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## JEWISH RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN CHAIM POTOK'S NOVELS

**Abstract:** Chaim Potok<sup>1</sup> was a scholar, rabbi, and a novelist who wrote about the conflict between Judaism and the secular world and the discord within Judaism. His novels frequently portrayed observant Jewish communities and families in a loving and respectful way, opening a window onto the insular Jewish American world. The strength of his writing is in his ability to dramatize universal question of faith, commitment and identity among, mostly, Americans of Jewish roots. The article aims to discuss religious conflicts in Potok's *The Chosen*, *The Promise* and *In the Beginnings*.

**Key words:** Hasidism, Orthodox Judaism, rabbis, Zionism, American family

Chaim Potok, a rabbi who wrote both fiction and non-fiction, a philosopher, and an observant Jew is little known outside the Jewish American environs. A modern American writer, who *has no quarrel with his religion, but who has continually explored the conflict between Jewish values and culture of the American secular world within which the Jewish sphere exists* (Sternlicht 2000:1). Interestingly, he did not write about Jewish faith and culture from a liminal perspective, as it is oftentimes the case with many other Jewish American authors, *he contemplated the religion from within* (Chametzky 2001:986).

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<sup>1</sup> Chaim Potok, born in 1929 in Buffalo New York, was educated in Orthodox Jewish schools. In 1950, he graduated from Yeshiva University in New York with a B.A. in English. He received his M.H.L. and rabbinic ordination in 1954 at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Then Potok went on to earn his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1965 at the University of Pennsylvania. He received the Edward Lewis Wallant Award and was nominated for the national Book Award for *The Chosen* (Chametzky 2001:987).

Potok writes a systematic sequence of interwoven novels dealing with the Jewish community as well as Jewish-American cultural confrontation. In his works, Potok shows Jews not only as travellers to America and European immigrants, he also examines his Jewish characters as religious outsiders, skeptics, visionaries and mentors. Potok carefully explores the seemingly disparate Orthodox, Hasidic and more liberal expressions of Jewish tradition as well as Zionism<sup>2</sup>. As Kremer (1989:28) says, *Potok writes about Jewish theology, liturgy, history, and scholarship and this task represents something new in American literature.*

*The Chosen* (1967) is essentially about the core of the Judaic tradition. The title of the book *The Chosen* refers to the belief of some, mostly religious Jewish people, that they are *God's chosen people, chosen to bring to the world monotheism, as well as God's words, messages and will through the Bible* (Sternlicht 2000:29). Yet, it is a story about friendship between Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders and the latter's personal change. They meet in baseball game as rivals. Both boys are brought up in Jewish families but Reuven in a less radical one. Reuven is an *apikoros*<sup>3</sup> for Danny:

*The word had meant, originally, a Jew educated in Judaism who denied basic tenets of his faith, like the existence of God, the revelation, the resurrection of the dead. [...] it also meant any educated Jew who might be reading, say, Darwin, and who was not wearing side curls and fringes outside his trousers* (Potok 1995:30).

They also come from different backgrounds. Danny, 'a brilliant son' of Reb Saunders, is raised in a strict Orthodox Hasidic sect:

*Jews from Southern Poland, who walked the Brooklyn streets like specters, with their black hats, long black coats, black beards, and ear locks. These Jews had their own rabbi, their own dynasty ruler, who could trace his family position of rabbinic leadership back to the time of the Ba'al. Shem Tov, the eighteen-century founder of Hasidism, whom they all regarded as a God-invested personality* (Potok 1995:11).

Being a son of a *tzaddik*, a *Hasidic leader, a righteous one, a superhuman link between people and God* (Potok 1995:81), he is restricted to study and read only Talmud and Torah. However, the youthful inquisitiveness of a gifted boy makes him dip into works of Western thought.

Absorbed by Freudian psychoanalysis, he starts to question his religion and drifts away from his background, and in the same way he loses his chance as a

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<sup>2</sup> Zionism, a term coined in 1890 by a Jewish activist Nathan Birnbaum, refers to the national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the creation of the state Israel.

