



## VOICE OF WOMEN IN CHAIM POTOK'S *DAVITA'S HARP*

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### ABSTRACT

In *Davita's Harp*, Potok creates his first story with a female protagonist and this seems at first an unusual choice of "voice," but merely completes Potok's analysis, according to the Zohar principles, of "man" as "humankind". Davita is also Potok's first protagonist of mixed parentage, her father is a non-observant Christian and her mother, a non-observant Jew. Davita's journey is very different from the pattern of initiation tales Potok writes in his previous five novels, since her parents actively denigrate religion, identifying it as a purveyor of false hope. Davita's parents, Michael and Anna Chandal are passionate communists, espousing the party dictate that religion is "the opiate of the masses". The religious vacuum in Davita's home allows her room to select once she has completed her own initiation into the search for religious significance. In a sense, Davita's journey parallels the Patriarch's movement from pagan/secular/religious belief systems to orthodoxy.

**Key words :** Zohar, Theology, Sabbath, Kabbalist, Yeshiva, Judaism, Jewish, Orthodox

### Introduction

This narrative inclusion, so different from the male, Jewish perspective in Potok's earlier novels, is congruent with the protagonist's feminist perspective: it is collaborative and communal learning. The writing of fiction holds no real values in the strictly orthodox community of which Davita becomes a part. This fact is coupled with the fact that women themselves also seem to lack significant roles in religious reading and ritual outside of the home, where their Sabbath role is enormously important, as they light the candles, recite the prayers, and becomes the "Sabbath Queens." Through the creation of a female protagonist, Potok discloses the weaknesses of exclusion, and in *Davita's Harp*, he makes a convincing case for rethinking and restructuring the place of women within the orthodox Jewish tradition.

### Discussion

Inclusive theology is not a new idea to Jewish thought. *Davita's Harp*, with its emphasis upon the value of story and the mystical, of the healing force of imagination and words, also reveals extensive

Kabbalist influences in consideration of women. But *Davita's Harp* also deals with overtly feminist, contemporary issues. Among them is the role of women in orthodox Judaism. Entering Judaism voluntarily, Davita challenges the rigid traditionalism of her community and thereby holds open to it, male and female alike, the opportunity to practice the Zohar teaching: to be sacred space, a community where the Holy One may be present in all forms; to identify and celebrate the image of God in Adam, which is to be both male and female; and thus to be blessed with complementarity embracing male and female in every aspect of existence.

In creating his version of a young girl's growth to maturity, Potok interrogates the predominantly patriarchal teachings of orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Eliezer stated succinctly: "The words of Torah should be burnt rather than taught to women" (Ochs 34). And in the twentieth century, Rabbi Baruch Epstein wrote: "Girls do not have the intellectual stability and are, therefore, unable to make profound inquiries with a sharp mind and appreciate the depth of Torah. It is possible that by

using their own minds, they will transgress the will of Torah" (Ochs 34 ). These quotations indicate the treatment of women in orthodox Judaism, Ochs' text actualizes the fictional *Davita's Harp*. For *Words of Fire*, Ochs traces her journey from non-observant, to observant Jew. The achievement of Potok lies in his adopting the mantle, the life-story, of such women as Ochs and Davita and thereby challenging an often repressive, anti-woman system.

Potok, in *Davita's Harp*, first describes what has become conventional orthodox Judaism and then, through Davita, challenges these dogmas. In this way Davita becomes a kind of everywoman and a liberationist who contests, transforms, creates, displays (through action, character, and finally her fiction) new ways of being Jewish in modern America, ways that revivify ancient Jewish beliefs, rather than reject them. In the time-frame of the novel (the late 1930s), women writers were devalued in the larger American culture. Davita's promise to become such a woman, to find what Virginia Woolf names "a room of [her] own," and in that newly located sacred place to create her own art is clear by completion of *Davita's Harp*. Her process involves the development and integration of various aspects of herself as well as movement towards maturity in her thoughts and thinking about the Jewish and the American worlds.

