

A GUIDE TO The Chosen

Chaim Potok

“[M]eaning is not automatically given to life. It is hard work to fill one’s life with meaning.”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Chosen is a novel about fathers and sons, communication, friendship, and the power of ideas.

Setting: The Williamsburg district of Brooklyn, June 1944 to September 1950.

Protagonists: Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter, young men who become friends and break with their fathers’ wishes in finding their identities.

Conflicts: **External conflicts** between Danny and Reuven over a number of matters; between the views of religion represented by Reb Saunders and David Malter; between Reb Saunders and his son Danny; between David Malter and his son Reuven.

Internal conflicts within Danny and Reuven as they struggle to reconcile head and heart.

Resolution: Danny and Reuven move from friendship to estrangement but are reconciled in the end; the two views of Judaism survive; Danny begins the secular career of his choice, Reuven decides to become a rabbi.

Themes: Young people must find their own way in life. One can communicate through silence. Repression can arouse rebellion. Friendship must overcome obstacles.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Because Chaim Potok explains Jewish religious practices and terms in context, the novel should pose few comprehension problems to upper-grade students. The power of the novel arises from its focus on the emotional and intellectual conflicts faced by young people as they seek to find their way in life. The milieu may be Orthodox Jewish, but the themes are universal and should be relevant to the concerns of many students.

BACKGROUND

Orthodox Judaism. Orthodox Judaism emphasizes study of the **Talmud**, a vast compilation of the Oral Law and rabbinical commentaries on it, mostly dating from the first to sixth centuries A.D. (The Oral Law is distinct

from the Written Law, or Bible.) The Talmud includes information and commentary on a wide range of subjects, notably religious principles and law, geography, astronomy, and folklore. In *The Chosen*, David Malter represents Orthodox Jews influenced by the eighteenth-century **Jewish Enlightenment**. These Orthodox Jews apply modern methods of scholarship to their study, usually limit traditional dress to a skullcap, and may know Yiddish but rarely speak it in daily life. (Yiddish is a form of medieval German, often written in Hebrew characters.) They contrast with **Hasidim**, people who follow a branch of Orthodox Judaism that originated in eighteenth-century Europe and who are represented in the novel by Reb Saunders. Hasidic Jews take a mystical approach to the Talmud, wear somber eighteenth-century-style clothing, and speak Yiddish. The men wear beards and side curls called earlocks.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Reuven (“Robert”) Malter, the narrator, a dark-haired Orthodox Jew, brilliant student, and good baseball player.

Danny Saunders, a sandy-haired Hasidic Jew, power hitter in baseball, and phenomenal student who is torn between fulfilling his father’s expectation that he become a Hasidic leader and satisfying his own thirst for secular knowledge.

David Malter, Reuven’s father, an Orthodox Jew open to nonreligious learning, teacher at a yeshiva (Jewish school), and author of articles on the Talmud. He guides Danny’s secular reading.

Rabbi Isaac Saunders (Reb Saunders), Danny’s father, a dedicated Hasidic Jew and Talmudist who speaks with Danny only to discuss the Talmud. He expects Danny to inherit his role as *tzaddik* (leader of a Hasidic group).

PLOT

Book One. Chapter One. The **setting** is Williamsburg, a largely Jewish area of Brooklyn, during World War II. As the **exposition** begins, we learn that Orthodox Jewish boys carry both a secular and a religious study load and gain prestige from high grades in Talmudic

study. Sports events between yeshivas are designed to demonstrate the boys' Americanism. Fifteen-year-olds Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter (the **first-person** narrator of the novel) meet during a dramatic Sunday baseball game that escalates into a kind of war, echoing the outside world and establishing the basic **conflicts** of the novel. Reuven injures his left wrist catching one of Danny's strong hits and is struck hard in the face by another. His glasses shatter, and he sits out the rest of the game because his eye is injured. The coach then realizes Reuven needs to be taken to a hospital.