<sup>3</sup> In Jewish culture an *apikoros* is the one who negates the rabbinic tradition.

successor of his father as a *tzaddik* who does not approve of his son's decision of not following the Hasidic tradition. With the help of his friend Reuven and the guidance of his father, Danny tries to comprehend complicated Freudian psychoanalytic theory: *He had wanted to read Freud. That had been his mistake. Freud had to be studied, not read. He had to be studied like a page of Talmud* (Potok 1995:287). Immersing himself in western culture and literature brings about a conflict between the father, who is firmly entrenched in the ideas of his Jewish world – he is a Jew first and a father second – and the son. Danny is inquisitive about the world outside his yeshiva<sup>4</sup>, and he searches for the answers to many questions which his father fails to or cannot answer. This influx of ideas that Danny brings into his father's world, causes a confrontation of ideas, which results in communication problems between father and son. Still, Danny's father 'communicates' with his son in silence. This is an old Hasidic traditional way of bringing up a son. Danny's father was brought up the same way, as he explains:

*My father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul. (...) One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said* (Potok 1995:91).

Although Danny respects his father's way of bringing him up in silence, while suffering at the same time, he draws away from his father's beliefs and way of living. Upon encountering Freud, Danny does not walk away as many religious Jews would do. He absorbs Freudian ideas and what goes with it – so-called 'Western Humanism'. Caught in the net of a strange method by which his father is teaching him compassion for human suffering of Jews, Danny finds in Freud the instrumentality for handling this pain and suffering, the Jewish way. It is in the nature of things that once you are inside an alien system of thought, no matter what door brings you in, you slowly begin to wander around inside that system in ever widening circles until more and more of the system becomes hospitable to you. That is precisely what happens to Danny Saunders in *the Chosen*. Danny eventually makes his peace with Freud by absorbing and utilizing Freudian psychoanalysis and instrumentality for the healing of human pain and suffering so commonly found in Judaism and Jewish tradition<sup>5</sup>. Danny's father put a great emphasis on suffering as an inseparable part of Jewish existence and Judaism. He says: *How the world makes us suffer. It is the will of God. We must accept the will of God* (Potok 1995:281).

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<sup>4</sup> In Jewish culture Yeshiva refers to a school where students study sacred texts, primarily the Talmud.

<sup>5</sup> In Jewish tradition and philosophy suffering plays a significant role. There are three purposes resulting from human suffering, namely: education, punishment and testing (Leaman 1997).

For Danny, after comprehending Freud's theory, suffering has a different meaning. Everything is tightly linked in a causal chain to the origin of *that pathology* (Gladson 1986:4). Danny realizes that by understanding the origin you can more or less deal with this pathology. There is no intrinsic meaningfulness in the universe, no intrinsic sense to human action. Most actions come from a kind of unconsciousness inside people about which most of them are dimly aware. At the end of the book, Danny Saunders decides to devote his life to psychology. Although he cuts his ear locks and shaves his beard, he is still a Jew. His father comes to terms with his son's choice of life. He says, *Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik* (Potok 1995:283).

Asked by Reuven's father if he would bring up his son in the same way as his father brought up him, he replies, *Yes, if I can't find another way* (Potok 1995:235). Danny seems to stray from the path of Jewish tradition, the path of his father, but in fact he works for Judaism just as his father, only his method differs. Morgan (1983:17) explains:

*In The Chosen, Danny Saunders, from the heart of his religious reading of the world, encounters an element in the very heart of the secular readings of the world – Freudian psychoanalytic theory. And these two elements are at odds with one another because Freud is utterly adversary to almost all the ways of structuring the human experience found in Western religion. And yet there are some magnificent things from Freud, profound insights into the nature of man. The question that confronts an individual like Danny Saunders is, How do you come in terms with the good things in Freud and what do you do with the things that cause you tremendous stress? That's culture confrontation.*

In leaving his family, Danny is not leaving his Judaism. He is still an obedient Jew, but in a new more modern way, a Zionist one. He has every intention of remaining observant of the Commandments but he does not want the *tzaddikate* and the charisma of his father to be inherited by him. Danny admires his best friend, an *apikoros*, Reuven, for choosing a rabbinic career as he decides not to do it. As Guttman (1971:109) points out: *The comically symbolic baseball game that opens the novel, in which Danny Saunders' team wins, turns the game into a struggle over the essence of Judaism.* Likewise, Ribalow (2001:13) writes: *In that baseball game you have two aspects of Jewish Orthodoxy in contention. [...] the Eastern European aspect, which prefers to turn inward and not confront the outside world. [...] The West European more objective scientific aspect. These are in interaction with one another inside the core. That's the baseball game.*

