



**JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF CHAIM POTOK :
*THE CHOSEN, THE PROMISE AND MY NAME IS ASHER LEV***

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ABSTRACT

The 1960's were the period of gestation for Jewish writers in America who treated Judaism with special authority rooted in knowledge of Jewish religious traditions and practices. Many of them wrote on the subject of Jewish identity in their fictional works in order to portray the effects of Americanization, assimilation and acculturation and its enduring significance to the Jewish tradition. Although the theme of cultural confrontation has been dealt by Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth and others, they could not adequately contextualize this problem in terms of a cultural conflict between Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Judaism comprising Jewish theology, liturgy, history and scholarship on one hand and Freudian psychology, Bible, Criticism and Modern Art on the other. The modish, largely socially oriented return to the synagogue of the 1960's had its most popular representative in the works of Chaim Potok (1929-2002), a rabbi philosopher and an observant Jew who had begun a systematic exploration in his sequence of novels dealing with Jewish American Cultural Confrontation.

Key Words : Americanization, assimilation, acculturation, cultural confrontation, theology, liturgy, Judaism.

Introduction

Potok as a novelist and story teller had subjected these abstract areas of cultural expression to novelistic treatment by comprehensively discussing the problems of Jewish identity and assimilation of the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic group into the main stream life in eastern New York. The three novels chosen for the study centre around the customs of the Hasidic sect of Jews and the problems their rituals and customs bring to the fore for the young Jewish men who realize what American culture has to offer them.

Jewish Identity in the Selected Novels of Chaim Potok

The study examines from variety of perspectives on Jewish culture which hardly received any critical attention in the last few decades. For highlighting the tragic plight of the Hasidic Jews who consider their goal in life to be the

perpetuation of Jewish laws, Potok deserves a place in contemporary literature. Potok's characters encounter alien ideas within their communities, and their arduous journeys to the world outside the perview of these communities provide the cultural confrontation that is at the core of his fictional works. His representation of the Jewish community and the lives of its inhabitants are intricate with poignant tales of the individuals who exist inside and outside this traditional framework. They are individuals who must find ways and means of dealing with change. In contextualizing rigidity of Hasidic culture isolated by its own customs and traditions, Potok's protagonists face a dilemma of choice: a choice between Jewish Orthodoxy and some other entirely different way of life, a choice that is moral, religious and finally absolute. They stand at the forefront of a number of conflicting sub-cultural and spiritual ordeals in quest of their

identity. Since Potok wrote in a prolific way, to achieve some kind of focus, only the most representative novels, *The Chosen* (1967), *The Promise* (1969), and *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) are chosen for critical analysis.

The Chosen, an immediate popular success, first brought Potok's world of Brooklyn's Orthodox and Hasidic Jews to spot light in America. The novel explores the conflict between Jewish faith, Freudian psychology, and the tension between two Jewish traditions: Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism. The text is set against the background of Second World War. This novel deals with the struggles and ordeals of two adolescent boys – Danny Saunders, a Hasid, and Reuven Malter, an Orthodox Jew. Their fathers are at odds on the issues of biblical criticism and Zionism, which fuels tension to their intimate friendship. At the same time each boy struggles with the question of pursuing their careers. Reuven eventually becomes a rabbi and Danny, who was supposed to take his father's place as *tzaddik*, the leader of a Hasidic group becomes a clinical psychologist. *The Promise* (1969) continues the story of these two boys with Reuven studying in an Orthodox Seminary and Danny studying psychology at Columbia University. This novel, like *The Chosen*, deals with the difficulties of communication between fathers and sons, and the questions of religious identity and individual integrity. It raises questions about how to maintain religious beliefs in the modern world.

Potok's next novel, *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), also deals with identity problems but from a different angle. The adolescent young protagonist of the novel is a promising young artist who is ostracized by the Hasidic community because of his two paintings which include crucifixion scenes.

Potok's characterization of Judaism in his fiction differs markedly from other authors of that period. He characterizes Judaism not as a tradition in opposition to mainstream American culture, but rather as an arena that had to be integrated with mainstream American life. By contrast, the trend in Jewish American literature at this time was to present a monolithic Judaism in opposition to mainstream culture; one could not be traditionally Jewish and American. Becoming the latter seemed to require rejecting the former. Since Potok's position differed from that of writers such as Roth

and Bellow, critics who had specific notions of what Jewish American literature was supposed to be, dismissed Potok's work as simplistic, naïve, and sentimental. But popular readers accepted the multiplicity of Jewish identity suggested in Potok's novels, and they often saw themselves in Potok's protagonists. As a result, popular readers – Jews and non-Jews – embraced his novels to narrate their own American story.

