between Reuven and David Malter in *The Chosen* and *The Promise* is consistently a respectful, loving, and nurturing one; in a psychoanalytic reading of the latter novel, Sanford Sternlicht remarks that without a mother for unconscious combat [Reuven and David] have the warmest, least inhibited relationship of the book's, father-son pairs (68). Their emotional ties are evident each shows concern for the other when illness or injury strikes (Reuven's eyesight is threatened in *The Chosen*, and David's health is a problem throughout the two books). David also is sensitive to his son's personal difficulties. "Little children little troubles, big children big troubles", he says upon finding Reuven brooding after a confrontation with Kalman. "When my big Reuven is so quiet, there are big troubles. Can I be of help to you, Reuven? (Promise 117). There is no silence between the two; they get along and communicate well. And not surprisingly for Potok's characters, whose concerns often are rather cerebral, their intellectual closeness is a major part of their relationship. David teaches Talmud in a yeshiva high

school in Brooklyn; Reuven studies with his father and plans to enter the rabbinate. Indeed, one of the climactic passages in *The Chosen* has Reuven using his parent's study methods to solve a knotty problem of Talmudic interpretation; after Reuven's bravura classroom performance, Rav Gershenson tells him: "I have been waiting all year to see how good a teacher your father is" (*The Chosen* 251). Kalman perceives the same intellectual influence. "I see you know this method very well, Malter", he tells Reuven after the two discuss parts of David's book. "Your father has taught you well" (*The Promise* 166-67). Reuven, then, is not seeking a substitute father; he is quite content with the one he has. Or is he? Late in the book, as Reuven contemplates the clash of the two worlds in which he is involved as well as Danny's impending marriage, he experiences an epiphany, "I found myself envious of Danny's solid-rootedness in his world and discovered at that moment to my utter astonishment how angry I was at my father for his book and his method of study and the tiny, twilight, in-between life he had carved out for us—a realization that leaves Reuven "frightened and shaken" (257). A similar situation between Abraham Gordon and his disturbed son, Michael, provides one of the novel's key plot lines. Unlike Michael, however, Reuven properly resolves his antagonism toward his father. "I would not have hated you that way, abba", Reuven tells his parent after describing an explosive confrontation between the two Gordons. "We would have talked about it" (361). Still, when David prods him further, Reuven hesitates before answering—a sign of the angst that his parent has unwittingly caused. Yet despite the strain, the underlying bond between biological father and son is strong—not frayed or broken in the ways that would send a young man in search of a replacement.

However, a father can be defined not only as one who "sires" by his own actions but also as one who does so by the reactions that he causes. David Malter shapes Reuven directly, in the ways typical of a loving father and also as one who is in intellectual sync with his son. Jacob Kalman does not do this the relationship between him and his student certainly is not loving, and the two of them clearly are not confreres of heart or mind—but he nevertheless is

indirectly responsible for who Reuven has become by the end of *The Promise*. "A teacher can change a person's life", David Malter says, but "only if the person is ready to be changed. A teacher rarely causes such a change, Reuven... More often he can only occasion such a change" (118). In his role of character-shaper, then, Kalman truly can be spoken of as Reuven's father—or perhaps the proper term might be "anti-father."

How does this "parental" status work itself out? First, family relationships (in contrast to friendships) notoriously are those that are not chosen, and this certainly describes the link between Reuven and Kalman. Neither seeks out the other. Kalman is not Reuven's ideal teacher, he takes the Talmud class because it is required. "I wanted no personal relationship with Rav Kalman", Reuven thinks, even before the atmosphere between the two becomes truly fraught (100). Nor is Reuven the "son" whom Kalman would have chosen. Sternlicht suggests that Kalman, who according to rumor saw his wife and three daughters shot by storm troopers during World War II (*Promise* 105), suffers from "unconscious jealousy of David Malter, whose brilliant son lives" (Sternlicht 69). Although this theory would add an interesting layer to the father-son issue, it is basically unsupported by the text; when Kalman waxes nostalgic about his life in Europe, for instance, he recalls a particularly talented student rather than his family (*Promise* 293). However, Reuven clearly does not hold such a privileged place in Kalman's mind. "I am afraid I really do not know what to do with you, Malter", he says, "I have never had such a problem" (168). In *The Chosen*, Gershenson views Reuven as an asset; in *The Promise*, Kalman sees him as an unwanted dilemma. This aspect of unwillingness also surfaces at the end of the book. "My sons have conquered me", Kalman muses (340), quoting a Hebrew saying as he explains to Reuven his reluctant decision to give him smicha: He was persuaded by his colleagues and his sense of the needs of the post-Holocaust Jewish community (339). The relationship, then, is metaphorically father-son in part because the personalities involved get the luck of the draw; as with blood relatives, the two are forced upon one another. Yet Kalman's part in the siring of Reuven's

