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# Exile and Identity: Chaim Potok's Contribution to Jewish-American Literature

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EXILE AND IDENTITY: CHAIM POTOK'S CONTRIBUTION TO JEWISH-AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## Chapter 1:

### An Introduction

Ever since Abram first told the story of how he was called out of his home in Ur into a new place of dwelling, the Jewish nation has wrestled with the reality of exile. The Torah account of Abram's story places emphasis on Abram's willingness to leave Ur through his faith in God. As a reward for his faith, God led Abram to the land of Israel, promising that generations of his descendants would come to know this land as home. Since that time the Jewish nation has been wracked with suffering from kings and nations who uproot them from this home. As such, questions of identity and exile are deep in the bones of the Jewish people. These questions of identity and exile inform their history, livelihood, and legacy.

Chaim Potok is a Jewish-American author who grew up in Brooklyn, the son of a Polish immigrant father. Potok's novels concentrate on portraying traditional Jewish life in relation to American culture. As people who find identity in being set apart, traditional Jews often find themselves at odds with aspects of American culture. Chaim Potok's experience growing up in a conservative Jewish family impacted and inspired him to write about an often overlooked portion of Jewish-American culture, conservative Jewish communities. In order to understand Jewish-American culture in the United States one must first understand the much broader spectrum of Jewish-American history. An appropriate introduction to Jewish-American history is encapsulated in an excerpt from Chaim Potok's book of Jewish history, *Wanderings*:

I write [this book] in the bloodiest century in the history of my people; probably in the history of mankind. To be a Jew in this century is to understand fully the possibility of the end of mankind, while at the same time believing with certain

faith that we will survive. There is so much about Jewish history that is mysterious and bewildering; I write with no illusions that I will attain to sudden revelations. I have only the hope that somehow in the writing, a small light will be shed on a nagging question: How is it that after almost four thousand years of tense, fructifying, and often violent culture confrontation - with ancient paganism, with Greece and Rome, with Christianity and Islam, and, for the past two hundred years, with modern secularism - how is it that after all this, Jews still exist and are still - as I am here - attempting to understand and interpret their history? (xiv).

Potok's emphasis on the remarkable existence of Jews is the driving force behind *Wanderings*. The Jewish people have faced all sorts of seemingly dooming circumstances and yet they are still a distinct people group with a history and culture that informs their current being. This "nagging question" is at the heart of my interest in Jewish history as it relates to the interpretations of identity and exile in Jewish-American literature, specifically the fiction of Chaim Potok.

Potok grew up as the son of a Polish immigrant. He writes in the introduction to his book *Wanderings*: "I am an American, a Jew. Early in this century my father came to America from Poland" (xiiv). The impact of his father's immigration on Chaim Potok's writing is significant. His fictional characters often concern themselves with inquiries into what it means to be a Jew in America. Just as Potok's father was an immigrant to America, his characters are outsiders in their respective families and communities. After World War II many Jews immigrated to America because they were exiled from other countries simply for being Jewish. Once these Jews arrived in America and began to make a home for themselves there was immense pressure to assimilate into American society. Assimilation, in the case of these Jewish immigrants, either meant giving up their religion and cultural identity entirely or downplaying both religion and

culture in order to be accepted in American society. The rampant anti-Semitism that forced Jews to the U.S. was not absent in America. In fact the stereotypes of Jews were prominent in American society. One example of a Jewish caricature in American society would be the prevalent joke that Jews are money hungry individuals who will stop at nothing to profit for themselves; a commonly held idea is that Jews are better with money than other individuals and because they are so good with money they seek to take advantage of anyone they can. Of course this is an exaggerated anti-Semitic portrayal, but it stems from a fear that a minority (Jews, in this case) might have control over American society in some capacity. Jews were seen as a dangerous Other (like many minorities), people who must be treated as inferior in order to maintain “normalcy” in American society. There was little tolerance for non-white, non-Protestant/Christian people during the years after World War II, as modern multiculturalism had not yet begun to emerge.

Anti-Semitism led to problems assimilating when Jews began to immigrate to America. Jews were rejected for their different religious views and cultural practices because these were not typical American behaviors or traditions. This rejection created a Jewish-American identity that was distinct from American identity. As this identity was created and Jews began to establish communities for themselves the tension between Jewish-American culture and American society became even greater. In *My Name is Asher Lev* Potok shows this tension by telling the story of one Hasidic Jewish boy, Asher Lev, who is passionate about American art. For Potok’s Asher Lev, his identity as a Jew and his identity as an artist are in direct opposition to one another because creating art is regarded as “making a graven image” in traditional Jewish thought so in being an artist he is violating one of the Ten Commandments. *My Name is Asher Lev* is a book about whether those two identities can be reconciled. For Potok’s Danny Saunders,

his identity as Jew and his identity as an intellectual are threatened by each other because traditional Jews do not leave their Jewish community in order to pursue an intellectual career. However, for Reuven Malter his identity as Jew informs his identity as a young American man. *The Chosen* is a book about their struggle with who they want to be and their friendship with one another. Of course each of these three men is a Jewish-American, which also puts them in the role of an exiled Jew, separated from the land of Israel. Ultimately each of these men also face exile from their Jewish-American communities by embracing some aspect of their identity. Reuven's decision to pursue the life of a Jewish rabbi could isolate him from a relationship with his less conservative father, who reveres intellectual endeavors. Danny's decision to pursue a career as a psychologist could isolate him from his father, a rabbi in the community who expects his son to follow in his footsteps, and his Jewish community as well. Asher's decision to pursue a career as an artist could isolate him from his family and community who regard creating art as being influenced from the evil Other Side. The tension between Asher Lev's passion for art and his father's opinions on the evil nature of art brings up the question of identity for Asher. . Essentially the pressure to assimilate and develop a more secular identity is the heart of the struggle for Jewish-American people. Because of stereotyping as the Other, Jewish-Americans feel pressure to conform to American societal expectations but this might put them at odds with their Jewish-American community. In Morris Dickstein's "Questions of Identity: The New World of the Immigrant Writer" he writes, "The question of identity is central to the immigrant narrative" (119). Jewish-Americans are faced with the choice of assimilating into American culture and becoming more accepted, or maintaining their traditional Jewish identity and becoming more isolated. The centrality of the Jewish-American struggle with identity allows for great similarity between the narratives of Jewish-American authors and these narratives run the

risk of sounding too similar. Dickstein comments on this similarity in his essay as well:

“Immigrant writers all run the risk of telling the same story about their coming of age, their sense of estrangement and cultural displacement, the ordeal of language, the conflicts between generations and their need for acknowledgement within their new world” (130). So the question that arises is, how does a Jewish-American writer separate himself from the stories of other Jewish-American writers from immigrant families? Do Chaim Potok’s novels stand out from the narratives of other Jewish-American writers?

One of Potok’s most distinct characteristics is the significance of Jewish tradition in his writing. Traditional worldview, here and for the remainder of this thesis, is most accurately defined as religious identity or faith as opposed to a non-traditional worldview which is most accurately defined as a more secularized interpretation of the world, one that has given up the faith associated with traditional Judaism. His characters often interact with some aspect of Jewish tradition as a way of interacting with traditional Jewish identity. Potok writes of his father’s belief in Jewish destiny and the role of Jewish tradition in his introduction to *Wanderings*: “He spoke often about the strange destiny of our people, a destiny chosen for us by the transcendent One God who had created man in His own image, thereby making each and every one of us unique and of infinite worth. For some mysterious reason, God’s world was imperfect. Man’s task was to help God perfect it” (xiiv). The traditional Jewish belief that Jews are taking part in the restoration of the world by following Jewish tradition is an important aspect of Potok’s novels; Potok and other traditional Jews are finding identity through their faith. Instead of viewing Jewish tradition as an extreme way of life, his characters reconcile their identities with Jewish tradition by embracing certain parts of their heritage and rejecting other parts. For instance, Danny Saunders finds resonance in Jewish tradition and does not forsake his



Jewish beliefs when he makes the decision to pursue psychology; however he still makes the decision to leave his community in order to become a psychologist and in making that decision he rejects a part of his upbringing. There is no set wrong or right amount of reconciliation with traditional Jewish heritage Potok's characters achieve, and some achieve no reconciliation at all.

Unlike many Jewish-American writers who strive to prove that their Jewish characters are typical American men, Potok does not ignore the option that his Jewish characters could be thoroughly Jewish in the traditional sense. Potok writes, "I have spent...decades in an evolving reshaping of my faith. I have done this by writing novels; that is my personal way of giving shape to thought. The novels are about certain kinds of culture conflicts in the present. This book is about the past that led to this present" (Introduction xiv). Potok's interaction with faith in his own life led to an emphasis on interaction with Jewish tradition in his novels. This interaction highlights a return to traditional Jewish values that is being witnessed in Jewish-American culture. For the first time in several decades Jewish-American literature is emerging from a despairing tone into a hopeful tone (McClymond 16). Potok's novels depict a Jewish-American culture where Jews openly wrestle with aspects of their history and tradition, just as they always have. However, instead of necessarily leaving Jewish tradition in order to pursue a purposeful, American life, Potok's characters often find a place of understanding between the two identifying pieces of their heritage, both Jewish and American. It is possible to participate in the restoration of God's world by maintaining a connection to Jewish tradition and embrace art, education, music and American life at large. Chaim Potok's novels make an argument for dual identity, that is a person can be both an observant Jew and actively participate in secular American life.

Simultaneous engagement in Jewish culture and American life is not a solution for every Jewish-American. A history of exile does not necessitate a firm belief in the restoration of the world for disillusioned people of Diaspora. The shattered fragments of belonging lie around them and it is difficult to imagine a reality where they will feel as though they can impact the world in a significant way. But there are some people of Diaspora who have come through this time of despair to find joy in Jewish-American life and to once again take up the cry that the exile of the Jewish people is for an ultimate purpose. Chaim Potok's novels come from this second perspective of purposeful exile, and this is what distinguishes Potok from other Jewish-American authors. The importance of a history of exile is not lost on Potok, nor is the significance of coming through the despair of isolation and into a life of meaning once again. He speaks of this history and its significance for understanding Jewish suffering in his book *Wanderings* when he writes:

We are in an interregnum between worlds, groping about peering into the future and seeing only our own image vaguely reflected in the dark glass. For many Jews there is a sense of constant struggle with frightening echoes of the past, a wariness that is the reflex of a battered people, a defensiveness after millennia of anti-Semitism, and a fear that once more we might lose hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of our people as we compete in the open marketplace of ideas during this confrontation with secularism. The Jew sees all his contemporary history refracted through the ocean of blood that is the Holocaust. But there is also a sense of renewal, a forced sharpening of our self-identity, a feeling that we are approaching some distant fertile plain, though we cannot clearly make out the paths leading to it. (Potok 398)

The “forced sharpening of self-identity” through tragedies such as the Holocaust plays an important role in the determining effect that exile has on Jews. Either they can stay behind and contemplate the horrors of their history in despair, vowing to separate themselves from the traditional Jewish beliefs that allowed their ancestors to be targeted, or they can move forward with a renewed sense of purpose believing that their history is headed to a place of significance instead of marginalization. This sharpening of self-identity directly connects to Chaim Potok’s novels because his characters struggle with this dynamic in their own stories. His main characters struggle with how to include Jewish tradition, or whether to include it at all, in their adult lives as Potok tells their coming of age stories.

The idea that exile is a communal experience is a characteristic of Jewish culture. Jews experience the exile of their forefathers by participating in retellings of their history at various points in the Jewish calendar and continue to pass this experience back to their posterity by continuing to retell their history. For example when Jews celebrate the holiday of Purim, a celebration of the salvation of the Jews in Babylonian captivity through the courage of Esther, they dress up in costume and wear masks as a testament to the way that their forefathers were forced to hide from evil Haman who sought to kill them during that time period. During this celebration the story of Esther is read aloud and whenever Haman’s name is mentioned the audience shows disapproval loudly by booing and making faces. At the heart of this celebration is the collective experience of the Jewish community. This retelling of stories is a part of Potok’s novels in the way that he portrays the upbringing of his main characters, each of them grow up in homes that are distinctly Jewish. As these characters learn about the stories behind their traditions, so do Potok’s readers. In portraying the culture of storytelling that is so intrinsic to traditional Jewish-American community Potok achieves a rationalization for the strangeness of

Jewish tradition in a way that other Jewish-American authors do not. Potok writes of the importance of Jewish history in his own life in his introduction to *Wanderings*: “In the schools that served me as daytime homes during the early decades of my life, I was taught my father’s Judaism and Jewish history...and the long exile in which my father and mother and sisters and brother and I were now a link in the chain of generations leading to the Messiah” (xiiv). Potok’s image of links in a chain demonstrates the closeness and continuity that Jews feel they have with their ancestors who lived in exile, seeing their experience as a product of the experiences their forefathers had. By acknowledging a history of exile and celebrating Jewish tradition throughout the year, Jews are allowing exile to become a positive reshaping of their identity. Norman Manea writes about the positive effects of exile in his essay “Nomadic Language”:

The uprooting and dispossession of exile are a trauma with positive aspects that only become apparent once one understands the advantage in relinquishing the idea of one’s own importance. Impermanence and insecurity can be liberating. Exile is also a challenging pedagogical experience. There is much to learn when one is forced to begin again at an advanced age, to enter into the world anew and to prove one’s abilities again like a child whose past has been wiped out but has been offered a “second chance” to rebuild his life from scratch, even if without one’s former energy and vigor” (13).

The positive effects of exile are less apparent, particularly for people of Diaspora who feel isolated and unsure because of their impermanence. However, Chaim Potok’s novels are a testament to the “liberation” that can result from embracing one’s identity as a person of Diaspora. By celebrating a history of exile, Jews derive their identity from their Jewish

community and collective experience, rather than a specific geological location. This identity of exile is an alternative to focusing on the return to Israel.

