The Inner Dialogue of Cultures:
"Core-to-core confrontation" in *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp*

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By
Sara M. Williams
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For my mother,
who battled cancer as I wrote this thesis,
yet forbade me to stop for anything.
Isaiah 41:13.

Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Arts in English

Student Name: Sara M. Williams

Dr. Matthew Towles — Date
Thesis Chair

Prof. Nicholas Olson — Date
First Reader

Dr. Mark Harris — Date
Second Reader

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Various kinds of cultural confrontations are possible. What I am writing about are what I call core-to-core confrontations. That is to say, an individual brought up in the very heart of his own particular reading of the world encounters ideas from the very heart of the secular umbrella civilization in which all of us live today" (Potok qtd. in Morgan 56).

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A fascinating phenomenon of literature is the universal nature which translates what originates in a specific context into an experience that resonates with readers from a multitude of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. One character's context may be completely different, but their experience and internal processes make available the opportunity to relate and identify with them, creating a bridge between culture and time. Chaim Potok's novels *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp* offer similar immersion into an otherwise private culture. They are doorways of sorts into the twentieth century Jewish community in America, full of complex history and a necessary resilience developed after centuries of oppression. These two novels are examples of what Potok calls "core-to-core confrontation," as his main characters experience tension between cultural expectations and their desires which appear to contradict those standards. Davita and Asher live in the complex reality of community, demonstrating that it is natural to desire various outlets of expression and still be a unified whole, and a well-rounded and grounded one at that. These combined narratives provide an in-depth picture of what it is to develop identity within a world full of false dichotomies and conflicting cultural expectations, all the while establishing the exigency for navigating these complexities with grace.

A Response to the Sacred/Secular Dichotomy

The divide between what is seen and unseen, otherwise known as the sacred/secular

dichotomy, became popular throughout Europe during the Enlightenment period and carried throughout the western world, influencing politics, religious societies, and education. The complexity of human nature, the misunderstanding of beauty as a direct cause of idolatry, and the degradation of what it means to be an embodied being contribute to this compartmentalized view of truth and humanity, its subtle extremism oversimplifying what is meant to be a unified complexity. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to this phenomenon as the sacred/secular dichotomy, as well as terms like beauty and truth, or faith and physicality, depending on the context of the point. These terms may vary slightly in what they represent, but overall, they each communicate in some way the distinction between forces of nature and faith; what drives the soul and what comprises the body. In her article in conversation with Peter Berger's thesis of secularization, Michaela Pfadenhauer comments, "To be able, now, to conceive of the religious and the secular as simultaneous, one needs this typically modern distinction between religious and secular in order to be able to go beyond it" (158). Pfadenhauer unpacks the reality that though pluralism is a natural and necessary experience for the individual to recognize, that truth does not negate the unique elements at hand, which ignoring would be to once again simplify the nature of humanity like the extremism of the dichotomy itself does. Though Potok's protagonists find themselves in tensely dichotomous situations, to deconstruct this unnecessarily staunch separation in hopes may shed light on a more holistic perspective; that is, an approach which acknowledges human beings as complex and multi-faceted individuals capable of creativity, logic, and faith all at once, to name a few.

Primary Literary Lenses

Among the many different literary lenses available which connect to aspects of Potok's novels, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp*, the philosophers and literary critics whose

writings significantly complement Potok's themes are those of M.M. Bakhtin and Martin Buber. They represent either the Russian or Jewish communities which are closely tied with Potok's work, and both deal with dialogue and relationships between different narrative styles within a novel, between individuals and God, or between individuals and the world around them. Though Potok's use of dialogue is known for being concise, his overall themes of internal conflict and cultural expectations contain a plethora of conversations that Bakhtin and Buber's works help expound upon through dialogism and insight on human's relationships with themselves, each other, their Creator, and the creation.

To frame the phenomenon of internal dialogue and conflict, M.M. Bakhtin's collection of essays, *The Dialogic Imagination* serves as a lens which helps give vocabulary to what Potok's characters experience. Specifically, Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel" discusses the different forms and narration that occur in a novel to create dialogism within the heteroglossia; the Russian philosopher gives an example of heteroglossia in the novel when he explains, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [raznorecie] can enter the novel" (263). In short, this term refers to the presence of multiple voices, as it were. Though Bakhtin is mainly discussing mediums of communication in the novel, this theme works well within the internal sector of an individual. In Asher Lev's life, for example, the history and dreams of his mythic ancestor act as an influential voice reflecting the core tradition of his faith community, but as his interests takes form through artistic passion and wrestle for pre-imminence, his personhood becomes a complex multitude of voices as he matures.

Bakhtin not only recognizes the presence of multiple social voices within a work but acknowledges that these themes are bound to converse and intersect. Humans are not like shelves

which are easily compartmentalized into specific topics and roles, but complex beings whose mind, bodies, and souls are interlocking factors; this is what Bakhtin means by dialogism, the interrelationships within the novel (or in this case, the individual), like separate cogs in a machine fitted together to operate a larger function. As someone who would transform the world of literary criticism through his writing by bringing a unique and revolutionary perspective on the novel, Bakhtin in his essay goes on to address the need for a revival of philosophical theories through a diversity of voices, stating that "[s]uch a combining of languages and styles into a higher unity is unknown to traditional stylistics; it has no method for approaching the distinctive social dialogue among languages that is present in the novel" (263). His use of the word languages is less a reference to the linguistic differences that exist between English and Russian for example, and more how language is used and by whom. Though there are a multitude of literal languages in Potok's novels such as English, Yiddish, and Russian, and these could very well represent different influences in the protagonists' lives, the larger picture is that of the content and use of language to create separate social pressures and traditions. Because of this, I will use the terms like language, worldview, and perspective interchangeably based on Bakhtin's claim, "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a worldview, even as a concrete opinion" (271). With Bakhtin's assertion in mind of a broader sense of linguistic influence within a work, Asher's mythic ancestor and the Hasidic tradition he is raised in are languages he speaks, while Davita's political scaffolding through which she understands world events is a dialect that the more traditional Jewish community she enters into does not speak. Both protagonists are the primary examples of dialogism, not because other characters do not experience a diversity of influences and desires, but because the audience has a more intimate

view of the conversations between languages within them. In addition, they have less inhibitions about expressing the different parts of themselves as young people who have not yet suppressed those languages which do not completely conform to society's expectations.

Not only does Bakhtin cover the presence and conversation between voices in the novel, he establishes the context of desire for a universal language to streamline communication and meaning. Though he does not portray this hope as inherently negative, Bakhtin questions the tendency to ignore the complexities of language for the sake of convenience: "we must deal with the life and behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-languaged world" (275). This concept of linguistic unity relates to Asher and Davita's experiences in communities where they feel pressure to adhere to a singular tradition or framework which has little tolerance for external influences. The desire for unity becomes dangerous when it leads to a sense of linguistic supremacy, or the belief that one language is superior to others without acknowledging the strengths and uses of other existing voices. Though Bakhtin does not explicitly reference the sacred/secular dichotomy, he describes a similar inclination to attribute a dominant tradition without considering the value of a more holistic approach that does not try to simplify a naturally complex situation, the term "holistic" referring to a condition of well-roundedness that rejects objective one-sidedness in favor of a more realistic acknowledgment of diverse languages. Bakhtin's philosophy may not be a fully established literary lens, but it provides identifying vocabulary and foundational ideology for interpreting Potok's works in a relevant sense of worldview and social voices.

Like his contemporary, Bakhtin, Martin Buber focuses not only on individual voices and their roles, but the relationship between them. His work, *I and Thou* delves into the nature of relationship between humans and their Creator, humans with one another, and humans with the

world around them. Buber's philosophy as a Jewish scholar pairs well with the cultural context and themes of Potok's works not because *I and Thou* addresses specific elements of Judaism and Jewish tradition, but the underlying foundation of spirituality and priority of relationship that exists within the book are evident; Buber does not identify a name for the spiritual Thou he discusses, though he insinuates a monotheistic deity, nor does he discuss any direct relationship between that eternal presence and humans. Rather, he describes more of a response from humans towards objects and spiritual elements, identifying pathways to idolatry while still validating the created object as a valuable thing to respond to (Buber 46). This is especially essential to consider in Potok's works which expound on how the protagonists reconcile with their surrounding cultures and navigate how to interact with them on their own terms. On the contrary to what the sacred/secular dichotomy epitomizes in compartmentalizing spiritual life from the physical world, Buber claims that "[a]part from the apparently isolated realms, through the historical influence of other pre-existing culture they take over, at a certain stage, the world of *It* belonging to these cultures… only then does a culture, thus grown, fulfill itself in decisive, discovering expansion" (37). In other words, when a culture adapts to the *It*, or the physical, inanimate objects of the surrounding environment, that culture can evolve and expand. Though this concept may be a threat to those who would like to maintain their sacred traditions and view secular culture, American culture specifically in this context, as the opposite of such values, Buber even in his Jewish faith and foundational values recognizes the realities of thriving cultures and does not exhibit a negative tone when discovering that growth.

Asher Lev's identity as a Jewish American artist is an example of spiritual and physical relationship that Buber discusses and the results of embracing such a combination. Asher would not face the tension he does if it were not for his artwork, but he also would not have the means

to cope with his developing cultural identity and experiences were it not for art as a mode of in-betweenness. Because his paintings are an outpouring of who he is, they reflect the unique combination of who he is and ultimately become a kind of metaphorical space in which he exists. Buber describes the relationship between spiritual reality and physical reality and compares it to that of an unborn child:

> the spiritual reality of the primary words arises out of a natural reality, that of the primary word *I-Thou* out of natural combination, and that of the primary word *I-It* out of natural separation. The ante-natal life of the child is one of purely natural combination, bodily interaction and flowing from one to the other. It's life's horizon, as it comes into being, seems in a unique way to be, and yet again not to be, traced in that of the life that bears it. (24-25)

In this case, if Asher is the parent of his work, then as it emerges into the physical world out of his imagination, it naturally carries those distinct characteristics of Asher's personhood, creating something that navigates between his Jewish and artistic communities, though not necessarily accepted by the first.

Asher not only obtains a name for himself in both his communities (though more negatively associated in the Jewish community as described in the first few pages), but he makes choices which catalyze his spiritual sense of identity moving forward. Buber's claim about how unseen and seen forces interact in an individual also lends itself to the observation that if spiritual relationships between human beings and between humans and their Creator hinges on combination, then the development of spiritual life is not based on distancing oneself from others, but embracing a multi-faceted approach to interaction and understanding, bearing new life out of that combination. Asher's painting is the life he creates from the intertwined

communities within himself, and though not perfect, his creations are a tangible example of the spiritual life Buber describes.