psyche is most directly acted out in his self-appointed role as a catalyst of clarity.

When the socially awkward student Abe Greenfield comes to a Talmud session unprepared because he opted to study for a math final instead, Kalman publicly and brutally rakes him over the coals for his decision. One's choices reveal one's character, he says-not only to the world but to oneself as well. "A man must be forced to choose", he tells Greenfield. "It is only when you are forced to choose that you know what is important to you" (147). Yet this face-off with Greenfield is merely one round in the all-too-serious game in which Kalman is engaged with those around him, including Reuven. Kalman wants to push others to see what they are and, in his view, what they should be. "Do you know yourself, Malter? Where do you stand?" he asks. "Do you stand with true Yiddishkeit, or do you stand perhaps a little bit on the path of Gordon?" (168). For this believer, the former is clearly distinct from the latter.

Kalman easily might be seen as a closed-minded inquisitor, a member of the religious thought police, an intellectual blackmailer. "I cannot give smicha to someone who does not stand with true Yiddishkeit, no matter how great a Gemora [Talmud] student he is", he informs Reuven (168). For Kalman, when it comes to ordination, scholarly expertise in the tradition is not enough-one's attitude towards the tradition is all-important. Reuven perceives clearly his teacher's black-and-white attitude. "He's telling me to take a stand," the young man says to his father. "I'm either with him or against him. All or nothing. I'm disgusted with the whole business" (189). Indeed, Kalman's version of Judaism and scholarship holds no attractions for Reuven; he sees it as hysterical (235), characteristic of the Middle Ages (194), and "musty with the odors of old books and dead ideas and Eastern European zealotry" (257). Hatred for this man who has made his and his father's existence miserable comes easily to Reuven (206).

Yet even as the battle lines are drawn, Reuven betrays a certain understanding of the forces that drive his teacher. The symbolic clothing to the contrary, Reuven knows that there is more to Jacob

Kalman than his black-and-white approach to life and Torah; although he bears certain hallmarks of the fanatic of faith, that is not all of the story. This quasi-empathy is suggested after a conversation with his teacher. "The Hasidim are not the only ones who guard the spark, Kalman says. "I too have an obligation" (168). Walking later through a cold, dark Hasidic neighborhood, Reuven reflects on that metaphor and the situation around him:

I... thought how this remnants of the concentration camps had changed the face of things. They were the remnants, the zealous guardians of the spark(M)en like Rav Kalman who were not Hasidim felt swayed by their presence and believed themselves to be equally zealous guardians of the spark, and no one at Hirsch would fight them because the spark was precious, it was all that was left after the blood and slaughter, and you dimmed it when you fought its defenders (183-84).

It is difficult to say whether the last part of this passage—"the spark was precious, it was all that was left after the blood and slaughter, and you dimmed it when you fought its defenders represents merely the feelings of the majority at Hirsch or those of Reuven as well. The former. Interpretation is perhaps more likely, but the latter is certainly possible; if this is the case, these musings reflect a certain understanding on Reuven's part of the complexity and ambiguity of the cultural battle. Reuven's feelings about the Hasidim and their sympathizers are mixed, as the novel makes clear; however, as a witness of the Holocaust's horror from afar, he understands the vulnerability of Judaism's spark and the problematic nature of a pitched battle over it.