The greatest struggle for Jewish-American writers from immigrant families is maintaining this resiliency in their writing. Some writers draw from their own experience of isolation from American culture in order to portray it in their writing. In general, Jewish-American authors share their experiences of exile from a place of hopelessness, insistent that the loneliness they feel within themselves will never be resolved, and thus they will never escape a life of exile. For instance, in Zsuzanna Ozvath's essay "From Country to Country: My Search for Home" she writes:

Yet there are questions the reader may ask, questions that emerge despite my sense of rootedness in America: have my old nightmares left me? Have I learned to believe that my house will be here rather than destroyed when I return? That those whom I bid farewell to will return? That I will return? That the horrific memories of the past will become part of a bygone world? The answer to these questions is of course no. In my nightmares, I am still running down the streets, homeless, alone. (214)

Understandably, it is dangerous to draw broad strokes from the life of an author to the lives of his characters. However, the experience of loneliness that Ozvath shares in her essay is a snapshot into the inner restlessness and despair that often comes from a life of exile. When investigating the concepts of exile and identity in Jewish-American writing it is important to remember that these some writers return to their own struggles with isolation in American culture in order to create tension for their characters. Chaim Potok's contribution to Jewish-American literature is decidedly resilient in a tide of hopelessness. As Norman Manea writes in

his essay “Nomadic Language”, “As with everything human, the extreme condition of exile contains both loss and gain, hopelessness and hope” (19). Potok’s work embodies both the darkness and lightness that comes from Jewish-American life. This duality of expression and mastery of writing is underappreciated in Jewish-American literary criticism. It is my ambition to provide a case for Chaim Potok’s work to be accepted in the Jewish-American critical arena on the basis of his significant contribution to the Jewish-American canon.

At this point I will move to deeper manifestations of exile and identity in Jewish-American literature. Chapter two of my thesis will bring forward the psychological repercussions of exile by examining the work of Nadine Fresco, Marianne Hirsch, and George Dynin. In this chapter I will build upon the historical information from chapter one in order to present the psychological information. The interaction with Jewish history allows the reader to easily see the connections between the physical loss of home and identity through the immigration of the Jewish people as they moved from country to country. The psychological discussion will concentrate on Jewish history during and after World War II in order to focus on the American-Jewish community and the effects that World War II had on the writers of that time period. Chaim Potok’s parents and Jewish community were forced to deal with the effects of World War II, and these events forced them to talk about the hardships that emerge in Jewish-American communities as they collectively and individually experience isolation, loss, and belonging. These events affected Potok and his family through their pervasive impact on Jewish culture. After the Holocaust, Jewish men and women felt that it was their duty to perpetuate the history of the Holocaust by preserving the experiences that they had experienced in the camps. Though Potok did not personally experience the Holocaust, he faced the expectation to preserve this new horror of Jewish history as a Jewish man.

Chapter three of my thesis will discuss the critical world that surrounds the Jewish-American canon and the way that the ideas of exile and identity are most commonly perceived. In this chapter I will unpack the specific characteristics of exile that people identify as “Jewish” and the space that “Jewish” identity occupies in this world of criticism. It is at this point that I will note the holes in Jewish-American criticism by discussing the acceptance of American-Jewish authors, such as Philip Roth, and the discrediting of other American-Jewish authors such as Chaim Potok. The critical works that I will be discussing include: Mark Krupnick’s *Jewish Writing and the Deep Places of the Imagination*, Julian Levinson’s *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, and S. Lillian Kremer’s “Post-alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature”. In critiquing the absence of Potok through my discussion of these critical works I will also set the stage for my main argument, ie. Potok should be recognized as a notable Jewish-American author because his novels provide commentary on Jewish-American exile and identity in a way that other authors do not, by allowing his characters the option of experiencing exile as a positive, transformative event and state of being.

Chapters four and five of my thesis will focus on a two of Chaim Potok’s novels: *The Chosen*, and *My Name is Asher Lev*. *The Chosen* is about two characters, Reuven Malter and Daniel Saunders. Reuven comes from a traditional Orthodox Jewish home and finds himself attracted to a life of dedication to Jewish tradition, the life of a rabbi. Daniel (or Danny) comes from a staunch Hasidic Jewish home and finds himself attracted to a lifelong dedication of psychiatry. Both protagonists grow up in Brooklyn after World War II and together they navigate the complexities of young adulthood as well as the complexities of Jewish identity, brought on by the creation of the Jewish State. *My Name is Asher Lev* is about a young man named Asher

Lev who grew up in a traditional Jewish home but finds himself fascinated with the world of art. Gradually this fascination grows into a passion and Asher Lev's community ostracizes him for his art. Asher Lev must count the cost of his passion for art, and the foundation of his identity. I chose these novels because they demonstrate the themes of exile and identity in particularly powerful ways. Reuven Malter's exploration of identity and exile leads him back to a more traditional Jewish life as a faith leader in the community. Daniel Saunders journey leads him to an intellectual life of psychoanalysis and his Jewish community learns to accept his choice. Asher Lev's artistry leads him to leave his community behind in order to follow his passion. These three men represent three very different interpretations of exile in Jewish-American life. In this chapter I will highlight the themes of exile and identity in Potok's work and unpack several new sources to comment on his unique interpretation of Jewish-American identity. I will focus heavily on his discussion of tradition in his work and his characters' interaction with the concept and the reality of home. Chaim Potok's work discusses tradition through the tension he presents in his novels. Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders live in the same community and choose vastly different paths for their life. *The Chosen* explores tradition as an elastic springboard for a variety of occupations, even if the community members can be resistant at times. By contrast *My Name is Asher Lev* depicts tradition as a rigid foundation, sure to hurt those who jump too high or far away from the community's expectation. My discussion in this chapter will be bolstered by Kathryn McClymond's essay "The Chosen: Defining American Judaism" in *Chaim Potok: Confronting Modernity Through the Lens of Tradition*, as well as the other essays in that book. I will also interact with sources that speak to Chaim Potok's own interpretation of his fiction such as Jonathan Rosen's "Chaim Potok and the Question of Jewish Writing". As I noted earlier, this section will also include an interpretation of Alan Wolfe's *At Home in Exile*, as I analyze the



correlation between Potok's fiction and trends scholars are observing in the lives of actual American Jews. These chapters will conclude with a segue into the new space that Chaim Potok's work creates for Jewish-American authors, namely a space where they are allowed to find hope instead of bitterness to be a quality of the new American-Jew.

The conclusion of my thesis will provide a look at Chaim Potok's legacy and influence as a Jewish-American author, with particular attention to Potok's depiction of longing in his work. I will establish Potok's credibility as an American-Jewish author by reiterating some of the gaps I noted in chapter three (Mark Krupnick's *Jewish Writing and the Deep Places of the Imagination*, Julian Levinson's *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, and S. Lillian Kremer's "Post-alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature") and filling those gaps with the new interpretations of American-Jewish identity that I discussed in chapter four. At this point I will utilize sources like Janet Burstein's *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing Since the 1980s* in which Burstein makes no mention of Potok's influence upon later Jewish-American writers. By finding the gaps in Jewish-American criticism and explaining the characteristics of Potok's novels that fill those gaps, I will connect the new ideas of Potok with the more accepted ideas of other Jewish authors and submit the idea that Chaim Potok's hopefulness must be married with a more typically "Jewish" bitterness in order to provide a clear picture of Jewish-American identity that is true for our world today.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The Impact of a History of Exile on Jewish-American Identity**

The history of the Jewish people is a history of exile. As an exiled people, they have been forced to cherish their identity in order to survive various oppressors throughout history. One way of cherishing Jewish identity is to continue to tell stories where Jewish men and women stood against evil rulers and won. The Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) is filled with stories of men and women who conquered struggles in their lives through the power of their God. The emphasis that Jewish history places on faith in a higher power is an important component in the traditional Jewish lifestyle. Remembering the faith of Jewish forefathers allows traditional Jews to have courage in their lives as well. But what psychological effects does this history of exile have on modern Jewish-Americans?

#### **Psychological Repercussions from a History of Exile**

Jewish people accept the story of exile as part of their heritage, and they pass the hope of redemption down to their children. For centuries Jews have been separated from their homeland, the land of Israel, but traditional Jews believe that when their prophesied Messiah comes to earth he will set wrongs to right and they will be reunited with their home (Potok 87). The Jewish people have experienced a multitude of exiles in their history; notably there is the diaspora who fled into Europe and Russia after the uprisings against the Romans. It is these two movements of exile that are central to my thesis. After the Jews rose up against the Roman Empire in various battles and riots during the Jewish-Roman wars between 66 and 136 CE, they migrated to Europe to seek sanctuary, leaving their desecrated homeland to hungry Roman hands (Sachar 196). During this time they moved to various countries across Europe, concentrating in the areas of France, Spain and Germany (Sachar 354). During the 14th century Jews began to be expelled

from Europe in droves and they fled again, this time to the regions of Poland and Russia in order to seek shelter. These Jews were left in relative peace until the early 1900s when the first quakes of anti-Semitism began to reverberate throughout the region (Sachar 689).

Interestingly, the exile of the Jewish people echoes the exile of man from the Garden of Eden, according to the Hebrew Scriptures. Adam was exiled from the Garden of Eden at the beginning of creation, but the grand journey of man is to be reunited with the homeland that he was exiled from when all things are redeemed at the end of time. Don Isaac Abravanel is an ancient Jewish scholar who thought about the way these two ideas functioned in Jewish history and human history. In Moshe Hallamish's essay, "Don Isaac Abravanel on Exile and Redemption", he summarizes Abravanel's interpretation of these two "circles of exile":

According to Abravanel, two important circles operate in history. The first which begins with Adam and his exile from the Garden of Eden, will be completed at the end of history when man returns to the Garden of Eden. The second circle is contained inside the first one and relates specifically to the Jewish people. This circle begins with the exile of the Jewish people from their land and ends with their redemption and return to the land of Israel. (115)

Seeing the exile of the Jewish people as a shadow of the overarching exile of man allows for a different interpretation of Jewish exile. Jewish people are not a subgroup of humanity who are the only ones isolated from their homeland; all of humanity is exiled from the Garden of Eden and each one longs for a home that they have never seen. The Jewish people understand the pain of exile more acutely because not only have they been exiled from the Garden of Eden with the rest of humanity, but they have also been exiled from the land of Israel.

Because the foundational story of Jewish tradition is one of exile, Jews have persisted and contributed to humanity in spite of being forced out of many nations at a moment's notice. The traditional Jewish belief that all of the sufferings of exile will be reconciled has allowed them to maintain their language and culture when conqueror after conqueror should have swallowed them whole (Potok 64). There is a courageous resistance hidden deep in their bones that has served them well throughout history. But this courageous resistance seemingly met its match during World War II, when over six million Jews were murdered by the Nazi regime. It is important to realize that though Chaim Potok's works are not Holocaust novels they depict the same courageous resistance for which the survivors of the Holocaust stood. The refusal to be conquered, no matter what the cost has kept Jewish history and culture alive and it is intrinsic to the Jewish stories that Potok presents in his novels because his characters harness the courageous resistance of their ancestors in order to reconcile their identities with encroaching assimilation.

In the months and years after the liberation of the concentration camps, the survivors maintained an eerie silence about their experiences. Nadine Fresco is a psychological analyst who has published a study called "Remembering the Unknown". In this study she interviews several men and women who are children of Holocaust survivors and documents their experiences. One survivor's child speaks of her parents' silence, "No one ever talked at home about being Jewish. In fact, no one ever talked about anything that might be a problem. As far as my parents were concerned, they had come out of it, and there was no point in talking about it (Fresco 6). Having come out of the Holocaust seemed to be enough for the men and women who experienced the horrors of Hitler's concentration camps, but their children sought answers to questions of identity and purpose. Fresco writes, "The children had been cast in the mould of that prohibition, struck dumb by silence, unable to transgress it, unable to ask for an answer to the

question that they dared not ask their parents” (9). There were a thousand questions that Holocaust survivors’ children must have had for their parents about their experiences, but the resounding question of Jews who finally began to speak about their experiences and the experiences of their parents in subsequent years was: Why? Fresco concludes her analysis of the Holocaust survivors’ children by writing: “These latter-day Jews are like people who have had a hand amputated that they never had. It is a phantom pain in which amnesia takes the place of memory” (10). Jewish people felt the deep void of sadness that comes in the aftershock of such a tragedy, and as they experienced this void some of them accepted the silence that their parents brought back from the camps. Others began to speak into the void in order to make the world hear their pain.

### **The Concept of Postmemory**

There is a term for the “phantom pain” that children and descendants of Holocaust survivors feel; that term is postmemory. This term was coined in recent years by Marianne Hirsch, a Jewish-American scholar and writer, as she read the book *Maus* by author Art Spiegelman. *Maus* is a graphic novel that depicts one Holocaust survivor’s retelling of his experiences to his son. As she read this novel, Marianne Hirsch discovered the need for a term that embodies the attachment children of Holocaust survivors feel toward the indirect experiences of their parents. This concept relates directly to Potok’s novels because his characters experience postmemory. That is, they feel the “phantom pain” of the generation before them as Jewish-Americans even if they are not direct descendants of Holocaust survivors. Marianne Hirsch’s term can be applied to the collective experiences of Jewish-Americans who continue to experience events of their ancestors, despite being absent from the actual event.

Hirsch expounds upon this term in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*:

Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated. (22)

The term postmemory expands past the experiences of Holocaust survivors' children to encapsulate the experience of anyone who grew up hearing the stories of the previous generation. People who experience postmemory cannot be expected to understand the experiences of their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents as they came to know about these experiences after they occurred (Hirsch 25). However, these people "remember" the experiences of prior generation because they comprehend their lives in response to the stories their family members tell about these experiences.

