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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SECULAR AND THE JEWISH LIFE IN THE SELECTED  
NOVELS OF CHAIM POTOK

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ABSTRACT

Chaim Potok's fiction reveals his Jewish theological endeavour which is in essence is a personal response to his privately experienced tensions in seeking identity based on his perception of Judaism. Theology has its origins with anguish Potok felt when his commitment to Orthodox religious model of reality is confronted by new knowledge of Talmudic wisdom threatened the root assumptions of Hasidic philosophy. Thus the problems of integration and disintegration in relation to Jewish Orthodox tradition are of paramount importance to determine the nature of the tensions which become elemental strands of the fabric that form the ultimate response in Potok's novels. Throughout his writing career, Potok was preoccupied to probe deep and understand the dynamics of Judaism, its shades and tones, its inner texture, the warp and woof of its commingling of Judaic principles, ideas and institutions. Potok's heroes inspite of their inability to cope up with rigid Hasidic traditional practices never embrace the disintegration as a last resort to seek spiritual and moral salvation.

Keywords : Judaism, integration, disintegration, culture confrontation, antagonism, Orthodox, Hasidic

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Introduction

Most of Potok's works emphasize Judaism as a configuration of thought and action. The protagonists of *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, the *Asher Lev* novels, and *In the Beginning*, affirm that Jews are not fearful of coping with realities of life from a position within Judaism to a 20<sup>th</sup> Century World that is grappling with the problems of integration and disintegration and in the process of solving these issues, meaning and meaningful behavior emerges. Potok argues that 20<sup>th</sup> Century humanism should catch up to the basic integrating values of Judaism as the only way to seek salvation. He makes a fervent plea to embrace those values to forge new Jewish ideas. He is optimistic, as his novels suggest that the richness and complexity that characterize the totality of human culture constitutes the

greatest gift each generation gives to its youth. Any idea that enhances one's being becomes a grain of sand or a flood of light.

**The Conflict between the Secular and the Jewish Life in the Selected Novels of Chaim Potok**

The five novels chosen for critical study exemplify Potok's wish that Judaism, in the ultimate analysis represents a vital integrating element in the pool of human culture due to its intrinsic worth. Potok is committed to the notion that Jewish theology and humanistic behavior must be organically inter-related. A theology that is not linked directly to a pattern of behavior is a blowing wind and a macabre game with words. And a pattern of behavior that is not linked to a system of thought is an instance of religious robotry.

The protagonists of *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *The Asher Lev* novels and *In the Beginning* follow a common career in the course of the narrative they are seen moving with vigor and confidence in the religious community in which they were born and brought up. For all the suffering they undergo in this process they are able to achieve in the end with viable insight into their own nature as well as the nature of other.

Potok elaborates on this notion of just what happens to an individual when confronted by ideas of integration and disintegration that clash with previously accepted or ingrained cultural and Jewish religious beliefs. In this case, Danny's interest in Freud and desire to engage with secular psychology is utterly at odds with the Hasidic tradition and provides the huge "culture confrontation". But there seems to be hope that the clash will yield what Potok refers to as "culture fusion," in which "something is yielded by both sides". The ideal would be that out of the fusion something new would result. One hopes when one gives something up that one gains something back. It is impossible to fuse totally with a culture for which you feel a measure of antagonism. The problem "always arises when there is something in an alien body of ideas that attracts you. If nothing attracts you to it then you simply walk away from it" (Morgan 28). The key here is that the exchange be mutual. Wisdom comes through suffering and the series of painful events experienced in life is the source of strength which opens one's eyes to what life is.

Historically, the Orthodox-Jewish Community, insular by choice and dint of outside pressure, has gone to extreme lengths in its acceptance to lead both secular and religious lives by casting off doubts about their identities. Potok's heroes, however, move from the religious to the secular with affirmative broader acceptance. In fact the heroes of his novels attempt to overcome the hurdles of disintegration existing in both the religious and secular spheres to attain assimilation in the mainstream American life. The agonizing trials and tribulations encountered by his characters to lead a double life and of speaking in two-often exclusive, languages the subject of all Potok's novels

– is precisely what he has been most successful either in depicting or in attempting to resolve.

