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**Chaim Potok's Selected Characters and Their Resistance towards Assimilation**

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

**Vedoucí bakalářské práce**

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Petra Hadlová

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## **Thesis abstract in English**

The thesis analyzed the general tendency of American Jews and their descendents to resist assimilation with a much higher probability than the other immigrant groups present in the United States of America. The thesis approached the problematics through sociological, psychological and religious perspectives as well as through cultural studies and literature studies. The thesis established three major aspects of Judaism, on whose basis, it explored the reasons for the notable defiance to assimilation. These three were concluded to be: religious aspect of Judaism along with the significance of family and community, and the focus on both religious and secular education rooted in Judaism. The thesis reached the conclusion that the assimilation in the Jewish community is and will remain significantly slower and the changes will occur mainly in stringency of denomination and the gradual shift towards less orthodox forms of the religious practice.

The thesis has been examined and proved based on two novels by an acclaimed orthodox Jewish writer Chaim Potok, which were selected to be *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev*. The thesis focused on the work of Chaim Potok because he is an exceptional writer appreciative of the Jewish heritage and culture and in his novels he pays tribute to Judaism, the aspects of the Jewish daily experience alongside the exceptionality of Judaism. These particular novels *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* were selected on the basis of their concentration on the development of individuals and the struggle for self-identity. The three main characters are torn between contemporary American mainstream culture and traditional Jewish background. The characters' choices and development reveal the three main motives for resisting assimilation, as previously mentioned, while each of the novels has a somewhat different focus.

*The Chosen* concentrates more on the aspect of family solidarity and hierarchical and

social structures in the community as well as on the significance of education, both religious and secular, for the individuals and the community. The main characters, Danny and Reuven, were subjected to thorough analysis from the psychological, social and religious point of view. The two discussed novels focus on various aspects of the Jewish identity and each novel approaches Judaism from a different viewpoint. In the novel *My Name is Asher Lev* more attention is paid to the analysis of the process of separation, in one's activities and lifestyle choices, from the community and its effects on the individual. The reason for Asher's resistance to abandon the faith and the community were defined and examined in detail. The analysis based on the two novels proved the hypothesis and showed that the general tendency among the Jewish people is preferably to liberalize the rules of the community and the approach to religious practice rather than relinquish their roots and background found in Judaism and assimilate, since Judaism provides the followers with support system, encouragement and guidance in times of hardship and struggle.

## Abstrakt práce v češtině

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumala tendenci amerických židovských imigrantů a jejich potomků k odolávání asimilaci. Na rozdíl od ostatních skupin přistěhovalců do Spojených států amerických, dochází u židů k začleňování a k plné asimilaci do americké společnosti ve významně nižší míře, spojené s nechtím k opuštění náboženských a společenských tradic. V bakalářské práci byla problematika nahlížena metodologií sociologie, psychologie a religionistiky společně s kulturními a literárními studii. Dospěla jsem k vymezení tří hlavních aspektů, které židy odlišují od ostatních imigrantských skupin. Prvním je náboženský aspekt judaismu, dodržování tradic s náboženstvím spojených jako je *bar micva*, náboženské vzdělání nebo docházení na pravidelné bohoslužby, druhým důraz na rodinu a komunitu a posledním akcent na vzdělání a to náboženské i sekulární. Ve své bakalářské práci jsem dospěla k závěru, že asimilace v židovské komunitě bude i nadále probíhat výrazně pomaleji než v jiných skupinách a změny nastanou hlavně ve vnímání vyznávání víry a jejímu volnému přechodu k reformnějším formám judaismu.

Hypotéza této bakalářské práce byla analyzována a ověřována na dvou románech uznávaného ortodoxního židovského spisovatele Chaima Potoka. Tohoto autora jsem zvolila pro jeho výjimečný přístup ke zpracování židovské tematiky. Na rozdíl od jiných židovských spisovatelů Potok vyzdvihuje ve svých dílech židovské dědictví a kulturu a ve svých románech judaismus doceňuje a popisuje v jeho každodennosti i výjimečnosti. Romány, *Vývolení* a *Jmenují se Ašer Lev*, byly vybrány na základě jejich zaměření na vývoj jedinců a výborného zobrazení vnitřního boje při sebepoznání. Všechny tři hlavní postavy těchto děl, Danny, Reuven i Ašer, řeší dilema, zda se přiklonit k hodnotám a kultuře dobové většinové americké společnosti a upustit od ortodoxního vyznávání judaismu, nebo zda raději přijmout a pěstovat tradiční židovské zázemí. Jednotlivé hlavní postavy byly podrobeny detailní

psychologické, sociologické a náboženské analýze. Vývoj postav dokazuje výše vyjmenované motivy pro odolávání asimilaci, přičemž oba romány se zabývají poněkud odlišným aspektem dané problematiky.