Gradually the descendants of Holocaust survivors and Holocaust survivors themselves began to tell their stories and bear witness to the horrors that occurred during that time. They spoke of the importance of bearing witness to the tragedy so that others after them would not forget what happened. In *Storms of Paradise: the Politics of Jewish Memory*, Jonathan Boyarin writes, "Jews have always, it seems, used narrative to recreate their shared identities across time"

(36). Because Jews have always used narrative to share their experiences with subsequent generations, they once again used this device to tell the story of what happened to their people during the Holocaust. It became increasingly important to maintain the high degree of accuracy in these stories because men and women who remembered the Holocaust began to die off. In her essay “The Task of Memory: American Jewish Writers and the Complexities of Transmission,” Victoria Aarons writes of this importance: “The ever-increasing passage of time that separates us from the events of the Holocaust and the inevitable if not deeply regrettable failures of memory make it all the more imperative that we bear witness to the past” (306). Preserving the experiences of Holocaust survivors is one of the tasks that postmemory allows a person to fulfill. In maintaining the suffering and detail of Holocaust survivors’ experiences as though they were their own, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and future generations can be acquainted with one facet of Jewish exile.

### **Jewish Identity Following the Holocaust**

After the Holocaust, Jews saw the creation of the Jewish State and the nation of Israel become a reality. But as the Jewish State took shape, Jews began to realize that their homeland was not a place of peace and redemption where the exiled at last became invited inhabitants. Instead the nation of Israel endured almost continuous war and suffering. The disillusionment with the reality of the Jewish state lead Jewish Diaspora thinkers into a new comprehension of home. In her essay, “In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora”, Sophia Lehmann writes about the nuances of “diaspora”. The term diaspora, first used to describe Jews who lived outside of their homeland during Babylonian exile, became more inclusive, being used to describe any people group separated from a homeland (Lehmann 101-2). This affects Jewish identity because people around the world began to see themselves as people of diaspora even

though they were not specifically Jewish. The widespread use of the term diaspora is important for Jewish identity because it provided a basis for Jewish-American authors to deeply connect with communities of readers who were not Jewish but had experience similar repercussions of exile. This pluralization of the term diaspora exemplifies one realization that Jewish thinkers had in the years after the Jewish state was created; the longing for home that Jews have felt for centuries is not so much a longing for a physical place they can access in the present but also a metaphysical reality that can give them access to the past experiences of belonging they have lost in exile. The metaphysical reality I speak of is more of a mental state of being; people of Diaspora create a place of belonging in their minds by interacting with other likeminded individuals in a community of people who have been displaced. By accessing a metaphysical home, Jewish people find some semblance of resolution. Of course a mental state is no substitute for a tangible homeland, and first generation Jews often passed the lost experiences from one generation to another by telling stories of the way things once were before they lived in exile (Lehmann 105). Because Jewish people began to speak and write about home as a mental state instead of a geographic location others saw the similarities in their own exile compared to Jewish exile. The suffering that the Jewish people knew during the Holocaust spurred them on to share their longing for home with the world and many others who felt that same ache for home, even if not the same home, answered the call.

The question of Jewish identity came into play for post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers as well. How do Jews maintain their identity if they are to be isolated from the homeland their forefathers have always told them about, a home of peace and reconciliation where the sufferings of the past find explanation? What is the role of Jewish heritage, language, and culture in their new world? The answer to these questions is hotly debated in Jewish culture because it is a



question of assimilation into the culture of their new physical dwelling or exclusion from the culture of their new physical dwelling. One Jewish-American writer who depicts the tension of assimilation and exclusion in her writing is Eva Hoffman, a fiction author. In her “Afterword” to the book *The Writer Uprooted*, Eva Hoffman expresses the ache of exile that Jewish people feel:

Home is constituted not only by the tangible present, but also by the past; and exile...takes place in time as well as space. Being ejected from the places that hold one’s accumulated memories, or from sites holding family history, can be felt as painful, even if those memories come in mixed affective colors. It is hard to discard one’s first world completely as to extract the first language from the psyche; to do so would be to some extent to reject or discard oneself. (241)

The question of Jewish identity for the Jewish Diaspora is an important consideration in the lives of Jewish men and women. Jewish people establish a community in their places of residence that protects their Jewish identity. This collective identity is one solution to the identity problem for Jewish-Americans. Chaim Potok’s work aligns with this belief because his characters are deeply embedded in their respective communities and this inclusion allows them to contemplate their identities as Jewish-Americans from a place of belonging within the Jewish-American community. In this community they can be both Jewish and adhere to the nationality of the country they live in. For Jewish-Americans this community is especially important as Jews maintain their connection to Jewish tradition and culture through their community while simultaneously experiencing newfound American identity through the lens of the community.

Two ways of identifying people of Jewish descent, religion, and/or culture who are also Americans are: Jewish American and Jewish-American. I use the term Jewish-American, rather than Jewish American because “Jewish-American” links the two words together, demonstrating

a connection between two cultures rather than a separation between two cultures. Jewish-Americans embody the connection between Jewish culture and American culture because they experience Jewish life and American life as one reality. Eva Hoffman notes the importance of a hyphenated identity for people of Diaspora:

We can have hyphenated identities, in which the hyphen stands for a link, rather than a division...We are constituted not only by our pasts and received identities but also by our minds and imaginations. We can open out to new experiences, languages, and cultures. We can, in some cases, absorb them deeply enough into ourselves so that we become truly bilingual and bicultural. There is, in other words, the possibility of addition as well as subtraction - and nowhere is this more possible, of course, than in the always polyvalent universe of literature. (243-4)

Jewish-American identity is different from Jewish identity or American identity because it allows Jewish-Americans to experience the world as people of two cultures. This experience is something that Jewish-American authors share in their writing and through literature Jewish-American authors give voice to the duality of traditions, languages and cultures that they have come to understand as people of Diaspora.

### **Literature as Catharsis**

The compulsion that Jewish-American writers have to share their postmemory with the world is a trait of Jewish-American literature. It allows readers to have a direct connection to the experiences they transmit in their writing, allowing readers of Jewish-American literature to experience the phenomenon of postmemory as well. Hoffman speaks of this connection in her

“Afterword” to *The Writer Uprooted*: “The literature of exile has often acted as a sort of deep bridge across geographical borders, cultural mentalities, and ideological divides” (246). The expression of shared experiences that Jewish-American writers have had and are having with generations of Jews before them is a point of entry for a Jewish-American outsider. Through Jewish-American literature outsiders are invited to take part in these experiences as well and to go on bearing witness of those who have come before. In her essay “The Task of Memory: American Jewish Writers and the Complexities of Transmission”, Victoria Aarons writes about the importance of transmitting memory, specifically in Jewish-American literature:

Such an impulse to transmit memory characterizes American Jewish literature, from its immigrant roots, to those post-World War II Jewish writers who made claims not only to a land but to an evolving literary culture, and eventually to a contemporary generation of Jewish writers staking claims on the threshold of a new millennium. The stories they tell - narratives of loss and continuity, suffering and survival - link the disparate assemblage of American Jewish writers, writers that span more than a century, to a shared history, a history of stories and storytelling that depends upon the persistent entreaties of memory, real or imagined, a collective stronghold held in sharp embrace against the ruptures of the past and the time-spent erosions of memory. (300-1)

Jewish-American literature is built upon a foundation of shared experience through honest storytelling. The Jewish-American community maintains connection with centuries of Jews who have come before them because of the Jewish-American writers’ dedication to continue preserving the memories of their ancestors and the personal and collective experiences of other Jewish-Americans in response to those shared memories.

Bearing witness to the catastrophes of Jewish history and the pain of exile is a heavy burden. With this burden comes deep sadness and longing for a restoration that seems distant; Jewish-American writers who choose to carry this burden in their writing do so because they feel that the world deserves to hear the stories of the people they represent in their writing. Elie Wiesel, acclaimed Holocaust survivor and author, writes of his inspiration in his essay "Why I Write": "I never intended to be a philosopher, or a theologian. The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it. This is what Jewish tradition teaches us" (907). As a Holocaust survivor himself, Wiesel witnessed the death of many men, women and children who did not get the chance to tell their story. His dedication to transmitting the experience of men and women stems from Jewish tradition and he sees his place as a writer in relation to his identity as a Jew. Wiesel goes on: "I owe them my roots and my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. And since I feel incapable of communicating their cry by shouting, I simply look at them. I see them and I write" (908). As a Jewish writer, Wiesel is compelled to communicate the suffering of other Jews through his writing. The dedication allowing Jewish men and women a voice in the world after their death by perpetuating their stories and the belief that those stories impact Jewish history are two qualities of Jewish-American writing that distinguish Jewish-American writers from other members of the Jewish Diaspora. No longer are the descendants of Jews sitting in silence, afraid to ask questions of their parents for fear of the answers they might hear. No, these writers want to feel the full effect of the memories that any of their parents or grandparents are willing to share, because that

is what Jewish narrative has always done. The core belief of storytelling in Jewish culture is that the story being shared has a direct and relevant impact on the person hearing the story and Jewish-American writers who share the experiences of Jewish men and women who have come before them express this belief in their own lives. Eva Hoffman writes, “For even though the Holocaust was a primarily Jewish catastrophe, the alchemical magic of writing can convey such extremity to those who have not lived through it, intimating the universal stratum of experience within the particular, and thus carrying the text from the writer’s imagination to its far-flung readers and destinations” (246). It is the hope of these Diasporic writers that readers will imagine the stories that they read and these imaginations will spur them to share the experiences they have heard, that these experiences will become a burden that they carry with them in every sleeping and waking hour, that through the literature of Jewish-American authors readers will take these stories to heart and be changed by them. It is the hope that these readers will go on remembering.

In order to appropriately introduce the next chapter, it is essential to detail the latter half of Jewish history (1750-1945) in order lead up to the exile of Jews in America after the Holocaust. After the country of Russian began to quake with anti-Semitic rumblings, several Russian rulers came into power who were particularly bent on purging the country of all Jews. Catherine II, who reigned from 1729-1796, and Alexander III, who reigned from 1845-1894, were two rulers in particular who escalated anti-Semitism in Russia with anti-Jewish policies. At the turn of the century there were large scale persecutions of Jews, including forced relocation to specified areas of the country and mass killings. Once again the Jews found themselves in exile (Sachar 698). On the heels of Russian persecution came the rise of one Adolf Hitler in Germany in the early 1930s. Hitler’s reign would be one of the supreme slaughters in Jewish history; the

blood of over six million men, women and children was on the hands of the Nazi regime before concentration camps were liberated by allied forces beginning in 1944 (Sachar 752). Following the Holocaust some Jews fled to America to seek refuge, as the United States was part of the Allied forces who liberated them. As the Jews immigrated to the United States they situated themselves in generally urban areas, creating communities where they could talk together of the atrocities that they had experienced and dream of new days ahead for their people (Sachar 784). This Jewish-American exile is different from European or Russian exiles in the fact that the anti-Semitism Jewish-Americans experience in America is comparatively mild when contrasted with the expulsions and exterminations documented in European and Russian history. However, Jews are still contemplating their place in America and grappling with the tension of assimilation into American culture or isolation from American culture due to their unique religious practices, traditions and ways of life.

### Chapter 3:

#### Collective Jewish Experience and Restoration of Jewish Culture in Literature

“It’s just a place. Our forefathers have been pushed out of many, many places at a moment’s notice.”

“Maybe that is why we always wear our hats.”

This conversation between *Fiddler on the Roof*’s Golde and Reb Tevye serves to demonstrate the intimate relationship that Jewish people have with exile. Many of the traditions Jews celebrate stem from time spent in exile. For instance, the feast of Passover is a commemoration of the Hebraic return from exile in Egypt, when the Pharaoh, at the behest of the great prophet Moses, at last agreed to allow the Hebrew people to return to their homeland. This is one of the earliest celebrations of Jewish return from exile, and it is a tenant of Jewish faith to keep Passover each year as a remembrance of the long awaited exodus that Jewish forefathers experienced. Each year at Passover Jews imagine the bitter pain of their ancestors living as slaves in Egypt and savor the sweetness of freedom as people who do not live under the Pharaoh any longer. This visualization allows modern day Jews to relive the agony of exile while simultaneously appreciating their Jewish community. The fetters of exile bind many Jewish authors’ hearts and minds to this day. These authors write of a longing for home that is unequalled in any other literature, because their traditions glorify a place of belonging, a place where they can feel secure in celebrating the fullness of their story.

#### Collective Experience in the Jewish Diaspora Community

The collective longing for home that Jewish-Americans celebrate in their traditions is experienced through the Jewish diaspora community. Jews find their sense of belonging in their community while simultaneously experiencing isolation as a people group. This foundational

diaspora community allows Jewish-Americans to become connected with other Jews across country borders, language barriers, and even time periods. For example, Jews adhere to a Jewish calendar as well as the standard Gregorian calendar. This adherence to a different calendar causes Jewish patterns of life to stand out. Jews keep track of their weekly Sabbaths and yearly festivals according to the Jewish calendar and unite together for the holidays dictated. This connects them with other Jews around the world, while separating them from a world that does not recognize these holidays. One of the fundamental teachings of Judaism is that all Jews figuratively participated in the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Some scholars, such as S. Lillian Kremer, think that this same figurative participation permeates other experiences in Jewish history, such as the Holocaust. In her book *Witness through the Imagination*, Kremer writes, "Tradition commands all Jews to consider themselves figuratively present at Sinai to receive the Torah. Contemporary Jews increasingly feel that, geography aside, they were present at Auschwitz. American Jews carry the psychological burden of Auschwitz and Chelmno and Dachau and Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka and all the other Nazi death factories where their relatives died brutal deaths" (6). In connecting Sinai and the Holocaust, Kremer makes an interesting point about the concept of belonging in Jewish thought. If one identifies as a Jew in the traditional sense, that is if one feels figuratively present at Sinai, then this identity piece enhances the sense of belonging that a person feels because they are connected with an experience that brought purpose and meaning to the lives of the Jewish people in spite of exile. However, if one identifies as a Jew in the more contemporary sense, that is if one feels figuratively present during the Holocaust, this identity piece enhances the sense of estrangement that a person feels because they are connected with an experience that brought shame and suffering to the lives of the Jewish people. Here we find a difference that can manifest into



tension between traditional Jews and contemporary Jews. Collective isolation, as exemplified by the Jewish community's continued remembrance of the Holocaust, and collective belonging, as exemplified by the Jewish community's continued remembrance of Sinai, are traditional Jewish values that are taught, but collective belonging is lost in the experience of contemporary Jews who speak about the tragic loss of Jewish culture and identity. For these people, there is no resolution for the heartache and brokenness of exile; they are prophets proclaiming the death of beauty, acceptance, and relevance of Jewish tradition in the modern world.