Chapter Two. At Brooklyn Memorial Hospital, Reuven awakens the next day in a sunlit ward with his eye bandaged and meets his ward mates, Tony Savo, a professional boxer, and Billy Merritt, a blind boy. David Malter, his father, tells him that the eye surgeon successfully removed a piece of glass from the edge of his pupil, but that scar tissue might develop. Malter is dismayed to hear that Reuven hates Danny. We recognize him as a humane man and notice his cough. He leaves Reuven a radio so his son can hear the war news. (Reuven is not allowed to read.)

Chapter Three. Reuven awakens to excitement: It's D-Day, June 6, 1944, and the Allied invasion of Europe has begun. Danny Saunders comes to apologize, but Reuven rejects his advances out of hand. That evening Reuven's father reminds him that the Talmud teaches forgiveness. When Danny returns the next day, the boys discuss the rage they experienced on the ball field. Each discovers the other is attracted to a career different from his father's expectations: Danny to psychology (not to being a Hasidic leader), Reuven to the rabbinate (not to a math professorship). Danny can memorize twice as much of the Talmud per day as Reuven can because he has a photographic mind.

Chapter Four. David Malter urges Reuven to befriend Danny. On Thursday hospital personnel make urgent visits to Tony Savo's curtained-off bed, and Reuven and Danny talk in the hall. Reuven learns that Danny hides from his father the seven or eight works of secular philosophy and fiction he reads each week, because Reb Saunders only approves of Talmudic study. Reuven, who reads three or four books a week, tells Danny about symbolic logic. Danny is struck dumb when David Malter arrives; this is the man who has been guiding his library reading. The next day, Friday, Tony Savo seems better, even though his right eye had to be removed. Billy has been taken to surgery. Reuven is released with a positive prognosis.

Book Two. Chapter Five. Reuven relishes the wonderful smells of cooking prepared by Manya, the family housekeeper. (His mother is no longer alive.) While David works in his study, Reuven views every detail of their flat with keen appreciation.

Chapter Six. After Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner, Reuven asks his father about Danny. In **exposition** related to

the **religious conflicts** of the novel, David Malter explains how Jews came to Poland in the thirteenth century, how their status changed, how the mystic known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (the Besht for short) founded Hasidism in the eighteenth century, and how the office of *tzaddik* developed. Malter says Danny will most likely hate the *tzaddik* role he is supposed to inherit from his father because he has a phenomenal mind like the eighteenth-century genius Solomon Maimon, who so thirsted for knowledge that he taught himself German in order to read secular subjects. That is why Danny reads "forbidden" books. Cut off from his cultural roots, he is lonely and needs a friend.

Chapter Seven. This long chapter contains a complete story. In the **exposition**, Reuven and his father attend a Shabbat service at a synagogue that serves Orthodox Jews influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment. That afternoon, as Danny and Reuven talk, we learn that Reuven's mother died shortly after his birth, that Reb Saunders lost his first family to terrorists in Russia and led his whole community to America, and that his new family includes Danny and two younger children. The **rising action** begins when Danny leads Reuven around a corner and into the Hasidic world of Reb Saunders's synagogue. **Suspense** builds throughout the events that follow: the parting of a crowd for Danny; a service during which Danny's pale little brother clings to Reb Saunders's robe; a meal; Reb Saunders's delivery of a Talmudic discourse; and a public test of Danny's knowledge. Astonished at the veneration the Hasidim accord Reb Saunders and Danny, Reuven learns they view their *tzaddik* as more than a rabbi—he is "a kind of messenger of God, a bridge between his followers and God." The story reaches a **crisis** when Reb Saunders turns to quiz Reuven, who realizes that his friendship with Danny is at stake. **Climactically**, Reuven answers correctly. The **resolution** seems to assure the future of the friendship: the boys discover they both plan to attend Hirsch College, an Orthodox institution in Brooklyn.

Chapter Eight. After his first day back at school, Reuven discusses Jewish history with Danny in the public library. He is shaken to learn that Danny is teaching himself German in order to read works of the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, and saddened to hear that Danny's little brother suffers from a blood disease requiring lifelong medication. The next Shabbat, Reuven engages in his first "Talmud battle" with Reb Saunders and Danny. Although Danny knows more than Reuven, David Malter's teaching methods have made Reuven equal to Danny in depth of understanding. In an incident intensifying the **conflicts** of the novel, Reb Saunders privately grills Reuven on how Danny came to discuss books with Reuven's father. Danny is relieved that he no longer needs to hide his secular studies, but Reuven is distressed at having been used as a buffer. He also can't understand why Reb

Saunders maintains total silence with Danny except for discussing the Talmud.

