



# Conflict Between Two Worlds

## WHEN JEWISH RELIGION AND SECULARISM COLLIDE IN FOUR NOVELS BY CHAIM POTOK

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### RELIGION VERSUS SECULARISM

Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, and *The Gift of Asher Lev* encapsulate many struggles within their pages and their worlds. However, there is one thread that unifies all four books—that of the confrontation between Jewish religion and secularism. In these books the battle is waged between Hasidism and secularism, between Orthodoxy and secularism. This conflict is the catalyst of dissension that occurs between different branches of Judaism, in Potok's books, and in society itself. The friction that occurs is due to the difference between those that adjust to the world and those that abstain from the world. This discord is played out in the lives of the main characters, all boys, in each of the four books.

### INNER CONFLICTS

Potok not only presents strife within society, but also shows an inner struggle that occurs within the four boys as they mature. In *The Chosen* and *The Promise* the battle is waged on the field of intellect, while in the *Asher Lev* novels the controversy pertains to aesthetics. These difficulties affect many aspects of the young boys' lives including their relationships, identities, and beliefs. They must make choices for which they might sacrifice everything. Throughout the book they are confronted with a world that does not understand their way of life and a faith that does not comprehend their dreams.

### OBJECTIVE

These particular novels embody the dilemma many suffer when pulled between beliefs and desires. The purpose of this Honor's thesis is to prove the underlying effect that secularism has on the various branches of Judaism. This is shown through the lives of the four boys in *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, and *The Gift of Asher Lev*; and, is the root of all that transpires in these books. I will endeavor to describe and prove this conflict, which is cultural, spiritual, sociological, and psychological in its nature.



*The arena of conflict is a boiling cauldron into which both the sides toss their feelings, ideas, dreams, terrors, all the elements of their separate beings . . . The result is often unpredictable, explosive, profound—and nearly always interesting.*

—Chaim Potok

### CHAIM POTOK'S LIFE

Chaim Potok was born into a Hasidic family on February 17, 1929 in the Bronx of New York. At age nine Potok showed remarkable artistic talent. His parents disapproved since in

Hasidic culture drawing and painting violates the second of the Ten Commandments which forbids graven images. At age sixteen, Potok read his first adult novel, *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh. Waugh's novel changed his life and Potok began to voraciously read and write. Potok wanted to make his Jewish world a reality to others just as Waugh's Catholic world had become a reality for him. Potok's literary desire brought disapproval from his father and others in his community.

In the late 1940s, while in college, Potok broke with Hasidism and became a Conservative Jew; this gave him more literary freedom. The subjects of Potok's novels concern Jewish individuals confronting beliefs contrary to their own, and are often based on experiences he endured. However, his subject is universal, and not just meant for Jews. Potok created a different way of portraying Jews in the novel and will always be remembered for his contributions. Chaim Potok died in 2002.

### THE CHOSEN

Potok's novel opens with a heated baseball game between two teams, one Orthodox, the other Hasidic. A main character is Reuven Malter who is modern Orthodox and narrator of the story. Reuven is struck in the eye with a baseball hit by Daniel Saunders, son of the Hasidic rebbe. He is hospitalized and during recovery, becomes unusually good friends with Danny. The plot revolves around Danny and the trials he is experiencing. Danny is highly intelligent and possesses a photographic memory. Danny lacks compassion and from the time he was seven years old his father did not speak to him, raising him in silence, It was Reb Saunders' method of teaching his son to suffer and have compassion for others.

Not only does Danny not have a father in whom to confide but he is also surrounded by the secular world whose ideas and areas of study beckon him. With Reuven Malter's help, Danny learns how to manage his feelings and desires. His father's silence also teaches him a great deal and in the end, though Danny does not inherit the rebbeship from his father, he does gain compassion for others.

### THE PROMISE

*The Promise* continues the story of Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter, with more of an emphasis on Reuven's life. Danny and Reuven are both in college, Danny studying psychology and Reuven studying to be a rabbi. World War II is over and the Jewish people are left with not only the reality of the Holocaust, but the survivors. *The Promise* deals with the religious zeal of these survivors, in particular one Rav Kalman, Reuven Malter's Talmud professor. Reuven is not the only person affected by Holocaust survivors; a young boy, Michael Gordon, is psychologically impacted by their virulent attacks against his father, Abraham Gordon, a liberal Jewish scholar. Abraham Gordon does not believe in God, but man, while the survivors believe only in God and have lost faith in humankind. It is between

these two types of Judaism that Reuven finds himself, and he is forced to make a choice between the two. By the novel's conclusion we see maturity in all the characters and good or bad, they have made their choices.