### **Collective Belonging and Traditional Judaism**

Thus, discussions of collective belonging are left to traditional Jews who continue to believe that Jewish tradition gives beauty and acceptance to Jewish men and women and has a place in the lives of modern day Jews. Traditional Jews emphasize identity that stems from a sense of unity and contemporary Jews emphasize identity that comes from a sense of brokenness. For one, it is the duty of Jewish people and Jewish literature to encourage this sense of unity by telling stories that reflect belonging and reassurance, even in difficult times. For the other, it is the duty of Jewish people and Jewish literature to talk about the hardships that sever the Jewish community and to tell stories that magnify this brokenness. This viewpoint creates a community of suffering for Jewish-Americans where they feel that they must participate in the brokenness of their history and culture to be accepted. Maeera Shreiber writes about the differences in these two viewpoints in her essay, "The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diasporic Poetics". In her essay traditional Jews are regarded as people who go silent about exile and the suffering that Jews experience because of that, and the contemporary Jews are regarded as people who actually bring freedom to themselves and others by talking about the suffering that results from exile:

Exile, as a mark and consequence of a profound severing of the relation between God and the people of Israel, makes for a collective crisis in aesthetic production. One solution to the catastrophe is, of course, to go silent – to hang up one’s lyre and acknowledge that forced homelessness dooms the possibility of song, which depends on and affirms a link to the divine principle that bestows meaning on the community. The alternative is to turn a liability into an asset; the question is also the answer, God’s absence or perilous distance makes for a condition of chronic loss that becomes the subject of a binding song. (Shreiber 273)

Shreiber makes an interesting point about the end goal of the two viewpoints regarding whether or not to discuss the effects of catastrophe on Jewish life; each side is seeking to bring about unity in the Jewish community. Traditional Jews who do not wish to speak about the horrors of the past encourage fellow Jews to remain silent and lean on the steadfastness of the community around them, and this is how they propose to survive catastrophe. As they overcame suffering in Babylon, Jews who experience the Holocaust experience a means to overcome suffering through the support of the Jewish community. They go back to stories of survival and restoration from their history and continue to see their history as a method of catharsis in their present circumstances. These men and women encourage those around them to go back to their traditional Jewish heritage, tradition, and culture in order to find a sense of belonging and triumph that allows them to overcome suffering. A concrete example of this viewpoint would be the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a scholar who stood alongside Martin Luther King Jr. on matters on social injustice, while simultaneously writing some of the most moving commentaries on the relevance of Jewish spirituality in modern American life. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Heschel writes, “This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to

experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things” (29). Heschel does not disguise the unpleasant aspects of Jewish tradition and history, but his focus remains on the redemption of Judaism in modern Jewish life, encouraging his readers to strive towards a meaningful spirituality that governs their actions and intentions.

### **Collective Isolation and Contemporary Judaism**

Contemporary Jews who want to discuss the details of catastrophe also want unity, but their unity only comes after a community has been honest about the hurt that they have felt and still feel. Some of these men and women encourage a rejection of Jewish, heritage, culture and tradition, insisting that an emphasis on the triumph of Jewish heritage is what predicated suffering in the first place. By clinging to Jewish heritage, culture, and tradition Jews were easily marginalized and targeted, allowing such atrocities as the Holocaust to become possible. For Contemporary Jews a legacy of remembrance in relation to the suffering of Jews is more important than a legacy of religious tradition. A concrete example of this viewpoint would be the work of Elie Wiesel who writes in his book *Night*: “For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time” (109). Though Wiesel is not a proponent of rejecting Jewish tradition, his emphasis on remembering and bearing witness to the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust allows Contemporary Jews to take extreme measures in separating themselves from the Jewish religious tradition which allowed them to be earmarked for destruction. For Wiesel, memory of the Holocaust, perhaps the greatest catastrophe of our time, is essential to lives of Jewish men and women because if the Jews who died during the atrocities of World War II were to be forgotten, the meaning of those Jews’ lives

would vanish. For contemporary Jewish writers it is necessary to perpetuate the exile that they have felt for centuries in order to validate the lives of men and women who lived in exile before them.

Brokenness is perceived as necessary through the contemporary Jewish interpretation of freedom. That is, one can only be truly free from suffering if one addresses and contemplates the suffering itself. In order to appreciate the lightness and joy that human life provides, one must first move through the heaviness of sorrow and attempt to comprehend the brokenness that besets humanity at every turn. The American novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote about despair: "At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily" (6). Regarding brokenness as necessary is dangerous to Jewish-American people because when they domesticate despair it begins to feel familiar to them. In a sense if one believes that despair is essential to one's identity then that despair is the only semblance of home that a man or woman in exile experiences. This domestication of despair causes a question of identity in the mind of Jewish-Americans. If they feel that brokenness is a necessary component of their collective identity, then they simultaneously remove themselves from an association with the traditional Jewish community. In Julian Levinson's book *Exiles on Main Street*, Levinson discusses the alienation from identity that Jewish-American authors experience, specifically Abraham Cahan, a Jewish-American newspaper editor, politician, and writer from the 1930s. Levinson goes so far as to say, "The price of [Abraham Cahan's] American success, it turns out, is alienation from an inner self whose connections to the Old World [traditional Judaism] seem as ineradicable as they are inexpressible" (Levinson 13). Jewish-American authors experience exile from themselves by severing connections to the Old World of Jewish thought. The Old World of Jewish thought is

the traditional religious roots of Judaism, where Jewish followers are encouraged to find their sense of belonging in Jewish community instead of the world outside it. This ties back to the tension between traditional Jews and contemporary Jews. For authors like Abraham Cahan, to take on a discussion of suffering in one's writing is to leave behind a connection with traditional Judaism.

### **The Death of Jewish-American Culture**

Julian Levinson goes on to speak about the manifestation of this loss in identity in Jewish-American fiction by stating that many Jewish-American authors proclaim the death of Jewish-American culture in their fiction. He writes, "What we learn from these [Abraham Cahan's] novels is that in America, there is no chance for resuscitation, repentance, or return...the tone of these final scenes is wistful rather than strident: the task at hand is that of mourning, not rebelling" (Levinson 14). Levinson's idea that an acceptance of brokenness is also an acceptance of defeat is important to a rounded discussion on Jewish-American exile because he highlights one of the most important perceptions of Jewish-American literature and Jewish-American life, bitterness. Jewish-Americans are often characterized as being bitter about various aspects of their life, and this characterization stems from the truth that some Jewish-American writers, such as Abraham Cahan, are prone to view their existence through a lens of pessimism rather than remaining upbeat and encouraging. Of course this characterization is not true of all Jewish-American peoples, but one would be hard pressed to dispute the idea that most Jewish-Americans are bitter if one used canonized Jewish-American literature alone. Jewish-Americans are characterized as being negative and despairing because Jewish-American authors have left that impression on American society with the bitterness of their writing.

An interesting consequence of this outlook on life is the assimilation of Jewish writers into American culture. Michael Krasney writes of this decision to assimilate in his essay “The Death of the American Jewish Novel”: “Jewish writers have increasingly less and less to do with Jewishness. The saturation of Jewish American novels during the period when they were so overwhelmingly popular made them increasingly appealing only to a limited audience, and we are not in an age of mass marketing...Increasingly, we find Jewish writers who simply happen to be Jewish” (96). As Krasney notes in his essay, Jewish writers made the decision to write about characters who happened to be Jewish because reading audiences were more likely to read about American characters with Jewish characteristics rather than Jewish characters with American characteristics. Some of the bitterness and negativity towards life that shows up in Jewish-American writing during this time could be attributed to this rampant assimilation in the Jewish-American community.

The bitter aftertaste of most contemporary Jewish-American literature is part of the longing for home that the Jewish-American community experiences. Not only do Jewish American authors write about the tension between speaking about suffering and remaining silent about suffering, but they also concern themselves with issues of isolation and identity because they feel isolated and self-conscious in American culture. Traditional Jews are more likely to pull away from assimilation into American culture because they feel that they would lose the semblance of identity they have if they gave up certain cultural practices and traditions. Contemporary Jews are more likely to embrace assimilation or at least resign themselves to it because they do not believe that Jewish culture can flourish in the midst of American culture. Authors such as Philip Roth, have discussed the hardships of being Jewish in American society, and maintaining a Jewish identity without feeling entirely apart from American life. Roth depicts

the loneliness of exile and the profound isolation that being excluded from American society brings to Jewish-American life. This isolation is characteristic of Jewish-American writing because Jewish people have experienced isolation definitively as a people group. They have been ostracized and isolated for generations and Roth captures the despair and bitterness that comes from that sort of suffering in his writing. Roth sought to universalize the exile of the Jewish people not by diminishing it, but by domesticating it, that is making it a familiar aspect of existence, and showing his readers that they dealt with this sort of exile in their own lives as well.

### **The Resuscitation of Jewish-American Culture**

The negative perception of a Jewish-American's outlook has been brought about by authors who have voiced their cynicism openly. However, there is an undercurrent of optimism in Jewish-American writing. Multiple scholars are discussing this phenomenon in their writing, and noting a move back toward reconciliation with a more traditional silent Judaism on the part of contemporary Jewish-American authors. In his book *Exiles on Main Street*, Julian Levinson writes, "There are important similarities linking all of the writers who were born and bred in America and who found themselves, in the middle of the road of the American century, bereft of language for expressing their ultimate concerns and commitments. In different ways, all have turned toward some version of "Jewishness" to uncover the resources with which to construct such a language" (191). Philip Roth and other Jewish-American authors create characters that are not religious and not influenced by any structured tenants of faith. For many Jewish-American authors, it is important to resolve the "strangeness" of Jewish life by creating characters that are only Jewish by birth. But now instead of resiliently standing on the belief that it is the duty of a Jewish-American author to show the normality of a modern Jewish-American life by creating

characters who are not connected with traditional Judaism, other Jewish-American authors are turning back to a more traditional Judaism in order to determine whether aspects of traditional Judaism have a place in contemporary Jewish-American life.

### **Chaim Potok's Reconciliation with Jewish Culture**

One such author is Chaim Potok, who has had multiple best-selling novels such as *The Chosen* (1967) and *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972). Potok's works are part of the undercurrent of reconciliation with traditional Jewish culture and values because his characters are traditional Jews or associate themselves with traditional Judaism in some way. This means that Potok's characters readily identify themselves as Jewish, they practice Judaism, and when Potok's characters speak of exile they speak of it in relation to traditional Judaism as well as American culture. Potok's characters experience an exuberance of life, a hopeful outlook and sense of self-assurance that is not widely accepted by Jewish-American critics, as seen in the pattern of Jewish-American literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Interestingly, the hopeful outlook has been historically expressed by Jewish-American women, whereas Jewish-American men have historically expressed a somber outlook. In this sense, female Jewish-American writers are more traditionally Jewish, encouraging a positive outlook on Jewish life and a value in Jewish heritage. Male Jewish-American writers tend to be more contemporary Jewish, encouraging a negative outlook on Jewish life and devaluing Jewish heritage. Two of these male authors are Abraham Cahan, and Sholem Asch. Julian Levinson notes this delineation in his book *Exiles on Main Street*; female Jewish-American authors are exuberant and joyful in their writing, while male Jewish-American authors remain disparaging (Levinson 13). Chaim Potok's fiction is unusual because as a rule, male Jewish-American authors do not present optimistic characters or stories in their fiction. Potok is unlike more typical male Jewish-American authors



because his characters experience the dark moments of exile as well as the lighter moments of exile. His characters wrestle with the value of Jewish tradition, sometimes finding religious tradition or parts of religious tradition to inform their own identities. Potok's characters often find resolution, at least in part, for the exile they experience, whereas more typical male Jewish-American authors do not afford their characters the same resolution.

### **Chaim Potok's Characterization of Jewish Culture**

Furthermore, Jewish-American literature has focused on a departure from traditional Judaism to such a degree that an author, like Chaim Potok, who has traditional Jewish characters is no longer interesting in the critical arena. Chaim Potok's characters are intrinsically spiritual in a way that many characters across the canon of Jewish-American literature are not. Critics can understand how exile, isolation, and loss of identity would result in depression from Jewish-American men and women, because these themes have manifested these feeling in other Jewish-American novels. However, it is unconventional to see characters confront these same realities and come away with a buoyancy of spirit, and resolution of belonging that many of Potok's characters find, so Potok's writing is not as easily compartmentalized. Still scholars continue to note a return to traditional roots of Jewish-American culture. One such scholar is Mark Krupnick; in his book *Jewish Writing and the Deep Places of the Imagination*, he writes, "Many Jewish American writers are writing about...the retrieval of their Jewish religious and cultural legacy. The whole burgeoning field of Jewish studies is one major expression of this turn. The question remains whether the current retrieval will prove any more lasting than previous Jewish religious and cultural reawakenings...The lightness of being is lighter in America than anywhere else" (254). This "burgeoning field" is the expression of Jewish-American experience without qualifying characters as men who happen to be Jewish. The Jewish characters and the authors

who create them do not apologize for being Jewish, nor do they apologize for being religious. Chaim Potok's fiction is directly related to this field because his characters are unapologetically connected with traditional Judaism and they experience exile and belonging in relation to their Jewish communities.