Davita's journey is significantly different from that of the male protagonists of Potok's earlier novels. Her concern for and ability to create community, her capacity to recreate ritual, her growing ability to use her imagination, her desire for academic excellence, and her overt awareness of her sexuality are all indicators of the young girl's achievements in reaching social, religious, physical, and artistic maturity. However, Davita's interest in words her ability to think metaphorically which is developed by three important male mentors, and her love of ritual enable her to become the kind of "constructed knower" Davita is a questioner this is the first clue to her capacity toward constructivist knowing, "Question posing is at the heart of connected knowing" (Belenky 189). Davita formulates questions as her way of connecting with her world. In the opening pages of the novel, she repeatedly asks her parents to define unknown words for her. The list of words is intriguing in its political nature. Davita questions her, for instance,

about the word "protection" and receives the historical, political, and etymological "facts" about the word; The girl tells her mother of a threatening encounter with the street-wise older boy who demanded Davita receive his "protection" from neighbourhood gangs, and pay him for it. Davita learns from this that girls are weak and in need of male protection from male violence (9).

Davita's journey to know, to understand her world and to find her voice and to speak with it, continues to be facilitated by three important male figures each of whom provides Davita with a training-ground that is new and unique. Davita's father, Michael Chandal; her uncle, Jakob Daw; and her step-father, Ezra Dinn bring their own ways of organizing the world, and Davita is influenced by each. By profession, these men are intimately connected to words; her father is a journalist, her uncle is a writer, and her step-father is a lawyer and Talmud scholar.

Michael Chandal's influence upon his daughter is great. He is vibrantly alive, and his presence fills their apartment. In turn, Davita responds to her father's warmth and affection with energy and desire for connection, but on the other hand, she is also frightened of him and the decisions he makes. Aware of her own need of fatherly protection, fearing abandonment, and fearing for his safety, Davita is angry when he travels to Spain during the Spanish Civil War as an investigative reporter. Her fears are realistic; Davita knows that war "makes people dead"(43). Davita's Island sojourn was a transformative, salvific event. The emotional ordeal of the death/abandonment of her "fathers" left her depressed and weakened: At the time of Davita's breakdown, her spiritual journey indicated her growing attraction to religion. She attended shul consistently, participated in the community, received the hope ritual offer, sang the melodies, and began to teach herself Hebrew.

Having emerged from the lake-event depression, Davita immersed herself completely into the Jewish environment. She left public school and enrolled in yeshiva. This action was transformative; at the yeshiva Davita's academic ability was affirmed instead of denigrated, celebrated instead of scorned. This event was redemptive. Davita was head, received, affirmed. She flourished in her yeshiva training and proved, by her disciplined and

perceptive work, that she could excel in a way that is respected by her chosen community. Her academic work highlighted her spiritual pilgrimage, and the two become for her a single task. Davita integrated her academic experience with her life outside school: she used the academic work and research to connect the various fragments of her life. Historical research echoes themes she sensed in her father's life, she wrote a paper on Rabbi Akiva, a Jewish scholar/ hero, which illustrated the likes (408). This act validated her father and also warmly connected Davita with the Jewish tradition. Using her imagination, Davita wrote creatively and was rewarded.

As Davita draws closer to the Jewish tradition, she gains insight into the depth and beauty of the religion and delights in this knowledge; however, she also becomes aware of the darker side of the Jewish faith. This shadow aspect is disclosed to her through the gender issue of women in the faith. When Davita entered the synagogue and realized she must sit with the women, separate from the men, and view the service through the obfuscating curtain, she was shocked (136). At this point, Davita did not understand why there was separation and the curtain; she did know she did not like it.

Davita gains insight into the place of women in the religious system through observing her neighbours, Mrs. Helfman and her daughter Ruthie, during a Sabbath meal. The men sit in an insular group, in a kind of triangular formation that precludes contribution from the women present; the women are, like the couch and its fixtures, ornamental. Davita observes that Mrs. Helfman's active contribution to the Sabbath ritual is limited to the candle ceremony and meal preparation. More insight into women's place in the faith occurs during Davita's encounters with David's friends, after the synagogue service. Like her earlier encounters with the gentile gangs that roamed her neighbourhoods and excluded her from trespassing onto their territory, these yeshiva boys are threatening towards Davita as she makes advances into their synagogue (14). She questions David on a point of Jewish law, the boys' snicker loudly;" Davita responds; "Is it the law that instead of helping you re supposed to laugh at someone who's trying to learn?" (147).

Davita's growing awareness of the discrimination women face in Judaism is heightened when, as a regular member of the synagogue, she observes her mother pray (382). This segregation keeps the service holy for the men. When Davita sees the arrangement, she understands that the existence of an authorized, anti-woman politic is an elemental part of this community's theology. Davita is deeply offended by the arrangement, for her mother seems to be praying in a prison (382). Davita senses that behind the segregation of the sexes is belief that women are suspect, dangerous obstacles to faith and purity. She experiences the formalized symbols of entrapment that are a part of the group's ethic: curtains exclude women from the service and trap them in a place of positional and theological powerlessness. Davita does not adjust to the synagogue divisions (145). This gender issue that keeps recurring in Davita's life is exacerbated in her conflict with the yeshiva.