To continue beyond the importance of individual cultures to survive and grow even as displaced peoples from their original homeland, Buber establishes relationship as the foundational tool of reality to continue. There can be no parental figure without a child figure to parent, and there can be no child without a parent, so relationships depend on everyone involved to maintain their unity of being (66). Potok's novels rely heavily on relationships between characters to establish the main themes of the works, relying less on action sequences and more on the internal significance surrounding events have on the characters. Throughout each novel there will be sequences of dialogue which do not include descriptions of action or even tags to signify the speaker, trusting the reader to keep track and read the tone between the lines. As the author himself says in an interview with Harold Ribalow, "I have this feeling that florid prose often covers up obtuseness of ideas" (19). Body language and more concise dialogue are major characterizing elements in Potok's work, but Buber's lens of interpretation provides insight on that existing dialogue as a prominent medium of relationship, and so each novel's dialogue establishes unique examples of unity between each character and their perceptions of objects around them, whether that be art, or even the products of their imagination.

Review of Research and Literature

The primary works I will be discussing are *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp* by Chaim Potok. Though Asher Lev has gained more recognition through burgeoning scholarship and a stage adaption of the novel, it is still not the most popular of Potok's novels; *Davita's Harp* even less covered despite being the author's sole female protagonist. Though based in different time periods and political backgrounds, Asher and Davita both experience significant cultural

shifts as they mature into adulthood, acting almost as two sides of the same coin, or ships passing one another on the linear spectrum of cultural exchange: one moving from a solely secular background in the direction of Jewish life while the other moves from an orthodox upbringing into more of the outside world

Artistic pursuits are treated with distance and skepticism based on the Jewish interpretation of the second commandment given to Moses: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4, *ESV*). Asher's passion and talent for painting create controversy with his parents and many Jewish leaders, causing him to struggle with how to respect the traditions of his faith while also joining a community seemingly separate from what he has always known, ultimately forced to sacrifice aspects of himself to live in peace.

Multiple compiled works related to Potok serve as helpful reference points where academics publish a diversity of perspectives and angles on his writing. Sources which contain Potok's direct language include his interviews as contained in the collection, *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Prominent commentary on his novels originate in Harold Ribalow, Elaine Kauver, and S. Lillian Kremer's exchanges with the author. Though secondary scholarship by other authors provides insightful resources, using Potok to interpret and illuminate his own work introduces a clarity of content and foundational understanding of what shaped his writing. This compilation is edited by Daniel Walden, one of the foremost scholars on Potok, and established writer and editor within the world of Jewish studies and literature. Walden is also the editor of *Chaim Potok: Confronting Modernity Through the Lens of Tradition*, which contains a plethora of contributions by other established authors in the field such as Nathan P. Devir and Kremer

once again, including his own essay on the nature of being in between two cultures, a relevant theme for both Asher and Davita.

In terms of individual works, articles like “Conceptions of Idolatry and Secular Art in Chaim Potok's Asher Lev Novels” by Devir provide a vital foundation of understanding how the Jewish community perceives idolatry and why this lends to so much controversy surrounding Asher Lev’s passion for art. Devir promotes the stance which navigates the intricacies of Potok’s themes in order to conclude that Asher actually helps his Hasidic community to grow and continue on in their American umbrella culture as Jewish-Americans through his art, not abandon or blaspheme against it (164). Joan Del Fattore’s essay, “Women as Scholars in Chaim Potok's Novels” and Joel B. Wolowelsky’s essay, “Women and Kaddish” expound on essential issues central to Potok’s works even when the protagonists are not female, since there are a plethora of complex and influential roles that women have as side characters as well, including Asher’s mother. While Wolowelsky’s article does not center on fictional works, it does cover the historical controversy in Jewish tradition about whether Jewish women should be allowed to say kaddish, a prayer recited aloud in synagogue for those grieving a loved one, commonly said by the male figures in the family. His examples of specific situations in the past century closely related to those of Davita when her father dies, establishing a bigger picture of culture and controversy outside the novel while validating that Davita’s desire to mourn her loved ones in the best way she knows how is not a unique one. Though this is not the full extent of the research and sources used throughout the chapters, it is a representation of scholarship and an acknowledgment of influential voices who helped shape and support this thesis.

Chapter One: The Deconstruction of Binaries in Asher Lev

"I don't think there's a conflict between art and Judaism alone. I think there's a conflict between art and any established institution because in the modern world, for the most part, the artist is antagonistic to established institutions" (Potok qtd. in Kauver 70).

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Like many of Potok's characters, Asher Lev encounters cultural confrontation as a Jewish American child to Hasidic Jewish parents in Brooklyn, New York. He struggles to navigate the internal conflict between his faith community and his artistic passion, since there seems to be irreconcilable differences in the societal construct of the Jewish community he is part of. I specify that this struggle is between his faith community and not his faith itself, though in the Judaic tradition these are often considered one in the same. Asher's mother exemplifies the parallelism between their faith and tradition when she explains to her son that Jewish people associate western art forms (mostly related with Christianity) with the hundreds of years of persecution they have experienced at the hands of Christians, and his father makes it clear that he believes the secularism of modern art to be from the *Sitra Achra* (Other Side, or Evil). Because of the connection between the Judaic institution of tradition and the faith itself, Asher is an outlier in how he adheres to his belief system while still embracing influences from his surrounding culture. Only when the Rebbe of Asher's yeshiva connects him with Jacob Kahn, a Jewish artist who has left the faith community, does Asher have the opportunity to explore and develop his gifting on a professional level, flourishing under the mentorship of someone who shares this interest and skill. Kahn becomes a paternal figure to the young artist, filling a gap created by the distance between Asher and his father, and represents the other "culture" within Asher. His parents and his mentor exemplify the different sides of Asher at war within him and

explain the development of the false dichotomy which ultimately separates him from his community in America.

Though Asher's parents have different relationships with Asher and different approaches to his artistic pursuits, they represent a collective unit of sacred tradition in Asher's life. Asher's father Aryeh is an American-Jewish man passionate about the persecuted Jewish community in Eastern Europe. His life centers on this sacred purpose, causing him to often sacrifice himself and time with his family in the struggle to maintain the unity and security of his people. Aryeh is loyal to the ideals of his faith community and adheres to them adamantly, so because art is not often a common factor within that tradition, he is skeptical of Asher's gift. He tells his son that "you have a gift. I do not know if it is a gift from the Ribbono Shel Olom or from the Other Side. If it is from the Other Side, then it is foolishness, dangerous foolishness, for it will take you away from Torah and from your people and lead you to think only of yourself" (Potok 109). He acknowledges that Asher has a gift, and so indirectly acknowledges the beauty of his art, but does not equate beauty with essential goodness. Because Aryeh does not understand the nature of Asher's talent, he is suspicious of it. His faith tradition does not have much context for such a situation, and he is so bound up in the laws that govern his worldview that what is foreign must be foolish and dangerous. When Asher is still a young child, Aryeh tolerates his artistic interests more than when his son grows up when Aryeh expects him to conform more closely to tradition. This earlier point in the novel when Asher is still a young child foreshadows the challenges he will encounter for the rest of his life. Martin Buber explains the phenomenon of children discovering their own interaction in the world, an experience Aryeh is more removed from as an adult: "[A child] has stepped out of the glowing darkness of chaos into the cool light of creation. But he does not possess it yet; He must first draw truly out, he must make it into a reality for

himself, he must find for himself his own world by seeing and hearing and touching and shaping it" (Buber 25-26). Aryeh has already drawn his own sense of reality, so it is difficult to see his own son draw (in both a physical and metaphysical way) an alternate picture of how he views the world and what he wants to do within that experience.

Because of Aryeh's passion for the sacred, he easily recognizes opportunities to advance the Jewish cause, even through his family. He associates the advancement of the Jewish people with the cause of righteousness and justice, since they are the people who represent the Master of the Universe and who have been sorely oppressed throughout their people's existence. When Asher is a more autonomous young man who travels to visit art exhibits, his father admonishes, "It won't hurt you to do something on your trips that is important to us. Next time you travel, please let me know" (Potok 298). It bothers him that Asher's goals are not wrapped up in the same focus as his are, since Aryeh's passion is connected to the larger sense of Jewish faith and life. Whereas Asher desires value as an individual, Aryeh, as Asher's elder and someone who has seen firsthand the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, carries a burden for his community (Potok 111). Hasia Diner writes in her article, "Encountering the Holocaust: Postwar American Jewry and the Catastrophe" that "[American Jews] had the financial means to build, and rebuild, Jewish life, and in particular to assist the remnants of European Jewry, whether in the displaced persons camps on the continent, in transit to Palestine, or bound for America" (xi). Aryeh Lev exemplifies this kind of American Jew in his plight to help other Jews immigrate to America and rebuild the yeshivas across Europe. When his wife Rivkeh grows bitter towards the Rebbe for a time because her brother died traveling on the Rebbe's orders, Aryeh "looked tormented" (Potok 48). He does not exclude the members of his family, especially his wife, from the sacredness of his mission, so when Rivkeh turns away from the head of their faith community, he deeply feels

the conflict between love for his wife and passion for his purpose (Potok 48). Not only does Aryeh characterize the Jewish cause and tradition in Asher's life, but he also endures his own conflict, adding a deeper view of what others who seem to embody just one side experience on a more complex level.

Not only does Aryeh doubt the nature of his son's gift, he ultimately questions Asher's morality as Asher embraces the artistic community: "Asher, if you had a choice between aesthetic blindness and moral blindness, which would you choose?" (Potok 305). In this more direct conversation between the father and son about morality and aesthetics Aryeh asking this question brings to light the mindset not only that there is a distinction between beauty and truth, but that they are two sides that Asher, and anyone else, must choose between. Though Potok does not comment on this line specifically, Aryeh's question brings to light the reasoning of a tradition which does not recognize the relationship between art and truth. In an interview with Elaine Kauver, Potok explains that "I don't think there's a conflict between art and Judaism alone. I think there's a conflict between art and any established institution because in the modern world, for the most part, the artist is antagonistic to established institutions" (70). In this sense, Aryeh represents the sacred tradition of Asher's being, the part of him that applies pressure to conform to the norms of his society which are much older than he himself, just as a member of any community might experience. Asher never answers his father's question because it is not one he needs to apply to his life; he identifies as an observant Jew and as an artist, but in the process of realizing the latter, he breaks from his family who represent what is acceptable in his community.