### **The Resuscitation of Jewish Culture Continues**

Potok's fiction is not the only Jewish-American discussion with traditional Judaism. As Krupnick suggests, several other American authors have incorporated aspects of Jewish religious tradition into their writing. Some of these authors include Arthur Cohen, Cynthia Ozick, and Hugh Nissenson. In her essay "Post-alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature", S. Lillian Kremer goes so far as to identify this trend as the spark of a Jewish-American renaissance:

A significant portion of contemporary Jewish-American fiction is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts. Jewish religious thought and values, the trauma of the Holocaust, and the establishment of a Jewish nation in Israel are among the most significant themes of Cynthia Ozick, Arthur Cohen, and Hugh Nissenson...Pervasive treatment of Jewish subjects and values, reference to Judaic texts, and introduction of the midrashic narrative mode, in which a familiar story or theme is given a new reading, are simultaneously making a profound mark on American thought and literature and heralding a Jewish-American literary renaissance. (572)

Kremer's analysis of the current climate in Jewish-American literature not only highlights a newfound relevance for Judaic texts and aspects of Jewish religion, but she also speaks about the rebirth of a Jewish style of writing, the midrashic narrative. The Midrash is a Jewish book of

stories that elaborate on various Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) stories, giving readers access to rationalization for some of the marvelous experiences Tanakh characters have, as well as some of the most puzzling actions that Tanakh characters take in order to follow what God would have them to do. The Midrash is further commentary on the stories of the Tanakh, allowing readers to experience further understanding when they read the stories of the Tanakh over again. Chaim Potok employs this Jewish style of writing in his own narrative in the way that his characters interact with symbols and traditions in Judaism. Potok's readers return to discussions of traditional Jewish heritage and culture with a new sense of understanding. Jewish-American literature is poised for a critical acceptance of authors, such as Chaim Potok who have long written about the strength that Jewish-American people can garner from interacting with their traditional Jewish heritage.

### **Chaim Potok's Place in the World of Criticism**

To accept Chaim Potok into the world of Jewish-American criticism would be to validate his contributions and the contributions of other authors like him. Potok's best-selling records acknowledge his success in the American public, but critics have not discussed his work in their volumes of Jewish-American criticism. A critical examination Potok's novels and inclusion of these novels in the Jewish-American canon would help to balance the influence that Jewish-American authors, fixated on the woes of exile without hope of triumph or reconciliation, have had on the perception of Jewish-Americans. S. Lillian Kremer concludes her essay "Post-alienation: Recent Directions in Jewish-American Literature" with these thoughts: "Jewish-American fiction is not dying... [It] is a vibrant, flourishing literature, more assertive than it was in the fifties and sixties, more essentially Jewish. Literary critics will need to broaden and extend their knowledge of Judaic thought if they are to explicate this new Jewish-American fiction with

the discernment it merits” (589). For decades, Jewish authors have heralded the loss of Jewish-American culture with their bitter characters and harsh paintings of Jewish-American existence. Jewish-American fiction cannot be expected to perpetuate in these conditions and Jewish-American scholars speak about Jewish-American fiction as though every book that is written by a Jewish-American author may be the very last. The idea that Jewish-American fiction is dying stems from the influence that pessimistic authors had on the Jewish-American canon. Their characters are so alienated from their Jewish roots that many critics do not expect Jewish-American fiction to be able to recover. However, Lillian S. Kremer encourages critics to immerse themselves in traditional Jewish culture in order to understand the contributions that authors like Chaim Potok are making to Jewish-American literature. A return to traditional Jewish culture would be helpful to Jewish-American critics and Jewish-American fiction because critics would be able to see the new life that is being communicated by authors, such as Chaim Potok, who immerse their stories in traditional Jewish symbols, history and stories.

A return to tradition would inevitably mean a return to the discussions of exile and identity in Jewish-American literature, for Potok’s writing does not deny the isolation that Jewish-Americans experience and the questions they have regarding their identity. In fact, his characters bring new meaning to these Jewish-American themes, necessitating a reevaluation of his contribution to Jewish-American literature. A return to tradition would resolve the gap in critically acclaimed Jewish-American fiction because collective isolation and collective belonging would be experienced simultaneously. Critical acclamation of Potok’s work would balance the bitterness that critically accepted authors, such as Philip Roth, have heaped upon Jewish-American fiction. Acceptance of Potok’s work would begin a discussion among Jewish-

American critics that would argue for the acceptance of other authors who write about the collective experiences of exile, both terrible and joyful, that Jewish-Americans experience.

## Chapter 4:

### Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*

#### Background of Chaim Potok

With the advent of Chaim Potok's first novel, *The Chosen*, his popularity as an author begged the attention of literary critics. First published in 1967, *The Chosen* vaulted Potok to national acclaim through a wide readership, much to the surprise of many Jewish-American authors, including Potok himself. This novel, situated in Brooklyn, New York in the 1940s, is a coming of age story about two young Jewish-American men. Literary critics were forced to respond to Potok's novel, due to its impact on the American public; a novel about traditional Jewish culture was an anomaly in the world of literature. In the essay "Chaim Potok and the Critics: Sampler from a Consistent Spectrum," scholar Leslie Field remembers a colleague saying, "He's not like the other Jewish-American novelists being read by the general American public. He's an entirely new breed. The critics won't know what to do with him" (Field 3). Field's colleague's prediction proved true for the literary critics indeed did not know what to do with Potok's work. His work did not fit neatly in a category of the Jewish-American canon, so after taking a cursory glance over his work and deeming it "too romantic", most critics dismissed Potok entirely as merely a popular author. Kathryn McClymond tackles this accusation in her essay "*The Chosen: Redefining American Judaism*": "Potok is often charged with presenting a romanticized (rather than realistic) view of traditional American Jews in the mid-twentieth century...Potok's work is undervalued in part because he does not present the version of Judaism preferred by critics of his time" (4). McClymond's characterization of Potok as a "romantic" refers to the narrative voice and tone in his work. His characters find resolution between their identity of faith and identity of intellect by the end of *The Chosen*, unlike the more messy battles

between faith and intellect that are fought in actual human life that often have no resolution at all. The preferred version of Judaism McClymond mentions is the one that previous Jewish American authors offered up to the American public and the critical world after World War II. This interpretation of Judaism presented Jews as either wrestling with their Jewish traditions or being staunchly faithful to them. (McClymond 14). In short they were faced with the choice of assimilation into American culture or isolation in their own Jewish communities. Other Jewish-American authors who were writing around the same time were: Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer; their characters were far less Jewish than they were American. However, as McClymond notes, "Potok's characters integrate their core Jewish and American identities rather than choosing one over the other" (16-7). In the late 1960s it was unheard of to depict Jewish characters who reconciled the Jewish and the new American world they now found themselves in, the thought was that a Jew must pick one identity or the other.

### **Chaim Potok's *The Chosen***

Potok's novel is set in Brooklyn, New York in the 1940s and chronicles the experiences of Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders over a period of six years, from the time they are fifteen years old. Reuven and Danny are similar because they are both two teenage boys questioning their place in the world and contemplating what to do with their lives. The events in the late half of World War II, such as the death of President Roosevelt, the end of World War II, the devastation of the Holocaust and the creation of Israel as a country function as a backdrop for their queries, oftentimes sparking a question in the mind of one boy that then spills over into the mind of the other due to their friendship. However, Reuven and Danny are different because they come from two different branches of Judaism. Reuven's family is Orthodox, believing that

intellect and faith work together to govern a person's purpose. Danny's family is Hasidic, believing that one should be governed by faith alone.

At this point it is important to pause and define the two varieties of Judaism that are present in *The Chosen*. There are multiple denominations of Judaism. Reformed Jews and Liberal Jews practice little to no aspect of keeping Biblical commandments in their daily life; they dress in typical American clothing and wear no head covering (Cohen 43). Orthodox Jews keep a great deal of Jewish law and incorporate it into their daily lives; they dress in typical American clothing but one will observe tallit (corners of a Jewish prayer shawl) hanging from beneath their shirts and kippahs (Jewish head coverings) on their heads. Hasidic Jews strive to keep all of the Jewish law and are visibly different from other Jews because of their long earlocks which they do not cut, velvet kippahs on their heads, and dark, plain clothes ordinarily accompanied by a prayer shawl that goes over their clothes. As far as religious beliefs are concerned, Orthodox Jews believe that their faith works together with other aspects of life, such as education and seek to better themselves by being good students in both areas. Hasidic Jews believe their faith determines their role in life, and strive to become more devoted to their strict religious traditions each day (Cohen 43). The ultimate difference between these branches of Judaism is who takes a more literal stance on how the Biblical commandments are to be obeyed, with Liberal Jews taking the least literal stance and Hasidic Jews taking the most literal stance. Reuven Malter, the narrator of *The Chosen* and an Orthodox Jew himself, provides a description of a Hasidic baseball team which allows even a non-Jewish reader to immediately ascertain that remaining set apart from other Jews is important to the Hasidic community:

There were fifteen of them, and they were dressed alike in white shirts, dark pants, white sweaters, and small black skullcaps. In the fashion of the very



Orthodox, their hair was closely cropped, except for the areas near their ears from which mushroomed the untouched hair that tumbled down into the long side curls. Some of them had the beginnings of beards, straggly tufts of hair that stood in isolated clumps on their chins, jawbones, and upper lips. They all wore the traditional undergarments beneath their shirts, and the tzitzit, the long fringes appended to the four corners of the garment, came out above their belts and swung against their pants as they walked. These were the very Orthodox, and they obeyed literally the Biblical commandment[s]. (Potok 16)

Because they are different Reuven sees them as weaker, and unable to play baseball well. Based on this description, one can tell that Reuven is sizing this team up for himself. When one of his teammates in the novel calls the Hasidic team “murderers”, implying that they are a great challenge in baseball, Reuven tells his teammate he does not see a threat (18). However as the game progresses it is apparent that the Hasidic team is stronger than Reuven first surmised. When he gets hit with a baseball and taken out of the game, he watches his Orthodox team lose to Danny’s Hasidic team. This loss also results in an eye injury on Reuven’s part due to being hit with a baseball Danny aimed toward him. After the injury, Danny’s father makes him go to the hospital and apologize to Reuven and their friendship begins in realizing the commonality they have as Jewish-American teenage boys. This friendship blooms into a deep trust as they learn about each other’s families, interests, secret dreams, and aspirations. Reuven and Danny learn from one another despite the different branches of Judaism they come from; their friendship proves the unity that is possible across the Jewish-American community.

## Exile and Identity

Chaim Potok's expression of exile and identity in *The Chosen* provided something new to previously recorded Jewish-American experience. Though he documents experiences specific to adolescence in the Jewish-American community, his novels have found enduring resonance outside the Jewish-American community. The baseball game meeting between Reuven and Danny quickly sets the stage for a combative theme throughout the novel. Throughout the book the boys often find themselves at odds with their families, each other, each other's families and even their own selves. In order to understand Potok's work with Jewish identity in his novels it is important to know that he presents the overarching metaphor for each of his novels in the beginning of his opening chapter. He speaks about this stylistic choice in an interview with Elaine Kauvar:

I use the openings to make the statement concerning the central metaphor of the novels. The central metaphor of *The Chosen* is combat of various kinds, combat on the baseball field, combat in Europe, and then what happens when the combat in Europe is actually brought home to Brooklyn because of the Holocaust and the subsequent hunger to create the State of Israel...Sooner or later, somewhere at the beginning of the novels, you're going to find the central metaphor treated in one way or another. (qtd in Kauvar 294)

In the opening scene of *The Chosen* Danny and Reuven find themselves pitted against each other in a baseball game that results in Reuven getting injured when Danny hits a low line drive toward him. This initial combat sets the stage for the issue of identity both boys will grapple with throughout the novel. Each boy tries to reconcile his identity with the different Jewish traditions that have been passed down to him. There are three different conflicts taking place in the novel:

the internal conflicts Reuven and Danny have, the external conflicts between the two different branches of Judaism, and the external conflicts between the Jewish-American community and American society. These conflicts connect to Jewish exile in the United States because they serve to demonstrate the challenges that young Jewish-Americans face when considering how their community will function in their adult lives.

If one examines this scene in light of the overarching metaphor of the novel, the Orthodox Jewish community as a whole has misjudged the strength of the Hasidic community and their relevance in American society. Initially Reuven thinks that Danny's team will not be talented baseball players because they are very religious Jews, however Danny's team proves that they are a viable baseball team, much to Reuven's surprise. During this era of American history citizens were concerned with all things American as a way to show support for the troops fighting overseas. In the 1940s while many men were away fighting and the American people were concentrated on the war effort, people often took time away from the stresses of daily life to root for their favorite team at a local ballpark. Orchestrating a game in which these two sects of Judaism play together suggests that the identity of both teams is common in the way that they are American. However, by ramping up the tension in pitting Danny and Reuven against each other, Potok suggests something else about identity, perhaps these teenagers are the same kind of American but they are not the same kind of Jew. In the opening of *The Chosen* Chaim Potok uses this baseball metaphor to pose the question, have we made a misjudgment about the relevance of the Hasidic community in American culture? If the Hasidic community is not relevant to American culture, their validity as a people group is being called into question on the basis that the manifestations of their exile look different than other exiled peoples who have come to

America. They would not be considered truly American due to following Jewish law strictly because they insist on segregation rather than assimilation.

### **Exile as Education for American Readers**

Another way the opening baseball metaphor functions is to situate the reader inside the mind of an Orthodox Jew who interacts with a Hasidic Jew at close range. Reuven's role as narrator cannot be overstated for it is through his eyes that we first see the Hasidic Jew, namely Danny Saunders. Reuven's view of Hasidic Judaism shatters in the first chapter quite literally when Danny's baseball hit breaks Reuven's glasses and lands him in the hospital. Reuven realizes that Hasidic Jews are not as foreign as he first perceived by experiencing Danny's athleticism firsthand. Most Americans and even some Jewish-Americans would not know a great deal about the Hasidic community because they are so private. Danny and Reuven would not have gone to the same religious gatherings or have been associated with mutual friends, but they have the shared commonality of a baseball game and this encounter thrusts them into a relationship with one another. Much like Reuven, Potok's readers did not know about the Hasidic community so getting to "meet" a Hasidic teenager and find that he is not so different from any other American teenager is an interesting part of *The Chosen's* impact on American society. Kathryn McClymond writes about the importance of Reuven as narrator:

Potok re-orientes the reader so that she sees the world through Reuven's eyes, committed to Orthodox Judaism, but also committed to some level of participation in American life...Here Potok differs markedly from the more critically acclaimed Jewish American writers, who focused on the angst of rejecting one's Jewish identity as a necessary prelude to living a full American

life. In *The Chosen*, the problem is how to work out one's Jewish identity in light of being an American - but never to leave one's Judaism behind. (10)

By telling the story from the perspective of Reuven, Potok allows us to glimpse the Hasidic world in an authentic way as Reuven discovers that he and Danny are both dealing with the same questions of identity and belonging.