*Vyvolení* se soustředí zejména na faktor rodinné pospolitosti, struktury a hierarchie v židovské komunitě a význam jak náboženského tak světského vzdělání. Postavy byly důkladně analyzovány z psychologického, sociálního i náboženského pohledu. V románu *Jmenuji se Ašer Lev* je kladen větší důraz na zkoumání vzdalování se od náboženství i komunity na základě aktivit jednotlivce a jeho životního stylu. Motivy Ašerova odolávání asimilaci byly definovány a detailně zkoumány. Analýza založená na rozboru dvou uvedených románů potvrdila, že obecná tendence v židovské komunitě směřuje k uvolňování pravidel a jasně dané hierarchie komunity a ke změně formy vyznání, ne však k naprostému odloučení od vlastních kořenů a zázemí, které jedinci nacházejí v judaismu a které jim v těžkých životních situacích dodávají odvahu a poskytují nenahraditelnou oporu.

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## **Preface**

This thesis focuses on the main reasons why particularly Jewish immigrants do not succumb to the proces of assimilation as fast as other immigrant groups. This will be demonstrated on the basis of work of a Jewish orthodox writer Chaim Potok and his novels *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Chosen*.

*The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* are the best examples among Potok's novels to prove the point of resistance to assimilation. First they both analyze the struggle for self identification within the belief system intimately and in great detail and second the strong will of all three protagonists to actually continue observing the Jewish customs and keeping the tradition cannot be traced in any other novel of Potok's. Even though Chaim Potok deals with the formation of self-identity in most of his novels, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Chosen* provide greater insight and illustrate the main three points, which are clearly necessary to resist assimilation. These are religion, family and the background it provides and focus on education, which is crucial within the Jewish community. This is the reason for choosing them over the other novels where interference from other topics would be detrimental to the argument.

The novels will be approached through a multidisciplinary background. Sociology provides understanding of assimilation, and the practice of assimilation which is closely related to the discipline of history. In addition to the assimilation proces, analysis of the role of one's family in society and particularly in Jewish community will be studied. Jewish beliefs and lifestyle will provide another viewpoint of the problematics as well as cultural studies in comprehension of the interaction between Judaism and American culture.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Chaim Potok as a unique representative of Jewish culture in the USA**

Chaim Potok was an exceptional Jewish writer and as unique as he possibly could be as he presented the community and the culture in an unprecedented and matchless way.

"Chaim Potok stands four cubits apart from almost every other American Jew who left a mark on English literature. Unlike the mainstream who evoke a faith heritage only to deprecate it, Potok presents the Jewish lifestyle as a living force that resists and survives the melting pot" (Lebrecht v). This quote epitomizes the core of the following thesis whose goal is to show how Potok's characters resist assimilation and analyze their inner dilemma when resolving their future careers incongruous with the faith and the acceptance of the Jewish society.

Chaim Potok accomplished this by depicting the psychology of the characters in relation to the Jewish community and illustrating how and why they were able to resist assimilation. The personal crises of all the three main characters are illustrated masterfully. Potok's appreciative approach to Jewish faith is a great contribution to the overall understanding and identification of the readership with Potok's protagonists. For the full comprehension of why there exists such a strong affiliation to the faith, aggravating the process of assimilation to the point where it is lacking so much behind other immigrant groups arriving in the USA in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Potok's work has become fundamental.

### **1.2. Judaism as the reason for the unprecedented resistance to assimilation**

To understand the resistance to assimilation better, a brief introduction to Judaism is necessary. Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion in the world. It stands on the belief that there is only one God who is almighty, who created man and who decides about the fate of the world. According to Jewish beliefs, God guides human life and everything regarding our

world. He provided the Jewish nation with the Ten Commandments, a social and ethical codex determining the sense of ethics in the Jewish-Christian society until today.

