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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SECULAR AND SACRED IN THE ART OF CHAIM POTOK

BY

KATHERINE ANNE WOODMAN



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
FALL 1993



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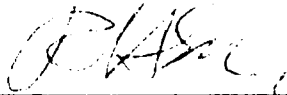
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Abstract

A rabbi, a philosopher, and an observant Jew, Chaim Potok has begun a systematic exploration and a sequence of interwoven novels dealing with Jewish-American cultural confrontation. In his creativity Potok has been led to re-vision conventional assumptions about what Judaism is and its place in American life: instead of concentrating on the Jew as traveller to America, or European immigrant, Potok examines his Jewish characters as religious questers, sceptics, visionaries, and mentors. For Potok the process of story telling re-visions Judaism as a way of being and believing. Potok carefully explores the seemingly disparate Orthodox, Hasidic, and more liberal expressions of Jewish tradition, as well as "Jewish theology, liturgy, history and scholarship," and this task represents something new in American literature (S. Lillian Kremer, "Chaim Potok" 232).

Potok addresses the question of the suffering of good people throughout his work and differs from most Modernist writers in his conclusion that humanity inhabits a benign universe with a benevolent ruler, and that there are ancient ways to understand this theological truth. Potok invariably echoes Jeremiah, who calls for a return to "ancient paths" (Jeremiah 6:16), and reintroduces to the modern reader the surprisingly relevant ancient texts, including Kabbalah, Talmud, and Torah. The premise of Potok's investigation of cultural confrontation between Jewishness and secular life is predicated upon the essential meaningfulness to the universe: Potok's writing is finally affirmative.

This study examines all of Potok's eight novels to retrieve the body of sacred and secular texts--from the Zohar to Picasso's Guernica--that are essential to a "fit

reading" of Potok's oeuvre. Potok examines, for instance, the role of painting, the importance of women believers, and the intersection between Jewish and Korean, Japanese, Christian, and secular systems of belief. The result is a genre of the novel emphasizing Jewish texts and universal problems.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, A Passion for Beginnings

Re-vision--the art of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.

Adrienne Rich

The Context

In Studies in Classic American Literature (1924), D. H. Lawrence writes: "In true art there is always the double rhythm of creating and destroying" (68). In 1967 when Chaim Potok, rabbi, scholar, artist, writer, published his first novel The Chosen, he began a systematic exploration and development of the important themes of Jewish-American cultural confrontation that have continued through his seven subsequent novels. In his creativity Potok has been led to "destroy" conventional assumptions about what Judaism is and its place in American life: instead of concentrating on the Jew as traveller to America, or European immigrant, Potok examines his Jewish characters as religious questers, sceptics, visionaries, and mentors. For Potok the process of story telling revises Judaism as a way of being and believing. Potok carefully explores the seemingly disparate Orthodox, Hasidic, and more liberal expressions of Jewish tradition, and this task represents something new in American literature. Furthermore, Potok is the first American novelist to demonstrate that "writing about Jewish theology, liturgy, history, and scholarship" is appropriate to the genre of the American novel (S. Lillian Kremer, "Chaim Potok" 232). Kremer states:

Pre-Potok American-Jewish fiction often failed to delineate either the rich diversity within Orthodox Judaism or the scope and variety of other Jewish denominations. The theological underpinning and the cultural and social manifestations of American Judaism had, until Potok's novels, gone largely unexplored. Where others have been brief and superficial, Potok has been substantial and substantive. In so doing, he has made an important contribution to American literature.

("Chaim Potok" 236)

Potok is equally creative in accepting the appropriateness of the novel written in English as a means of furthering an understanding of Jewish theology and the attractions of being Jewish. It is remarkable that Potok--knowing, as a rabbi, that secular art forms have been dismissed for centuries among Jewish believers, and aware, as a philosopher and reader, that modern secular art has often been dismissive of religious belief--writes the century's longest sequence of novels about Judaism.

In Potok's background are found the Jewish and secular preparations needed for creating what amounts to a new American literary sub-genre, the "American novel of Jewish texts." To facilitate his desire to write Potok began an extensive university career that involved training in religious and secular institutions: "Always, whenever I chose to do something it was, and still is, to utilize it in fiction" (Kremer, "An Interview" 84). To deepen his understanding of his own culture and faith, Potok attended Yeshiva University in New York City, where he earned a B.A. *summa cum laude* (1950), and then pursued rabbinic ordination at the Jewish Theological

Seminary (1954). Following this, Potok studied philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned his doctorate in 1965. With respect to both sources of knowledge and inspiration, Potok writes:

My whole world has been an effort to utilize the sophisticated learning at the seminary for fiction, the very sophisticated learning at the University of Pennsylvania, where I got my doctorate in secular philosophy, very deliberately chosen to see what the center of the Western World was really like, for fiction. (Kremer, "An Interview" 85)

There is congruence between Potok's rich educational background and his diverse work experience as an Army chaplain in Korea (1956-1957), instructor at various universities, editor of a number of journals, committee member on the translation team for the Jewish Publication Society's Hebrew Bible,¹ and writer of numerous scholarly and critical articles, the titles of which appear in the bibliography to this study.

Before we look at Jewish texts and influences, it should be noted that the chief literary influences in Potok's life include novels, specifically Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited and James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Potok first read Waugh's Brideshead Revisited as a youth, and was captivated by the power of a novel "to successfully transport readers into cultural environments foreign

¹ The JPS translation of the Hebrew Bible will be used throughout the thesis, unless otherwise indicated.

from their own" ("Chaim Potok" 232). Potok has discussed the intersection between his reading and his experience in an article appearing in Literature and the Urban Experience (Michael Jaye and A. Watts, eds.), entitled "Culture Confrontation in Urban America" (164). The shared interest of Waugh and Joyce, the *bildungsroman*, the novel of formation, became an important influence on Potok and is a recurrent pattern in each of his novels. Potok investigates the conflicts that arise from entering or rejecting the belief system of your community, country, and with equal importance, your family. Like characters in Waugh's fiction, Potok's protagonists "display a strong sense of continuity with national history and are often presented against a backdrop of the demands of family and religion" ("Chaim Potok" 232). Like the works of Joyce, which according to Potok "[were] almost as much a part of my growing up as were the Bible and Talmud," Potok's novels are replete with what he describes as "mythic tonalities" and "archetypal tales" ("The First Eighteen Years" 101). Potok states:

Interestingly enough, I feel closer to someone like Joyce who really did, in terms of models, precisely what I'm trying to do. Joyce was right at the heart of the Catholic world and at the same time at the heart of western secular humanism. And his confrontation, both as an artist and as a human being in the twentieth century was a *core-to-core confrontation*. As a human being, he fused his Catholicism with his secularism and produced a Catholic-secular way of writing, if such a thing is possible. His epiphanies, his sacrament of language, the way

he structures and sees things are all Catholic, Jesuitical, and he went the secular route through his Catholicism. That didn't happen to me. I stayed inside the Jewish tradition and took the secular into it. (Kremer, "An Interview" 96-97, my emphasis)

Kauvar also uncovers the same patterns of influence in her interview with Potok ("An Interview" 294-297). Potok's affinities to Waugh and Joyce extend to include Flannery O'Connor and Graham Greene who are, as Potok describes, "models, in this century, for what it is I'm trying to do with my work" (Kremer, "An Interview" 96).

In "The First Eighteen Years," Potok assesses his literary career as a confrontation between contending cultures: "Culture interaction is my subject--ideas from the cores of cultures in confrontation" (103). In "Culture Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer's Beginnings," Potok had identified his interest in "[the] individual and society in polarization," and, moreover, in what happens "when two ultimate commitments--one from your sub-culture, the other from the umbrella culture--meet in you and you love them both and they are antithetical one to the other" (164, 166). In this essay Potok affirmed the possibility of a religious commitment lived out in a secular society, which "makes no fundamental appeal to the supernatural," and explored the social, psychological, and religious issues constellated by such tension (162). There is, in Potok's novels, a growing intensity of cultural interaction, from the confrontation between Jewish orthodoxy and Freud (The Chosen), to the tensions evoked when a woman voluntarily enters the Jewish community and challenges the elemental patriarchy the group espouses (Davita's

Harp). Potok suggests cultural conflict introduces to his texts a "dimension of Greek tragedy" precisely because the clash erupts between "two equally valid systems of values." This clash appears in the lives of his characters who are all essentially good, noble people and who suffer dearly ("Culture Confrontation" 166).

Potok addresses the question of the suffering of good people throughout his work and differs from most writers of this century in his conclusion that humanity inhabits a benign universe with a benevolent ruler, and that there are ancient ways to understand this theological truth. Potok invariably echoes Jeremiah, who calls for a return to "ancient paths" (Jeremiah 6:16), and reintroduces to the modern reader the surprisingly relevant ancient texts, including Kabbalah, Talmud, and Torah. The premise of Potok's investigation of cultural confrontation between Jewishness and secular life is predicated upon the essential meaningfulness to the universe: Potok's writing is always affirmative. In his article, "The State of Jewish Belief," Potok suggests that the problem of meaning is central to the twentieth century and that in light of this problem one faces a choice: to concede life to be meaningless and absurd, or to "seek to find some significance in seeming meaninglessness" (127). Potok identifies the response of Judaism as the latter, and places himself "provisionally" in agreement:

The assertion of emptiness, blindness, essential meaninglessness as an inherent characteristic of the totality of things seems to me to be an inadequate response--for there is after all much around us that has apparent meaning. I would rather live in what I take to be a

meaningful world and be staggered by moments of apparent absurdity than in an absurd world and be troubled by instances of meaning. (127)

Potok's theological declaration is a code by which to uncover another important premise, the connection, for Potok, between theology and *praxis*, which describes the congruence between belief and behaviour. Potok writes:

The notion that the universe is intrinsically meaningful is, for me a provisional absolute. At the present stage of my thinking I am thoroughly committed to that absolute. Were this commitment ever to be shaken, the entire structure of my thought would have to be reshaped and my pattern of religious acting-out might well undergo alteration. For I am also committed to the notion that theology and behaviour must be organically related. A theology that is not linked directly to a pattern of behaviour is a blowing of wind and a macabre game with words. And a pattern of behaviour that is not linked to a system of thought is an instance of religious robotry. (127)

Congruence between thought and action, so central to Potok's life, occurs in his novels which are a kind of fictive reflection of the artist's commitments. Potok's chief characters learn to live the "examined life," to engage the difficult circumstances of being human, to perceive the painful ambiguities from a position buttressed by their knowledge that these perceptions, though wounding, are ancient. For example, although The Chosen concludes with the Hasidic Danny in secular dress, minus his

distinctive earlocks and caftan, and heading towards Columbia University, the reader knows the young man is, nevertheless, a *tzaddik*, that is, a righteous man, a keeper of the commandments. So too, Asher Lev, in exile in his modern Babylon, Nice, painting art with non-traditional iconography, examines his life and the life of the Jewish people from a position and with a goal that Potok connects to Jewish belief. In these novels, in spite of their being non-culminative, there is a life-affirming "Yes" which functions like a guiding "pillar of cloud" or "pillar of fire."

That Potok writes from within a specific religious tradition is not to be understood as his encouraging or dramatising blind acceptance of the faith's paradigms. Often his characters resist, modify, or reject parts of Judaism and its practises. Potok's protagonists are inherently rebels and critical thinkers--to some degree each destroys while creating (or re-creating), just as Potok and D. H. Lawrence apparently see the modern novel doing--who constantly "look back" in order to re-vision their faith; re-vision is necessary in light of the complex pressures of life in modern America, and in light of the destruction of European Jewry, a constant background for Potok's novels. In this process of re-creation they secure their own survival as individuals, and ironically foster the preservation of the group in its new circumstances. In an interview with Elaine Kauvar, Potok states that "a civilization that can't say something to its total people or that isn't in a seminal place of creativity really doesn't speak in a significant way to the world or to itself" (316). The key words are "significant" and "seminal": for Potok, "voice" is essential to a civilization, even if what is said is neither permanent nor culminative, and the passing

on of insights is a personal necessity that also establishes communal continuity and value. For Potok, the test to disclose the vitality and relevance of Judaism as it is expressed in the western world is its ability to "speak significantly." To attain such a voice two things are necessary for the Jewish-American artist: intimate knowledge of the sub-culture (Judaism) and the larger society (modern America), and a Judaism that is open to change and growth. To cultivate this voice Potok suggests it is necessary to possess "the binocular vision of the iconoclast, the individual who grows up inside inherited systems of value, and while growing, begins to recoil from the games, masks, and hypocrisies he sees all around him" ("Culture Confrontation" 164).

Potok's novels disclose his commitments: the protagonists are students who easily manage an encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish theology, liturgy, sacred texts, and rabbinics. Furthermore, they explore the vast potential of secular study through art, newspapers, education, systems of thought, social institutions (from softball games, to universities, to the U. S. Army), while at the same time expressing warmth and regard for Jewish faith and community. Potok's protagonists remain observant Jews; yet, they acknowledge the dark aspects of the tradition and their relationships, discern the dark side of the secular culture, perceive their own dark side, and struggle with questions of meaning. The tension, however, is not located simply in the character's cognitive aspect; rather it is intensely realized in the emotions and circumstances of the protagonist, whose loyalty to faith and family contests with loyalty to self, and loyalty to his/her sense of place in America, and, in The Book of Lights, the larger world.

While a chronological examination of Potok's canon would provide the conventional framework for viewing the author's plans and achievements, Potok's novels sometimes move in pairs and in fact, if we are to accept Potok's assertions about his overall strategy for his oeuvre, there is justification for dealing with the novels non-sequentially. Responding to Kauvar's questions regarding pattern and scheme, Potok states:

What I'm doing is setting the groundwork, and I'm finished with that now. I have in my cast of characters a psychologist, Danny Saunders; a talmudist, Reuven Malter; I also have a Bible scholar, David Lurie; an artist, Asher Lev; a mystic, Gershon Loran. Now I have a feminist writer; that's what Davita's going to be. . . . All of these people are going to be brought into the contemporary period, and the first one who will be brought into this part of the century will be Davita. (295)

Because my reading of the novels supports Potok's statement of intention, I will begin with linking The Chosen and The Promise, for in the latter novel Potok continues the life stories of his protagonists. This allows him to demonstrate the efficacy of the life choices made in the first book, and the other novels will be discussed with similar linkages, where that is appropriate.

The Texts

From the beginning Potok's chosen task has been to expand the dialogue where Jewish life and thought are being tested. In a way, American life has been similarly challenged in this century, as has European Jewish culture, which flowed

from the Old World to the New, and then outward to every corner of the map. For Potok this expansion and evolution provide the perfect opportunity for an increasingly complicated exploration and explanation of Judaism's values. These values are examined as they apply to Jewish men who believe, then to sceptics, then to world travelling and comparativist Americans, then to Jewish women, and then even to Koreans.

The Chosen, Potok's first novel (1967), explores the conflict between Jewish faith, Freudian psychology, and the tension between two Jewish traditions: the Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism, the former embraced by Danny, the latter by Reuven, the novel's narrator. The text is set against the larger background of the Second World War and the subsequent formation of the State of Israel. The two young men provide contrasting perspectives on religious, social, political, and even geo-political issues. Each faces the difficult choice between faithfulness to self and the demands of community, whether American, Jewish, or both. Reuven's dilemma in part involves his willingness to apply secular higher-critical methods to the study of Talmud--a technique denounced by his religious group. On the other hand, Danny's rigorous study of psychology, ironically motivated by his father's choice to raise him in silence, threatens to separate him from his Hasidic ties. Both characters struggle with these tensions while also managing the dynamic and often painful friendship they share.

Potok's examination of the developing brotherhood of Reuven and Danny begins in the specialized and closed communities of Orthodox and Hasidic males, with

parallel stories of acceptance and re-interpretation of the tradition. Quickly, however, Potok extends this drama of the Jewish confrontation. The Promise, Potok's second novel (1970), is sequel to The Chosen and continues the conflicts developed in the first work. Danny is now a psychologist who brings psychic health to a young boy, Michael Gordon, wounded by a zealous Jewish community, and Reuven pursues an ordination jeopardized by his decision to emend a Talmudic text by offering a variant manuscript reading--a further utilization of higher-critical methods--and by his refusal to deny his friendship with the Gordon family. The fusion of secular scholarship with orthodoxy that evolves in the lives of Danny and Reuven and the impact this fusion has on their fathers and the Crown Heights-Williamsburg Jewish district are the core of this second of the pair of novels. Potok reveals the cost involved to the characters as they process their respective conflicts, as, through their relationships with fathers, each other, teachers, and peers, the young men form/reveal their identities. In spite of the oppression of the Holocaust, the quick succession of Arab-Israeli wars, and the acerbic attacks of uncomprehending colleagues and instructors, "each character defines himself, understands himself, and celebrates himself as a twentieth-century Jew" (Kremer, "Chaim Potok" 235). In effect, the author presents two counter-traditionalist Jewish males and accepts and invites the reader to consider the rare conclusion that Orthodox Judaism may be more flexible and inclusive than it is exclusive.

My Name is Asher Lev, Potok's third novel (1972), is a *künstlerroman* tracing Asher Lev's growth to artistic maturity. The central issue is the conflict between the

Hasidic ethic which esteems only work of overt religious value that directly benefits the group and Asher's giftedness and devotion to art. Asher's artistic gift creates a number of traumas within his immediate family and the larger community. His parents are divided in their reaction: his father's response moves from dismissive disregard to condemnation; his mother, on the other hand, is interested less in a theological reading of the talent than in simple concern for her son himself. Thus the third novel carries us to the problem of reconciling the profession of faith with the business of art. It also offers a variation of the theme of conflict, displaying the conflicts of artist with family and artistic drive with spiritual impetus. In effect, Potok supports the demands of the imagination within a traditional system of belief. Potok's affinity for James Joyce may be seen in the linkage between the Jewish artist rebel Asher Lev and the Irish-Catholic Stephen Daedalus.

The position and power of the Hasidic rabbi over individuals in the community, while important to the first two novels, are even more crucial to the protagonist's experience in My Name is Asher Lev. The significance of tradition is intensified--mystically in the recurrent appearances of Asher's "mythic ancestor" and realistically in the person of the Rebbe. Both contribute to the artist's torment and growth and act as mentors guiding Asher to maturity. Indeed, at the conclusion the joint influence of the Rebbe, with his exhortation to Asher to leave Brooklyn, and the epiphany Asher experiences while painting his ancestor brings Asher to the place which is at once exile and freedom. In that provisional ending, the reader senses that art permits the alienated person an imaginative power to re-enter and re-vision

Judaism. For a Rabbi/novelist like Potok, Asher's choice is heroic and revolutionary, whether it is the decision of this character or, as it seems to have been, whether it is Potok's own way to express his rabbinic and artistic callings (Kauvar 296).

The Gift of Asher Lev, the sequel to My Name is Asher Lev, was published in 1990, eighteen years after the first Asher Lev story. Asher, now middle-aged, married, and the father of two children, is in an artistic desert. After living twenty years in Nice, France, disconnected from his American ties and flourishing as an artist, he is called home to observe a week of ritual mourning for the death of his uncle and becomes slowly re-enmeshed in family and community. Although his wife and children experience health and vitality in their new-found American family, Asher persistently resists an entanglement that represents for him artistic death. Asher has re-entered American-Jewish communal life in two ways: through ritual and family.

Asher possesses a new gift which brings the artist pain and delight: his son Avrumel. Avrumel completes the cycle begun with Asher's rebellion, for the boy is the now aged Rebbe's choice of successor. Asher, in turn, must choose whether to acquiesce to the Rebbe's request to raise Avrumel. To affirm the Rebbe's choice would mean sacrificing the rights to a normal father-son relationship in order to meet the needs of the community. Asher's decision to "give" Avrumel to the Rebbe for religious training is an act which forges an important link to Asher's past, and the novel concludes with Asher in a liminal and costly position. On the one hand his artistic gift continues to draw Asher from America--he can paint only in France; on the other hand his son is now firmly, and soon to be powerfully, the centre of the

American Hasidic community. Ironically, the pain invoked by the gift of his son to the Rebbe and to the community transforms Asher's personal and artistic desert; the novel concludes with the Asher in Nice, painting. Asher has re-enacted the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Set in this framework, this longer perspective of biblical narratology, the father-son relationship seems less alienated than typologic, lessening but not removing the reader's sense of shock at the Rebbe's demand, the community's needs, and Asher's reaction.

As the use of the opening phrase of the Book of Genesis reveals, In the Beginning, Potok's fourth novel (1976), carries his study of Judaism's relevance back to first questions: the nature of God's design for humankind and for Jews in particular. Investigating the origins of Jewish passivity, Potok's novel foregrounds one of the most horrific of cultural confrontations, the trauma of violence, as it occurs in the pogroms, the Holocaust, and even in racial anger in the streets of America. The reactions of Jews and of Jewish intellectual thought during two millennia of anti-semitism is the focus of this work and the presentation is global. The protagonist's father Max is a soldier, not a rabbi or scholar, who uses the vehicle of "battle" as his way of best understanding and connecting with life. A soldier in Poland, Max immigrates to America after a pogrom destroys his home village. Unlike Reb Saunders of The Chosen and The Promise, who uses spiritual charisma to transport family and friends to safety in America, Max Lurie relies on hard work and economic skill to accomplish a similar end. Unfortunately, anti-semitic feeling also crosses the ocean with the immigrant Jewish community and infiltrates the Bronx,

which is the most pluralistic of Potok's American settings. The protagonist David, the son of Max Lurie, is subjected to violent, racial attacks perpetrated by the immigrant sons of Polish anti-semites. No longer is the challenge in Potok's novel to show the relevance of art to traditional Jewish thought: now it is to expose the problem of violence.

In David's arsenal of weapons, art and imagination mediate between his early training and his growing psychological and physical needs. To cope with the growing violence reported from Europe and experienced at home, David imaginatively recreates the legendary golem of Jewish folk-tradition. Together, David and the golem are heroic and salvific: they destroy the oppressive Nazis, restore order, and rescue the Torah from fiery extinction. Thus, creation-and-destruction is invoked as a boy's hope and dream. David cannot, however, sustain the fantasy--the increasing horror only reveals the tragic impotence of a young boy unable to bring meaning to his world. Finally, the legendary mythic figure is replaced by the liturgy of *Yom Kippur* prayers and by Torah, as David embraces the Book of Genesis, which become his centre and hope. In this novel the father is a warrior, and yet the book's protagonist/son is still a scholar, as in the earlier novels. But he is an imaginative one, and his battle with anti-semitism is not worked out with weapons and armies, but with words and ideas. He fights his campaign in the field of biblical scholarship, engaging in rigorous debate with the German Graf-Wellhausen theory, which for David undercuts the authority of the sacred text. David chooses to learn the interpretative techniques of higher-criticism in order to demonstrate to his

communities, academic and religious, the value of Torah. Just as his father saved a remnant of Jewish families from extinction in German death camps, David works to save Jewish tradition and scholarship from extinction by German theory. In each case, Potok explores how Judaism re-creates itself in order to survive in a violent world. The archetype for father and son is the same historical Jewish figure, King David the poet-warrior, who serves in this novel as a complex symbol of the Jewish will.

The Book of Lights, Potok's fifth novel (1981), returns to the familiar pattern of juxtaposing two young men who are friends, although they are from very different Jewish backgrounds. Through their shared experiences, Potok discloses the centrality to life, and to Jewish life in particular, of ambiguity; he employs light as the chief example of ambiguity. For Gershon Loran, the protagonist, light is understood mystically, as an important symbol in Kabbalah. On the other hand, Arthur Leiden, his friend, apprehends light as death--a symbol fraught with unresolved guilt because of his father's involvement in the discovery of atomic power. Gershon and Arthur's journeys merge when they are young men studying for the rabbinate. Gershon pursues this path of study to recapture and comprehend an epiphany experienced at sixteen; Arthur, after graduation from Harvard with a degree in physics, begins his vocation as a means of expiating his father's sins. Once again Potok's focus is on separate doorways to belief: one leads from delight as a psychological and aesthetic revelation, the other from a sense of moral dread. Rather than propounding a theory of Jewish life consumed by guilt or totally free and lighted by revelation, Potok shows

that there is room for both in his theological economy, just as creation and destruction fit D. H. Lawrence's "double rhythm" to true art.

In The Book of Lights Potok broadens the setting from New York to include the mysterious Eastern worlds of Korea and Japan after the Second World War. The effect of these profoundly different cultures on Gershon is intense, provoking struggles with the difficult questions of the relevance of Judaism to the larger world. In this novel Potok explores the horror of the Hiroshima events and their implications for a religious Jew. The setting amid the unfamiliar beauty of the East signals Potok's introduction of western religion to non-western settings. This novel heightens the reader's awareness of the gaps among the worlds of the Jew, the Anglo-Saxon, and the Asian. In an act of courage, Potok, through his character Gershon, asserts dramatically that the only languages that seem able to make sense of this tension are the mystical language of Kabbalah and the liturgical language of *Kaddish*. At the novel's close Gershon's search is not culminated, nor does he achieve the sense of acceptance that some of Potok's other protagonists do. Instead, he continues to travel, going from Korea, back to America, and finally even farther East, to Jerusalem. There he will continue his study of the uncertain world of Kabbalah.

I am the Clay, Potok's eighth novel (1992), appeared eleven years after The Book of Lights. In this short novel Potok writes the story of Kim Sin Gyu, the young Korean boy who served as Gershon's houseboy in The Book of Lights. The tale is set entirely in Korea and traces the journey of three people brought together by chance while fleeing from their villages during the Korean War. The orphan theme,

central to the first novel, is also developed in I am the Clay. The sole survivor of his village, the young child would surely die but for the care of the old couple who find him in a ditch and nurture him back to life. The conflicts between mysticism and realism and between the rational and the irrational continue to be developed in this novel. I am the Clay, however, is the most "non-Jewish" of Potok's novels: Jewish sacred books, traditions, community, and rituals are not mentioned. In some interesting ways this novel functions in Potok's collection much as the Book of Esther, which does not contain one direct reference to Yahweh, functions in the Biblical canon.

Another aspect unique to I am the Clay is the strong presence of the maternal figure in the woman who finds and succours the boy. Until Davita's Harp, the mother figure is largely absent in Potok's novels; here, however, it is the woman who directly saves the child's life. Potok extends his treatment of the role of women, as this aged woman defies her husband and her culture in order to protect the dying child.

Other Potokian concerns and devices appear. They include the *leitmotif* of words and inscriptions, and the image of "clay figures" representing the divine and the infernal, the beginning and the catastrophic conclusion to human existence (Adam and the Golem). In addition, there is the theme of violence, and there are the symbolic scars and wounds encountered in other Potok texts: all of these are re-created, developed, and expanded in I am the Clay. However, because I am the Clay was published after much of the work on this thesis was organized, I do not attempt

to deal with it at the same length as the chapters covering the other novels.

Nevertheless, even a short look at this short novel suggests that it contains the unity of ideas, styles, intertextuality, and imagery that occur in all of Potok's works. Like an Aeolian Harp, Potok's oeuvre resonates in response to what Potok must believe are eternal and universal vibrations, emanations, and intimations of an immortality rejected by most modern readers, critics, and theorists. In a sense "I am the Clay" is a complicated, layered trope and could serve as the title for any of Potok's eight novels, all of which are statements of identity. I am the Clay recalls Jewish, Christian, and non-western accounts of the creation of the species. Like In the Beginning, and The Chosen, and The Promise, I am the Clay conjures for the reader the primal "stuff," the source of human life as well as Jewish life in particular.

Davita's Harp, Potok's sixth novel (1985), establishes a different direction because for the first time the central character is a woman: in fact the tensions are doubled since now the conflicts are between Jewish male and Jewish female, as well as between Jewish culture and American culture. The problems of contemporary Judaism concerning the role of women are confronted directly by Potok. In earlier novels his Jewish female characters disclosed the first steps in a movement toward dialogue about the gender issue. The earlier women were predominantly scholars: in The Promise, Rachel Gordon is a graduate student in English writing her thesis on the "Ithaca" section of Joyce's Ulysses; in Asher Lev, Asher's mother is a graduate student in Russian Politics; in The Gift, Asher's wife is an art critic and writer of children's novels; and in The Book of Lights, Gershon's lover is a professor of

philosophy. Scholarship, which is an important value and powerful signifier in the orthodox Jewish male community is readily attained by the women, who are fictive pioneers in these pursuits. The question raised implicitly in the novels is what else academic, political, or artistic, might these women achieve, given the opportunity. Davita directly confronts this question of the ethical and unethical treatments of women in the Jewish community and in America. Potok signals his sympathy for women, and once again his courage as a writer is disclosed by his adopting a female voice for telling the novel, a controversial gesture that furthers his goal of demonstrating the value of a woman's mind, spirit, and body. A culture that does not speak to women's issues is not, by Potok's standards, speaking significantly.

Davita narrates her own story, beginning with her childhood and concluding when she is thirteen. The only child of a mixed marriage--her mother is a non-observant Jew, her father, a non-observant Christian--Davita journeys in quest of her own spiritual needs, bringing with her an early political awareness and zeal cultivated by her parents' ardent loyalty to communism. She is also driven to find some way to hold her personal world together, to transcend politics and end the pain and disruption of her life. To that end she seeks solace through liturgy, community, and worship. However, Davita's religious experience is not simply positive, for her growing commitment to Judaism is not equally reciprocated by the Jewish community, a fact Davita is made painfully aware of when, because she is female, she is not awarded the academic prize she deserves. Her own independent sense of self, her

decision to pursue a writing career, and the healing power of her imagination rescue her. As Potok has stated:

Every time Davita confronts something unbearable, she restructures it through the power of her imagination. Finally at the end of the novel when she suffers this terrible indignity, she restructures the graduation ceremony by having her uncle, her father, and her aunt there along with everything that she has imagined. (Elaine Kauvar, "An Interview" 298)

In Davita's Harp, Potok deepens the dialogue between Judaism and the artistic imagination that is central to his novels. In many ways, Davita's Harp, with its concentration on a young woman growing up as an artist, is Potok's most experimental and challenging work, especially for Orthodox Jews.

As the next section of this chapter indicates, critical responses to Potok's works have varied, but certain qualities are shared. For one thing, most critics have grasped neither Potok's design of intertwining novels, nor his investigation of the significance to modern life of ancient Judaism. While some understand assimilationist and secular Jewish writers, few critics seem equipped with the information necessary to decode the Jewish religious and theological references in Potok's works. With few exceptions the critics do not grasp Potok's rebelliousness and the themes of creation and destruction, nor the import of his dialogue with Orthodox and Hasidic traditions towards art, violence, non-Jewish religions and perspectives and in Davita's Harp,

women. Potok has been read too often by critics who are themselves alienated from the author's background or unfriendly to his endeavour.

The Critics

Sheldon Grebstein affirms The Chosen as a happy combination of "basic emphases and materials of the Jewish Movement" and "peculiarly American optimism and social idealism." For Grebstein, Potok's work "shares in the appeal inherent in all art--the power to render archetypal experience in accessible cultural forms" ("Phenomenon" 25). Curt Leviant, on the other hand, suggests "the debut of the Hasid as American hero is marred by the novel's lacklustre craftsmanship and uncombed prose" ("The Hasid" 80).

Hugh Nissenson, in his review of The Promise, criticizes Potok's "craftsmanship, in his frequent reluctance to dramatize," yet also writes: "The Chosen established Chaim Potok's reputation as a significant writer. The Promise re-affirms it" (6). Michael Gilmore, however, berates The Promise as facile: complications between fathers and sons are disposed of "with ease;" Reuven and Danny "both presumably in their early twenties, are never guilty of such youthful indiscretions as passion or rage;" universal problems are "dispelled by self-awareness;" and finally, Potok's symbolism is shallow, "setting up one-to-one relationships which are barren of insight or subtlety" ("A Fading Promise" 76-79).

My Name Is Asher Lev has received the most critical response. Rabbi Mendel Lipskar accuses Potok of an unauthentic description of Hasidim in his first three novels ("My Name is Not Asher Lev" 32). Guy Davenport writes that Potok exceeds

mere competence and creates a work that is "a tragedy of terrifying dimensions" ("My Name is Asher Lev" 5). Davenport continues "Mr. Potok has a sure sense of how to diagram tragic misunderstanding. He knows that it must happen in a context of faith and love, and that it must be the exercise of faith and love that breaks hearts" (5). Finally, Robert Milch suggests "My Name is Asher Lev is narrated with a fluent simplicity that belies its intellectual depth and the technical skill of its construction" ("My Name is Asher Lev" 66). While the observations of these critics are interesting, it is necessary to expand upon their basic insights in order to more fully appreciate the subtlety of Potok's art.

With respect to In the Beginning, Hugh Nissenson commends Potok's "talent for evoking the physical details of the world;" for the technical accomplishment of the structure of the book, which Nissenson identifies as a "recapitulation of the book of Genesis;" for superb manipulation of the "mythic elements;" and for struggling with the complex problem of "sustaining religious faith in a meaningless world" ("My Name is David Lurie" 38). At the other extreme is Daphne Merkin's response, which accuses Potok of misrepresenting Orthodox Judaism: "its conception is at once too hallowed and too facile," and "Judaism in Potok's world is never simply lived; it is, rather, an intellectual curiosity that is always being examined, questioned, held up to the light, displayed" ("Why Potok is Popular" 75). This question should give way to the primary one: What is the vision of Judaism Potok offers?

With reference to The Book of Lights, Johanna Kaplan writes, "Chaim Potok has written a powerful, controversial and enigmatic novel" ("Two Ways of Life" 28).

Conversely, Ruth Wisse dislikes Potok's selective use of history, especially in Potok's "Judaizing the development of the atom bomb," an act she feels unjustly validates the false guilt and self-accusation typically pervading Jewish morality ("Jewish Dreams" 47). Edward Abramson identifies an important alteration in Potok's predictable pattern of linking together two religious Jewish males from different backgrounds: "There is greater complexity here in that *both* men must make crucial adjustments of belief and attitude that do not fully solve their problems; their conflicts remain resistant to solutions with no neat endings being offered" (Chaim Potok 131). This observation, although general, comes close to the focus of this thesis and gives light to the discussions that follow.

Aside from Abramson's brief postscript on Davita's Harp, it is curious to note that there has been very little critical response to the novel published in 1985. Abramson's response to Davita's Harp is positive--he affirms the wider range of religious belief, or lack of it, that Potok grapples with (134), and he delineates several "stylistic advances" that disclose Potok's maturation as a writer and discovers "Davita's first-person narration [to be] largely effective in presenting the reactions and development of a young girl" (134, 135).

The question remains, then, why so little response to a work published in 1985? Or is the lack of response in fact a critical response? Perhaps conservative critics are reacting to Potok's first feminist novel with a silent "no," intimating the subject is inappropriate. Conversely, serious feminist critics perhaps find Potok's

work insufficient--the issues old and the conclusions facile. This is, of course, speculation. Nevertheless, the questions are legitimate.

Finally, there has been little critical response, aside from book reviews, to either The Gift of Asher Lev or I am the Clay. Potok has provided the texts in a sustained and interwoven web; Orthodox Judaism has supplied the context that enables the Jewish and the aware Gentile reader to interpret Potok's novels; and modern literary analysis, close reading, and other analytical strategies offer solution to the complicated acrostic of Potok's Jewish-American novel sequence.

The Acrostic

In an interview with Elaine Kauvar, Potok suggests that the central problem with our time is how people confront ideas different from their own (295), implicitly re-affirming D. H. Lawrence's statement of the novel's "rhythm." Although some of the critics do receive Potok warmly (such as Cheever, Kauvar, Kremer, Marovitz, Grebstein, Nissenson, Uffen), most seem to miss the significance of Potok's narrative, do not apprehend the richness of the dialogue in Potok's novels, and assume incorrectly that Potok's voice is uni-vocal. While Potok tends to be read as if the novels are simply "traditional" texts valorizing a "conventional" Jewish point of view, much more is at work in a Potok novel. With attention to Hebrew/English reference books, current texts in biblical studies, Jewish histories and commentaries, Potok's allusions to art, literature, comparative anthropology and religious studies, one uncovers a palimpsestic text. This discourse challenges and confronts the "surface text" with a re-reading and re-visioning of things Jewish and American, and

which, rather than blindly supporting all things Jewish, courageously challenges the public and rabbinical interpretations of the adjective "Jewish." Potok interrogates "traditional" Judaism, disclosing in his work with Talmud and Kabbalah a history of ideas much less linear and hierarchical than might be first imagined, especially by non-Jews. Like his protagonists, Potok rebels against conventional forms and ideas. His characters feel alienated and might be damned by a lesser author or a lesser divinity, yet they are welcomed into Judaism as Potok re-visions and envisions it. My interests are in exploring the elements necessary for a close critical reading, that is for decoding the inscribed designs of Potok's novels and exploring his dialogue with belief.

It is inevitable in view of Potok's extensive education and experience that he speaks from the threshold of Judaism: "I am a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I choose to serve the world" ("The State of Jewish Belief" 127). Because he is also an American in an age of expansion, Potok presents a particularized version of the contemporary western search for meaning, and because he is a rabbi he does so with almost Talmudic complexity. Potok, in the Kremer interview, describes his own reading process:

I grew up in both worlds simultaneously. I was reading English books when I was a kid. At the same time, I was reading Hebrew books. I was studying Talmud at the same time I was reading Stephen Crane and mastered a passage of Talmud at the same time I was trying to master a passage of English prose. I would study the chapter of a novel that I

liked in exactly the same way I studied a text of Talmud. I don't know any other way to study. You take the text apart and try to figure out the way it was put together. (87)

In this conversation Potok provides his readers with the hint that his system of close reading will emerge in close writing. To read a Potok novel carefully means to uncover and decode layers of text. For instance, as we shall see, The Chosen includes a discussion of *gematryia*, the manipulation of Hebrew letters and their numeric value to hint at meaning. The novel concludes at chapter eighteen, with Danny and Reuven each on the threshold of a new start. Kremer writes: "In Hebrew the number eighteen is transcribed *chai*, which also spells the word *life*" ("Chaim Potok" 235). Potok, using *gematryia*, inscribes his modern novel with symbolic meaning, even as he discusses the value of language in the novel itself. Symbolic language, codes, translations, and the theme of analyzing words fill Potok's texts.

Potok's protagonists are multi-lingual. They converse with ease in English, Hebrew, Yiddish. Language is a complex signifier and another indicator of the dialogue of ideas in a Potok's novels. Robert Alter, in Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem, suggests:

Hebrew is a language written in strange, forbidding square letters, against the grain of all European systems, from right to left. The historical attachment of Jews to the stubborn particularism of their own graphic system is mirrored in their practice of clinging to the Hebrew script even when they converted one of the surrounding languages into

a distinctive Jewish language, as they did with Yiddish. . . . Languages . . . are seen to have a kind of geospiritual orientation. If we may extrapolate from this image a line of cultural history . . . Hebrew moves from east to west . . . The languages written in Latin script, on the other hand, move from west to east . . . (27, 28)

Alter's observation is appropriate to what Potok identifies as "cultural confrontation" and the different movements of the various languages are a germane symbol of the novels' tensions.

The challenge of differing ideas emerges in the Potok novels in words, names, the merging of ancient liturgy with present reality: David Lurie prays the Yom Kippur prayer just after learning of the Holocaust event. In Potok's characters' lives, body language, social ritual, myths, kinship systems, games, and authoritative texts, Jewish and non-Jewish, give meaning to their society and the new ones they seek and pioneer. And the conversation goes forward, much like the yeshiva classes his novels describe, with multiple voices, including the voice of silence, and points of view contending for a space in this fictive "market-place of ideas" (Wanderings 524). I uncover the conversation and allow the differing voices to be heard.

An important vehicle for Potok's themes is the use of opposites to reveal this theme of the paradoxical aspects of the examined life, both social and private. Through this delineation of difference, the symbolic code of the pairing system works at once to separate and join and thereby allows for subversion or reinforcement of the antithesis. In his article "Martin Buber and the Jews," Potok suggests a distinction

that can profitably be applied to his own novels: "The sphere of Buber's philosophical exploration is relation or betweenness; it is the hyphen that lies between an I and an It, and an I and a Thou" (46). In "Cultural Confrontation," Potok describes the *zwischenmensch* as, "a between person. Such an individual will cross the boundaries of his or her own culture and embrace life-enhancing elements from alien worlds. . . . To be a Zwischenmensch is to feel at home everywhere and nowhere simultaneously" (166, 167). This is the "sacred space" Potok's protagonists find for themselves, the space of the hyphen between such apparently irreconcilable and disparate terms as American-Jewish, modern-ancient, inner-outer, play-work, comic-absurd, intentional-accidental, safe-dangerous, sacred-profane, individual-community, freedom-responsibility, male-female, sound-silence. To the degree that Potok brings together conflicting or contradictory encoded pairs, for instance, in the juxtaposition of symbols from differing traditions or in the creation of new images that challenge and perhaps replace old forms, the text approaches a plurality of meaning; it becomes what today might be called a multiple encoded text.

Pairing occurs in character development, too. Potok's novels are peopled with *dopplegänger*s: visionary sojourners, mentors, and mythic ancestors who reveal the protagonist's dark side. "I think we all struggle with that side of life. There's a dark side to man. We are a killer species. There's no question about that" (Kauvar, "An Interview" 309). Potok appears to be drawn to the shadow self as it is discussed in the works of C. G. Jung. However, the shadow side, so quickly denigrated and feared by the civilized and rational aspect of the protagonist, the "light side," is often

not so much repulsive as it is an un-lived aspect of a person's life and development, one which needs to be allowed candid, full recognition and expression, as in the example of Asher Lev and his struggle to reveal his artistic nature. The shadow self, if given freedom, explores "the road not taken." This denied aspect of the self which might go overlooked and unrealized is freed in the lives of Potok's protagonists, who are energized by this freedom to evolve in new ways.

The codes, symbols, and images Potok creates are not ideologically neutral: Potok is always a Jewish writer, whether he is melding Jungian, or Korean, or Christian ideas, symbols, and traditions with those of his own background. In effect, Potok re-defines and extends the *mitzvot* code, divinely ordained deeds, to include new and astonishing sacred acts. As one example, Davita's recitation of the *Kaddish* introduces as sacred the act of a woman chanting a prayer that was previously the sole domain of men (*Davita's Harp*). Potok extends Judaism with the intention, as he writes in *Wanderings*, "to rebuild its core from the treasures of our past, fuse it with the best in secularism, and create a new philosophy, a new community, and take seriously the word 'emancipation'" (523).

My study outlines Potok's evolutionary Judaism as it occurs in the symbols and protagonists of his novels. Potok's art follows the rhythm that D. H. Lawrence identifies--a rhythm of creation and destruction--for Potok's protagonists are iconoclasts, men and one woman who challenge tradition and cherished beliefs. Their confrontations are transforming; new constructs of Judaism arise or are retrieved from the ancient ones to replace, fuse with, or coexist with other beliefs, some

Jewish, some non-Jewish. Robert Alter provides an apt metaphor which he gleans from the world of art and applies to Torah writings:

. . . [the biblical writer creates] an approximate narrative equivalent to the technique of post-Cubist painting which gives us, for example, juxtaposed or superimposed, a profile and a frontal perspective of the same face. The ordinary eye could never see these two at once, but it is the painter's prerogative to represent them as a simultaneous perception within the visual frame of his painting, whether merely to explore the formal relations between the two views or to provide an encompassing representation of his subject. (The Art of Biblical Narrative 146)

For this investigation of Potok's vision--and he is an artist as well as a novelist--it is important to employ appropriate theories, approaches, and resources friendly to a reading of his novels: for example, Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque; Alter's exegetical methods; the feminist perspectives of Belenkey, Showalter, Gilbert, and Gubar; Buber's dialogical encounter; theories of play and art; aspects of the psychologies of Freud, Jung, and Lacan; and the criticism of myth. Perhaps the most influential intertexts are ancient ones--the Torah, a term which functions often in Jewish studies as a metonymy of the entire Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar. Together these modern and ancient sources provide the necessary lenses through which to read the Potok novels and the Potok sequential strategy, for Potok's webs of meaning enrich the expected canon of Jewish values in

the works and reveal his revolutionary new design for Judaism's place in all corners of the modern world.

Chapter 2: In the Silences, a Voice

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.

James Joyce

Potok endeavours in The Chosen and The Promise, his first two novels, to present and examine some of the levels of interaction between the American and Jewish cultures. Like his characters, he interweaves lines of thought and value, as well as symbols drawn from the religious and secular realms. So entwined do the two systems become in these novels that at times they appear to be inherently interdependent. The texts themselves are perhaps best considered as a weaving together of disparate elements of Jewish and Gentile life in New York during the decades of the forties and fifties. As in all weaving, however, the final pattern can be missed or read incompletely by the interpreter. For the Jewish characters in the first two novels, the task of reading the pattern supplied by Torah, Talmud, and secular instruction is fraught with tension. The weaving of each life pattern involves motions and decisions that may be attractive and repellent, since those actions frequently involve challenging not only conventional limits, behaviour, and belief, but also parents, rabbis, and religious forbearers.

Potok describes a web in The Chosen, and it becomes a metaphor for the interaction of human relationships. However, like Joyce's net metaphor in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Potok's metaphor is not univocal: just as one can fly past a net, or because of it, so one can also be trapped in a web, or can use it as a

bridge (as in Walt Whitman's poem, "The Noiseless, Patient Spider"). In Potok's depiction the structure is, on the one hand, exquisite and complicated. On the other hand there is an inescapable overtone of threat, for by design the spider's web entraps:

A spider had spun a web across the corner of the upper rail, and there was a housefly trapped in it now, its legs flaying the air frantically. I saw its black body arching wildly, and then it managed to get its wings free, and there was the buzzing sound again as the wings struggled to free the body to which they were attached. Then the wings were trapped again by the flimsy, almost invisible strands of the web, and the black legs kicked at the air. I saw the spider, a small, gray, furry-looking spider, with long, wispy legs and black eyes, move across the web toward the fly. (165)

Reuven, the narrator of this account, frees the insect from the spider's net, thereby revealing an important aspect of his personality: Reuven is committed to freedom and is willing to intercede in a situation in order to emancipate a victim. The web, however, is also the means to the spider's survival; it is the beautifully woven bridge the spider crosses in order to sustain its life. Both capacities of the weaving/web duality are present in Potok's texts; nets are beautiful patterns that may become nearly invisible traps. Through this metaphorical use of the weaving/web pattern in The Chosen and The Promise, Potok reveals the complexity of the modern experience of culture and cultural exchange for Jews in America.