When Potok's characters consider their identity they consider their secular life and their religious life as one experience; this is a different expression of Jewish-American life than other more well-known and critically acclaimed Jewish authors have put forward in their writing. By placing readers in such close contact with Hasidic character, Danny Saunders, through Reuven Malter's depiction of his growing friendship with him Potok takes away some of the ignorance about the Hasidic community. This contact allows readers to experience specific Jewish-American struggles with identity but also to find these same identity struggles reflected in their own lives. In setting up the baseball game, Potok harnesses something familiar to most readers as innately American, but then he introduces the tension between Reuven and Danny by placing them on different teams and orchestrating a scene in which Danny's hit ends up injuring Reuven's eye. Often in sports diversity among team members is encouraged and celebrated; teams are seen as more well-rounded and versatile because of the unique skills and backgrounds of the team members. However, in this baseball game diversity among team members is not celebrated. The Hasidic team is composed of Hasidic boys who adhere to strict religious guidelines. The Orthodox team is composed of Orthodox boys who see the Hasidic team as a group of individuals who discriminate against diversity in their team. The Orthodox players see the Hasidic team discriminating against them because they are all in Hasidic clothing as opposed to clothing that would be more appropriate for an athletic event. Several of the Orthodox boys

even take this opportunity to tease the Hasidic boys about how silly they look in their prayer shawls (Potok 8). Reuven and Danny have to decide for themselves where Judaism fits in their lives and they question their identities.

At the same time, a story about two teenagers who question the beliefs of their parents, grandparents, and communities is not unfamiliar to readers. Danny questions the beliefs of his parents and grandparents when he begins to consider a life of psychology because he is not following in his father's footsteps as tzaddik. He also questions the beliefs of his community in making this decision; because he will not continue his family's tradition as religious leader, the community will undergo a shift after his father dies. Interestingly, Reuven questions the beliefs of his parents and grandparents in the opposite direction, making the decision to live a more traditionally Jewish life than he has been brought up in so that he can become a tzaddik like Danny's father. In making this decision Reuven also questions the beliefs of his community; because he chooses a lifestyle that is more traditional, he leaves his childhood Orthodox upbringing behind. The decisions of Danny and Reuven complement each other to such a degree that Reuven's decision to become a tzaddik counteracts Danny's decision not to become one, and Danny's decision to become a psychologist counteracts Reuven's decision not to pursue an intellectual career in the secular world. In regard to the relevance of *The Chosen* outside the Jewish community, McClymond writes: "The novel demonstrate[s] that while the particularities of Hasidic experience may be foreign to most Americans, the underlying concerns and conflicts are identical to other Americans' conflicts. It suggested that people across various religious communities wrestle with questions about how to live as modern Americans within traditional religious frameworks" (20). The familiarity of questioning one's identity, even if the main characters are Jewish-American teenagers, gives Potok's novel the relatability that other Jewish-

American authors have without giving up the traditional Jewish aspects that help set his characters apart. Potok has been criticized for a lack of relatability in his work but the success of his novels and the relevance of his characterization dispute that criticism.

### **Chaim Potok's Reconciliation of Jewish-American Identity**

One way that *The Chosen* suggests people question how to live in religious communities is the way in which Potok sets up the tension between the intellectual world and the religious world, making this tension applicable to many readers who come from a religious background apart from Judaism. The conflict presented in *The Chosen* places the reader in a position to understand Jewish-American experience in a new way. Rather than seeing Jews as others, readers see them as familiar. For instance, Reuven's battle within himself about whether to choose a life of faith or a career of the world is a familiar battle in the lives of readers, particularly those who had strong religious ties in their childhood. Reuven's relationship with his father is conflicted because he desires to become more traditional than he has been taught to be. Reuven wants to follow Jewish law more literally in order to become a religious leader in the Hasidic community. This move toward tradition could be seen as a rejection of intellectual study if faith and intellect were mutually exclusive. Thankfully, they are not. Reuven's relationship with his father has always encouraged Reuven to pursue higher learning. By choosing to become a tzaddik, Reuven is pursuing more education but instead of venturing out into the secular world for his education, he ventures deeper into his Jewish-American community.

Danny develops a relationship with Reuven's father as he questions a potential career in psychology. At one point in the novel, Danny receives book recommendations from Reuven's father based on his newfound interest in psychology (Potok 95). Danny's relationship with his father is conflicted because he wants to become more intellectual than he has been taught to be.

In the Hasidic community the son of the tzaddik is expected to follow in his father's footsteps and become a religious leader as well. Reuven's relationship with his father is conflicted because Reuven wonders if retreating to a more traditional lifestyle, a lifestyle that his father does not lead, will be a problem for them. It is interesting that each boy grows to admire the other boy's father: Danny receives encouragement towards the intellectual world from Reuven's father, and Reuven holds Danny's father as an example of the kind of religious leader he would like to become one day.

For the greater part of the novel the boys' relationships with their biological fathers is unresolved, instead each of them favors a relationship with a surrogate father who instructs them in lessons of Jewish identity. This shift in family ties is a plot device Potok uses to highlight the discord that comes with leaving the way of life you were brought up in. Both Danny's father and Reuven's father feel that their sons must choose intellectual life or a life of faith, certain that both cannot work cohesively together. However, Potok's characters comprehend their secular life in terms of their religious experience, through their decisions to lead lives where faith and intellect work together to inform their decisions. Reuven's decision to become a tzaddik is not a rejection of his upbringing in the Orthodox community. In the first chapter of the book Reuven's eye was injured and his glasses were broken from that baseball injury. In a sense *The Chosen* is a novel about getting hit square in the face with the relevance of Hasidic life. For Reuven this relevancy is at first painful because he sees that he will have to leave his familiar life. However as Reuven heals from the initial shock of the realization that he wishes to lead a life as a religious leader in the Hasidic community, he gains new sight as it were. Reuven comes to understand that his decision to become a tzaddik is not a rejection of his childhood education in expanding his mind, rather it is an affirmation of that education. By becoming a religious leader, Reuven will



continue to learn and grow and question aspects of Jewish religion because people of faith can also be people of intellect. Danny's decision to become a psychologist is not a rejection of his upbringing in the Hasidic community. Instead it is an affirmation of his upbringing as a strictly religious Jew. In his childhood Danny learned care for the world by watching his tzaddik father listen to the problems of others and provide a religious diagnosis in order to enhance their life. Danny wants to continue this tradition in a new way by becoming a psychologist. His decision is not a decision of intellect that leaves behind a life of faith, rather he sees intellect and faith working together in order to shape his desire to become a psychologist. Potok's work is differentiated from the writings of previous Jewish-American authors because of this discrepancy (Kremer 27). Giving readers access to a community of Jewish-Americans who embrace Jewish tradition and American identity makes Chaim Potok's work a significant contribution to Jewish-American literature. Critics have long held the idea that Jewish-American authors either have novels that encourage lives of intellect or lives of faith, Chaim Potok's work suggests that Jewish-Americans can live both lives simultaneously.

To exclude Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* from the Jewish-American canon is to support the preference toward a certain version of Jewish identity, an identity that looks more American than Jewish. This identity does not accurately represent all Jews in America and the Hasidic and Orthodox Jewish communities are just as important to Jewish-American literature as any other Jews. What we can observe through Potok's exile from the literary canon is that he has been overlooked in literary criticism. Kathryn McClymond writes of this misjudgment in her essay "*The Chosen: Redefining American Judaism*":

The tendency among critics of Jewish American fiction was to highlight a certain kind of Jewish American experience, one chronicled in the writings of authors

such as Roth, Bellow, and Malamud. By highlighting the stream of fiction, without noting divergent streams of writing, critics were not just simply evaluating fiction. They were also glossing over the diversity of Jewish experience in America...Such treatment conveys not only a certain perspective on traditional Judaism, but also assumptions about the trajectory of modern Judaism, implying that the future of Judaism is assimilation. (21)

It is important not to marginalize divergent streams of writing in Jewish-American literature. Marginalizing works that represent portions of Jewish-American culture that are not comfortably classifiable as “American” emphasizes the pressure upon literary critics to determine who presents a legitimate Jewish-American experience in their writing and who does not (McClymond 20). McClymond continues to elaborate in her essay:

By omitting Potok’s work from the great canon of mid-twentieth century Jewish American fiction, the myth of monolithic religious history is perpetuated. Smaller traditional Jewish communities get dismissed as out of date, irrelevant, perhaps even backward, and thus are indirectly labeled as insignificant to the understanding of developing Jewish life in that time. Such a characterization not only oversimplifies Jewish American fiction; it belies the diversity of Jewish American religious experience and the complexity of Jewish American identity. (23)

In leaving Potok’s work out of Jewish-American fiction and not taking his writing into consideration when critically assessing Jewish-American fiction, the integration of spirituality and secularism that comes across so beautifully in Chaim Potok’s characterization is exiled from critical world. One of the ways that Potok showcases this integration is through Danny’s decision

to become a psychologist and his father's interpretation of his career as becoming a new kind of tzaddik (Potok 186). Danny's father sees Danny's secular ambition from a spiritual perspective, thus understanding the resolution between the Hasidic community and the outside world that Danny has found in making his decision to pursue psychology. Another way that Potok showcases the integration of spirituality and secularism is through Reuven's decision to become a tzaddik (Potok 105). Reuven's father has encouraged Reuven to read books all his life in order to expand his mind outside the borders of his Jewish-American community. When Reuven makes the decision to lead a more traditional Jewish life his father sees this as an intellectual decision, believing that Reuven will continue to be a student of books that expand his mind, even as a religious leader. For Reuven, a life of faith and a life of intelligence go hand in hand. In order to appropriately represent all of Jewish-American fiction, even popular authors must be considered when composing volumes of Jewish-American fiction.

If literary critics only choose Jewish-American pieces of writing that end in assimilation into American culture, the traditional culture of the Jewish-American community will continue to be absent from the literary canon. In order to accurately represent all of Jewish-American life through Jewish-American criticism, critics must choose pieces about traditional Jewish characters who retain their faith, either in part or in whole, because a life of faith is important to them. The tension between the Jewish-American community and the threat of assimilation is represented in *The Chosen* when Danny Saunders' father, a tzaddik or Jewish religious leader, deals with his emotions in the wake of the Holocaust. He says: "Six million of our people have been slaughtered...It is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning. We cannot wait for God...There is only one Jewry left now in the world...It is here in America. We have a terrible responsibility. We must replace the treasures we have lost...A madman has

destroyed our treasures. If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people." (Potok 182). The idea that the Hasidic community will face complete assimilation, both through calculated exterminations, such as the Holocaust, and through loss of belief in Jewish tradition and validity of the Jewish-American community, is a threat to their traditional way of life, because complete assimilation would mean that they lose their Jewish religious traditions and pieces of culture that are specific to Hasidic Jews. Danny's father, a Hasidic Jew, sees a direct connection between his life of faith and rebuilding American Jewry. He sees his life of faith as a means of resistance, intent that his continued allegiance to Hasidic tradition is giving meaning to the deaths of Jews who have been persecuted and murdered. The way that Danny's father takes immediate responsibility for the restoration and perpetuation of Jewish tradition is also an example of how Potok portrays the concept of exile in his writing. A consequence of exile can mean assimilation for Jewish-Americans but Potok portrays a different identity for his characters. When Danny and Reuven speak about Danny's father's reaction to the Holocaust later in the chapter Danny speaks of this collective suffering: "Danny's hand went slowly to an earlock and I watched him tug at it nervously. 'Six million Jews have died,' he said. 'He's - I think he's suffering for them'" (Potok 189). The picture of a Jewish leader suffering for the loss of other Jewish people across the world is important to a complete view of how Jewish-Americans deal with being in exile. It is second nature to take on the suffering of another Jew for Danny Saunders' father because he comes from a long tradition of people who maintain attachment to their ancestors through remembering their suffering. Assimilation is a consequence of exile, and the danger is that as Jewish-Americans adjust to life in America they will gradually disappear into American culture without retaining their Jewish sensibilities. The concept of exile

does not affect one person in isolation who must then bear it alone, the entire Jewish-American community is a pocket of exiles who suffer together.

Danny's father's role as a tzaddik for his community necessitates his participation in the suffering and remembrance of Jews who have suffered. When Danny decides that he would like to become a psychologist instead of taking the mantle of tzaddik after his father, Reb (a term for rabbi) Saunders says: "Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik" (Potok 267). Danny's father sees a direct correlation between his role as a servant of the Jewish community and Danny's role as a servant of the world. In saying that he will be a tzaddik for the world, Reb Saunders is saying that Danny will take on the suffering of others in the world of psychology and through bearing the suffering of others, he will offer restoration and hope to a world that desperately needs it. Kathryn McClymond writes in her essay "*The Chosen: Redefining American Judaism*": "Because Potok draws on a different stream of American Judaism, he describes a different kind of relationship between Orthodox Judaism and mainstream America. Potok does not assume that Jewish and American identities are mutually exclusive" (16). Thus, the duality of both Jewish and American identities is completed in Danny's mind and in the mind of his father for his religious upbringing and continued dedication influence Danny's ambition to become a psychologist and his father sees that. By leaving the Jewish community to study in psychology Danny is perpetuating a Hasidic way of life because he continues to be influenced by his religious beliefs in secular society. Instead of shunning him for leaving the community, Reb Saunders gives Danny his blessing. As for Reuven, his decision to become a tzaddik instead of pursuing more secularized lifestyle is neither a rejection of his upbringing in an Orthodox family, nor a rejection of intellectual study. Reuven has many years of Jewish

education that he needs to catch up on in order to be able to function as a religious leader in the Hasidic community. Reuven does not leave a life of education behind in order to become a tzaddik; the last chapter is only the beginning of his life as a student of faith.