### **1.2.1. Fifth commandment**

For the purposes of this thesis we will only discuss in detail the fifth of the ten commandments: "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land your God is giving you." ( Exodus 20:12) As De Lange states: "Jewish society is built upon two units, the family and the community" (81). Family occupies the central space in Judaism and is of vital importance to the religion and its people. "The idea of a Jewish nation is an extension of the idea of a family, a group of people sharing common ties and ways of living provide support and example" (Rosen 114). Judaism revolves around family and depends on family values and solidarity. This particular stress on family is obvious from all the ceremonies revolving around it, for example the Sabbath, Pesach, and many others. The family unit is regarded highly even in the Talmud, one of Judaism's essential books together with Torah, concerning all the important aspects of life and providing the solutions in crucial life situations and disputes. The family deserves profound respect.

To Potok as an author family life is crucial. In both novels analyzed, *The Chosen* as well as in *My Name is Asher Lev*, the respect of the main protagonists to their parents and the community is climactic and influential. The family treated as a haven strongly helps defy assimilation as it serves as a source of great pride and self identification to the whole range from pious to non-observant Jews. This topic will be discussed in more depth in the third chapter of the thesis. As an extended family, the community to which a particular Jew belongs is always absolutely indispensable to them. The rabbi thus becomes the undisputed leader of the community and is looked upon and respected greatly. Especially in the Hasidic congregations where the so called tzadik is viewed as the "righteous one [...] superhuman link

between themselves (the Hasidim) and God. Every act of his and every word he spoke was holy" (The Chosen 111).

### **1.2.2. Education**

Another vital element of the Jewish faith is the emphasis on education both religious and secular. The elementary education was historically delivered at home, coming once again back to the family and its absolutely inevitable position in the religion. It was to be contrived by the father of the family who would have taught the children all the important aspects of the religion, would study the Old Testament with them and teach them all the necessary skills to succeed in life. Later on they would attend school and improve themselves in understanding the holy book and acquire further knowledge to become an asset to their community.

Even in cases where the parents were not able to provide the child with proper education the community would take care of it: "He was born about the year 1700 in Poland. His name was Israel. His parents were very poor and not learned, and they both died while he was still a child. The people of his village cared for him and sent him to school" (The Chosen 108). Understandably, in the more pious community more stress will be put on the religious education. In contrast the less observant Jews put less stress on the religious education and more on the secular.

As a climax of the religious education the ceremony called bar or bat mitzvah for boys and girls respectively is carried out at the age of thirteen. The young boys are ceremoniously accepted by the adult male community and become competent members of the congregation and the girls enter the world of adult women. These three concepts, the religious life, the family and the education, are vital in the resistance to assimilation since they help to develop a sense of belonging and roots, help individuals with self identification and provide the people with certainty and feeling of security.

### **1.3. History of Jewish immigration to the USA**

To understand why particularly American Jews are so immune to assimilation a succinct introduction to history is necessary. As was stated previously, Judaism is the oldest monotheistic religion in the world with immense tradition and highly developed and sophisticated culture, literature and customs. As Rosen states "the origins of the Jewish tradition go back nearly 4000 years" (2). The year 1225 BCE is supposed to be the date of great exodus of Israelites from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish calendar is currently at the year 5774. The history is highly expanded compared to Christianity and Islam or even to European history. This sole fact provides the Jewish people with a long and traditional source of pride to be respected and appreciated.

#### **1.3.1. The Diaspora**

Nonetheless, the Jewish nation has experienced almost two thousand years of exile. They could not return to their religious homeland, Israel, and were forced to live under various rulers, along or among various communities and their cultures, usually experiencing oppression and even persecution. The so called diaspora, derived from the Greek word for dispersion (De Lange 224)<sup>2</sup>, started with the Roman invasion in 70 AD and ended only recently in 1948 with the formation of the State of Israel. The diaspora contributed greatly to the strong inclination of the Jews to their religion and their communities, finding in them what they were denied in terms of having one's own country. The Jews are the only people in the world who were able to overcome such a long separation and still retain distinguishing traits and culture. The history of the Jewish diaspora is an intriguing topic but the extent of this

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<sup>1</sup> De Lange mentions the specific year in the overview of chronology of Jewish history in *An Introduction to Judaism*; xv.

<sup>2</sup> The term diaspora is used to describe the communities of Jewish people living outside Eretz Israel.

thesis does not allow for further exploration of the subject matter and we will discuss only the diaspora in the USA.

