

ANTISEMITISM: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF CHAIM POTOK'S THE CHOSEN

Jemima G S

Ph. D. Research Scholar (18111274012028)

St. John's College, Palayamkottai.

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli.

Abstract:

Antisemitism is a form of racism manifested in multiple ways. This prejudice or hostility is experienced by the Jewish people for centuries. The expressions ranging from hatred, discrimination towards the Jewish community can be witnessed in the works of the American Jewish writer Chaim Potok. The term anti-Semitism was first coined by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr in 1879. He designated the anti-Jewish campaigns under way in the Central Europe during that time. Potok's characters do not become fully assimilated into American culture but maintain their own culture and try to balance their religious interests with their secular ones. The prejudice between the Orthodox Jews and the secular Jews and people outside their community is portrayed effectively in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*. This paper attempts to trace the problem of antisemitism in the novel.

Keywords: Antisemitism, Jewish, Orthodox, prejudice, culture.

In *The Chosen*, two characters occupy the centre stage: Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders. Both are representative of two kinds of Jewish culture. The novel examines Jewish identity by narrating the parallel stories of these two Jewish adolescents who share similar interests but are different enough to influence each other. The first part of the novel unfolds during the Allied offensive in World War II, the midsection deals with the American Jewish

community's response to the Holocaust and the final section is concerned with the Zionist movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine. This differentiation in their identity arises from their parents Reb Saunders and David Malter.

The psychologist Erik Erikson in his theory of 'Psychosocial development' describes about Identity versus Confusion as the fifth stage of ego occurring during the adolescence between the age 12 to 18. During this stage an individual develop a sense of independence and self. This ego identity formation is achieved through the interaction with the society. This also includes the experiences, relationships, beliefs, values and memories from the past through the influence of parents. When this identity is overbuilt it leads to boastfulness and arrogance and when it is left unexplored the individual faces role confusion. The influence of Reb Saunders and David Malter on Danny and Reuven affects them and make them subject to identity crisis.

The different reactions of Reb Saunders and David Malter to the Holocaust reflect a major difference in belief and ideology. Reb Saunders argues that the murder of six million Jews is God's will and that, in response, man must wait for God to bring the Messiah. In total contrast, David Malter believes that the American Jews must give the Holocaust meaning by preserving Jewish culture in America and by creating a homeland in Palestine. Their fundamental difference of opinion forms is also transferred to their children. Being influenced by the fathers both the boys are forced to choose between isolating themselves from the outside and retreating into tradition.

The relationship between the two boys begins in strife, dramatized in a quintessentially American baseball rivalry and the Crown Heights Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, an area heavily populated by the Jews, becomes the setting for a religious conflict. The Hasidic zealots are led by Danny Saunders, and the traditional Orthodox team is led by Reuven Malter. Potok

himself admitted in the interview with Harold Ribalow that what he was really writing was culture war:

The overarching culture in which we all live is the culture we call Western Secular humanism. In the novel *The Chosen* someone from the center of the Jewish tradition clashed with one element from the model of Western secular humanism, that is Freudian psychoanalytic theory (4)

Reuven and Danny are the best players in their team. Reuven's friend Davey Cantor warns him that their opponents, students belonging to a very religious yeshiva, are murderers. Their appearance at the softball court as Danny's team with their cut short, wearing skullcaps and the traditional zizith, the specially knotted ritual fringes worn by observant Jews and the fringes fixed to the four corners of their garments are suggestive of a very orthodox form of Judaism. This "baseball game... contains two aspects of Jewish Orthodoxy in contention" (13). There is the Eastern aspect which "prefers to turn inward and not confront the outside world" (13). The other team represents the Western European attitude which has a more scientific aspect within the core that is within Orthodoxy.

As the game progresses it becomes a kind of holy war. Danny Saunder's team wanted to defeat Reuven's team but they considered them not holy enough. Danny's team calls their opponent "apicoros" (TC 23) because Reuven is in a parochial school where more English subjects and Jewish subjects are taught in Hebrew instead of Yiddish. It is a desecration of God's name. As the game progresses the balls from Danny's side are strong and hard and one eventually shatters Reuven's spectacles and he falls down. The war-like game parallels World War II which forms the background of the novel. When Reuven is hit in the eye, he is badly hurt, his vision is blurred and he suffers a lot while he is recovering in hospital.

Danny's relationship with Reuven begins as a result of pain that Danny inflicts upon Reuven. Reuven's eye injury is critical and demands immediate medical attention. His coach Mr. Galanter takes Reuven to the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital. Here he is attended to by expert doctors. After his eye injury and treatment, Reuven realizes what it would be if he were blind. Sigmund Freud brought a theory called pain pleasure principle in which an individual make choice to avoid or decrease pain. The belief, values, actions and decisions of an individual is built upon this principle. Here Danny Saunders who first inflicts pain on Reuven come for apologizing but is rudely turned away by Reuven.