Aryeh is not himself subject to just one aspect of being: he is spirit and flesh and emotion and intelligence and all those other things that also make up his son. His frustration and cynicism

towards Asher's art are a clear indication of his priorities, though, and in that disposition, he represents the intellectual spiritualism that takes precedence in the Hasidic community which aspires to unity and status quo among followers. In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin addresses this desire in how humans strive for unity through language in order to gain security and communication, since "a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" (271). However, this unification is not totally realistic in the face of inevitable heteroglossia. No group of humans have the same worldview or basis of understanding perfectly paralleled with the other, which is why linguistic supremacy is so dangerous since there can never be a singular dialect or even a singular internal voice to overcome all the others without fatal suppression.

Aryeh's seemingly one-sided nature prevents him from bonding with his son and demonstrates the danger that Bakhtin presents as the centralization of language. An example of this is soon after Aryeh asks Asher to choose moral blindness or aesthetic blindness, as Aryeh invites Asher to teach him about the vernacular of the art community. Asher narrates, "We spent days discussing those concepts and came slowly to understand how futile it all was" (Potok 306). Aryeh's guarded heart and years of pent-up frustration towards his son do nothing to help him bridge the distance between them in one conversation where they are communicating on different planes of understanding. This distinction between the truth and structure of art and the truth and structure of religion may be the very problem that frustrates them. When there is not a common ground of experience and understanding, there can be little successful communication, and both Aryeh and Asher fail to recognize this root of their problematic relationship: both of their communities have believed and propagated the false narrative that there are two worlds,

two different truths concerning what is valuable and what is necessary. Buber negates this destructive narrative by using the image of a tree, arguing that "[e]verything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colors and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, all are present in a single whole" (8). When Asher surmises that his father "possessed no frames of reference for such concepts" (Potok 305), referring to the vernacular of art, this observation makes it clear that what is missing is a translator of sorts, something to provide a basis that these two languages can use to have dialogue.

Though Asher's mother Rivkeh is more compassionate towards her son and his artistic pursuits, she still adheres to their faith tradition alongside her husband. Amid her grief, she sees her young son's art as an opportunity to create beautiful things that will cheer her up. But when the content of his work becomes more serious and controversial, she becomes disenchanted with his pursuits, especially when they involves disobeying his father and therefore the structure of the family that is so deeply engrained in the Jewish community. Rivkeh experiences deep suffering throughout the novel whether it be at the hands of her brother's death or the fracturing between her husband and her son, and these situations create in her a certain determination to continue the work that her brother left behind. For example, when convincing her husband that she should go back to school, she says that not finishing his work "would be a victory for the sitra achra," though later she claims, "My brother would not have been killed if the Rebbe had not told him to travel" (Potok 47, 48). This demonstrates the distinction between her beliefs and her part in her community, full of waiting and uncertainty. Buber clarifies the difference between people like Rivkeh and Aryeh while still maintaining their parallelism, illuminating that neither institutions nor feelings separated from relationship "knows the present: even the most up-to-date institutions know only the lifeless past that is over and done with, and only the most lasting

feelings know only the flitting moment that has not come properly into being" (44). In this case, Aryeh emits a concern for the institution of Judaism while Rivkeh feels the grief and burden of her husband's absence in service to the institution. Rivkeh demonstrates a high intellectual competency like her husband, and together they embody this institutional and emotional quality of the sacred traditions Asher is drawn to but can never fully integrate into because of his draw into the artistic community.

Aside from her purpose in finishing her brother's work through her education, the link that Asher connects between Rivkeh's suffering and Jesus indicates the spiritual nature of her role in Asher's life. Her sickness and anxiety are brought on by emotional stress, not physical torture, and Asher recognizes the conflict inside of her between the relationship with her son and her husband. Rivkeh is the one to explain to Asher the negative association Jewish people have with Christians, giving context for why his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings will be so scandalous and ostracizing (Potok 1). Because she is so tormented, she wants Asher to paint beautiful things like flowers and birds, but Asher's passion is to paint the truth of what he sees, and what he sees is anguish; Asher desires to see the truth in his work. A collaboration of artistic forms which translates the seemingly eternal images in his mind is supported by Buber's assertion that "[t]his concentration [on the cooperation between both physicality and the eternal] does not desire the self that is set apart, but the whole, unimpaired man. It aims at, and *is*, reality" (89). As Asher paints the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* in the climactic moment of the novel, he reflects on the reality of his mother's experience, realizing that she stood "between two different ways of giving meaning to the world, and at the same time possessed by her own fears and memories, she had moved now toward me, now toward my father, keeping both worlds of meaning alive, nourishing with her tiny being, and despite her torments, both me and my father" (Potok 325). In this way she

experiences acute confrontation like her son, but in a more relational and spiritual way, since her anguish is between two specific people, as well as the questions that arise amid her grief and her family's fracturing. Though she is torn between Aryeh and Asher, she ultimately aligns herself with her husband, in addition to her narrower view of art which is that it should paint a brighter version of the world and not communicate the honest and often bleak reality of what the artist actually sees.

Asher has multiple parental influences in his life, and though his mythic ancestor who he dreams about does not parent him, he does provide a reminder of Asher's heritage and the tradition he was born into. Asher recalls that "the great man would come to me in my dreams and echo my father's queries about the latest bare wall I had decorated and the sacred margins I had that day filled with drawings. It was no joy waking up after a dream about that man. He left the taste of thunder in my mouth" (Potok 4). This figure appears multiple times throughout the novel, often around times of strife in Asher's family when the continual pressure to be a good Jewish boy expected to stay away from drawing and painting. Gideon Ofrat in his article questioning the lack of surrealism in Jewish literature asserts that there can be no tension between fathers and their rebellious sons in surrealism, since it is an escape from oppression for the later party (105). This seems limiting in that the imagination and realm of surrealism are vast and reflective of multiple aspects of psychology, especially since Asher's mythic ancestor is a kind of father figure, and Asher in fact *does* feel haunted by him. On the other hand, Asher's dream may also reflect his own characteristic, not necessarily an outside force. If Ofrat's assertion is accurate, and surrealism also applies to dream states, then Asher's visions are more equated with his own psyche, a part of him that applies pressure to himself, which also explains why he can translate these dreams into art; he transforms the voice in his head into a physical

medium, and therefore somewhat transcends the conflicting narratives in his internal life.

If Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev symbolize the spiritual intellectualism of their faith community and the "sacred" side of Asher, then Jacob Kahn and Anna Schaeffer are the external, more "secular" components of the novel's parental influences. Though Kahn mentors Asher in his painting, he is primarily a sculptor, which enforces his association with physical form. In his article, "Chaim Potok's Reforming of a Traditional Judaic Narrative in *The Gift of Asher Lev,"* Nathan P. Devir discusses Kahn's role in Asher's life:

> From the moment in the novel that Asher makes the acquaintance of Jacob Kahn, the reader becomes aware of just how saturated with modernity the latter character is. The first set of images that relay this depiction are primarily physical in nature: for instance, as opposed to the hunched-over, sickly, or persecuted types of men whom Asher knows from his Ladover community… Jacob is presented as a towering figure who imposes by his girth as much as by his revolutionary intellect. (169)

So not only does his profession characterize him, but his physical appearance correlates with what he represents as well. When Anna notices Asher looking at two of Kahn's bronze statues, she informs him that "[h]e parts with very little now. He says he wants in his old age to be surrounded by the work of his hands" (Potok 211). Kahn is a creator, and he understands the abstract ideals of art in a way that is translated into physical reality, just like he will teach Asher to do.

Despite Kahn's initial reluctance to integrate Asher into the artistic community, once he sees that his mentee has committed himself, Kahn challenges him to embrace his identity as a painter which includes painting nudes. Young Asher, who has lived within a conservative Hasidic context his entire life, is understandably anxious to embark on this assignment, but Kahn

counters his silent hesitancy by using a frame of reference Asher will understand: “The nude is a form of art I want you to master. To attempt to achieve greatness in art without mastering this art form is like attempting to be a great Hasidic teacher without knowledge of the Kabbalah” (Potok 229). As Asher paints the nude models every week, he becomes more accustomed and comfortable with the task, signifying his transition into the realm of artistic vision and professionalism. Bakhtin addresses such a shift between different kinds of languages in literature: “Concrete socio-ideological language consciousness, as it becomes creative—that is, as it becomes active as literature—discovers itself already surrounded by heteroglossia and not at all a single, unitary language, inviolable and indisputable” (295). As Kahn pushes Asher into the artistic sector (not without his consent) and becomes more creative as Bakhtin would say, he is able to recognize the different forms and ways of communicating through his paintings, developing his place in the artistic community through his time with Kahn.

There is a parallel drawn (pun intended) between Kahn and Asher as their relationship develops. Kahn is in his early 70’s in the beginning of the novel, and though still active as a sculptor and mentor, approaching the end of his prime both physically and professionally. At Kahn’s exhibition of sculptures, Asher notices, “One of the sculptures consisted of two heads facing in the same direction. One head was Jacob Kahn’s; the other was mine” (268). This sculpture demonstrates not only Kahn’s affection for his mentee but their parallelism. Asher is not the same as Kahn—they have their own forms and personalities and systems of belief even with a shared Hasidic foundation, but just as Buber concludes, “Man speaks with many tongues, tongues of language, of art, of action; but the spirit is one, the response to the *Thou* which appears and addresses him out of the mystery” (39), Kahn and Asher also share a similar language that they address the world with through artistic expression. This alignment perpetuates

Asher's belonging not just in the community of artists, but of *great* artists.

Though Khan does not hide his heritage or nature as a Jewish man, he does not adhere to the Jewish faith, nor does he pretend to. Kahn admonishes Asher that art "is not a toy. This is not a child scrawling on a wall. This is a tradition; it is a religion, Asher Lev. You are entering a religion called painting" (213). Though artists no doubt form a distinct community, Kahn is still perpetuating the narrative that the pursuit of creating beauty and communicating truth must be separate from the Jewish faith, or any other faith for that matter. This view can be just as dichotomous and one sided as Asher's own father, just about a different idea. No doubt this is the manifestation of the pressure to choose one over the other, just as Asher is experiencing. Kahn is ethnically still a Jew. He does not define himself as a religious one, but understands Asher's conflict through personal experience, so much so that he agrees to mentor the young man quite hesitantly, knowing that it will create further strife between Asher and his father (Potok 194). Kahn's character is an interesting representation of the generation before Asher and the tragic consequences aesthetic Jews like he and Asher face after bearing such a conflict for decades.