In the baseball game with which his first novel *The Chosen*, begins, Potok captured the zeal and inventiveness with which boys turn play into a ritualization of their parents animosities. Similarly, the most successful passages in *Asher Lev* occur which the child artist is caught in class drawing the face of the rebbe on the page of a Bible. He is taunted by his classmates as "the destroyer of Torah", and "Goy Lev", then one day he discovers a mildly scatological poem inserted between pages of his Talmud text with vengeance, Asher copies a detail from Michaelangelo's *Last Judgement* that depicts "a man being pulled headlong into hell by serpentine demons", substituting the face of an especially obnoxious classmate for that of the man, he inserts the copy into the classmates Talmud:

He said nothing to me about the drawings. But he began to avoid me. His thin face would fill with dread whenever he caught me looking at him. I had the feeling he regarded me now as evil and malevolent, as a demonic and contaminating spawn of the Other side. (*My Name is Asher Lev* 241-242)

Even should he wish to remain within his community, Asher Lev stands beyond its circle if not outside God's creation as well. As a portrait of the artist and study of his growth and maturing. Asher Lev novels are superb portraits of an artist's development from self doubt and maturity to high profile distinction in the realm of art. We are constantly told of Asher Lev's prodigious talent, and the extent to which he suffers for his art and but Potok's brilliant description of an artist endeavour coupled with inherent dynamism to excel add a new stylistic device to fictional interpretative dimension. Moreover, his conflict with his father provides the impetus to his creative energies. This aspect of the dramatic focus of the novel is treated with greater emphasis on Orthodox Jewishness. Thus, when Asher Lev finally cuts off his side curls, a gesture rich in psychological suggestiveness precisely because it is at once an assertion of self and an act of self-castration. Potok treats the incident meticulously as an indication of Asher Lev's movement from one social ambiance to another.

*My Name is Asher Lev* concludes with the description of "Brooklyn Crucifixion" painting which is not only shocking but flouting the Jewish law. The painting shows his mother tried to the Venetian blinds of her front window as she waits for her husband and son to return. It nevertheless poses an overwhelming question: the possibility, or viability, of an art authentically Jewish. The artist committed to remaining within Judaism in a more than peripheral way, who makes his concern the creation of a work that will stand firmly within Jewish tradition, faces the necessity of working in genres whose origins and structures are all secular. Potok feels that working in the direction such an aesthetic with imaginative richness and narrative strength to attain fictional excellence can inspire generation of readers.

As a quasi-empirical inductive hypothesis with rather limited range of probability, the notion of chosenness might be used to account for the perplexing question of the continued existence and vitality of the Jewish people. Jews choose to be chosen by linking their lives to the history and destiny of their people. Each generation must make its own commitment based upon whatever it finds in Judaism. They exist only by virtue of these renewed commitments. And they do not choose to be racially superior – a notion that would have been absurd to the prophets and the rabbis of the Talmud had they ever conceived of it. Jews choose to be the bearers of a tradition which they feel enhances human existence. It is an assumption of responsibility, not superiority. That the notion of chosenness may have been the basis for various theories of national and racial superiority indicates to Potok nothing more than all ideas are potentially corruptible when taken up by inferior minds. That does not mean that those with great minds should cease thinking.

Potok in his first novel *The Chosen* fundamentally depicts the conflict between Orthodox and Hasidic Jews during the 1940's in America raising many problems of Jewish identity. He had to deal with the social problems of the Orthodox world in his Yeshiva and was left with no choice but to make a decision whether to remain an Orthodox Jew or journey into the comparatively less Orthodox world that Reuven Malter confronts in