The sequel, *The Promise* (1969), is Reuven Malter's story rather than Danny's. The first scene of the book is similar in its form and symbolism to the opening scene in *The Chosen*. Here we have a country fair, where Reuven meets a compulsive,

disturbed young Jew named Michael Gordon, the son of a Jewish scholar and humanist. Reuven, a student of a radical and fundamental rabbi, Jacob Kalman, dares to read forbidden books by Abraham Gordon, a liberal professor of Judaism, whose books contain a Hebrew warning: *This is the book of an apostate. Those who fear God are forbidden to read it* (Potok 1997:29). Guttman (1971:123) states: *Reuven's involvement with the Gordon family is thus a double one: he arranges for Michael's treatment by Danny Saunders (now a psychologist), and he is persuaded that Abraham's methods are sound ones.* Encountering Abraham's ideas, who *has been put into cherem, the Hebrew term for excommunication* (Potok 1997:49), and supporting his father's book dealing with new methods of interpreting Talmud, endangers his *smicha* (in Hebrew Ordination). His professor does not approve of new methodology and questions Reuven's father's work. This leads to Reuven's thoughts of abandoning his rabbinical studies and being given a *smicha*. Eventually, Reuven decides to take his *smicha* exams, in which he uses the new methodology of his father, and after the fierce discussion between two of his teachers, Rav Gershenson and an opponent of the new thought, Rav Kalman, he passes it.

In *The Promise* the confrontation is between a fundamentalist religion, represented here by Rev Kalman and other European rabbis, and general civilization, Western Humanism. *Reuve's father is a supporter of a methodology, we call scientific text criticism*, as Gladson (1986:4) points out.

He further comments: *It's a methodology that uses all the modern findings of archaeology, philology, ancient languages, and the new things that we know about the cultures of the ancient world and their interactions to explore the development of ancient texts.*

This causes tension between Reuven's father and Rav Kelman, who expresses his criticism of the book in strictly Orthodox Jewish newspapers, calling his article 'New book a threat to Torah Judaism'<sup>6</sup>. He claims that people who use new methods of interpreting the Bible should be excommunicated as a scholar who used such a method was committing heresy; he was destroying not only Yiddishkeit<sup>7</sup> but also the very essence of religion – the belief that the sacred texts were given by God to be studied by man, not to be written by him according to Jewish religious tradition. Those who feared God were forbidden to study such works of scholarship; they were forbidden to let their children study them. Indeed for the Jew the problem is considerably exacerbating, for the Jew all of Jewish law is predicated upon the idea that the first book of the Jewish Bible, the Torah, is literally word revealed by God to Moses at Sinai and may not be touched. The entire legal religious tradition of Judaism is founded upon the infallibility of that text: *to tamper with the sacred text is to do the violence to the core of a tradition* (Potok 1997:213). Reuven Malter

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<sup>6</sup> *Torah* refers to the Five books of Moses which is the central concept in the religious Judaic tradition.

<sup>7</sup> *Yiddishkeit* - Jewish tradition, history, Yiddish language, character or heritage of being a Jew, chiefly of Ashkenazi origin.

resolves this particular tension by using the new methodology during the *smicha* exam and while working with his father on his book. However, he is not permitted to teach Talmud in the rabbinical school of the yeshiva, he can only teach at a graduate school. Despite the Jewish fundamentalism of Rav Kalman, the very structured way of seeing the world, the inability to maneuver and question the legacy of the past that orthodox Jews are expected to absorb, master and give back to the coming generation untouched, unaltered, there is a group of educated Jews such as Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter who *observe the Commandments and are followers of Judaism* (Potok 1997:224). As Reuven's father says: *Abraham Gordon has achieved something that is remarkable. To develop a theology for those who can no longer believe literally in God and revelation and who still wish to remain observant and not abandon the tradition - that is a remarkable achievement* (Potok 1997:224). As Ribalow (2001:18) notices: *you can be inside the core of Judaism and at the same time enjoy the world.*

*In The Beginning* (1975) is a story of a boy, David Laurie, growing up on the streets of New York and encountering anti-Semitism from boys of the same age. Being the son of a Jewish activist enables him to meet a wide range of other Jews having different outlooks upon life. As his father, an avid member of Zionist movement, is busy organizing help for Jews in Europe and raising money to bring them to America, young David is left alone to his studies. The only person who helps him in reading Torah is a friend of his father Mr. Bader. Studying Torah at the age of eleven, David is puzzled by different readings of it and explanations, he says:

*Rashi*<sup>8</sup> *says things I don't understand sometimes, Papa. I feel angry at Rashi sometimes. The teacher says Rashi is holy, but I feel angry at him. He puts things into the Torah which aren't there* (Potok 1972:24).