Anna Schaeffer, another one of Asher's mentors within the artistic community, is a unique influence in that she is the only non-Jewish person in his life. She is not an antagonistic character but does present an alternative to his kosher way of life. Towards the end of the novel as he becomes a well-known artist, she gives him a beret to commemorate his entrance of sorts into the world of art, especially since he has lived in Paris for a time already, but Asher notes, "I put the beret into a drawer and continued to wear my fisherman's cap" (Potok 321). Asher already wears a fisherman's cap as a Hasid, so his choice to keep the beret in a drawer is a clear signifier of his choice to continue as a religious Jew, even if he has also transitioned into the artistic community. As Potok says in an interview with Doug Morgan entitled "When Culture

Confronts Faith," "In culture fusion something is yielded by both sides. The ideal would be that out of the fusion something new would result. You hope when you give something up that you gain something back […] The problem always arises when there is something in an alien body of ideas that attracts you" (57). In Asher's case, he yields his community in Brooklyn for the sake of his art since it is so personal and controversial in the place where he is known so well; however, in this new sense of identity, he does not yield that which is the indicator of his faith, and in doing so demonstrates the coexistence of faith and culture because of Anna's gift.

Anna also contrasts Asher's normal community since she does not adhere to the same religious practices and worldview as Asher. For example, she is unapologetic about serving non-kosher food at the exhibition of his work, and though Kahn and his wife do not eat kosher either, Anna's role as a businesswoman and a gentile takes her influence as the representation of the secular world a step further (Potok 345). This is Asher's entrance into a broader world, and she does not mask this for the sake of him or his family; this is the reality of the community he has entered. Anna's separation from the Jewish community allows her to appreciate the skill and climactic nature of his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings more fully, since crucifixions are not an offensive or scandalous art form to her. Her reaction to seeing the paintings for the first time communicates a sense of awe: "She gazed a long time at the two large paintings. 'They are crucifixions,' she said very quietly. I said nothing. 'Asher Lev,' she murmured. 'Asher Lev.' That was all she seemed to be able to say. She stared at the paintings. A long time later, she looked at me and said, 'They are both great paintings'" (Potok 331). There is a sense of bittersweetness in her reaction as well, since she knows that it will have dire consequences for Asher's relationship with his family. Her compliment after that reflects the part of him that is talented and gratified by what he has accomplished by creating a piece of great cultural

significance and value to the secular world. Buber recognizes the pursuit of art as something that pours from the artist out of need as well as passion and acknowledges that "[t]his is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work… the act includes a sacrifice and a risk" (9-10). Asher has sacrificed the security of belonging to his Jewish community in Brooklyn, but without risk, he would have never manifested such a powerful portrait of truth, love, and anguish, satisfying the desire in him to process and communicate through art.

The tragedy of Asher's story and of Jewish artists before him like Jacob Kahn is that much of their conflict and strife come from false narrative of dichotomy, namely the stark compartmentalization of art and faith. Devir's article on idolatry and aesthetic forms in both Asher Lev novels identifies one source of such tension, namely the interpretation of the second commandment against idolatry, or creating images ("Conceptions of Idolatry" 155). He goes on to assert that Kahn's mentorship of Asher shows

> how blind adherence to prescribed meaning (such as in the Second Commandment's prohibition of idolatry) inevitably decontextualizes content from its original sources. The fact that Jews had to wait until the turn of the twentieth century to actively and publicly participate in the world of visual arts is, according to Asher, a testament to this unfortunate fact. (Devir "Conceptions of Idolatry" 156)

Because the modern Hasidic religious tradition has closely associated art with idolatry, there have been no substantial progressions in artistic expressions, which leads Asher to look elsewhere. As Potok describes in an interview with Harry Ribalow, "Asher Lev sometimes can make an accommodation between his Orthodoxy and Western art and sometimes cannot. The point to Asher Lev, of course, is that since the Jew has not contributed any aesthetic vessels, as it

were, to western art his range and maneuverability in the area of aesthetics is very limited" (11). The key point that the author points out is that because Jewish culture has not prioritized the value of aesthetics and stereotyped western art as related to what is evil and anti-Semitic, those like Asher and Jacob are left frustrated and ostracized when they can see the intersection, communicate that vision effectively and beautifully, yet the singularity this kind of vision creates is not enough to perpetuate an entire cultural shift.

Asher and Jacob's skill as artists signifies their deep relationship with the world; as Buber articulates, "The man who experiences has no part in the world. For it is 'in him' and not between him and the world that the experience arises. The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced but has no concern in the matter" (5). Buber's discussion of how mankind relates with the rest of the world provides a clearer interpretive lens of how the two generations of artists in Potok's novel have a deep internal dialogue within themselves about *what* they have seen and experienced, not *with* it. The conversation is between them and others about this experience, and presents a wrestling with what they are experiencing, but not so much so that they equate the product of their hands as a higher power. This negates idolatry and the desires of Asher's parents to limit what Asher paints (or not paint at all, of course). Asher is not completely parallel to Jacob, however, since the latter has left the faith and shows no desire to return (though Kahn still respects the Rebbe), so that Asher still commits to his system of belief is a sign of hope for the Jewish community as one of their members trailblazes a path of discovering beauty and truth.

Despite Asher's loyalty to his faith, membership in both the artistic and Jewish community, and defense of his actions from the very beginning of the novel, the danger of sacred/secular dichotomy is most prevalent when his parents visit the exhibition with the

Brooklyn Crucifixion paintings displayed. There is a personal aspect involved since Asher depicts his parents themselves in a visual form which has been an offense to Jewish people for centuries (Christianity used as a reason for Jewish persecution and the theological implications of Jesus as the Messiah), and Asher knows this well, which is why he is so nervous beforehand (Potok 357). Their lack of understanding of artistic history and forms coupled with fragility of their relationship with Asher and their framework as Orthodox Jews climaxes in this moment as they interpret these works as a line Asher has crossed towards sacrilege and idolatry. If there was a bridge of sorts between Asher and his parents, between what they believed as Jews and what they understood of why Asher uses this artistic form the way he does to help break down the strict compartmentalization between truth and beauty, then the sacrifices and fracturing that occurs in the Lev family would be significantly lessened through this bridging.

Analyzing Asher's parental influences as a conduit of cultural significance demonstrates the nature of Asher's conflicting communities not as one side on his left and one on his right, but both as manifestations in Asher himself. Recognizing the presence of multiple languages or identities within an individual negates such a divisive framework, and instead opens the possibility of navigating ancestry and passion in a healthier way while still acknowledging the inherent complexity. The nature of parents is to create a new being, someone who encompasses two sides of something in one. Whether it be Aryeh, Rivkeh, Jacob or Anna—none of these characters are completely one-sided themselves—none embody the sacred and secular because they are human beings who have both spiritual and physical components. What these characters do is provide examples of the extremes of each side, whether that be those who embrace the aesthetic or the religious in this case, ignoring the multiplicity of both. Potok explains that stereotypes are the result of an incomplete and shallow image of a people group, and it is only

after looking at the foundational elements of a society that stereotypes diminish (qtd. in Kauver 72). On an individual level, it is vital for a community to recognize the different facets of interest which can be present in each member and the strengths that those interests bring to a society. Though Asher may not be a carbon copy of either of his parents in regards to their interests or perspectives, he does express a similar loyalty to his faith and a conviction to do what he feels is necessary even if that separates him from his family, and though often times his conflict is a result of false narratives within his communities, his identity as Aryeh and Rivkeh's son and Jacob and Anna's burgeoning prodigy enables him to embody a multitude of skills and insights.

My Name is Asher Lev is one of Potok's darker novels due to its heavy themes of internal turmoil and familial trauma, yet these make the work so moving and essential, since confrontation between communities and ideologies is the reality of most individuals, no matter their system of belief or interests. Though Asher Lev's parents and mentors are complex beings in their own right, in their clear priorities, they represent Asher's conflict on an external level, and are ideal examples which showcase the realities of Bakhtin's heteroglossia. Whether it be the sacred tradition of Asher's Hasidic community, or the artistic one focused on the truth and importance of beauty, the young protagonist has mentors in each of those areas that he learns the core of each from, whether that is through a close relationship like the one he has with Jacob Kahn, or a more tumultuous and distant one that he has with his father. Ultimately, Asher demonstrates that the sacred/secular dichotomy which his communities perpetuate creates an impossible situation for those who desire belonging but who are drawn outside the status quo and into a space where faith and beauty intersect, yet this need not be the ongoing narrative.

Chapter Two: Davita Chandal's Disillusionment

"[Davita] has a feminine kind of toughness and a certain kind of wiliness that's almost matriarchal. The biblical period admired the matriarch's tribal cunning. If it hadn't been admired, they would have written it out of the Bible, believe me" (Potok qtd in Kauver 83).

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Chaim Potok's protagonist Davita Chandal presents a unique perspective in that she is Potok's only female protagonist, she transitions into a different culture much like Asher Lev does without deeply damaging her relationship with her family, and she is brought up in a Communist household with a gentile father and a Jewish mother. These are not the only traits that give her character depth and complexity, but they are a few which set her apart to be a memorable and example of cultural conflict and context amid a tumultuous time in history. Similar to Asher's mother, Davita is a gifted scholar, but this conflicts her life as she tries to integrate into Jewish culture, since her more secular upbringing combined with her academic aspirations cause strife with the traditional framework of the yeshiva she attends. In the end, though, she becomes a well-rounded character who learns to defend herself and come to a place of stability as she remembers her loved ones even after some have died in the tragedies of war and political unrest. Since Davita has grown up in a more progressive and politicized household, she brings a more secular awareness into the Jewish community which presents confrontation as she grieves her father and strives to integrate within this newly religious life.