Potok draws his inspiration from the "Great Tradition" or rabbinic stream of Judaism which is focused on Torah study, Jewish law, and Jewish global history, woven into an American experience. He himself makes this point very clear by stating that his experience is so entirely different from that of Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. For Potok, the kind of Jew he writes about resonates more strongly with the kind of Catholic Joyce was writing about with a different type of Jew.

He portrays in his fictional works a different kind of relationship between Orthodox Judaism and mainstream America which are mutually not exclusive in their identities. Potok's characters therefore integrate their core Jewish and American identities rather than choosing one over the other. The study aims to discuss these issues with reference to the novels chosen for critical analysis. Significantly Potok's three novels chosen for study center around the customs of the Hasidic sect of Jews and the problems their customs bring to their young Jewish men who realize what American culture by prevailing norms has to offer them. Significantly *The Chosen* and *The Promise* emphasize the traditions of Hasidism face threat from the mainstream religious and cultural forces at work to destabilize its moorings. The problem of reconciling efforts between two different Jewish sects with two different sets of traditions and beliefs is a tricky affair riddled with counter complexities to seek lasting solution. The conflict does not concern whether the characters portrayed in the novels remain steadfast in holding their Judaism and committed to being observant Jews. In fact, they should rather, make the choice between Orthodoxy and commitment to a distinctive belief and a more liberal Jewishness and possible assimilation. This results in a peculiar situation and perennially the problem persists to torment minority, religious or ethnic groups. But the subject of Potok's novels is

unique and, in order to fully comprehend the gravity of the situations presented in Potok's novels and the conflicting Jewish cultures that his characters encounter a detailed discussion of Hasidic sect of Jews is necessary.

Potok deals with this theme in both his novels *The Chosen* and *The Promise* with the Williamsburg, Brooklyn world of the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jew. Hasidism has always posed a threat to at least one major character in the two novels: it traps Danny into making a difficult decision to choose between its rigid rules and strict tradition and a career of his own preference. It threatens Reuven's future as a more liberal rabbi thereby affecting his relationship with his father. He cannot be forced even to decide between a compromise of ideas or a commitment to a doctrine he cannot fully accept. Both Danny and Reuven know that they have to either accept traditional requirements in totality, or reject Hasidic law. There is no question of compromise: One is either a Hasid or not a Hasid. Reuven's words in *The Promise* emphatically convey in no uncertain terms about the difference between Hasidism and other Orthodox sects, when he describes how he feels about the Hasidim:

... when I could see them in their respective garbs, most of them in fur-trimmed caps, some in dark suits ... it was particularly strange and I felt myself to be an uncomfortable outsider who had somehow been transported to a world I once thought had existed only in the small towns of Eastern Europe or in books about Jewish history. They were my own people, but we were as far apart from one another as we could possibly be and still call ourselves by the name "Jew" – and I had never felt as distant from them ... (*The Promise* 232).

The Hasidim migrated to America not only to assimilate, but to maintain their unique traditions in a congenial new environment that would allow them religious freedom. But notionally it is difficult to describe the rigidity of Hasidic culture. Poll contends that their social structure as a community in the midst of a metropolis is isolated by its own customs and traditions. Though the male members only associate on a social level with other group members, women are even more restricted in their contact with the "outside world". They are expected

only to raise the children and govern the household, and have no business associates or friendships outside the Hasidic community. The Hasidic resistance to the American way of life and any kind of deviation from custom is evident when Poll describes the social life of the Hasidic children is governed by strict code of conduct prohibiting their participation in games or watching movies. Sponsoring any activities of their own for their artistic expression or entertainment, provides the conflict in the novel *My Name is Asher Lev*, because the Hasidim consider artistic expression to be a form of idolatry, not to be encouraged in any manner.

The Hasid's were against the glamorous diversions from tradition in America they are prove to adhere to old traditions of Europe. "They considered Americanization taboo, and did not try to become Americans like those Jews who had preceded them" (35). The fear of change was great in the Hasidic community and they believed that the Jews that preceded them had sold out to American values, and they constantly sermonized the evils of the outside world to their children. They were obstinate in their view that "One whose family does not follow the way of God, one who shaves off his beard, or sends his children to college, or whose wife does not cut off her hair, or dresses according to the general norms of the larger society, or who practices birth control" (39) is considered a traitor because that person does not observe, in letter and spirit, Hasidic law and custom.

