



INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION OF JEWISH TRADITION IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF CHAIM POTOK

D.JYOTHSNA

Lecturer in English, Sri Venkateswara College, Suryapet

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the themes of integration and disintegration regarding Jewish faith in all its complexity and diversity in Potok's five novels *The Chosen*, *The Promise*, *My Name is Asher Lev*, *The Gift of Asher Lev* and *In the Beginning*. In discussing this conflict various differences that exist between orthodox and liberal sects of Jewish tradition are taken into consideration based on Potok's arguments on Judaism as a religious force. Apart from close analysis of Potok's five novels the study also deals with his treatment of recurring themes such as religion in conflict with society, individual artistic needs in conflict with institutional beliefs and tradition verses modernism, conflict between integration and disintegration are evaluated in the context of specific Jewish beliefs and rituals which are integral to Potok's work.

Key Words : Integrity, disintegrity, Jewish tradition, Judaism, Jewish Identity, Rituals, *Mitnagdlim*, *apikorism*.

Introduction

American Jewish fiction, before Chaim Potok emerged on the literary scene, often failed to adequately delineate the rich diversity within Orthodox Judaism with reference to variety of other Jewish denominations. By extensively writing about Jewish theology, liturgy, history and cultural and social manifestation's of Judaism Potok has made an important contribution to American literature. He demolished the age old conventional assumptions about Judaism and its significant place in American life.

Integration and Disintegration of Jewish Tradition in Potok's Novels:

Potok's novels deal with the core conflict between Hasidic belief in the traditional integrating values of orthodox and modern secular humanism. As a conservative Jew he wrote about the issues of conflict between integration and disintegration which made it possible for him to achieve a reconciliation with Judaism. Potok considers

disintegration from Jewish faith poses an open treat to the sacred Talmudic texts of Judaism and can invalidate the sanctity of integration which is so important for a minority culture striving to maintain a distinct presence in the midst of rich American culture.

Potok's characters are Jewish and are well grounded in Jewish tradition. Even though it is difficult for a Jew to make a choice between integration and disintegration he or she preferably tries to remain within the Jewish tradition without forsaking the core values of secular humanism. Potok characterizes Judaism not as a tradition in conflict with mainstream American culture, but rather as an arena that had to be integrated with American life to maintain their specific identity.

Potok's young protagonists struggle to break away from the rigidity of their faith but they fail to do so because they are strongly bound by their traditions. But those who eventually leave have to alienate themselves from the family, the

community and the faith that has nurtured them. They embrace secular humanism and liberal ideology and at the same time retain their commitment to Jewish faith. This aspect reflects Potok's own ability to fuse his Hebrew learning into a kind of spiritual intellectual bridge to mediate whether one can remain integrated with tradition or to disintegrate from tradition to pursue secular ideas of liberal humanism.

This paper deals with Potok's concern with the problematic aspects of Jewish religious tradition as well as the potential consequences which would result if one chooses either integration or disintegration to ensure Jewish continuity in an inherently pluralistic American society. The conflict between religious obligations to promote integration and adherence to western secular humanistic values or to disintegrate from rigid religious practices is discussed with reference to Potok's the five novels chosen for the study. Instead of focusing only on the most obvious differences between integration and disintegration, Potok depicts them from alternate Jewish religious perspectives and dramatizes their implications. He employs a device by which the entire theme unfolds dealing with the ironies of cultural interaction and how one has to work out his Jewish identity in the light of being an American and at the same time never to relinquish Judaism behind.

Unlike other American Jewish writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, I.B. Singer and Norman Mailer, Potok places a great deal of stress upon Judaism as a religious force with specific Jewish beliefs and rituals as central concern in his fictional works. With Potok the issues of conflict between integration and disintegration are heightened and made very pertinent because of his protagonist's commitment to religious view point. As S. Lillian Kremer points out:

"Whereas the assimilated American Jews of the fictions of Bellow and Roth retain only peripheral connection to Jewish institutions, Potok's characters, like those of Joyce, are at the core of their cultural and religious heritage. They preserve the languages, traditions and beliefs of Orthodox Judaism, even when they enter the secular professional world. Unlike most of the characters in the writings of Bellow,

Malamud and Roth, who leave the religious life for the secular, those of Potok's novels bring the secular life into the religious" (27).

Potok addresses the issue of cultural and religious confrontation in *The Chosen* and its sequel, *The Promise* with reference to varying traits of integration and disintegration of Jewish faith. The first-generation Ashkenazi American Jews struggle to negotiate between the often inflexible Hasidic propriety of their father figures and their newly-found American intellectual freedom. Just as Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders, the main characters from *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, are torn between alternate versions of what it means to be Jewish, the hero of the novels *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev*, the artist Asher Lev, is torn between two divergent world views. As an adult, Asher is ultimately able to provide a bridge between these two worldviews by way of the symbolic significance of his art, but not without causing much pain and suffering to those around him. The changing perceptions regarding idolatry and secular art in *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev* is focused on the ways in which Potok subverts, recasts, and reinterprets several key tropes from the intertextual reservoir of Judaic faith, along the lines of emphatically American concerns in order to transform traditionally discursive rejections of visual art into affirmative themes for creative endeavors and spiritual renewal in Jewish American life. Evelyn Waugh's considerable influence can be seen in Potok's religious theme in that his characters remain observant: "No matter what they choose to do they try to remain Orthodox Jews" (Walden 1).