Because of her parents, Davita has grown up around political news and discussion all her life. She has a certain understanding of the corruption around the world that others her age do not. One day as Davita reads during recess, she observes, "The yard was filled with the high happy sounds of playing children. I envied them and wished I could be like them… Unaware of

Spain and Madrid and Bilbao. Unaware of the destruction by airplanes of the little town of Guernica a few miles from Bilbao where my father and Jakob Daw now were" (Potok 178-179). Her parents' political interests and pursuits have exposed her to understanding, as opposed to the ignorant bliss she sees in the other children. She has a strong desire to understand and learn, so that knowledge does not embitter her, but it does weigh on her. The heaviness of Davita's context and what she has already started to realize about the world does encourage her to use her imagination in a more vivid way, allowing her to come to terms with her experiences through stories. Buber asserts that "the spirit is never independently effective in life in itself alone, but in relation to the world: possessing power that permeates the world if *It*, transforming it" (50). Davita's growing context of the world allows her to transform it, based on Buber's assertion at an earlier stage than her peers who have not been exposed to the truth of injustice so deeply yet.

Davita's understanding of politics helps to fan her imagination, but even in a secular, non-Jewish context, her identity is controversial. Not only does she qualify as a Jew under her mother's ancestry, but a communist as well, and neither of those roles are popular outside of her home. After Davita mentions Mussolini and other Fascist world leaders in her class, an Italian American boy confronts her on the playground and threatens, "My father says Adolf Hitler is the best thing that ever happened to Germany. He's gonna get rid of all the Commies and Jews. You better keep your mouth shut or you won't make it back home one day" (Potok 32). She has yet to recognize that many did not share her parents' perspective and that it is dangerous for Jewish women and communists, let alone both in one person, to live in 1930's America. This is an example of two of her primary communities being unified in how they are equally distrusted, bringing in a stark contrast between her ideals and ethnicity with her nationality. Those aspects of her identity are what Bakhtin might call diverse voices, or modes of influence to who she is.

Though the Russian philosopher addresses the intricacy of voices within a novel, the presence of relationship and input parallels the narrative tactic of which he writes: "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorecie*] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)" (Bakhtin 263). The identifying factors just in this scene of *Davita's Harp*: Italian, Jewish, American, boy, girl, communist, capitalist, are the very kinds of social voices that Bakhtin is discussing, and their existence in a scene represents the dialogism that makes Potok's characters so complex and realistic. For example, the boy who confronts Davita is merely parroting the dogma of his father as children will do until they learn how to think for themselves. It's just that instead of inheriting a sense of social justice and concern like Davita has from her family, he has a more unfortunate input of hateful and one-sided voices from his father, becoming defensive when these ideals are challenged by Davita. Without this exchange, painful and threatening as it may be, there would be little other examples of children whose cultural understanding and community pride (in this case an Italian American community defensive of Mussolini) converse or clash within a single setting.

Davita's dual sided heritage is evident from the beginning of the novel, but in her own household, she is recognized, especially by her father, as a holistic being encompassing the separate ethnic and cultural backgrounds of her parents. As Davita starts to question how others might see her and how she sees herself, she asks her father, "According to you, am I Jewish?" to which he responds, "According to me, Davita, all of you is Jewish, all of you is Gentile, all of you is Marxist, all of you…is beautiful, and all of you is my special love" (Potok 11). Her neighborhood is surrounded by gang activity where her ethnic identity as either a Gentile or Jew

determines her safety, but within her home, she is not forced to choose. Because Ilana Davita's parents have the same political ideology, it is easier for them to reconcile their past religious and cultural affiliations. This peace in her household is before her father goes to Spain where he dies, so this is a more innocent Davita who has not faced nearly as much inner conflict over her identity and beliefs. Unlike Asher Lev's home, this is not a place where she feels pressure to choose a specific community where she belongs; instead, she is in a state of adding onto to her existing framework, especially as it pertains to religion. Even though her father is shocked that Davita started to attend synagogue while he was away in Spain, it is not something he discourages in her, nor her reading of the Bible with his sister (Potok 141). Michael Chandal seems to understand that his daughter is at the intersection of a multitude of influences, a situation Philip Roth would describe as not "either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable—it's and/and/and/and/and as well" (qtd in Kauver 877). It is not usually so simple for certain communities and ideologies to coexist like this, but Davita does not gain a community with the intention of throwing one out in exchange, but scaffolds them, developing her imagination in the process.

Because her father's presence signifies the wholeness of her household and her family, Michael Chandal's death produces more internal conflict for Davita, almost like a symbol of her wholeness itself dying. By "internal," I do not mean something merely mentally related since that might seem to downplay the effect Davita's imagination and psychological state have on her overall being. As Buber makes clear, "I experience something. —If we add 'inner' to 'outer' experiences, nothing in the situation is changed. We are merely following the uneternal division that springs from the lust of humans to whittle away the secret of death. Inner things or outer things, what are they but things and things!" (5). Davita is in this process of mourning her father,

and she is looking for a way to "whittle away the secret of death" as Buber mentions, and saying the *Kaddish* (a Jewish prayer that someone, usually a man, will recite in mourning of someone close to him) each morning and night is a strategy she uses to do this (Potok 53). Like most coming-of-age stories, there is a catalyst in her life that she cannot return from, something that changes the direction of her life, and her father's death is this catalyst. Davita is not less of a person afterwards, of course, and it is natural for children to develop a more complex identity as they grow up, but when Michael Chandal dies, it exposes her to a deeper sense of division.

The loss Ilana Davita experiences and the draw to fill this need for wholeness pushes her to assimilate into a more specific community, that being the Hasidic one. It helps that her mother marries a Hasidic man after Michael dies, further creating an opportunity for Davita to come into this culture, but even before then, she and David Dinn meet and form a sort of loose connection of fascination between each other (Potok 58)—fascination of the differences between them but also the looming question of similarities. This is not just a passive understanding of Jewish culture that she gets pulled into, but a transition that Davita seeks out in many ways, the type of willfulness that Buber describes as "[t]he united *I*: for in lived reality there is (as I have already said) the becoming one of the soul, the concentration of power, the decisive moment for a man" (89). So, though trauma escalates her and her remaining family into a specific community, that is the general narrative of those who have moved from one culture to another: projected by pain and sustained through resilience. Joseph Edelman, in his article, "The Centenary of Jewish Immigration to the United States: 1881-1981," explains,

> Although most arrived with a little more than what they had on their backs, the immigrants came with a lingua franca, Yiddish, and shared Jewish customs and values which facilitated their communication with American Jews. This wealth of cultural

> baggage enriched the American Jewish community and contributed significantly to the culturally pluralistic symphony of America. (Edelman 224)

Davita is not a first-generation immigrant, but even as a generation removed, she is discovering how she identifies and belongs within this conglomeration of communities and ideals, perpetuated both by external stimuli and internal struggle.

Based on her burgeoning knowledge of Judaism and her transition into that community, Davita grieves her father in the best way she knows how, by saying the Kaddish every day in either school or the synagogue, which is traditionally not done by a woman. Her additional context of secular defiance against power constructs prevents her from strictly adhering to the traditional framework of the synagogue. Controversy about the role of women and their ability to say Kaddish spanned throughout much of the twentieth century, so Potok displays a topic in contemporary Judaism especially prominent for a female protagonist. In the article, "Women and Kaddish", the author cites an example of a synagogue in Amsterdam where a daughter wished to say Kaddish for her deceased father, but the Rabbi ruled that "despite the apparent permissibility of her doing so, he must forbid it because he fears the negative impact that a permissive ruling might have on the fabric of his community. Such a decision, of course, is by definition applicable to a specific community at a specific time" (Wolowelsky 284). Wolowelsky's observation distinguishes between spiritual ideals and human tradition, which is more fluid and defined by cultural trends than a rooted spiritual truth. Because Ilana Davita comes from an outside perspective, she is more aware to question these inconsistencies, like when she tells her future stepbrother, David Dinn, "'I don't understand why a girl can't say it,' to which he responds, 'A woman doesn't *have* to pray, she doesn't *have* to come to shul. Why are you doing it?'… I have to do more for my father than just attend one memorial meeting. He was my father'" (Potok

209). She acknowledges tradition in her own way, the controversy arising because of her prescribed role within that community, not the action itself. Her stubbornness demonstrates that she does not completely leave her previous ideals behind as she enters the Hasidic community, demonstrating Potok's theory of "core-to-core confrontation."

Though Davita struggles to assimilate into the Hasidic community because of her strong will to say Kaddish, holding onto her father is not the only thing holding her back, but her inclination to academic success as well. Women are permitted to be educated in yeshivas, but Davita would have less trouble entering the Jewish community if she was perhaps less scholarly. There are other women from Potok's cast of characters in both *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp* who pursue further education or have a continued interest in scholarship such as Asher's mother, Rivkeh Lev, and Davita's mother, Channah Chandal. Either their degrees are sanctioned and encouraged by Jewish leaders in their community like in Rivkeh's case, or they have completely cut themselves off from the Jewish community, like Channah. In either case, both are successful scholars and find ways to effectively navigate this identity within their home life. The distinction between these women and Davita may be that Rivkeh and Channah have husbands and experience certain privileges within their communities because of that; Davita on the other hand has no such security in her newfound community. Yes, her stepfather is established and respected among them, but she is still young and not tied to a grounding force of tradition that a husband would provide. Even more so, she is an academically inclined single woman. In other words, she is an unknown factor and possible risk to the security of tradition.

Davita experiences backlash in her religious courses, not her general studies ones, revealing an underlying expectation that women are not expected to excel in their religious education like men are. Joan Del Fattore discusses the portrayal and historical background of

women scholars in her article for *Studies in American Jewish Literature*. The reason Davita is not discussed is likely because the article was written in January of 1985 and the novel not published until later that year, yet Fattore's observations still highlight relevant ideas to Potok's female protagonist: "[m]ale characters are often shown as boys studying Torah and Talmud, but the women earlier religious education, if any, is barely mentioned" (Fattore 59). Rivkeh Lev is an accomplished scholar, but her studies are based on Russian language and literature, not directly related to Jewish studies or Torah, though she uses her degree for the advancement of her people. Davita, however, expresses great interest in religious life, whether by saying Kaddish or even questioning her teacher's interpretation of Torah (Potok 330). The newness of this information and culture, as well as her upbringing which encouraged breaks in tradition and challenging structures of authority, lends to her struggle to assimilate into an orthodox yeshiva. She works diligently to catch up, earning David's jealousy as he chastises, "You're working too hard, Ilana. Even I don't work this hard" (330). David marks the standard of effort by his own studies and the expectations placed on him as a male Jewish student. In this way, Davita draws attention to herself as an outsider which creates tension and skepticism within this new community, while highlighting the differing expectations between male and female students in their religious education.