Finding reading of the Torah imprecise, he searches for other sources to explain his doubts. He decides to get to know the Christian Bible and learn about *ideas and images in many of the subsequent passages which I could not grasp, but I understood more than I had come prepared thinking I would* (Potok 1972:38). All the time he spent reading and studying the New Testament, gives him the opportunity to see the Bible from different points. He sees the Bible not only from his own Jewish perspective, the perceptive of Rabbinic Judaism, which has its own special way of interpreting it, but David sees it through the perspective of the Western scholars. He reads books by Hertz and Hoffman, which shows him a new way of looking at the text. He begins to get a sense of what the words really meant in their original sense. David also sees the sophisticated artistry that went into the creation of the texts of the Bible. His reading of such sources is not approved by his teachers and schoolmates as

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<sup>8</sup> *Rashi* (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) was the most famous and outstanding Biblical commentator of the Middle Ages.

*they are anti-Semitic German goyim who tried to destroy the Bible* (Potok 1972:54). For a religious Jew, such a way of viewing the Bible is not acceptable but David Lurie is faced with an extraordinary dilemma when he suddenly realizes that imbedded inside the instrumentality are powerful truths:

*It hurt that they thought me close to or already beyond the borderline of orthodoxy because I was reading scholarly books about the Bible. It hurt that no one understood I had entered a war zone, that the battlefield was the Torah, that the causalities were ideas, and that without the danger of serious exposure the field of combat could not be scouted, the nature of the enemy could not be learned, the weapons and strategy of counter attack could not be developed* (Potok 1972:90).

As Gladson (1986:8) observes:

*Scientific Bible Criticism is the most powerful instrumentality brought to bear upon that text. Biblical criticism opens up the layers of Biblical tradition. It reveals to us the contradiction inside the Biblical text. It shows us the extent to which the Bible is locked in a cultural context that is enormously broad in space and time.*

David Lurie is aware of it. The text of the Bible fascinates him so much that he studies it, using the scientific method, in every bit of spare time he finds. Although his rabbinical teacher Rav Tuvya Sharfman despises this method, claiming that *it is a shallow work and a shallow mind is a sin against God*, he allows David to take his ordination exams, after which he proceeds to study the Bible at the university with secular professors.

David Lurie *In The Beginning* makes the intellectual decision to commit himself to this new instrumentality he comes across in his life. He knows fully well that no fundamentalist community can countenance at this point in time an alliance with Bible criticism, and so he leaves his world but not tradition. At the end of the book, while studying rare manuscripts in Frankfurt, he visits the concentration camp Bergen Belsen, where all his European family was slaughtered. He recites the Mourner's Kaddish and hears the words of his late uncle *never forget the past as you nourish the present* (Potok 1972:38). With such words he comes to terms with his 'new life' and the tradition of Judaism. As further explained by Walden (2013:132), David Lurie's 'road' acts a symbol of the Genesis's *berashith*<sup>9</sup> 'in the beginning':

*From the home and the yeshiva to Poland and the camps and back, from the isolated Orthodox and Hasidic ghettos of Williamsburg and Crown Heights [...]*

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<sup>9</sup> In Hebrew *berashith* translates as 'in the beginning' as described in *Legends of the Bible* by Louis Ginzberg (1992).

*to David's remembered prophetic bar mitzvah reading from Amos, Potok's moves from despair to hope, to the restoration of the health of the people of Israel.*

These three books by Chaim Potok show similarity in presenting a human being and his experience in finding a new way of Judaism. All the characters, starting with Danny Saunders, Reuven Malter, Gershon Loran and ending with David Lurie find a new map of the human experience. Although they experience a tension and confrontation of ideas within their culture, they are still obedient to their Judaic culture as Judaism wants Jewish people to map the world with certain kinds of information that our protagonists possess. And that information consists of the value system, the tensions, the success and the failures, the dreams, and the terrors of the Jewish past. Moreover, as observed by Chametzky (2001:987): *In Potok's novels, the Jewish American experience inevitably evolves the practicing of religious ritual; it is not a quest to escape, redefine, or supplant religious belief.* These novels demonstrate how to negotiate protagonists' religious identity within a secular society.

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