Davita's academic talent, although initially affirmed by the Jewish community, becomes threatening to the group. By the conclusion of grade eight, Davita is eligible for her Yeshiva's prestigious Akiva Award given for academic excellence. She sets this goal for herself shortly after learning about the prize and directs her energy towards achieving the award. Her motivation is a desire to memorialize her father's and Jakob's deaths. This desire is validated for her in the sacred texts she is reading, where she learns that memorials, such as Joshua's twelve stone, are a significant part of ritualizing the Jewish faith. Davita succeeds and achieves her goal; the Akiva award should be hers. The school's Board of Trustees refuse her the honour. They are ashamed that a girl is the best student at the school and horrified at the reception this news will receive in the larger New York Jewish community. Students of other Jewish high schools scorn the quality of a yeshiva which produces such poor male scholars (428). To forestall public embarrassment, the Trustees secede to give the Akiva award to the male with the best grade point average. The unwritten policy is actualized. The status quo is affirmed. Girls do not receive important awards at orthodox yeshivas.

Davita is devastated by the news. Mr. Helfman tells her she will not receive the Akiva prize. Davita is to take heart, however, because she

does win a number of minor awards. Davita can not "believe what[she] was hearing." Not only does she not receive the earned award, she is asked to collude with the faculty in their unjust decision. When Helfman asks Davita to accept the decision to not receive the award, he invites her to participate in a millennia-old code which suppresses the female voice and represses female participation and success in the tradition. Davita leaves the school hurt, angry, bitter. According to this text, the Jewish people are to be upholders of a justice that is equally administered to all. Davita's inner sense of justice tells her that her mother should not have to pray in a cage; that Davita should not have to sit behind a curtain in shul; that Mrs. Helfman should not have to sit quietly and submissively during Sabbath discussions; and that she should not have to step down to let a boy receive the prize. Davita is right and the tradition of which she has become a part is guilty of neglecting the sacred texts which advocate equity and not discrimination. Because Davita does not win the award, she is not able to give the acceptance speech she prepared. However, she does not become a victim to the school authorities. She takes the advice offered her years earlier by her Aunt Sarah, makes her own way, and brings her own healing through her imagination.

Davita does so by "entering" the door harp, an act which ties together the novel's many themes; music, David's poetry, family, society, communists, written wisdom, Torah, and Zohar. Placed within the harp for safe keeping are the tiny birds which have come to symbolize for Davita her fragile search for peace and security in this world. Davita, utilizing her imagination, achieves the thing she set out to do. She says good-bye to her past. Davita will not return to the yeshiva; she will go to "[a] public high school. A very good one:" (436). In keeping with the larger pattern of female kunstlerroman, Davita confronts the prison of male domination as she encounters it in the yeshiva, and makes her own way (Huf 157-59). Davita is a community creator, too the lessons she learns, those that nurture and those that do not, grow out of her relational experiences. The conclusion highlights this; *Davita's Harp* closes with Davita holding her baby sister in her arms. She is telling her a story, establishing the community of fiction, of Jews, of family, of sisterhood.

### Conclusion

In *Davita's Harp*, Potok suggests that the old lessons are still potent. In this novel which confronts an important tension shared by the Jewish and the larger American society of which it is a part, the modern formulation of the issue of the role of women is given a voice. From the Zohar comes the explicit teaching of the need for male and female both as evidence of the presence of God, and the Torah instructs the community that justice is to be extended to all. In *Davita's Harp*, chaos and pain are unleashed when these basic truths are not honoured. Potok invites readers, through his own process of story-telling, to re think conventional patterns. God's presence evident in the novel in the harp, and in Davita as she attends to its music and sympathetic vibrations, is absent from the damning voices in the novel. Davita integrates the outer authority she receives in the voice of parents/family/community/God with her inner, intuitive voice. She speaks with constructed, whole and healing knowledge. By the end of the novel Davita has grown from a girl who builds castles, fortified by magic as a means of protecting those whom she loves, to an observant Jew, a scholar, and a creator of stories. She has found music, resonances of God in the past, fiction, community, and her voice, which is not hers alone. She is becoming a constructed knower.

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