The Chosen and The Promise contain a dialogue between binary opposites. Recognizing this pattern allows us to enter Potok's text and read the inscribed design. The metaphor of weaving resonates with the Jewish directive to weave threads into one's prayer shawl and parallels Potok's dialogue, which is often composed of contending voices. Removal of either voice, the secular or the Jewish, creates a sense of estrangement from the realities of Jewish and American life. These novels are not about monologue or about a simplistic, univocal voice. Rather, the texts have to do with conversation; in this exchange of words (literally a dialectic), Potok does not accommodate a privileged voice. The back-and-forth movement between Judaism and modern secular humanism, the places of interconnection as well as disruption, the interchanges that enhance life as well as those that diminish it, finally create a pattern that emerges as non-hierarchical and non-logocentric. One culture is not privileged over another--both are valued, both are critiqued. Potok's text is not simple and linear; there is present a plurality of meaning and a concomitant reluctance to closure. In short, one is left with a weaving whose pattern is becoming, not yet completed. Two of the most important threads in these two novels are play and silence. Play occurs in three forms in The Chosen and The Promise: as baseball, gambling, and study. Silence is non-linear; inherent in it is the capacity to destroy or to heal.

One of the important symbolic threads Potok weaves into The Chosen and The Promise is the concept of play, which may itself be described, in view of its function in society, with terms of interconnection. Neil David Berman, in Playful Fictions and

Fictional Players: Game, Sport, and Survival in Contemporary American Fiction,

writes: "It is impossible to consider sports apart from their social consequences, their influence on culture, their ultimate reality, significance and seriousness, because, as Ehrmann says, 'the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played. Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable'" (7). Christian K. Messenger, in Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner, writes: "Play and game, sport and work. The terminology is most often fluid and ambiguous in the American experience" (2). Games figure heavily in both of Potok's novels and work as a site in which to elaborate upon significant cultural interaction. In the texts, play is a net of relationships, cultures, and rites. Play challenges assumptions and definitions and offers a re-creation of old perspectives. Play also creates the opportunity for self-reflection as play "en-webs" the participants, who then discover themselves.

Potok integrates typically American and typically Jewish games into The Chosen and The Promise. Importantly, the games from the two cultures share much in common. Berman suggests the main types of play are transcultural and often interconnected. He identifies three main categories of play: games of chance, games of strategy, and games of physical skill (American Fictions and Fictional Players 6). All three types exist in the two novels: present are gambling, *gematriya* and baseball.² Each of these games is a code containing the principles and the mores of

² *Gematriya* is about the manipulation of the numerical value of Hebrew letters. The term will be defined and described more fully, later in the chapter.

the society in which it is located. As a result the games are an important hermeneutic of cultural exchange. The use of play from both traditions further discloses the cultural interaction existing between the sub-culture and larger society. Not only does play reveal important cultural meaning in The Chosen and The Promise, it also functions on the deeper level of providing a means for character self-revelation and transformation. As Potok's characters engage in play, one discovers much of who they are and might become, where they come from, where they are, and where they are going, in this vision of America.

The Chosen begins with a softball game, a form of the quintessential American summer past-time of baseball. This game is repeatedly mentioned in both novels and is the means by which the two protagonists meet and clash: Reuven and Danny play on opposing varsity teams. The opposition, however, extends far beyond the usual rivalry one expects between high schools. In fact, the contest is freighted with meaning. Several pairs of binary opposites heighten the stress, as the seemingly simple ball game deconstructs into the carrier of complexity. The conflicts include those between American and Jewish-American; Hasidic and Orthodox Jew; dexterity and ineptitude. Each pair of opposites uncovers important tensions in the text.

Reuven, the narrator of The Chosen, makes it clear that for his team, skill in baseball equals assimilation--it is a way of proving that he and his team-mates are not simply guests in a host land but full-fledged American citizens. This proof of citizenship is especially important for Reuven because it carries the additional disclosure of patriotism: he wants to support America's entry into the Second World

War. Mr. Galanter, the team's coach, asserts during the pre-game warmup the connections between the game and larger social reality. His speech uncovers the depth of the linkage; his language is the language of the drill sergeant and his offensive and defensive strategies are sent in with all the zeal of a field commander:

"No holes," he shouted from near home plate. "No holes, you hear? Goldberg, what kind of a solid defensive front is that? Close in. A battleship could get between you and Malter. . . . Schwartz, what are you doing, looking for paratroops? . . . Throw it like a sharpshooter. . . . No defensive holes in this war." (The Chosen 12)

The language of the game is American. David Fine, in "In the Beginning: American-Jewish Fiction, 1880-1930," writes: "New worlds through new words. Yiddish, the language and culture of the Easter-European Jew, was the link to the past; English, to the present and future" (Handbook of American-Jewish Literature 16). Reuven's team chooses, through language, to bond themselves to America, to the present, and to their future as fully assimilated citizens.

Further, the game itself is a microcosm; it discloses the larger social reality and therefore the playing field is a site in which to establish a young man's national, social, and personal loyalties and commitments. In the game the boys work out their desire to be "American" heroes; as they succeed, America will succeed. The players sense themselves to be fully Westernized and dedicated citizens in spite of their religious, ethnic, linguistic, and social separateness from the group into which they are, by national myth, supposed to melt. Their point of identification is not the "old

country" and parental homeland; rather, it is New York, America, the Western hemisphere.

Reuven's perception of America as home and his need to be accepted as an American is important to him, but he is confident of neither. Reuven's lack of ease over the infiltration of Hasidic Jews into his Brooklyn neighbourhood is one indicator of the boy's fear of rejection; he desperately does not want to be associated with what for him is a repellent, archaic form of Judaism. Further, he assumes the Hasidic Jews are reviled by Gentile America. Reuven does not want to be connected with the despised; he has given the power to judge his worth and his conduct to an external source and lives in fear of rejection. Asher Z. Milbauer, in "Eastern Europe in American-Jewish Writing," suggests: "Some of the German and Sephardic Jewish community perceived the arrival in America of the quaint-looking, impoverished masses of Eastern-European Jews as a threat to their own security as well as a spark that might fuel anti-Semitism in their adopted country" (Handbook of American-Jewish Literature 363). The immigrants are clearly a threat to Reuven's sense of security. Therefore, Reuven diligently works at creating distance between himself and the embarrassing appearance, conduct, religiosity, and challenge of the Hasidic world. Reuven is so far removed from these old world immigrants that he admits that but for the ball game he might never have met the Hasidic Danny, who lives merely five blocks away. Ironically, it is the foreign game drawn from the heart of American culture and not the shared elements of their cultural backgrounds that brings the boys together.

Further evidence of Reuven's tenuous sense of belonging in America is revealed in his feeling of apprehension towards the foreigners who flood New York after the conclusion of the War. This immigration of concentration camp survivors fills Brooklyn with numerous Jewish refugees. By the time they arrive in America, the tragedy of their European experience is well known. However, Reuven does not feel compassion for these desperate people. Instead, his response is ironic: he is fearful, perhaps almost anti-semitic, in his concern that the Hasids will cause his district to devolve into a European ghetto:

. . . it was time to leave for synagogue. . . . we walked along the Williamsburg streets through crowds of Hasidim in long coats and fur-trimmed caps on their way to their various tiny synagogues. I listened to their Hungarian Yiddish. Walking to and from our synagogue every Shabbat was becoming an increasingly uncomfortable experience for me. It was like moving back through centuries to a dead world. . . . 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. (The Promise 250, 51)

Reuven is not self-reflective about his reaction towards the Hasids, and as a result his discomfort re-emerges in projection. Marie-Louise von Franz, in Projection and Recollection in Jungian Psychology, suggests a tripartite structure to projection: first, there is an unconscious transfer of subjective psychic elements onto an outer object;

second, the outer object provides a hook to receive the projection; third, the projector contains, unconsciously, some aspect of the same quality projected (2,3). In this case, Reuven transfers his fear of being rejected onto the Hasidic people. They in turn receive the projection and reject Reuven because he is too American. Finally, Reuven will not admit to himself his kinship with the immigrants around him; he refuses to perceive or acknowledge any connection. These issues emerge during the ball game in which Reuven meets Danny.³

The ball game facilitates needed growth for Reuven, for it offers, in the form of Danny, an opportunity for him to confront a sizeable personal fear. Despite the fact that Danny is at least as good a ball player as Reuven, and as a result not so "other" as Reuven thinks, Reuven is not able to move beyond the barrier of appearances. Danny looks Hasidic and foreign, and Reuven is too blinded by his own anxieties to discern any connection they may share. Therefore, Danny becomes the "hook" to receive Reuven's projection. In fact, it is not until Danny becomes more at ease with his Hasidic roots that he ceases to receive Reuven's transfer. When this occurs Danny refuses to collude with Reuven's projection. Until that point, Danny is a constant unconscious reminder for Reuven of his need to resolve his anger towards the Hasids. Before Reuven can affect the resolution, he needs to become more accepting of his own authentic Jewish-American self.

³ The projection first emerges during the game but is later present in The Promise when Reuven directly attempts to westernize Danny. For example, Reuven expresses intense dislike of the *shtetl*-like atmosphere pervading Danny's apartment (79). For Reuven, such a setting is too closely associated with a past he wants to reject.

For Danny, the ball game represents another kind of tension: Danny wants to disassociate himself from Hasidic Judaism, not in order to assume a solely American identity, but rather to gain the less extreme expression of Jewish orthodoxy that Reuven and his team-mates represent. Ironically, this desire is revealed through Danny's intense desire to beat Reuven's team, a group Danny names *apikorsim*. The term *apikoros/im* is a Hebrew-Yiddish idiom, meaning "disbeliever" or "heretic" and as such is a comment upon an individual's lack of religious acceptability. Yiddish performs a number of important functions in The Chosen: it is the language of denigration and curse; it is the language of study for the Hasids, as opposed to Hebrew; ironically, it is also considered, by the Hasids, to be a holy language, despite the fact that its roots are Middle German (150). Danny's verbal expression of his anger discloses his trap, and Danny is caught in an "if you can't join 'em, beat 'em" inversion of the familiar American cliché. Consequently, Danny's naming of the other team as heretics delineates his boundary in the game: it is not simply political confrontation, it is Holy War. This heightened sense of the conflict's import successfully nullifies Danny's concern for America's secular battle with Germany and explains his sustained lack of interest. Danny is more preoccupied with conquering the pagans in his own neighbourhood than he is with the battle overseas. As a result the language of play for the Hasidic team is theological discourse, in stark contrast with Mr. Galanter's Westernized war commands. Thus, the game is played on several levels at once: linguistic, religious, social, nationalistic, and patriotic.

Although it is Danny who enters the game with overt, angry intentions, he successfully hooks Reuven into responding in like manner. On one level the two youths act out a familiar male pattern, for they are both skilful athletes, and ironically, by extension, good Americans, and they seek to dominate each other. They have clearly integrated the familiar, competitive affect. However, the competition between them transcends the merely physical and extends to the unconscious: they also clash at the level of shadow-selves. Robert Bly, in A Little Book on the Human Shadow, provides a different metaphor for the burden of this shadow. He describes the shadow as a long tote carried throughout life, containing all the parts of the psyche that parents, friends, and others, do not like. Eventually the self begins to reject these aspects of the personality as well. Bly writes: "We spend our life until we're twenty deciding what parts of ourself to put into the bag, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again" (18). In keeping with Bly's definition and distinction, each youth embodies components of the personality the other has not "actualized." Danny represents an unintegrated part of Reuven's personality insofar as Reuven does not acknowledge the "Danny" he carries within. On the other hand, Reuven embodies for Danny the freedom and openness Danny is afraid to admit he longs for. As a result, when Danny hits the ball the only way he can, right at the pitcher, he unconsciously connects with Reuven so as to inextricably bind them together (The Chosen 70). For Reuven, who stubbornly refuses to duck, the confrontation with a Judaism he detests nearly blinds him, and ironically binds

him to Danny, whom he will grow to love.⁴ The seemingly simple softball game decodes as a controlling metaphor, for like Potok's web, it combines several strands of the story. The naivety of the American label "World Series," the quintessential expression of the baseball game, turns out to be in fact global in this neighbourhood adaptation. The game ties the boys on many levels, far beyond the basic two of religious practise and nationalism.

Similar to the use of the ball game in The Chosen is the use of gambling introduced in The Promise. This second type of play occurs at the outset of the novel and functions as a controlling symbol in a web of duplicity and irony. Reuven, Rachel, and Michael assume they are going to a country fair, a familiar symbol of fresh air, health, and rural American life. Upon their arrival at the grounds, however, they discover the fair is, in fact, the more sinister carnival, a traditional Puritan symbol of moral danger. Potok's description of the event discloses the menace: the language is violent, sexual, intrusive. Floodlights "poke bright fingers into the black sky," there are "gashes of colored lights," and teenagers "[jostle] roughly through the crowd," while pitchmen "shout their games" (26). For Reuven, "it seemed as if all the noise of the world's wide night had descended upon this one stretch of lighted earth" (The Promise 26).

⁴ Reuven's name in Hebrew means "see, a son." The biblical character named Reuven was the first-born son of Jacob and Leah (Genesis 29:32). His life was a weaving of acts of faith (he tried to rescue his brother, Joseph), and acts of rebellion (he slept with his father's concubine and therefore lost his birthright [Genesis 49:4]). Obedience/disobedience, sight/blindness--these pairs reveal something of the character who is an intertext for Potok's Reuven Malter.

In keeping with the familiar pattern of a moral fable, although they know they should leave immediately, they do not. Michael, the youngest and most vulnerable of the threesome, first succumbs to the carnival's lure. Seduced by the shiny radio with its phallic antenna "jutting upward . . . like a regal finger" (26), Michael's engaged sexual energy overpowers Reuven's and Rachel's will to leave; Michael insists on playing the game that will win for him the powerful prize. The anticipated archetypal figure of the "wolf in sheep's clothing" then appears in the guise of a Jewish pitchman. Reuven trusts the man because he is Jewish, speaks to them in Yiddish, and converses with them about familiar things, such as the Talmud, the European Jewish community, the War. Reuven neglects to decode the carnival's message because he is duped by a familiar appearance, because he naively feels "calm and protected" (37), and because he disregards the larger reality. Aware of Michael's aroused interest, the owner entices them to play his gambling game and proceeds to cheat them.

Potok's foregrounding of phallic imagery here is intriguing. First, menacing sexuality and its concomitant imagery, especially as it occurs in association with the carnival motif in the tradition of the Western novel, is typically feminine. Ordinarily, the male protagonist needs to beware of the dangerous woman who will entice him to sexual sin. One of the more famous examples of the menacing carnival woman is found in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, in the episode describing the town of

Vanity Fair.⁵ Here Christian, the hero of the story, is confronted by and overcomes the seductive woman, who is only one of the many threats of the town. In Potok's text this familiar code is inverted; the threatening woman does not appear. In place of the vice of sexual lasciviousness is a lust which is, to use contemporary understandings, a negative phallocracy, that is, power gone wrong. Potok's treatment of the carnival theme is ironic: ungoverned female sexuality is typically the only significant threat to patriarchy, for men have assumed it is only the destructive, sensual temptress, the witch, or the castrating mother who contain the power to subvert the "Great Chain of Being."

Potok's idea is consonant with Lacan's that as the symbol of patriarchy, the phallus, is to be feared. In The Promise the phallus represents power, fullness, the law--it is plenitude and not lack. Conversely, the phallus is also negative power. For Reuven and his friends the representation of the phallus at the carnival is victimizing--it is negative "plenitude" energized by the carnival's power. Potok's text suggests a negative phallus itself is the undoing of patriarchy, and not female sexuality. Consequently, Potok's characters, because they are confronted with the need to resolve a construction of the phallus that is negative yet threatening and appealing, inherit the task of finding a new formation of power. It is in this carnival setting that they encounter a trans-cultural choice: to value and embrace the garish, victimizing world the carnival represents or to seek their identity and empowerment elsewhere.

⁵ See John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress. 2nd ed. Ed. Roger Sharrock. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960.

The carnival motif in The Promise can be further explored by using the approach of Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World, a seminal text that explores the issue of the carnivalesque in literature.⁶ Bakhtin suggests carnivals allow for the transgression of normative social values in religiously and socially rigid societies. During carnival, the community's norms and mores are flaunted by public rejection and the reign of "mis-rule." However, as Potok might see it, the carnival itself is an institution and thus the mutiny is finally impotent--it simply diffuses the frustrated energy that if used more constructively might substantially change the rigid and oppressive societal structure. In Potok's text, this unproductive diffusion does not occur. His characters actualize an important transformation. For instance, Reuven leaves the carnival wounded, knowing he was duped and victimized; this pain creates the opportunity for Reuven to challenge the system productively.

Enmeshed in the complex imagery of the carnival is the gambling game that eventually ensnares both Michael and Reuven. Tricked by the pitchman, seduced by the power, they gamble and they lose. Because they do not decode the signs, they take the risk and it costs them dearly: they are shamed and ridiculed by one of their own. The gamble was foolish, yet without the gambler's deception with the symbols of Jewishness, they would have been able to read the signs. This is not all there is to gambling in The Promise. In the epigraph to book one of The Promise, Potok quotes Pascal: "Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked." What

⁶ See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.

Reuven and the others need to do is to continue to play, to gamble, but to engage the game wisely.

Hugh Nissenson writes in his review of The Promise: "The gamble, Potok is telling us, is the human condition--a prerequisite for human development" ("The Jews Have Long Since Embarked" 5). What is discovered in the simple carnival game is the character's need to identify himself--to know who he is. The game discloses Reuven's lack of self-knowledge and blindness with respect to himself and the larger society. For Reuven, the experience uncovers his naivety and the need to challenge assumptions about appearance and reality. By befriending Danny, Reuven partially resolves his feeling that the Hasids are not like him at all, but the carnival experience discloses Reuven's remaining dependency on eternal constructs. In this case, the gambling event teaches Reuven both to perceive more clearly the reality around him and to know himself better. This exchange at the carnival alerts Reuven to the comic/playful and the cosmic/deadly side of the game.

The opportunity for personal growth which is inherent in the carnival gamble in The Promise is consistent with other uses of the gambling motif in the text. Each time a character is presented with a choice, for instance to publish a book, to use higher critical hermeneutics, to create new psychotherapeutic models, or to confront prejudices and fears, the character risks, among other things, the known past for the mysterious future. It is by ~~the~~ of this risk that the character develops greater understanding of the self. For Potok, presuppositions are challenged through risk-taking; what one thinks one knows, what is, what might be, and who one is while

caught in these variables are all questioned and redefined by means of the engaged gamble. According to Potok, such is the stuff of life and growth.

Potok places alongside the first two familiar games of softball and gambling a third, very unfamiliar, non-American idea of play, borrowed from the centre of the Jewish world. Rejecting the typical work/play dichotomy of the West, which names learning as work, Potok re-creates study as a weaving of both work and play. The enormous value study carries in Danny's and Reuven's world is self-evident in The Chosen and The Promise. Study is the canon by which one's seriousness about and faithfulness to things Jewish is disclosed to the watching community. Study is a common thread held which ties the orthodox and Hasidic groups together, for they both hold the ethic to be the measure of one's soul. Certainly for Danny and Reuven, success in Talmud is tantamount to success in life. Consequently, it is Danny's remarkable facility with the sacred texts that first earns him Reuven's approval. Respect and opportunity accrue to the one who is able to answer the Talmud instructor's questions quickly and insightfully.

Potok imbues discussion of the fine points of Talmud interpretation with the excitement of a contest or game. In fact, the boys' skill and training in their "sport" is acquired with the same level of discipline one expects of an highly trained athlete. Sheldon Grebstein, in "The Phenomenon of the Really Jewish Best Seller: Potok's The Chosen," writes: "To all these people *learning*, education, is a form of high adventure" (28, original emphasis). This sense of adventure is contagious; it draws the reader into the text to experience with Reuven the thrill of victory over daunting

and complex Talmud passages. Grebstein states: "It is also greatly to Potok's credit as storyteller that he can transform such a seemingly forbidding subject as an assignment in Talmudic study into one of the novel's most stirring episodes" ("The Phenomena of the Really Jewish Best Seller" 28).

The study/game is not simply contained in the classroom. Reuven discovers, during his first attendance at Danny's Hasidic synagogue, the Rebbe's use of *gematriya* in the shabbat lecture to be a type of game. *Gematriya* is the manipulation of the numerical values of the Hebrew letters as a way to read the text; it is an hermeneutical method. Initially Reuven, who experiences the service and sermon as foreign, is quite uncomfortable with the Rebbe's exegesis. Reuven's methodology names *gematriya* as an irresponsible way of reading; for him it is especially associated with Hasidic hermeneutics and is generally discredited as a viable interpretive method. *Gematriya* is not modern. The method is representative of old world exegesis and therefore depicts a way of being Jewish and of reading the sacred texts from which Reuven seeks distance. Reuven does not want to be associated with what are for him archaic and shameful practices; he is proud of his exceptional intellectual capacity and proud his father is a master of modern exegetical methods. Reuven describes the synagogue he and his father frequent: "The synagogue was attended mostly by men like my father--teachers from my yeshiva, and others who had come under the influence of the Jewish Enlightenment in Europe and whose distaste for Hasidim was intense and outspoken. Many of the students in the yeshiva I attended prayed there, too . . ." (108). Reuven is a part of a community which

denigrates Hasidim. He has internalized their criticism and made it his own.

Consequently Reuven's experience in Danny's Hasidic synagogue, which is replete with the atmosphere of Eastern European Judaism, works in consonance with the earlier ball game--it brings to Reuven the issue he needs to confront.

Reuven's growing relationship with Danny begins to mitigate against a defensive affect which would keep anything "shameful" at a distance. Reuven's willingness to enter the synagogue discloses an interest in connecting with a group he formerly denigrated. However, when the Rebbe begins to employ *gematriya*, Reuven is initially uncomfortable. Nevertheless, he listens politely, only to discover his feelings change: "I had heard others do this before, and I enjoyed listening because sometimes they were quite clever and ingenious. I was beginning to feel relaxed again, and I listened carefully" (128). Reuven the mathematician enjoys the Rebbe's facility with numbers and words and feels secure in the service because he is able to follow the Rebbe's reasoning competently. When pressed by the Rebbe to find an error, Reuven's competitive side responds and he displays his sharp wit by locating and explaining the intentional miscalculation. Although initially shocked that the Rebbe would deliberately attempt to trick Danny in public, Reuven discovers the exchange is in part a game and when he succeeds at the game Reuven is able to feel the joy of this success.

Later, in The Promise, Reuven's use of study as re-creation or a means to relax is disclosed. To absent himself emotionally from Rav Kalman's *musar* messages (moral harangues), Reuven sets for himself complex logic problems to do

silently, while Kalman's tirade passes unheard. When he is overwhelmed with the emotionally and morally complex issues arising from his father's new book or Michael's illness, Reuven uses study as a means of escape. Work transports him from the frustrating murkiness of relational problems to the safe simplicity of logic:

Late that night I sat at my desk at home and worked automatically and without effort at a series of complicated problems in symbolic logic . . . I knew I would be unable to sleep, and so I sat at my desk in my pyjamas with only the desk lamp on and filled pieces of paper with the conventional notations that form the language of logic . . . There was comfort and satisfaction in the effortless manipulation of neutral symbols. . . . (128-29)

Reuven's retreat into the safety of his logical, empirical self, enables him to create distance between himself and the moral/emotional dilemma he faces. This in turn helps him to see the issue more clearly and gain some sense into how he needs to respond. In short, Reuven's ability to transform work to play is enabling. As Berman writes in Playful Fictions and Fictional Players, play "offers the possibility, real or apparent, of achieving some liberation and hence self-definition, however minimal, in a reductive world" (7). Reuven's capacity to find methods to resist the reductive demands of his world, which disallow methods of scholarship that challenge familiar traditions, or attack those who would set new horizons of thoughts and ideas to invigorate the old and less applicable, is a measure of his maturity.

Danny's experience of study as play, as a form of re-creation, is more poignant than is Reuven's. First, the seriousness of the study/game is heightened because Talmud discussion is the one remaining place of direct contact between Danny and his father. All other opportunities for dialogue, the conversations and games occurring in the past, have ended with the Rebbe's imposition of silence between himself and his eldest son. As a result, when Danny and his father meet to discuss a Talmud passage, the conversation is stirring, confrontive, competitive, and full of emotional content. When Reuven is invited to participate in the conversation, he is initially intimidated by the emotional intensity; neither Danny nor his father understands why Reuven does not join in: "Danny and his father, during a point they might be making or listening to, would cast inquisitive glances at me, as if to ask what I was doing just sitting there while all this excitement was going on: Why in the world wasn't I joining in the battle?" (156). What Reuven misses is the sense of play in the experience. Once he understands that play is a controlling thread woven into the dialogue Reuven is no longer as intimidated by the strong feelings expressed and he is able to take part in the Talmudic discussion.

The second way in which study is a re-creative activity for Danny is located in his extra-class reading. Danny suffers under the rigid system of Hasidic orthodoxy that denigrates any secular study; it is suspect because it is worldly and takes time away from the study of Torah (The Chosen 79 ff.). This ethic generates a type of intellectual desert in which Danny languishes. His oasis is the secular literature David Malter directs him to in the public library. Because he is directed to secular

research by an observant Jew, Danny is nurtured by a member of the larger Jewish community and not left without a guide. From David Malter's perspective, Danny is a modern Solomon Maimon and as such represents a new opportunity for the Jewish community to embrace and receive brilliance, instead of attacking and rejecting the gifted ones (The Chosen 106). Because Malter acts as Danny's mentor there is hope the youth's gift and contribution, unlike Maimon's, will not be lost.

It is significant that Maimon is mentioned in The Chosen; Potok wrote his doctoral dissertation in philosophy on Maimon. Maimon, a brilliant eighteenth century Polish Jew, fled his repressive Hasidic community to pursue study elsewhere. Maimon could not survive in the intellectual prison Hasidim was for him, but he was also unable to connect successfully with secular European society. Maimon died in exile. In the introduction to his thesis, Potok writes, "The life and thought of Solomon Maimon are strongly reminiscent of Greek tragedy" (The Rationalism and Skepticism of Solomon Maimon 2). Potok later asserts that Maimon's contribution to philosophy, though significant, was essentially wasted largely because there was no community to receive and honour Maimon's work. By the end of Maimon's life he was a *zwischenmensch* (a between person)--neither a part of the Jewish community which had excommunicated him, nor a fully accepted member of the philosophical community, which was anti-semitic.

In The Chosen and The Promise, Danny embodies the Maimon story and transforms it; tragedy becomes comedy. Danny is able to find refreshment and challenge in secular learning while remaining connected, although sometimes it is

fragile, to his community. Surprisingly, Danny's commitment to his Hasidic roots matures as he moves more deeply into the secular study of modern psychology. In The Chosen, Danny is a very hostile and rigid young man; he is unable to express the joyful exuberance of Hasidim because his energy is consumed by trying to escape the entrapping web of Hasidim. In The Promise Danny is finally more at ease with his faith; he is now a promising psychologist, and is far happier and more relaxed than he was earlier. It is in this text that the singing, dancing Hasid inside Danny emerges. Having decided to pursue his dream of practising psychotherapy, Danny is no longer in a conflicted place, caught by the requirements of his faith. Danny decides he will be both a therapist and an observant Jew. The entrapping web of Hasidism has become transformed into a beautifully woven structure--a bridge transporting inner emotion out to external expression. Thus, Potok asserts optimistically, it is possible to be brilliant and modern, as well as faithful to the tenets of Judaism.

In consonance with Potok's interweaving of the codes and values borrowed from both American and Jewish cultures into games and play is his use of silence. Potok imbues silence with iconic force in The Chosen and The Promise: silence becomes a means to reach the holy. The symbol is not simple and linear; it is not merely a path to find an external God. Potok enlarges the transforming power of silence to include the capacity of finding one's self. Thus, silence reaches within and without, as a connective thread in a web, providing a way to apprehend the God without and the self within. In this way silence bonds the characters who experience

its healing force with God, themselves, and others. Silence, then, is transformative and restorative, replete with message and meaning.

In Dialogue With Deviance: The Hasidic Ethic and the Theory of Social Contraction, Mordechai Rotenberg recounts this story:

Two Hasidic Jews were travelling together in a train. After a long hour of silence, one of them sighed heavily, from the depth of his soul, you might say. Although the two had never met before, the other immediately responded by saying, "You're telling me?!" (89)

Speaking through silence. This idea is contrary to a simplistic definition of silence as the absence of any sound, since conventional understandings of communication presuppose sound. It is suggested, in Silence, The Word and The Sacred, that "It may be possible to assert, then, that when we speak, therefore we are" (E. D. Blodgett and H. G. Coward, eds. 1). This creative re-working of Descartes' famous declaration ties existence to discourse and thereby reasserts a familiar presupposition: the centrality of the *logos*. In contrast to this very Western assertion, the Hasidic folktale, despite its anecdotal nature, illustrates the paradoxical notion that silence, the absence of sound, communicates.

The capacity of the Hasidic Jew to listen to silence, to learn from it, and to be transformed by it is central to Potok's text. It enters the work radically, astonishing both Reuven and the reader through the discovery that Danny is intentionally raised in silence. When Danny first relates to Reuven that he and his father do not speak to one another, neither Danny nor Reuven understands what the Rebbe is really about.

Danny is able to inform Reuven of the premise, but nothing more: "He says that words distort what a person really feels in his heart. He doesn't like to talk too much, either. Oh, he talks plenty when we're studying Talmud together. But otherwise he doesn't say much. I'd like to tell you once he wishes everyone could talk in silence" (The Chosen 72). The characters' responses and Reuven's response to this parenting technique are negative: Danny's eyes are cold and hard while he speaks; Reuven is baffled and disgusted. Even David Maier, Reuven's father, who is a noble, compassionate, and learned man, is perplexed and suspicious of the Rebbe's action (The Chosen 161). All three of these characters receive from silence only the wound it has the capacity to inflict. It is the Rebbe who apprehends the healing side of silence.

The Rebbe's assertion that words are limited, that they misrepresent feelings, that they are somehow unable to fully identify, define or communicate the content of one's heart, is the key to decoding silence. It is the Rebbe, the *tzaddik* (*zaddik*), who knows the code. Samuel Dresner, in The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy, defines the term:

These men were saint-mystics of a most practical order. They did not forsake this world for another world. Their goal was to join the two, to build that rarest of phenomena in history--the religious community. They represented a paradox of solitude and communion. He who attained the highest degree of spiritual solitude, who was capable of being alone with God, was at the same time the true center of the

community. To live among ordinary men and yet to be alone with God, to speak common words and yet to draw strength to live from the source of all existence--this was the supreme achievement of the zaddik. (13)

The *tzaddik* is by definition a righteous man. And according to the tradition, righteousness is gained through solitude, listening, silence.

To acknowledge the limitations of the spoken word and to embrace the goodness silence offers is the skill the Rebbe teaches the two boys. The Rebbe perceives the need Reuven and Danny have to enter the mystery of silence. Danny, the Rebbe's son, is brilliant but detached, unconnected to self and community. Reuven is logical, inductive, a mathematician, yet essentially disconnected from his intuitive self. As Danny and Reuven encounter silence, they discover its capacity to speak to and communicate from their hearts. Silence offers, as Danny later admits, the ability to "look to [one's] soul" (160). This is what the Rebbe knows: present in silence is the potential to awaken the human soul, to illuminate what we are, and what we are not--that is, God.

Initially, Reuven is a young man whose development is skewed; he is all "head." He favours logic, mathematics, and a higher critical, scientific method in the study of Talmud. Because he is pragmatic and concrete, his point of view is limited; he tends both to disregard and denigrate the intuitive and numinous. This limitation accounts for the overdeveloped judging and critical aspect of his personality. If Reuven is not able to reduce an experience to what can be tested and measured, he

tends to reject it. He is afraid of everything that he names non-rational, such as Hasidim, and this fear is expressed in his rejecting behaviour. As a result, when confronted with Danny, Reuven initially seeks to protect himself from all "Danny the Hasid" represents. Reuven is unable to initiate with the "irrational" Danny in any way, because he is too trapped by his own prejudices. Thus, it is Danny who makes the first overtures to friendship, partly because he is curious about his own anger towards Reuven and wants to understand why he feels the way he does. Further, Reuven's father also intercedes for Danny; as well, David Malter clearly exhorts Reuven to receive Danny's friendship as a valuable gift and not to stay distanced and condemning (The Chosen 74).

It is by means of the relationship with Danny that Reuven's limitations of an overdeveloped judging faculty and underdeveloped intuition are challenged and transformed. First, Danny ushers Reuven into the Hasidic world and Reuven there experiences first hand the celebration and joy this community brings to ritual and study. Second, and more important, Reuven undergoes his own radical education in silence when he is excommunicated by the Rebbe and no longer allowed to speak with Danny. The intense pain Reuven feels in being doubly isolated by his father's hospitalization and Danny's absence is transformative and rehabilitative. Silence confronts Reuven with his propensity to hate; it reveals to him his need for community; it discloses his capacity to forgive; it confirms his desire to become a rabbi. His initiation into silence does not devalue his mind; it gives birth to his soul.

With respect to Danny, Rebbe Saunders feels fear when his son manifests a photographic memory, and the Rebbe's anxiety increases with his perception of Danny's self-absorption. While a young child, Danny takes great delight in his own genius to the exclusion of interest in another's experience or pain. Horrified by Danny's lack of empathy but abundance of conceit, the Rebbe resorts to using silence as the means to cultivating Danny's stagnant compassionate affect. In an attempt to teach Danny empathy, the Rebbe talks to his son only during Talmud study. The Rebbe's treatment is radical but it is not new, for as a young boy the Rebbe underwent the same process with his father, who also wanted to teach a brilliant son the world's pain: to feel it, to listen to it, and to talk about it.

When the novel opens, Danny is a hard, cold, arrogant young man who feels trapped in a system that is too limiting: his enormous capacity for knowledge is hindered by a community ethic that values only the study of religious texts. Danny is also in pain; he does not understand why his father will no longer speak with him, and his reaction to the entrapment is two-fold. He is violently angry when in the presence of freedom, hence the desire to kill Reuven at the ball game, and he subverts the community's ethic by reading secular texts at the library (The Chosen 66, 83). Both these expressions of frustration are responses to a disabling home and community environment. Danny is alienated from his father, his community, and himself.

The Rebbe wisely permits his son to attend a less theologically rigid yeshiva, to continue reading widely, and to befriend Reuven. Nurtured by these new freedoms

and comforted by his relationship with Reuven, Danny becomes increasingly more relaxed and at ease. This newly created sacred space and peace facilitates the emergence of his central problem: Danny realizes he does not want to fulfil his spiritual and familial obligation to continue the dynasty by becoming the next Rebbe, he wants to become a psychologist. This insight creates a new crisis for Danny, for he is unable to imagine how he will communicate this desire to his father. Ironically, his intellectual genius does not help him find his way through his crisis; rather, it exacerbates the tension by fuelling his desire to learn more. Because cognitive work does not ameliorate the tension, Danny begins to look elsewhere for relief; finally, his journey leads him to look within. Danny begins to listen to the silence.

By the conclusion of The Chosen, Danny's resistance to silence is greatly diminished. He becomes accepting and no longer expends his energy in fighting the unseen force. This transformation frees him; now he is able to explore, as opposed simply to reject. Danny discovers silence is not empty but full: "You can listen to silence, Reuven. I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own. It talks to me sometimes. I feel myself alive in it" (249). This discovery is regenerative; while speaking these words to Reuven, his voice possesses a singsong quality and his face is soft and relaxed, as if he is chanting about "not-chanting." In fact, his stance is that of the praying Jew; to speak of silence is to speak of the sacred. No longer self-trapped in the need to hate either the silence or the man who instigates it, Danny is enabled to live in greater freedom. Hence, when David Malter questions the young man as to his relationship

with his father, Danny acknowledges he is no longer angry with the Rebbe (The Chosen 255). The hard, cold, defensive Danny begins to soften, relax and turn inward; in short, he begins to embody and express the qualities of a mystic.

Danny learns much on his own about the value of silence, far more than does either Reuven or his father, David. Until the final, transformative conversation with the Rebbe, Reuven is still reactive. He tells Danny "I hated [the silence]" and later, when Danny tries to explain the regenerative aspect of silence, his friend is dismissive in his response (The Chosen 243, 249). Danny, however, still must face and resolve the conflict between becoming a Rebbe or a psychologist; only then he is freed to understanding his father's purpose in the process of silence. Part of the task is for Danny to acknowledge he is afraid to confront his father. When invited by David Malter to discuss the matter with him, the young man accepts the invitation. When the three men, Reuven, David, and Danny gather for the conversation, the meeting is only of limited value for Danny. Unfortunately, David's direction is to prepare Danny to think clearly, in order to confront the Rebbe with a carefully constructed, logical, and therefore seemingly irrefutable argument as to why Danny should completely overturn his father's, family's, and community's expectations. Danny realizes, however, that the conversation he needs to have with the Rebbe will not be predicated upon logic, yet he is fearful because he is not sure what the basis will be.

Danny's fear is somewhat alleviated when the Rebbe initiates the conversation himself and invites Reuven to participate as well. During this dialogue Danny learns the value the Rebbe places on silence and compassion. It is also during this

experience that the Rebbe offers to Danny an extended meaning of the Hasidic concept of the *tzaddik* which radically challenges Danny's pre-conceived ideas. The Rebbe essentially delineates a crucial element of the doctrine of the *tzaddik*, known as the "descent of the *tzaddik*." Dresner writes:

The action which the zaddik initiates not only carries him *out* after the people, but also, and primarily, *down* to them. To be able to find them at all, so that he might love them and bind and heal them, he must descend to their level, seeking them out wherever they may be, in order to raise them. Otherwise all his good intentions will be in vain.

(149, original emphasis)

The Rebbe describes his journey with silence and tells Reuven and Danny what was gained through the process. Silence permits reflection, it is an opportunity to look into one's self, to find one's own strength, to find company within one's own soul (265). Silence creates sufficient quiet for one to feel and hear one's own pain: "And it is important to know of pain. . . . It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others" (The Chosen 265). Finally, the Rebbe relates what the task of the *tzaddik* is: to suffer for his people, to carry their pain. In short, silence creates the capacity to descend, to meet the community in their own sacred, painful space. Silence is the environment in which the *tzaddik* is nurtured; it is the

place where he learns to feel his own pain, and thereby is equipped to feel the pain of others.⁷

This is the key which unlocks the mystery of silence and with which Danny and Reuven are opened and instructed in the redemptive value of silence. Having experienced the painful aspect of silence, now they begin to explore its healing presence. In addition to this lesson they are taught the authentic role of the *tzaddik*. In an inversion of expectation, Danny's understanding of the *tzaddik* is disclosed as rigid, whereas his father's is fluid. For Danny, it is necessary for a *tzaddik* to be both an Hasid and a Rebbe, while for the Rebbe the special quality the *tzaddik* possesses is not located in the position, but the person. As a result, the Rebbe's concern is for Danny's soul. The Rebbe informs Reuven, "I had to make certain [Danny's] soul would be the soul of a *tzaddik* no matter what he did with his life" (266) and then again, "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" (267). The silence has done its work. Danny will not be an Hasidic rebbe, but he will still be a *tzaddik*, a man at ease in solitude, connected to God, and connected to people.

This lesson on silence and the *tzaddik* is presented in The Chosen, but the sustained evidence for the integration of the teaching is not disclosed in Reuven's and Danny's life until The Promise. In this novel Potok continues to weave the threads of silence, its wounds and its healing. The Promise contains the story of the testing

⁷The role of the *tzaddik* is gender specific; only a male is permitted to fill the position.

ground for both Reuven and Danny. In this work, Reuven's and Danny's capacity both to be self-reflective and to feel "the pain of the world" is revealed as they experience a triangulated relationship with the young boy Michael Gordon.

In The Promise Reuven's and Danny's lives continue to be closely intertwined; the decision one makes deeply affects the life of the other. Ironically, their roles are somewhat reversed. Previously, Danny had been enmeshed in an archaic Jewish world; now he is settled into the secular world of Columbia University. This time Reuven, the one from the modern American home, is the one who feels trapped by Eastern European Jewry. Reuven's conflict is with his Talmud teacher, Rav Kalman, a survivor of the camps and a very rigid Hasidic Jew. Reuven's task in The Promise is to challenge his tendency to be critical and judgmental of himself and others. This means he must question his dismissive, non-empathic perception of Rav Kalman. It is Reuven, the one who insists on using modern critical methods of interpretation, who is free to be a philosopher or a scientist, who pursues a path that leads him farther into the complex, variegated, and often intensely wounded, Jewish world.

Danny, on the other hand, journeys away from the familiar streets of his old Eastern-European neighbourhood to the halls of Columbia University, a white, anglo-saxon, protestant, Ivy League school reflecting the core of American educational values. In this setting Danny pursues the study and practice of psychotherapy. During his internship, Danny reconstructs his own experience with silence into a therapeutic model in order to bring healing to the wounded and angry Michael. With Danny, Potok reveals how a concept from the core of Jewish mysticism can merge

with the peculiarly Western discipline of psychology so that both traditions are enriched.

Reuven and Danny are tied to Michael: Reuven is connected to the boy because he dates Michael's cousin, Rachel, and Danny is involved because Michael is a client at the institution at which Danny is an intern. The young boy acts as their emotional catalyst. Nissenson suggests Michael is their *doppelgänger* ("The Jews Have Long Since Embarked" 5). Michael's issue, which is to recognize and acknowledge the enormous anger he feels towards his parents, especially his father, is so deeply traumatizing he requires institutional care. Michael is twice wounded. He is a victim of the Orthodox academics' vitriolic attacks against his father's liberal scholarship, and he is neglected by his parents' obsessive drives. He is the unseen casualty, the one sacrificed by unthinking parents who are not aware of the pain their work causes their son, and the one sacrificed by a community that does not think to evaluate the emotional damage created by their zealous defense of Judaism.

In the working out of Michael's trauma, a number of triangular relationships emerge and overlap. The struggle with orthodoxy that creates a crisis for Michael is a struggle Reuven and Danny share. Additionally, each of these three characters experiences anger towards his father; the latter embodies the constraints of the tradition in which all participate. To resolve the conflict and be free of unwanted restraints, each young man must recognize a strong sense of self. New personal boundaries enable the men to deal more equitably with the criticism they encounter, whether it is Reuven, who is attacked because of his use of modern exegetical

methods, or Danny, who is harassed because he no longer wears caftans and earlocks, or Michael, who is rejected because of his father's liberal scholarship. Reuven, Danny, and Michael are persecuted by their communities because they attempt, in observable ways, to weave together the valuable from their Jewish tradition with what is worthwhile from the larger, secular culture.

Resolution of the conflict between the old and the new, between Jewish and American culture, arrives for Danny and Reuven after each discovers what of his respective tradition is his own. By acknowledging and accepting their own priorities, they answer for themselves the question of how to live. They no longer simply adhere to received tradition. But also they do not discard their traditions in order to embrace secular American culture. Instead, they find a balance between the two contending voices. Their capacity to resolve these difficult concerns with compassion is causally connected to the solitude and silence they embrace. Danny is often described as sitting alone at his desk, turned inward, thoughtful and reflecting. Reuven seeks solitude in walking late at night or passing long hours on the subway lost in thought. The hard work of being in silence creates the confidence to be alone and the space to engage ideas. In this way they are enabled to stay within the tradition, evaluate it, recognize what they dislike, and retain what is meaningful.

Alan M. Dershowitz, in Chutzpah, writes:

Coming to America was not the safe way, not the old way, not the road taken by those to whom religious observance was the all-consuming passion of life. It was not like going to Palestine in those days, or

Israel today. Making *aliyah*--going up to Zion--fulfilled a religious commandment, a mitzvah. Coming to America was making a new *secular* life, hopefully within the constraints of religion, but not in pursuance of any of its commands. (29, original emphasis)

David Malter and Rebbe Saunders fled the religious oppression of Eastern Europe and arrived in America to begin life anew. They chose the secular path that led to America. To offset this decision, was their task simply to re-create the *shtetl* of their past? Potok's response to this question is an emphatic no. But simply to embrace Americanism and to reject their cultural roots was clearly not the answer, either. Both David and the Rebbe remained close to the traditions they brought with them; the tension of assimilation was actualized in their sons.

In general, Reuven's journey resembles Huck Finn's. In "Cultural Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer's Beginnings," Potok uses Huck's adventures on the Mississippi River as a metaphor to describe his own journey through the Bronx. By extension, Reuven's experience is clarified and defined by the same metaphor. Huck travels down the Mississippi River on a raft, observing southern society in the company of Jim, a black man unjustly rejected by the society that would "civilize" Huck. Reuven's path through the streets of Brooklyn, observing the Jewish and American cultures of his neighbourhood, is made in the company of Danny. Like Jim, who teaches Huck much of what he needs to learn in order to become more fully human, Danny brings to Reuven the issues he needs to face in order to learn how to live with integrity, as a man and as a Jew, in modern America.

And like Huck before him, Reuven learns what to accept and reject. Reuven is a discriminating learner; he develops the grid through which to view the traditions of his youth and the secularism of the society of which he is also a part. The false mentor of the carnival, the false value of a negative phallocracy is replaced with his learned and integrated self, a self forged in the fires of silence. Affection for Danny, who at first is entirely other to Reuven, as is Jim to Huck, contributes to his growth in compassion and intuition, costly lessons which Reuven is willing to receive.

Danny's journey, like Reuven's, provides an emblem with which to define both experiences. Throughout the novels, Danny's tapping shoes function much like a Dickensian signature. The image is vivid; it invites the reader to think of a blind person's tapping cane. Danny is, of course, trying to find his way through the jostling crowds of Hasids making their way into schul; or he is seeking his way down a path that leads to his place of new beginnings, Columbia University (The Chosen 271). Whatever the location, the image symbolizes an important reality: Danny's tendency to slip into blindness and the concomitant difficulty of finding his way through life to enlightenment and a sustaining vision. Both Danny and Reuven seek a *tallit* (prayer shawl) that they can wear with faith and commitment. Danny's tapping shoes do not hinder him, for he travels carefully, yet with certitude. He journeys down many paths and through a network of streets. The streets, like individual threads connecting the orthodox, the Hasidic, and the secular worlds together, become a life-giving means on Danny's and Reuven's quests for spiritual, emotional, and moral growth. Importantly, the novels do not really conclude; the

young men are on their way, they have not yet arrived. Hesitantly, the two boys find together, their separate ways.

Chapter 3: Separate Ways

If I am not for myself, who is, and if I am only for myself, who am I, and if not now, when?

Hillel

The Artist's world: a site of chaos, emotion, new visions, new truths, new expressions of new ways of seeing. A world that challenges past assumptions, disregards traditions, respects talent, creativity, inspiration, yet establishes no immutable gods. The world of Asher Lev.