*The Chosen* and *The Promise*. Each hero of Potok's first five novels is endowed with great commitment to his chosen faith and makes an effort to avoid a loss of vital touch with the center which is rooted in his heritage and community. The sacrifices made by the members of the community in the name of God strengthens their will to retain their devotion and proximity to the sense of holiness at the centre from which emanate the twin concepts of beauty and love. They have to confront the dogmatism and communal restrictiveness in order to overcome the temptations of the secular world in their struggle to give their life meaning and purpose. Each one confronts the "rigid Orthodoxy which does not change with the passage of time though the role of the person representing this impassioned restrictiveness varies from novel to novel" (Marovitz 134). The novels clearly suggest that faith is a moral and spiritual force from which one may draw inspiration to revitalize meaning to his brief span of life. The novels *In the Beginning*, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev* assert that there is a need of a place for faith in the modern World and it should not be compromised in order to remain viable. This vital force makes his protagonists remain as observant Jews. They readily encounter and acknowledge the dark aspects of the tradition and their relationships but valiantly struggle with questions of meaning. They courageously uphold their loyalty to faith, family, self and eventually to their place in the larger world of America. Potok, through his works, has enriched the canon of Jewish values to reveal his essential revolutionary new framework for Judaism's place in all corners of the modern world.

Judaism becomes, then, a living, vital force in the lives of these characters. It is not a stifling power that forces the characters to lose their individual identities. Potok seems to assert that man must invariably live in two worlds: the world he has chosen by linking himself to the history of Judaism, and the world he chooses for himself in an effort to become a humanist individual. He portrays characters that exemplify "ideal" Jews facing the crises of religious choice and also stresses that these characters have each become unique individuals endowed with the capacity to pursue occupations that enhance their individualities, yet these

characters continue to be “Jewish” and remain as integral part of their Jewish worlds. Potok concludes his statement about his own religious position when he says “In the end I am a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I choose to serve the world” (“The State of Jewish Belief” 127). In *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *My Name is Asher Lev*, *The Gift of Asher Lev* and *In the Beginning*. Potok portrays many characters that are Jews in the end, and choose to serve the world as Jews. And Potok has served the world by proving that each Jew can be a part of Jewish history as well as an individual making a contribution to a modern American world.

Potok’s ability to make his readers identify with the struggles of the individual in a very particular setting accounts for his current popularity and his novels deserve more serious critical attention. Most of Potok’s characters are depicted as divergent atoms in the cosmos of humanity. Each character makes others what they are, and each in turn is recreated in a dynamic world of tradition, conflict between integration and disintegration and other issues relating to Jewish orthodox faith. *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *My Name is Asher Lev*, *The Gift of Asher Lev* and *In the Beginning* will open new dimensions of knowledge, experience and self awareness in young readers.

Celebration of 350 years of Jewish life in America recently seems appropriate in the new millennium to reflect, not just on the historical presence of Jews in this country, but also how we characterize that presence. As Americans become increasingly aware of the many religious communities being nurtured in the American landscape, it is important to highlight the complexity within each religious tradition as well. In this task, Jewish American literature has much to contribute. Jews continue to have widely divergent experiences of integration their Jewish and American identities, experiences that Potok could not even dream of. A heterogeneous critical approach to Potok’s works in particular and Jewish American literature in general will represent and speak to the complexity of Jewish American life in a way that offers meaning to Jews and non-Jews alike.

### Conclusion

The Jewish tradition has its own aesthetics and its own sense of morality. Concept of aesthetics

are in the service of morality, humankind, and the core of the Commandments. Fusion between the center of religious thought and Western secular humanism will not be easy, perhaps impossible. The destabilizing factor of disintegration have no place to a firm believer in Jewish faith. At its core, Judaism is a counterculture to the pagan world. Perhaps fusion may be obtained through the inherent ability of the Jewish tradition to confront new civilizations, and to renew itself as a result, and also from its ability to pull back from disintegrating factors when it senses it’s about to give up too much. The two civilizations: one was biblical and the other was rabbinic. In this sense, what Potok envisions as the “emergence of a third Jewish civilization may come about and even be one of the ways Western civilization will save itself” (Walden 2). Hedonism, runaway individualism, indifference to others, and the Jewish ethos are in conflict. Potok visualizes fusion with the best of Western humanism which above could determine the future.

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