## Chapter 5:

### Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*

Chaim Potok's novel published in 1972 tells the story of Asher Lev. Asher Lev's life begins in a sheltered Jewish home in Brooklyn's Hasidic community. His relationship with his mother is the most cherished part of his life and his relationship with his father is the most confusing aspect of his life. From a very young age Asher feels drawn to portraying people, objects, and experiences in his daily life through his art work. When he grows older he notices that there is a large amount of suffering in the world. This realization is brought about by his mother's severe anxiety following the death of her brother who was killed while traveling for the Rebbe, the leader of the Hasidic community, and his father's involvement with traveling for the Rebbe to and from the Soviet Union in the years after World War II. Asher's father serves as a messenger for the Rebbe and is often absent from his family. Asher often faces his mother's anxiety about his father's safety alone. He does not share his feelings about loneliness with his father or his mother, instead he channels his feelings into his artwork. It is during this time in his childhood that he realizes he cannot oblige his mother's request to "draw pretty pictures" if he is to be a good artist. One day Asher speaks with his father about his latest realizations:

"It's not a pretty world, Papa."

"I've noticed," my father said softly. (Potok 54)

This is one of the few uncontested agreements that Asher has with his father. After acknowledging the darkness in the world, Asher feels compelled to depict the darkness he sees through his art. He is especially drawn to a photograph he sees in a newspaper of Russian leader Joseph Stalin in a coffin following his death. This picture becomes a point of fixation for him in the days and weeks after he sees it. He becomes obsessed with capturing Stalin's lifeless form as

accurately as the newspaper picture he saw. He draws this photograph everywhere and gets in trouble at his school because he is caught doodling this picture in class. When he gets in trouble for this behavior his father first begins to fully reject his artistic aspirations. His father sees Asher's art as an association with evil because Asher depicts darkness and suffering in his drawings. To draw pictures at all is to make a graven image and this is against one of the tenets of Jewish faith, but to draw pictures of corpses in coffins is a level of profane that goes beyond childish ignorance.

### **Exile and Identity**

The disapproval of his father affects Asher deeply but he finds that he cannot help his affection for art. In his book *A Way of Seeing: Chaim Potok and Tradition* John Timmerman writes about the underlying question in Asher's interest in his father's approval of his artwork, 'The central theme of all of his books has been the enduring and changing religious tradition of a people, and how that tradition shapes the present moment and is shaped by it...The question that the young protagonists of his novels begin to ask of their fathers is, "Can we trust our tradition sufficiently to grow with it, or must we only guard it jealously as a precious memory?"' (516). Because his father's devotion to Jewish tradition prevents him from accepting Asher as an artist, Asher grows resentful of Jewish tradition. At this time he also begins to discover that he feels powerful when he creates art because his father does not have influence over that area of his life. He begins to contemplate his identity as a Jewish-American by examining the light and darkness inside himself and in his art:

I looked at my right hand, the hand with which I painted. There was power in that hand. Power to create and destroy. Power to bring pleasure and pain. Power to amuse and horrify. There was in that hand the demonic and the divine at one and



the same time. The demonic and the divine were two aspects of the same force. Creation was demonic and divine. Creativity was demonic and divine. I was demonic and divine. (*My Name is Asher Lev* 220)

Asher Lev's realization that his creativity is both demonic and divine and thus his interest in creativity is an example of his acceptance of the duality within himself. He comes to a place where he accepts both parts of himself and sees how each of them interact with each other. He is not demonic or divine; Asher Lev is a cosmic cocktail of both creation and destruction. This acceptance of demonic and divine tendencies within himself is a metaphor for his acceptance of both portions of his identity, both Jewish and American. He sees these two identities as one instead of mutually exclusive choices. This acceptance translates to an acceptance of the consequences of embracing his true identity, that is exile from his Jewish community. It is as if his embracing his true identity as Jewish-American necessitates an intimacy with exile that Asher has not known before. Asher's choice to face exile instead of retreating back into his Jewish-American community shows that he has confidence in the validity of his art in the world. If he does not bring his art into creation then no one will, and by depicting the demonic and divine tendencies within himself he takes part in the ongoing creation of the world, a deep-seated Jewish belief.

### **Psychological Repercussions of Exile**

*My Name is Asher Lev* presents a narrative in which the main character is not accepted by his father. Asher Lev leaves the community but does not receive his father's blessing when he chooses to become an artist. The character of Asher Lev is, Potok says, closely related to Chaim Potok's personal experience in being rejected as a painter by his father (Kauvar 306). In an interview with Elaine Kauvar Potok says: "I started painting when I was about nine years old,

but it became a big problem in my family. I come from a fundamentalist Jewish background, and my father would have nothing to do with painting. Painting to him was the preoccupation of the gentile world” (294). Again in Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* the idea of assimilation comes into play. As the son of a very religious father, Asher Lev is supposed to find an occupation that directly correlates to bearing the suffering of his Jewish community and contributing to the perpetuation of that community. Choosing to go out into the world and work as an artist is not a reasonable decision, and unlike Reb Saunders, Asher Lev’s father cannot reconcile Asher’s identity as a Jew and an American. In his mind he is supposed to be either a religious individual or a secular individual. In that same interview when Kauvar asked Chaim Potok to elaborate on the idea of painting being directly connected to the gentile world, Potok said:

An artist deals in images, and the Jewish tradition has a very serious problem with images. It’s had a serious problem with images from the very beginning because in the ancient, pagan world, images were intimately connected to modes of worship. The Second Commandment is against image-making because image-making was part of ancient worship. The tools with which the sculptor sculpted his idols were sacred; the stone was sacred, and the quarry was sacred. There were blessings that were made all through the process. Anything connected with process, therefore, was anathema to the ancient Israelite...Asher Lev typifies what might happen to a religious Jew who wants to enter the mainstream of Western art. (303)

Asher Lev’s father is not able to reconcile faithfulness to Jewish tradition and a passion for image making. He is not understanding of Asher’s love for art, he sees it as a hold that the Evil One has over Asher. Edward Abramson writes of Asher Lev’s problem with refusing to give up

his art in his book *Chaim Potok*: “Asher Lev’s problem stems from the fact that he reaches a point where, like Danny Saunders, he places more stress upon his own personal fulfillment than upon the furtherance of the goals of the Jewish community” (65). Unfortunately, unlike Danny Saunders, Asher Lev faces no redemptive conversation with his father, because his father will not concede that any form of image making could be a healthy occupation for a devout Jew. This lack of resolution addressed another critique of Potok’s work, as Asher Lev’s ending is decidedly not “romantic” in the sense that he does not settle the disapproval of his father or his community

Later in the novel after Asher Lev has come to realize that he will no longer be accepted by his father should he enter the field of Western art, he identifies himself by writing: “My name is Asher Lev... I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years.” (Potok 305). He is making reference to his seminal work in the novel, a crucifixion painting of his mother strung up by her arms with the blind strings in a window as his father looks on. The violence of this portrayal expresses Asher Lev’s feelings about the way his father has always tried to protect him and his mother from a life free of influence from the outside world. Because Asher Lev’s paintings are dripping with bitterness about the tradition that he comes from, his father can see no other recourse but to banish Asher Lev from the Jewish community in order for he and his wife to remain a part of it.

Asher Lev’s story is without a doubt a different novel entirely from Potok’s *The Chosen*. There is no reconciliation between father and son, no mutual understanding and heartfelt blessing from his father. In his book *Chaim Potok: A Critical Companion* Sanford Sternlicht writes: “In the end *My Name is Asher Lev* comes close to tragedy. Although he has triumphed as an artist,

Lev is heartbroken at the reception of his crucifixion paintings by his family and the Ladovers [a sect of Orthodox Jews specific to Russian-American immigrants] and is returning to Europe an exile from his parents, his community his city, and his country. He has hurt the people he loves most” (77). However because Asher Lev has reconciled his art and his religious beliefs in his own mind, he continues to create after he is exiled from his Jewish community. Had he not been comfortable with his own identity prior to his Jewish community’s ultimate rejection of his art, Asher Lev might have chosen to remain in close contact with his family rather than pursuing his craft. In an interview with Elaine Kauvar Chaim Potok speaks about freedom in being exiled from a community as a consequence of participation in art: “Every 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” (200). The freedom that Asher Lev finds at the close of the novel is bittersweet because he has his art, but he loses his Jewish community. He is an exiled from a community of exiles with only his art for consolation.

### **Chaim Potok’s Reconciliation of Jewish-American Identity**

The idea that all of humanity has been exiled from the Garden of Eden and that the arc of human history bends toward a redemption of that separation is central to Jewish belief, as I discussed earlier in this thesis. An interesting compliment to that story is a story found in the Talmud (an ancient instruction book on Judaism) that teaches each person was touched by an angel so they cannot remember any aspect of Talmud. Devout Jews become scholars of Talmud, taking care to integrate this instruction into their everyday lives. In his essay "Chaim Potok and the Question of Jewish Writing" Jonathan Rosen writes about this story:

The Talmud teaches that all of us study Talmud in the womb and that, before birth, an angel touches us on the mouth and we forget it all. I've often thought of this as an explanation for why immigrant fiction retains its hold even when American Jews are no longer immigrants or even the grandchildren of immigrants. It's as if we are all immigrants - as if the womb were a kind of old-world shtetl where we studied all day, and we still have dim memories and longings for the old country. (137)

Rosen's interpretation of this Talmudic story in terms of exile is interesting because it supports the idea of collective exile and suffering. As I have discussed, collective experience is essential to the Jewish-American community. The longings for home that each Jewish-American feels is directly tied to this collective experience because they take on the sufferings and triumphs of other Jews in their community. Chaim Potok's fiction would be considered immigrant fiction to some degree, because he is the son of an immigrant and his main characters in *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* are also sons of immigrants. Potok's work finds resonance outside of the Jewish-American community because the longing for home he depicts is intrinsic to human existence. Though we may not all study Talmud, the idea that each person in human history has communed directly with the Divine is powerful in informing how one should view the world.

Of course the struggle with assimilation is significant in Jewish-American literature. In her essay "Introduction: Some Reflections on Contemporary American Jewish Culture" Elaine Kauvar writes: "The issue of assimilation has been ever present in Jewish history, sometimes influencing it creatively, at other times destructively, but always powerfully" (339). The issue of assimilation has certainly influenced Chaim Potok creatively. Potok's work depicts this struggle with assimilation just as other Jewish-American authors before him, but offers a new solution.

His characters are individuals who see the connectivity between Jewish identity and American identity, finding a resolution with assimilation unlike other Jewish-American characters depicted by other authors. Danny Saunders, Reuven Malter, and Asher Lev all find different ways to express both sides of their identity and to allow their religious influences to impact their secular lives. Potok's characters are distinctive in their interactions with tradition. In his essay "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism" Gershom Scholem writes:

Talmudic literature recognizes two types of men who preserve the tradition. One is the man who was useful in the Houses of Study, who could recite from memory the texts of all the old traditions of the schools - mere receptacles who preserved tradition without augmenting it in the slightest by their own inquiry... So far as the consciousness of future generations is concerned, only the men of the second type are the true carriers of tradition, for tradition is living creatively in the context of revelation. Precisely because tradition perceives, receives, and unfolds that which lives in the word, it is the force within which contradictions and tensions are not destructive but rather stimulating and creative. (297)

Scholem's assertion that learned men carry Jewish tradition by asking questions is applicable to each of Potok's three main characters I've highlighted. Danny Saunders will carry Jewish tradition because he will take on the suffering of the world through his study of psychology. Reuven Malter will carry Jewish tradition because he will become a Jewish religious leader, encouraging people of his community to continue finding meaning in their traditions. Asher Lev will carry Jewish tradition because he will continue to paint and depict the embodiment of both the demonic and the divine in his paintings. His paintings will continue to be influenced by religious topics, particularly the struggle between good and evil because this is the struggle that

Asher sees in the world around him. Each of these young men asked a question about their identity as a Jewish-American in the context of exile and got a different result. Danny Saunders will not be exiled from his community in the sense that he will still speak to everyone and maintain good terms with his community, however he will go away to school to study psychology and this will take him out of the Jewish community as far as location is concerned. Reuven Malter will not be exiled from his community, either geographically or emotionally because he will study to become a rabbi within his Jewish community. Asher Lev is exiled both physically and emotionally from his Jewish community but he is still not divorced from his own identity as an artist. Asher Lev's resolution with his identity is perhaps the most poignant of the three because *My Name is Asher Lev* depicts his choice to leave his community so unflinchingly. In her essay "Exile: Inside and Out" Bronislava Volkova writes of exile: "Exile is essentially a tragic experience. Feeling expelled directly or indirectly from one's country of origin, being repeatedly robbed of one's possessions, and not being welcomed back leaves scars" (168). Certainly the rejection that Asher Lev experiences leaves scars on his heart and mind. However, as an artist Asher is able to use these scars in order to further expound upon the complexities of human experience through his art. This introspection and outward demonstration of suffering is consequential of his intimacy with Jewish identity.