The fathers of the protagonists are quite well informed about the holy texts of Judaism particularly the Torah, the Talmud, and they are proud to see their sons excel them until the intellectual curiosity and honesty of these youths take them into the dangerous territory of "western secular humanism." In none of the five novels does the son lose his faith or seriously doubts the trust of the religious values reflected in the sacred texts. But in the context of family life, because of his willingness to take advantage of modern approaches to study, each confronts the implacability of a rigid orthodoxy that does not change with the passage of time. The role of the person representing this

impassioned restrictiveness varies from novel to novel. The dilemma of whether to stay integrated with one's faith or disintegrate in order to pursue the ideals of western humanism, Potok deals in this context the conflict between integration and disintegration from a variety of perspectives. In *The Chosen* it is Danny's father, the Hasidic tzaddik, rabbinical sage and leader of the sect; in *The Promise* it is a brilliant but ultra-conservative Talmud instructor freed from a Nazi death camp at the war's end; in *My Name is Asher Lev*, the hero is not a religious scholar but an artist, and his father is the tyrant; in *In the Beginning*, David's father, too, is fanatical in his distrust of gentiles and his hatred of anti-semites, and the small world of the yeshiva. Of the two central figures in *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, one becomes a psychoanalyst but remains a Hasid, and the other becomes a Talmudist using modern methods of textual analysis; in *My Name is Asher Lev*, the artistic child becomes a painter of wealth and genius but remains, in his own words, "an observant Jew", still affiliated with a yeshiva, though in Paris rather than his familial home in the Crown Heights area of Brooklyn; in *In the Beginning*, David retains his strong ties to Judaism but moves into the secular culture as a university professor teaching Bible Studies from the perspective of the higher biblical criticism.

Potok's first two novels, *The Chosen* and its sequel, *The Promise*, tracing the conflict between an individual's dream of preserving Jewish tradition in America or breaking away from Judaism without completely relinquishing it. Potok poses two significant questions in the novels: how to live as an observant Jew in a secular society, and to what degree can one remain integrated to the tradition of orthodox separateness in a secular society? In *The Chosen* and *The Promise* Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter symbolize the two aspects within Orthodox Judaism, the Orthodox and the Hasidic. There is a confrontation between western secular humanism and religious orthodoxy. In *My Name is Asher Lev*, the realm of aesthetics is the subject of the novel and a very different realm to navigate in the Jewish tradition. In *In the Beginning*, the confrontation is between the core of Judaism and modern Western anti-Semitism.

A baseball game brings together Danny, son of the Rebbe and thus heir to the Hasidic dynasty,

and Reuven, son of a modern Orthodox Talmudic textual scholar. Reb Saunders, the tzaddik, the Hasidic sect's spiritual leader believes that there is a danger that his gifted son's soul might be dominated by mind and therefore communicates to him through silence. In this way he feels he will nurture the values of heart and soul. Mr. Malter, viewed by the Hasidim as one of the *Mitnagdim*, a Jewish rational intellectual, who denies the basic Jewish religious tenets, and is thus one of the *apikorsim*, integrates the best of secular learning with the best in Talmudic scholarship. What couldn't be predicted is that Danny would decide to become a psychologist while remaining an observant Jew, which meant he was renouncing his role as the heir to his father's Hasidic leadership. Meanwhile, in a significant crossing pattern, Reuven decided to become a rabbi; from his point of view such subjects as symbolic logic, math, and secular philosophy would fuse the sacred and the secular. Each was combing two cultures. Each was reflecting his and Potok's own attempts as a "between-person" to exemplify the role of Judaism in a secular society.

Danny and Reuven never consider abdicating their Jewish identity; rather, their choices center on how to integrate their religious identities in relationship with secular modernism, what Potok himself termed "core-to-core" confrontations. These choices are dealt in very concrete ways in *The Chosen*. At the end of the novel, Danny shaves his beard and earlocks, choosing to look one way when the rest of his community looks another. Reuven develops an interpretive response to a problematic Talmud passage using religious texts critical methodologies, a strategy rejected by traditional Orthodoxy. In all these examples, Potok speaks to general readers wrestling with how to integrate their religious identity with secular modernism. *The Chosen*, unveils a world of conflict, not between Judaism and America, but within Judaism. It describes localized conflicts within families and between particular communities, challenging broad-brush characterizations of mid-century Jewish experience.

More significantly, Potok painted a complex picture of the diversity of integration and disintegration within American Judaism and, as a result, a nuanced conception of the choices presented about competing identities. The choice

presented was whether someone would be a traditional Jew or a secularized American – implying that one could not be both. Potok understood that American life required choices – as suggested by the novel's title – but he presents more complex options. First, Danny and Reuven face differences within Judaism. The central conflicts within *The Chosen* are conflicts between Jews with different understanding of integration and disintegration of what values for what it means to be Jewish. Potok suggests a spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, dramatized most strikingly in the imposed separation between the two boys of Danny's father.