Once Michael Chandal dies and Channah marries Ezra Dinn, Channah leaves behind her involvement in the Communist party, evidence of a transition in her communities and how she identifies. This may seem out of character for the passionately political, Anti-Fascist woman, but as Motti Inbari observes in his article related to Jewish deconversion, communism, and the Jewish author Arthur Koestler, "[he] clung to this belief [in the ideals of Communism despite the party veering from his original expectations] for another year and a half, until the Hitler-

Stalin Pact destroyed this last shred of the torn illusion" (142). Like Koestler, Channah's shock at the alignment between communism and fascism disillusions her to the party and allows her to enter the Jewish community once again, much like the death of Michael Chandal acts as a catalyst for Davita: Channah's faith in the party's ideals died. Earlier in Inbari's article, he clarifies, "Although Communism is an atheistic movement, many of its most fervent followers saw themselves as participants in a utopian social experiment that would lead to messianic times. However, people who embrace prophetic beliefs may fall into a crisis of faith when their prophecies fail to materialize" (129). Potok's novels, particularly *Davita's Harp* and *My Name is Asher Lev*, do not just demonstrate the entrance or addition of external communities into its protagonist's life, but the separation from communities as well. Both actions manifest because of growth and resilience in the face of change, not necessarily a change in morality, but a change in what practices and representations of those beliefs the characters perceive.

Though Davita's mother, Channah, mentions multiple times that she has lost her faith, the death of Davita's father and her marriage to Ezra Dinn reconnect her with her previous life and propel both her and her daughter into a life full of religious tradition and faith. Not only does Davita display an interest in integrating into sacred studies and practices, but her immediate family transitions into a practicing Jewish household as well. Right before Channah marries Ezra, Davita recounts her mother cleaning the apartment to make it kosher: "I marveled at my mother. She seemed so easily to have become once again an observant Jew… She had been brought up well by her mother and grandfather and was familiar with the details of those parts of the Commandments a woman needed to observe" (Potok 314). Channah does not totally leave behind her political ideologies, but she does move forward by adhering to the Jewish faith once

again, exposing the buried tension within her.

Just after Davita notices her mother's transition back into orthodoxy, she concludes upon further observation of Channah's dark and spaced staring, "[d]uring her years with my father she had thought often about her religious past; now she reflected upon her Communist past. She seemed unable to bring together those two parts of herself. And that haunted her" (Potok 315). Davita's observation of her mother gives insight to the cost of belonging to more than one identifying community and struggling to reconcile warring priorities, an awareness that draws a parallel between Davita and her mother, a shared experience for two women living in a community defined by sacred tradition yet bringing with them secular passions and perspectives.

By the time the novel's protagonist, now Ilana Davita Chandal Dinn, has spent a substantial amount of time within the yeshiva, she has risen to one of the top students in her class, but once immersed in the Hasidic faith tradition, Davita encounters some of the bleaker realities of belonging to an identity she had been interested in at a distance. A primary injustice she experiences is being surpassed for the Akiva award because she is a girl, despite her overt qualifications to receive it rather than the recipient Reuven Malter. Her stepfather, Ezra Dinn investigates further to discover, "Authorities in high academics of learning… would look with disapproval upon a yeshiva where a girl was publicly shown to be the best student of a graduating class that had boys in it. This had not been a mean and petty decision, my father said, but a statement of strong policy from some of the most powerful figures in the Torah world" (Potok 363). In a way, this situation feels like the climactic moment of the book—a quiet climax where Ilana is left in shock and disorientation, yet this moment also clarifies that she has in fact assimilated into the community and is therefore privy to its injustice as well as its belonging. Towards the middle of *I and Thou*, Buber describes how leaders will try to convince the workers

that they are working for themselves when those in power control the whole operation from the shadows in order to secure the *It*, which would be money, power, or objects in this context (48). It echoes the ideals of Marxism and the corruption that Davita's family has fought against from the moment they are introduced, and this kind of situation comes full circle within Davita's own life, not only through her father's death in Spain but her own unfair treatment in the culture she has entered— all of its history, tradition, depth, and flaws encompassed within.

As the only female protagonist in Potok's works, Ilana Davita carries the weight of representing a female Jewish woman in first person. Alongside her, though, are key male characters that help to further develop the complexity of relationships throughout the novel, one such figure being her stepbrother, David Dinn. One of David's roles in the novel is related to Ilana Davita's own story line by shedding light on religious or cultural context and providing a clear picture of a young Jewish boy's perspective, but he has his own experiences of internal conflict and pressure which he reveals to his stepsister. Unlike Asher Lev, David fulfills his community's expectations by exceling in religious scholarship and following in his father's footsteps, but behind closed doors, he reveals to Ilana Davita that "Everyone thinks I'm a saint. Everyone thinks all I do all day and night is study study study… There's no one to talk to, Ilana, if everyone thinks that you're a saint" (341-42). He is scared that if he talks to his father or another authority figure at the yeshiva about his dreams and concerns that he will shatter the image of his piety. His conflict is less between two communities than between reality and perceived expectation, between instinct and accepted practices in his faith. David does not fall out of line regarding the ordinary experiences for pubescent boys, yet he acutely perceives what Buber describes as, "The boundary line [between institutions and feelings], to be sure, is constantly in danger since the wanton feelings break in at all times on the most objective

institutions; but with united goodwill it may be restored" (43-44). The boundary line separating his feelings and the Judaic institution to which he belongs is clear in David's mind, and he feels as if he must maintain it within his own strength and confidence, but notice that Buber clarifies that this boundary is maintained "with *united* goodwill [emphasis mine]," as in a body of members holding one another up. Even as a lifelong member of his faith community which prioritizes the family unit, David is still learning how to access the resources available to him in a people group who recognizes strength in numbers.

Like David, Ilana Davita experiences a sense of growing sexual understanding as she grows up. The intriguing distinction between David and Ilana Davita's understanding of sexuality is that he has been taught that it is something to suppress and avoid talking about, whereas Ilana Davita secretly witnesses her mother embrace her sexual desires even after Michael's death. This image leaves a deep impression with Davita, one that is formational in how she understands female sexuality and her own developing body (258). While it is stereotypically expected for men to embrace their sexuality with confidence and women to maintain more discretion, David feels no such confidence while Channah exemplifies to Davita what it is to embrace it. This reversal of stereotypes manifests after David confides in Ilana Davita and kisses her on the cheek, when Ilana Davita hears him in his room exclaim a quiet, existential cry that "It all means nothing!", while she contemplates and touches her body in the same way she saw her mother doing (342). Not only does her original cultural context inform her childhood, but her burgeoning adulthood as well, exemplifying the realities of dialogism even when one community or voice seems more prominent at the time.

Ilana Davita Chandal Dinn is one of a kind among the cast of Potok's characters, and her account displays the perseverance of stories amid tragedy and chaos. Whether it be the political

climate that she grows up in, her controversial origins, or her academic and creative passions, Davita's early life delivers a narrative through a lens of slowly dying innocence and the clarity of grief she must discern between what is right and what is comfortable. Her perspective exemplifies the safety that comes with belonging to a community so rich in tradition and memory, yet the disillusionment which accompanies seeing the flaws of any people upon closer inspection. Cultural confrontation in this novel particularly is not only made up of a series of specific groups clashing against one another in one person, but the conflict within just one community between its member's ideologies and will. The story does not end with a clear cut answer of how Davita should exist in these complexities, but her core nature is more stable as she goes forward, and if the adults around her are still struggling for firm footing in their identity, then this young protagonist will have years of discovery to go before coming to a more final conclusion; even then, there are always new voices in a conversation, new experiences that add depth to identity. Despite her unknown future, a more mature Davita holds her baby sister by the end of the novel, whispering to the infant stories she acquired through those she loves, the ones she still imagines surrounding her with all of their internal torments, passion for justice, and affection for her.

Chapter Three: Bridges

"The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly—except the situations do not always follow one another in clear succession but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusingly entangled" (Buber 17-18).

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The Hasidic Jewish culture that Chaim Potok translates into his novels is intrinsically tied to the member's religion, so it's impossible to analyze them separately, though the complex layers of Potok's characters expose the natural conflicts that arise from living within an umbrella society which are not possible to totally restrict into compartmentalized binaries.

Both Davita and Asher find methods of escaping the tension of their situation, whether through the imagination or encountering someone who recognizes the possibility of navigating the conversation between communities and desires. Although they do not live simply or without sacrifice, Potok's characters find ways to cope with their conflict and grief, exhibiting a sense of bittersweet clarity going forward. Since the characters come of age throughout the narration, their natural aging traverses between naivete and a loss of innocence which results in a maturity to recognize how they must proceed into adulthood.

Challenges to Dialogue

Part of what makes Asher's entrance into the art community so difficult is that he feels challenged to embrace the cultural normality which feels foreign from his own. The art itself is a medium that he can immerse himself in and freely express himself, but as he progresses as an artist under Kahn, he realizes that the art community has traditions and expectations just like his Jewish community. For example, Kahn brings in a nude model for Asher to draw. The young teenager is reluctant since modesty is such a pivotal part of his religious foundation, but Kahn

confronts him with the reality of being an artist: “And we will see more naked women, and you will learn the reason for the differences between the naked women of Titian and those of Rubens. This is the world you want to make sacred. You had better learn it well first before you begin” (Potok 228). Though Kahn presents Asher with the option with going forward as his mentee or not, he does not give any other options for what going forward looks like, displaying a kind of constraint on what being a part of this world requires. Though Kahn has existed in both worlds, he ultimately aligns himself with the artistic one over the Jewish one and keeps his own bias and sense of tradition with which he believes Asher must adhere to become a successful artist. Asher makes these sacrifices, namely painting in a way he feels necessary to express yet knowing that it will create further distance between he and his family, to become a member of this community. Kahn is partially his example, yet Asher must forge his own identity between his faith and his art, though no other examples are available of others who have done the same in the same way. Jewish artists like Kahn or even Chagall have left the faith, yet Asher still holds to conviction. This lack of solidarity with any one mentor is a primary challenge the protagonist faces, and one that leaves him isolated and searching for community elsewhere in the end of the novel.