The fact that Potok writes from within a specific religious tradition is not to be understood as his encouraging or dramatizing blind acceptance of the faith's paradigms. Often his characters resist, modify, or reject parts of Judaism and its practices. Potok's protagonists are inherently rebels and critical thinkers– to some degree each destroys while creating. For Potok re-vision is necessary in light of the complex pressures of life in modern America, and in light of the destruction of European Jewry, which is a constant background for Potok's novels. Re-creation is a process to secure one's own survival as individual and foster the preservation of the group in different hostile or friendly circumstances.

In order to understand Potok's lifelong passion for Judaism it is necessary to discuss how deeply he was influenced during his childhood to

pursue secular education which enabled him to study the history of Hasidism and Talmud studies. This scholarly pursuit made him committed to Orthodox Judaism and it reflects in fictional works. A background information of Potok's early life is essential to a broader discussion about his religious views expressed in his writings.

Discussing Potok's family background Cynthia Fagerheim quotes his views in her essay, "Chaim Potok: A Bibliographic Essay," "I grew up in a Hasidic world without the beard and the ear locks ... My mother is a descendent of the great Hasidic dynasty and my father was a Hasid, so I come from that world"(107). His father apparently wanted him to teach Talmud, but Potok was drawn to the arts and Western philosophy. He graduated from Yeshiva University and during the early fifties he went through a radical shift in his perception of a Judaism that ultimately resulted in his leaving his Hasidic community.

In *The Chosen* and in subsequent novel, Potok explores the issues involved when protagonists raised in the Hasidic world choose to leave it due to their controversial artistic pursuits. This transition from his original concept of Judaism has become a patent theme in critical studies of Potok's work.

His early background provides a lot of information regarding his Jewish and secular academic pursuits which helped him to rationalize a new American literary sub-genre, the "American novel of Jewish texts."

The fact is that his narrative moves quickly make his popularity comprehensible. Potok followed *The Chosen* with a succession of novels. *The Promise* (1969), *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972 and more. Most of his novels have essentially the same theme – the conflict of Torah as the word of God with Torah as an ancient human document subject to textual criticism, with all its doctrinal, ritual, and social implications. Despite the variations introduced into each successive novel, the basic conflict in each is essentially the same, exposing Potok's limited imaginative range.

Father and son relationships are an integral part of Chaim Potok's novels. Though critics have commented on father/son relationships, they fail to fully discuss these relationships and their inherent intricacies. Abramson, the only critic who has

completed a full-length study of Potok's works, deals with these father/son relationships, but does not convincingly address them in terms of communication and normal familial interactions. Therefore in Asher Lev novels Potok portrays the confrontations and conflicts basically involved in father/son relationships highlighting miscommunication as the cause of unpleasant familial bondings.

The fathers of Potok's heroes are seekers and are highly knowledgeable in the holy texts, the Torah and the Talmud. They are proud to see their sons excel them in intellectual curiosity and honesty. The sons never in their religious or family values lost their faith. In *The Chosen* Danny's father is Hasidic *tzaddik*, rabbinical sage and leader of the sect; in *The Promise* the father is the ultra-Conservative Talmud instructor, in *My Name is Asher Lev*, the protagonist is not a religious scholar but an artist, where as his father is the tyrant.

The Three novels discussed in the study offer a rare glimpse into traditionally private communities of Russian Hasidic Jews in New York. Through the novels Jews and non-Jews alike are introduced to a branch of Eastern European Judaism that exists on the margins of mainstream American life. The issues raised in the novels provide a glimpse to the readers to an unexposed world of Hasidic history, culture traditions and principles of familial domestic observance. The novels demystified this world in order to highlight universal concerns shared by Potok's readers. The novel also demonstrated the unique features of Hasidic experience which are unfamiliar to most Americans whereas the deeper concerns and conflicts are identical to other American conflicts. The novels reveal that people across a wide spectrum of religious communities struggle to resolve questions about how to live as modern Americans within traditional religious frameworks.

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 three 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.

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 *The Chosen*, *The Promise* and *My Name is 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.

CONCLUSION

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*, and *My Name is Asher Lev*, 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.

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