In *The Chosen*, Danny is an angry and rigid young man. He cannot express how profoundly affected by the joyful exuberance of Hasidim. At the same time he wishes to escape from the entrapping web of Hasidim. In *The Promise*, Danny is finally more at ease with his Jewish faith. He is proud to be a promising psychologist, and is more happier and relaxed than he was earlier. Out of sheer joy and ecstasy he sings and dances and experiences the feeling of inheriting Hasidic way of life. Having decided to pursue his dream of practicing psychotherapy, Danny is no longer in a conflicted place, caught by the requirements of his faith. Danny makes sure that he will be both a therapist and an observant Jew. The entrapping web of Hasidism has become transformed into a beautifully woven structure – a bridge transporting inner emotion out to external expression. Thus, Potok asserts optimistically, it is possible to be brilliant and modern, as well as faithfully integrated to the tenets of Judaism.

Potok's novels, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev* which are Potok's most successful and most memorable creations, not least because of the use of a first-person narrator who is also the central character, which gives the novels a great deal of immediacy. *My Name is Asher Lev* describes retrospectively and in vivid colors the painful, heroic struggle of the young Hasidic boy, Asher Lev, who tries to disintegrate from his fundamentalist upbringing in order to become an artist. With the exhibition of his two powerful, highly controversial 'Brooklyn Crucifixion' paintings, in which he has used the crucifixion motif in order to depict his sense of his mother's protracted suffering because of the tense relationship between her

husband and her son, Asher Lev has outraged his parents as well as his religious community to such a degree that he is temporarily exiled. And so Asher Lev moves to Paris, although he remains an observant Hasidic Jew.

As the sequel to the third novel, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, published eighteen years later, Potok deals with the core-to-core cultural conflict which extends as far as the next generation of children and grandchildren. Having returned to his Brooklyn's Hasidic community with his wife, a Holocaust survivor, and his two children. When he attends the funeral of his uncle Yitzschok, himself in private a collector of modern art, Asher Lev faces continuing resentment over his notorious crucifixion paintings, which to many survivors of Christian anti-Semitism amount to pure blasphemy. Moreover, he is confronted with a personal as well as an artistic mid-life crisis since his critics have strongly criticized his recent paintings for repeating themselves too much. After prolonged soul-searching the rediscovers his 'gift' as an artist and decides to return to France, albeit at the cost of partial separation from his family and at the price of allowing his son, Avrumel, to eventually succeed the aged, charismatic, childless Rebbe. This, then, is Asher Lev's 'gift' to the Hasidic community; it is an act that in a symbolic way, parallels the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac, which also happens to be the subject of one of Asher Lev's own paintings. *My Name is Asher Lev* offers a portrait of the Hasidic artist as a young man disintegrating from Hasidic values, and *The Gift of Asher Lev* depicts the same artist as a middle aged family man. Although the later novel can be read independently, it obviously acquires more relevance in the light of the former. One important difference between the novels is that the earlier novel is more concerned with the psychology of the artist, whereas the later novel focuses more on the artistic process itself, offering a great deal of insight into such painterly problems as the use of color, space, forms and techniques, besides making us share in a good many discussions on art.

The same problem of how to keep a deep commitment and integration of Judaism in balance with the findings of modern biblical scholarship which originated in Germany towards the end of the 19th century is highlighted which lies at the heart of

Potok's fourth novel, *In the Beginning*. In it Potok's alter ego, the brilliant young yeshiva student David Lurie, undertakes to bridge the gulf between fundamentalism and secular humanism, including ugly aspects of Western anti-Semitism, even at the risk of losing the respect of his family, his friends, and all of his teachers. David Lurie's transgressive personality bears comparison with that of Asher Lev, the brilliant young artist in the novel carrying his name in the title. Potok in this novel has come to grips with the problem of sustaining faith in a meaningless disintegrating world.

Conclusion

All the Potok's novels end on an affirmative note, ranging from almost unbound optimism in the first two novels to a more qualified form in the later ones. This positive attitude derives in part from the fact that Potok's novels are decidedly American, so that his protagonists to varying degrees share in the ethos of the American Dream. In part this optimism is inherent in the Jewish tradition of philosophical idealism. "In the world it may seem that life is without meaning, and perhaps it is, but it is the task of mankind to give meaning to it". Potok's fictional heroes aspire, to rebuild Judaism's core from the treasures of Judaic past, fuse it with the best in secularism, and create a new philosophy, a new literature, a new world of Jewish art, a new community, and take seriously the meaning of the world emancipation. Hence Potok's emphasis throughout his work is about restoration through renewal of Judaism in America.

He traces the responses of young protagonists to the threats and temptations of secular America in contrast to the security offered by their smaller communities of faith which illuminates an essential purpose in his writing. He believes that there is a need of and a place for faith in the contemporary world and that it does not have to be compromised in conflicts between integration and disintegration in order to remain viable. He shows, however, that faith is something to be understood as well as accepted and that such an understanding cannot be achieved without confrontation, struggle, and pain.

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