The Hasid's world: a site of coherence, sanctification, trusted insights, eternal truths, established liturgy expressing enduring beliefs. A world that reifies the past, authorizes traditions, empowers ritual, sanctifies texts. The world of Asher Lev.

Potok's third novel and its sequel, My Name is Asher Lev and The Gift of Asher Lev, are replete with the tensions that erupt when the Hasidic world of Asher Lev and the artistic world collide. The conflict concerns the opposition between the contending demands of Asher's inner and outer worlds and his drive to openness and the received demand to remain closed. The novels are about judgment: they are concerned with the ways in which Asher is damned by his family and his community and cast off as a pagan and a rebel. Potok treats questions of identity: How does one measure faith? How does one measure self? Who is Asher Lev?

Asher's struggle to name himself is exacerbated by demands of obligation to the community and the self. Both vie for attention and pre-eminence. Both offer to Asher freedom and life and entrapment and death. This conflict between the contending voices of community and individual responsibility is clearly disclosed through the investigation of the function of the aesthetic as it occurs in Picasso's Guernica painting, in the genre of nudes and crucifixions, and in Asher's creative response to the Isaac and Ishmael narratives of the Genesis account. Further, Asher's mentor relationships with his mythic ancestor, with the Rebbe, with Picasso, and with Jacob Kahn, contribute to the delineation of the community/self conflict of My Name is Asher Lev and The Gift of Asher Lev. From these categories the core issues emerge. Asher's task is to find balance; such equilibrium is not readily attained.

In juxtaposing the Hasidic and the artistic, the community and the self, Potok creates the narrative equivalent of a montage. Sergei Eisenstein's description of the montage in The Film Sense provides a useful definition to illuminate Potok's technique. Eisenstein writes:

The juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus one shot--as it does a *creation*. It resembles a creation--rather than a sum of its parts--from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition *the result is qualitatively* distinguishable from each component element viewed separately. . . . Each particular montage piece exists no longer as

something unrelated, but as a given *particular representation* of the general theme. (17, original emphasis)

This effect is disclosed in Asher's life. He is a montage of the Hasid and the artist, the meeting point of the commitment to self and other. Asher learns the enriching value of embracing struggle by bearing and not rejecting the heavy yoke of conflict. In his journey through the often fragile and dangerous landscape of his conflicting worlds and their demands, he acquires the art of containing tension. Asher courageously transforms his paradoxical commitments into a non-confrontational way of life.

Aesthetics is a central source of contention in My Name is Asher Lev and The Gift of Asher Lev. Essentially, the study of aesthetics is the study of beauty; it is a discipline that attempts to delineate components of the beautiful. What one values, how one perceives, and how one thinks are all variables that not only affect one's sense of and definition of beauty, but also affect what one defines as art. The Hasidic definition of beauty and, by extension, art, reflects a value located within the community's rigid theological boundaries. Art and artistic expression are subsumed by theological discourse. David Stern, in "Two Worlds," outlines the Hasidic position:

Orthodox Judaism sees eye to eye with Plato, and whenever the community has seen fit or been compelled to permit artistic expression in its midst, it has proceeded more or less along the lines suggested in the Republic: tolerating and indulging that which clearly lies within

the boundaries of the Law or, at the least, does not subvert the religious interests of the community; rigorously forbidding everything that refuses to yield to the needs of didacticism. (102)

On the other hand, Robert Henri, in The Art Spirit, a book given to Asher by his mother, states: "Every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture has been a rebel, a "universal" without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere" (Asher Lev 195). This alternate aesthetic view upholds the value of the artistic *individual's* perception of reality: the artist is to free him/herself from community commitments and restraints. This ideology rejects the premise that art must conform to a higher system of values, that it must be didactic and support those values. For those who accept this position, art does not serve *halacha*--the "way," the Law and moral code the covenant community follows--rather, art exists for its own sake.

Asher's introduction to the potentially contentious art world begins at four years of age when he develops an insatiable desire to draw. It soon becomes evident to himself and his family that art is his most satisfying means of self-expression. Art is the method through which he makes contact with the world, and it is his means of providing himself with stability and security in his turbulent home life. Asher is victimized by his father's vocation--travels for the Rebbe demand extended absences from home--and by his mother's nervous breakdown. Fearing abandonment, unable to communicate verbally or emotionally with parents whose occupation or pain

precludes them from intimacy with their son, Asher learns to express himself, in isolation, with pencil, crayons, and paper. Asher's artistic gift is the product of natural talent and environment.

Ironically, the family dynamic facilitates a talent it does not esteem. Asher's Aunt Leah warns his mother that despondency and withdrawal from family will prove costly: "[This] isn't healthy. It leaves scars. You don't want to leave scars on the boy. . . . The boy will have scars" (Asher Lev 25,26). In this admonition to Rivkeh to come out of her depression, Leah suggests that her sister's illness will adversely affect Asher. Read through the conventions of the Hasidic community, of which Aunt Leah is a member, Asher's escape into drawing during his mother's illness is identified as a scar. Leah insinuates Rivkeh is ultimately responsible for Asher's moral state and subsequent "decline" into the artistic world. Likewise, Asher's father describes drawing as foolish (16) and later despises the talent.

With the innocence of a four year old, Asher assumes his pictures will be welcomed by his family. He soon discovers differently: what is serious to Asher is denigrated by those around him. Asher's father asks his child: "You have nothing better to do with your time, Asher? Your grandfather would not have liked you to waste so much time with foolishness'" (Asher Lev 17). Through these encounters, Asher slowly begins to uncover the potency of the family's and community's ethic. He perceives the negative response his drawing elicits and feels baffled and confused. He experiences art as a double-bind: it is a release, a place to communicate his feelings, and a source which incites community condemnation. When his art is not

valued, Asher feels rejected. At this point the four-year old Asher's eager desire to please and conform reflect a greater need than his individuation. He is not able to defend his own sense of the gift as good against the double assault of family and community.

This tension creates a crisis of identity for Asher: the gift seems good, but is it? What or who is the source or the giver of the talent? Asher's community defines the activity as childish play, legitimate only while the child is illiterate; once Asher learns to read, his time is to be consumed by the study of Talmud. In contrast, Asher thinks his art is serious, that it contains a kind of sacramental power that will heal the pain he senses in his home, and, through conversations with his Russian emigre friend, Yudel Krinsky, Asher learns it is also a potent part of the larger world. Art cannot possess the restorative power Asher hopes if it is truly foolish, and the only way to improve the world is through the sanctioned "good deeds" of the Hasidic ethic.

Asher attempts to integrate the community's values; just before beginning Yeshiva he decides to stop drawing in order to please his father and gain acceptance by his peers:

To draw, to make lines and shapes on pieces of paper, was a futile indulgence in the face of such immutable darkness, a foolishness I would certainly leave behind when I entered the world beyond the window of our living room. . . . The Russian Jew would remain

unfinished; the land of ice and darkness, the street crying in the rain--
all of it would remain the fantasy of a child. I would grow up.

I lay in my bed in the darkness of the night, praying to grow
up. (Asher Lev 52)

Asher authentically attempts to replace his visual symbols with the letter and the word and to accept written language as the sole outlet for his inner self. During his first few years of school he tries to live within the rigid demands of Hasidism. However, the prayer and liturgy his community provides are not, on their own, sufficient for Asher's passion. When he learns of Stalin's persecution of the Jewish community in Russia and is in conflict with his father over plans to move to Vienna, Asher can no longer keep his pain unexpressed. He begins to draw again (Asher Lev 98).

Asher's persistence at art becomes, for his community, less innocent as he ages. Soon the pursuit is located in the province of *the sitra achra* and Asher is warned, "[art] will take you away from Torah and from your people and lead you to think only of yourself" (Asher Lev 106). In the Hasidic tradition, the *sitra achra*, (a Kabbalistic term), designates the satanic and the diabolical; Satan and the Angel of Death are two manifestations of this evil from the "Other Side." According to Daniel Chanan Matt, in Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, evil is released when Judgment is not softened by Love. When this imbalance occurs, the "Other Side" is released and life is threatened (34).⁸ However, in My Name is Asher Lev, the Hasidic

⁸ The Zohar's teaching on evil will be explored more fully in chapter five, in the discussion on the Kabbalah in The Book of Lights.

community ignores this fundamental definition and distinction, and reconstructs evil as non-observance and neglect of the community. Improper action, and not a condemning attitude, is named evil. By re-defining evil, the community absolves itself from its own guilt of replacing grace with judgment and shifts the focus to Asher's behaviour. Therefore, when Asher draws in the *Chumash* (a sacred text, 118), steals art supplies from his friend (137), studies Talmud reluctantly (174), and refuses to travel with his father to Vienna (103), he is guilty, by virtue of his unacceptable behaviour, of association with the "Other Side." All these events indicate to his rigid society that Asher's art is evil.

As an artist, Asher is in conflict as a result of his upbringing and communal existence. He detests the behaviour to which he feels driven and is tempted to conclude that his community's judgment is correct. However, Asher knows he must find ways to nurture his art; without visual expression, Asher is silenced, unable to explore or release his emotions. Because of the liberation Asher experiences while drawing and the inner peace this affords, he is unwilling to accept completely the dogmatic assertions of his community. The tension between his need to draw and the community's judgment is overwhelming, and, as a consequence, Asher must resolve upon a course to follow; he decides in favour of his art (Asher Lev 103).

Asher begins formal art study at thirteen years of age, the time in which the Jewish boy is transferred, through the ritual of *Bar Mitzvah*, from the state of childhood to the status of independent adulthood. The term *Bar Mitzvah* means "son of the commands" and describes an initiation rite. Asher reaches religious majority

when he turns thirteen. The concept is a religious/legal one, designating the youth as no longer a minor; now he prays as an adult and counts for quorum in services. As well, Asher is now completely accountable for his own moral development and behaviour. Prior to the *bar mitzvah*, the male child's sins belong to, or are accepted by, the child's father. Now, Asher is responsible to ensure he performs all the precepts and commandments to which his community ascribes. At this time of transition, when the young boy becomes an adult, the Rebbe intercedes and begins to direct Asher's life. The decision to sanction his pursuit of art is made by the Rebbe, who chooses the sculptor, Jacob Kahn (a non-observant Hasid, 284, 247, 256) to be Asher's artistic mentor.

Asher's development as an artist and as an adult member of his community will now proceed concurrently. Asher's immersion in the world of art at once facilitates his growing desire to draw and increases the tensions in his inner voice responding to the condemnations of the Hasidic community. The confrontation between Asher's internal and external realities is direct and consuming, and it occurs chiefly in Asher's study of Picasso's Guernica, nudes, crucifixions, and in his visual re-creation of the Isaac/Ishmael narrative.

The Guernica painting, as it is presented in My Name is Asher Lev, is an important clue that decodes much of the Asher Lev text. Potok's inclusion of this piece, from the core of gentile western civilization, discloses the potential for an icon from outside the Jewish community to provide insight into the Hasidic group. The boundaries are permeable; Asher discovers the potency of the Guernica to speak to

and to help him identify and understand his Hasidic experience, especially in light of the cosmic evil reflected in modern German brutality.

Guernica, an ancient Spanish town and a cultural centre of the Basques, was subject to bombardment on April 26, 1937. Eberhard Fisch, in Guernica by Picasso: A Study of the Picture and its Context notes: ". . . the Condor Legion flew a major attack against the undefended Basque town of Guernica and destroyed it completely: this ranks as one of the most blatant acts of unmitigated cruelty in the history of mankind" (18). Picasso, commissioned by the Spanish government to paint a large mural for the Spanish pavilion to be displayed at the 1937 world exhibition in Paris, chose to solemnize the Guernica tragedy. The picture, painted in black, white and grey, concretizes the pain and suffering of an innocent people, caught unprepared and unguarded, victim to an obscene attack. Thematically, the painting raises issues of oppression, victimization, and innocent suffering. Contained within Picasso's ritualistic, mythological painting are many of the themes and much of the iconography that are important to Potok's text.

Guernica is central to post-cubist, modern art. Frank D. Russel, in his study of the painting, Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision, writes: "It is difficult to point to a major phase of western art which cannot be said to be reflected in some way in the Guernica, surely the most eclectic of pictures."⁹ Fisch notes that Picasso understood this work to be pre-eminent. The artist's only will

⁹ This statement of F. D. Russel's is quoted in Eberhard Fisch, Guernica by Picasso: A Study of the Picture and its Context (57).

stated that Guernica should not be returned to Spain until a ". . . stable, democratic government was installed there" (Guernica by Picasso 14). The will contained no settlement of his financial assets, only this information regarding the painting.

When Asher becomes Jacob Kahn's apprentice, Kahn immediately directs the former's attention to the Guernica painting. Asher's first task is to study the work thoroughly; the boy immediately identifies the painful content present in the work. At thirteen, he possesses a heightened sensitivity to pain and an adult sense of angst. Asher's home is a site of sustained tension. For example, through his friendship with Yudel Krinsky, Asher is made conscious of the plight of the Soviet Jew. This Eastern European Jewish reality deeply affects Asher's home, and his mother studies Russian politics in order to aid the Rebbe in his work to free Soviet Jews from Stalin's barbarous assaults. Asher is also made aware of the Jewish tragedy during the Second World War by the fact that his father travels relentlessly and often at great risk to re-establish Ladover Hasidic communities throughout the disseminated Jewish European community. Asher's world is replete with the pain of innocent suffering and responses to that pain.

Asher's realization of his own isolation from family and oppression by the community resonates with the external suffering he observes in the world around him. Furthermore, he perceives that the conventional Hasidic response to suffering is to act in order to change the pain into something "other." This reaction is modeled for Asher by his parents in their relentless actions to transform their world and is sanctioned by the Jewish ethic of *mitzvah*: the command to perform good deeds.

Asher's Ladover world provides no symbols or rituals to express feelings in an act of simple identification; instead, emotional expression is neglected through the consuming activity of "doing." The typical releases, those his parents and community endorse, are essentially without effect for Asher. He does not want to lose his feelings or to make them disappear through a flurry of activity--Asher wants to express his emotions. When Asher discovers Guernica, he perceives a new language and means with which to communicate a world of emotion. He also receives a legitimization of his own response: to paint is to disclose pain, to reify suffering. For Asher, it is important to give pain a voice and not to silence that voice through unrelenting acts intended to transform pain into joy.

Guernica provides Asher with the alphabet he needs to speak the language of pain. It contains the religious symbols of the crucifix and the pieta, an important interpretation of the spatial distinctions of room and window, and offers a potent communication of suffering. Furthermore, Guernica is a syncretic work: Picasso merges Christian with Classical Greek forms in order to enrich and universalize the significance of the work. Fisch states: "For the Spaniard, Picasso, a combination of Christian ideas with those of antiquity was not at all unusual . . ." (45). Fisch's study explains the iconography of Guernica and Picasso's synthesis of disparate religious paradigms to create new ways of perceiving and identifying the tragedy resulting from the war. "Paradigm" here is to be understood not simply as an example, but as a way of perceiving the world, (as it is in Thomas S. Kuhn's The

Structure of Scientific Revolutions).¹⁰ Asher learns through the study of this piece that such combinations of dissimilar elements are possible and effective in transmitting one's reactions to being in a non-coherent society during an evil moment. The richness of the Guernica vocabulary makes it clear to Asher that the holistic art-religion structure of the Hasid is not a viable communicator of his experience. Syncretism and a sense of dissolution or chaos co-exist, and for Asher Lev, as for Potok, Guernica is symbol and model. Asher discovers a useful language of communication and thereby gains a vocabulary he might never have received from his Hasidic experience.

The crucifix symbol occurs in three places in Guernica. The first is found in the image of the fallen horse. One interpretation of the dark, jagged light emitted by the central electric lamp, positioned just above the horse's head, is that it represents a crown of thorns. The animal, pierced by a sword and mortally wounded, dies with an unheard cry of anguish, fusing a forsaken, dying saviour with the destruction of a guiltless Spanish people, and encoding an important message of human pain. The second visual echo of the cross is situated in the dead warrior, dismembered and lying on the ground, in cruciform position. His left hand, bearing the stigmata, is open with the fingers extended. His right hand grips both the hilt of a broken sword still extended in the direction of the enemy and a small flower, a symbol of resurrection and hope. In the third iteration of the crucifix theme, the dying woman on the extreme right of the painting is in mid-air, with her head thrown back, crying out in

¹⁰ Kuhn published the first edition of this work in 1962.

anguish. Her arms are upraised in cruciform position and her fingers are wide apart; her entire form emanates a deep intensity of suffering. Clearly, Picasso intends universal applicability of the crucifixion as a symbol of anguish, for in the painting the symbol is revealed as gender-free: the form is expanded to disclose either a man's or a woman's suffering, a human's or an animal's.

The second religious motif in Guernica is the *pieta*, which is a devotional rendering of the Madonna with the dead Christ cradled in her arms. Like the crucifix, an important element in Potok's novel, the *pieta* form is another familiar code and depicts a mother's intense grief over the death of her son. The image contains the idea of sacrifice and loss: the son is renounced and killed by a group that would not receive him. In the original *Pieta*, the Son was helpless and at the mercy of the oppressor, who exacted the ultimate price from the victim, His life. Picasso uses this image in Guernica to convey the devastation of the town destroyed, without mercy, by an unrelenting political system. This tragedy is recorded on the extreme left side of the mural where a lamenting woman, with her head twisted upward, shrieks her grief as she holds her dead child in her arms.

The room and the window are important to Guernica and recur as an important intertext in My Name is Asher Lev. The room is sparsely furnished and predominantly dark, with the exception of flashes of light bursting through the window into the chamber. The room is a trap; humans and animals are entombed within its four walls. Danger penetrates the cell through the window, both in the form of the woman, with the oil lamp, and in the flashes of light. Fisch suggests that

in Guernica, "The interior is a symbol of the limitations of life on earth. Symbolically, its darkness suggests the brutality and darkness of earthly existence" (Guernica by Picasso, 51). On the other hand, the flashes of light are not juxtaposed with the darkness. The light is piercing and explosive, the flash from a bomb. Thus, the room contains the suffering; within its walls are the innocent, victims of an obscene assault. Outside the room is that which is "other": it is threatening, intrusive, and violent. It enters the chamber through the windows and destroys the room's inhabitants.

Asher approaches the study of art with the methods used in Formal scholarship: he carefully observes all the components, studies the alternate "texts," and then memorizes Guernica in order to master the painting. In this way, the themes, images, and symbols that compose the picture are indelibly imprinted upon his memory and psyche. Asher absorbs Guernica, and years later its language re-emerges, transformed by Asher's own experiences, in the art he produces during his first European sojourn. Intrigued by the cruciform woman in the Spaniard's painting, Asher experiments with the idea of placing the Madonna on the cross. The two images of the cross and the pieta, symbolizing the son's and the mother's pain, respectively, which are separated in Guernica are synthesized in Asher's art. He draws this suffering woman repeatedly, while he unconsciously prepares to paint his Brooklyn Crucifixions (Asher Lev 295-299).

For Asher, the forms of crucifix and pieta are rich with possibilities, and they provide an appropriate vehicle for expressing his inner reality. Asher has his own

experience with a mother who is "crucified" and also mourns the loss of her son. However, to Asher's father and most of the Hasidic community, the crucifix and pieta are not universally applicable signifiers, but instead simply manifest in Asher's community Christian "misinterpretation" of Jewish history and scripture as mere prefigurations of Christ. For these Jews, the cross and the pieta also symbolize religious justifications for the deaths of innocent Jews at the hands of enraged Christians. The community's interpretation of the icons is limited, universal, traditional, and unambiguous; there is no possibility for a multiplicity of meanings. Asher's study and use of the form is clear evidence that art is of the *sitra achra*: it leads to acceptance of the murder of Jews, to evil, to "the Other Side." In iconography, Hasidism will not allow revivification, resonance, layering.

Asher, through this act of artistic creation, places himself alongside other important artists who employ the crucifix symbol, but for more nearly orthodox Christian purposes. Wagner, Eliot, Pound, and other modernists, like Asher Lev, re-interpret, re-contextualize, and re-view the cross, Christ, Mary, and western religious, cultural, and artistic traditions and symbols. Asher's artistic mentor, Jacob Kahn, instructs him about the crucifixion in art, "I am not telling you to paint crucifixions. I am telling you that you must understand what a crucifixion is in art if you want to be a great artist. The crucifixion must be available to you as a form" (Asher Lev 218).

For instance, Marc Chagall's picture Calvary, (1912) is an early example of a Jewish artist using the crucifix form in a Jewish painting. Avram Kampf, in Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century, describes the painting:

In *Calvary* we face the ethereal figure of the pale blue child mounted on a pole as if he were being crucified, against the dark expanse of green colour. Curved lines appear, disappear and reappear in the canvas as they converge on the child. The child is beset by a tall bearded man with a torn sleeve, and a small woman in a green dress decorated with little flowers. Both are firmly grounded in the red soil.

(11)

In this work, the child is lost from the perspective of the watching figures and separated from the community and its traditions. From the child's perspective, he is sacrificed by his family. Kampf writes: "[The parents] saw their children leaving the traditional faith and mourned the loss. The children saw the process as a move upward and outward into a new and hopeful realm. . . . [The artists] portray Christ, venerated by the outside world, as a brother, a fellow artist, a performer of miracles. For Chagall he will become the symbol of Jewish martyrdom" (12). Chagall is mentioned in two of Potok's novels: In My Name is Asher Lev, Asher's uncle identifies his nephew as a young Chagall (35) and in The Gift of Asher Lev, Asher discovers one of Chagall's works in his now deceased uncle's collection (53). Chagall's painting is another important text for Asher, and empowers the young artist to make non-Jewish forms a part of his artistic vocabulary.

When Asher utilizes the crucifix motif to express his experience of his mother's anguish, the community rejects his voice. He is not allowed to use this language to name his pain. The Hasidic community is unable and unwilling to decode the code; they will not acknowledge that beneath their customary reading of the icon, Asher's text had re-inscribed the form with new meaning. As Picasso and others secularize the cross, re-creating it as an appropriate symbol of human pain, so Asher also fills the image with new meaning. It is, as he attempts to explain to a people who will not listen, a universal message of suffering, a form he legitimately appropriates to serve as an ironic container of a Jewish woman's pain.

Asher identifies the paradox: ". . . I created this painting--an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment;" ". . . There was no other way" (Asher Lev 313, 333). Asher, rejected because he does not observe the community's rigid boundary, is coldly told, "There are limits, Asher" (343). The Hasidic society devalues Asher's expression of his experience, and, at the same time, the community denigrates the sacrifice Asher's family makes in order to do the Rebbe's work. His parents and society do not want to be made aware of their own pain. Asher rejects the hidden ethic the group shares: one does not disclose one's "dark" emotions. The appearance of cheerful service is everything. Asher exposes the deception by revealing the emotional cost to his family in facilitating the Ladover community. However, neither his parents nor their friends are willing to

face and own their suffering; instead, caught in denial they sacrifice their son and friend, and reject the paintings which reveal their anguish.

Asher's awareness of the denial of his family and community is made evident in his appropriation of Picasso's room and window imagery. The appearance of his apartment in the Brooklyn Crucifixions is consonant with the Guernica chamber's significance of limitation and entrapment. As a child, Asher observes his mother in her ritual by the window in their livingroom. Unaware the room is a trap, Rivkeh Lev stands in the livingroom, and looks out to the larger world. All her life Rivkeh waits and watches; she fears an encroaching destruction--her brother died in the outside world, and, perhaps, while traveling for the Rebbe her husband will, too. For Asher's mother, the world beyond the safe confines of the apartment is hostile and dangerous, and her family is fragile. Her room is demarcated by the patriarchy of Hasidism. Men are authorized to define the room she stands in, which is a symbolic container of her family and their tradition, as the only good space in which she can exist. On the other hand, the same traditional voice states that the outside world, which Rivkeh sees through the window, is hostile. This teaching keeps Rivkeh within the "safe" confines of the tradition and fearful of venturing out. She has, in Virginia Woolf's words, no "room of her own." Without her own sacred space, Rivkeh exists in a trap. Keeping her vigil by the window, Rivkeh dreads what she looks out upon, and fears it will penetrate her home.

Asher paints his mother in the livingroom by the window as the woman in cruciform position in Guernica; Rivkeh's movement, the contortions of her body, the cry on her lips, all disclose her pain and reflect Picasso's women:

On top--not behind this time, but on top--of the window I drew my mother in her housecoat, with her arms extended along the horizontal of the blind, her wrists tied to it with the cords of the blind, her legs tied at the ankles to the vertical of the inner frame with another section of the cord of the blind. I arched her body and twisted her head. . . . The torment, the tearing anguish I felt in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs. (Asher Lev 313)

Asher uncovers the significance of his mother's watchfulness: Rivkeh is in torment, sacrificed by her husband/son/community. The danger Rivkeh tries to forestall, by keeping her vigil, enters the room in spite of her. Her best attempts to keep her family together, protected from the dangerous outside world, are futile. Secular American culture, in the form of western art, enters the cloistered home in Asher's art and seems, to Rivkeh, to undermine their sheltered Hasidic enclave. And the Hasidim which defines their space from within, with its rigid perspective, divides Aryeh and Asher. Father is turned against son; mother is crucified between them.

The painting is subversive. Conventional Hasidic teaching demands exclusivity. Asher defies this instruction because he discerns it to be self-defeating

for himself and his community. The Hasidic society is suspicious of the outside world. The Hasids fear its influence and power and sense that for this group, self-protection demands utter rejection of western culture, ideas, philosophy. Persecuted in the past, the Hasids regroup in America after the Second World War and during Stalin's regime, and, fearful in the present, they expect the larger society to intrude upon them with an "air attack" or a pogrom. In the Brooklyn Crucifixions Asher paints, with compassion, his own culture, knowing it perceives itself to be at risk; he paints its torment and fear authentically. On the other hand, with prophet-like understanding, he knows the livingroom is not a safe place, and he perceives that the ghetto mentality that the room signifies is a trap.

The tragic allusion from the Guernica painting reveals that seeking protection within the confines of one's sub-group will not ensure preservation; the strategy might mean extinction. In the town of Guernica, the chamber did not provide shelter. The enemy was too powerful, and as a result Guernica was destroyed. Asher is instructed by this historical event, learning that hiding does not always provide safety. Seclusion can intensify vulnerability and create an ironic collusion with the oppressor that perpetuates the victim position. To step outside this accepted confinement in order to explore the initial assumptions--first, that Jews can only live in ghettos because the oppressor will not allow integration, and second, that Jews must live in ghettos because, in order to preserve themselves the community will not allow assimilation--is a risk Asher will take. Asher hazards being open and connecting with the outside world.

Asher's capacity for artistic and theological openness is evident from the outset. He is prepared to ask the difficult questions that those around him do not and to express the feelings he has been taught to repress. During Rivkeh's nervous breakdown, the four-year-old Asher, frightened by the inexplicable change in his mother, is the only one who honestly declares his pain:

There was a sensation of something tearing wide apart inside me and a steep quivering climb out of myself. I felt myself suddenly another person. I heard that other person screaming, shrieking, beating his fists against the top of the table. "I can't stand it, I can't stand it, I can't stand it!" that other person kept screaming. (Asher Lev 33)

Later, still suffering over the alteration in his mother, Asher stands by the living room window and struggles to open the blinds in order to gaze out on the night. When Aryeh enters the room, Asher asks his father, "Why [is] God doing this to [his] mama?" Aryeh ". . . turned away from the window and looked at me. I could feel him looking at me. Then he tugged at the cord near the window, and the blind dropped swiftly with a clattering noise. He flattened the slats and shut out the street" (Asher Lev 47). His father does not answer the question, because a question which suggests God is causally connected to their pain should never be asked. Further, Aryeh's activity of closing the blinds Asher wants open reveals an important difference between them. Asher resists this tendency to close out the rest of life, which the window event symbolizes (Asher Lev 142, 183, 199, 235, 305, 350). Metaphorically, he wants the windows open; Asher wants access to more than his

Hasidic world provides. The window is an exit, and it is also a trope for Asher's eyes.

This openness is the subversive sub-text in Asher's integration of the Guernica painting symbols into his Brooklyn Crucifixions. Asher discovers that the logocentric premise of Hasidic theology, that this way of organizing and expressing spirituality is the only way, is inadequate to his needs. Asher experiences the simplistic constructs of cause and effect as rigid and dogmatic (Asher Lev 118-125). Consequently, the apartment Asher draws is not only the container of an important and valuable culture, but it is also the means of showing that same culture's entrapment. The threat to Hasidism is both without, to the extent that racism is politicized in the larger secular society, and within, to the extent that the community condemns any venture out. Asher's access to this truth comes to him through his risk-taking capacity to paint the crucifixions. For Asher, it is fluid, open, organic life which is preservative, though it is dangerous, too. Still, this is America, and the European anti-semitism is modulated, distanced, so that the Hasid must reject the old barriers.

Asher's open pursuit of art leads him not only to the crucifixion and the pieta, but also to the nude. The nude form is also offensive to his community, and is one more indicator of art's evil. As a group, the Hasids are extremely modest, to the extent that women wear wigs, keep their arms covered at all times, and swim in separate areas, away from men. For Asher to learn to paint the nude is in direct violation of Hasidic law, and it undercuts the system of moral order the Hasids seek to establish. Consequently, the community is single in their response: "We must

fight against the Other Side, Rivkeh,' my father shouted in Yiddish. 'We must fight against it! Otherwise it will destroy the world'" (Asher Lev 170). Once again Asher is in conflict with conventional Hasidic teaching. Yet once again conflict becomes the means to discover the needs artistic integrity creates for him.

Asher's first trip to the local museum, a journey he makes alone, introduces him to the nude; he is not yet thirteen. This initial observation of the nude in art intensifies Asher's appreciation of female beauty and alters the way he looks at women. Prior to this encounter, Asher has only known the disguised beauty of the covered Hasidic women. The epiphany at the museum removes layers of learned social constructions as it reveals the naked female form. Only later in the novel, with Jacob Kahn, will Asher begin to discover the beauty of the male form. Now, he begins to notice his mother in a new way: "I had begun in recent weeks to be conscious of the lines and planes not only of her face but of her body as well" (Asher Lev 140). Asher's world is gaining the three dimensions of body, depth, and complexity. He is breaking free of the Hasidic two dimensional point of view. His experience of the beauty inherent in the nude art form causes him to question the formulaic Hasidic response to paintings of nudes. During his second trip to the museum, accompanied by his mother, Asher asks her, "Is it against the Torah? . . . Can it be against Torah to paint something beautiful?" (161). Asher's mother does not answer this question and he does not wait; he begins to draw nudes.

Aryeh Lev's reaction to Asher's trips to the museum is theologically conventional and is expressed with castrating rage. Aryeh provides for his son the

doctrine Asher's mother does not. He confronts his son, during their morning breakfast routine, with the full force and intensity of his anger:

. . . didn't [Asher] know that the body was the gift of the Ribbono Shel Olom; that the Torah forbade us to treat it without modesty; that such drawings were vile, that they followed in the ways of the goyim; that Jews, Torah Jews, would never think of drawing such things. The body was a private and sacred domain. To display that privacy in a painting was disgusting. (Asher Lev 166)

Aryeh's anger is legitimized and empowered by his internalized sense of patriarchy. He has authority by virtue of his position as male, husband, and father. To this authority, evil exists in the painting of nudes and in sons that rebel against their fathers. Furthermore, this anti-nude, anti-disobedient son response is a sign to the Hasidim of their fealty to God, scripture, tradition. Asher challenges this authority when he paints nudes, and Aryeh confronts the challenge directly and violently.

From a Freudian perspective, Aryeh appears as the quintessentially castrating father. It is while preparing the breakfast juice Aryeh confronts Asher. Aryeh holds a knife in one hand and an orange in the other. Initially, the breakfast ritual of slicing and squeezing fresh orange juice signifies connection, affection, and regard: Aryeh expresses love and care to Asher in the act of making the morning drink. Further, the orange contains good things: it possesses life-giving and life-enhancing vitamins and juices. In this moment of Aryeh's rage, the symbol is endued with new meaning. Aryeh is determined to impress upon his son the authority he holds as

Asher's father. Ironically, the orange, about to be crushed for the good of the son, becomes an apt metaphor to describe Aryeh's attempt to crush his son's independent, subversive artistic power. Aryeh's rage, if it succeeds in controlling Asher, will destroy Asher's art and vitality.

Asher withstands the assault; he will not be made his father's eunuch. Intuitively he understands that Aryeh's behaviour is unjust. Asher's strategy is neither open defiance nor blind submission; he will pursue art, and he will continue to paint nudes, but he will do it quietly. His tactic of "civil disobedience" is fundamental to his growing maturity as an artist and as a Jew. Asher weathers the temptation to remain forever subservient to the system in which he is raised, as it is embodied in his father, a system that seeks to reject much that Asher values. Asher's ability to challenge the controlling father-image is a measure of his own growing sexual maturity. It is not surprising, then, that shortly after this confrontation, Asher begins to recognize his own sexual impulses.

During the next ritual meal that the Lev family celebrates following the breakfast ordeal, Asher consumes too much wine, perhaps echoing Horace's *in vino veritas*, and goes to bed:

I lay beneath the blanket and felt the taste of the wine on my tongue and the throbbing inside my head. . . . I closed my eyes quickly and was rocking back and forth, feeling very hot and sweaty . . . Behind my eyes was one of the nudes I had copied. I felt my eyes begin to move across the contours. . . . My eyes rested a long time in the dark

softness of the picture. Then I felt them begin to move again across the rise and fall of the contours, across the warm light and dark colors. . . . I felt the colors . . . I felt the forms . . . I felt the picture . . . all was fusing into [a] brilliant white light . . . I opened my eyes and was very frightened. (Asher Lev 171)

The sexual content in the art resonates with Asher's own sexual energy and completes the Freudian pattern evoked by Aryeh's rage. Asher is hooked by the erotic power of art; it liberates him to express his sexual self, which in turn enables an important separation from his father. As well, the eroticism frightens Asher, perhaps in part because of the Torah indictment against the "graven image" as a source of potential idolatry. It is also the terror of the unknown; the young boy's Hasidic training does not provide a means to explore his sexuality, for bodies are to be kept hidden and not exposed, and parents do not publicly embrace. Asher is unprepared for the intensity of his reaction, but he further discovers that art is a means to release and to self-connection. Through his study of the nude, Asher becomes sexually self-aware.

Art continues to inspire Asher's sexual energy. Jacob Kahn, disregarding the Rebbe's explicit admonition that Asher not paint nudes, insists he learn to paint the genre. In this way Kahn invites Asher to enter the battle between reason and feeling, ". . . between his rational side and his sensual side" (Asher Lev 219). Kahn informs Asher of the importance of engaging this tension: "The manner in which certain artists have resolved that battle has created some of the greatest masterpieces of art" (210). To facilitate Asher's artistic talent, Kahn hires a model to pose for Asher.

Feeling shame, Asher agrees to sketch the model. While he draws her, she is bathed in a sunlight that softly illuminates her form (Asher Lev 219, 220). The woman is the recipient of a kind of heavenly light that shines upon her and warms her. This lighting creates an almost sacred ambience and endues the scene with an overtly religious sense and the woman with a special, divine benediction. Other uses of similar kinds of lighting in the text occur in association with the Rebbe, the mediator of holiness, who is frequently described in light or as illuminated by white light (Asher Lev 19, 270; The Gift 20, 30, 99, 341). The nude's association with light discloses the moment's truth. While Asher paints he receives a type of divine blessing or approval. Later on, the sensuality of this day in Kahn's studio affects Asher at night: "I drew her with my eyes, letting my eyes move slowly across her. I drew her slowly until there was again the sudden light and I was able to sleep" (Asher Lev 221). Working all day with the woman results in a fusion of his spiritual/sexual instincts. The sexual moment is also described in terms of white light and gains the significance of being an important physical truth. Art, nudes, white lights, release; these are the metaphors of Asher's growing sexual awareness. Art becomes a focus that satisfies two of Asher's elemental drives: his spirituality and his sexuality.

Asher's ability to work with crucifixes and nudes, two of the most significant forms of western art, is expanded in The Gift of Asher Lev, the sequel to My Name is Asher Lev, to include his creative re-working of one of the key sacred texts of the Jewish tradition, the *akedah*, the sacrifice of Isaac. Asher incorporates a sacred Jewish motif into his growing artistic language; the Isaac text is central to Jewish life

and worship. Located in the Genesis text (22), the Torah passage records the incident of Yahweh's command that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac. The Isaac story teaches several values important to the Jewish community. First, the account contains the ritual prescription for the redemption of the first-born in Israel. Second, the "first-fruits," (in this case, the first-born son), belong to Yahweh. Third, the proper stance of the covenant community is one of obedience and faith, as evidenced in Abraham's behaviour. And finally, the result of such faith is abundant blessing, as disclosed by Yahweh's response to the patriarch. Asher, aware of these conventional readings, moves away from traditional exegesis and re-interprets this important sacred work with the hermeneutic of his own experience. In this act Asher brings to this biblical account an openness and desire to expand beyond the limiting interpretive boundaries he inherits from his community.

It is significant to The Gift of Asher Lev that some exegetes consider the Genesis 22 text to be the second part of a doublet, a parallel biblical account of a single incident and a narrative technique used by the ancient writer/redactor to juxtapose divergent and often conflicting accounts of the same event. Robert Alter, in The Art of Biblical Narrative, suggests the format is deliberate and purposeful, and that both pairs are essential to communicate the full, if often ambiguous, biblical theme (23 ff.). Other interpreters, (such as Samuel R. Driver in his influential work, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament), who use the "Documentary Hypothesis" as their hermeneutic, suggest doublets disclose the preferences of diverse redactors and argue that the accounts are often in conflict. In this interpretative

stance, invariably one account is privileged over the other as the container of biblical doctrine, and as a result, the neglected pericope is marginalized and suppressed. Either way, the suggestion is that the first *akedah* account is found in the sacrifice of Abraham's first son, Ishmael (Genesis 21). In this text, Sarah, frightened by Ishmael's legitimate right to Isaac's inheritance, commands Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the camp. Abraham complies with his wife's directive, although he is "greatly distressed" by the demand (Genesis 21:11). Through this exile of the pair, Abraham sacrifices both his concubine and his son. Fortunately, the angel of God intervenes and they are saved. In spite of this divine intervention and redemptive act, however, Hagar and Ishmael are forced to live out their lives isolated and marginalized, forever banished from the covenant community. When Ishmael does return, through his descendants, it is to wage war against the covenant community.

Both the Genesis 21 pericope of the sacrifice of Ishmael and the Genesis 22 account of the binding of Isaac intertext with The Gift of Asher Lev and, in keeping with Alter's distinction, the assumption is that both pairs of the doublet contain essential information. Asher uses the sacrifice texts as a pattern with which he paints his own story. Utilizing the Isaac event, he paints his anguish over the Rebbe's request his son, Avrumel, be trained as the next Rebbe. However, initially, Asher superimposes the Ishmael event upon the Isaac story to re-create and illuminate the other, darker side of the patriarch. Using the Ishmael scene as a type of his own experience, the artist draws his experience of painful rejection by his own father. His use of this parallel biblical account and his interpretation of it reveal the artist's

ability to step aside from the conventional hermeneutic and uncover a deeper, marginalized meaning in the texts.

At first, Asher uses the Isaac form unconsciously. While giving an impromptu lecture at his daughter's yeshiva, Asher draws on the blackboard the scene of Abraham with arm uplifted, about to kill Isaac:

I drew the boy with his eyes wide open, his thin neck arched back, throat exposed to the poised blade; the bearded man anguished and determined, his free hand clutching his chest in a gesture both pitying and purposeful--all of it frozen by the chalk and the work of my fingers. (The Gift 138,39)

Unaware, Asher replaces Abraham's features with his own and Isaac's with Avrumel's. Asher draws unconsciously what he has suppressed: he knows the Rebbe wants his son to be a vital, connected part of the Hasidic group and will train Avrumel to be the next leader. To comply with the Rebbe's desire feels, to Asher, like a sacrifice of the first-born. In the biblical text, the test establishes Abraham's faith: because he is willing to obey Yahweh's command, the killing is forestalled by the provision of a ram. Abraham reveals his commitment to the covenant and to the notion that the covenant community is greater than his individual desire. Isaac's life is spared; Abraham is promised the blessings of covenant as a reward for his faith; and Isaac becomes the next patriarch and leader of the holy community. Isaac, too, is blessed through his father's example and faith. Likewise, the Rebbe's request challenges Asher's bond to his family and friends. The Rebbe, who stands in for

God, tests Asher's faith. Asher is asked to be a modern Abraham and to give his son to the community, an act that will ensure its survival.

Prior to the Rebbe's request, Asher creates a painting that uses the Ishmael text as language to express his abandonment by his father, Aryeh. Ishmael was treated unjustly by Abraham and became Abraham's (and Sarah's) victim. He was unfairly sent into exile, not at God's request, but because of Sarah's anger and was never re-integrated into his father's community. Whereas a sacrifice was provided for Isaac, Ishmael, in every meaningful way, was lost to Abraham, who essentially killed Ishmael, for whom there was no ram hiding in the bushes. Through Abraham's act, Ishmael lost his inheritance, his place in the community, his participation in the group's rituals, his family, and was orphaned and exiled. Unlike the Isaac account, which discloses Abraham's faith, the Ishmael-event reveals the darker side of the patriarch, showing how his choices created for himself and his son a potent enemy. Ishmael essentially became the patriarch of the enemies of Abraham's clan, and as such, both Abraham's critic and his shadow side.

When Asher paints his first version of the binding of Isaac, he creates a montage: he superimposes the first of the double accounts, the Ishmael pericope, over the Isaac story and reveals Abraham's ambiguity as a person and as a father. Through this technique Asher finds a language to express how deeply he identifies with Abraham's first son, Ishmael, and how deeply he feels sacrificed. Asher also distinguishes Aryeh's anger. Aryeh is horrified:

[He was] staring in trembling anger and bewilderment at the finished painting, his face white, and saying, "What have you done? He did not kill him," and I replying, "There is a midrash that states he did," and my father saying, "But it is only a midrash. This is what you will show the world? Abraham slaughtering Isaac?" and I replying, "It's how I feel about it." And he finally excusing himself and leaving and never returning to that apartment all the rest of the time we lived there . . . (The Gift 333)

Asher, in brutal self-honesty, exposes the secret, hidden meaning. Asher perceives the complexity of the biblical accounts, accepts the double reading and rejects a conventional hermeneutic that insists Abraham is simply a man of faith and that ignores the complexity of the Abraham narrative. Asher perceives the dark side and the important function of the Ishmael account. Asher is able to see this in the text in part because he will not deny this in his own experience. He is aware of the light and the dark side of the Hasidic community, his father, and himself.

Once again, Aryeh will not receive the way Asher names his experience. Aryeh cannot even bear to look at the art his son creates. The Hasidic community perceives Aryeh as a type of Abraham: Aryeh is a loyal, faithful patriarch obediently serving the community. Aryeh accepts this ennobling construction of himself. There is, however, another side to the man. The dark side of Abraham is hidden in the marginalized account, the story of Ishmael. Aryeh lives out this event; acting out of rage and therefore not listening to the voice of the Rebbe, he abandons Asher in order

to preserve the unity of a system he depends upon, the system of Hasidic belief. As the recipient of Aryeh's rejection, Asher is as marginalized and exiled as Ishmael.

Asher's utilization of both parts of the Ishmael/Isaac double in his art brings to light the two roles he plays in his family and community. Asher is the sacrificed son who is victim to his father's folly, and Asher is also a faithful servant and member of the community. Asher does allow the Rebbe to train Avrumel to become the next leader. In this double place of victim son, faithful father, Asher dwells in the tension of exile and connection. His ability to live in this difficult place is nurtured by his teachers.

Asher's capacity to question, to challenge authority and ideas, is largely facilitated by his mentors. He learns from four significant instructors: his mythic ancestor, the Rebbe, Picasso, and Jacob Kahn. Separately, each of these teachers possesses the ability to be either a true or false mentor. Together, they compensate for and bring one another into balance. They create for Asher a rich and nurturing developmental environment. Collectively, they delineate the tensions and tranquillity generated by individual and community responsibilities. In many ways, they work as a montage, disclosing to their pupil the dark and light sides of the worlds of art and Hasidism and their concomitant commitments to the community and self. As Asher engages the values, texts, rituals, and teachings these men bring to him, he finds his way on his journey of maturation. Asher gains insight into his place as individual artist, Hasidic son, and *Bar Mitzvah*.

Asher learns the value of the community through the ancestor who he identifies as mythic, and the Rebbe. Asher writes of his ancestor: "I was told about him so often during my very early years that he began to appear quite frequently in my dreams: a man of mythic dimensions, tall, dark-bearded, powerful of mind and body . . . He left a taste of thunder in my mouth" (Asher Lev 10). The ancestor and the Rebbe are doubles; the mythic ancestor is the Rebbe's shadow side, the dark aspect of the religious world the Rebbe represents. Jointly they provide Asher with an integrated picture of the strengths and weaknesses of loyalty to community. To the extent that they offer the dark and light sides (double-vision, double-sacrifice, double-loyalty), they provide a balanced perspective. Whereas Asher's parents offer him false counsel by encouraging blind acquiescence to a rigid, simplistic theology, the mythic ancestor and the Rebbe reveal the freedom to move through the ambiguity and complexity of life.

With respect to the ancestor, S. Lillian Kremer, in "Dedalus in Brooklyn: Influences of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man on My Name is Asher Lev," writes: ". . . the reproving patriarch is an appropriate historic touchstone for a young Hasid and influences Lev's conscious and subconscious development as man and artist" (35). The ancestor is mythic for Asher because he enfleshes a basic truth generally accepted in the Hasidic community. For instance, the ancestor consecrates travel as a means to sanctify the world. This sanctification is dependant upon the promulgation of the Hasidic ethic: the more faithful the Hasids are, the better the world will be, and then the Messiah will come. The point is not necessarily to

convert the gentile to halachic law, but to ensure the Jewish community observes the tradition.

The mythic ancestor embodies the dark side of the tradition. He reinforces Asher's feelings of guilt about and responsibility for everything negative occurring to himself and his family and for his art. "That great man would come to me in my dreams and echo my father's queries about the latest bare wall I had decorated and the sacred margins I had that day filled with drawings" (Asher Lev 10). He influences Asher, at the outset of the novel, through intimidation and terror. Asher's forbear is not a gentle and nurturing instructor; he storms and rages, attacking the boy during his most vulnerable and open moments. The ancestor typically assaults his descendent in dreams after a day spent exploring his artistic gifts:

I dreamed of my father's great-great-grandfather. He was dozing in the sunlight in the living room and I was drawing him, when he woke. He went into a rage. He stormed about the room. He was huge. He towered over me. . . . "Wasting time, wasting time," he thundered. "Playing, drawing, wasting time." I woke in terror, my heart beating loudly. (Asher Lev 39)

Asher transfers his perception of Aryeh's anger onto his ancestor. Similarly, the stories the child is told about his forbear reinforce Aryeh's ethics and methods. Asher is tormented by his family history, and his present reality with his father. The capacity for victimization is intensified by this inner/outer onslaught. Asher is rebuked and derided by this patriarch in his nightmare appearances and by his father

during the day. The boy's own uncertainty and guilt are hooked by the myth and the demand he comply to the group's ethic. Clearly, Asher has internalized the Hasidic obedience to religious observance through fear, which allows minimal individual expression and freedom from group enmeshment.