Chapter Nine. Reuven's eye is declared perfectly healed, and he enjoys the reading and writing involved in taking his final exams. Still exhilarated at the gift of vision, he calls Billy Merritt's house, only to learn that Billy's operation failed and he remains blind.

Chapter Ten. Reuven's July is filled with ballgames, war news, symbolic logic, and Talmud study with his father and with Reb and Danny Saunders. Danny is frustrated with Freud's technical vocabulary until he realizes he must study Freud as he studies the Talmud, with the equivalent of a commentary at hand.

Chapter Eleven. Reuven's and Danny's senior year at separate yeshivas passes with little chance for them to talk. First Reuven is too busy; then the various members of the Saunders and Malter households fall ill with flu. Meanwhile the Allies press into German territory, and America mourns the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The war in Europe ends in May, and news of the Nazi extermination camps floods the world. Reb Saunders sees the horror as somehow serving the will of God; David Malter says that if any meaning exists, "we must make it for ourselves." A heart attack hospitalizes Malter, and Reuven goes to live in Danny's house.

Chapter Twelve. Through all of July Danny's little brother, Levi, wanders around the Saunders house like a ghost, and Reb Saunders turns silently inward. Evenings, Reuven and Danny chat with Danny's mother and sister or read. Afternoons, they catch up on their discussions, and Reuven wonders how Freud and the Talmud will be able to coexist inside Danny. David Malter is still too ill to be consulted about that; besides, he is obsessed with the need for a Jewish state and for a great many new Jewish teachers and rabbis. One day Reuven mentions Palestine as a Jewish homeland, and Reb Saunders violently denounces Zionists. The correct way, he says, is to wait for the Messiah to come and establish Eretz Yisroel, the true Jewish state.

Book Three. Chapter Thirteen. Reuven is excited by his college courses and his father's lessons in applying scientific criticism to the Talmud. Danny needs Reuven's help with graphs in experimental psychology; he is irate that his psychology professor dismisses Freudian theories because they cannot be tested in the laboratory. David Malter suffers repeated colds, but drives himself in work for the Zionist cause because a man must live a meaningful life to be worthy of rest in death. He approves Reuven's decision to become a rabbi instead of a mathematician: the previously nonobservant Jews now flocking to synagogues will need good rabbis. Bloodshed continues in Palestine; at school, factions form for and against Zionism. Danny is pro-Zionist, but he cannot say so because of his father's and his own position of Hasidic leadership. When David

Malter's highly successful pro-Zionist speech at Madison Square Garden is publicized, Reb Saunders forbids Danny to come within four feet of a Malter on pain of being forced to leave Hirsch College.

Chapter Fourteen. Reuven misses Danny so much that he comes to hate Reb Saunders. He is enraged when his tolerant father says that the faith of Jews like Reb Saunders has kept Judaism alive. The Malter's August cottage vacation is cut short, as David needs time for his Zionist work. In September Reuven cannot even try to forget Danny, because they are assigned the same Talmud class. David Malter is elated when the United Nations approves a partition plan for Palestine in November 1947; this means a Jewish state will be created. Reb Saunders's Hasidic pamphleteers denounce the U.N. vote, but they grow silent as the toll of Jewish dead rises in Palestine. At semester break David Malter collapses with a second heart attack. Living alone while his father is hospitalized, Reuven finds himself devoting long hours to studying the Talmud.

Chapter Fifteen. David Malter comes home in March, and Reuven and Danny establish a system of silent communication. Grim faces at school reflect continued death in Palestine. When the independent state of Israel is declared in May 1948, Arab states immediately invade. In June, on the very day a United Nations truce is enforced, the war is brought home to the students when Hirsch College honors a recent graduate who died in the fighting around Jerusalem. In August the Malter's go to their country cottage. The following month David Malter resumes his teaching, and Reuven begins his third year of college. And one day the following spring, Danny sits down next to Reuven and asks for help in setting up a graph.