Danny returns the next day and Reuven apologizes for his rudeness. The two begin to talk and there springs a new bond of friendship between them. Danny feels remorseful after the way he had treated Reuven in the game of baseball. Both being orthodox Jews and one a Hasid they have a lot of things in common Talmud, the holy book of the Jews is the starting point of their conversation. Danny would read four pages of the Talmud daily and he reveals that he has a photographic memory so that he can memorize anything easily. Despite the differences between Reuven's and Danny's beliefs both boys exist in Jewish communities whose culture is markedly different from mainstream American culture.

Danny further discloses his innermost apprehension that he would become a rabbi in the future and take his father's place as rabbi and leader of a particular Hasidic community. There is no choice as it is an inherited position though if given a choice, he would rather become a psychologist. Reuven, in turn, remarks that his father would like him to become a mathematician but he is more interested in becoming a rabbi. The question of making choices, the freedom to make a choice is the chief preoccupation of the novelist and this idea continues to the end of the novel. Malter encourages his son to make Danny his friend.

Danny shares with Reuven his father's belief in silence. He reveals the fact that his father never speaks to him except when they are studying Torah or Talmud. Danny also confesses that even though his father tells him man's mission in life is to obey God, sometimes he is not sure what God wants. Reuven is shocked when Danny reveals that he reads seven or eight non - religious books a week including works by authors like Darwin, Huxley and Hemingway. Reuven gradually forgets his anger and hurt over Danny's injury to his eye. They share a common platform as they share a ravenous intellectual curiosity and they both study the Talmud diligently. Both of them evince a deep commitment to and respect for Jewish tradition.

Danny is interested in science and humanities while Reuven's strength is in mathematics. Danny regards Reuven as an intellectual equal who can teach him about things. Reuven is privileged to enjoy a warm healthy relationship with his father, where he can speak freely on all subjects to his father but Reb Saunders teaches Danny only Jewish law and Talmud. He attempts to restrict his son's education to Hasidic customs and precepts reflecting a narrow minded and limited worldview. Reb Saunders observes silence towards his son which seems unusually cruel and inexplicable and his lack of non-liturgical interaction seems to imply a fundamental distance in the father- son relationship to Danny. After hearing Danny's remark about his father and Danny's great interest in secular literature Reuven remarks, "He was dressed like a Hasid, but he didn't sound like one" (TC 67)

Granville Hicks remarks that, "Whatever happens, the centre of the novel is always the conflict between Danny and his father" (25). It has been taken for granted and logically apparent that Danny will become a tzaddik, a great leader of his people like his father and grandfather. But though Danny is a brilliant Talmudist when he is fifteen, he becomes interested in psychology, and by the time he graduated from college he has resolved to become

a psychologist. The novel builds towards the decisive confrontation between Reb Saunders and Danny which is as surprising as it is moving. David Malter explains that in the seventeenth century Polish Jews were persecuted by Polish peasants and by members of the Greek Orthodox Church. As a result of anti-Semitism, someone pretending to be a Messiah deceived them. Serious Jewish faith in Poland was replaced by a superficial belief in magic and superstition. A leader named Ba'al Shem Tov the kind or 'Good Master of the Name' emerged into this spiritual void with a new vision of Judaism and led to the birth of Hasidism.

Ba'al Shem Tov studied the Jewish mystical texts of the Kabbalah and downplayed the study of Jewish legal texts in favor of spirituality and prayer. Every Hasidic community was led by a tzaddik, (a righteous person) who served as a superhuman link between the community and God. The Hasidim lived shut off from the rest of the world and passed on the position of tzaddik from father to son. Despite opposition from the Mitnagdim the intellectual opponents of Hasidism, the movement flourished, and its traditions were passed down through the generations. David Malter points out that the clothes the Hasidim wear today are the same they wore in Poland hundreds of years ago. The Hasidic Jews held on tenaciously to their religious texts: the Torah and the Talmud and not only rigorously followed them in the new land America but also still retained the same social customs followed in Poland.

Reuven explains that Danny is next in line to inherit his father's great Hasidic dynasty with all its traditions and customs. Mr. Malter remarks that because Danny is so brilliant, he is not satisfied with Jewish texts alone but voraciously consumes all types of literature. In fact, Danny reminds Mr. Malter of Solomon Maimon, an eighteenth century Jew, who forsook his faith to pursue secular knowledge. Mr. Malter's comment about the difficulties of being a tzaddik or a buffer in a community foreshadows the consequences of Reuven's involvement with Danny and Reb Saunders. David Malter's speech demonstrates that no single monolithic

Jewish tradition exists. Many different systems of belief are subsumed under the category of Judaism. These differing groups are bitterly opposed to one another particularly when it comes to the issues of Jewish heritage, history and belief.

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