It is in Reuven's interactions with the young Michael Gordon, whose father has been bitterly criticized by Kalman and those like him, that Reuven most clearly indicates a certain understanding of his nemesis. When Michael asks him why he doesn't abandon a school that is "full of spiders and cobwebs and old men who cheat you," he counters: "They're not evil. If they were evil, it would be easy to get out of the school. They're very sincere" (208). Reuven

thus acknowledges that the ultra-Orthodox are not simply seeking power over their fellow believers; rather, this is a fight for principle. As critic Edward A. Abramson observes about the novel, even "those characters who exhibit fanaticism are seen to be fanatical in the service of deeply held, honor beliefs... (38). David Malter, beleaguered by conservative yeshiva colleagues, sees the battle in part as an overprotective reaction to the Holocaust and tells Reuven that it is different when you understand it. There is less of the-hatred (*Promise* 294-95). The son appears to take in the lesson. "Rav Kalman is an angry person," he tells Michael:

But he suffered. He lost his whole world and people who sometimes take out their suffering are suffering. Others. They defend what the ones they loved died for.

They become angry and ugly and they fight anything that's a threat to them. We have to learn how to fight back without hurting them too much (352).

Reuven thus demonstrates that he has come to a nuanced, truly adult view of this man. He has not changed his opinion of Kalman's actions—they are pugnacious, "angry and ugly", and should be actively opposed. At the same time, Reuven understands not only that much of this springs from suffering but also that even though fighting is necessary, a scorched-earth policy is not. [In this, he deliberately rejects the tactics of his professor, who is "so zealous a guardian of Torah that he did not care whom or how he destroyed in its defense (259)].]

In this way, then, Jacob becomes the father of Reuven. True, he does not sire the younger man in either body or soul; Kalman does not reproduce himself. However, by pressing his student to make a choice between what he sees as the genuine Yiddishkeit that he himself defends and the heresy/apostasy of David Malter and Abraham Gordon, Kalman creates in Reuven a more profound self-awareness. At story's end, Reuven is what he is in part because of Jacob Kalman—which is one way of defining fatherhood in a sense, Reuven still inhabits, "the tiny, twilight, in-between life that his biological parent whittled out (257); he approaches texts as a Western secularist might but is guided by those texts

in a traditional manner. He is neither in Gordon's nor Kalmans camp. Yet he now owns that interstice more fully, during his oral examinations, he persuades Kalman (barely but successfully) that he can be trusted to pass on and guard the tradition—that in his hands, his method of study is a tool rather than a weapon. Ironically, even against his own judgment, Jacob Kalman has succeeded in his mission of bringing about clarity; he has helped bring Reuven to a greater understanding of himself. A deceptive stranger in a strange land.

Jacob Kalman, then, echoes the role of his biblical namesake as the father of Reuven; yet this is not the only way that he does so. One of the best-known stories about the Hebrew patriarch is his theft of the blessing from his twin brother, Esau, who is the firstborn and the favorite of their father. The elderly Isaac sends out Esau to hunt some wild game in preparation for the bestowal of the blessing. At the instigation of his mother, who favors the younger twin, Jacob takes some well-prepared goat meat, impersonates his sibling, and fools the blind old man into giving him the blessing instead (*Tanakh*, Gen. 27). And like his ancestor, Kalman proves himself capable of connivance. When David Malter's book on the Talmud is published, Kalman persuades Reuven to tutor him in the volume's scholarly intricacies, among them its use of Greek. Only later does Reuven discover—ironically, through his father—that his teacher has been engaged to write an attack or the book. After the publication of the two-part review, which Reuven finds "vicious and sarcastic" (234), Kalman is unapologetic: "Tell me, Malter, who else should I have gone to in order to have your father's book explained to me? I did not want to attack your father for things he did not say. I wanted to understand clearly what he wrote. I went to his son because the son of David Malter understands his father's writings, and I know the son" (259). By concealing (or at least not revealing) his motives, Kalman enlists Reuven's help in an attack on his own parent. In Kalman's eyes, the end justifies the means. Unlike his biblical forebear, the latter-day Jacob does not lie outright, nor is he pursuing personal gain; even Reuven acknowledges that he acts out of theological conviction (259). Nevertheless, a "family resemblance" is at work in

that the latter-day Jacob, like the one of old, is willing to mislead in pursuit of his goal.