Chapter Sixteen. Reb Saunders has finally lifted the ban of silence he imposed in relation to the Malter's, but he is still silent with Danny except to discuss the Talmud. Danny plans to wait until he is ordained a rabbi before telling his father he is going to become a clinical psychologist. That summer Reuven attends Danny's sister's wedding, and Reb Saunders invites him to resume his visits.

Chapter Seventeen. That fall Reuven tells Danny a joke about a *tzaddik's* silence and cannot understand Danny's assertion that silence *does* "talk." Reuven tells Danny he ought to get a girl, only to find out that Danny's marriage has long since been arranged. In October Danny attends young Levi's bar mitzvah. The boy is a ghostly echo of Danny, and when Levi suffers a relapse in his ongoing condition, Reuven tells his father how Danny's career plans hinge on the boy's taking over as *tzaddik*. Meanwhile Danny has applied to three universities for doctoral studies. David Malter advises Danny to anticipate every question Reb Saunders will ask when the confrontation occurs. Reb Saunders keeps asking why Reuven doesn't come over.

Chapter Eighteen. The novel comes to a **climax** almost as soon as Reuven sits down with Danny and Reb Saunders. On hearing that Reuven plans to become a rabbi, Reb Saunders quietly remarks that Reuven and Danny will be going different ways. Both young men correctly infer that Reb Saunders already knows about Danny's plans. Addressing Reuven, Reb Saunders goes on to explain his years of silence toward Danny. He wanted his beloved son to possess more than a brilliant, cold mind. He wanted him to understand pain and develop the compassionate soul of a *tzaddik*. He believes that this technique has worked and that, whatever else Danny becomes, he will be a *tzaddik* to the world. He thanks Reuven and his father for providing the voice he could not offer Danny and asks their forgiveness for his stance on Zionism. **Resolution** follows in a few summary paragraphs. Reb Saunders announces Danny's decision to his followers; the arranged marriage is canceled; Danny and Reuven graduate from Hirsch College with highest honors; Danny shaves his beard and earlocks and moves to a rented room near Columbia University; Danny and his father now talk about everyday matters; Reuven and Danny resolve to see each other again.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Assessing the Power of Ideas

In many ways *The Chosen* is a novel of ideas. You might ask students to consider the following questions. Let them cite concrete details in the novel or from their own lives when answering:

- How important are ideas in shaping our everyday lives?
- What types of ideas are the most influential—religious, political, social?
- To what extent should parents try to shape the beliefs of their children?

2. Researching a Religion

Students can learn by studying unfamiliar beliefs. Have them read up on a religion—perhaps Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism. Then have them discuss the religion, considering questions like the following:

- What are the main beliefs of the religion?
- What are its principal ceremonies?
- What is your response to the religion?

MEET THE WRITER

Chaim Potok (1929–2002) is a Jewish scholar, rabbi, novelist, story writer, and historian. He was born into a Polish immigrant family in New York City and reared as an Orthodox Jew. He has taught in a variety of Jewish seminaries, served as a military chaplain during the Korean conflict, worked as editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society of America, and produced a great deal of scholarly work. However, he is best known for his novels about American Orthodox Jewish life. His background and religious commitments provide him with a wealth of material for his fiction, but they also create conflict. In the Jewish tradition, he says, it is Talmudic scholarship that counts, not works of the imagination. Yet without the tension, he might have little of interest to say.

READ ON

The Chosen. Well-received film version (1981), starring Robby Benson (Danny), Barry Miller (Reuven), and Rod Steiger (Reb Saunders).

Chaim Potok, *The Promise.* Sequel to *The Chosen*, a continuation of Danny's and Reuven's stories.

Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel." A New York rabbinical student seeks the services of a matchmaker, with surprising results for both the student and the matchmaker.

Andrea Lee, "New African." A young African American woman cannot fully accept the religion of her father, a Baptist minister, which creates a conflict similar to that between Danny Saunders and his father.

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