Though Davita uses her imagination as a coping mechanism for her grief and as a medium to reconcile her family and ideals, she still experiences a paradox between her foundational mode of ethics and religious interests. Her understanding of political events like the Spanish civil war enables her to empathize with and better understand the Jewish struggle across the Atlantic, but her association with communism proves to be a stumbling block to her sense of unified identity towards the end of the novel as world events continue to develop. According to Matthew Hoffman in his article for the *American Jewish History* journal, there was a significant community of American-Jewish communists, who, during the Popular Front in the 1920’s and

30's, "became preoccupied with identifying and fighting against occurrences of antisemitism in America and elsewhere. They thereby identified themselves as the true defenders of the Jews—all Jews, not just fellow communists—from antisemitic aggression" (Hoffman 5). Davita's mother, though a non-religious Jew, and her biological father, a non-religious white man, could align themselves with both each other and the communist party, believing that it fought against injustice in an inclusive and fair way. This is the household that Davita grows up in, seeing the union of diverse backgrounds come together for a common purpose. However, two dividing and disillusioning factors occur as the events of the novel unfold: the alliance of Russia with Nazi-Germany, and the death of Davita's father. The fracturing and separation within Davita's communities and personal life may come from multiple influences, but these two specifically relate to her and her parents' ideology and the momentum of how Davita identifies herself.

Room for Dialogism

The Rebbe in *My Name is Asher Lev*, the head of Asher's religious community, acts as a bridge between Asher and his artistic connections. He connects the young Asher to Jacob Kahn, propelling the conflicted Jewish boy further in his artistic pursuits, albeit with caution. Kahn tells Asher, "Our Rebbe is very clever. If it isn't me, it will be someone else. Yes? He prefers to take a chance with me" (194). Though Kahn is not a religious Jew, he has a sense of respect and connection to the Jewish community that the Rebbe trusts. The Rebbe is somewhat of a conundrum in his community in that he does not discourage Asher from drawing and painting, yet as an authority figure, he has the credibility to show an alternative to others like Asher's parents without being accused of blasphemy. He does not display a personal conflict between communities like Asher does, but he is someone willing to look beyond stereotypes and fear of the umbrella culture they exist in. He tells Asher, "I do not hold with those who believe that all

painting and sculpture is from the sitra achra" (Potok 366). Though the Rebbe does have a frank conversation with Asher concerning the boundaries of their culture right after this quote, this character's first major action earlier in the novel pushes Asher towards the outer limits of those traditional boundaries. This teacher of the Jewish community demonstrates an understanding that the physical world is not inherently of the Sitra Achra, aligning with Martin Buber when the author clarifies that "[t]he primary word I-It is not of evil—as matter is not of evil. It is of evil—as matter is, which presumes to have the quality of present being" (46). The Rebbe expresses his hope that matter that can be used for good despite the negative associations it has within his and Asher's context. He is the primary character in the novel that makes this distinction out loud, a voice whose authority carries great credibility to say such a thing for the audience, and the protagonist, to hear. This authority figure in Asher's life is one of the first to encourage the young boy to work on navigating these cultural languages instead of adhering to the sacred/secular dichotomy he is normally pressured to choose between, and even provides the building blocks to do so by introducing Asher to Kahn.

The Rebbe in Asher's community would not have the positive connection with Jacob Kahn and the authority in his Jewish community if he were not respected by both sides. When Kahn meets Asher, he explains, "I am not what you call a Torah Jew. I am a great admirer of the Rebbe's. My father was a follower of the Rebbe's father. But I am not a religious Jew" (Potok 194). He makes his position clear so that Asher more clearly understands his role and values before becoming his mentee. But more than that, he exhibits respect and relationship with the Rebbe despite this, not only reflecting on the Rebbe for maintaining that connection but for Kahn as someone who has experienced cultural and spiritual fracturing himself yet who still admires the Jewish teacher. Kahn is technically an outside influence from the Rebbe's primary

community, but he is not threatened by this voice as Bakhtin would call it. In Bakhtin's discussion of effective prose writing, he claims that the writer, or in this case the Rebbe as the prominent authority in his community, must acknowledge the diversity of voices surrounding them and make use of the discourse in a way that now serves them:

> The prose writer as a novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons (big and little worlds) that open up behind heteroglot languages—rather, he welcomes them into his work. The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master. (299-300)

As a minority group under the larger umbrella of American culture, an underlying pressure exists to maintain the boundaries of the original cultural framework in order to avoid blurred lines surrounding ethics and heritage for the following generations, but remaining unaffected by the surrounding context of life remains unrealistic and unattainable. The Rebbe acknowledges this, but instead of succumbing to the flood of outside influence, he chooses with great care how to engage with those influences in a way that maintains his own ethics while growing his understanding of how that can be lived out.

Despite the Rebbe's rarer, more accepting view of the role of art and the potential of Asher's gift, he acknowledges the realities of his community and the boundaries in place outside of his influence. In the last chapter of the novel, his words are quiet and calm, but they are full of seriousness and resoluteness: "'Asher Lev,' the Rebbe said softly. 'You have crossed a boundary [in painting the Brooklyn Crucifixions]. I cannot help you. You are alone now'" (Potok 367). It is not an angry confrontation full of accusations, but an acceptance of the world they live in. The

Rebbe is a well-respected leader in Asher's synagogue, but that does not mean he can so suddenly change the social laws that envelop those he leads; the community is made of a multitude influenced by hundreds of years of tradition, and that multitude sees Asher as an idolater, a traitor to that inheritance. To non-Jewish observers of Asher's paintings, the "Brooklyn Crucifixions" might represent a powerful emotional struggle deeply rooted in historical and religious themes, but as Daniel Walden contextualizes, "To [Asher's] parents, crucifixions were what they were to most Jews: centuries of pogroms, suffering, anti-Semitism, rivers of blood" ("Potok's Asher Lev" 151). The object of his sacrifice is anchored in the belonging to his original community, driving him to seek out somewhere where he can practice his faith with more artistic freedom. When asked if Asher finds a balance between his conflicting desires, Potok responds that "[h]e has found a tenuous balance; in the end, he sacrifices his relationship to his parents and his community, and he's going to pay for that sacrifice by trying to become a greater artist. He will find his own 'play of forms,' as he puts it" (qtd. in Kauver 76). There are no easy ways to internally make peace with the communities Asher is a part of, but there is a larger picture at stake than his internal clarity, which is his very belonging to the Hasidic community in Brooklyn. He does not sacrifice his faith so much as his belonging to his childhood faith community. Asher going back to Europe to seek out Jewish community is a clear indicator that he has not given up on pursuing the integration of his identities, but he still experiences great cost. The Rebbe recognizes that Asher has gone past the point of no return, and in directly telling the artist this, he does him a service of clarity: there are steep costs associated with this life he has chosen, and this is the reality he now faces. The Jewish teacher would not be the wise bridge of sorts between Asher and the possibilities outside his traditional Jewish identity if he did not warn and prepare him for what is past that bridge.

As the figure characterized by his sense of insight and mentorship, the Rebbe remains loyal to those characteristics by not only admonishing Asher for crossing the line that he has but blessing him as he moves on as well. Directly after presenting Asher with the fact that he is now on his own, the Rebbe gives him his blessing (367). These statements may seem contradictory at a cursory glance, like a puzzling combination of sentiment or a habitual phrase to tack on at the end of a reprimand, but based on the Rebbe's past characterization, they are a genuine blessing. His acknowledgement of reality and admonishment of Asher do not diminish his care, and though Asher is alone, the Rebbe can still bless him as he goes forth into a new chapter of his life. This small addition provides a sense of hope that there may be a place where Asher can live in peace, and until he finds that, he has the blessing of someone who wants that for him.

Europe, specifically Paris, ends up being the setting that Asher escapes to after his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings debut. Apart from the characters themselves, the spaces where they exist reflect the environment of the culture, and Paris holds a community for Asher which more readily embraces art yet still holds Jewish values. As Kahn once told his young mentee, "Florence is a gift" (307). For Kahn to say this speaks to the relief an artist feels by being in a setting which embraces and identifies with him. Though Paris ends up being to Asher what Florence was for Kahn, the Italian city serves as the starting point for his draw to Europe. After years of his parents trying to convince him to move there for the sake of his father's work, he finally makes the journey by himself to find inspiration (306). The catalyst is not spite for his parents, but the ability to live on his own terms as an adult and for his own growth. Asher could easily move to Paris with no intention of joining a Hasidic community once more. He could be free of all restraints, religious and cultural responsibilities, yet he still gravitates towards somewhere familiar; he does not deny his past nor deprive his goals. Asher has strong conviction

about maintaining his authenticity of existence, which Lilian Kremer expounds on in her article on artistic influence and themes in *My Name is Asher Lev*, claiming, "Lev's art would be inauthentic if it sought to deny his Hasidic essence. As Kahn amply illustrates, it is Lev's cultural background which accounts for the integration of the rational, emotional, and sensual in his character and his art" (37). Kremer's commentary acknowledges Asher's multiplicity of essence, pointing to a greater need for a setting which has a better foundation for the young artist to thrive in his adult life: Paris. Each location has contributed to who Asher is by the end of the novel, and he demonstrates a growing maturity in how he chooses to go forth. Yes, his choices also hurt those around him, since as Potok contends, "The modern artist voice is really an antagonistic one" (qtd. in Kauver 70). His growth as a character is wrapped up in moving forward and learning how to navigate his cultural identities and moving towards a more stable setting where further maturity is possible.

Asher as an artist has evolved from simply an individual encompassing a multitude of influences to a voice in his own right, speaking into the cultures who have spoken into him. By the end of the novel, Asher's mentor Kahn is growing old, and has taught him what he needs to know to be a successful artist independently. Though Asher is still affectionate and thankful to the authority figures in his life, there is now distance between each one of them, his parents, Kahn, the Rebbe, Yudel Krinsky, signifying that he has become his own person. The gallery show where both crucifixion paintings are debuted serves as his coming-of-age ceremony into that world where he must decide which voices he will listen to, and how to respond to them in turn. In Kahn's final conversation with Asher, he concludes, "I created a new *David*… a breathing *David*" (350). The parallel to Michelangelo's masterpiece embodies Asher as Kahn's seminal creation, a living medium of influences now able to do the same.

Like how Asher finds solace and purpose in his artwork, Davita Chandal's imagination is a central part of her ideology and development. Often described as an actual setting throughout the book, Davita's imagination is a place where she is free to process her emotions and see her loved ones. The ability to visualize people in her life like her father and Jacob Daw becomes especially important once they die, since her imagination is now the only place where she can interact with them again. Davita explains to her teacher that "[m]y real father was a journalist and was killed trying to save a nun. I think it's important not to forget. And stories help me to remember" (Potok 343). Her method of describing her father's death is characterized by a narrative; she could simply say that he died, but a detail she focuses on is that he died trying to save a nun, like a story she keeps replaying in her mind. The end of the novel is set in her imagination as well, not in her school, home, synagogue, or any other place besides that which is most essential to her where she is surrounded by those who love her (368). Though this scene is a personal comfort for the protagonist, it also speaks to a larger picture of what it is to not feel torn between two ideals, but to exist in a space where narratives collaborate because they have the inhabitant in common.