Asher's response to the mythic ancestor's emotional trap by consciously defying the tradition he represents. His attempt to distance himself from the damning voice within is vigorous. The boy expresses his rage through overt acts of rebellion: he desecrates a chumash, draws a demonic-looking Rebbe, neglects the study of Talmud, refuses to travel to Vienna with his parents. The span of years in which these activities occur and the events themselves facilitate an important discovery; Asher, in achieving temporary distance from the tradition, is free to gain a new reading of the mythic ancestor's story. The artist uncovers another side to his ancestor:

But now I could recall tales told to a wondering child about a Jew who had made a Russian nobleman rich by tending his estates. The nobleman was a despotic goy, a degenerate whose debaucheries grew wilder as he grew wealthier. The Jew, my mythic ancestor, made him wealthier. . . . You see how a goy behaves, went the whispered word to the child. A Jew does not behave this way. But the Jew had made him wealthy, wondered the child. Is not the Jew also somehow to blame? (Asher Lev, 307)

Asher allows multiple interpretations of this dream-text. On the one hand, there is the received, oral tradition story which exonerates his ancestor. The patriarch is valorized as an example of fierce loyalty to Hasidism. Alternatively, Asher wonders about his ancestor's collusion with the oppressive Russian landlord. This second interpretation discloses the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the confused boundaries that are also parts of the forbear's reality. Perhaps his energy for travel provides a mask to hide a man driven by his own guilty complicity with pain and suffering. The mythic ancestor is guilty of enabling the oppression against his own people, of strengthening the oppressor, and of benefitting from enriching an evil man. The endless travelling done for the Rebbe simply may be unconscious acts of penance.

Asher matures because he does not remain distanced from his tradition, in spite of the initially raging voice with which it speaks. Had he continued cut off from his community, stuck in the place of angry rebellion, he would have avoided the important issue of receiving the dark side, of acknowledging the shadow side of his faith. Simple reaction tends to blind; it is only as Asher resolves upon productive response, which for him is painting the truth, that he begins to sense and to gain new insight into his ancestor's story (Asher Lev 308). This discovery leads to freedom from the once oppressive presence of the myth.

The act of painting the ancestor's story enables Asher to acknowledge that he shares an inherited past, a kind of "collective unconscious" drive to atone: "Was my ancestor's act of atonement to extend through all the generations of our family line? . . . I did not know. But I sensed it as truth" (Asher Lev 308). Asher is further

connected to his past. Just as the patriarch enriched a gentile landlord, so Asher enriches his gentile art manager, Anna. We are told repeatedly, in both of the novels, of her delight over the growing value of Asher's work. Asher contributes enormously to her wealth. Asher, who struggles to be truthful in art, to expose the hidden side of the Hasidic experience and later, to paint the plight of those living under political oppression (The Gift 4), enriches a system (Anna/America) that is not innocent of tyranny. The collusion is inescapable. Recognizing the complexity, Asher no longer needs to be angry with or to reject his forefather. Instead, they become fellow travellers; no longer enemies, they are now companions. This new reality transforms both the voice with which the patriarch speaks and his appearance--he is now a whispering, aged man, walking with a cane, struggling to find his way through the dark woods and forests, as he travels his journey of atonement.

If the mythic ancestor brings Asher into conflict with and then into acceptance of guilt, the Rebbe is the one who offers Asher grace. Asher wrestles with and fights his ancestor; he wonders at and is amazed by the Rebbe. Whereas the patriarch is surrounded with images of darkness, forests, and endless journeys, the Rebbe is encompassed in images of light. When he enters the Asher's home during Rivkeh's illness, "His presence seemed to fill the apartment with white light" (Asher Lev 19). Asher paints a watercolour of the Rebbe for Avrumel and defines the holy man by white space and white light. When instructing his son on the meaning of the art,

Asher directly associates the Master of the Universe with white light (The Gift 356).

The Rebbe teaches Asher the warm, nurturing side of the faith.

By modelling and through teaching Asher the written precepts of the faith, the Rebbe instructs Asher to value the community. In his first meeting with Asher, prior to Asher's *Bar Mitzvah*, he instructs the boy in the politics of Hasidic life:

A life should be lived for the sake of heaven. One man is not better than another because he is a doctor while the other is a shoemaker. One man is not better than another because he is a lawyer while the other is a painter. A life is measured by how it is lived for the sake of heaven. (Asher Lev 184)

The absence of hierarchy, of value that is defined by professional status, is important. The Rebbe, like the Rebbe in the Potok's earlier novels, discloses the ethic that the only priority is to live life for heaven, and he also points out that many do not understand this. Just prior to becoming an adult member of the community Asher learns the lesson he grapples with for the rest of his life: the value of "being" over "doing." For Asher, this suggests the question, what makes a man a Jew? What defines the Hasidic community and separates it from all others? The Rebbe supplies the answer: it is a life lived for the sake of heaven. This moment discloses the Rebbe's acceptance of Asher. The issue is not whether Asher is an artist, but what kind of man Asher becomes. Asher's *Bar Mitzvah* is predicated upon this important lesson the Rebbe offers him: to be Jewish is supremely an inner state, not simply an

outward form. The Rebbe then facilitates Asher's growth as an artist and arranges for Jacob Kahn to instruct the boy in art.

It is interesting that each time the Rebbe meets with Asher he blesses him. The Hebrew concept of the blessing is significant. A blessing is effective and irrevocable, and, even when the source is human and not divine, the benediction is potent; it is thought to produce the effect which it expresses. A blessing is a performative utterance that confirms and enacts the promises of the covenant, for to be blessed is an indication of membership in the covenant community. Thus, when the Rebbe blesses Asher, he identifies him as a participant in the community, and invokes the continuation of that state.

To bless is also a paternal action. The patriarchs blessed their sons and thereby the covenant was renewed and re-affirmed. When the Rebbe allows Asher to pursue art as a profession, he does so in direct contradiction to the wishes of Asher's father. The Rebbe, asserting his authority as group leader, essentially steps between Asher and Aryeh, placing himself directly in charge of the young boy's education. The Rebbe tells Asher "I have looked upon you as a son" (Asher Lev 233). Whereas Aryeh offers his blessing to Asher only once, the Rebbe gives his benediction to Asher each time they meet. Furthermore, the Rebbe's blessing directly connects Asher with the larger group: "I wish you a long and healthy life, my son. I give you my blessing for greatness in the world of art and greatness in the world of your people" (Asher Lev 271). The Rebbe does not deny Asher's gift. He acknowledges

and affirms the talent at the same time as he acknowledges and affirms the value of Asher's religious heritage.

The Rebbe's blessing is inscribed with connection to covenant and responsibility to covenant. Even when Asher is exiled by the Rebbe, after the showing of the Brooklyn Crucifixions, he is exiled to the Paris Ladover community. Although Asher can no longer live in the American "promised land," which is also the centre of modern Hasidic power, he is still to remain a part of the group. This is more than Asher's father would offer him; in his immediate anger, Aryeh rejected Asher entirely. Asher obeys the Rebbe's decree, moves to Paris, marries an Hasidic girl, and settles, as an observant Hasid, into his modern Babylon, Nice.

The Rebbe acknowledges Asher's pain, which is never acknowledged by anyone else in his community, and in so doing identifies Asher as a type of Job, a figure of patient suffering: "And you, dear Asher, endure not only the torments of your art but also the burden of your responsibility to the Ladover. We have hurt you, yet you love us. We have exiled you, yet you are tied to us. 'Though He slay me, yet will I have faith in Him'" (The Gift 241; the Rebbe quotes Job 13:15). By linking Asher to Job, the Rebbe foregrounds and decodes what many others have missed: Asher's loyalty and faithfulness. This is the grace the Rebbe offers Asher Lev--he knows him, accepts him, trusts him, and loves him. The Rebbe is a mentor to Asher and brings him a concept Asher struggles to accept and integrate, the idea of interdependence:

A man may not live alone. A man is part of a larger world. Even a great man, a creative man, a man who needs solitude, even such a man is part of a larger world. To live alone, apart from a community of men, is to live in death. (The Gift 354)

Thus the Rebbe offers Asher the blessing, the goodness of participation in community. The Rebbe accepts, receives, encourages, nurtures Asher, and allows Asher to be both an artist and a man of faith.

In the world of art, Picasso and Jacob Kahn are consonant with the mythic ancestor and the Rebbe, as the respective mentors of the dark and light sides of individual integrity. The art world is predicated upon the primacy of the individual. It is, as Asher is told repeatedly, a profoundly selfish world, and the artist's point of reference is found only in his/her own self. An artist, Asher learns, is subject to no ethic outside his/her own soul, yet Asher also feels and acknowledges the Rebbe's traditional community ethic.

Picasso brings to Asher the dark side of the artistic experience: he communicates the sphere of inner turmoil, the place of the unknown and unexplored, the locus of myth the artist carries within. Richard E. Hughes, in The Lively Image: Four Myths in Literature, writes: "Myths are engendered in the same place that dreams and poems are born, and that place has never been completely charted by an analytical explorer. The best we can do is annotate the suburbs, marking the inner territories as the medieval cartographers did those unexplored land masses on their maps: *Here there be tygers*" (3, original emphasis). Through Picasso's influence,

Asher does, indeed, discover his own "tygers." Picasso and his art confront Asher in dreams and waking visions and goad him, driving him into intense self-reflection. Confronted with his own demons, Asher learns he must paint in order to free his soul (Asher Lev 310).

Picasso is "king" in Asher's art world (The Gift 4). He occupies a place of pre-eminence in Asher's studio; it is his photograph and not the Rebbe's displayed on the wall. The Rebbe, insofar as he signifies for Asher commitment to a group and ethic outside himself, could not be present on the walls of Asher's studio. Asher teaches his son, "I told [Avrumel] that in my studio I was with myself alone and with no one except myself telling me what right and what was wrong. . . . Not even the Master of the Universe" (The Gift 259). This doctrine of artistic autonomy is, for Asher Lev, embodied in Picasso. Picasso is identified by Asher as ". . . an artist's Rebbe. A demonic rebbe, as it were, from the Other Side" (The Gift 346).

In My Name is Asher Lev, Asher experiences Picasso only through his art; the novice studies and integrates the great works of the Master. However, in The Gift of Asher Lev, the adult Asher is now confronted directly by an internalized Picasso, who compels him to find deeper places of meaning and new worlds of expression. These confrontations lead Asher away from family and commitments and drive him to the wilderness of his own soul. Picasso begins appearing, much as the mythic ancestor did, in visions and dreams. It is in these altered states of consciousness that Asher wrestles with the Spaniard.

In The Gift of Asher Lev, Asher moves from battles with guilt to the problem of doubt. His internalized Picasso hooks his doubt, and therefore Picasso is given the task of identifying the doubt. Picasso, like the mythic ancestor, is fierce, unrelenting, and confrontive:

Truth has to be given in riddles. People can't take truth if it comes charging at them like a bull. The bull is always killed, Lev. You have to give people the truth in a riddle, hide it so they go looking for it and find it piece by piece; that way they learn to live with it. You tell people God is a murderer, they can't take it, they become angry, they kill you like you're the bull. Why are you shaking your head? You don't think God is a murderer? What do you know about God? . . . God killed my little sister. That's right, Lev. A little girl, suddenly sick and dead. Everything He touches is destroyed. . . . How do you worship Him, Lev? He's the true destroyer. Satan works out in the open, cards on the table. He gives it to you straight, no games. God plays at sweetness and goodness, and kills you. (The Gift 193)

Picasso's confrontation leaves Asher trembling. Finally Asher's voice of doubt is allowed to speak. Asher's questions and indictment of God would be considered blasphemy by the Hasidic community, and therefore Asher does not identify or speak his doubt in Brooklyn. The doubt emerges only in Paris, in the safety of a Picasso museum. In this temple to the Spaniard, Asher is free to voice his deepest fear; what is at stake for Asher is the fear that God cannot be trusted, that the dark side is

predominant. So compelling is the trauma associated with these ideas that Asher is still not able to speak at all, and therefore he gives that task to his own inner Picasso.

Asher's doubt is exacerbated by his sense of powerlessness. He knows, intuitively, that he is in danger in Brooklyn; Asher senses he will be asked to make a costly choice, (costly because it involves his son and because it means Asher will be once again closely tied to community), and the impact of this fear upon him is disclosed by the images of entombment and suffocation which pervade The Gift of Asher Lev. He knows that to live in America is artistic suicide; his life and creativity are energized in his more isolated home in Nice. In Nice, Asher feels distanced from the unresolved problems of his Brooklyn home. Picasso helps Asher look at these feelings. Insight comes to Asher as he observes the Spaniard's painting of himself, his wife, and his son at the beach. The moment becomes a kind of vision; Asher gazes at the work and sees instead of Picasso's family, himself, his wife Devorah, and Avrumel. He then explains the art to the visionary Picasso:

The man's sex is concealed, as are the woman's breasts and sex. The child's finger that probes the man's ear is perhaps an echo of the man's hidden member. The man lies on the sand as if dead; only the woman and child are in motion. The sky is threatening; the sea is dark. The mother of this child protects and castrates simultaneously. It is a picture both tender and terrifying. (The Gift 191)

This painting embodies the relational double-edged sword Asher fears: the cost of commitment and the goodness of connection. His powerlessness and fear in the face of these realities are evident in his interpretation of the work. The focus of the terror is Devorah; the artist is frightened of his wife's repeatedly expressed desire to remain in Brooklyn, where there is "community" (The Gift 82, 171).

Thematically, Asher is once again confronted by the threat of castration, which echoes the earlier conflict with his father. Aware of Devorah's power to "unman" him in her desire to do the best for their family, and to seek community for herself, Asher feels disempowered. He is frozen and unable to act to protect either his vitality (signified in his inability to paint) or his son from the Rebbe's intentions, which Devorah as yet does not perceive. Picasso, however, is not satisfied with Asher's interpretation. The American does not go far enough; the Spaniard names the fear with brutal honesty:

This is what you should see. You give them a baby to make them happy, to bind them to you, and they forget you are alive. You die in every way except as the supporter of their baby. It makes no difference what you give them. In the end, they leave you without balls. When the baby grows up, he also tries to cut off your balls.

That's the way the world is, Lev. (The Gift 192)

Asher wants to resist the reality Picasso identifies and immediately, though weakly, suggests that women are not so brutal. But his inner Picasso scoffs, deriding the artist's lack of experience with women. Asher's interior Picasso clearly states the

fear: to be committed and connected is dangerous and costly, and will exact from him his vitality, his art. As the mythic ancestor identifies for Asher the dark side of community driven by guilt, Picasso labels the dark side of individuality, driven by a fear of risking commitment.

Just as Asher resolves the terror of his mythic ancestor by facing and transforming the demon into an aged companion, similarly he resolves the bitter isolation Picasso espouses. Asher, who leaves his family in the United States and returns, alone, to France, is driven to an ironic balance of both self-enforced exile and connection; he begins to perform philanthropic acts. Picasso performed similar good deeds, giving gifts of his art and sums of money to the poor. Fisch notes: "In those years [c1937], Picasso (according to an estimate of the Spanish Aid Fund) contributed about 400,000 francs in order to ease the poverty in his native country, as well as giving money to compatriots in need" (*Guernica by Picasso* 19). When Asher arrives in Paris, he seeks out the widow of Lucien Lacamp and gives her his valuable artist's proof from an early work (*The Gift* 231). This is only the first of several important pieces he gives her. In this way Asher begins to create an equilibrium between solitude and connection. Art, created in isolation, is social in origin, and it is used by Asher to forge a bridge between himself and the larger world.

Bitter renunciation of the world, retreat based upon suspicion of and disenchantment with relationships, and seclusion within the four walls of the studio, away from pain and connection, are the actions fuelled by the dark side Asher carries within. This type of self-isolation is tempered by the light brought to Asher by Jacob

Kahn. Although Kahn is the first to teach Asher the need for artistic "selfishness," he offers his apprentice this lesson in the context of a positive sense of individuation. And, like the Rebbe, Kahn becomes a surrogate father for the essentially orphaned boy.

Kahn is presented as a man who knows himself. He is at ease with his body and is the first person who mentors for Asher a strong sense of the goodness of the male physique. When Asher first meets Kahn, the boy is immediately aware of Kahn's strength: "With the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, I could see the muscles of his arms; they were powerful arms, and they looked sculpted out of stone" (Asher Lev 198). Later, Asher discovers Kahn naked to the waist, sweating and labouring over a sculpture. Asher's previous experience with adult males, specifically his father, is limited to viewing them in business suits or business suits plus ritual garments (*tallis, tefillin*). Kahn's ease with his body teaches Asher the beauty of the male form. This generates conflict for Asher in his Hasidic world:

My Uncle Yitzchok walked into my room one evening and found me painting stripped to the waist and let me know he thought it indecent to be dressed like that. He had a responsibility to my parents; I was to cover my body and wear my ritual fringes. I painted and drew in the house wearing an undershirt and my ritual fringes. In Jacob Kahn's studio, I painted stripped to the waist. (Asher Lev 215)

Not only is Kahn candid about his physical self, he is openly and expressively affectionate. During his first meeting with Asher, Kahn warmly embraces the boy.

This overt expression of care continues; Kahn sculpts a figure of the two of them, dancing together during a *Simchas Torah* celebration, holding hands and carrying the Torah scrolls. Kahn frankly declares his emotions; whether they are feelings of rage or love, he identifies and declares his passion without shame or confusion. By example, he teaches emotional freedom to Asher. Whereas the Hasidic ethic instructs Asher in the legitimacy of spiritual apprehensions and joy, Jacob Kahn gives Asher back his body, its sensations, and the dark emotions that have to do with pain and anger. Kahn affirms for Asher the goodness of a life wholly lived.

Asher's experience with Kahn is an initiation into a new kind of life. Kahn offers Asher rebirth to an honest acknowledgement and valuing of "self." Just prior to his *Bar Mitzvah*, Asher first encounters Kahn in the Rebbe's office. This meeting involves not only the verbal agreement to begin working together as mentor and student, but also an exchange of art; they each draw the other's picture (Asher Lev 184). This foreshadows the way they will bring insight to one another and, through their connection, affect one another. Months later, Asher journeys from his home in Brooklyn to Kahn's Manhattan studio, alone and on the subway, discouraging his mother from making the trip with him in spite of her protestations that the route is long, difficult, and dangerous. Asher knows, intuitively that he is embarking on his own hero's journey and must take the path alone.

Asher enters the subway and travels through the underground tunnel. In the train he observes his own image in the glass window: "We were in underground darkness outside the window and I could see only my reflection. I spent the rest of

the journey looking at my reflection in that dark window of the train" (Asher Lev 196, 97). This experience mirrors for Asher what he will discover with Kahn: he will learn to observe himself in the light of his own "underground darkness." The inner reality denied to him by his family and community will be brought to light. He will discover the "self," especially the "shadow self," previously denied him.

Kahn teaches Asher to be selfish. He teaches him all artists are selfish and self-centred (Asher Lev 207). Likewise, Kahn is not afraid to name his own pleasure, and he instructs Asher to enjoy the pleasure-giving experiences life offers. Kahn informs Asher he will disregard the Rebbe's explicit instruction to Asher not to paint nudes, because the sculptor's ethic is that the artist must do whatever facilitates good art: "I do not know what evil is when it comes to art. I only know what is good art and what is bad art" (Asher Lev 207). Kahn is without allegiance to anything or anyone; he is loyal only to his own intuitive understanding of the art he needs to create, and he encourages Asher to paint the same way. Asher must find the voice within and allow it to speak. If that voice causes pain, then Asher must "Be a great painter. . . . That will be the only justification for all the pain [his] art will cause" (Asher Lev 332). Kahn encourages Asher to paint art "for art's sake;" he teaches his apprentice an aesthetic independent of any constraint, an aesthetic which judges itself on the basis of its own honesty.

Kahn teaches Asher not to be dishonest in art by avoiding the truth or submitting his talent to unworthy use. Self-deception, shame, cowardice: these are actions Asher must spurn. To avoid this "wide path" Asher must know himself, stay

centred, and be aware. Kahn's exhortations are costly; they facilitate the creation of the Brooklyn Crucifixions and the Isaac series. This teaching of artistic honesty encourages Asher to contend with community demands, to find his personal boundaries, to speak with his own voice. Kahn's instruction aids Asher's maturation because it affirms Asher's self as artist and man. In The Gift of Asher Lev Kahn, now a very old man, tells his protegee:

Artists are not kind. Artists are selfish and calculating. . . . you possessed the capacity for rage. Even the Rebbe could not see the anger in you. I saw those demons. They were the source for your art.

I saw that right away, during the first weeks we were together. (275)

Asher, with Kahn's help, finds his passion and expresses it--this is the non-religious but necessary grace Kahn brings to the young boy. In a world which denies Asher his demons, Kahn admits them and sets them free. Kremer, in "Dedalus in Brooklyn," suggests Kahn is a type of priest: "*Kahn suggests kohen, signifying membership in the priestly class of Israel, and Lev represents the Levirate group which assisted the priests in the sanctuary*" (33, original emphasis). As Kahn brings Asher to himself and to his heritage as a human being, the teacher is involved in a sacred, priestly act. Consonant with the Rebbe's blessing and paternal care is Kahn's blessing of the artist. Kahn teaches Asher the priestly ritual of honouring the self.

In art, sculpture, and his own life, Asher wrestles with the two conflicting values of community and individuality. He determines not to reject one in favour of the other or to establish a hierarchy of values; instead, he decides to hold both ethics

in balance, as dynamic complements. Asher accepts this difficult task of allowing one world to superimpose itself upon the other; the art world teaches Asher to honour himself in his religious life, and the Hasidic world permeates Asher's artistic life and helps him to honour community. Asher remains committed to much of the teaching the Hasidic world brings to him; that is one picture. However, he splices this loyalty with his fierce commitment to his gift, his artistic talent; this is his second picture. His life then becomes the dynamic interplay between the two views, and the deeply religious Hasidic world and the deeply sceptical artistic world become Asher's domain. Asher learns there is no simple solution to the complex problem of living life with two such commitments, and his journey develops much like some artistic creations, through contrasts, balances, counterpoints. In this process Asher learns to receive himself entirely as a non-fragmented human being. He accepts the integration of the demonic and divine which he carries within, as taught to him by his mentors, and expresses this reality in the received and then transformed language of art. Asher boldly names himself: "Asher Lev, son of Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev, . . . the child of the Master of the Universe *and* the Other Side" (Asher Lev 348, original emphasis).

Chapter 4: Beginning, with David

The man who thinks he can live without myth, or outside it, is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society. . . . The psyche is not of today; its ancestry goes back many millions of years. Individual consciousness is only the flower and the fruit of the season, sprung from the perennial rhizome beneath the earth; and it would find itself in better accord with the truth if it took the existence of the rhizome into its calculations. For the root of the matter is the mother of all things.

C.G. Jung

In the Beginning, the title of Potok's fourth novel, through direct allusion to the Hebrew Bible, foregrounds Genesis and foreshadows the book's complex layering of biblical and later Jewish themes and texts. The novel recalls *Berashith bara Elohim*, "In the beginning, God created . . ." With its confident assertion of a good God creating good things, the sacred account predicates all subsequent biblical narrative on elemental "goodness." In Potok's (and our) post-lapsarian world, his novel rightly begins, "All beginnings are hard" (1). The growing complexity of the beginning-phrase reflects Jewish and non-Jewish history. Potok writes in the shadow of the biblical imagination, as in Harold Bloom's notion of the "anxiety of influence" ("The Anxiety of Influence" 1973), and draws to the modern reader's attention the complexity of this first assertion. Hugh Nissenson suggests in his review "My Name is David Lurie" that an important intertextual relationship exists between In the Beginning and The Book of Genesis: "[the novel is] a recapitulation of the book of Genesis from the Creation to the Flood" (36). For instance, he points to David's "fall" on the stairs as a mythic element echoing the biblical fall (In the Beginning 10). Structurally, Nissenson's idea is workable. However, I think that thematically

Potok's David Lurie is foiled by his important biblical namesake, the ancient King David, and that stylistically, the more important influence on Potok's novel is the Wisdom Literature.

Perhaps the most psychologically complex and elaborately presented narrative cycle in the Hebrew Bible is the story of David. Lore Segal, in his article on David, "II Samuel" (in Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible), writes of the king:

David plays more roles, in more situations, than any modern protagonist: he is boy warrior, musician with healing powers, poet laureate, court favourite; for a while he is the leader of a band of marauders who massacre alien cities. He is monarch, general, diplomat, a natural at public relations, a public man with a private life-- a careful son, an irritating younger brother, a loving and faithful friend, the husband of a harem that includes one very angry wife; the father of children who make him howl with grief, an adulterer who plots murder, a penitent, a frequent mourner, and an old man, at last, who meets a new Goliath and can't do anything about it--can't make love, can't keep warm. (109)

King David attracts creative response; the sheer plethora of possibilities evident in the ancient poet/king's life incites reaction. Jung might suggest that to work with the David archetype is to attend to the strong voice of the collective unconscious, aspects of the unconscious that owe their existence exclusively to heredity and to bring insight

into the shadow-self. Creative re-workings of the David story permeate western artistic, musical, literary life. This can be seen in medieval times, where David is the supreme example of valour, an exemplary knight; in Renaissance recasting of the mythic character in a stone creation, a giant David in heroic stance about to engage a now less frightening Goliath; in Romantic reconstructions, with David symbolizing the yearning to return to the pastoral life of shepherd/peasant/poet; and in modern African-American folksongs and spirituals which laud the "man after God's own heart." David spans history and the reaches of imagination.

The modern plight of alienation also finds possible sources in the David myth. David, identified in the biblical account as descended from "Ruth the Moabitess" (I Samuel 22:3,4), is, in one Talmudic account, tainted and marginalized by virtue of his birth. Opponents of the Davidic dynasty point to Moabite contamination and revile him as king (Yev. 76b-77a). By virtue of his exclusion from the centre, David attracts the outcasts: "Everyone who was in straits and everyone who was in debt and everyone who was desperate joined him and he became their leader" (I Samuel 22:2). Freudian critics read the strange silence about David's father's house and interpret his seeking an adoptive family in Saul's house as evidence of an unresolved father-complex.¹¹ David's complicated relations with his several wives, enmeshed with such oppositional emotions of love, lust, and rage, disclose the intimacy of the portrait we have of this man, and his inability to cope with domestic problems. The

¹¹ See Joel Rosenberg's discussion on 1 and 2 Samuel in The Literary Guide to the Bible, 130-132.

contrast between David the scholar and man of faith who reads Torah diligently and David the warrior who executes opponents such as Uriah the Hittite quickly and mercilessly is stark and unrelenting. His private life is replete with problems and pain, in contrast to his public life of seeming coherence and faith, and there is a complex interplay between the two realities.

Robert Alter describes the Hebrew method of characterization:

. . . the underlying biblical conception of character as often unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity, in fact has greater affinity with dominant modern notions than do the habits of conceiving character typical of the Greek epics. (The Art of Biblical Narrative 129)

Although Alter published The Art in 1981 and Potok published In the Beginning in 1975, this novel and subsequent Potok texts are patient of Alter's assertion about the biblical material. As the David figure in western tradition evolves, artists, reflecting their times, focus on different problems, and violence, which is so central to our century and to American fiction, is a focus of Potok's study in this novel. In Davita's Harp, as we shall see later, violence is present, but this time it is distanced.

Nevertheless, through David Lurie and Davita Chandal, Potok explores, in a very modern equality of treatment, two kinds of "Davids." Potok's David Lurie engages the tensions and ambiguities of the poet/killer, pragmatist/idealist duality and points to the complexity of this archetype's influence upon his Jewish life in modern America.

King David is part of David Lurie's past; David Lurie, to recall the Jung quotation that prefaces this chapter, must take into account the existence of the "David-rhizome," and factor this variable into the calculations he makes with respect to his life, past and present. Violence is a part of David Lurie's story, the Jewish story, and the century's story.

In the Beginning is the novel in which Potok deals most directly with violence as a central psychological and religious problem in the Jewish tradition and in the secular world. In this book violence is monolithic and omnipresent and occurs in various forms. In fact, it is located in David Lurie's outer and inner worlds. Violence creates enormously complex problems for David, including the question of theodicy, the investigation of the justice of God: is it possible to defend the goodness and omnipotence of God in view of the existence of overwhelming evil? Another problem violence generates for David is its valorization within his Jewish community, including the family, school, and traditional society. David intuits himself to be a pacifist, yet he is the son of a competent, clever soldier and a mother terrified by war. His community of Jews exists largely because, as history and myth record, its members have fled violence in Europe, and America has, until this century, heeded George Washington's directive in his second inaugural address, to avoid "foreign entanglements." But in David's life, violence is everywhere. Potok explores these issues by locating the discussion in David's present reality of street racism in Brooklyn, in the growing Nazi threat, and in the traditions and sacred texts of the Jewish faith.

In Potok's examination of the life of the Jewish immigrant in America, the ancient king is an important model for his discussion. King David was a strategist who marshalled his talent in order to establish the political boundaries of a new and powerful nation, Israel. His actions were urgent; he protected a fledgling "nation" by methods of war from the attacks of pagan expansionists. Like King David, Max Lurie, David's father, accepts a similar mandate. He is concerned with establishing the security of the modern Jewish community, this time in New York in the 1930s, and, like King David, he is willing to fight to do so. For members of David Lurie's community, struggling against its better judgment, tradition of peace, and hoped-for sense of security in America the new "Promised Land," violence is ubiquitous and it tests its belief, as well as its bravery and strength of body. Its background, as members of the Jewish community, is more complicated than they acknowledge. The community is an inheritor of a conflicted past, and as a result carry an unresolved sense of how to respond to violence. As a community, it has survived for nineteen hundred years by adopting the stance of non-violence. In spite of the horrors of the Pale, with its politicized violence, the Pogrom, the group has lived essentially as pacifists. On the other hand, the Jewish tradition had given the world an important archetypal warrior in King David, and so Potok's protagonist and every thoughtful Jew in his novel must resolve this double heritage of poet/killer.

In David Lurie's struggles with the peace/war tensions exacerbated by the liminal position in which he, the son of an immigrant, finds himself, he faces a dilemma of categories. Problems from his past, in particular his extended family's

life in war-torn Poland, but also his biblical "past," invade David's present and delimit the future on his American street. For David, texts bring these tensions into focus: he responds to and interprets the past, present, and possible future, as he "reads" them in newspapers, photographs, legends (the Golem story), and finally the sacred books of the Jewish faith.

As psalmist and progenitor of "Solomon the Wise," King David controls text and encodes events and feelings into art. King David's role as poet is one that lies at the centre of much of David Lurie's sacred and ritual experience and is foundational to the important study ethic of the Jewish community. *Midrash* hails the ancient king as the quintessential student of sacred text. As David Lurie grows, he valorizes the style, content, and psychological/religious/social value of reading. In this novel, then, Potok intersects with the Hebrew Wisdom Literature. It is significant to note that Potok was a member of the committee responsible for the translation of the *Kethuvim* (Writings), which includes the Wisdom texts (and Psalms), for the Jewish Publication Society's Hebrew Bible.¹² Inevitably, Potok's mind was on the ideas, style, and influence of Wisdom Literature, at the time of creating In the Beginning.

The books that comprise the Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Bible are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The writers of this genre did not avoid the difficulties inherent in such existential concerns as the cycle of life and time or theodicy. Rather, intriguing texts, such as Ecclesiastes, emerged as the result of keen

¹² The translation committee was established in 1966 and first published their work in entirety, in 1982.

and honest investigation of complex problems. In this biblical work, life is often explored through juxtaposition, with seemingly conflicting observations.

Furthermore, the simplicity of the "Thou shalt not" command of the Torah or the "Thus saith the Lord" of the Prophets is replaced in the Wisdom Literature by a summons to think hard: rudimentary obedience is fused with reflective thought. The assumption made in these texts is that wisdom can be taught and learned: the mentor instructs the apprentice to "give heed to his words." Robert Alter writes:

. . . the transmission of wisdom depends on an adeptness at literary formulation, and the reception of wisdom--we should note, by an audience of the "wise" and the "discerning"--requires an answering finesse in reading the poems with discrimination, "to understand proverb and epigram." The proem of the book of Proverbs, in other words, at once puts us on guard as interpreters and suggests that if we are not good readers we will not get the point of the sayings of the wise. (The Art of Biblical Narrative 167, 168)

The emphasis, then, if one will learn to live life wisely, is on the reception of a text and the ability to read and interpret it. This emphasis is shared by Potok, who creates the novel to function stylistically like Wisdom Literature, although it is secular/prose/American/modern/English. Furthermore, David Lurie is drawn to the interpretation of the secular and sacred texts, written and visual, that intersect with his life. He teaches himself to read English, Hebrew, and Yiddish well before he begins

to attend school, and gains the admiration and respect of his community (88). David, who would be wise, is pre-eminently a "reader."

Like the ancient writer of Proverbs, Potok uses the *mashal* form, which is the oldest and simplest literary form used in Wisdom Literature and is a striking sentence that catches the imagination, a popular saying, or a maxim. In Proverbs the *mashal* is usually a short, pithy sentence; the format of the *mashal* is consonant with its the content. Alter comments: "The smoothness [of the *mashal*] is hardly surprising in a kind of verse devised to transmit the wisdom of the ages. . . . because the wisdom itself derives from a sense of balanced order, confident distinction, assured consequence for specific acts and moral stances" (The Art of Biblical Poetry 164). Potok employs this style by using epigrammatic, didactic statements as one way to bring order and meaning to the dilemma of human injustice, violence, and suffering. He also discloses various kinds of wisdom with this style.

Max Lurie, with his pragmatic work ethic and perception of the world as "firm and fixed," orders his universe within the parameters of a kind of military wisdom; for instance: "It is the job of a child to listen to his father" (34). For Max, wisdom contains the notion of absolute obedience reinforcing the demands of a patriarchal state and community and thereby limits the self, self-expression, and self-insight. This militaristic point of view is dangerously transferable and usable for good or ill, by either side of a conflict. Saul, David's cousin, offers the young boy a way of organizing the world through the pithy observations of *midrash*, suggesting, "That everything God create[s] has a reason" (151). Saul's hermeneutic of literal

interpretation seeks meaning in chaos through the assertion of an unarguable world-order. David's instructor in Bible and the "wise-man" figure in David's community, Shmuel Bader, when reporting on the plight of the European Jews in pre-Second World War Poland suggests enigmatically, "He who understands will understand" (74).

On the other hand, Potok, using the same gnomic format, yet infusing the form with a very different content, discloses sources of anti-wisdom in In the Beginning, creating a multi-vocal text. Eddie, who is the same age as David, curses him with utterances such as "*Anonymowe Panstwo*," anonymous empire, and with the street language of millennia-old racial slurs (55, 54, 58). Mrs. Horowitz, David's unsettling widowed neighbour offers David the alternate world view of superstition, suggesting incantation is the way to bring order to chaos, and magical expression is the appropriate language of wisdom (99, 116). The novel opens with the adult David, in the process of interpreting his life, stating: "All beginnings are hard" (9). His life is a juxtaposition of violence and order, often derived from the instruction and shared stories of the faith, and his task is to learn to discern the differences between the various "wisdoms" and the voice of "anti-wisdom," he encounters and hears.

Wisdom Literature is concerned with the individual and her/his destiny. The individual's behaviour is central in these texts. In Potok's novel, David Lurie's journey is the centre of attention. David is faced with a deeply troubled world, a world replete with madness and suffering that eludes his best attempts to make sense of the pogroms, the wars, the Holocaust, the street violence. David seeks

understanding; he wants to know his world and discover what it means for him to "fear God." The concept of fearing God is fundamental to Proverbs, which begins with the following teaching:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

For learning wisdom and discipline:

For understanding words of discernment;

For acquiring the discipline for success,

Righteousness, justice, and equity;

For endowing the *simple* with shrewdness,

The young with knowledge and foresight.

--The wise man, hearing them, will gain more wisdom;

The discerning man will learn to be adroit;

For understanding proverb and epigram,

The words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge (1:1-7, my emphasis)

Potok's David is the "simple one" from the Proverbs text and he is willing to pursue truth. In Proverbs there are three main character types: the simple, the wise, the fool. The *pti*, the "simple one" is the catechumen, the one who is the object of both Lady Wisdom's and Dame Folly's search (Proverbs 9). The "simple one," as yet undecided, will choose whether to be either wise or foolish. David, as his story unfolds, heeds the call of Lady Wisdom.

Wisdom Literature offers the example of the wise father/mentor figure as an important component to the outcome of an individual's destiny. This wise figure enters into a relationship with the uninitiated youth in order to transmit the community's history and wisdom. This type of alliance, valued and celebrated in the ancient books, is offered in this genre as a key ingredient to wise living. David Lurie's task is to receive the instruction of his elders and learn to discern between the voices of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly, especially as they speak to the complex, modern incarnation of the problem of violence in his life. The allegory of Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly is found, among other places, in chapter nine of Proverbs. It reads, in part (from the New International Version),

Wisdom has built her house;
 . . .and she calls. . .
 "Let all who are simple come in here!"
 The woman Folly is loud;
 . . . She sits at the door of her house,
 . . . calling out. . .
 "Let all who are simple come in here!"

The "simple one's" predicament, and therefore David Lurie's, is learning to discern the difference between the two womens' cries. The similarities in their invitation, in terms of location and voice, is an important aspect of the confusion the uninitiated youth feels. The calls of Wisdom and Folly, as they come to David in his family's ethic, the maxims of his community, the teachings of sacred texts, in his past, rich in

liturgy and ritual, and in the voices of curse and incantation, are the source of David's tension. To find his way through the chaos to discernment and integrity, even to an integrity-in-transition, David must acknowledge and enter his family's and his society's past.

In the Beginning is therefore retrospective, a journey by means of traditional stories and photographs of older and other existences. The novel develops through the reflections of the first person adult narrator, David Lurie. He begins with the "advent story" of his own beginning, by describing the incidents around his birth. His parents are immigrants who remain emotionally tied by their vibrant and terrible experiences in Poland to their homeland, living their present in America partly as a reaction to their past, the medley of personal and communal experiences in Eastern Europe. David Lurie is born in America. As a citizen of this new, golden land, he is supremely a child of the future, according to the myths and dreams of his parents', community's, and country's hope (11). Yet David is enmeshed with his parents' past; he is named after his dead uncle and through this act is given the legacy of fulfilling his ancestor's destiny. He is caught between the commitment to his parents and their friends, and his own need to find his way in America. For David, the tension between these loyalties is exacerbated when he is only six years old in his discovery of a photograph (12).

Photographs freeze moments in time and create the illusion of a past that is immutable, made into a seemingly eternal present by the camera lens. History may be interpreted through the frame of the camera. Because it is a "rectangle of frozen

memory" (168), the picture/story suggests a reality which is static. The meaning contained in the print is fixed; a photographic text is inscribed with a pre-determined way of seeing, set by the position of the camera. In In the Beginning, the photograph describes European-Jewish life as a reality. David's parents are from the *shtetl* in Poland, an insular community living a fantasy of timelessness, believing that history can be captured in an eternal present. The *shtetl's* lifestyle, ritual, and mores were of the past, lived out in the present.

The main disruption to the illusion that this continual re-creation could work was the interruption of the community's life by the violent imposition of power from the outside world, which chiefly occurred in pogroms. The *shtetl* tried to keep the past alive, but the destruction of this way of life in Eastern Europe during the Second World War would be thorough. Some of the immigrants to America, who hoped they could recreate this culture or aspects of it in America, attempted to transplant, without loss or change, the old way of seeing, into a new environment. When David discovers the old print in Shmuel Bader's study, he finds an important locus of interpretation that defines the codes of his family's and community's behaviour. David's problem is two-fold: first, how will he read the story in the frame, and second, how will he accept the illusion that meaning is fixed.

The photo challenges David's illusions of Jewish passivity. It is a picture of a group of guerilla fighters, the *Am Kedoshim* Society, a nation of holy people, and was taken during the winter in a forest in Poland. The picture is of David's father, Max Lurie, and the group of Jewish friends he trained to be soldiers, fighters whose

response to the violent, racist attacks of inflamed Polish and Russian peasants was to fight back with physical force. In opposition to all David has been through, they have learned the means and strategies of war, which were taught to Max while he was a soldier in the Polish army. These lessons are necessary in order to defend the Jewish community against pogrom attacks, and the fact that these men chose to learn war indicated their theology, and their appropriation of the warrior king and violent political action discloses their identification of themselves as a "holy nation."

"Tulchin," a Jewish-Russian city destroyed because the Jews chose to pray instead of fight, became their code word for deadly passivity: "The Cossacks slaughtered the Jews. Out of fifteen hundred Jews, three hundred half-dead Jews managed to flee from the city. . . . A nice story, yes? The courageous Jews! What martyrdom! . . . So they were slaughtered by the bastard Cossacks. A disgusting story! (118).

Earlier, while speaking to the *Am Kedoshim* Society, Max speaks again of Tulchin:

~~We~~ will not stand by with our arms folded when our enemies attack us. . . . We leave such righteousness to other Jews, to the Hasidim, to Jews whose pure souls make them unable to shed goyishe blood. We are not so pure. When our enemies attack us, we will fight them. Not we, but our enemies will crawl up smooth walls. (71)

Max Lurie rejects pacifism. For him the situation is clear. God is guilty of not helping: "When is there ever a time without accidents? . . . Being born a Jew is the biggest accident of all. A man plans and God laughs. God in heaven, if there is a God in this world, how He must laugh! He is not doing His job" (67). Max

abandoned a theology which included a sympathetic and involved God, and embraced self-reliance. He determined he would defend himself from swords, with swords; prayer was an impotent weapon. Max's pragmatism saved from violence some of his immediate generation of family and friends; but those who chose not to help the Jewish warriors or accept their aid died in the pogroms or perished in the concentration camps of the Second World War. For those who followed him, Max was a hero, a modern, secular saviour, a man of war who kept the covenant community from extinction. As his gentile name suggests, however, he was not a type of King David; he fought independently of God.

Ironically, the photo was taken at the time of a wedding celebration. In it the ritual of new life and eternal tradition such an event commemorates is arrayed against the Jewish army unit which is also present; there is a collapse of the disparate realities of these bride/groom/soldiers. All three points meet at the wedding ceremony. Each generation is simultaneously present: the past is in attendance by virtue of the tradition the ritual contains; the present, by means of the relationship about to be solemnized; the future, through the promise of the new generation to be brought forth by the couple. This celebration of life is juxtaposed to the presence of death, represented by the guerilla troops. War and festival, death and life merge, fuse into a single event. Although the soldiers are necessary to protect life and ensure the continuity of the people and their tradition, the wedding is also necessary; fighting can only preserve life in limited ways.

From the point of view of the *Am Kedoshim* society, it is dangerous for anyone not part of the group to know of the photo. There are two reasons for this. First, American immigration authorities would misinterpret the photo if they found it. For the government officials, the picture is of a small band of Jewish compatriots involved in illegal and traitorous activity. They are men who made war against Poland; they might do the same in America. Read this way, the photo/story is evidence of Jewish power and control. Max knows the guns and knives in the photo would re-victimize the victims. The insidious threat of government against people is present not only in Poland, but also in America. The immigrants feel marginally safe in their new home, yet are aware that safety is fragile: the photo must be kept hidden.

Second, American officials cannot be trusted because they are citizens of a racist country. This tension is disclosed in the encounter between David's parents and a government man who interrogates them concerning a Polish friend's immigration application (142 ff.). Max is not straightforward because he knows that if he were, the official would reject the application. Max knows he is unable to explain Jewish history to the American government. While they talk in the Luries' livingroom, the immigration official sits in the chair the family and community recognizes as Max's place: in his own home the immigrant is literally displaced by the government. In addition, the tenuous sense of place the community feels is exacerbated by Father Coughlin, who is, in In the Beginning, a disembodied radio-voice, yet still a potent

symbol of the racial violence that incites the American public against their Jewish neighbours (280).

Only six years old, David observes the picture through the eyes of a frightened child; his innocence and naivete preclude his fully understanding the mixed messages the photograph contains. David describes the photo:

Then I reached up, took it from the desk, and peered at it closely in the dim light of the study. I brought it over to the window and looked at it intently, at the faces of the men, at the guns and knives in their hands, at the forest, at the snow on the ground and the ice on the branches of the trees. When I looked up, the afternoon had darkened perceptibly.

(16)

David observes the picture in a darkening room; it is difficult for him to look at the photo, physically and emotionally, for it contains information he does not want to know. Because he is young, David is not able to confront directly the image and its implications. He is frightened by the potential violence the photo contains, and he is astonished to discover familiar faces holding the instruments of war. Rousseau's ideas of the "noble savage" and the innocence of the child are an important code here, for Potok suggests, in David's inability to contain the information, that the naive vision of the child might be the best point of view by which to observe violence. In keeping with Rousseau's notion, which evolves into the Romantic view of the child, as in Wordsworth's ode, "Intimations of Immortality," David's innocence is evidence of wisdom. David reveals to his father that, "I don't want to have to kill anyone in

order to live. I hate killing and dying" (119), and later, when telling his mother of this conversation, she states: "[Violence] is like a bone in his throat . . . I am tired of it. There are other ways to fight goyim besides killing and killing" (119). Potok, in this novel, gives wisdom to women and children, who are able to see the limits of violence, yet are not heard by the larger, adult male community.

David knows intuitively that violence is wrong, but he does not know what to do with this new information about his family. Unable to hold the tension this creates and in need of release for his confusion and fear, David transfers his emotion from the photo to a text. He fuses his feelings towards the picture, with its overt violence, with his emotional response towards a *midrash* he learns from his orthodox cousin Saul, immediately following his first look at the photo.

