

SESSION THREE



Fathers, Sons, and Friendship: *The Chosen*

Novel, 1967

Author: Chaim Potok

Publisher: Simon and Schuster

Feature film, 1982

Director: Jeremy Paul Kagan

Screenplay: Edwin Gordon

Danny Saunders: Robby Benson

Reb Saunders: Rod Steiger

Reuven Malter: Barry Miller

Professor Malter: Maximilian Schell

Length: 108 minutes

You'll see a glimpse of the author in this film – Chaim Potok plays the college Talmud teacher.

This film is adapted from the first published novel by scholar and author Potok. Exploring the struggle between Jewish tradition and modernity, *The Chosen* portrays two father-son relationships and examines the role of friendship in adolescence.

The friendship between Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders is an unlikely one. Although both are Orthodox, or traditionally observant Jews, and they both live in the same neighborhood of Williamsburg, their lives are very different. Reuven is the son of a progressive Orthodox Jew, a teacher and modern scholar of the Talmud who advocates Zionism and repudiates the mystical, insular culture of Hasidism. Danny is not only a Hasid, but is the son of a *tsadek*, the spiritual leader of a Hasidic sect. A prodigy, Danny is the heir apparent to his father's title.

The boys' friendship revolves around their intellectual struggles to make sense of the world and of the meaning of being Jewish after the devastation of World War II. Danny agonizes over his obligations to his father and his community, on the one hand, and his fascination with psychology, on the other. Reuven is close to his widowed father, though they clash occasionally over intellectual questions. Danny's father barely speaks to his son, except when they debate the Talmud. The two families' lives intersect in complex ways over the years, as Danny and Reuven study together at the same college. *The Chosen* ends as the two young men complete their studies and begin their adult lives.

About Chaim Potok

Herman Harold (Chaim Zvi) Potok was born in 1929 in the

(Danny calls on Reuven at his home for the first time.)

Reuven: *You're weird.*

Danny: *I'm weird?*

Reuven: *You look like you walked out of another century. You play baseball like Babe Ruth. You talk like you're from outer space.*

Danny: *Thanks for the compliment.*

Reuven: *You can come in if you'd like.*

Bronx, New York. The son of Hasidim, Potok attended Orthodox Jewish schools. As a child, he painted and drew, but his father wanted him to pursue a traditional rabbinical education. Potok became a literature student at Yeshiva University, and after graduating, he became more liberal in his Judaism. He studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary and was ordained as a Conservative rabbi in 1954. The following year he became a chaplain in the United States Army and served in Korea. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania and wrote his dissertation on Solomon Maimon, an eighteenth-century Polish Jew who abandoned his traditional life and became a philosopher active in the early Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment movement, in Berlin.

In the years after *The Chosen* was published, Potok wrote a sequel, *The Promise* (1969), as well as the novels *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), *In the Beginning* (1975), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davita's Harp* (1985), *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990), and, most recently, *I Am the Clay* (1992). In the two decades since its publication, *The Chosen* has sold over 900,000 copies; a special twenty-fifth anniversary edition was issued in 1992. Other writing includes *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews* (1978) and *Ethical Living for a Modern World: Jewish Insights* (1985).

From the Page to the Screen

Potok's novel is set in a subculture of Brooklyn's observant Jews unfamiliar to most Americans, and to many American Jews. They live in a complex of distinctive, sometimes insular Jewish communities, most of Eastern European descent, whose notions of piety vary considerably from one to another. To present this world to the reader, Potok relates the history of Hasidism and the cultural diversity among Brooklyn Jewry. He does this through narrative information supplied by the novel's protagonist, Reuven Malter, and by impromptu lectures given by his father, a teacher.

Because the story is told from Reuven's point of view, Hasidim are portrayed as exotic. For example, their Yiddish is presented as an impenetrable language, and their clothes and mores are described as old-fashioned. (For Danny, who has grown up within a Hasidic community,

(Reuven takes Danny to his first art museum, where they are standing by a sculpture of a woman.)

Danny: *It's a deception. Have you ever noticed that we have no pictures or paintings on the walls of our home? It's because the images detract from what's real, what's true.*

Reuven: *I see you haven't stopped looking.*

Danny: *That's because it's beautiful.*

this way of life is of course familiar rather than strange.) This exoticization of Hasidism carries over to the larger contrast between Brooklyn's observant Jews and mainstream American life. This theme is established in the book's opening sequence, where boys from the different Jewish communities play baseball to demonstrate their Americanness. Ironically, they transform the game into a contest between their divergent approaches to Jewishness; the teams see each other as backward Hasidim and *apikorsim* (heretics).

In Potok's novel, the larger struggle between tradition and modernity, and the more specific contest among different approaches to Jewish observance, appear in intellectual and historical terms. Danny's conflict is between Freud and the Talmud. Reuven and his father debate the various responses among observant Jews to Zionism. Danny's coming of age is shown through visits to the library and applications to colleges, Reuven's through his mastery of Talmudic exegesis. Much of the novel's action is internal or introspective, as the two boys struggle to understand their personal destinies and that of their people, their relationships with each other, and with their fathers.