### MY NAME IS ASHER LEV

Written in the first person by the main character, Asher Lev, Potok weaves a story about a boy who is caught between two worlds. He lives in the nucleus of the Ladover Hasidic world, but is driven by an aesthetic passion into the secular world of art. Secular artistic endeavors are not valued in the Hasidic world, so Asher meets with disapproval from his parents and community.

Asher's father travels for the Rebbe, so Asher and his mother are frequently without a father and husband. Asher's mother, Rivkeh, worries not only about her husband's travels, but also the deteriorating relationship between Asher and his father. Rivkeh is in the middle as she tries to maintain peace between father and son. In the end, Asher depicts her suffering in two crucifixion paintings resulting in his excommunication from the Ladover Hasidic community in New York.



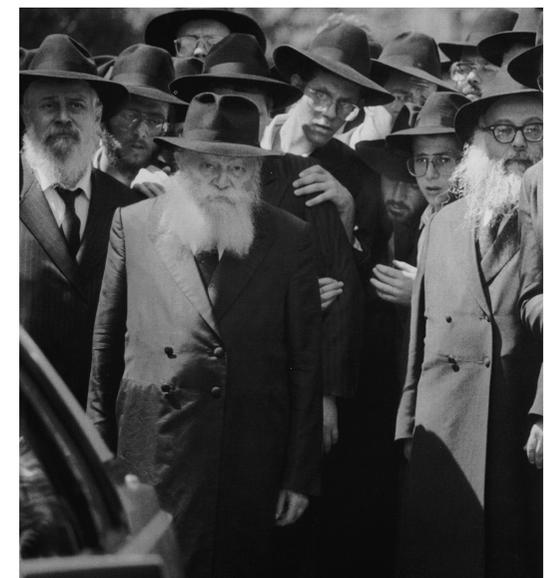
### THE GIFT OF ASHER LEV

This novel is the sequel to *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Asher is residing in France and is married to a woman named Devorah. They have two children, Rocheleh and Avrumel. It has been twenty years since Asher's exile from New York and he is now a famous artist. The novel focuses on Asher's return, along with his family, to New York to attend the funeral and week of mourning for Asher's Uncle Yitzchok. The week extends into months as Devorah and the children desire to become acquainted with Asher's parents. Once again Asher is confronted with the Hasidic world of his childhood which continues to misunderstand him as an adult. In addition, Asher must make a decision that might cost him a great price. Basically he must choose between his family and his art, resulting in complete exile and seclusion.

### HASIDISM

Hasidism is a Jewish sect known for their extreme Orthodoxy and their adherence to Jewish rituals. The movement originated in central Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century as a reaction to changes in secular society and the Jewish community

itself. Hasidism expanded quickly and prior to World War II there were fifty Hasidic courts, each centered around their individual leader or rebbe. After World War II the number of Hasidim was greatly reduced and currently the largest number of Hasidim reside in America, particularly New York. There are still different Hasidic courts but the two on which Potok focuses are the Satmar and the Lubavitch groups. The Satmar are seen in *The Chosen* and *The Promise*. The Lubavitch are represented by the Ladover Hasidic Jews in the *Asher Lev* novels.



### CONCLUSION

*On occasion someone will ask me: Why do you write only about Jews? I now answer that I have used Jews much as Ibsen used Norwegians. People will come to understand that in time.*

—Chaim Potok

The statement quoted above is crucial to this thesis. Chaim Potok's characters may have been Jewish but they represent a universal conflict that most everyone experiences. This conflict is one that occurs between an individual's religious beliefs and the secular world surrounding him or her. It is a battle which has repercussions within the character's social, familial, and religious life. The strife between religion and the secular world, in this case Hasidism, is one that affects all areas.

Potok's novels portray struggles both in the intellectual and the aesthetic fields. While secularism appears to be the faction that triumphs there is no true victor. Danny Saunders combines secularism with Hasidism, while Asher Lev seems to completely immerse himself in the ways of secular art. Whether they realize it or not, neither Danny nor Asher have separated themselves from their Hasidic roots. In a way, at one time or another, all of us will experience a collision between two worlds: our religious beliefs versus those of the secular world.