Saul, who is several years older than David, tells the boy a story. The tale is about the patriarch Abraham and his participation in Holy War. Abraham, the hero of the tale, is more powerful than his pagan enemy, and in this *midrash*, the enemy is Abraham's pagan father, whom Abraham defeats. Because the battle is "holy" the contest involves idols; Abraham fights on behalf of his God, Yahweh, and destroys the enemy gods in vindication of his own. Abraham's victory is signified by smashing the idols' heads and bodies. The story embodies a number of David's fears. First, the patriarch endangers himself and his family by openly defying the pagan gods. David has already learned, in the arena of his street with its bigoted children, the immigrant's need to placate and not to challenge the host nation's authority (11). Second, Abraham chooses to express his theological differences through physical

attack: he smashes his father's icons. Abraham's assault is beyond David's ability to comprehend. He asks his cousin: "Why did he have to break them all to pieces, Saul? . . . It was awful, Saul. Abraham should have found another way" (21).

David does not accept the conventional interpretation of the story Saul offers him, which identifies Abraham as a hero. David, the innocent child, does not assume violence, even sanctioned theological violence, can ever be a legitimate means of resolving conflict. But David's voice is silenced by adult authority. When David's Uncle Meyer affirms the *midrash* and the patriarch's methods, he reasons with David:

"What should Abraham have done when he talked and talked and they didn't listen? And all the time he believed he was right." [Meyer] held me to him lightly. His thick wavy brown hair lay neatly combed on his head and his face was stubbled, as was my father's, for they did not shave on Shabbat. On the right side of his forehead a vein throbbed slowly as he spoke. I watched its pulsing rise and fall, and asked myself in wonder and dread, How can you smash a head? There are so many precious and beautiful things in a head. . . . "What should he have done, David?" my uncle said. "Sometimes you have to smash." (24)

In this moment David experiences what will become an important and persistent "double bind." On the one hand, he receives the gentleness, goodness, and security his uncle offers. David's uncle enfleshes the security the tradition holds and makes it tangible for the young boy. The stubble on Meyer's face, indicative of his

faithfulness to Sabbath law, the warmth of the embrace, the human contact of an older man affectionately holding his young nephew, all signal to David messages of connectedness and security. On the other hand, the warm physical encounter is accompanied by a verbal message of violence. Tenderly holding David, Meyer asserts it is legitimate to attack others. For David, this is a mixed message, and the conflict is made apparent to him as he closely observes his uncle's face. Silently, because his question would not be permitted by the adults, David wonders to himself how anyone could deliberately hurt another person. Uncle Meyer is able to hold the tension of the paradox. David is not.

David is similarly perplexed by the photograph; he is not able to imagine a knife or a gun in either his uncle's or his father's hands. The young boy's reaction to the photograph demonstrates his limited imagination. Because the picture jars with his experience of his father and uncle, he projects his fears and anger on the *midrash* story: in a limited way it is safer for him to challenge the dead Abraham than to contest the living representatives of the almost-lost tradition of the Jewish warrior. In this way, David creates a safe, fictive or narrative distance between himself and the actual problem, forestalling the necessary dialogue until he is older.

Initially, David links violence to men, but he sees it as external to himself. He experiences and imagines brutality as penetration; bullets and knives strike and enter you, empowered by the male force that wields them. Or, racist words, sharp and painful, directed at him by male bullies, invade David's sense of self. David is overpowered by this world of attack and conquest and feels unable to meet it on its

own violent terms. His protection from it is found in a friend's mother, frequent illness, and his imagination (60, 65, 54). David's sense of himself as incapable of violence is challenged when he is sexually assaulted by two Polish boys, Eddie and his unnamed cousin. David is still six years old and is easily terrified by the boys' menacing comments. They accuse him and all Jews of conspiracy, financial coercion, and cultural control. Eddie refers specifically to the *Anonymowe Panstwo* (Polish for "anonymous empire") and by implication, accuses David of participation in this group (55, 56). Eddie believes this Jewish Conspiracy theory and is angered by the supposed Jewish intention to take control of the world. The Polish boys are afraid of what they identify in David's conduct as Jewish power and are unconsciously afraid of their own lack of power.

By virtue of his race, David inadvertently confronts the Polish boys' fear that they lack influence and will be controlled by another race. For Eddie and his cousin, this racial conflict will be resolved by men; authority is located in and defined as male power: Eddie's father, the boy asserts, can beat up David's father (55). The older youths are associated with violent, phallic imagery, as David observes:

After a moment Eddie Kulanski's cousin withdrew a pocketknife from his trousers. He opened the blade. It was a small knife with a red handle. At the base of the maple were large, gnarled protrusions of roots. He proceeded to toss the knife into one of these roots. The knife would enter the root and remain upright, quivering. (111)

In this description is sexual symbolism; Eddie's cousin and, by extension, Eddie, send David the clear message that they are powerful males. They communicate their potency in terms that are redolent of adult phallism: they are the ones with the knives and are therefore to be respected. It is not surprising that the type of attack they perpetrate against David is sexual in nature.

The threats of Eddie and his cousin become reality when the boys capture David, who is alone in the parkland beside the zoo, push him to the ground, and examine his genitals. They satisfy their previously stated curiosity about circumcision (59); unconsciously, however, they also satisfy their need to know that David's phallus is "wounded" and therefore, they assume, not as potent as their own. This restores their sense of supremacy; in Freudian terms, they are the possessors of untouched male vitality/potency, whereas as David is circumcised/castrated. Once the Polish boys are satisfied they alone are the controllers of "intact" power, David is no longer a threat.

During this first assault, David is instinctively, spontaneously violent. He lashes out at his attackers and inflicts the greatest injury by kicking one of the boys in the head: symbolically David becomes Abraham, smashing the heads of pagans in righteous anger. In this circumstance, the location of power is in a phallic idol, and David, by resisting the attack, symbolically identifies this idol as false. David is threatened and hurt by those outside of his community who define their own potency in terms of negative phallic power. The negative phallocracy the Polish-American boys espouse is not limited to the "outside" world. While Eddie hates David because

he is Jewish, in the yeshiva David attends he encounters a Jewish enemy who hates David because he is smart: once again, the criterion by which David will be judged is phallic and the assault is violence against his Jewish body.

In the second attack, the persecutor is Larry Grossman, a fellow student, and the confrontation is no longer oblique:

One day on my way through the crowded corridor at school after recess, I felt a hand grasp my right buttock. . . . "Hello, crooked nose." [Larry] grinned. "How are your brains today?" . . . "Where is it, brains? You got nothing here to squeeze. Such a small petzel for big brains Davey Lurie." (293, 294)

David is honoured in his community because he is smart and intelligence is a highly esteemed group value. But David is a threat to Larry Grossman who is, as his name suggests, vulgar, unrefined, and stupid. Larry rejects his group's value, perhaps because he cannot attain it, and chooses to rate merit on the basis of phallic power; he is gratified to discover David's apparent "lack." David might have "brains" but they are, for Larry, no substitute for phallic power. David is enraged by the violation Larry perpetrates against him, and responds with physical force. His retaliation is successful, and Larry flees in painful defeat.

Through these experiences and the seduction of his success at fighting off bullies, David learns the pragmatic worth of physical force. Ironically, this insight bonds David with his father. David unconsciously draws closer to his once distanced parent, although he does not tell Max of either assault. David's former child-like

rejection of violence is replaced by an appreciation of its practical value. To David, he and Max are now both "men of war"--they have fought their battles and won. These encounters enable David to "read" the photograph from a different point of view, and David feels connected to the men in the picture, who are now heroes with whom to identify. David no longer needs to deny the physical force the men in the photo both accept and celebrate and can internalize some of the phallogentrism that Eddie/Larry/*midrash* teaches. He asserts that his dad is now "the strongest and bravest of them all," and is the mentor David decides to emulate (169).

David's recapture of his father's life occurs when, through play, the boy imaginatively enters the photo, joins the *Am Kedoshim* Society and lives the soldier's life with the men in Poland. Sometimes he fights their battles with them, acting out the various parts as he relives the stories of their valiant past, and David includes his own victories, re-fashioning the photo to include the defeat of Eddie Kulanski and his cousin. Finally, he includes himself in the picture with the soldiers and his father:

They won't kill David again, I kept thinking. We have to smash their heads. There isn't any other way. . . . And one day I stood silently beside my father as he waited and joked with his brothers and friends, and Yitzchok's camera clicked loudly and added a new face to the photograph. (170)

David's play in the woods at the lake is re-visionary; he essentially becomes a soldier and lives the soldier's reality. Feeling connected to his community in a new way, he no longer experiences himself as an outsider. Once the marginalized one

because he did not interpret as they did and therefore did not share a common and important ethic with his family and friends, David is now part of the new group of strong, even deadly Jews. David rejects his self-made utopia, the peaceful fantasy world of the bed-sheets; it is now a meaningless, impotent fairy tale that he abandons in order to embrace violence as a means to sustain life.

David's attempt to make the picture frame his own view, to give the image the power to define the boundaries of his world, begins to fail. The *Am Kedoshim* men succeeded, in limited ways, in their battle with the Russians and Poles, and were able to gain the safety of America, but they are not invincible. Once in America the Society turned its energy towards raising funds to help other Jews escape the poverty and violence of Eastern Europe. By doing so, it laid down arms in order to do battle in the financial district and gain economic power. The tactic was very successful until the Stockmarket crash in 1929 nearly destroyed its assets. The group, once strong and unified, became divided among itself, overwhelmed nearly to the point of defeat. The men in the photo were not strong enough to face this new enemy; Max Lurie is devastated by the crash and has a nervous breakdown. David cannot comprehend the change in his father and their life-circumstances and feels lost. He is still dependant upon physical intervention as the means to control chaos and evil, the "accidents" that infuse his life (11). The *Am Kedoshim* fail as figures on whom he can depend. David, in this place of despair, looks again at the photograph:

I looked carefully at the faces in the photograph. It felt odd to be holding in my hands the heart of the firm and solid world molded by

my father at the very moment when that world had disintegrated. . . .
 Now, as I peered into the snowy depths of the forest, the men seemed to stir. Before my eyes, as I watched, they moved slowly and silently from the world contained by the rectangle. One by one they slipped away, taking with them their guns and knives and flags until all I held in my hands was an empty forest through which blew the winds of an icy and indifferent winter. (235, 236)

David must look elsewhere to find a hero strong enough to contend with his current evils, which have evolved from the containable street bullies to financial ruin, Nazism, and war.

David's personal world is shattered. His larger world is also destroyed, for social disintegration is omnipresent. The newspapers are replete with pictures and reports of the growing violence in 1930s Germany. The magnitude of these new horrors leave David frantic for a new hero, a strong-man to restore balance to his world and protect him. He finds the hero he needs in a mythic Jewish figure, the Golem of Prague. David first encounters stories of this mythic hero from his cousin Saul and is captivated by the strength and ability of this Jewish giant. Where others cannot possibly succeed, the golem enters and saves entire towns. When God is absent or will not intervene, the golem arrives as a mighty saviour; David uses the story of the golem to save and protect his world.

According to the myth, the golem is a male creature generated by men alone. By means of magic, manipulation of the tetragrammaton, and an ecstatic experience,

Rabbis brought forth the heroic figure without the aid of a woman. Gershom Scholem, in his article in Encyclopedia Judaica, writes:

Those who took part in the "act of creation" took earth from virgin soil and made a *golem* out of it . . . and walked around the *golem* "as in a dance," combining the alphabetical letters and the secret Name of God in accordance with detailed sets of instructions. . . . As a result of this act of combination, the *golem* arose and lived, and when they walked in the opposite direction and said the same combination of letters in reverse order, the vitality of the *golem* was nullified and he sank or fell. (vol. 7, 754, original emphasis)

The golem embodies raw power. For his creators, the golem is a means to victory over oppressors too strong for them. Better than any son in his obedience and strength, the golem enters the Rabbis' battles at their command, and defeats their enemies. The golem, as one answer to the difficult issues of theodicy, is a kind of god made in the image of man: potent, concrete, and controllable. Unlike the golem who responds immediately to human need and performs the deeds exactly as the humans ask, Yahweh is distant, enigmatic, elusive. The complex problems of theodicy are irrelevant where there is a golem, for Yahweh's mysterious plan becomes academic once the golem is present to deal with current human pain. But there is also a diabolical side to the creature who, much like Frankenstein's monster, may develop dangerous powers and grow out of control. Initially, he is a servant of

his creator; however, according to the myth, unless he is destroyed, he eventually terrorizes those whom first he served.

Just as David enters the photo and re-constructs his world with the meaning it contains, so he uses the frame of his bedroom window to facilitate his imaginative excursions with the golem. Leonard A. Cheever, in his article, "Rectangles of Frozen Memory: Potok's In the Beginning," writes: ". . . in his imagination [David] allies himself with the Golem of Prague, a supernatural being who aided persecuted Jews in the past. The rectangle of the window in David's room thus becomes an imaginary doorway through which he sends the Golem on forays to do battle with the enemies of the Jews" (9). David's desire to save his world and his use of the golem to aid his compassionate plan re-creates the boy as a type of soldier/rebbe with mystical powers; David becomes a "King David" whose Goliath is not an enemy to defeat in battle, but a strong-man to coerce into helping fight David's battles. The boy's fantasy is further enhanced by his theology. With a child's fears and reasoning, David constructs a Manichean universe. The religious dualism of this paradigm formulates a less ambivalent and therefore seemingly more straightforward and less dangerous world. It is precisely this type of system that makes a golem figure heroic.

David tries to see the world in binary opposites; he does not want ambiguity. His three-stage journey through the *Am Kedoshim* Society picture--from confusion over its violent/loving double message, to eager, straight-forward acceptance of the soldiers as heroes, and then to disappointment with its impotence--generates for David an opportunity to accept the enigmatic quality of reality. He is not ready to admit this

mystery; he returns to fantasy, this time not an Edenic but a violent utopia, and embraces the golem. David entrenches himself in a dependency on violence. What men accomplish alone, through warfare, cannot be compared to the superhuman, physical exploits of the golem, whose powers bring comfort and security to the troubled child. Furthermore, the reduction of the world's problems to issues containable in a single window frame also enhances David's hope that the German menace is controllable. David contracts the world to what he can "see" through his bedroom window and establishes a new utopia.

David is completely withdrawn from his world when he begins to fantasize about the golem. Suffering from an accidental throat wound, David is unable to speak (251). Weak and dependent, he is deeply attracted to the golem's super-capabilities. In the legend there is hope for deliverance from David's multiple enemies. The presence of the golem amid the absence of any other help mitigates the weakness of David's father and his friends. Now balance will be restored, for world wars require supernatural powers if the enemies are to be defeated. David creates a golem for himself; he enters the legend and brings the mythic being to life:

Before a stretch of brown viscous earth three figures stopped and set their torches in the ground. Bent, working swiftly, two of the three figures shaped a clay man. They permitted me to mold the head.

When it was done they stood around the clay figure. Prayers were chanted; the secret name of God was uttered. Water poured from the figure; it glowed a fiery red; it rose from the earth. The three robed

figures vanished. From its huge height the clay man gazed down upon me. Golem. It stared. Something must be done. Something. It gazed steadily at me. Then, slowly, it bowed. (252)

David is now able to connect with his world; he is the possessor of a "secret weapon" that equips him to leave his withdrawn state. Because David brings the golem to life, he is the one the creature will serve. The fact that David forms the creature's head is important, for according to the myth, the word *emet* (truth) was inscribed on the clay head in order to bring the figure to life. Death comes to golem if the first letter (*aleph*) of *emet* is erased. This leaves the word *met*, the Hebrew word for "dead" (Goldsmith, The Golem Remembered, 1909-1980 16, 17). David is empowered, by this act of writing, to nullify the monster's existence, and this myth works to reinforce David's sense of the power of words to create or destroy life.

In the beginning, the boy and the golem participate in numerous salvific acts. David's giant, a transformed Goliath figure, responds to every command, the obedience bringing the child a renewed sense of security in his ability to establish utopia. David, like the famous king before him, wants to establish the kingdom of God on earth. When the golem enters David's world and subdues his enemies, he lives in hope that physical power might be the means to peace. This illusory hope is strengthened by the simultaneous events of the golem busily restoring order in the Eastern European Jewish world of the 1930s and the onset of Max's slow recovery from his nervous breakdown. Ironically, the stronger Max becomes, the more the golem figure begins to assume the ex-soldier's weary appearance. The golem is

chameleon, sometimes looking like the young boy, sometimes like the father (254, 257).

This blending of appearances works to sustain the eternal nature of the mythic figure and, by extraction, the unending nature of suffering and evil--each generation needs its own golem. David takes a myth from his Jewish past and gives it powerful interaction with his present Jewish and secular reality. The merging of identities underscores David's felt need to appropriate his father's methods in order to restore balance to the world. Through the golem, David grapples with the father/son identity problems delineated by Freud and Jung. Insofar as it carries David's identity, the golem becomes a potent means to win his soldier-father's approval.

David's and the golem's imaginative forays into Germany culminate in the event of the Nazi book-burnings. The boy and his hero have fought together to salvage vandalized synagogues and to aid the oppressed. They have attended secret Nazi meetings in order to learn the strategies to be used against the Jewish community, and they have saved Torah scrolls from fiery extinction. But each attempt to subdue the Nazi threat has left the boy exhausted from lack of sleep and the golem slightly weaker and close to collapse. Their final raid occurs during an especially fierce attack against German Jews:

Books were being burned! Books! Golem! Stop them! He was suddenly by my side, in his gray shirt and baggy trousers, looking strangely small and weary, his face, my face, worn with the nights of sleepless forays against the hordes of the Angel of Death. Now! Now!

A leap, and we were inside the tumultuous square, . . . near the curling edge of the smoke and flames that rose to the black and silent sky.

From everywhere books were being thrown to the flames. . . . A rage filled my being and I knew I could kill out of my hate. But the books had to be saved. (261)

David is able to rescue only a single, unnamed text. He returns from the journey overwhelmed and distressed. David calls silently to the golem, only to discover the creature has dissolved. The giant's vitality has been drained by German power, and the golem was not sufficiently potent to fight this enemy. In an ironic inversion of the myth, it is not the golem who grows so heinous he must be destroyed. Instead, it is the other "clay figures" the sons of Adam, who are the monsters. David's yearning to find a being strong enough to rid the world of evil ends in the silence and weariness of his bedroom. He learns that no matter how strong you are, there is always an opponent who is stronger. Another fantasy has failed.

In spite of the successes David experiences with his creature, he is not entirely at ease with his golem. This tension is clarified for David after the giant disintegrates. Unwittingly, through the internalization of the golem myth, David generates for himself another multi-faceted problem. This conflict emerges because David desires the strength the giant offers and fears the incantation associated with the creature's genesis. The golem was derived from superstition and exists outside the prescribed boundaries of authorized theology; he was the stuff of Kabbalah. David's encounters with non-canonical practise have been negative experiences. His mother

Ruth, a weak, ineffectual woman, resorts to incantation to protect her frequently ill son. Their widowed neighbour Mrs. Horowitz, who is distrusted and feared by those in the district, is a practitioner of this renegade mystical tradition. She provides Ruth with prayers to whisper over her son's bed, but David is frightened by his mother's supplication--it is suspect because it is not sanctioned liturgy. Although his father's prayers have legitimacy and offer security to the child, his mother's frantic whisperings alarm David:

I shuddered. I felt vaguely unclean thinking that a special prayer by [Mrs. Horowitz] was being spoken upon my forehead by my mother. Why did my mother need prayers from her? Weren't there enough prayers in the prayer book? (115)

The traditional reaction to non-canonical religious experience is to condemn it as subversive, pagan speech. At the yeshiva David discovers the canonical rebuke to his mother's behaviour, when a fellow student quotes to David from the authority, the Rambam's text:

One who whispers a spell over a wound, at the same time reciting a verse from the Torah, one who recites a verse over a child to save it from terrors, and one who places a scroll of phylacteries on an infant to induce it to sleep, are not in the category of sorcerers or soothsayers, but they are included among those who repudiate the Torah; for they use its words to cure the body whereas these are only medicine for the soul. (333)

David experiences "bile in [his] mouth," when he hears these words (334). His mother's actions were dangerous; she was only something less than a sorcerer; moreover, she was a repudiator of Torah. But David is also implicated in this judgment, for he too has resorted to sorcery during the fantasy formation of the golem..

David learns two things from this event. The first is the inadequacy of superstition to handle the problems of adult life. For David, magic lacks the authority of the canon and the power to act meaningfully upon and transform reality. Read this way, the golem's insufficiency is evidence to David of the larger failure of superstition and validates David's intuitive sense that incantation is wrong. The second lesson David learns as a result of his golem experience is the futility of his parents' philosophies, for Ruth, in her inability to overcome evil, turns to incantation, which proves to be an empty gesture. Max, who is determined that will-power, drive, and sheer wits when turned into physical force are sufficient to defeat his enemies, is also proven wrong. David, in the creation of the golem, has attempted to use both methods of incantation and will-power, and they have failed him. He is left with a single option, discovering whether Torah, the text which challenges all others as heresy, is sufficiently powerful to battle with life's dark side.

David's double problem--his attraction to the golem because it is a type of saviour, and his repulsion of the giant because it emerges from the shadowy domain of superstition--is resolved by the decision to receive Torah. Afterward, when he looks for the golem only to discover it has been dissolved, David is left without a

powerful ally against the mounting evil that threatens to consume his world (261). Alone, divested of his illusion of the potency of incantation and physical strength, David is faced with a choice. His utopian dreams have not worked, and he no longer possesses the energy to sustain the illusion that the fantasy is achievable. No longer speaking silently, David finds his voice and begins to recite aloud verses from the psalms and prayers, and then he picks up the sacred text: "The room grew very silent. I hugged to myself the large firm brown rectangle of the volume of Genesis I had taken to my bed. The window shade scraped softly upon the sill. It remained blank. I closed my eyes and slept" (262). David chooses to pursue the study of a text as his means for infusing his world with meaning and finding comfort, and in this decision, actualizes the other side of his ancient name-sake, King David, the student/poet. Thus, David Lurie repudiates physical force and superstition as legitimate methods for attaining peace and espouses Torah. The Genesis text is the final rectangle/frame David will enter.

David's journey through photos and windows, up and down the sidewalks of his neighbourhood, to and from synagogue and school has finally brought him to certitude. The "simple one" has made his choice: he will follow a path defined by Torah wisdom. This decision marks not the end of his journey but rather the advent of something new: "All beginnings are hard" (9). His newly chosen path soon reveals its own painful demands on him. David responds to this sense that he must pursue life from within the frame of his sacred texts, and he discovers his own need

to explore his family's and his faith's history. Likewise, David also now becomes aware of his need to discover his own "self" in the midst of his community's identity.

Signals pointing to David's discovery of his authentic self are disclosed at the outset of the novel. It is evident from his actions as a young child that he has been predisposed to faith. Although he grows up in a home less concerned with nurturing his spirituality than in physically preserving the Jewish people, David is acutely spiritually aware. Unlike the characters in Potok's previous novels, who were directly trained in the faith by their fathers, and like the ancient king, whose father also did not recognize or nurture his son's potential (I Samuel 16:1-13), Max Lurie is spiritually absent to his son. Max is an observant Jew, but the focus of his life is his own secular work to make the world safe through pragmatic action. Nevertheless, by virtue of David's birth into a religious home he is prompted to view the world through devout eyes. However, his innate commitment to the spirit of the text is uniquely his own, and the form his spirituality takes and the ways in which he cultivates it causes conflict between David and his family and friends.

David's sensitivity is disclosed during the Sabbath ceremony of *havdalah*. After the first viewing of the photograph, David and his family go to Meyer's home in order to celebrate the close of Shabbat. During this evening ritual that marks, separates, and sanctifies time, David observes his family through the frame of the Shabbat candle's flame: ". . . then I stared through the flame at the faces reddened by its glow, at the hard, strong-boned, squarish face of my father, at the pale, weary nervous face of my mother . . . at the faces of the only family I had in America:

four adults and a boy" (21-22). As he watches through the candle's radiance, his family is contained in and defined by the liturgy they celebrate. David's propensity is towards viewing his world through the illumination of faith. The boundary of the candle's flame both defines and separates his family from all others and his religion from other faiths.

As David turns from the golem to the sacred texts and begins the next branch of his journey, he encounters a new tension. He carries the name of his dead uncle, a man famous in scholarship and renowned in his belief. Thus the boy is not free of tradition. He carries within himself the voice of his uncle and the expectations of others that he will attend to his dead uncle's mandate. Their anticipation that David will accept this task is freighted with emotion and urgency, for his uncle's work was cut short by the brutal violence of the pogrom. He senses a strong call to honour his past. However, although David is also becoming aware of his own voice and his need to speak, he does not want his future delimited by his past. In his search to find his way through this conflict of expectations, he is drawn more deeply into an exploration of his family's and his faith's roots. By knowing his past, David hopes to discern what he will embrace and what he will reject.

Unfortunately, as David begins his search, he is troubled by two increasingly enigmatic problems. The first is the racism he encounters. David's ordeals in his community and his victimization by the street violence of his neighbourhood drive him to search out the ideas that fuel hatred against him. He finds a Bible with both testaments and a second source, a Catholic reader, a theology text studied at the

school his perpetrators attend. It teaches "the fundamental truths of Faith essential to a high-school course in religion" (307). But David is bewildered by what he uncovers: his faith and people are described in the theology primer as carnal, misguided, deficient. For David, the theology text denigrates and misrepresents Judaism, and the joint discovery of the Gospel accounts and the Catholic reader leaves him in shock:

Sound seemed to have been sucked from the street, funnelled out of a hole somewhere in the fabric that enclosed us. All the sound I heard, the thin rushing cry that pressed upon my ears, came from within me. I sat down again and stared at the worn and pitted stone of a step. I saw its dull sheen and its tiny cracks. There seemed strange comfort in the sight of that old, dirt-veined stone step. I picked up my schoolbag and the books, stood up, and went down the steps. (307)

Faith becomes increasingly important to David when vengeance in the form of mythic promises, one of which is the golem, and modern militarism, the photo, fade into the background. David's inquiry into the motives behind racism returns him to his own past. The comfort he receives from the yeshiva's doorsteps, worn with age, speaks of a faith that defies the ravages of time. In the midst of the shock, he experiences something solid and good in the moment, and thereby the horror to him of the Catholic text is offset by the solidity of his own faith and experience, as symbolized in the stairs. David is beginning to learn who he is, a person of faith, and to know that the identity is good, even if those outside him and across the street

repudiate that fact. Having already discovered that physical confrontation of one's enemies succeeds only for an instant, David is doubly reassured by the solid, if worn, stairs, and accepts that there is something deeper and eternal that outlasts hate and violence. The experience on the stairs suggests to David that violence does not have the last word.

David's relationship to the Divine Word constellates his second obstacle, which is the response his questions generate from those who teach him Torah. His community accepts that Torah and Talmud are inerrant, the inviolate word of God to his people, and that textual flaws do not exist in the works. The community's hermeneutic precludes textual emendation, or, more to the point, it precludes any suggestion of redactor error. In his reading of the Bible, however, David finds inconsistencies and grammatical problems. David's theoretical position sets him at odds with his peers and instructors, whose fundamentalist approach regards such observations as at best foolish, at worst, heretical. Insofar as David insists on identifying the problems as he uncovers them, he enters a dangerous space (374, 377). The discomfort David's community feels in response to his persistent, subversive study energizes their reaction to him. Initially, they try to intimidate David into acquiescence to the group's norm, and when this strategy fails, it simply rejects him. David is a threat because he asks questions.

The past is David's accuser and his comfort. His family and friends marshal the past and tradition as convincing evidence David should leave his investigation of higher-critical theory and German text criticism to embrace the safe, sanctioned study

of Talmud. David repudiates this reasoning. His research has uncovered a substantial Jewish exegetical history at variance with his community's way of reading. David learns some of the most well-respected Hebrew scholars asked the same questions he poses. Centuries prior to Julius Wellhausen's publication of The Prolegomena to the History of Israel (1875), these Hebrew exegetes practised textual emendation and redaction criticism; David states: "I went back to my *Mikraot Gedolot*, reread Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12:6, 22:14, Deuteronomy 1:2, 31:9, 3:11, and began to think that he really had attributed post-Mosaic origins to a number of verses in the Torah" (379; *Mikraot Gedolot*: "the large multi-volumed work containing the major rabbinic commentaries to the Bible" [260]). David discovers the ancient interpreters engaged in rigorous text criticism, and the results of this research encourage David's questioning process and make his community's history a kind of two-edged sword: history and tradition validate as well as attack.

David learns the lesson in historical ambiguity while at seminary, where he experiences the past as a blessing and a curse, a combination of light and dark, good and evil. The lesson is not entirely new to David. His Torah teacher, Shmuel Bader, formally introduces David to the complexity of their tradition, when preparing him for his *Bar Mitzvah*:

Mr. Bader explained the horrifying deed done to Noah. "I think you are old enough to understand it," he said. "And if I am going to teach you Bible I am going to teach it to you the way it is written. The

Torah is an account of man in his beauty as well as, sometimes, in his ugliness. Now we're at one of the ugly parts." (282)

If Mr. Bader helps David identify something of the character of "man," then David wonders if the same is not true of God. David finds it difficult to hold together the tension between the received doctrine, that God is good, and the immediate events of his life. He asks of a fellow grade-school student: "You remember what we learned the other day in *Chumash*? Where Abraham says to God, when he's talking about Sodom and Amorrhah, 'Will You destroy the good people and the evil people?' Doesn't it look like it makes no difference now if a person is good or bad? God is just destroying everyone" (212). David's perception that God might be hostile meets with the expected response: David's classmate rebukes him without delay, silencing the subversive speech, but not the subversive thought.

Now that he is an adult, David's willingness to hold the tension of ambiguity and not simply accept the group's fixed unambiguous hermeneutic empowers David and offers him new horizons of knowledge and experience. David learns to be fluid, accepting new thoughts and ideas; he will live with an organic, evolving theology, and will "chart [his] own [life]" (405). His receptivity to growth and change and the candid manner with which he speaks his doubt evokes rejection from many. However, it also facilitates a new humility and tolerance. David is willing to consider the validity of the useful/destructive, and the light/dark within single moments in time, ideas, and relationships. This is evident in David's transforming relationship with his father.

Words are joined by pictures, real and imaginary, in David's growth to maturity as a Jew. A moment of change occurs between David and Max during a discussion about the now ongoing War, when David observes:

I stared at him. His face was grim. The scar on his cheek was starkly white within the flesh reddened by the bitter wind. It occurred to me at that moment as we stood there in the March cold outside the yeshiva that his eyes were seeing this war in a way utterly different from mine. I saw it in newspaper photographs, in movie newsreels, in the images I conjured up for myself as I listened to radio broadcasts; but this man, my father, had led men in combat, had killed men in war, knew the smells of battle and death, and was able to enter the photographs and newsreels and radio broadcasts to see the war. In that same way, he could see Jews being killed. (336)

The event is an epiphany for David: through this newly found empathy and humility, he gains the ability to value his father's experience and to acknowledge his father's scar, which signifies Max's loyalty to the tradition of the warrior-Jew (95).

Significantly, David and Max stand beside the yeshiva while they talk. This symbol of learning and tradition which infuses their lives with meaning brings them together, not only as father and son, but as joint heirs of a tradition they are committed to preserving. David attempts further connection with his father; he wants Max to understand the importance of the dialogue David engages in with books. David, in an effort to communicate in a language Max will appreciate and respect, employs

military images to define and explain his task to his soldier-father, "some Jews fight with guns, other Jews fight with words" (358). David has abandoned physical violence as a way to preserve the tradition he loves. He will work through dialogue, with ideas. David identifies this as a sacred responsibility: "[it is a] sacred task, a necessary way to respond decisively to these new critics who came as oppressors to do violence to the holy Torah" (356).

David's journey is incomplete until he resolves his feelings about the now ended Second World War and its violences. Like an archetypal hero, David must descend into the "abyss;" his journey of initiation takes him, during his darkest moment, down a slippery descent to the Hudson River. David has learned with certainty what he had previously guessed: the fate of European and Jewish society. He is unable to contain this new reality; the horror is too great for him. Experiencing hate gave David the energy to fight his external enemies, Eddie and Larry, and to protect himself. Now experiencing pain drives David into an interior journey of descent, a journey that is his "dark night of the soul."

The environment David enters at the river's edge evokes the images of the newspaper's picture of the concentration camps: factory chimneys belch smoke, trains pull sealed boxcars, planes fly low (409-411). In this setting the Hudson River, like the Nile in the ancient past, runs red for David: "[The river] ran dark and foamed white as it licked at the stones; then it foamed dark too, and then red, and I looked and saw the river running red . . ." (411). Time collapses; history repeats itself. The atrocities against the Jews in Egypt re-occur in David's present against the

Jews of Europe. In this location by the Hudson River, replete with symbols which invite David to feel the unremitting, illimitable nature of evil, David confronts an elemental horror. The path down the river bank comes to an end, and David continues his descent without a route to guide him. The untrodden way is hostile and wounds him; bushes scrape him, his clothing is torn, he falls and his left hand is cut and bleeds profusely. Torn, beaten, broken, David completes his costly descent. It is only when he reaches the bottom that he senses another presence with him, in the form of the wind: "the wind blew cold and I shivered" (412). David is no longer alone in his journey. The wind, the traditional embodiment of the presence of the Jewish God, accompanies the traveller and teaches him wisdom.

Through the inspiration brought by the wind, David begins to hear the call of Lady Wisdom: "Does not wisdom call out?/ Does not understanding raise her voice?" (Proverbs 8:1). David is instructed by an inner voice to look closely at the landscape around him and to observe the black earth, the stones, and, finally, the roots. He is directed to the foundation of life, the earth and then is asked, "Who will water the roots? . . . Who will give them new life? The leaves are already dead" (413). David is called to look to the foundations, to know the structure. He heeds this voice.

Like an ancient prophet, David is driven into his wilderness because of his fervent quest for discernment and understanding. In the wasteland he discovers his capacity to feel the pain that envelopes him and to determine to care for the "foundations" which have been badly shaken in the terror of the War. By these acts

David cares for himself, and he cares for his community. David will start again to build in America, in the name of the devastated European community, a vibrant Jewish society that speaks its faith with a confident voice. He will not let evil and its manifestation in the many violences of the past and present silence him. David listens:

How you have grown, he whispered. It is so good to see how you have grown. You are making your own beginning. I bent low and leaned my head upon the cold stones of the river wall. Then I felt myself weeping for all the years of pain I could remember and all the years of pain I knew lay yet before me. I wept a long time near the river, my head upon the stones. The wind grew slowly warm; the air grew still. I became silent. . . . The river ran with a silken sound, gathering in little pools upon the stones, murmuring softly the hopes of all beginnings. (413)

Having not denied his dark night, David gains from the river experience a renewed sense of hope.¹³

¹³ In this instance, David resembles the prophets, who are sometimes associated with rivers, for example, Ezekial at the Kebar River in Babylon as recorded in the first chapter of Ezekial. Weeping over the lost and slain of Israel, is also a familiar part of the prophet's experience. (The idea of the biblical type-scene is described by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 47 ff). The parallel with Ezekial is especially strong; Ezekial and David Lurie are both immigrants--Ezekial is in Babylon by virtue of war in Israel, David is in America due to war in Europe. Further, both weep, in part, over the destroyed 'House of Israel' in the established communities of Israel and Eastern Europe. Finally, both Ezekial and David have 'eaten the scroll' (Ezekial 3: 1-3) and seek, on the basis of the sacred text, to enable the restoration of the Jewish community.

David emerges from the river ordeal with a commitment to integrate the cognitive and the emotional by doing the academic work necessary to tending the foundations, as well as to living his faith as a meaningful way of being in the world, a decision which recalls Potok's own commitment to theology and *praxis*. David's journey, beginning as a child who intuitively abhors violence, to a boy who learns to use violence in self-defense, to a youth who attempts to stop violence through the imaginative re-creation of a superhuman soldier, to a student of the sacred texts and not of violence brings him to the river. In this moment David confronts an evil more horrific than he could have imagined. His response to this encounter is to affirm his pain and his faith. He has come full circle: David's initial pre-disposition to faith is validated.

Joseph Campbell, in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, suggests of the past:

. . . schism in the soul, schism in the body social, will not be resolved by any scheme of return to the good old days (archaism), or by programs guaranteed to render an ideal projected future (futurism), or even by the most realistic, hardheaded work to weld together again the deteriorating elements. Only birth can conquer death--the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be--if we are to experience long survival--a

continuous "recurrence of birth" to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death. (16)¹⁴

Beginning with King David, beginning with an American David, beginning with the first of two Davids, Potok creates a novel which explores the ties between past and present, birth and death. David tries to return to the past, then to create a utopia, and then to adopt the pragmatics his father teaches. Each attempt fails; it is left to David to locate a balance between the past and the present that is uniquely his own. But, his journey is instructive; he learns his place among his ancestors, his family, and his community. This knowledge is not static: his self and his faith are dynamic, and therefore his journey is marked only by its beginnings, its birth. He is committed to pursuing and acknowledging the past as his means of being wise and self-aware throughout his life. By receiving the gift and responsibility of history he finds the way to create his future. David learns, unlike that twentieth century typically American protagonist, Jake Gatsby, that history cannot be repeated. Yet David also learns it cannot be ignored if one is to live, in the words of the secular "wise man" Socrates, the examined life.

¹⁴ In this quotation, Campbell restates Arnold J. Toynbee's observation about the rise and disintegration of civilizations.

Chapter 5: Omphalos

. . . several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement . . . I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

John Keats

Existence is interspersed with suggestions of transcendence and openness to transcendence is a constitutive element of being human.

A. J. Heschel

Potok's fifth novel, The Book of Lights, is remarkably complex; its intricacy is mirrored by an intertextual relationship of singular importance to the novel, Jewish mystical literature. The Book of Lights is about contraries and is replete with binary opposites which work to enhance the theme. Gershon Loran, the adult protagonist of The Book of Lights, is a staple Potokian character, a brilliant Jewish scholar seeking to understand his world, Jewish and secular, and his place within that world. Like Reuven in The Chosen, he is paired with a double; his *doppelgänger* is Arthur Leiden. Unlike the movements of Reuven, or the characters in the subsequent novels, Gershon's and Arthur's journeys of individuation take them beyond the boundaries of their New York world into the unexplored territory of the Orient. Potok transports the modern Jewish-American point of view of the 1950s into the deeply wounded, post-war worlds of Korea and Japan. In this different cultural setting, with its new ethic, the men apprehend the life-altering truths which deeply affect their lives.

A compelling reality in The Book of Lights is the presence of orphan and abandonment motifs: Gershon's parents have died in Israel; Arthur is metaphorically orphaned by his parents through their choice to participate in the bomb-making

Manhattan Project; Korea and Japan are peopled with the broken and destitute sufferers of war; and, consonant with the Kabbalistic influence in the works, the earth seems abandoned by the God who is her creator. (As we shall see, the doctrine of God's abandonment of the earth during the act of creation is delineated in the Lurianic myth.) Finally, the children who receive this legacy of rejection and destruction from the absent parents who were "giants," are bereft of mentors to guide them into the future. During one of his many visions, Gershon is asked:

When in all the history of your species have you ever produced so vast and panoplied a parade of great minds across so large a portion of your planet in so short a time as you did in the first decades of this century? Your generation and the one yet to come are the children and grandchildren of these giants. What have they left you? They were your greatest gifts to yourselves; they were of a special grace. How you trusted them. What heritage have they given you to hold in your hands? (321-22)

Later, Gershon is told by his inner, visionary voice, "You are the bereaved children and grandchildren of a broken century" (324). What is the heritage the orphan receives? The legacy is abandonment, loss, grief, broken trust, anxiety, and a lack of authentic parenting. The work necessary to survive the trauma of these losses is enormous. The journey out of the victim state and into a reclaimed life is arduous and painful. Such are the parameters of the path Gershon, a kind of everyman, and Arthur, a wanderer, are compelled to walk. Faced with their own brokenness and the

woundedness they perceive in the world they inhabit, the young men seek healing. Their task is to reconnect, to restore relationship where it has been seemingly irremediably severed, and to find hope amidst chaos.

Two important texts significantly influence The Book of Lights and provide meaningful ways in which to enter the novel and uncover the protagonists' journeys. A twentieth century philosopher and theologian, Martin Buber's significant formulation of relationships, encoded as either I-It or I-Thou constructs, affords a means of understanding the central issue in the books: the elements which constitute meaningful and authentic human connection. As well, the ancient Jewish text of the Kabbalah works in consonance with Buber's ideas to establish and reveal the important themes of abandonment, ambiguity, and hope and to explain the symbols and mystical ascents which are key to Gershon's experience. Danie! Chanan Matt, the editor of Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, defines "Kabbalah" in his "Introduction": "Kabbalah means "receiving" and refers to that which is handed down by tradition. For many centuries the word was used quite generally, but by the time of Moses de Leon, [c1264], the term Kabbalah denoted esoteric teachings, techniques of meditation, and a growing body of mystical literature" (5). By way of these two theories the existence of a conversation, the dialogue with which the texts are inscribed, emerges. As the reader engages the conversation, Potok's insights into human spirituality and relationship surface.

Potok's interest in Martin Buber is evidenced in the critical article he published to explain the philosopher's contribution to Jewish thought and religious

experience, "Martin Buber and the Jews" (1966), as well as in his recent publication of the "Foreword" to a re-edition of Buber's Tales of the Hasidim (1991). Potok's attraction and affinity to the writer are easily discernable in his positive, although not entirely uncritical, explication and interpretation of Buber's life and thought. In his lifetime Buber actualized what was to become later the quintessential Potokian struggle: the conflict between the intense engagement of modern secular thought and behaviour and orthodox Jewish theology and praxis. Buber was born in Lemberg in 1878, into a climate of intense change, challenge, and conflict. Potok writes:

Buber grew up in an age when Jewry experienced the full power of the secular enlightenment, the subsequent marshalling of Orthodox forces in opposition to secularism, and the birth of modern political Zionism. Newly emancipated Jews, heady with the prospect of participating as partners in Western civilization, attempted to enter fully the mainstream of European life--some by denying their inherited culture, others by taking with them a personal vision of it into the wider world.

("Foreword" vii-iii)

Buber encountered, in his grandfather's home, an environment which was to affect him deeply, because this relative modeled for Buber the integration of secularism and pietism.

Buber's parents were divorced and he spent an extensive amount of time at his grandparent's farm. His grandfather "was an enlightened, renowned scholar and editor of classic rabbinic texts, and at the same time a well-to-do banker, a Jewish

communal leader, and a devout Jew, who prayed in a small hasidic synagogue from a prayer book dense with mystical discourse" (Potok, "Foreword" vii). With this background Buber began his university career. His academic studies at the University of Vienna disclosed a growing disinterest in things Jewish, and Buber rejected his former ties to his Jewish past. It was not until Buber attended a congress on Zionism, held in Basle in 1897, that he returned to his faith. He began to revive his ability to read and write Hebrew, a skill learned while a boy, and also commenced research into Jewish texts. This exploration led to a lengthy period of self-imposed exile. Buber chose solitude and isolation as the setting in which to conduct his re-assessment of Jewish practise and belief. He emerged from this silence committed to the Hasidic experience.

In this context Buber developed his most important theory of human relationships, and he integrated these ideas into the framework of the Jewish faith:

It was often suggested to him, he wrote in Hasidism and Modern Man, that he liberate hasidic thought from its particularist narrowness and offer it as a teaching of all humankind. This he steadfastly refused to do. "Taking such a universal path would have been for me pure arbitrariness. In order to speak to the world what I have heard, I am not bound to step into the street. I may remain standing in the door of my ancestral house. . . ." ¹⁵

¹⁵ Buber is quoted in Potok's Foreword, xv.

Buber predicates the dialogical encounter on faith, positing an "*already existing essential unity* which it was the task of the mystic to *discover* by means of his ecstatic experiences" (Potok, "Martin Buber and the Jews" 45, original emphasis). This process of discovery arises in the dialogical encounter, which contains two possibilities, the I-Thou and the I-It relationships.

In the first of these relationships, the I-Thou, one embraces essential *Otherness* in relation, meeting the other with one's authentic self; one responds entirely, openly, and fully to the other. For Buber, such an act is genuine and therefore sacred. Walter Kaufmann, in his Prologue to Buber's I and Thou, explains this infusion of the sacred into the mundane: ". . . Buber succeeds in endowing the social sphere with a religious dimension. Where other critics of religion tend to take away the sabbath and leave us with a life of weekdays, Buber attacks the dichotomy that condemns men to lives that are a least six-sevenths drab" (30).

On the other hand, the I-It relation is situated in objectivity and utility: "The man who . . . says I-It assumes a position before things but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity" (Buber, I and Thou 80). Potok suggests the "It" is "something to be manipulated, exploited, or objectively experienced" ("Martin Buber and the Jews" 46). The I-Thou relation is spontaneous and fluid, "The Thou meets me through grace," and evidences intense involvement (Buber, I and Thou 62). The I-It is rigid, static, the stuff of institutions and laws, and is evidenced in objective detachment. The I-It is not, however, an intrinsically wrong relationship; Buber explains: "And in all seriousness of truth, listen: without It a human being cannot

live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (I and Thou 85). Thus, the occurrence of these modes of existence are part and parcel of all experience; the boundary between the two is fluid and both are actualized at any given time.

Buber's philosophy of relationship is central to his thought. To live authentically is to be open to a dialogical encounter with the natural world, with one's neighbour, with the spiritual realm. Buber rejects a rationalist, empiricist approach to life. It is impossible, according to Buber, to reach God outside of the I-Thou relationship. Further, one becomes legitimately human only through the exercise of one's freewill to choose the I-Thou: ". . . the mark of man's freedom is his ability to choose and to stake his life on his choice. By risking everything through a decision of faith, man becomes a genuine person; it is in making an ultimate choice for faith that man is most human and most free" (Pewok, "Martin Buber and the Jews" 47). In contrast, Buber defines evil as the disposition constantly to view nature/people/God as "It," for this tendency is grounded in selfishness. To be continually the central point is to create the other as an eternal second. Buber writes: "The capricious man does not believe and encounter. He does not know association; he only knows the feverish world out there and his feverish desire to use it" (I and Thou 109). For Buber, the It-world, isolated from all Thou-world interaction, becomes alienated and therefore, an "incubus" (I and Thou 111).

A controlling tension in The Book of Lights is the struggle to identify and choose between I-Thou and I-It relationships. In fact, success or failure in the novel is largely based upon the ability to distinguish between these two modes of being and

to choose relation. In general terms, the I-It stance is that of the scientist, while the I-Thou is that of the poet, a development detailed in The Book of Lights. Conflict erupts on several levels between science and art (in the form of the Manhattan project and the saving of Kyoto), in terms of expression of religious experience (Talmud and Kabbalah), and in the practical concretizing of faith and existence in the ways of being a chaplain in a war-torn country. Each of these expressions of conflict involve Gershon and Arthur, and the choices they make in the midst of the tension is a measure of their growth.