A final way in which Kalman's life echoes that of the patriarch is his status of exile. The biblical Jacob spends much of his adult life in Haran, far from Canaan (Gen. 27-33). Originally sent away both to avoid death at his brother's hands (his mother's motivation) and to marry a proper wife (his father's instructions), Jacob eventually spends twenty years in the employ of his uncle Laban. Yet his stay is not altogether happy. After arranging marry one of his cousins, he is famously tricked into marrying her sister as well, and his business dealings with Laban also turn sour: "As you know, I have served your father with all my might", he tells his wives. "but your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again" (Gen. 31:6-7). In similar fashion, Jacob Kalman is an often bewildered and unhappy exile from his homeland. Once an influential teacher in what is now Lithuania, he spent two years in the Polish concentration camp of Maidanek during World War II and later lived in Shanghai before moving to the United States (104-05). But "there was little about America he seemed to like", Reuven notes (107), including the lack of rigor in much of American Judaism: "A Jew travels to synagogue on Shabbos in his car, that is called Yiddishkeit". Kalman rants. "A Jew eats ham but gives money to philanthropy, that is called Yiddishkeit. A Jew prays three times a year but is a member of a synagogue, that is called Yiddishkeit" (109). When confronted by a colleague who says, "It is a different world here!", he barks: "It is a corrupt world! I will not be changed by it!" (265). More poignantly, he is fearful about pogroms in the wake of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg spy case. "He had been in the country about two years", Reuven thinks, "and he still didn't understand what it was really all about" (303). Like his namesake, Jacob Kalman finds himself a stranger in a strange land.

A guardian of the spark

As pointed out previously, Potok characterizes *The Promise* as concerning the confrontation of traditional Judaism with the tools of textual criticism (Kauvar 69), which is a stand-in for Western secularism. In the broader sense, the novel is about

the confrontation of two Judaisms, each of which claims to be a valid version-indeed, one of which claims to be the only valid version. At one end stands Abraham Gordon, who ironically bears the name of the original party to the divine covenant but who has rejected traditional theism. (In one of the novel's flashes of humor, he says, "Sometimes I wish there were a personal God.... I would have someone to shout at [284]). Raised in Orthodoxy, he now is engaged in a naturalistic re-interpretation of the faith-revelation is no longer a viable concept; religion is a human construct; God is merely "a lofty human idea an abstract guarantor of the intrinsic meaningfulness of the universe (63-64). At the other end stands Jacob Kalman, not merely Orthodox but fiercely so, a full-bearded and black-garbed guardian of the holy spark. David Malter and Abraham Gordon are only two of the targets of his zeal; he often turns his classes into savage lectures on the corrupt American culture or even the university's internal doings:

Students and teachers were attacked by name. A projected college course in

Greek mythology was canceled because he labeled it paganism. A student was almost expelled because he caught him outside the school without a hat.....

[H]e waged a vitriolic campaign against girls sitting together with boys in the yeshiva auditorium. The whole year was like that (107).

One might expect a scholar or believer with strong convictions to adopt certain take-rio prisoners approach to the field of his profession or faith. Kalman does this, and in a rather ruthless style-but he also employs the same tactics in student-related affairs that others probably would shrug off or simply grumble about. This signifies a particularly rigid mind-set that helps make Kalman a striking embodiment of a calcified Old World Judaism against which Reuven defines himself. At one point in the novel, the younger man muses: "I would enter Abraham Gordon's world if I was forced into taking a stand. The world of Rav Kalman was too musty now with the odors of old books and dead ideas and Eastern European zealotry" (257). Such is the

clash that Potok sets up for Reuven: On one side, Gordon and his intellectually free but overly humanistic philosophy: on the other, Kalman and the believing but restrictive forces of ultra-Orthodox theology. Thus the Talmud teacher, in addition to echoing the themes of fatherhood, deception, and exile in the Jacob narratives in the Bible, also plays a vital role in the culture clash that is key to *The Promise* and much of Potok's other work.

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