Not only has Chaim Potok's work depicted a new resolution with Jewish-American identity and broken new ground in the concept of exile by highlighting various degrees of exile in the lives of his characters, but he has also brought about a new way of seeing the place of Jewish-Americans in the United States. Specifically, Chaim Potok's work has allowed Jews and non-Jews alike to wonder whether the victimization that has always been synonymous with Jewish identity is necessary. Must Jews be constantly downcast about being separated from the

nation of Israel? Are they in a perpetual search to return there? Alan Wolfe's book *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora is Good for the Jews* is an exploration of the idea that exile might be a positive experience for Jewish people. Wolfe writes: "As it increasingly becomes clear that the Diaspora is not a disaster and that the security offered by statehood has proven to be precarious, the lost universalism that has been so much a part of Jewish tradition may well be prepared for a comeback, and this time on firmer ground than in the past" (3). Wolfe submits that after the Jewish people saw the nation of Israel come to fruition without the manifestation of an all-inclusive redemption of the Diaspora at large, they began to participate in collective experience with renewed vigor. The reason for this, Wolfe argues, is because the meaning of exile is lost in the creation of the Jewish state (213). In order to experience exile and benefit from it, Jews would need to see themselves as direct receivers of the joys that come with being able to function inside a community of likeminded individuals who are all trying to accomplish the same goal. In bringing about the perpetuation of Jewish tradition and remembrance in their everyday lives, Jews function well within the bounds of exile. From the security of their communities they achieve a homecoming that is mental and emotional rather than physical. Being in contact and fellowship with other Jews is becoming synonymous with belonging for Jews in exile. This experience of home is eloquently depicted in Chaim Potok's work, particularly Reb Saunders ultimate acceptance of his son's ambitions in psychology. Though Danny may function as a *tzaddik* to the world, he will always have a significant place in his father's life and the lives of his Jewish community.



## Chapter 6:

### A Conclusion

Chaim Potok's absence from literary criticism is a testament to the pervasiveness of a single definition for what and how a Jewish-American author writes. For many years, Jewish-American authors have remained distanced from their traditional Jewish roots and written about characters who remained distanced from these roots as well. The choice between Jewish religious tradition and progress in the secular world was just that, a choice. Jewish-American characters were either more Jewish than they were American, or more American than they were Jewish. Through Chaim Potok's characterization of Danny Saunders, Reuven Malter, and Asher Lev, Potok created narratives that allowed for characters to have a third alternative: to remain faithful to Jewish religious tradition and participate in secular American life.

Potok's work does not deny the challenges that come with being a Jewish-American. His characters navigate identity crises, sicknesses of parents, poor mental health of Holocaust survivors, rejection from parents, frustration with Jewish tradition, and moving away from one's Jewish-American community. But because Potok's work speaks clearly about the hardships of Jewish-American life does not necessitate that his work is devoid of positive aspects of Jewish-American existence. Potok's characters know the joy of doing well as a student in school, the warmth of celebrating Shabbat (or Sabbath) with one's family at the end of each week, the adrenaline rush of hitting a baseball and running for first base, and the beautiful stories from Jewish history that are passed down for generations. Potok is not a lesser Jewish-American author because he presents a different picture of Jewish-Americans experience. His contribution to Jewish-American literature is significant precisely because it is so different from other authors in the canon.

At this point it is important to note that the ultimate goal of this thesis is not to argue for the removal of longstanding Jewish-American authors from the literary canon. An author's presentation of either a largely pessimistic or largely optimistic view of Jewish-American life is no reason to make a case for removal. Rather, it is my intention to provide a credible case for Potok's contribution to Jewish-American literature, and in doing so to argue for the inclusion of his works in volumes of Jewish-American literature studied by literary critics. One way to put forward this idea is to find volumes of literary criticism that do not currently include Potok's work and highlight how his writing could fill some of the gaps in presenting a more complete representation of Jewish-American life.

In her book *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing Since the 1980s*, Janet Burstein details the significant contributions that have been made to Jewish-American literature in since the 1980s. Though Potok's book *The Chosen* was first published in 1967, he continued writing until his death in 2002. Potok's contribution to Jewish-American literature has enduring impact on the tide of writing after his first few publications, but his work is not included in this volume, nor is his name mentioned. In her book Burstein highlights a "new wave" of authors and how they interact with the Jewish past:

But the shape and the consequences of renewed interest in the Jewish past... vary as writers lift different threads of the fabric of collective Jewish experience that had once seemed so tightly woven, so whole. Sometimes nostalgically warmed, sometimes stifled by the Jewish past, immigrant and postwar writers had tended either to embrace or discard it. But writers of the new wave may be enraged by the violence that tore it apart, or carefully skeptical about its virtues. (6)

Burstein assessment of postwar writers is accurate. Writers either embraced or discarded the relevance of the Jewish past and often traditional Jewish-American culture with it. As an important aspect of the Jewish past, Jewish religious tradition was also embraced or discarded by postwar writers (7). In contrast, a “new wave” of writers considers different aspects of Jewish past and Jewish religious tradition such as whether the virtues of Jewish tradition still hold a place in modern society. Chaim Potok’s work, specifically his novels *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* provide a place for questions of relevance about the significance of Jewish religious tradition; it is a main issue that Potok’s characters wrestle with. Potok fits the criteria that Burstein outlines in this excerpt from her book and should be included in this volume as a “new wave” author.

Another indication of “new wave” authors is their definition of the word ‘home’. Often “new wave” authors provide journeys for their characters that are bent toward a mental or emotional place of belonging rather than achieving a physical dwelling in a certain geographic location. This plurality for the term “home” allows for divergence in Jewish-American literature, particularly among authors who write based on the expansion of the word into its broader contexts. Janet Burstein writes:

In some writings by the second generation [children of Holocaust survivors] and others of the new wave, protagonists undertake journeys that embed mythic places of loss and suffering within the often abrasive experience of lived geography. They complicate the word “home” for American Jews; they reconnect our sense of homeland to a world vastly different now from the one that expelled, imprisoned, and murdered its Jews, from which traces of a Jewish presence have been largely erased. In other writings the effort to imagine homelands the writers

never knew is saturated not only with anxiety, grief, and sometimes rage for losses too massive to bear, but also, at times, with clear eyed appraisal of the sacrifices exacted by traditional culture. (9)

Homeland for “new wave” authors is an imagined place that they have not known in their own lifetimes. The homeland these authors create is a conglomeration of memories that their parents and grandparents have shared with them as well as personal experiences of belonging or isolation that have impacted the author’s life. Chaim Potok’s creation of this homeland is different than other Jewish-American authors because Jewish tradition finds an integral place in the hearts and minds of his Jewish characters. The “clear eyed appraisal” that Burstein mentions is no less present in Potok’s novels than in any other Jewish-American author’s works. However, in appraising the sacrifices that traditional culture has warranted Potok also appraises the contributions that traditional culture has given.

Some of the contributions Potok notes are the stories that Jewish tradition has given to his characters, the community of belonging that his characters experience, and the close family bonds in Jewish families. It is easier to see these contributions in *The Chosen* as opposed to *My Name is Asher Lev* because Reuven and Danny both get to resolve their fathers’ questions about their life goals and their own questions about where their Jewish identity fits in their lives. *My Name is Asher Lev* halts before Asher has a chance to demonstrate resolution on either count but the novel is not devoid of contributions from his Jewish upbringing. For good or bad, his childhood inspires the art that flows in his veins and Asher recognizes that. He also recognizes his close relationship with his mother and his damaged relationship with his father as being points of influence for his art. Before the end of the novel he comes to a place of acceptance

where he understands that Jewish tradition has had an impact on his life. If he had not been brought up in a closed Hasidic community, he would not be the artist he is today.

Some of the sacrifices Potok notes in his work are the conformity that traditional Jewish communities encourage, the tension between a religious life and an intellectual life, and the cost of opposing the traditional Jewish community. Danny and Reuven's story allows us to become intimate with the tension between leading a religious life and leading an intellectual life. As Danny and Reuven find out, it is a difficult fight to marry both lives together, but it can be done. Asher Lev's story is a testament to what can happen to an individual who opposes the Hasidic community, stepping outside its bounds to pursue a career as an artist. The underlying sacrifice that each of these young men is being asked to make is a sacrifice of their true identity in order to conform to the standards of the traditional Jewish community. Each of them discovers their own true identity and makes his decision to stay or leave their community based on that knowledge.

Chaim Potok's place in the world of Jewish-American literature is not only unique in his ability to examine Jewish-American community by assessing the effects of Jewish tradition on Jewish-American life, but it is also unique because of his interpretation of Jewish-American life as a burgeoning opportunity for Jews to participate in the material of American culture. Potok discusses this opportunity in his introduction to *The Jews in America*:

Never before have Jews participated in the core of the host culture. No matter what contributions were made in the past by Jews to the societies in which they lived, it was never possible for them to affect the essential nature of those societies. This situation is altogether different today: Jews are part of the very substance of American civilization. In that lies enormous opportunity. (11)

In other periods of Jewish history Jews were isolated from participating directly in the decisions of the overarching culture. They were relegated to making decisions about their own communities. But today Jewish-Americans work throughout America in various capacities. Jewish-American people come from a distinctly American heritage because of the impact that Jews have had on the United States through government, commerce, literature, athletics, and art. The opportunity that Potok sees is for continued influence in affecting the essential nature of American society. However, Potok does not only see the opportunity for Jewish-Americans to participate in American culture; he also speaks about the risk that involvement in American culture poses for Jewish-Americans: “Some of that risk is...the disintegration of core Jewish values; the splintering of the Jewish community into dissident factions; even the previously unthinkable prevalence among Jews of alcoholism and drug abuse” (11). The disunity in Jewish-American community, frequency of substance addictions, and loss of Jewish values that have guided Jewish communities for centuries all stem from a lack of attachment to Jewish tradition which has built in religious safeguards, preventing these behaviors if followers remained faithful to Jewish law and practices. Potok’s interpretation of the opportunities and risks placed before Jewish-Americans today is a call back to a relationship with Jewish tradition that Jews have not had in some time.

The place of Jewish religious tradition in the lives of Jewish-Americans directly relates to the home they create for themselves within their Jewish communities, which is something that Potok highlights in his novels. In his book *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, Julian Levinson poses an essential question for Jews as they immigrated to America: “How would they reshape their identities as Jews in the face of the radical newness called America?” (2). Reshaping Jewish identity is a concern for Potok’s main

characters. For Asher Lev, Jewish identity is reshaped through broad brushstrokes on the canvas of his severed relationship with his ultra-Orthodox Jewish father and Asher finds reconciliation only in resolving his own relationship with Jewish tradition by continuing to create art after his Jewish community has rejected him. For Reuven Malter, Jewish identity is reshaped through exposure to the conservative, quiet, and righteous life that Rabbi Saunders leads, causing Reuven to become a rabbi himself. For Danny Saunders, Jewish identity is reshaped through his intellectual study and his desire to make an impact in psychological study outside of the Jewish community. He finds resolution with his identity through his father's acceptance of his psychological goals as righteous, because the world needs someone to lead them into restored lives.

Another necessary piece of Jewish-American life besides reshaping Jewish identity in the face of American culture is speaking out about Jewish-American worldview and Jewish history. Chaim Potok's work as a Jewish American author demonstrates what Janet Burstein outlines as the obligation of Jewish-American writer, speaking about one's own experiences and listening in order to give voice to the experiences of others. Janet Burstein writes:

Perhaps within this noisy and distracting place of manifold differences, the necessary work for American Jews will be not only to speak from what we know of our old wounds and promises, but also to listen to those who can speak from their own hurt and hopeful places. To hear the human voices barely audible outside our windows...Our writers have opened our imaginations to them. Strong as we are now we need to learn from them, to listen. Listening, we may find in ourselves - or invent - responses that will honor not only the stories of our

becoming, but also those of people who, like us, are working to uncover and to tell their own little secrets. (207)

As a Jewish-American author, Chaim Potok has listened to the stories within himself and the stories that other Jewish-Americans have shared with him in order to create an authentic community of Jewish characters who experience struggles with identity and exile in new and brilliant ways. Some of the ways that Potok's characters experience exile and identity in a new way are: Reuven Malter's decision to become more traditional in his Jewish beliefs in order to become a rabbi, Danny Saunders's decision to become a psychologist and use his traditional Jewish foundation to inform his professional intellectual goals, and Asher Lev's decision to become an artist who wrestles with the isolation of American Judaism through his artwork. Potok's characters function in the dissonant region between American culture and Jewish culture, making decisions about what place Jewish tradition holds in their lives.

The decisions of these three Jewish-American men are all distinct from one another, yet each of them finds resolution with their own identity by figuring out where Jewish tradition works best for them. Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders continue to see themselves as Jews who must function in America and resolve to have Jewish tradition be a part of that American life. Reuven and Danny find positive resolution with their Jewish roots and this positive resolution is what Potok has long been criticized for portraying in his novels. However, even Asher Lev continues to see himself as an individual who interacts with Jewish tradition. Asher Lev's story does not end with resolution of his Jewish roots, and this continued dissonance allows us to examine Asher Lev's story in terms of the negative effects that Jewish tradition can have on the life of an individual who wishes to leave the Jewish community. Chaim Potok



divides the decisions of Jewish-Americans into two dynamics: commitment to Jewish tradition and flight from Jewish tradition. In his introduction to *The Jews in America*, Potok writes:

Two dynamics are occurring simultaneously among America's six million Jews: continuing and, in many instances, increasing commitments to Jewish concerns (religious education, Israel, Soviet Jewry) by about two-thirds of the group, and flight from virtually all things Jewish by the rest. Will the committed two-thirds succeed in fashioning an authentic American-Jewish civilization, one rich in new forms of individual and communal expression - as did the Jews of Babylonia, who, two thousand years ago, created a host of new Jewish institutions along with the Babylonian Talmud? Or will American Jewry become a modern-day version of the vanished, culturally attenuated Jewry of ancient Alexandria - so much a part of their culture that they finally faded into it? (11)

Chaim Potok's place as a Jewish-American author is decidedly in the dynamic of preserving Jewish-American culture, so much so that critics have long excluded him from the world of Jewish-American literary criticism and American literary criticism in general. Chaim Potok should be admitted to the Jewish-American canon with resounding applause and joyous shouts for he has made great strides in depicting the continued interaction that Jewish-Americans have with Jewish tradition.

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