The connections between Gershon Loran and Martin Buber are evident at the outset of The Book of Lights. Gershon is orphaned when his parents, who are Zionists, are killed in Israel; he is raised by his aunt and uncle. Buber is essentially orphaned when his parents divorced; he too is raised by his close relatives. Buber's grandfather was a devout Hasid, as is Gershon's uncle. Both forged their first connections to the Jewish faith through the mentorship of these surrogate parents.

When Gershon is introduced, he is withdrawn and depressed. He is physically unattractive, emotionally unconnected, and intellectually uninspired. His life is dismal and this internal state is mirrored by the physical surroundings of his home. Gershon lives in an impoverished Brooklyn apartment house that is run-down and dirty: "The house was the talk of their Brooklyn neighbourhood. There was something wrong with it, something had gone awry from the very beginning" (3). Like the life the youth lives, the apartment's basic structural functions, (furnaces, electricity, plumbing, roofing), are capricious and disruptive. Such is also Gershon's

encounter with life, from the death of his parents, to the frightening and often eccentric, although harmless, behaviour of his aunt and uncle, to abandonment by school friends. For Gershon, "The world seemed a strangely terrifying place when you really thought about it" (6). Influenced by abandonment, poverty, and decay, he begins life disadvantaged and he seems encompassed by an aura of despair. Jacob Keter, his Kabbalah instructor, observes:

He stood behind the desk watching Gershon thread his way through the desks and out of the classroom. The door closed with a soft click. He gazed at the space in front of his desk, the space occupied a moment before by Gershon Loran, and it seemed to him that space now contained a dark and palpable sadness. (13)

Gershon's as yet unrealized capacity to find his way through life is foreshadowed by his name. Loran is, as Einstein observes during his address to Gershon's graduating class, the acronym for the "Long Range Navigational Device" (115). Gershon's task, which is to learn to pilot the seemingly impossible seascape of his experience, is infused in the name he carries. At the outset of the novel any sense of effective navigation of life seems impossible to the passive, withdrawn young man. However, in his sixteenth year, Gershon undergoes a transcendent experience. The event proves his capacity and his propensity to connect and to receive, which, read through Buber's constructs, discloses an inherent skill to find one's way through life, and to enter the I-Thou encounter.

Gershon's vision occurs in the summer, during a particularly hot and humid evening. To escape the intense heat, Gershon makes his first ascent: he climbs the fire-escape to the roof of his apartment building. Like a kind of ziggurat bringing the seeker closer to the heavens and therefore nearer to God, Gershon perceives from the roof-top "the vast heaven of stars clear as he had never seen it before, stretching from one end of the city to the other" (6). In the midst of this new seeing of the celestial spheres, Gershon is made aware, by soft whimpering noises, of the nearby birthing of pups. Heavenly and earthly realities meet in this moment and Gershon is overwhelmed by the mystery, beauty, transcendence of life:

Life was being created before his eyes. . . . Overhead the star-filled sky seemed to drop down upon him. He felt all caught up in the life of heaven and earth, in the mystery of creation, in the pain and inexhaustible glory of this single moment. . . . he reached up and brushed his hand across the sky and felt, actually felt, the achingly exquisitely cool dry velvety touch of starry heaven upon his fingers.

(7)

What the often sullen, clearly unattached Gershon here discloses is his earnest desire to connect and his ability to feel. Gershon's capacity to engage life by means of attachment is fundamental to I-Thou relationships; his future skill in life is signified in this event. Gershon is open to reciprocity: "All actual life is encounter" (Buber, I and Thou 62).

Henceforth Gershon is a seeker; he yearns for the repetition of the transcendent moment. Although still quite passive about career and personal relationships, Gershon is determined to find and re-live the mystical roof-top experience. His need to experience mystical connection draws him to Kabbalah. Gershon holds in tension his existential angst and experience of life as harsh and unrelenting and the glimpses he receives through his aunt and uncle, his girlfriend Karen, and his recurrent visions, that life might also be beautiful, purposeful, and good. Kabbalah nurtures these instincts, for it presents a view of life that is at once ruthless and wounding, gracious and good. Gershon's attempts to live relationally are tenuous, but they disclose his desire to engage life. This yearning will enable Gershon to live both wisely and well.

In contrast to Gershon is Arthur Leiden, the wounded child of a brilliant physicist and an art historian. Arthur's father participated in the construction of the atomic bomb in the Manhattan Project, while his mother used her art history connections to ensure Kyoto was not the site of American revenge on Japan (379). Because of his parents and their acts in the world, Arthur internalizes an enormous sense of guilt. His name is also a legacy, for *leiden* is German for "suffer," and "Arthur" evokes King Arthur, the Western, Christian mythic figure who provides an unusual counterpoint to Potok's carrier of Jewish pain. King Arthur represents the successful achievement, if only for a time, of peace on earth, in the establishment of Camelot, the "city built to music." Furthermore, the knight is also an important warrior and political figure who is ritualized in the myth of a hopeful second advent.

When King Arthur returns, legend has it, England will once more be a land of prosperity and peace.

It was understood in Camelot that the knights' acts were meaningful: they were sent out to quest for adventure, to right wrongs, to perform salvific acts, to find the Holy Grail. They were welcomed, received, celebrated. Thomas Bulfinch, in Bulfinch's Mythology, writes:

[The knight traversed] the country in quest of adventure, professedly bent on redressing wrongs and enforcing rights, sometimes in fulfilment of some vow of religion or love. These wandering knights were called knights-errant; they were welcome guests in the castles of the nobility, for their presence enlivened the dulness of those secluded abodes, and they were received with honour at the abbeys, which often owed the best part of their revenues to the patronage of the knights; but if no castle or abbey or hermitage were at hand their hardy habits made it not intolerable to them to lie down, supperless, at the foot of some wayside cross, and pass the night. (368)

The knights were potent figures, powerful to transform evil to good.

Arthur's desire to re-create Camelot is evidenced early in his life.

Traumatized by witnessing the charred, eyeless birds that rain down on his home in Los Alamos after the bomb testing, Arthur perceives and experiences long before the rest of the world what the cost of the powerful weapon will be. It is only then that the young boy understands something of the project in which his father participates.

At first he is proud of his father and the other scientists. After the detonation of the bomb in the desert and the subsequent inundation by dead birds, the feelings of pride are contaminated with fear and contempt. Following the detonation of the bomb in Japan, Arthur receives mixed messages from friends:

We were heroes, all the kids in our highschool, when everyone finally found out what our fathers had been doing. . . . Yes. All very proud until started to hear words like mass murder and crime of Hiroshima and horror and other things like that. Unpleasant. Lost many friends. Funny looks. Some girls don't let you touch them. Begin to feel leprous. (346)

The conflict Arthur experiences as a result of his association with the inventors of the "death light" haunts him throughout the rest of his life (295). The bomb, with its archetypal "I-It" relationship to the earth, permeates Arthur's life; he sees no other way to live and so concludes, "We are a terrible species" (295). His reaction to his trauma is to abandon a promising career in physics, become a Rabbi, and travel to Korea like a kind of knight-errant in an attempt to atone for his father's sins and bring peace to the earth (365). Arthur does not ever get beyond his self-imposed task of atonement. He tells Gershon, "I know what I am, dear Gershon. . . . I'm an offspring of killers, that's what I am. . . . We owe them'" (269). There is no grace in Arthur's system; he cannot forgive his father or himself and therefore lives in a dangerous mix of anger and existential despair. Thus, unlike Gershon, Arthur is not

a seeker of meaning or beauty, but is consumed by searching out penance: seeing only by the light of the bomb, Arthur perceives only the vicious and the painful.

Arthur is reactive. He is certain that humankind will destroy all of life, and therefore he does not engage life positively. In contrast with Gershon, who earnestly desires to know and to gain knowledge through study, Arthur is an uncommitted, flighty, irresponsible person and student (35). He drinks too much in order to avoid exams, to resolve family pain, and to forget "death light" anniversary dates. Arthur is also passively aggressive; he sends his friends and family postcards with vicious remarks to remind them of the Hiroshima event and their culpability (378). Arthur receives no visionary ascents to heaven and no intense apprehensions of birth and life, and he is never fully connected to any other human being. It is only in Kyoto, his replacement Camelot, that Arthur finds calm. The city represents for Arthur the American decision not to drop a bomb; Kyoto recalls a place saved from inhuman destruction by a human act. But his connection to Kyoto is not through human relationship; ironically, Kyoto represents another, more subtle rejection of humanity. Arthur replaces the *mitzvah* to love your "neighbour" with an abstract love for the beauty of a city. Arthur lives largely in the I-It mode of encounter.

Gershon's and Arthur's antithetical tendencies towards relationship decode their lives. Both have experienced abandonment and pain, yet both make very different decisions on the basis of these events. Arthur, mortally wounded by his experiences concludes, in despair, that the human species is, in fact, "reptilian" and does not deserve goodness because it does not have the capacity to appreciate it (307).

Gershon, on the other hand, chooses to pursue a path which might lead him to a sense of certitude and confidence in grace and thereby bring resolution to his sense that he and the world are orphaned. This desire to find fulfilment culminates for Gershon in the study of Kabbalah.

The influence of the Kabbalah is direct and pervasive in The Book of Lights. The title of Potok's novel echoes that of the Seder ha Zohar, the Book of Splendour, and the themes of the Zohar find expression in this modern American novel. Through Potok's use of mystical literature as an allusion, his symbols take on new and rich meaning. For instance, Potok's images, such as his use of light and dark, airplanes and birds, and choices in landscape, are all enhanced when the reader attends to the parallel mystical texts. As well, the Kabbalah is a profoundly ambiguous and therefore often subversive Jewish text. Unlike Talmud, which is typically read as a comfortingly orthodox and securely logical religious treatise, Kabbalah has not enjoyed extensive canonical approval. The Jewish community has been ashamed and shocked by the Kabbalah's treatment of various ideas and dispute with important concepts and has marginalized the texts. This historical tension is present in Potok's novel, in the conflict existing between two important professors, Nathan Malkuson, a Talmudist, and Jakob Keter, a Kabbalist.¹⁶ Potok locates the tension, not in religious orthodoxy, but, rather, in the inability of the empiricist to value the intuitive. Although the focus of this tension is found in the heart of the

¹⁶ Keter, S. Lillian Kremer points out, is modelled on the famous Kabbalah scholar, Gershom Scholem ("Chaim Potok" 241).

Jewish culture, the parameters of the argument are relevant to the larger society of the West.

Although Keter treats the "peripheral" texts historically and analytically, subjecting them to the higher critical method as the first step in the exegetical process, he is not respected by Malkuson, who sees Keter's academic time and effort as a waste, a mere study of "oriental paganism." While Malkuson represents to his students "the force of traditional Jewish learning, historicity in law and scholarship," Keter rejects Malkuson's minimalization of the Kabbalah and the mystical and accepts the importance of mysticism and its texts to Jewish faith and experience (Stanford E. Marovitz, "The Book of Lights: Jewish Mysticism in the Shadow of the Bomb" 64). He explains to his unreceptive class: "Talmud tells us how a Jew acts; Kabbalah tells us how Judaism feels, how it sees the world. We are Western secular beings today, rational, logical, yes, and so we are embarrassed by Kabbalah, which is so irrational, illogical. But the tradition was not embarrassed; for nearly two thousand years it was not embarrassed" (24). Later, in conversation with Malkuson, Keter argues:

I am a threat to you, my friend, am I not. You would like our world to be smooth and rational, would you not. You do not care to know of the rabbis, the great ones who were filled with poetry and contradictions. There is deep, deep within us the irrational as well. It is our motor energy, our creative demon. You think we know the world only on the basis of what we observe or can deduce logically?

No, my good friend. As you grew up, did you meet no one who spoke of his experiences through the use of images rather than logic, who spoke of things that did not correspond to any reality we can observe?

The irrational completes us. (27)

Through Keter, Potok inscribes his modern novel with the arguments that favour and respect the Kabbalah tradition with its emphasis upon the value of the "irrational." Moreover, the conflict which is expressed cognitively between Keter and Malkuson is more deeply explored in Gershon Loran. Gershon experiences, at an emotional level, Kabbalah's direct impact. An outstanding student, he is strongly intuitive, and the Kabbalah brings meaning to these processes and validates them for him.

The Merkavah (or Merkabah) and the Zohar are the mystical works discussed in The Book of Lights. Like the detailed passages in The Chosen describing the history and theology of Hasidism, definitions and descriptions of these Kabbalistic texts are included in The Book of Lights. The reader is not left without a guide in the often labyrinthine world of mysticism. It is interesting to note that of the various mystical texts available, Potok begins with the Merkavah tradition.

David Blumenthal, in Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader, writes of the Merkavah texts:

The world of Merkabah mysticism is one of the most dazzling of the mystical worlds. It is a realm of fantastic heavenly beings, of bizarre magical names, and of occult interactions between spirit and matter. In it, closed gates to celestial palaces are opened by long,

incomprehensible incantations, and the dangers which rise up against man as he enters the realm of the supernatural are met with seals of truth. It is also a world of visions--visions which are terrifying and illuminating all at once. (3)

Merkavah texts reflect humanity's preoccupation and curiosity with the world of the numinous and the holy. They were not written for the average person, but rather for the Jewish elite (Understanding 93 ff). In this tradition, "elite" signifies not the economically privileged, but the spiritually set apart. Not every Rabbi could receive the often bizarre and seemingly sacrilegious content the tradition contained. Although the major theological premise is that of orthodox Judaism, the Merkavah supports monotheism and transcendence, it contains much that is "other" to conventional Judaism. For instance, the motivation for seeking God comes from humanity alone, for God does not condescend to humanity; we approach God.

Blumenthal identifies four main characteristics in the Merkavah material (Understanding 93-94). First, the texts are magical. This is illustrated in the manipulation of seals, the methodology of ascent, the names of the angels, and the formulaic patterns of the hymns. Second, the system contains a tension between hidden and revealed. Secrets are disclosed, yet God remains unrevealed. Third, the system is dynamic. Motion is both constant and powerful and encompasses the diverse realms of letters, angels, music. Fourth, the tradition is both theology and praxis. The Merkavah is *gnosis* and way--dealing with the material is to include study *and* mystical activity.

Marovitz, in "The Book of Lights: Jewish Mysticism in the Shadow of the Bomb," indicates that an important Merkavah subject directly affecting the novel is the mythic being, the angel *Metatron*. The angel Metatron embodies a significant Jewish Kabbalistic teaching. Perle Epstein, in Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic, states: ". . . the Jewish mystic will eventually bear the responsibility for unifying the highest world with the lowest" (xv). The angel Metatron's story illustrates this principle. According to the legend, Enoch, a Jewish cobbler, spent his life uniting the higher and the lower, in the form of sewing the upper part of a shoe to its base. In the story, the cobbler's mundane act teaches the spiritual reality of uniting the transcendent with the immanent. Enoch is rewarded: he becomes an angelic being and is re-named Metatron. Gershom G. Scholem records the story in his work Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: "This Enoch, whose flesh was turned to flame, his veins to fire, his eye-lashes to flashes of lightning, his eye-balls to flaming torches, and whom God placed on a throne next to the throne of glory, received after this heavenly transformation the name Metatron" (67). Metatron is associated with fire, power, and humility, and given the task of being a type of angelic messenger who is to bring the Divine will to humanity. The Metatron myth is a Kabbalistic response to humanity's need to be in contact with the divine and to transcend its mundane existence. It is an attempt to infuse life with existential meaning.

Gershon's association with the angel Metatron is developed throughout The Book of Lights. This alliance begins with the young man's movement from disconnection and disinterest toward a consistent desire to understand the mystical

texts and their relevance to his present life. Through this new interest Gershon slowly discloses his *éntheos*, his growing passion/fire for the learning about his unconscious self through the Kabbalah text. Gershon's Talmud professor, Nathan Malkuson, tells him, "I detect in you, Loran, a good head for Talmud. But you have no enthusiasm. You are without *éntheos*. You know what that means in Greek? No? You are without the feeling of possession by the divine. There is no fire burning in you" (19, original emphasis).

At first Gershon's interest in Kabbalah is simply academic: he studies the material to fulfil a course requirement. His research is careful and exacting, and Gershon is the only one awarded superior grades in Keter's demanding class. As he spends more time in the area and as the texts become less foreign and more familiar, Gershon begins to develop a kind of passion for the material; the depressed student begins to feel attachment, interest, curiosity, desire. Gershon senses that the essence of the Kabbalah echoes his own feelings of abandonment, bewilderment, and hope. Gershon's growing *éntheos* inspires an urge to connect: with people, as he begins to take tentative steps towards relationships, and with the divine, as Gershon nurtures his capacity for visions. Gershon frees himself to receive what life offers; he relinquishes the need, born out of his fear of abandonment, for control and distance. This movement away from detachment leads to a growing curiosity about himself, his world, and his God. Although he could avoid the decision, Gershon takes the risk and accepts a chaplaincy in what is for him an entirely foreign part of the world, Korea.

The Orient is as "other" to Gershon as the heavenly reality might have been to the cobbler, Enoch. Gershon does not retreat when offered this new opportunity to learn. Through this experience, he reveals his growing tolerance, and consonant ability to welcome and integrate. Korean culture is entirely different from American Christianity and Judaism, and this difference prompts Gershon to ponder the epistemological issues of how one ever knows anything, even the most familiar of things, with certainty. For instance, he wonders if he ever really knew his aunt and uncle: "How do you live almost a lifetime with two people, and love them, and really not know them? What sort of energy or accident brings together loving and knowing?" (240). His experience in Korea challenges his former essentially non-critical view of his America: the urban squalor in parts of New Jersey is worse than anything he sees in Korea (241). Gershon's perceptions and questions then evolve from his immediate and conventional world to the far-off and exotic. He recognizes that he travels, during Army leave, to Hong Kong simply in order to explore: "[Gershon] had journeyed the farthest distance he could from his own world. Why? He did not know. He wanted to look, that was all" (292-92). This "looking" facilitates the emergence of theological issues and he questions his received faith and tradition. Gershon explains to his Catholic roommate, John:

I was taught when I grew up that the Jewish religion made a fundamental difference to the world. You know what I mean. Well, more than half the world is on this side of the planet. They don't even know what Judaism is, and they're perfectly and marvellously content

without it. This is a rich culture, probably no more violent and cruel than our own. (261)

Gershon identifies his theological doubt. This tension is intensified by recurrent transcendent experiences. As in the roof-top moment, Gershon is deeply moved by the sight of a waterfall, then by watching a Buddhist pray, and later by viewing Mount Fuji (259, 261, 265). Initially he is unable to respond verbally to the transcendent moment; he is rendered inarticulate in the presence of beauty, but by the time he reaches the sacred Mount Fuji, Gershon consciously offers a Jewish blessing, and then: "He abandoned himself to it, to this sacred mountain of Japan, this god" (265). Gershon acknowledges, "He was being taught the loveliness of God's world by a pagan land" (263). He is open to learning sacred truths from non-Jewish sources.

Gershon also learns to adapt Judaism, to make it relevant and potent in the foreign land, and by so doing to unite "the higher with the lower." He is a contrast to his superior officer, a Jewish chaplain who feels secure only inside his office in Seoul, rarely leaves Seoul to visit the troops, and, in order to avoid the temptations he feels the foreign land offers, never takes his recreational leave in Japan. Gershon, on the other hand, travels extensively, both within Korea and around the neighbouring areas Hong Kong and Japan.¹⁷ His journeys in Korea and visits with the troops cause him to become well-known; Gershon is the travelling Rabbi who, like

¹⁷ Gershon's links to Metatron and the Merkavah chariot will be discussed more fully, later in the chapter.

Metatron, brings the message of God to men in a foreign land. Gershon's integrity in his work endears him to the men and challenges him to creativity. How does one celebrate the Festival of Booths, which commemorates the forty years of wilderness wandering and celebrates God's providence and provision, in an alien land, where the required, traditional apparatus cannot be found? Gershon resolves this difficulty by adapting and constructing an unorthodox *succah* (a temporary booth), made of plywood and camouflage nets. Through the construction of the unconventional *succah*, Gershon unites the intention of the "higher," the celebration of the liturgical holiday, with the "lower," his present reality in Korea. Then, during a planned vision, in which he invites as his *ushpizin* (invisible) guests both Keter and Malkuson, Gershon receives Keter's blessing for his creative adaptation of Judaism. The professor approves of the booth and is intrigued by it; he tells Gershon, "[The *succah*] conceals and reveals simultaneously. It hides the sun and lets in the sun simultaneously" (211). Thus, Gershon creates a symbol reflecting an important mystical truth, that of simultaneous concealment and revelation, and demonstrates his ability to integrate his theology with the practical working out of his life.

Gershon's success in his work as Army chaplain is not limited to his ministry with the Jewish soldiers. Gershon's hard work and integrity are of benefit to all the army personnel. Compassion and the confidence to be involved enables Gershon to challenge a general's decision and obtain engineering help in a road construction project his MASH unit is responsible for. Gershon challenges the bureaucratic bungling which insists that a group of medics construct roads without the aid of heavy

equipment in the height of the Korean summer, and, because of Gershon's involvement, the men are rescued from certain heat prostration (190). On another occasion, when Gershon's quick thinking protects the vulnerable soldiers from the increasingly dangerous attacks of the "slicky boys," (Korean thieves), his foresight saves his unit from multiple thefts and injuries (226). Gershon's efforts also improve the morale of the men serving in Korea, in real and concrete ways. His travels in his chariot/jeep brings positive influence to all the men and earns him "a military paean of praise" (279). Gershon, a Jewish chaplain in an American army unit, brings the heart of his faith to this most secular of any society's functions. Therefore, in light of Buber's construct, Gershon enters an I-Thou relationship with a group predicated upon establishing an entirely I-It relation to the rest of the world. As the allusions to Kabbalah suggest, Gershon's chariot brings the goodness of the omnipresent God to those in a difficult situation.

Like Metatron, Gershon is connected to images of fire and power. As the novel progresses, the images become more closely aligned to the maturing mystic/scholar. Fire imagery, first given destructive expression in Brooklyn's burning buildings and the destitution of the ghetto in which Gershon lives, is reductive and foreign. This is similar to Gershon's initial experience of the mystical, when the Kabbalah was simply a text to be studied in order to fulfil a course requirement. However, the mundane requirement soon becomes the stuff of inspiring scholarship; Gershon is intrigued by the foreign ideas and new ways of expressing faith and liturgy that he finds in the marginalized texts, and his enlarged capacity to

embrace the mystical is mirrored by transformed associations with fire. It becomes Gershon's task to stoke the coal furnace and fan the flames to life, in order to heat the decrepit apartment building. Fire is expanded to include associations with warmth and life and, insofar as Gershon makes fire, he provides life to himself and those around him. Fire is also a sacred image, for Enoch was transformed from simple cobbler to a keeper of the Divine flame. Gershon's appreciation for Kabbalah on an academic level leads to a radical transformation of his daily life. He becomes a chaplain, the keeper of the Divine fire for the observant in Korea, and is no longer without a sense of direction, lost and without goals. Now he is the effective chaplain of an entire army of observers, in short, an adept navigator.

Metatron is closely tied to the *Merkabah*, the Divine chariot of Ezekiel's vision. G. Vajda, in "Jewish Mysticism" writes:

The speculative taste of Jewish thinkers between the 2nd century B.C.E. and the 1st century C.E. took them in many different directions: angelology . . . and its counterpart demonology . . . mythical geography and uranography, description of the heavens; speculation on the divine manifestations--which had as background the Jerusalem Temple worship and the visions of the moving "Throne" (the "Chariot," *Merkava*) in the prophecy of Ezekiel . . ." (cited in Blumenthal, Understanding 6)

Ezekiel described his vision:

As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures. As for the appearance and structure of the wheels, they gleamed like beryl. All four had the same form; the appearance and structure of each was as of two wheels cutting through each other. And when they moved, each could move in the direction of any of its four quarters; they did not veer when they moved. Their rims were tall and frightening, for the rims of all four were covered all over with eyes. And when the creatures moved forward, the wheels moved at their sides . . . Wherever the spirit impelled them to go, they went . . . Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form. (1: 15-26)

Images of movement and power abound in Ezekiel's vision. Since Ezekiel received the vision while he was in exile in Babylon, God's power and presence were not, Ezekiel learned, limited to Judea, nor was the message limited to the covenant community. Ezekiel was also a *navi lagoyim*, a prophet to the gentiles; he foretold the doom of Tyre and Egypt. The throne, a symbol of the presence and justice of God, authorizes Ezekiel's vocation and provides the content of the message he will speak universally. Ezekiel's account inspired similar patterns of theme and imagery in the mystical literature the biblical text generates.

According to the legend, Metatron was placed beside the chariot-throne as the final realization of his transformation from humble human servant to powerful angelic being. The angel was connected to the omnipresence the chariot-throne represents and this indicates Metatron was empowered to communicate the Divine will globally. Gershon re-creates this reality. His "chariot," however, is not the stuff of mystical visions, but is American Army issue. Gershon travels by plane, "He arrived in Korea in a snowstorm on a huge big-bellied aircraft named the *Thin Man*," and has the army engineers construct a wooden replica of the Ten Commandment tablets and wire them to the front bumper of his jeep (3, 220). In this way Gershon travels about Korea, literally bringing the throne-emblem, the Commandments, to the "exiled" community in Korea. And, like the celestial travels of the Kabbalah mystics, Gershon's voyages around Korea are replete with hazards: abandoned minefields, flooded rivers, snipers, and snow storms. Gershon revivifies the vision and recasts the ancient icon in modern form; he becomes a contemporary Metatron, and his message is to the observant Jewish army personnel, as well as to the larger community.

The second mystical text from which Potok draws is the Zohar, the most important literary work in the mystical collection. In the thirteenth century, the Zohar achieved near canonical status; it was received, by some, as an authoritative counterpart to the Bible and the Talmud. This status was short-lived and "in the revaluation of the Enlightenment, it became the 'book of lies', considered to have obscured the pure light of Judaism" (G. Scholem, "Zohar: The Book of

Splendor").¹⁸ The text itself is *midrash*, interpretation of the Torah. The Zohar is comprised of exegesis, homilies, short sayings, and secret revelations and oracles, all of which tend to be written in an elevated, intensely symbolic style. Daniel Chanan Matt writes: "Torah is not merely law; it is cosmic law, a blueprint of creation. The Zohar illuminates the cosmic aspect of Torah" (Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment 24).

A significant development in the Zohar writings is the teaching of the *sefirot*. The word means "numbers, ciphers" and refers to the metaphysical powers the Zohar suggests inform the stages of creation. The *sefirot* are a mythical pattern or scheme. In the Zoharic system the name of the ultimate reality of God is the *En-Sof*, the Infinite. This God is unapproachable and unknowable, the *En-Sof* is without attributes, and the *sefirot* are the manifestations of the *En-Sof*. Matt, in the "Introduction" to Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, describes the function of the *sefirot*:

Here God thinks, feels, responds, and is affected by the human realm. . . . Though ultimately God is infinite and indescribable, the *sefirot* are real "from our perspective." They provide the human being with a way to know the Unknowable. "Through these gates, these spheres on high, the Blessed Holy One becomes known. Were it not so, no one could commune with Him." The human need to contact God informs the Zohar's theology. (22-23)

¹⁸ Quoted in David Blumenthal, Understanding Jewish Mysticism, 104.

The *sefiroth* are humankind's response to the mystery of God. Remembering the premise that the Kabbalah is predicated upon the theory that humanity must seek God, that God does not condescend to humanity, the *sefiroth* are a way to make God knowable.

The Zohar expands upon the Torah text which teaches that humanity is made in the image of God by suggesting that the divine image first appeared in the *sefiroth*, the original image of God. These manifestations of God are then actualized in the Primordial Adam (*Adam Kadmon*), who is the mythical prototype of the human being. Matt writes:

The human race has lost this nature, but if one were to purify himself, he would reconnect with the *sefiroth* and become a vessel for them.

This is what the Patriarchs attained and, to a greater degree, Moses.

The *sefiroth* generate the ultimate confusion of identities: human and divine. Such sublime confusion catalyzes the process of enlightenment.

("Introduction" 34)

In this system the authentic human being achieves the same sort of unification that does Enoch/Metatron of the Merkabah tradition: the unification of the higher with the lower. People, as they regain their lost nature, become a happy combination of human and divine attributes.

The *sefiroth* system involves ten manifestations, beginning with *Keter* (God's transcendent, or pure, royalty; His Kingdom), and concludes with *Malkhut*: (God's

engaged royalty; His connection to the lower realms; His covenant community).¹⁹ Through Professors Keter and Malkuson, Potok alludes to the *sefirot* system, Keter bringing to Gershon aspects of God's transcendence and mystery, and Malkuson teaching the student of God's immanence and His community (Marovitz 71). Insofar as the two instructors respectively represent the study of Kabbalah and Talmud, how Gershon resolves the tension between the intuitive and the empirical is rich with meaning. In the *Zohar*, the *sefirot* system is not discrete and static; rather, it is dynamic and interactive and full of divine power: "The *Zohar* conceives of the personality, or consciousness, of God on the model of the dynamic human personality, i.e., as a consciousness that flows and moves within the self, from the inner to the outer aspects of the self and even among the inner and outer aspects" (Understanding Jewish Mysticism, 115). Gershon's challenge is to find balance; he is to accept the necessity of the pairs (transcendence/immanence; rational/irrational; cognitive/intuitive), and not to privilege one over the other. If he succeeds and internalizes the teaching, Gershon will become the restored human--the person who unites the human and the divine. It is the Lurianic adaptation and interpretation of the *Zohar* which provides a means of assessing Gershon's mastery of the task of integration.

Marovitz writes: "Luria himself was a sixteenth-century kabbalist of Safed, which became a vital center of Jewish mysticism in Palestine after Ferdinand's

¹⁹ This delineation is from David R. Blumenthal, Understanding Jewish Mysticism, 114.

expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. The Lurianic system is dynamic, highly visual, and innovative, though it shows a strong influence from the Zohar, the world of which Luria accepted as 'completely real'" ("The Book of Lights" 72). In Luria's system, the *sefirot* perform an important function in the creation story and directly impinge upon the subsequent development of humanity.

Luria's myth is predicated upon three important ideas. What follows with respect to the Lurianic system is found in David R. Blumenthal's Understanding Jewish Mysticism (162 ff). The first is the concept of the self-limitation of God, the *En-Sof*. In order to facilitate creation, God turns in upon Himself and becomes increasingly hidden to make room for the created order. This withdrawal creates primordial space, which allows for something other than God and His pure essence to exist. This contraction is implicitly a kind of abandonment, exile, or self-banishment. Furthermore, by this act of withdrawal the *En-Sof* is purified, because the powers of judgment are eliminated from His being. These powers are left behind in the primordial space in a concentrated form as pure judgment (which here signifies limitation). According to the Lurianic system, pure judgment ultimately includes evil. Ironically, God's act of withdrawal, motivated by love in order to create, contains the seeds of evil because it unleashes the powers of stern judgment. Marovitz elucidates this idea: "Because both judgment and limitation predicate the existence of something outside of divine purity and perfection, the roots of evil may be seen to have originated with the first act of creation--in itself paradoxically a negative one of withdrawal--and concomitant separation of judgment from divinity" (73). Along with

the essence of pure judgment the Primordial space is also left with a "faint residue of light" (Marovitz 72).

The second important concept in Luria's creation myth is the emanation of *Adam Kadmon*. He is the Primordial Man and his existence is precarious. From his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth emanated *sefirot*/light. These lights were to be gathered into vessels which were in turn to serve as the instruments of creation. However, the vessels were not sufficiently strong to contain the potency of the *sefirot* and shattered under the impact. When this occurred the *En-Sof* lost control of creation. The result of the crisis of the breaking of the vessels is chaos. According to Blumenthal, "the 'breaking of the vessels' [is a] crisis of the powers of judgment, the most unassimilable parts of which are projected downward into this cataclysm to lead an existence of their own as demonic powers" (164). From this tragedy, good and evil are mixed and intertwined--the spark of light is contained in the shell of darkness (known as the *kelippot*, the dark forces of the *sitra achra* as they take on the substance of the shell). Thus, when Adam "fell" (he fails to remove himself from the fallen sparks), humankind participates in this cosmic reality of brokenness, exile, and evil.

Finally, the third aspect of the Lurianic system is that of *tikkun*, restoration. For Luria, this process of reintegration takes place in God and humanity. Blumenthal writes, "[*Tikkun*] is an intricate process . . . The process of elimination must continue, for the configurations of the *sefirot* that now arise still contain vestiges of the pure power of judgment, and these must either be eliminated or transformed into

constructive powers of love and mercy" (165). The task of restoration is largely humankind's; the work is to restore the sparks from the shells and in this way recreate unity from chaos. The means to the fulfilment of the task is found in the Torah: "But the essential function of the Law, both of the Noahide law binding on all men and of the Torah imposed specially upon Israel, is to serve as an instrument of the *tikkun*. Every man who acts in accordance with this Law brings home the fallen sparks of the *Shekhinah* and his own soul as well" (Blumenthal 166).

To complete the work of restoring the sparks demands endless travel, because redemptive opportunities are found throughout the world. Luria's ideas redefines the idea of exile, and the paradox inherent in the first exilic act--God's abandonment of creation--is recreated in the "exiled" Jews. When decoded by the Zohar, the concept of exile is no longer freighted with the overtones of punishment; exile is now understood as "mission." The wandering Jew is the characteristic symbol of a creation paradoxically exiled and guilty, but also hopeful of redemption. It is precisely in "wandering" that the need of the world for the sparks to be restored is realized. Furthermore, when a sufficient number of the sparks is gathered up and reestablished, when good is separated from evil, the Messiah will come. The intent of Kabbalism is to facilitate this gathering through the restoration of the divine person in the human. The work is to overcome judgment with mercy.

Gershon Loran becomes the restored Adam. He recognizes, through his reading of Kabbalah, an incredible, cosmic ambiguity (91). His work with the mystical texts validates his personal experience. Gershon is aware that life is replete

with contraries, and he resists any attempts made by professors, students, or books to suggest otherwise. In this frame of mind he begins his advanced yeshiva education and enters Keter's course on mysticism. Gershon is ready to receive the Zohar's teaching that creation is founded upon divine abandonment. As an orphan, Gershon acknowledges loss and abandonment, and he is also prepared to accept the Zohar's suggestion that chaos is an authentic part of creation. Gershon feels intensely that God has somehow lost control. The decaying buildings of his neighbourhood, the queer chance events of death and blessing, the horror of the bomb, all indicate to Gershon a universe replete with chance and chaos. Gershon describes his attraction to Kabbalah to Arthur: "They say things in those books that no one dares to say anywhere else. I feel comfortable with those acceptable heresies. God originally as sacred emptiness; . . . creation as a vast error; the world broken and dense with evil; everything a bewildering puzzle . . ." (309). Finally, in Keter's seminar Gershon finds a source of voice for his inner reality, which effects two changes in the man: he no longer feels alone and he is hooked into the study of mystical texts.

Like the patriarch Abraham, Gershon makes an important descent. In contrast with the significant image of ascent in Merkabah mysticism, the descent is critical to the Zohar text. Matt describes the importance of the legend of the patriarch's sojourn in Egypt:

Having discovered the mystery of faith, the mystical union of the divine realm, Abraham "had to know all those levels that are connected below" (Zohar 1:8 1b), the dark underside of wisdom. This wisdom of

Egypt includes magic and alchemy. Abraham's descent symbolizes his exploration of *Sitra Achra*, "the Other Side," the Abyss. This dangerous psychic journey is the crucible of Abraham's spiritual transformation. (Zohar 220)

Abraham, the prototypical mystic, teaches the importance of the descent: the mystic must explore both the light and the dark aspects of his faith experience and learn from the traditions of others, and Gershon accepts this task. Korea is his Egypt, and in this Asian land Gershon learns a wisdom foreign to his own tradition. Gershon is captivated by the land, the simple stoicism of the people, and the traditions and rituals they observe. He is intrigued by the burial of his Korean servant boy's grandmother. Her grave site is the side of a hill, facing south, that she might hear the birds sing and see the beauty of the sky and sun (173). Gershon senses a connection with these people through their religious observance; his own parents are buried on a hill in another "foreign" land, Israel.

Gershon's capacity to receive Korea and adapt to her ways is evidence of his enlarged ability to embrace what is "other" to him. His visions disclose the discomfort those from his own tradition feel in the strange land. In all his visions, it is only Keter who shares Gershon's ability to adapt. Malkuson and Gershon's aunt and uncle are uncomfortable in Korea, and the vision always contains their desire to leave (210, 149). On the other hand, Keter encourages Gershon's adaptations of Judaism to Korea and affirms the insights Gershon gains from the oriental culture. Prior to Gershon's trip to Korea, Keter explains to his student a suspicion that dark

and light aspects are a part of all of creation. Keter tells Gershon of the choice between science and mysticism: ". . . I decided instead to explore the demonic that leads to life [Kabbalah], rather than the demonic that leads to death [science]. It seemed to me that nothing was more demonically creative in all of Jewish history than Kabbalah" (126). Keter is intrigued by the Zohar's theory of the enmeshment of evil with good. Gershon and Keter share the realization that life is complex and ambiguous.

The Zohar describes more fully the merging of the dark and the light when it states of Abraham's descent into Egypt:

Come and see the secret of the word:

If Abram had not gone down into Egypt

and been refined there first,

he could not have partaken of the Blessed Holy One.

Similarly with his children,

when the Blessed Holy One wanted to make them unique,

a perfect people,

and to draw them near to Him:

If they had not gone down to Egypt

and been refined there first,

they would not have become His special ones. (Zohar 64)

This passage reads like a kind of *felix culpa*; Abraham's descent is a "fortunate fall" which results in the attainment of a new level of holiness. This good fortune is

universal; Abraham's journey is transferable: each of his children must complete the circular journey of their own descent into the abyss and then return to the Promised Land in order to be whole. It is during his time in Egypt that Abraham confronts the abyss and returns a wiser, more righteous man. Likewise, while in the Orient Gershon challenges the dark side of his faith, its teaching of exclusivity, and engages an overt confrontation with ambiguity and uncertainty. Gershon embraces this reality and while travelling with Arthur in Japan reveals what has become axiomatic for him: "I can live with ambiguity, I think, better than I can with certainty" (309). Gershon's utterance discloses his preparedness for their joint encounter at the Hiroshima memorial. Arthur, on the other hand, is never really prepared.

Arthur's experience in the Orient is very different from Gershon's. He deliberately contrives events in order to become a chaplain in the Far East, because he is obsessed with the need to see the damage Japan sustained in the Second World War. His Japan fixation is revealed in his first conversation with Gershon, when he reaches Korea. Upon Arthur's arrival, he badgers Gershon, who has been stationed in Korea for over a year, for information on how to get leave from chaplaincy duties in order to travel to Tokyo. His obsession is driven by a double-edged guilt: he did not want to be the only seminary student not to do chaplain duty and he must see for himself the damage done to Hiroshima by the bomb (222). The reason he is in Korea to be a chaplain is lost to Arthur; he is compelled by his own need to absorb the pain inflicted on the world by the creators of the Manhattan Project. Arthur is ineffective

in assisting the soldiers with their emotional, spiritual, and physical wounds, because he is so consumed by his own.

When Arthur reappears in Gershon's life after a long absence, he is a changed man. Whereas Gershon's time in Korea has enriched him, so much so that he tells his friend, "I've never felt better in my life" (219), Arthur, once the golden boy, "a suave and handsome Harvard graduate," is stooped and aged (16). His vibrancy, charm, and athletic build--attributes which set him apart from Gershon at seminary--have visibly deteriorated. The difference between Arthur and Gershon, which during their seminary years was the difference between the handsome and the plain, is reversed in Korea. Arthur is constantly driven to re-live a past that ravages him. He tells Gershon:

Our God [is] not kind to His humble servant. I seem to gravitate toward certain dark holes on the planet, and sometimes with nearly the speed of light. It wasn't enough that I grew up near there while they made the fucking bomb--if you'll pardon the expression; I had to be stationed there too. What do you call that? Irony? God's gambit with His frail servant?" (220)

Arthur is a prisoner of his own construction of his father and his God. He has not learned the skills he needs to recover from the abandonment and rejection he senses. His anger is internalized and spent on ineffective rage and self-contempt. His unwillingness to find ways to decode his pain and seek its resolution is disclosed, in part, in his lack of interest in Kabbalah, which he "never liked" (308). Arthur's

consistent response to Kabbalah is that it should be used to conjure a miracle; he does not comprehend an affinity to its themes (32, 47, 64, 119).

Arthur's life is depleted by futile acts: he sends angry postcards to his friends and parents (67, 345), starts a riot among the starving when he angrily gives beggars money (316), nearly kills himself by eating Korean food in order to get involved with Korean political dissidents (254), and drinks too much, which costs him his engagement to Karen (240). Arthur's dismal sense of identity, that he is the offspring of killers (269), leaves him feeling intense self-hate, since each of his seemingly "humanitarian" acts is essentially self-destructive. Arthur is not able to give to the needy from a place of health; his work is not predicated upon *rikkun*, the redemptive acts which restore balance to the world, but on desperate acts of confusion motivated by inner blindness. He wastes his energy on self-defeating and non-effective deeds because he views the world through the light of the bomb, the death light, and everything he touches turns dark. He senses he reminds people of "their worst nightmares" (272).

Arthur will not receive new information about life. This, in part, keeps him trapped in a world view illumined by a kind of Miltonic "darkness visible," the non-light of the bomb. His life is hellish; he is withdrawn, non-interactive, and alienated. When Gershon, full of curiosity and authentic interest in the new and the unknown, insists they travel to Hong Kong prior to going to Japan, Arthur resists. He does not care to know what Hong Kong holds or what he might learn from there. Conversely, Arthur is driven by the need to return to Japan repeatedly. His cyclic

journeys to Japan are an apt metaphor for his interior journey, an endless downward spiral. In his ineffectual life, Arthur is endlessly repeating the Kabbalah pattern of the fallen Adam.

The pattern in the Zohar's pericope on "The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" concerning Adam is this:

So did Adam move back and forth from one hue to another, from evil to good, from agitation to rest, from judgment to mercy, from life to death: never consistent in any one thing, because of the effect of that place, which is thus known as "the flaming sword which turned every way," from this direction to that, from good to evil, from mercy to judgment, from peace to war. (Understanding 144)

Blumenthal suggests that this passage discloses Adam's propensity to concentrate on "changing *Malkhut*" instead of "unchanging *Tiferet*" (144). *Malkhut*, the last of the *sefirot*, contains the elements of "severity, war, evil, and death" (144). Adam's meditation upon this aspect of God, to the exclusion of *Tiferet* (the unity of God), was his sin: "He chose the wrong side of God; he allowed a split in the divine" (144).

Blumenthal explains:

. . . meditating on *Malkhut* alone became the sin *par excellence* in the Zohar, for to be content with puzzling over the vagaries of God's providence is to be distracted by only one aspect of His being. To continually confront the question of the Holocaust as a problem in theodicy . . . is to recommit Adam's sin, that is, to allow a split in the

divine. "Sin" . . . is becoming preoccupied with one aspect of God. "Idolatry" is worshipping . . . only one aspect of the totality that is God. And, conversely, "redemption" . . . is "unifying" all God's aspects. "Worship" is a meditative fusing of divine diversity into divine simplicity. (145)

Arthur re-enfleshes Adam; Arthur's sin is Adam's sin. Arthur is preoccupied with meditating upon "the vagaries of God's providence" to the exclusion of the light side of God, the "unity" of God and God's grace. As a result, Arthur is lost in the endless and deeply victimizing place of reacting to God. Arthur is not really proactive; he simply lashes out against a world, parents, and a God who all seem intent upon destruction. There is no peace in Arthur's life, for he is caught in the tendency to privilege judgment over mercy. Arthur is consumed by the existence of the bomb and the destruction it inflicted upon Hiroshima, and his visions consist of an endless display of desolation. Having chosen, like a medieval warrior, to split God, Arthur is unable to see beyond chaos and pain to God's merciful qualities.

Arthur's and Gershon's tendencies are clearly disclosed in their response to the Japan trip they take together and the culmination of the journey in Hiroshima. Arthur's response to the memorial to those destroyed by the bomb reveals his bitterness, sense of futility, and pain:

I'm telling you how I feel, Gershon. How I *feel*. I know about all the thinking. God, isn't there something we can say? You know, I think I hate this city. I think I really hate it. It cries out too much. Look at

it. Bare and raw. I can smell the death. Look at that monument. It's vulvar, and it reminds you of the real possibility of an end to our species. You want a neater contradiction than that? . . . You know what my soul tells me about this city? It tells me that my father helped kill nearly one hundred thousand people. (348, original emphasis)

Arthur cannot see beyond the memorial: "It's a weight, a sore. It doesn't lighten, it doesn't heal" (350).

Gershon's experience with the memorial is different from Arthur's. Gershon, who has developed a balanced sense of the world's pain and joy, can experience joy. He does perceive grace, and he has found a way to hold both realities together in tension; he possesses the mystic's capability to perceive God as "unity." His resolution with respect to this tension is fought out in the mystical domain of the vision. While travelling with Arthur, Gershon is approached by the visitor from the abyss, the "Other Side," a sibilant voice that comes to him in the darkness and brings with it the view of darkness. The voice speaks its reality of chaos, meaninglessness, and pain, and challenges Gershon's fragile sense of unity, meaning, and joy. It speaks specifically of Arthur's anguish and confronts Gershon's inability to end his wounded friend's pain. Initially, Gershon is silent and frightened of his "night visitor" and wishes to flee its presence in order to silence its voice. In focusing upon Arthur's fears, the Voice speaks of an irresolvable problem: evil may be all there really is. Gershon, on the other hand, finds the courage to be still, to descend, and to

listen to the dark Voice and through listening to find his way out of the abyss. His journey to rehabilitation and psychic/religious health proceeds in two steps.