This poses a challenge to the filmmakers. The film largely ignores the religious conflict between Hasidim and non-Hasidic Orthodox (the *misnagdim*). Instead, the conflict between the Jewish worlds of Reuven and Danny centers mainly on Zionism. Consequently, Reuven and his father appear less removed from mainstream American culture than they do in the novel, while Danny and his community appear more alien. The exoticization of Hasidism is even more pronounced in the film than in Potok's novel. In the book, Reuven becomes more understanding of Hasidism as he spends more time with Danny and his family. The film persistently presents Hasidism as strange, antiquated, and impenetrable. The filmmakers always show the interior of the Saunders home and their *shtibl* (community synagogue) in a shadowy, warm light, reminiscent of the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt's paintings, suggesting that Hasidim live in a world of twilight past. Their rituals are presented as either unintelligible, as in the torah service when Danny brings Reuven to meet his father, or histrionic, in the slow-motion observation of Reb

Saunders dancing at a wedding. New scenes are added to the film, when Reuven and Danny visit art museums and movies, to portray Hasidim (even those who are interested in psychology!) as backward provincials, out of touch with modern mores.

The film handles the book's introspective passages by dramatizing many elements that the novel expressed as thoughts or narrative. When Danny first comes over to the Malter's house, for example, he demonstrates his photographic memory by reciting verbatim a newspaper article. Danny's decision to go to the same college as Reuven, never at issue in the original novel, is dramatized as a family conflict involving Danny's mother, who is barely mentioned in the novel. The chess match between Reb Saunders and Levi, another innovation of the film, dramatizes the very different relationship between Danny's father and his younger son. These dramatizations often follow the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, as with the suggested romantic interest between Danny's sister and Reuven, which is not a part of the novel, or Reuven's participation in the illegal arms shipment to the Haganah in Palestine. This scene, barely mentioned in the novel, becomes filled with melodramatic suspense, as Reuven hides from watchmen in a warehouse at night.

As a result, much of what makes *The Chosen* a distinctively Jewish American novel is blunted in the film, which shapes the story according to the formulas of any Hollywood movie. Perhaps the most striking example of this is in the novel's motif of silence. The introspective responses of Danny and Reuven to the silences they are subjected to are better described on the page than they could ever be on film. The idea of silence, with its many different levels of meaning in Jewish tradition, in the lives of the book's protagonists, and in contemporary Jewish history is dismissed with a conventional happy ending. In the film's final scene, Reuven asks the clean-shaven Danny how his father has responded to the changes in his life. Danny smiles, "We talk all the time now." In the novel, Danny answers quietly, "We talk now." And when Reuven's father asks Danny if he would raise his son in silence, Danny indicates, after a long pause, that he might.

Reuven: *There is a story in the Talmud about a king who had a son who went astray. The son was told to return to his father. The son said: "I cannot." The father sends a messenger to say: "Return as far as you can – and I will come to you the rest of the way."*

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ To a wider audience of non-Jews, the differences between the two Orthodox worlds – Hasidic and non-Hasidic – might seem minimal. For not only does Reuven speak Hebrew but he studies Talmud and his father is a scholar of Jewish studies. How are the distinctions between the two worlds shown in the film?
- ◆ How do the differences in the boys' backgrounds play out in their friendship?
- ◆ How do their relationships with their fathers differ? What do these differences show about the two cultures?

Reuven: *I think I want to become a rabbi. I've been seriously thinking about it. Not like Reb Saunders. A rabbi for today's world.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ *The Chosen* tells two coming-of-age stories. What are the spiritual and intellectual struggles each boy faces?
- ◆ When the boys meet they find some aspects of the other mysterious, even ridiculous, yet some of the strangeness of the other's world is appealing. How do they incorporate what they learn from each other in their evolving identities?
- ◆ What role does each father play in influencing his son's life choices? Would they be seen as good parents in the 1990s?
- ◆ How central is the concept of Israel in the two approaches to Judaism? To the identity of American Jews today?
- ◆ What is our response to the two cultures depicted in the film – the Hasidim and non-Hasidic Orthodox: are there elements we admire, reject, etc.? How would we describe our own religious culture?
- ◆ What help, if any, can adults provide young people seeking to define their own relationship to Judaism?
- ◆ Consider the significance of the title of the novel and its film adaptation. What does “chosenness” mean in traditional Jewish thought (for instance, the perception of Jews as the “chosen” people)? What does it mean for each of the protagonists? What does it mean to you?

INDEPENDENT FOLLOW-UP

Potok's novel *The Promise*, a sequel to *The Chosen*, follows Danny and Reuven into adulthood. The novels *My Name Is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev* explore the life of a Hasid whose artistic talents conflict with his traditional upbringing.

For critical insight into Potok's fiction, see Edward A. Abramson, *Chaim Potok* (Boston: Twayne, 1986).

To learn more about Hasidism in America, see:

- ◆ Harris, Lis. *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*. New York: Summit, 1985.
- ◆ Heilman, Samuel. *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*. New York: Schocken, 1992
- ◆ Hoffman, Edward. *Despite All Odds: The Story of Lubavitch*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

Compare the portrait of traditional Jewish life in *The Chosen* with other Hollywood dramas, such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Crossing Delancey*, *Yentl*, and *A Stranger Among Us*. What are the similarities of presentation, despite the different settings of each film? What does this say about the prevailing image of traditional Jewish life in the consciousness of Hollywood filmmakers?