In terms of mentorship or role models who straddle different areas of interest, Jakob Daw becomes a prominent figure in the Chandal's life and provides a source of insight for Davita as an imaginative writer. Her observations of Daw also connect to her making sandcastles on the beach in front of her house as if to associate Daw with a sense of place: a setting where she is building something new from her imagination. For example, Davita recounts, "From my castle on the beach I watched Jakob Daw writing… I asked him over lunch what his new story was about" (69). These castles as representations of imaginative fortresses against the chaos she is learning about are associated with not only what she can build with her hands but with her mind

as well. Her interest in writing focuses on the fictional genre, which may reflect reality but is ultimately her own creation. In the same scene that Davita asks about Daw's story, her father also mentions that he is writing about "hungry and angry people," but Davita only asks questions about Daw's stories, which are fictional (69). She has a growing understanding of world events through her parents, but her response is to create out of that information—something that Daw emulates himself and inspires Davita to do likewise. Daw's story that he reads to the meeting of Communist party members relates to disillusionment of what the protagonist, a bird, originally thought to be a source of eternal music seems to point towards the disillusionment to Communism itself, and while this is not the direct experience Davita has herself, that theme of recognizing the flawed reality of a community pervades her time to come at the yeshiva (80). Daw's experience foreshadows Davita's in his search for truth and bridge between what is accepted in his Communist community and what he observes and writes out of those insights.

Davita's imagination not only serves as a space where she can see her loved ones, but where the social boundaries of her communities which have disillusioned her have no weight. Since Davita has already started to integrate into the Jewish community after her father dies, she wishes to say kaddish to grieve him in the best way she knows how (Potok 222). In her article, "Women as Scholars in Chaim Potok's Novels," Joan Del Fatore explains, "…Jewish women were traditionally exempt from many religious obligations, such as communal prayer, because of their household duties: they were primarily responsible for domestic matters, while the men were primarily responsible for religious observances" (59). As a woman, Davita does not face a burden of religious responsibility, though she wishes for a space where she can practice her faith without social limitations due to her gender. Though Jewish law does not forbid women from saying kaddish, Joel Wolowelsky gives an example of a rabbi who forbids the only daughter of a

deceased man from saying it in the synagogue not because of the law, but because of the expectations of the community (284). That Davita's synagogue makes an exception and finds a way to say this prayer while respecting the boundaries of their faith shows a hopeful change, but still a rare example. No matter the limiting circumstances, her imagination serves a place where she can be free of the forces separating the distinct parts of her identity and those that she loves, a place of healing and reconciliation within her own mind.

Throughout all the dichotomies that Potok displays in his works, there are also threads of possibilities and glimpses of dialogue woven in, whether that be through specific characters, settings, or even actions. For Asher Lev, a prominent voice of balance is the Rebbe, particularly when it comes to recognizing the boundaries of the community yet supporting the benefits of challenging those in some ways. For Davita Chandal, her imagination is the main mode of dialogue, since it is where her ideologies, loved ones, and passions can converse without inhibition or prejudice. Though relatively small examples of change or hope for reconciling truth with tradition, Potok's characters are not the saviors of their stories, nor are they the ideal of what navigating communities should look like. They are children who are pulled in conflicting directions by the innocent wisdom of recognizing value in communities outside of their own, making their own mistakes and struggling to understand what is right and what is false, yet setting a precedent for a maturing consciousness of the complex identity.

Conclusion

"[Potok's characters' suggest that] balance, objective reasoning, and reconciliation between opposing worldviews is a pressing moral imperative in the modern Judaic paradigm. This is the… Swan song of a Conservative rabbi who chose fiction as his most exalted pulpit" (Devir 178).

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Chaim Potok's novels resonate with his readers not because they represent something so narrow and concrete which cannot be translated or understood, but because works like *My Name is Asher Lev* and *Davita's Harp* present a microcosm of what it is to discover identity, all within a unique context which is so often private to outsiders. If these characters were not Jewish, they would still encounter challenges of where they fit in and how to align their passions with their beliefs, but since their narratives are based in more specific cultural and religious contexts, they provide a grounded sense of characterization and place; the integration of Yiddish, traditional Jewish customs, and even controversies like women saying kaddish and the political affiliations of Jewish people throughout the persecution of the twentieth century are but a few examples of this. Specificity of community does not negate the universality of such tensions between what is considered sacred and what is secular, nor what is accepted and what is outside of those societal boundaries. Potok's novels challenge the false dichotomy of the sacred/secular divide by simply representing the unmistakable intertwining of beauty and truth, and how these components of creation come together in a complex yet natural way to demonstrate a deeper being than they would in isolation. Asher's paintings without beauty would not display the truth of his family's pain, nor would Davita's imagination be as moving without the truth of her grief and knowledge. Potok's stories serve as reminders of the presence of Jewish American voices even amidst

persecution and ignorance and a multitude of other factors which threaten to stifle minority influence under an umbrella culture.

Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* is considered one of the darker, more intense of his novels due to the intensity of conflict Asher encounters and how he is eventually separated from his family and community in Brooklyn. Because the primary conflict of the novel is between the protagonist's faith community and artistic abilities, it makes the work an ideal example of the cultural confrontation Potok is famous for. Not only do these communities clash around Asher, but they initially display themselves as dichotomies in his household and internal workings as well, connecting to what Bakhtin explains as heteroglossia. From a broad view of his parents and mentors, they represent the different motivations within him, which can be a helpful perspective in terms of recognizing foundational influences like tradition and expectations of each community he is a part of; however, closely analyzing these influencing figures reveals that they themselves are not simply dominated by stereotypes, but contain a multitude of motivations and inner communities, further breaking down the sacred/secular dichotomy and revealing the complexity of human nature no matter what community an individual belongs to. Asher may be the primary one to experience this tension as the protagonist, but that does not mean the cast of side characters do not also share in the conflict of understanding who they are and what they want to portray, deepening the dynamic of the novel overall through its characterization.

Davita's Harp still embodies core-to-core confrontation like *Asher Lev* does, though there are multiple communities and constituent parts at play that are not as clearly compartmentalized as in previous novels. For example, Davita as a Jewish female raised by communists who has a strong sense of imagination brings a plethora of characterizing aspects to consider as she grows up. Though she does eventually encounter tension between the ideals of

her upbringing and the Jewish community she enters into later on, the conflict is less about her entering into the community itself and centers more on the disillusionment that comes as she recognizes its flaws. One such discovery centers around her developing a prominent interest and talent for Jewish studies and writing in her yeshiva, yet being overlooked for the Akiva award because it would not represent the school well to have a female be named its best student (Potok 363). Davita still yearns to be a part of this tradition, wants to embrace her Jewish heritage and the belonging that comes with it, but is faced with its complexities and sometimes its rejection because of her gender and background. Davita's story not only displays what it is to feel torn as she enters into a new dynamic of history and beliefs, but what happens when her success is paralleled with the unfortunate realities of humankind: the burden of belonging as well as the joy.

There is far too little conversation within Potok related scholarship dedicated to his only female protagonist, and one which embodies such themes on par with his other novels like *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev.* Themes like Davita's creative writing abilities, her relationship with Jacob Daw and the influence that his stories and life have on her own imagination and understanding of the world would be well worth researching and looking into further. In addition, the dynamic between Davita and her step-brother David, and their developing sexual identities are largely undiscussed and may provide an insightful perspective of adolescence and sexual awareness/acceptance in the Jewish community.

Asher and Davita may exist in different settings and story lines, but their struggle and movement across communities complement one another by balancing the narratives between male and female, secular politics and Orthodox Jewish tradition, scholarship and artistry, peace and grief, and rejection and acceptance. As Asher moves from being completely contained

within the Jewish community to embracing more of the artistic one, Davita moves from her more secular culture into the Jewish one: lines passing each other as they move in different directions. Both characters experience the pain of recognizing the aesthetic blindness around them and feel isolated in their understanding of imagination and relationship between seemingly dichotomous natures. By considering the novels in tandem, the perspectives are able to form a fuller picture of what it means to discover the complex nature of identity, and how faith and worldly interests can complement each other in a way that deepens spirituality and promotes beauty.

Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* and Buber's *I & Thou* provide valuable lenses for which to illuminate cultural relationship and discourse within a novel or an individual, applying to Potok's works in a multitude of ways which help to showcase a deeper complexity to the author's work. Though both philosophers' works easily connect with either of Potok's, Buber's discussion on the dynamic between humans and the rest of creation specifically helps shine a light on Asher's draw into the artistic community, bringing to light the insight of combination and the new kind of life which springs from it, while Bakhtin's discussion on the different voices within a novel parallel closely to Davita's imagination where she encounters her diverse loved ones all in one setting, applying truths and contexts from seemingly conflicting places to create her own sense of heteroglossia. Bakhtin and Buber provide vocabulary to what is observed but not easily described, enabling further discussion and universal applications.

Asher and Davita's conflicts are ultimately not between the sacred and the secular because they embody both, and even the parental influences who characterize different aspects of their experiences embody some form of alternate "language" besides the one that they mainly adhere to. Tradition without context and understanding of the joint nature of the spiritual and physical results in chaos. Beauty and truth are complex and distinct, but they do cohabitate and

must for Potok's characters to properly maintain their faith and become the bridges and mediums of deconstructed dichotomies they themselves wished to have available. The conflict that these two protagonists experience is between communities which compete for their unadulterated loyalty without regard for the inevitable dialogism that exists within any kind of heteroglossia, whether it contain multiple belief systems, cultural values, or pursuits. Thus, the sacred/secular dichotomy is false, though there will always be conflict of some kind in everyone, especially when societies are unwilling to recognize the diversity and intersection of languages. Those at the crossroads of such communities cannot balance both equally—they will ultimately lean towards one more than the other—but this does not equate to an irreconcilable division between the sacred and the secular, nor does it assume the sacred is a more valuable state of being because it is unseen. Rather, Potok's core-to-core confrontation is simply the evidence of human nature's complexity, our desire for belonging and community, and the lengths we will go to navigate that desire.

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