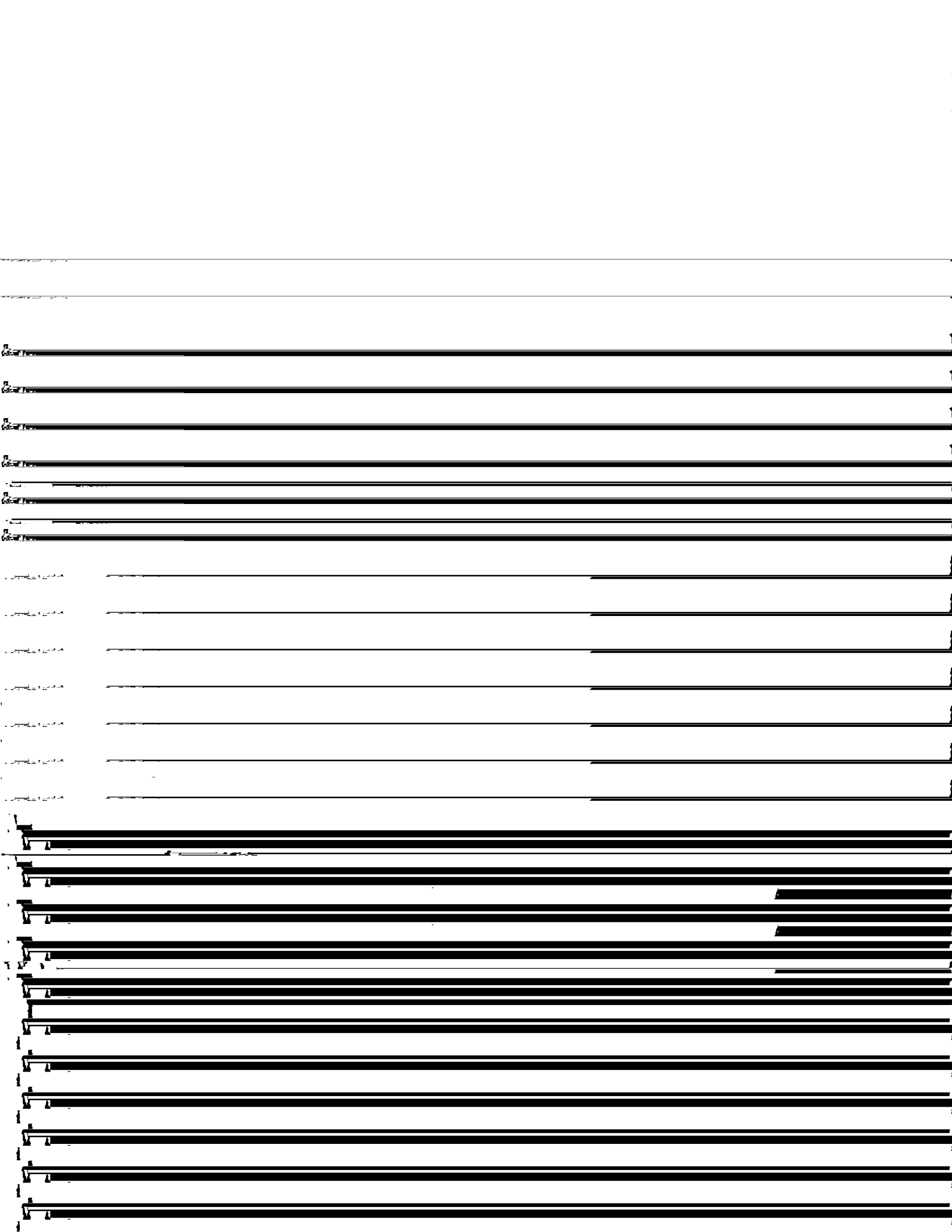
The first step occurs the morning after the initial memorial visit. Gershon awakens to find himself alone in the hotel room. Instinctively he knows that Arthur has returned to the memorial, and Gershon finds his friend in front of the statue, dressed in ritual garments, praying from the Book of Psalms. The words Arthur prays are about God's anger and abandonment of His people and their eternal need for God's protection from "the terror by night" (352). Arthur then recites the *Kaddish*. Donin, in To Be A Jew, writes:

The Kaddish is not technically a prayer for the dead. There *are* special prayers for the dead . . . but the Kaddish is not one of them. It makes no reference to the dead or to mourning. It is a prayer in praise of God. It is a declaration of deep faith in the exalted greatness of the Almighty and a petition for ultimate redemption and salvation. (305, original emphasis)

Arthur's offering of the *Kaddish*, alone and at the monument, would be another ineffectual act, except for Gershon's presence: Gershon provides the necessary response to the prayer, for "Without a listener's response the Kaddish was meaningless; the response was the soul of the Kaddish, its living center" (352). The *Kaddish* requires community; it requires an I-Thou relationship of reciprocity. Together, Gershon and Arthur publicly affirm and sanctify the name of God in a foreign land and before a monument created to memorialize a terrible destruction. As

they pray, they are joined by a Japanese couple, who pray with them in agreement with the supplication, "May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life for us and for all Israel; and say ye, Amen" (353). The four of them together become a kind of global, covenant community, petitioning the Divine for peace. As Gershon prays he affirms life through this liturgy of hope and faith, in response to the seemingly unanswerable questions from the dark side. Despair is not the only reality. Gershon's first response to the abyss is the liturgy of the faithful, in the community of the just, and the public affirmation of the goodness of God.

Gershon's second step out of his descent occurs in New York, once he returns from Korea. Arthur died in a plane accident while trying to return to Japan (363). Although Arthur gained some sense that perhaps there was more to life than despair, as revealed in the letter he sends his parents, he was still uncertain. Arthur sensed, largely as a result of his experiences with Gershon, that life was about ambiguity; he wrote to his parents: "[life is a] grayish sea . . . and we must learn to navigate in it or be drowned" (378). But Arthur did not see any balance to the pain. He literally drowned in this place of unresolved angst, and his body was discovered, four days after the crash, in the Han River (367). Gershon is deeply affected by Arthur's death, which throws him into a downward spiral: "The anger and numbness had slowly turned into an ache, a poignancy, a heavy and persistent sense of the melancholy capriciousness of all existence" (372). Unable to pray, Gershon feels defenceless against the voice from the dark side, and when he returns to America, his



conception of God. The Zohar, responding to a profound human need, resurrects myth and transforms the Torah into a mythical text. (24)

Potok, in The Book of Lights, works against the suppression of the mystical in Judaism in the creation of this novel. As Gershon receives the subjugated and silenced tradition the "core of things" is indeed challenged and transformed (263). In his respect for the traditions of Kabbalah and Talmud Gershon unites both Keter and Malkuson and as a result achieves balance and unity. It is as the *sefirot* Keter and *Malkhut*, a kind of beginning and end, interact, that God is known most fully (Blumenthal 115). Gershon achieves what Keats identifies as negative capability, the capacity to be in uncertainty. He balances the many voices he hears, the call of tradition, of Talmud, of Kabbalah, of his own emotional wounds, of the pain of others, of the dark side of doubt and chaos, and of the seemingly withdrawn God. From this place Gershon is empowered to do the good work of *tikkun*, to help separate the sparks from the shells, and to return good from evil. He is enabled to connect in I-Thou relationships with those around him, irrespective of their race or religion. In short, Gershon has learned to perceive mercy in judgment and to offer grace to many and to himself as well. Consequently, it is fitting that the closing scene in the novel is of Gershon waiting patiently for his teacher, Jacob Keter, in the beautiful, sunlight garden of Keter's Jerusalem home. Gershon, the healed Adam, is back in the garden, in the promised land, in the best place to continue his journey.

Chapter 6: Beginning Again, with Davita

Any image that does not embrace male and female
is not a true image . . .

The Blessed Holy One does not place His abode
in any place where male and female are not
found together.

Blessings are found only in a place where male
and female are found, as it is written:

"He blessed them and called their name Adam
on the day they were created."

It is not written:

"He blessed him and called his name Adam."

A human being is only called Adam
when male and female are as one.

Zohar

To understand is to invent.

Jean Piaget

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. 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. Davita's faith experience is born out of a self-nurtured and self-attended desire to respect her own spirituality; yet her investigation of Judaism becomes the reader's investigation. 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 journey is both Davita's and the reader's.

Perhaps to demonstrate Potok's own inclusiveness, but also in line with contemporary feminist concern with "margins" and control of the text and canon, Davita is a "reading heroine." Davita does not read to escape her reality, she reads to understand, enter, and recreate her own experience. One of her tasks is to reconcile her need for and enjoyment of fiction with her own way of living out her faith. Initially, Davita explores the world through words. "Story" is one important way in which meaning is communicated. By the conclusion of the novel Davita creates stories, too, moving full circle from entering the text, to entering the world as if it were "readable," to creating an oeuvre for other women (and men).

The writing of fiction holds no real value 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 become 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.

Inclusive theology is not a new idea to Jewish thought; the Zohar passage which prefaces this chapter indicates a millennia-old view of the indissoluble union of man/woman. 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 practise the Zohar teaching: to be a 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, and are cited in a non-fiction parallel to

Davita's Harp, Vanessa L. Ochs' work, Words on Fire: One Woman's Journey into the Sacred, which is a spiritual autobiography. Ochs' text actualizes the fictional Davita's Harp, for in Words on Fire Ochs traces her journey from non-observant, to observant Jew. Davita and Ochs share the struggle to be a woman, an orthodox Jew, and a writer, for Ochs is a writer and professor of English. 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.

Ochs and Potok both have to be seen against the background of contemporary feminist literature. They are part of a new movement underlining the importance of women in Jewish theology, if not tradition. Perhaps Potok and Ochs are answering the concerns that drive so many Jewish women to feminism and other ideologies that interrogate Judaism and in particular the practices that appear so restrictive to women's freedom. Unlike more radical theorists, however, neither Ochs nor Potok finds it necessary to leave the tradition or to claim the tradition justifies restrictiveness. 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. The British version of that devaluation in western

civilization is eloquently described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, and more fully expounded in their subsequent No Man's Land trilogy, which reveals the extent of opposition to woman's writing. Potok, in Davita's Harp, directly confronts this significant point of tension within the Jewish and the American cultures which provides the setting for the text. As a self-proclaimed Jew and as a female writer, Davita is a doubly marginalized character: she is a "disappearing woman" subsumed in the dominant male culture shared by her religious world, as well as a marginal performer in the secular society.

Thus Davita's Harp is that unusual variation of the *künstlerroman* that is a novel about the development of a female artist into maturity. Potok gives us a response to Patricia Meyer Spacks question: "Where is the female equivalent of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man?" (The Female Imagination 200; Spacks wrote this work in 1975, Potok published Davita's Harp in 1985). Traditional ways of interpreting the *künstlerroman*, however, such as those outlined by Maurice Beebe in Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts, are inadequate, for they assume the male pattern of artistic development can be universalized to include women. Linda Huf, providing a perspective workable with Potok, but which she uses elsewhere, in her important work A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature, (1983), writes:

Because the author of Ivory Towers assumes that male experience is universal experience and male art universal art, he is purblind when it

comes to women. He does not notice that artist heroines not only are much less often met with than artist heroes but that they have different traits and troubles than artist heroes. And he does not see that women's artist novels are so unlike men's--and so like each other--that they must be supposed to have their own tradition and development.

(4)

Huf's observation that male paradigms are neither an adequate nor an accurate means to interpret women's experience as it occurs in the *künstlerroman* is a perception that Potok, as evidenced in Davita's Harp, shares. In this novel, Potok indicates his feminist bias: Davita seeks a viable self as a young girl in what she observes and experiences to be an often hostile male world. By the conclusion of the novel, Davita is becoming what Mary Field Belenky, et al, in Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, identify as a specifically female development, the "constructed knower:" Davita is sensitive of her own as well as others' interior lives and seeks the integration of "reason *and* intuition *and* the expertise of others" (Belenky 133, original emphasis).

Belenky delineates more fully the qualities of the constructed knower:

Women constructivists show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity. They abandon completely the either/or thinking so common to the previous positions described. They recognize the inevitability of conflict and stress . . . They no longer want to suppress or deny aspects of the self in order to avoid conflict

or simplify their lives. . . . These women want to embrace all the pieces of the self in some ultimate sense of the whole--daughter, friend, mother, lover, nurturer, thinker, artist, advocate. They want to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men--the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. In women, there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. And they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity. (137)

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 the completion of Davita's Harp. Her process involves the development and integration of various aspects of her self as well as a 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" described above.

Davita is a questioner and this is the first clue to her capacity towards constructivist knowing, "Question posing is at the heart of connected knowing" (Belenky 189). Davita formulates questions as her way of connecting with her world. She seeks to understand. Davita's natural inquisitiveness fits the pattern Huf identifies in heroines: Davita, an intelligent child and a good student, investigates words and their definitions (A Portrait 4). 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. Within the first fifty-four pages of the novel, Davita asks about: "protection," "proletariat," "goy," "Jewish," "strike," "death," "idea," "magic," "Spain," and "war." She senses the importance of words and admits her confusion about all she overhears during her parents' in-house communist gatherings:

There were many meetings in our apartment. Again and again I heard the names Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco. I heard strange words. Republic, militia, rebellion, coup d'état, garrison. And more names. Ethiopia, Germany, Spain, England, France, America. And names with menacing sounds. Anarchist, Falangist, Fascist. And words that frightened me. Murder, bombing, air raid, execution. All the world's peoples and politics seemed to crowd into our apartment at those meetings. (33)

When Davita asks her mother about definitions, the answers naturally enmesh etymologies with politics. Davita questions her, for instance, about the word "protection" and receives the historical, political, and etymological "facts" about the

word; "My mother explained words to me in a special way. She would give me the present meaning of the word and a brief account of its origin. If she did not know its origin she would look it up in the dictionary in the bedroom near my father's desk" (9). Anna asks her, after providing the dictionary definition, where Davita heard this word and why she wants the meaning explained. 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). Anna, however, ignoring the misogynist overtones in the event, instead politicizes the encounter to teach Davita about capitalist corruption: "'[Davita], you see how the exploited working class lives?' she said. 'Look at what happens to their children'" (9). Davita's mother demonstrates one way of knowing words; these lessons are cognitively based, politically enmeshed, and helpful; yet they are also confusing, since Davita's role as a child/woman is not clarified at all by this approach to knowledge.

Davita's experiences with her father and words are more relational than those with her mother. When Davita is encouraged by school friends to avoid certain areas in her district because, "The gang there don't like it if you ain't a goy" (12), she asks her father the meaning of "goy" and if she, in fact, is one:

"What's a goy?" I asked my father that evening. . . . "Am I a goy?"

"No, my love. Your mama is Jewish and so you're Jewish.

Jewish people go according to the mother."

"According to you, am I Jewish?"

"According to me, Davita, all of you is Jewish, all of you is Gentile, all of you is Marxist, all of you--"

"Papa!"

"--is beautiful, and all of you is my special love."

He tickled me and I laughed and hugged him. (13)

Although the terms themselves are still confusing, in the context of learning with her father, Davita experiences relational affirmation. She is validated through the strong emotional connection she shares with her father.

Davita learns that the names/identities of things are important through this instruction she receives from her parents. Because of these lessons, the young girl learns something of the potency of words: there is danger in getting a thing wrong, in naming it the wrong way. This knowledge works to protect Davita. When she is confronted by a street gang, while on her way home from school, Davita is interrogated: Is she Jewish? The child senses the danger in supplying the wrong answer and feels the threat contained in the boys' words. Davita's knowledge comes to her aid; with wit and skill she alludes their query by positing a counter statement, "My father isn't Jewish" (14). The boys are not equipped with the ability to sort through the confusing data of mixed marriage and, therefore, simply, if weakly, tell her to stay out of their territory. On another occasion, Davita again discovers a potency to words. Invited by her teacher to tell the class of her Aunt Sarah's nursing career, Davita embarks on an informative, Marxist based assessment of the situation

in Ethiopia, as well as her aunt's mission to alleviate victim suffering. But Davita's words offend those who do not share her politics, and during recess she is threatened by several of her classmates. Davita learns, through her experience, that her classmates' parents have different politics, and that this confrontation of knowledge with bias and ignorance can be deadly, especially for a girl and for a Jew. "I leaned heavily against the bars, my heart thundering. I had not thought words could be so dangerous. Cold and murderous blue eyes. He had really wanted to hurt me" (38). Davita learns of the power of words: they incite real emotion. However, she also learns of her vulnerability to them: she is terrified by the verbal threats she receives.

At this stage in her journey, though she is still in elementary school, Davita senses words have a power of their own. Through a mythic story her mother tells her, Davita finds a way to alter events with magic (27). She is fascinated by the idea of magic; it seems a good way to find the protection and order she feels she needs to make her world safe from powers she can not yet grasp. Her dreams uncover internalized fears: the chaos of a life of continual eviction and moving (53); the fiery meetings her parents hold in their apartment (29); the violence on the street and the wars overseas (34, 38, 203). Davita's perceptions of hostility and indifference to suffering are validated when her mother tells her of the Baba Yaga, a Russian folktale describing the evil intentions of the witch, Baba Yaga, against the vulnerable children, who flee her in their attempts to return home. The children are saved by magic when objects they carry become the creators of forests, rivers, mountains, and Davita is fascinated. Although she has nightmares in which the Baba Yaga chases her, Davita

is able to protect herself with magic, and she welcomes magic as a means to hold back the evils of her waking reality. Words/stories/magic hold power for Davita, and their use ameliorates her immediate experience.

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. Problems of self and other, inner and outer authority, voice and silence are worked through within each relationship of educator-student. Belenky, discussing the value to women of multiple teaching relationships, writes: "Reliance on authority for a single view of the truth is clearly maladaptive for meeting the requirements of a complex, rapidly changing, pluralistic, egalitarian society and for meeting the requirements of educational institutions, which prepare students for such a world" (43). 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.

In an interesting departure from previous patterns in Potok's books, none of the educator/mentors is a Rabbi or a Yeshiva professor. The absence of the "institution" in Davita's aspect of her learning process is significant. Belenky points to the limits of conventional learning: "In the institutions of higher learning most [women] attended, the subjective voice was largely ignored; feelings and intuitions were banished to the realm of the personal and private. It was the public, rational,

analytical voice that received the institutions' tutelage, respect, and rewards" (124). Davita learns from those she is most intimately connected to, family members, and they bring to her an affirmation of her self, of her own voice. Davita's task is to learn from what these men can teach her, yet not allow their powerful voices to overcome her nascent voice nor to end her journey. Davita deeply connects with these men and takes important steps towards "the kind of maturity [called] connected knowing, an orientation toward understanding and truth that emphasizes not autonomy and independence of judgment but a joining of minds" (Belenky 55).

Michael Chandal's influence upon his daughter is great. He is vibrantly alive, and his presence fills their apartment. Michael is the centre of vitality, humour, and positive, athletic energy (12). His language is exuberant; his signature with his daughter is to be found in his call for hugs, for Davita is to give her father a great "mountain of a hug" (26), a "decent hug . . . [to] last me for a while" (118), an "ocean of a hug" (178), and so on. 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). Angry her father left, and in spite of her concern, Davita will not read his published war articles and objects to the fact that he does not write letters to either her or her mother (130). Davita does not want to read about the War, she is scared of it. She does want to

stay close to her father, but their limited connection--enabled only through the written word--is not honoured by him. When he is sent home from Spain, injured and in need of care, Davita's dread is realized. Her father has not been invulnerable to the pain and violence sweeping Europe, and he returns to America changed.

Davita is unable to understand why her father is driven to go to the troubled, war-torn areas of the world. She understands, in a child's limited way, that his absence is in part motivated by his politics, but she cannot fathom that politics should risk life. Furthermore, she feels that it is not simply his life which is compromised, for Davita is very aware of the price both she and her mother pay during her father's absences. But the puzzle of Michael Chandal's motives in tirelessly reporting the world's injustices and suffering is resolved somewhat when Davita learns of the "Centralia" incident.

The horrifying Centralia event, the brutal death of Wesley Everest at the hands of non-union thugs, is first mentioned by Sarah, Davita's aunt, who wishes aloud that her brother had never gone to the city (156). Later, Davita asks her recovering father what happened to him in Centralia. He gives her a brief, censored account which satisfies her for the moment. Michael concludes the account of the events with this lesson for his daughter: "Davita, listen. There are two kinds of America. That's what I realized that day. And I knew which kind I belonged to. That's why I'm going back to Spain, my love. I don't want racism in my country, and the place to stop it is Spain" (177).

Michael's return to Spain educates Davita and initiates a new response. When her father begins to write home frequently, Davita feels secure and is freed to read his professional writing (181). Her understanding of the horror of the war grows exponentially as she follows the stories in all the leading newspapers (211). When her father is first missing and then reported dead, and the details of his last acts are finally disclosed to her and her mother, Davita is unable to comprehend Michael's heroic act. Instead of pride in her father's selfless courage, Davita experiences anger and abandonment and above all, a sense of the ignorance of moral dedications in her peers and herself: "Why did my parents *care* so much? No one else's parents seemed to care much about the world. . . . most people had jobs and came home at night and played with their children" (208, original emphasis). Lonely and frightened, angry and immature, Davita seeks authorities outside her own experience to explain Michael's action, and, as is most frequent in her education, finds the answers in newspaper articles and books. Sensing the importance of the Centralia event to her father's life, she goes to the library in search of John Dos Passos' work, Nineteen-Nineteen, and reads the record of the Centralia horror.

The words in the novel, the event they memorialize, deeply affect Davita. She reads them carefully, slowly, trying to absorb the meaning they signify. Davita is traumatized by the account and replaces the novel on the library shelf, escaping the adult section for the safety of her home (231). As she bolts down familiar streets through the rain, the usual occurrence of traffic, pedestrians, shops, and schools are a blurred, insubstantial, untrustworthy reality. Fleeing these internal and external

storms, Davita loses control and wets herself: she is simply not able to contain, to hold, the truth she has been given (232). Davita is inconsolable; her mother is unable to comfort her or release Davita from her pain.

Earlier, Michael Chandal had offered Davita a life predicated upon social responsibility. Confronted by the horrors of which even America, the golden land, is possible, and having witnessed the unjust and brutal treatment to which Wesley Everest is subjected, Michael had lost his naivety and simple faith in the American people. The son of the privileged, Michael had grown up in New England wealth gleaned from a logging industry based on a capitalism greedy for profit. Observing Everest's death destroyed Michael's faith in free-enterprise; he became a communist. Michael became an ardent Marxist, protesting and fighting government procedure whenever it oppressed the weak. Like a secularized version of his biblical namesake, the angel Michael who in Jewish tradition is God's champion, and whose name means "Who is like God?" (see Daniel 10: 13, 21), Michael became the guardian angel for the chosen people, not religious Jews, but the oppressed proletariat.

Michael did not respect or appreciate religion. What he offered Davita was genuine affection, with a politics which precluded religious faith. He held out an ardent Marxist millennial vision; Michael hoped for the advent of a new world order in which atrocity and injustice can not occur, and committed his energy and talent to the realization of that goal. He reported the data, he recorded the world's pain, he disclosed the horror of the world's political evils, and he gave up his life trying to

save a nun. But he could not, in his commitment to historical materialism, accept the possibility of divine intervention:

"historical materialism" designate[s] that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another. (Friedrich Engels, in Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy 53-54).

In his great confidence and hope in the potency of the proletariat to recreate a supremely human world order, Michael Chandal is a foil for Jakob Daw's Kafkaesque despair. Davita's adopted uncle is European and brings to her American home the weariness and loss of hope in Europe, in contrast with America, which represents the new "Promised Land." Whereas Michael was young, vibrant, athletic, and potent, Jakob is older, weak, fragile, and ill. Jakob Daw is a type of Kafka, who also was born in Eastern Europe and educated in Vienna, fought in the First World War, and suffered from a respiratory illness. Jakob's signature cough parallels Kafka's severe illnesses. Both the fictional and historical characters spent time in sanitoriums, both died early, and both had a number of their stories edited by women friends and published after their deaths.

Kafka was a student of the mystics and of Kabbalah and his writings are often autobiographical. His area of interest lies in the conflict between people and their

environment, and Kafka dramatizes, symbolically, the implacable futility of life. He was concerned with moral and spiritual problems: how to find one's authentic place and vocation and how to act congruently with these realizations. These are the dilemmas Kafka takes up in his fiction, and they are echoed in the stories Jakob Daw creates. Potok's Jakob Daw crafts tales for Davita that are replete with images and details of despair; his ubiquitous black bird flies endlessly over the earth, seeking a place of rest and healing, or searching for the source of the music which disguises life's horror. Whereas Davita's mother, who teaches her daughter the cognitive aspect of a word's meaning, and her father, who brings to Davita the relational importance of words, Jacob Daw instructs Davita in metaphor. His lessons with words are embodied in story. Initially, Daw's stories are non-culminative; the plots are without resolution, and the mood of despair is without relief. The first story he fashions for Davita introduces the blackbird and its eternal journeys. The bird perceives that civilization is a sustained symphony of human misery and that, although he likes the land in which he lives and its music, he does not like the people because they are cruel and often at war. Then the bird has an idea:

It occurred to him that in some way it might be the music that was the cause of the cruelties he saw. People hurt one another, killed one another, made war with one another--and instead of feeling sorrow and regret, went ahead and were soothed by the music. Perhaps if the music came to a stop; perhaps if there was no music to soothe a person who did someone harm--perhaps then the harm itself might

come to be felt as intolerable and be brought to an end. And so the bird set out to discover the source of the music. He began to fly back and forth across the land, back and forth, and back and forth. (49)

The bird begins his journey to find the source of the world's delusion, the music, and to put a stop to it so that the people might be confronted with their reality. Davita asks the obvious question: does the bird find the music? For Daw, the journey is not complete, nor is the story. Davita is dissatisfied; she wants closure, certainty, and success. She wants the bird to find the source of the deceptive music and to bring about an end to suffering and war. She is frustrated that her Uncle Jakob provides no answers.

Jakob Daw is captivated by Davita, her perceptions, and her questions, and he treats her seriously and respectfully: Daw listens to Davita and attends to her needs and is struck by her innocence and her fundamentally hopeful way of regarding life. When she is a small child, he participates in her "story" as she builds sand castles to protect her family and helps her at the beach. Davita is convinced that the construction of the castle, as well as a few carefully spoken magical words, will protect her family from the wars raging in Europe, just as royalty was looked upon as a magical shield against chaos (see Kafka's "The Castle" for the foiled royalty). Davita feels connected to Europe by virtue of the waves which touch both the shoreline of their summer cottage and the shoreline of the distant continent. Thus, when a storm ruins her fortress, she determinedly ~~begins~~ to build another:

". . . It will take you a long time to rebuild this castle, Ilana Davita."

"It's our protection against the Fascists on the other side of the ocean, Uncle Jakob. I have to rebuild it."

He said nothing. I felt his hooded eyes looking at me.

"It's our magic protection. We'll live in it and never move from it. That's why I can't let it be wrecked."

. . . Jakob Daw coughed and cleared his throat. Then I heard him ask in his soft and raspy voice, "Ilana Davita, may I help you?"

"Yes," I said.

. . . Jakob Daw and I worked together rebuilding my castle. (72)

Jakob encourages Davita in castle building: "I admire your castle very much. It is a fine and formidable castle" (109). The young girl's idealism and hope are not denigrated by Jakob, they are affirmed. In short, Daw believes in her ability to create and confirms/affirms her as a "knower" of her environment: Daw enables Davita.

Jakob Daw further expresses his love for Davita when he leaves her with an important symbol: she is to care for their shared, imaginary bird. Prior to his deportation from America, Daw offers Davita another story. He tells her he now knows where the tired, worn little bird has come to rest. The quest to find and end the delusive music has failed, and now the bird simply seeks refuge. The bird finds a little girl with a door harp, which the creature senses to be the source of good music: "It was the kind of music the bird thought he could listen to forever: sweet but not false, a comfort but not a deceiving caress; a music of innocence" (267). The bird

makes a nest in the child's door harp, content to remain there forever. In this way Daw passes on to Davita the task of caring for the creature who knows the world is ill and is exhausted by the work of trying to heal its disease. As Davita accepts this task, she ties herself to Daw, participates in his story, and accepts his vision as valid. On the other hand, Daw's vision of despair is balanced, in part, by Davita and the love and community she offers him. She is given the task of keeping the bird; Jakob returns to Europe and dies.

The third male mentor who offers Davita his way of viewing the world is Ezra Dinn, who becomes her step-father. Michael Chandal's exuberance is contrasted to Jakob Daw's weariness, and the courtly courtesy of the observant Dinn contrasts with both. The American-born child of Jewish immigrants, Ezra is a combination of skilful secular lawyer and Talmud scholar; he is an important member of the synagogue and the legal community and maintains a balance between Michael's over-reactive political response and Jakob's existential despair. As a result, Ezra is able to fight the America government when he feels it fails its citizens and to work to see the immigrants fleeing Nazi Germany can be admitted into America. Ezra's vision of the United States is neither naive nor cynical.

Like his biblical namesake, Ezra is a type of scribe. This ancient designation for the position of political advisor, lawgiver, and policy maker for the king approximates Dinn's profession in modern America. More important than this secular work, the ancient Ezra was also a key figure in the Jewish Restoration. Commissioned by the Persian government, Ezra returned to the Promised Land in

order to rebuild the Holy City and the Temple and to recreate the Jewish community (see Ezra 7). Ezra received this mandate because of his faithfulness to the Persian king as well as his loyalty to God: "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the LORD so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Potok's Ezra Dinn shares a similar mandate. His assignment is to enable the establishment of the Jewish community in New York and to provide safe passage to America for those caught in European violence. With the destruction of the European community, it is largely left to the American and Israeli Jews to keep their culture and religion alive. Ezra participates in this necessary task. Like the ancient scribe, who re-acquainted his people with the Law and ceremony (Ezra 9; Nehemiah 8), Ezra Dinn encourages the members of his synagogue in their faithful observance, acquires immigration permits for the European disenfranchised, and brings Channah Chandal, Davita's mother, who is in political and religious exile from the Jewish community, back into the group. Ezra Dinn is a restorer.

Davita is aware of Ezra's influence upon her family from the outset. He is her mother's first cousin; he is the provider of the one apartment they live in (from which they never move), he is the protector of her Uncle Jakob, and the lay-leader of the synagogue she attends. Ezra impresses Davita as an "urbane and courteous gentleman:" he is "tall and finely tailored," "[speaks] in a kindly way," and is "polished and courtly" (104, 138). Davita finds these qualities attractive. When Ezra makes a point of speaking with her after synagogue, he is gentle, attending, warm, perceptive, and inclusive. The other boys and men at the synagogue stare at and are

rude to Davita, while Dinn answers her many questions and includes her in the teaching and ritual. Unlike Dinn, Davita's parents were passionate about their politics and antagonistic towards religion; as Davita's mother told her, "We'll build the new world in our own way. The old way is false" (105) and, "Religion is a dangerous fraud, Ilana, and an illusion. It prevents people from seeing the truth and expressing their discontent, and sometimes it inflames the heart so that people follow horrible ideas like fascism" (315, 16). On the other hand, Dinn extends to Davita a religion that is moderate, stable, and secure, and he offers the religious/spiritual signifiers that Anna, Michael, and Jakob have not given their daughter.

Davita is at ease with her mother's marriage to Ezra Dinn. She senses that he redeems her home and family from a prevalent chaos whose reign has come to an end. Davita links her awareness of new security and peace to Ezra and perceives him to be a kind of amalgam of the best of Jacob and her father:

He seemed a happy and relaxed man. . . . He was proud of his family, solicitous and soft-spoken, with a courtliness of manner that resembled somewhat the old-world habits of Jakob Daw . . . But when it came to ritual practice, his strictness with the Commandments brought an exactness to my life that was quite new. He insisted on the careful observance of the law . . . Sometimes he sat relaxed in an easy chair, one of his legs draped over an arm, and I saw in his sprawled form a ghostly reminder of my father. (366)

Davita carefully places her recollection of Dinn's scrupulous religious observance between the very warm and positive echoes of two men she loves dearly: Jacob Daw and Michael Chandal. The prose indicates her acceptance of the newness Dinn brings with him. It is "other," but at the same time encompassed by or embraced within the familiar and the loved.

Dinn also adds to Davita's life a strong appreciation for books. When he marries her mother, he moves a large legal and biblical library into the house, for Dinn is a scholar--he turns to outside authorities on a regular basis to consult and to learn. Like Davita's father, Dinn reads journals and newspapers widely, but unlike Michael, Dinn has available an enormous resource in his personal library. This is new to Davita. Both Michael and Jacob were writers (Michael did have a library of political writings), and Davita is familiar with expressing views on paper. But it is Ezra Dinn who offers Davita, implicitly, the value of consulting extensive, external authority. His library symbolizes the worth of alternate views and experts and the importance of considering their ideas. The one absence in Dinn's collection is fiction. Nevertheless, although "He did not read the Sunday comics or stories or novels but was never disdainful toward those who did" (367).

In significant ways, Ezra is more accepting than Michael or Jacob. Congruent with Davita's age is her tendency to be rigid and unyielding. When angry or frightened, Davita typically resorts to name-calling. When Ezra is excluded from a government contract Davita identifies the official as a "fascist." Dinn confronts her narrow view, her prejudice: "'Please don't use that word like that,' my father said,

his voice rising. 'Not everyone who disagrees with you is a Fascist'" (407). In this encounter, Dinn offers Davita political moderation in a way that is accessible to her, because he insists that words be defined and used carefully. Davita listens; she learns tolerance from Ezra's influence, which gives her a new way to evaluate criticism and opposition.

Dinn's capacity to "listen seriously to all sides of a conversation" (366) allows him to depart from the conventional understanding of the role of women in the Jewish faith and to understand Davita's and her mother's need to pray the *Kaddish*. Dinn's openness to outside "authority" includes not just the academic stuff of books, but also the experiences of others. He is very observant and affirmative of his new family. Little gestures disclose his connection to them: flowers brought home each Sabbath (367); warm approval extended to David and Davita as they study (366); loyalty to Davita during her conflict with the yeshiva (425); the language of connection--"He used those words often. My family. He seemed to like the sound of it and said it with pride" (361). Ezra Dinn attends to those he lives with, and their feelings are factored into his theological stance. When Davita and her mother pray the *Kaddish* for Michael and Jakob, Dinn has the imagination to be sensitive to their interior lives; he apprehends their need to grieve loss, and to affirm faith. *Kaddish* is traditionally only said by men, Davita is told, "Girls don't recite Kaddish" and then later, "A woman ~~can't~~ *have* to pray, she doesn't *have* to come to schul" (236, 247, original emphasis). The exclusionary response is not adopted by Dinn, who is not

embarrassed to be associated with women who use this part of Jewish ritual as a way of bringing meaning to their pain.

Michael Chandal and Jacob Daw die in Europe: Michael in Spain, attempting to save a religious woman, and Jacob in France, unable to save himself, unable to obtain the visa that would permit him to leave the physical and political environment that leads to his death. Only Ezra Dinn survives. Is Potok suggesting something about world views and their life-giving/saving or destroying capacities? Daw's old-world despair and Chandal's political utopia could not outlive modern European reality; Dinn's integrity, social concern, and confidence in a world predicated upon hope remains. Dinn's religious observance is not static, but dynamic. He is scrupulous to observe tradition and ritual, but also apprehends the grace behind the teaching. He offers Davita, through the example of his own life, a way of thinking about and living in the world motivated by external touchstones, private reflection, and respect for others. Dinn reflects the value of the emotional and spiritual self, the inner and outer voice. Davita learns from all the men in her life, but more closely approximates the ways of knowing enacted for her by her step-father. Because of his example, Davita attempts to define her experience by integration. Belenky identifies this approach as "constructed" knowing: "to *integrate* knowledge . . . felt intuitively [to be] personally important with knowledge . . . learned from others . . . weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing" (Belenky 134, original emphasis).

Davita's capacity to receive and know hopefully, holistically, and vibrantly, is revealed in the symbol she creates from the door harp. This imaginative creation discloses her ability to generate important symbols for herself out of her own experience and to facilitate her own unique and authentic voice.²⁰ As a small child, Davita had been attracted to the musical harp that had hung on the front doors of the many apartments which the Chandal family lived in. This decoration became a constant for the girl; among the upheaval, chaos, and strong emotion with which her home is filled, the sweet, tentative music of the harp was a fragile melody providing Davita with a sense of continuity. Through the disharmony of dislocation and contending emotion, the door harp's music provided Davita with comfort and was the container of her greatest hopes and fears and the announcer of her emotions. When her father went missing and died, Davita, absorbed in grief, had her mother tape the small, wooden balls away from the strings; the time for music had come temporarily to a close (218).

Throughout her thirteen years, Davita has been attracted to music. She listened with interest to the political songs her parents and their friends sing and was intrigued by folk songs (10). But Davita was most captivated by the *zemiros* (special Sabbath melodies) sung by her religious neighbours (105). Donin writes:

It is customary to brighten the Sabbath dinner by the singing of *zmirot* between the courses of the meal. The *zmirot* are poems, most of them written during the Middle Ages, that rhapsodize the Sabbath rest and

²⁰ See Belenky, 134.

the Sabbath glory. Numerous melodies for each of these songs are extant and they lend an added dimension of cheer to the Sabbath meal. One need not limit himself to these "official" zmirot, but may choose from among many songs and melodies which have some religious or spiritual theme. (To Be a Jew, 80, original emphasis)

Davita preferred the sounds of the Sabbath melodies to the tone of her parents' political discussion:

We were eating supper in the kitchen of a Friday night . . . I heard through the walls and floor of the house the faint sounds of singing from the apartment below. The Helfmans were singing their zemiros together. . . .

"Ilana," my mother said. "What on earth are you doing? You'll tip the chair."

I was leaning back to be closer to the wall and the music. I brought the chair forward. The music was now barely audible. . . .

"Ilana, please sit straight," my mother said. "What's the matter with you tonight?" . . .

"I was listening to the music, Mama."

"What music?"

"From the Helfmans downstairs."

The three of them looked at me. (167-68)

On the other hand, Davita's parents were oblivious to the music around them, especially the religious music of their observant neighbours. Michael and Anna were at best indifferent and, at worst, suspicious of things spiritual; they were consumed with politics, with the war in Spain. Their attention to international justice created a kind of injustice in their own home; Davita was often neglected because of her parents' political work. Davita's feelings of alienation were, in part, what attracted her to the *zemiros* ritual. She was fascinated by the strange Yiddish words and melodies ascending from the apartment below. Although Davita was unable to translate the songs into English, the atmosphere created by the ritual was not lost on her--she drew close to the music. Davita's attraction to the music, which begins with the door harp, and extends to the *zemiros*, was one of the first lures attracting her to synagogue.

For Davita, the door harp becomes an important symbol, linking the secular/religious, outer/inner worlds of her experience. The instrument also recalls for us the Aeolian Harp, the Romantics' symbol of imaginative inspiration: the classical harp took its name from Aeolus, the Greek god of the winds. According to the tradition, the inspirational winds would blow upon the simple wooden harp and create the music of the gods. The harp was a recurrent Romantic image for the mind in poetic inspiration or in perception, responding to an intellectual/spiritual breeze. For the Romantics the rising wind, which is linked to the cycle of the seasons, is presented as the outer correspondent to an inner change from apathy to spiritual vitality (see Wordsworth's "The Prelude" or Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" or

"The Eolian Harp"). M. H. Abraham, in "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," writes: "The wind-harp has become a persistent Romantic analogue of the poetic mind, the figurative mediator between outer motion and inner emotion" (English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism 38).

Potok's use of the harp *leitmotif* also recalls the biblical correspondence between breeze and inspiration, wind and spirit. In Hebrew, (as in the Latin "*anima*," and the Greek "*pneuma*") the word for wind and spirit is the same, "*ruach*." Potok exploits this double meaning: wind is creative, life-giving, and evidence of the presence of God in Davita's Harp. As the harp responds to the Spirit/breeze, beautiful reviving and consoling music occurs. As Davita responds to the Spirit/breeze her creative self is nurtured. In fact, in these moments Davita becomes a female "David," the famous poet/king of the Hebrew tradition whose name she carries. The ancient Hebrew used his skill with the harp as an important access to his spiritual and imaginative self. David wrote numerous Psalms for ritual observance and also soothed the angry Saul by inspiring hope and subduing despair:

Now the spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD began to terrify him. Saul's courtiers said to him, "An evil spirit of God is terrifying you. Let our lord give the order [and] the courtiers in attendance on you will look for someone who is skilled at playing the lyre; whenever the evil spirit of God comes over you, he will play it and you will feel better." . . . One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is

skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him."

Whereupon Saul sent messengers to Jesse to say, "Send me your son David . . ." Whenever the [evil] spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it; Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him. (1 Samuel 16:14-23)

Davita's capacity to become a type of David in her modern Jewish-American world is hinted at through the allusions in Davita's Harp with the biblical account.

The link between the King David, his lyre, and Davita's door harp is underscored, implicitly, in a story Ezra Dinn tells Davita:

"Well, I see you enjoy singing, Ilana. You know, there's an interesting story told about King David and his harp. . . . King David was a great musician. When he slept his harp hung from the wall over his bed. The winds are strong in Jerusalem. Each night the wind would blow through the strings of the harp and the harp would begin to sing. King David would wake and listen awhile to the music of his harp, and then spend the rest of the night studying Torah so he could be a strong and wise king. An interesting story." (194)

The correspondence between wind and harp, music and Torah opens up the text of Potok's novel. Because of her love of music, Davita is connected to the ancient king by the observant Ezra Dinn.

Davita's harp extends to signify an important Jewish icon: it is a kind of secularized *mezuzah*. The religious function of the *mezuzah* is to remind those entering a building or home of the presence of God and of His commandments. The command to place the *mezuzah* at each entrance is found in Deuteronomy, "And these words which I command you this day . . . you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (6:9). The container that is fixed to the doorposts by observant Jews holds a small scroll of parchment inscribed with a biblical exhortation to recall God, to love God, and to obey His commands. To place the *mezuzah* on one's doorpost is a sign of participation in covenant; the ritual is about loving God and respecting the path of righteousness. Each time someone enters the home where a *mezuzah* is located, one is directed to reflect upon their spiritual self and God. The icon connects the observer with the past and present covenantal community.

Initially, Davita permits no connection between her door harp and the Jewish symbol. When asked by David Dinn what the strange carving is on the door of her sand castle, Davita responds that it is a door harp and explains its function:

"It plays music when you open and close the door. It gives you a good feeling."

"Do castles have door harps?"

"I don't know. My castle does. We have one in our house. It belongs to my father."

"Is it like a *mezuzah*?"

"What's that?"

"It's something we put on the side of a doorpost. It reminds us of God."

"A door harp has nothing to do with God. It just plays nice music. We don't believe in God." (84)

With her learned ethic that precludes religion, Davita does not at first perceive the link between her harp and the Jewish symbol. Later, however, she is offered an opportunity to reconsider the connections. Davita has begun to attend synagogue without her parents and is deeply interested in and drawn to Jewish ritual. She is invited to participate in her neighbour's Sabbath meal. In their home Davita sees the small containers and asks Ruthie, her friend, to explain. Davita learns the *mezuzah* reminds you "that God [is] in your house" (186).

Then Davita begins to infuse the harp with the same protective and positive associations as the *mezuzah*. Davita learned from her parents that the harp was a kind of "good luck charm" (131), and her father had the instrument moved from the front door to his bedroom wall while he was recovering from a war wound, as if it was a healing amulet (155). When recovered, Michael told Davita the harp was "magic" (166). However, as Davita became more involved with the synagogue, the harp was increasingly linked with positive religious associations. Harp notes blend with Sabbath greetings and later combine with David's Talmudic chanting, infusing Davita's experience with remembrances of things spiritual (187, 388). Like the *mezuzah's* links to past covenant community, so Davita's harp contains the emotional content of family relationships: it was a gift from her uncle to her father; it is a

connection between Davita and her dead father and later, with her Uncle Jacob (164, 266, 358). Harp and *mezuzah* point to respect for and contemplation of things spiritual; both create ties between past and present community.

The harp symbol takes on salvific meaning through the operations of Davita's imagination. As a young child, Davita had been instructed by her benevolent Aunt Sarah on the power of the imagination, and was invited to participate in the oral tradition of American folktale while her aunt recounted to her the stories of Pilgrims and Natives. Then Davita learned of the heroic pioneering women who settled the west and of the hardships and loneliness they endured. Sarah told her niece: "The men would go off hunting and trading and be gone for weeks. It's terrible to be alone, terrible. What do you think the women did in all that lonely time? Are you still awake, Davita? Are you listening? They used their imagination. That's right, their imagination" (18, 19). Sarah offered her niece a code, a way to deconstruct women's experience and reveal their methods of survival. The technique was listened to by Davita, and later in her life during her times of immense loss and aloneness it would come to her aid.

Together, Davita's imagination and the door harp transform her experiences. Like the Romantic poets or the Hebrew prophets, Davita waits for the corresponding breeze to enliven and bring her peace; announced by the gentle vibrations from the door harp, the breeze transforms spiritual stupor and wasteland into a desert which blossoms like a rose. Davita finds hope and restoration in the door harp which contains her life, reminds her of her past, and connects her to God. The regenerative

power of the symbol is disclosed in two episodes of intense trauma. In the first, Davita has a nervous breakdown, and, in the second, she is unjustly denied a prize she has earned.

When Davita's father returned to the war in Spain and then died, Davita discovered new depths of old pains and abandonment. Her process in grief pressed her to find meaningful ways to express her sorrow. She discovered a healing outlet in the recitation of the *Kaddish* prayer during the synagogue service. The affirmation of the presence of God, the goodness of creation, and the meaningfulness of life healed Davita. Her participation in the ritual was, however, non-conventional. Women are not supposed to recite these prayers. Numerous strangers and friends pointed this out to the young girl, but Davita did not care. She was aware that her father deserved more recognition than the simple memorial service organized by the political party. When David Dinn told Davita she should not alter convention, Davita stubbornly resisted:

"Are you going to keep saying Kaddish for your father?"

"Yes."

"You really shouldn't, Ilana. You really don't have to.

Everyone's talking about it. . . . "A woman doesn't *have* to pray, she doesn't *have* to come to shul. Why are you doing it?" . . .

"I have to do more for my father than just attend one memorial meeting. He was my father." (247, original emphasis)

Davita persisted in saying the prayers, and a handful of women and men affirmed her action by providing the required response (236).

For Davita, the observance of the *Kaddish* prayer was not an indicator of her belief in God as much as it was her celebration of the community of God. She informed David: "[I] don't believe in God. . . . I like to be with everyone. I like to listen to the songs. I like it when the Torah is taken out and read. It's warm and nice. It feels good . . . " (246). Davita sought community; she found at the synagogue the sense of family missing in her own home. However, simple ritual and communal connection was not enough for Davita when her trauma was exacerbated. Soon after her father's death, her second significant father-figure was deported from America. Uncle Jakob's expulsion intensified her pain, and Davita suffered a nervous breakdown.

In Davita's adult world, peopled with loved ones who insisted upon putting themselves at risk, Davita felt her powerlessness to save them, which created fear and chaos. Davita sensed that she did not matter, that she was not important when her needs were compared with political issues and world pain. Davita's attempt at suicide, by stepping from a rowboat into a lake, announced to her mother Davita's need for nurture and care (280). Davita sought oblivion in the "warm and silken" lake waters: ". . . the girl simply walked off the boat and slid almost without a splash into the water, her dress ballooning up and covering her face, her hair billowing out behind her and then closing up like the petals of a flower as she sank" (280). The switch from first person to third person narration indicates the distance

and disassociation Davita felt from others and her self. Davita was then sent to Prince Edward Island, under the care of her Aunt Sarah, in order to recover. The journey to Canada appears almost mystical, with Davita travelling to an Edenic garden in order to recover. Far away from the life-threatening experiences of her Brooklyn home Davita was healed.

Davita's Island sojourn was a transformative, salvific event. The emotional ordeal of the twin death/abandonment of her "fathers" left her depressed and weakened: "At first it was difficult for me to walk, I had lost so much weight and strength" (284). Hope was restored to the young girl while she rested by the seashore, listened to the ocean, sat in the sun, felt the constant, unchanging wind against her skin. Davita's encounter with nature combined with her experience of God:

Often when [Aunt Sarah] prayed she knelt and I knelt with her and said amen when she was done. There was comfort in the kneeling and a sense of my exhausted self yielding to the embrace of a presence I could not understand but felt all about me as I did the wind and the sea. . . . [I] gazed at the setting sun and listened to the birds and the wind that blew in from the sea. Marvellous. Yes. And a comfort. Yes. Oh yes. (286)

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.

In contrast to the girl's exploration of Judaism, Aunt Sarah, who was an Anglican missionary-nurse, took Davita to an Island church. The experience had not been positive: the cross was frightening, the people restrained, the chapel stifling, and the sermon incomprehensible (287). Although she prayed privately with her aunt, her encounter with formal Christianity was not compelling; she sensed it was not where she fit. After she recovered from her relapse and returned home, Davita continued her pilgrimage to synagogue.

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. At registration, Davita spoke with a "kindly bearded man in a small musty room whose walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books" (293). Unlike the intellectual desert of public school, with its threatening environment and students and teachers reacting violently to Davita's feelings about the War, the yeshiva was, like the teacher's study, replete with ideas and intellectual challenge. Most importantly, Davita was allowed to speak:

I sat in a classroom amidst new faces and listened to a young clean-shaven man speak softly about a Jewish scholar named Rambam, who had lived hundreds of years ago in Spain. Spain was a very important country for the Jews, the teacher said. Did anyone know what was going on now in Spain? I raised my hand. "Ilana," he said gently. "Yes."

I talked. I talked and talked--as if I had never spoken before in all the years of my life; as if I had never uttered words before in all the classrooms I had attended. Faces turned to me. The teacher stood behind his desk, listening. (293)

This event was redemptive. Davita was heard, 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 links (408). This act validated her father and also warmly connected Davita with the Jewish tradition. Her father's great passion for justice is echoed and re-echoed in papers and lectures and in school celebrations; Davita felt at home. When she wrote her English papers, Jacob Daw's voice and symbols entered the research essay--she validated and re-created his life through her words (417). Using her imagination, Davita wrote creatively and was rewarded. Thus her formerly chaotic existence was replaced with security, ritual, and meaning as Davita became increasingly and congruently an observant Jew.

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. Davita's first experiences in synagogue are startling for her. At home, she had seen her mother as equal and as politically active as her father. In fact, Davita noticed the attention her mother received from her colleagues, "My mother was talking to a small group of men and women who were listening intently to her words" (87). Davita observed the respect Channah received from her communist colleagues and assumed this was the way women were treated. 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. Typically, neither of these two contributes in any meaningful way to the men's conversation:

We had taken seats in the living room. Ruthie and her mother sat together on the blue upholstered couch, Mrs. Helfman leaning against the tufted side cushion at her right, her plump fingers playing idly with the ornament of the curved wooden scrolled arm of the couch. I sat next to Ruthie, who had on her face the blank look she wore when she was bored. Mrs. Helfman listened with interest to the conversation but said little. Mr. Helfman sat in an easy chair across from David and his father. (189)

Topics of theology, politics, and economics hold little interest for Ruthie, and Davita sees that neither Ruthie or her mother are encouraged to participate. 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, 170). The post-service confrontations reveal the boys' hostility towards Davita. They laugh at her lack of knowledge and are baffled by her mixed parentage. They do not receive her questions warmly, but use her inexperience in things Jewish as an opportunity to scorn her. Davita is hurt by their mockery but not intimidated; she is able to defend herself from their attacks. When 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 tenacity is, as Huf describes regarding other protagonists, further evidence of her journey of maturation: "Whereas the artist hero, as Beebe has shown, inclines to be passive, sensitive, and shy (that is, to have conventionally "feminine" traits), the artist heroine tends to be stalwart, spirited, and

fearless" (A Portrait 4, 153). Davita persists in her journey of faith, despite the many obstacles she encounters: she learns Hebrew, attends shul, prays the *Kaddish*.

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). Anna faithfully attends the service of Morning Prayer in order to pray the *Kaddish* for Jacob Daw. She is permitted to attend only if she will remain in a kind of "cage," a construction that keeps Anna out of the direct presence and observation of the men. 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. Images of entrapment, Huf points out, are ubiquitous in such stories of women's artistic development (A Portrait 12). Davita is deeply offended by the arrangement, for her mother seems to be praying in a prison (382). Vanessa L. Ochs writes about women and prayer:

Physical separation of the sexes, in study, in prayer and in large chunks of life, is legislated in several Jewish sources. Semimonastic lives are thereby possible for Jews without having to build monasteries or cut back on baby production. One law referred to as *kol ishah* (a woman's voice), means a man is forbidden to listen to a woman sing (unless it's [sic] his wife), for her voice may excite him erotically. Women, in turn, are not supposed to sing in the presence of men, in order to prevent them from transgressing. Ideally the silence should be

continuous, but it's particularly important to hush when men are directing their attention to holiness, through prayer or Torah study. The rabbis elaborate on the law. A man can listen to his own wife's singing provided he's not trying to pray . . . Girls who are over eleven should not sing too loudly in school, lest men walking by hear them.

(Words on Fire 71,72)

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, 234, 246, 381, 395). 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 stones, 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 decide 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. Helfman is honest with her;

. . . the Hebrew faculty felt you should not get it because it would look bad for the school if we announced to the world that a--how shall I put this without hurting your feelings?--that a girl is the best student in our graduating class. It would not be good for the name of the school, for its reputation. What would all the other yeshivas think of us? (422-23)

Helfman goes on to tell Davita, "The faculty was sure you would understand" (423). 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.

Davita refuses, however, to collude with Helfman, the faculty, and the past. Her sense of self and her observation of other women tells her she should receive the award. Davita's Aunt Sarah, and the women in the service who provide the needed response to affirm Davita's *Kaddish* prayer provide positive examples to the young girl of women's strength and integrity. On the other hand, Mrs. Helfman and her daughter Ruthie, who live in quiet self-effacement, bring to Davita the "angel in the house" motif which discloses a passivity Davita does not like. Davita's experience with both types of women and her need to resolve their influences are important aspects of her journey (Huf 6-9). Ironically, the Torah text her class studies just after Helfman tells Davita of the Board's decision affirms Davita's sense of justice and equity:

I slid into my seat. . . . We were studying Deuteronomy, chapter 16, and were about to begin verse 18. . . . I sat with my eyes on the text, listening to the words. . . . "You shall not judge unfairly; you shall show no partiality; . . . Justice, justice shall you pursue" . . . I closed my Bible and rose from my desk and started slowly toward the door. . . . I could feel them all looking at me as I opened the door and went out of the room and closed the door behind me. (424)

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 schul; 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. The brief talk was to be more for Davita than simply a thank-you to the community. She wanted to use the opportunity to say good-bye publicly to her father and Jacob Daw. She wanted the ceremony to create for her a chance to bring closure to the past and to open more fully the present. Davita is robbed of this healing moment. 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 about 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. Imaginatively, Davita calls the birds to her aid and reconstructs the symbols of past pain to enable her to resolve her present crisis. The birds respond to her call and Davita enters the harp; the birds, a transformed Icarian symbol, because they complete their journey, carry the instrument on their wings to Davita's sacred and healing place on Prince Edward Island. The birds accomplish their task, and Davita arrives safely. In flying from her prison, Davita succeeds "like Daedalus in reaching land rather than fall[ing] like Icarus into the devouring sea" (Huf 12). On the Island she imaginatively invites Aunt Sarah, Jacob Daw, and her father to hear

her speech. Davita creates for herself a kind of mystical gathering together of a group of people who consistently and warmly listen to Davita. In this process Davita brings together a kind of spiritual support group, and they hear her words. Davita refuses to let anyone take away her voice.

Davita, utilizing her imagination, achieves the thing she set out to do. She says good-bye to her past. In the process of this farewell, she acquires healing and a renewed purpose. Davita indicates her capacity to care and her fears:

I wanted to say that I'm very frightened to be living in this world and I don't understand most of the things I see and hear and I don't know what will happen to me and to the family I love. I wanted to say that I would try to find and join with the side of America that wouldn't hurt people like Wesley Everest, and I would also try not to let this century defeat me" (434).

Davita adds, "And I wanted to show everyone the harp so they could see where the decent music of the world comes from" (435). Davita's words are heard and affirmed by those she gathered. Aunt Sarah blesses her, "I thank our Lord for bestowing upon you His favour" (435). The benediction is wonderfully ambiguous; the "our Lord" works as an amalgam of the many ways of naming and thinking about God offered in this novel. The "sacred discontent" which is an important aspect of the lives of all gathered on the Island motivates Davita to live authentically (436). The oppressive dogma of the Yeshiva's Board is overcome by Davita's will to live and love.

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 the female *künstlerroman*, Davita confronts the prison of male domination as she encounters it in the yeshiva, and makes her own way (Huf 10, 157-59). Davita is a creator; her words and imagination bring forth life. Words are central to Davita's knowing process and she gains them through relationship. She is not just a recipient of knowledge, she becomes a source. Of all the many constructions of words offered in this novel, speeches, poems, stories, songs, journalism, doctrine, Torah, dictionaries, essays, it is the language of story which Davita celebrates. It is supremely through the creative endeavour of story writing that Davita is able to represent, celebrate, and resolve her experiences. Through the medium of the story, Davita creates community and enters into dialogue. Through story, which is a dangerous activity--Davita suggests Daw died in part because of the stories he wrote (434)--Davita engages her world. 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.

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.

Chapter 7: Maps and Puzzles

The central problem of our time, I think, is how people confront ideas different from their own.

Chaim Potok

God travels incognito.

anonymous

As I review what Potok has done to date in re-asserting the centrality of accumulated Jewish experience, it becomes clear that to read him with any sensitivity one must be equipped with the lens supplied by Jewish texts as well as texts from American and British literary history and literature, and modern psychologies, theories of art, and revisions of history. This context has been introduced in the earlier chapters, not in an attempt to be conclusive or exhaustive but to point out the texts, secular and sacred, essential to understanding the novels. In this chapter I will summarize what one needs to bring to Potok's novels, what the novels offer to the tradition of modern fiction, and what Potok criticizes, affirms, and hopes for modern life, whether lived by Jew or non-Jew, American or non-American. The text that illustrates his most radical of interpretations of Jewish life and tradition is Potok's sequence, which he considers one long, dialogic, iconoclastic book, including his only non-Jewish novel, I am the Clay. But, first, let us look at the context.

The Context

In this final chapter we return to the "context, text, and acrostic" configuration of the "Introduction" as a pattern which suggests interconnection and reiteration--important elements in the design of the Potok oeuvre.

In The Book of Lights, Potok creates a trope which decodes the importance of "puzzle" in his schema and his world-view. Gershon, in one of his earliest recollections, is playing a game with his father (who will die in Israel shortly after, killed by an Arab bomb). The young boy and his father work on a puzzle: "[Later that evening] they did a picture puzzle together. It was a gift his mother had just given him for his seventh birthday, a puzzle map of the world. He and his father spread the pieces on the living-room carpet and worked on it together until it was done" (4). Potok matches this scene with Einstein's epigraph to the novel: "Out yonder there was this huge world, which exists independently of us human beings and which stands before us like a great, eternal riddle. . . . The contemplation of this world beckoned like a liberation." Potok invites the reader to consider the puzzle as a paradox--that is, as a way of perceiving and accepting the complexity of the world, with the sense that an explanation or answer to the riddle can be found if one only looks hard enough. The hieroglyphic contains hope because Gershon and his father, together, in community, are able to fit the pieces together.

The puzzle is an appropriate symbol for the burden/hope with which Potok's chief characters advance into the world. In all of Potok's novels, there is faith in the religious quest, in the American sense of a mission to a New Jerusalem, as new Israelites. Disparate bits, the puzzle pieces of life and experience, fit together, and the artist-investigator's work must go forward inside a community and with patience. Unlike millennial Christianity, the Jew's work, however, is ultimately non-culminative, because once the puzzle is completed there still remains its text to be

interpreted. In The Book of Lights the richness of the puzzle-map metaphor uncovers Potok's message: once finished, Gershon and his father have before them a map of the world, a seemingly "completed" project. This map still needs to be interpreted: "completion" generates a false and naive confidence for the difficult task of interpreting/understanding the symbol/text remains. The complications are intensified, furthermore, by the fact that the neat picture of the world the map offers is in fact false, for the world is not "flat," the boundaries are not fixed, the countries are not coloured, and the proportions are not maintained. Every map, then, when it is elevated to signify absolute truth is a lie: the religious, political, cultural, linguistic, racial boundaries are permeable or fluid. Yet we can navigate, live politically significant lives, create art and literature, and think logically--all within a somewhat fictionalized world-view. The fact that Gershon, a member of the "chosen people," studies a map invites the reader to re-think the concepts of "chosen" and "promised land" and to consider that there are no conclusions to the task of analysis of life and texts. The map, like the "creations" of the world and modern life that it represents, is a mystery provoking bewilderment, curiosity, study, and endless dialogue, even while permitting active, benevolent, and rewarding participation in social life.

This puzzle metaphor is also located in the important texts and sacred texts which the characters must decode or help others--Jews, Christians, and Buddhists--to decipher in the endless act of problem-solving. For example, each of the chief characters in Potok's novels, including Davita, is a student of the Talmud. A page of

Talmud is not at all unlike a puzzle: it is composed of many pieces, and the reader's task is to find how they "fit" together. In the centre of the Talmudic page is the *mishnah*, the fundamental text and the first commentary; beneath this is the *gemara*, the rabbinic commentary; to one side are Rashi's comments, to the other the *Tosafot*, which are the remarks of Rashi's descendants and disciples; and around and about these are cross-references to the Bible and other Talmud tractates. The Talmud is itself a brilliant image of a puzzle. Just as the geography map-puzzle seeks to delineate the political, social, and physical boundaries of Gershon's world, so the Talmud, in its complex format and without concluding dialogue and analysis, seeks to illuminate the boundaries of the moral and spiritual universe and to guide human life. The hope with respect to this text is that enough attendance to studying the voices that the page contains--the word *Talmud* is Hebrew for *study*--will cause one's life and experience to "fit together" and will contribute to social and political growth, even while truth in all its glory remains hidden, like the name and face of God.

The Talmud echoes another of Potok's recurrent symbols, that of the web. In fact, the smallest divisions of the *Mishnah* are the *ma'asekhot*, which are usually translated as "tractates," but which also are "webbings."²¹ The Talmud, then, is a text which is itself a web, an interconnected and interdependent work; it contains not a single, authoritative voice, but rather multiple voices in a sustained conversation exploring questions of moral and ethical behaviour and meaning. Goldenberg writes

²¹ See Robert Goldenberg's "Talmud" in Barry W. Holtz, Back to the Sources: Reading in the Classic Jewish Texts.

that sometimes this conversation is a "gathering where everyone is talking at once" (142), and it goes forward, not with certainty and closure, but on the basis of argument and contradiction. Jewish dialogue is thus a web reminiscent of novelistic conversation, as well as modern literary theories and hypotheses about reader's response.

A web of argument, contradiction, new ideas, old ideas, puzzles, mysteries, enigmas, and paradoxes fill the typical Potok novel. Like D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, we find in Potok's sequential exploration of Judaism in the world a double rhythm of "creation and destruction." In Potok's view, the Jewish tradition invites intellectuals and artists to a world of study and problem-solving, suggesting that within texts, as they are interpreted, can be found reliable ways of understanding the world and the evolution of human history. This confidence in words and study implies that the world is a text that can be understood, and then lived in wisely, if one attends long enough and with the aid of the past to the puzzle. This hope compels Potok's protagonists, who all live the "examined life," to leave the confines of their Jewish enclaves, to go out into the world, and to explore art, books, schools, and other societies. In this way, Potok's characters expand the Talmud's discussion to include other voices familiar and foreign, such as Picasso and Buddha, and to proceed in the hope that all the world contains Torah, God's presence and truth, if one but looks. For these men and one woman, the canon is not closed; rather, the page is enlarged as they engage the "map," for they employ new information and ideas, from such disparate sources, as I have shown, as Freud's theory of

psychotherapy and Picasso's Guernica, and so divine revelation goes forward and evolves, as tradition is re-interpreted, re-created, extended, and affirmed. This is an iconoclastic, syncretic Judaism, one that enlarges Talmudic disputation by including non-Jewish voices, the "other."

Potok's characters do not completely leave the tradition while in pursuit of new ideas, communities, and ways of being in the world. While for Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, "silence, exile, and cunning" replace the Trinity, for Potok's characters, Judaism remains valuable or is recognized precisely because, in his view, it provides room for investigating contemporary problems of social conduct, language, alienation, and religious scepticism and mystery within an ancient tradition. Thus, Potok's Jewish characters discover layers of doubt and belief, truth and refutation, exile and return, ignorance and wisdom, and they discover them within themselves and in Judaism, and, increasingly, in American society and the world. For in a sense, Potok's oeuvre advances from the New York Jewish microcosm toward the macrocosm, in a double movement of travelling out--to the larger society, and inward--towards the centre of the ancient Jewish tradition. And so Gershon, by the conclusion of The Book of Lights, is effected by his experiences in Korea and Japan, which help to shape his sense of life, and yet he decides to pursue graduate study not in Asian religions or politics, but in Kabbalah, the texts which for him most nearly "explain" his predicament and place in the modern world. To understand the Far East, the Westerner turns toward Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Potok's cultural interaction reflects the double rhythm: he both creates and destroys in his systematic exploration of the dialogue between Judaism and the larger world. Potok makes a baseball game in The Chosen a fit vehicle to express and interpret competition and conflict between two young men at four levels: the level of simple athletics, the more complicated level of cultural differences between the Hasidic and the Orthodox, and between Jewish and American, and finally, the struggle between the Nazis and the rest of the modern world. By using this all-American game, Potok also invites the reader to ponder the appropriateness of the American metaphor to the Jewish experience; the game brings together two Jewish people their own culture could not have brought together and both are enriched thereby, and the book suggests that such a peaceful combat as sport is essential to breaking down ancient religious walls. Later, in My Name is Asher Lev, Potok invites the reader to consider Guernica, a secular work of art depicting gentile violence against a gentile culture and to extend its significance to the problem of violence and pain within Hasidism. When Asher appropriates this symbol, he destroys the silence imposed upon him by his family's rigidity and creates something new: a syncretic, but also authentic portrait of the pain his family bears. Modern art, like modern games, Potok suggests, must be added to Judaism and integrated with it if Judaism is to add a significant voice to the predominately secular discussion of how to live wisely in the modern world. In a sense, Potok suggests there is an "essentialism," something universal, and he refuses to museum his own cultural

history. This is a radical rejection of modern situational and materialistic perspectives such as neo-Marxism and cultural relativism.

Potok shows the ways in which the secular world is enriched by the Jewish sub-culture; his idea of Judaism offers a response to America's inherent yet increasingly illusory optimism and the realities of a reactive pessimism which pervades the modern western world. When Gershon Loran and Arthur Leiden stand before the statue memorializing the Hiroshima event, they stand at the core of humankind's violence, however it has been "justified" politically, against self and neighbour. As they weep, grieve, and affirm hope, they express not simply a Jewish concern for Jewish survival, heightened by the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, but also a global need for survival and spiritual renewal in view of humankind's new capability to destroy the earth. Their Hebrew prayer demonstrates a capacity to feel and to mourn that is noble and compelling; a Japanese couple joins the young men in their ritual, completing a circle, the cycle from destruction to creation. The contemporary, non-American and non-Jewish couple appropriate ancient Jewish liturgy as a suitable means by which to express their pain and fear for themselves and for all of humankind, and the space they occupy with the Jewish rabbis before the memorial becomes sacred and sacramental, a shared terrain of exchange and openness. This secular appropriation of the sacred balances Asher's adoption of the crucifix and the pieta as efficacious symbols for Jewish pain.

As Potok's characters go out into the world with their double citizenship of Jew and American, they enter the secular world (as does Danny) as *tzaddikim*,

righteous persons. They fulfil the ancient Abrahamic covenant to enter the world and to be a blessing (Genesis 12). This is not to say they enter the world with a paradigm to impose. Instead, they join as seekers and puzzle-makers, and potential puzzle-solvers, open to learn, to receive what they find, and their own sub-culture provides a model, a microcosm, by which to interpret problems and propose the solutions for the larger world. On their journeys to maturation Potok's protagonists discover, as I have shown, the complexity of the enmeshment of good and evil in their religious enclave and utilize this perception as they participate in and criticize their secular and sacred societies. Each main character grapples with the light and the dark within self, the Jewish community, and the larger world. Potok's novels are not about denial of temptations. The protagonists learn of the omnipresence of ambiguity--within and without, personal and social--and Potok's novels reflect this observation in their non-culminative endings.

Thus, In the Beginning "concludes" with David at Bergen Belsen, caught in his personal response to the camp that is the grave of his people. As he faces this evil and acknowledges its potency, David's reaction is two-fold: he recites the mourner's *Kaddish*, and he is energized to continue his scholarly work to bring the riches of Torah to light in secular and religious academies. Davita responds to the bigotry and misogyny of her Jewish community by turning to the public school system for the remainder of her education, but at the same time she continues to attend synagogue and to create stories. Potok's chief characters, in their quests for self-knowledge and knowledge of their religious and secular worlds, are not naive about

the weaknesses of the Jewish tradition, nor are they polarized into total rejection; instead, like Potok himself, they extend and interrelate the two worlds they inhabit. There is, of course, a bittersweet quality to this, as family, friends, and religious leaders attempt to adjust to this revisionist view of Judaism.

Because Potok's stance toward his own faith and faith community and American secular culture is iconoclastic, his characters become *zwischenmenschen*, "between persons." They inhabit the newly sacred, if tenuous, space that Potok posits can exist between the polarities of "Jewish-American," between enduring belief and contemporary scepticism. They possess the "binocular vision of the iconoclast" and look with a mixture of regard and criticism upon the systems and relationships by which they are surrounded ("Culture Confrontation" 164). Instead of denying the potency of family, culture, and religious background, Potok accepts the flaws that are to be overcome and writes about fidelity to ultimate commitments. The protagonists love most of Judaism and much of the secular world, finding in both valid systems of meaning, although realizing, too, that they are often antithetical ("Culture Confrontation" 166). Potok explores with sympathy the personal costs to the iconoclast of this hard-won sense of integrity. There is pain for Asher from challenging the narrow, paternalistic vision of his Hasidic community and from offering to Judaism and America and Europe the enlarged view born from his artistic creations.

An important component of Asher's pain is located in the recognition of the ambiguity, the mix of the dark and the light, that each of the protagonists observe as

they encounter and struggle with their "maps." Max Schulz, in Radical

Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish/American Novelists, suggests:

This capacity for belief in the face of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" is a radical sophistication that the Jew, with a culture historically of long standing, is currently giving to a century convinced in its existentialist isolation of the incoherence of existence. . . . This willingness to accept the world on its own terms--disorderly, incoherent, absurd--"without any irritability reaching after fact and reason," and yet without losing faith in the moral significance of human actions, underlies the confrontation of experience in the best of the contemporary Jewish-American novels. (22)

Schulz's observation, although not directly applied in his work to Potok's art, nonetheless echoes Potok's commitment to "speak significantly" to American culture while remaining an observant Jew who writes with accuracy and compassion about his tradition (Kauvar 316). Potok wants to conserve as well as renew.

In The Wanderings, Potok writes of a desire to rebuild Judaism from the core, fusing the best of the culture with the best from the secular world and through this process to engender a new, re-visioned Judaism (523). His protagonists, insofar as they retain the best of their tradition, while appropriating the art, learning, theory (biblical and literary) they discover in secular society, engage this task. The moral and ethical vision of Judaism, predicated upon a hope in the essential meaningfulness of the universe, is held in tension with the contrary apprehension of often incoherent

human events. Furthermore, the dialogue between the two cultures goes forward from a sense of spiritual immanence; when Potok's Judaism speaks, it is not distanced, transcendent, hierarchical, or coldly intellectual, so much as it is a "felt" experience that accompanies intellectual dialogue and introspection.

On the other hand, secular wisdom and experience are not privileged, either. For example, in Asher Lev, the nude and the Abraham/Isaac pericope are both useful tropes for Asher's artistic expression; and, again, the Aeolian Harp and the *mezuzah* speak equally well to the import of the door harp in Davita's Harp. Anger and violence are found not only in the anti-Semitic attacks of Polish boys, but are also present in the perverse jealousy of a yeshiva schoolmate. Potok's texts are multi-vocal, and the discussion is non-linear. In Potok's view the inevitable dialogue between the secular and sacred is based on love and respect as opposed to cynicism and disregard, and the cultures offer balanced, equal perspectives. In this sense, Potok is neither assimilationist nor separatist, but, rather, integrationist or syncretic.

I stated in the "Introduction" that Robert Alter provides a useful metaphor which is relevant and applicable to this discussion of Potok's art. Borrowing a term from the world of visual art, Alter suggests that the post-cubist strategy of placing together for the purpose of exploring "formal relations," or to provide an "encompassing representation" of disparate perceptions of an object, extends the modern understanding of biblical literature (The Art of Biblical Narrative 146). I think Potok in his re-creation and re-vision of Judaism uses a similarly cubist technique in his literature. Potok provides the reader with, for instance, the Hasidic

Danny, and then superimposes upon that portrait the psychologist Danny and re-creates by this act something greater than the sum of the two parts. Danny is, as I have shown, the dynamic interplay of these two realities: psychologist-Jew descending a staircase. The Chosen must be non-conclusive, for Danny is evolving as microcosm and site of the cultural dialogue Potok creates in the book and posits for American-Jewish society.

In his first seven novels, Potok explores in great detail the effect of cultural exchange and the movement of creation/destruction constellated when this exchange is taken seriously. His protagonists indicate a direction, for they are on the threshold of a new way of seeing and being in the world, and the novels "conclude" with promise. In I am the Clay, moreover, Potok turns his vision of dialogue and exchange, of puzzle solving, to a society without significant Jewish influence and offers an extended if not universalized version of his theory. In this novel Potok suggests the principles, themes, and symbols of his preceding art are applicable to this story set in Korea which concerns, among other things, the problem of how to be authentically human.

The Text

Probably the most surprising fictional step for Potok, other than his selection of Davita's "voice" in Davita's Harp, is his decision to remove Judaism from centre stage in his latest book. But Potok has not removed the themes and messages that he associates with Jewish tradition in his other novels. I am the Clay, Potok's eighth novel, departs from the now familiar territory of the nineteen forties New York

Jewish community, and is set entirely in Korea. America intrudes into this Far Eastern place, however, for the story occurs during and after the last stages of the Korean War. The novel's protagonist, Kim Sin Gyu, is a child orphaned by the war, bereft not only of his parents and extended family, but his entire village. As this tale of loss and destruction evolves, several of Potok's important themes emerge.

Through the investigation of the orphan motif the Potokian concern with abandonment and loss and how this affects culture and tradition is uncovered. Kim is an orphan, an alien--familiar metaphors in the Jewish novel.

That Kim Sin Gyu is an orphan is an important link to the text in which he first appears, The Book of Lights. In Gershon's story, the theme of abandonment is exegeted in part through the Zohar allusions with which the novel is replete, and specifically through the Lurianic myth, which describes all of creation as abandoned by God. From Gershon's story emerges I am the Clay, which as its title suggests, concerns an identity that is universal, for according to various creation myths, humankind is a product of the earth. Furthermore, it is precisely this issue of identity which is so problematic to an orphan, who struggles with fears of abandonment, with finding an authentic sense of self, and with separation from parents, traditions, patriarchal voices, ancient texts, and community. Kim's journey to connection and identity moves in a spiral motion from the ditch where he is found, to wandering through Korea in search of shelter and safety from the war, to the security of the old people's village, back alone to his original home place, to the old ones' home again, and, finally, to Seoul, the setting of the novel's conclusion. Like Danny before him,

leaving his Brooklyn neighbourhood to embark on a journey of studies at Columbia University, Kim leaves his new-found home and village to attend school in Seoul. Potok's novels suspend the protagonists between old educational milieus, religious and social, and new ones, secular and sacred. His answers for the questions in the minds of his protagonists are to be found in the over-laying, as in cubist art, of perspectives ancient and modern. Like Potok's previous novels I am the Clay is non-culminative yet hopeful, for Kim's quest leads him steadily nearer to finding his own sense of self, society, and humankind.

Consonant with the shared orphan theme are the Zohar allusions which occur in I am the Clay and The Book of Lights. The Zoharic orphan story and symbol is located in the story of the *Yanuga*, an Aramaic term meaning "suckling, infant, child." Matt, in Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, describes the importance of children in the Kabbalah, who appear in multiple places throughout the Zohar text "catching the rabbis unawares with their startling wisdom" (286). These children are wise beyond their years, possess a divine quality, and seem magical in what they do and how they provide. In "The Rabbis Encounter A Child" (Matt 170-176), two travelling rabbis, in need of food and shelter, are greeted by an orphaned child whose father has "departed from the world" (172) and who proceeds to correct and instruct the holy men in the way of Torah. The child rebukes the rabbis for neglecting to recite the *shema* and for not pronouncing the blessing before washing their hands to eat and then instructs them in a proper understanding of a Torah passage. The child derides the Torah scholars' ignorance: "You who are so wise, how could you be so

careless?" (171). Finally the rabbis, amazed by the child's wisdom, declare the boy an "Angel of YHVH" (172). The final inversion of the expected occurs when the child, not the religious men, pronounces the closing benediction. The boy argues for the right to bless on the basis of having provided sustenance for the rabbis: "From the bread and food of my Torah you have eaten!" (174). When the rabbis reach the destination of their travels the following morning, they tell their friends of the encounter with the boy, and the men conclude that they have been in the presence of a "sublime" child: "This one is not known by any name in the world, / for something sublime is inside him. / It is a secret! / The flowing light of his father shines upon him!" (Matt 176).

Kim Sin Gyu functions as a *yanuqa* in Potok's I am the Clay, for Kim is the "secret child" who sustains the life of those around him by providing for physical needs and, by the novel's close, by containing Korea's hope in the restoration of a destroyed culture. When the old couple find the boy, he is lying in a ditch and dying from a wound inflicted by shrapnel. Ironically, the source of the shrapnel is never known and therefore could be from American, Japanese, Chinese, or Korean weapons: the boy's wound is a symbol of the chaos which reigns in his land. Unconscious and near death, the boy is "adopted" and nurtured slowly back to life by the woman. The three of them flee from the invading armies as a "family" created by war and hardship. Yet they are aliens, refugees in their own land. Surrounded by death, but in a typical Potokian irony, the uprooted person becomes tied to images of life: Kim is increasingly linked to salvific acts. Shortly after he revives, at a time

when the old man is now near death from exhaustion, the boy discovers a stream and catches three fish (71). He offers one fish to the hungry, wild dogs which gather and brings the remaining two to the old woman; these fish and the others he catches save their lives. The old man wonders: "This is a world filled with spirits. Is this boy, then, a child of spirits, that he saves my life again and again? Is there good magic in this boy?" (81).

The old man's question is recurring. Throughout their journey, the boy continues to be a source of benediction and is causally connected by the couple to their good fortune in finding wood, in locating a place to stay in the American refugee camp, and finally, in saving their village:

The old man felt the rising of the hairs on the back of his neck and the heavy beating of his heart as he stood staring at the columns of climbing white smoke. A confusion of feelings: soaring joy at the saving of the village; astonishment that they had survived; dread at the might of the boy. No doubt now. This is a boy with the same magic as the ginseng root. To have him in our home. Power. (164)

The boy's magical deeds continue when Kim secures a job as a houseboy at the American Army base, for this employment allows him to buy the old couple an ox for their farm work and to obtain meat for them from the Army cooks (194). Kim is the alien as magical provider in a barren land.

The old woman, motivated by genuine interest in the child, questions Kim about himself and his past. Because Kim is a refined, sensitive, intuitive child, the

woman is curious about his appearance, his rich clothing, his lineage. As well, the old woman wonders about the boy's nature as a male because of his unusually delicate appearance: "Is there a girl inside this boy?" (66). Although the story is set in an Asian culture and Davita's story is not, there is a parallel in the two books: each culture identifies human sexuality in a deceiving, simplistic fashion. The woman's next step is to examine the "map" of his sexuality, which for her and her society is purely physical and genital. While we accept this as wry humour in I am the Clay, a similar sexual stereotyping is what causes Davita great suffering. Potok is obviously criticizing the shared sexual mapping found in Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, as well as in their respective secular societies of east and west. Potok, in I am the Clay, extends his interrogation of the effects of such social constructs of identity, which he began in Davita's Harp. Kim, the weak, delicate, feminine child sustains the life of the frail couple.

Kim responds to the old woman's questions and tells her that his parents are dead and his village is destroyed and that he is the son of a poet/scholar from a long line of poets who were renowned in their northern village and in China:

Great scholars and famous poets to ten generations, famous in the North and in the lands of the Chinese and known to emperors and kings, writers of poetry and lovers of Chinese characters and teachers to the sons of ambassadors and landowners, and Grandfather and Great-Grandfather once in the service of the government in Seoul. (66-67)

Kim is the child of "wise men" and mystics, wealthy forbears who crossed national boundaries and cultural differences and were accepted because of their love of ideas, words, and poetry. In short, these men were "puzzle-makers/interpreters." This love of and skill with words earned them respect, admiration, and status, and has been an important family signature for "ten generations." Kim senses, through the gentle insistence of his mythic ancestor as he appears in dreams and waking visions, that he too should be a poet, a wordsmith. He asks the spirit: "Will I die in this cave with these strangers? And what of your wish that I become a scholar and a poet?" (65). As his journey and the visitations of his ancestors continue--"I have seen in dreams the spirits of my father and mother" (171)--Kim senses his own desire to extend the ancestral line. Because the woman responds to the dying child and nurtures him, Kim is kept alive, and the cultural richness his lineage represents, which contains the hope for the continuation of Korean poetry, writing, and wisdom, is secured.

Like Potok's Jewish protagonists, Kim is aware of and respects his spiritual self. He senses spirits around him and acknowledges the sacredness of life and land. He is guided and directed by this sacred knowledge, but he is also inventive, adept at making the secular culture of the American army base work to his benefit. He moves from one promotion to another and realizes when it is time for him to leave. Kim is approached by the leader of a gang of "slicky boys" which insists he must cooperate or the ox will be killed and the farm burned. Kim sees the limits of his options and know he must depart from the base. He is also aware of his inner drive pushing him towards the path leading to study and poetry. Honouring his inner sense and the

direction given him by his mythic ancestors, Kim approaches the one person in his world he trusts to give him wise and spiritual help.

Kim seeks advice from an unnamed but identifiable chaplain wearing the "six-pointed-star double-tablet" insignia (207). It must be Gershon, for the reader is given other clues to connect this chaplain with the protagonist from The Book of Lights: he keeps his books in orderly rows; he is dark haired; he seems troubled; and he inquires about the religious meaning of the old woman's grave. Kim calls Gershon, "you man of strong power and know the spirits" (207), for he recognizes Gershon's spiritual capacity and power. Kim is right to trust Gershon, who affirms and respects the young boy's desire to study and facilitates his journey to Seoul to begin the learning that will be his personal salvation. It is Kim's way out of the post-war destitution of Korea. Kim's study, matched by his mystical ability and awareness, will also help to restore Korea, for in this story Potok suggests that is precisely those who hold in tension the dual reality of the physical and the numinous and express this reality in the words and language of liturgy and metaphor who secure the future for the group.

In the "Introduction," I suggest that I am the Clay functions in Potok's oeuvre much as does Esther in the Hebrew Bible. The parallels are compelling. In The Book of Esther, God is not named, yet is everywhere present through the actions of this courageous woman who saves the Jewish people, their religion and their culture, from genocide. Similarly God, who is multi-named but silent in I am the Clay, graces the existence of Kim, who in turn becomes Korea's hope for a better future.

Both texts centre on questions of identity and on the use of personal power to save the threatened self, and by extension the group, from extinction. Furthermore, the use of the orphan motif, especially in light of its function in Kabbalah literature where it decodes to reveal the wisdom and power of the innocent child, extends Potok's exploration of our sense of personal, social, and religious abandonment and hopes for rejuvenation and redemption. It is not simply, in Potok's economy, the Jewish people who are in exile, but all of humankind, and to the extent that Kim Sin Gyu represents hope and future, he too is numbered among the "chosen." Perhaps Potok is suggesting, in novels which function as the meeting place of his ideas about culture interaction and spirituality, that relativistic religion need not be reductionist or coldly comparative either. Either Judaism touches essential needs or it will not endure in an increasingly sophisticated, culturally diverse world. The novels, then, are not simply "Jewish" texts, but are for "everyman," transformed in Potok's sequence into "every person," male and female, too, and suggest that tolerance, forgiveness, and sympathy, joined to an earnest desire to live the "examined life" contain the hope for the modern world's recovery from its destructive patterns of violence against self and others.

The Acrostic

Potok's place in the continuum of American literature is, as Kremer indicates, unique ("Chaim Potok" 232). In his novels, he interweaves the significant discourses of Jewish theology, liturgy, history and sacred texts, with the riches of secular culture (psychology, art, theory), and the dilemmas, ennui, and bewilderment of modern humanity; he creates his own puzzle/design as a new map by which to navigate the

complexities of life. In contrast with what Kremer identifies as "the assimilated urbanites of Roth and the intellectual assimilationists of Bellow" ("Chaim Potok" 235), however, Potok's characters evidence a sustained concern with things Jewish as a key for decoding the world.

Potok, in an interview with Kauvar, suggests there is value in using the novel form to investigate such ideas. In response to her question, "Do you think it is essential for a text to have meaning?" (292), Potok answers:

. . . But the one thing that you must never do is to convey the notion that reality has the configuration of a tale. That's the essential epistemological stance of the nonstructuralists, that is to say, the storyless storytellers. On the other side, you have those who say--and I side with them--that the fundamental endeavour of the story is to create a model. The storyteller who's serious about his or her art in the twentieth century never makes the claim that his or her novel is the model of reality. It is a private model of reality, a personal vision of things. That's another epistemological stance. . . . Both Barth and Gass are extraordinary wordsmiths. But many contemporary novelists are a lot of sound and fury and loveliness; in the final analysis, they signify nothing, and I think a novel must signify. (293-94).

Potok's fundamental assertion of meaning, of the viability of the novel form to signify, is consonant with his decision to approach life as essentially meaningful ("The State of Jewish Belief" 127). He does not deny, as I indicated in the "Introduction"

to this study, that one must also contend with instances of chaos, a potent reality shaping human life and destiny. Potok's chief characters are often located in situations which illuminate the struggle between chaos and meaning, balanced between contending cultures and existing in "between places." Their creative survival demands that they stay in motion: always growing, learning, creating, destroying.

The movement in these novels is internal and external, within and without. In each novel, as I have shown, characters participate in cultural activities and appropriate symbols from the heart of Jewish and American tradition. Rueven and Danny play baseball, visit carnivals, transform work to play, and grow as they are challenged by the Rebbe's mystical use of silence. Asher appropriates nudes, crucifixes, and biblical stories as the language of his art and matures under the joint tutelage of his mythic ancestor, the Rebbe, Picasso, and Jacob Kahn. David struggles with the potent King David archetype, recreates a golem, and learns secular methods of biblical studies as he matures as scholar and teacher and grapples with the ubiquitous nature of violence. Gershon interrogates light as joint image of death and life and finds in the ambiguity strange comfort, a consolation that is intensified in his study and practice of Jewish mysticism. Finally, Davita approaches a Judaism that is warm, stable, and peaceful and attaches herself to the community, while at the same time distancing herself from the injustice and misogyny she discovers at the centre of her group's practice. To find balance in this tension she turns to her imagination, symbolized in the docer harp which contains the dual significance of the Aeolian Harp and the Jewish *mezuzah*. Potok's investigation of what happens when two different,

rich, but very diverse cultures connect in the lives of his protagonists succeeds in disclosing a resultant creativity in personal and ideational terms. His chief characters become psychologists, artists, scholars, mystics, writers.

Every acrostic, however, includes words and missing words, questions and implied answers that each contribute to a slowly emerging pattern. That is as true of Potok's intertwined novels as it is of American Literature as a single entity. We can ask, for example, what has been neglected by Potok, but we must be aware that the notion of neglect derives from a conception of responsibility; it springs from a sense of what an American novelist must do, what a modern American novelist must cover, and what a contemporary Jewish-American writer has to focus on or at least consider. In today's critical circles such pre-conceptions as the existence and need for a hero/heroine are under attack, so we must be warned against taking too seriously any prescription, even for modern Jewish fiction.

For instance, must Potok be interrogated about his work's absence of direct, explicit treatment of human sexuality? Bonnie K. Lyons, in "American-Jewish Fiction Since 1945" addresses this question generally with respect to Jewish-American literature, by first discussing the difference between "*menschlichkeit*," a Jewish value, and "manliness," an American value. Irving Howe defines *mensch* as: "a readiness to live for ideals beyond the clamor of self, a sense of plebeian fraternity, an ability to forge a community of moral order even while remaining subject to a society of social disorder, and a persuasion that human existence is a deeply serious matter for which all of us are finally accountable" (World of Our Fathers 645). Lyon then states:

[This ideal] is in direct opposition to traditional American ideals of manliness. In particular, the aspects of American masculinity having to do with the body are conspicuously absent. There is no code of physical competence, no survival techniques, no outdoor skills, and no sexual virility. Likewise there is no toughness, no self-sufficiency, no longing for, let alone fulfilment of, freedom and solitude. (66)

While Lyons' distinction might account for some of the absence of explicit sexuality in Potok's novels, it does not completely answer the question. Potok has handled gender and issues of sexuality. One instance is Asher's growing awareness of and value for his own male body, a value taught to him by his assimilated mentor, Jacob Kahn. This interest and appreciation is extended to include the female body--the "nude." Let us posit that in some way the artist Asher stands for the novelist Potok, able and willing to present intimate portraits, that is incisive and revelatory pictures of what men and women are, without, however, feeling any need to believe that the spiritual revelation occurs in bed. Although this sets Potok apart from other American writers like Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Marge Piercy, there actually may be method to his omission of the overtly sexual. The focus of Potokian love is not physicality, nor is the physical a type of "Lawrencian" guide to the universe's meaning. So far, the only sexual moments in Potok's novels occur on the Sabbath, which in the Kabbalah signifies a spiritual act, "This is the ideal time for mystics to make love" (Matt 36). As well, the only memories of love-making occur to Asher, who recalls his wife Devorah's facial appearance.

With respect to racial issues the absence of dialogue with African-American characters, especially in view of the predominantly New York settings, seems a strange silence. Once again Asher is a point of contact, although oblique, for this issue; he travels to South Africa and paints an apartheid series. But unlike Bernard Malamud, who directly confronts such issues in The Tenants (1971), Potok essentially subordinates this kind of "cultural confrontation" to his other explorations. Can we dictate a writer's concerns? In Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, the protagonist asks whether, on a lower level, he speaks universally. Ellison has suffered for decades because of his refusal to limit his books to the question of African-American invisibility alone. Potok would seem to be sympathetic to racial problems, but may be reinforcing a point by rejecting race and racial conflict as inherently more important than one's spiritual self or essential to such an exploration.

Other surprising silences occur around the lack of direct treatment of the concentration camps of the Second World War, or the Arab-Israeli conflict. For some Jewish-American thinkers, such as Richard L. Rubenstein, the Nazi "Final Solution" is the central issue for post-World War II Jews, and therefore must be the constant point of reference for all Jewish activity (see Arnold Jacob Wolf 247 ff). Lyons observes that this Nazi horror is typically held at a distance by American-Jewish writers: "American-Jewish writers have tended to avoid evoking the Holocaust directly and to repudiate the nihilism that it implicitly suggests. . . . In general, American-Jewish fiction writers have written about the Holocaust by focusing on a survivor who has come to this country" (77). On the other hand, the Arab-

Israeli issue deals with conflicting loyalties and senses of justice/injustice, religious difference, and cultural change. This disturbing issue is one more missing piece in the word/phrase/image of Potok's acrostic: there are no friendships, dialogues, or conflicts of belief between Potok's Jewish characters and those of Arabic descent.

These omissions are created by the expectations of readers of modern American fiction, and are generated by modern life. Other lacunae in the "reading event" originate in the readers' lack of preparation: the next readers of these novels will advance Potok scholarship by taking us more deeply, for instance, into such areas of Kabbalah, Talmud, Biblical narratology, even modern art theory. Also, Potok's literary indebtedness and general relationship to Joyce and Waugh, the beginnings of his use of stream of consciousness in In the Beginning, and his indebtedness, in I am the Clay, to Henry Roth's experiment with language in Call it Sleep all need to be the foci of critical attention. In addition, scholarly training in philosophy and especially Solomon Maimon's theories of imagination and fiction might enable us to trace Potok's notion of fiction as a model for structuring human experience: Potok wrote his doctoral dissertation on Maimon.

The reading of literary texts requires the reader to attend carefully. The task requires discipline, the kind of tough-mindedness that enables the reader to perceive the inscribed design, to follow the encoded allusions, to apprehend character development, to uncover important themes. What I have tried to demonstrate in this study of Potok's oeuvre is the reward from attending carefully, and with specialized knowledge, to his art. To the "fit reader," his novels, convincing enough as stories

to begin with, disclose an unexpected complexity and subtlety. His anti-apocalyptic tendency and affirmation of human life and wholeness, in spite of the chaos and political destruction which often threatens to overtake the modern world, contributes to modern dialogues about culture, religion, history, and literature. In the face of post-modern directives, these books enter ancient texts and retrieve materials too often forgotten or neglected, and Potok argues that this use of the old establishes the value of individual growth and connection to community. Potok is not an assimilationist, as Saul Bellow is, and his characters do not enter modern America, like Herman Wouk's, seeking material gain or power. Nor is Potok an isolationist like much of the Hasidic community which turns its back on the riches of secular thought. Rather, Potok affirms the importance of integration, posits ways of creatively joining cultures, and, in his quiet way, challenges every culture and every academy to recognize that hope, love, and justice signify.

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