### **1.3.2. Immigration to the USA**

In relation to Chaim Potok's work only the Jewish immigration to the United States of America will be considered. It occurred in three main waves. The first Jewish settlers came in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and they settled on the east coast where is the highest concentration of people who define themselves as Jewish still live today. These first Jewish immigrants were Sephardic Jews who derived their cultural background during the period of diaspora in Spain. The second major wave arrived in 1840s and it was of the Jews of Askenazi descent from Germany. These newcomers spread the Jewish culture further to the midwest, west and the south as well. The last and the most significant one came a few decades later from Eastern Europe beginning in the 1880s and ending in 1924 when the oppressive immigration quotas were imposed and the immigration levels dropped dramatically. What is relevant to the thesis is the fact that for the immigration to the USA, as for any immigrant to assimilate was and still partially is typical.<sup>3</sup> The Jews did not and still do not succumb as fast as the other immigrant groups.

### **1.3.3. Chaim Potok's identification as a Hasidic Jew**

As we speak about the last immigration group we finally arrive at the point when the parents of Chaim Potok arrived in the USA from Poland. It was in the 1920s and they belonged to the Hasidic community, which resulted in Potok growing up in a highly religious environment surrounded by a pious community. Such an upbringing influenced him greatly. In his own work as a novelist, the traits of education and his appreciation of religion are sensed as easily as the intimacy with which he depicts the religious communities.

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<sup>3</sup> The information for this overview of Jewish immigration in the USA was sourced from the first chapter of Seymour Lipset's and Earl Raab's *Jews and the New American Scene*.

#### **1.3.4. Short biographical introduction to Potok's life**

Chaim Potok was born in February 1929 in Brooklyn. He grew up in the tumultuous era of WW II, the formation of Israel, the Korean war, as well as in an era of colossal changes in American society itself. He received an orthodox education but was himself interested in English literature, which he chose as a major for his college degree. He studied at the Yeshiva University in New York City and finished his studies of English literature *summa cum laude*. After accomplishing his secular education he went to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where he studied and was ordained a rabbi in 1954. He worked as a writer, lecturer, editor and rabbi.

#### **1.3.5. The unique combination of the religious and the secular**

Potok proved in his life that it really is possible to combine both secular and religious education, a topic central for the two novels analyzed in the thesis. Through his own experience he was truly able to comprehend the inner struggle of his protagonists, who too have to go through similar experiences and are forced to, at a very young age, deal with conflicts and dilemmas that are of crucial consequences in their adult lives. Potok's approach to his protagonists is attentive and his portrayal of the psychology and of the repercussions which take place after the essential decisions they make. It is remarkable that the characters do not give up their faith, nor their respect for their parents and love for the community despite the fact they do follow a secular career or vice versa. Danny Saunders from *The Chosen* and even more so Asher Lev from *My Name is Asher Lev* try to find their way into the world of secular occupations while remaining orthodox Jews. Such a behavior is notable since to give up the religion would be much simpler for both of them and they do not even consider it. We will come back to the clash in the second chapter of the thesis.

#### **1.4. The works chosen for the thesis**

Why and how Judaism can be so significant to the main characters is a question this thesis will try to answer as it exemplifies how the community survived throughout the centuries in the diaspora. These two novels represent the two most important aspects of the faith and its role in the life of its followers. In *My Name is Asher Lev* the readers witness the conflict from an unusually close perspective. Since it has been written in first person narration, the reader establishes an intimate relationship with Asher and can follow closely what is in the core of all his paintings and all his perceived disrespect. Danny on the other hand is presented through the eyes of Reuven, a close and dear friend, but the narration is not as intimate as if it had been recounted by Danny himself. At the same time Reuven allows the reader to follow his own inner struggle. As opposed to Danny, Reuven wants to become a rabbi. Conversely to Asher's case the reader is provided with the direct impression Danny's behavior leaves on the community and how such a revolt is processed and experienced from the outside perspective, through Reuven. Since both of these novels carry highly autobiographical traits, the readers are allowed into the exclusive and normally impenetrable world of Hasidism.



## **2. Religious grounds for defying assimilation**

The religion is an essential aspect of Judaism, and particularly so for the Hasidim who are orthodox Jews. This chapter focuses on the religious element of Jewish immigrants' reluctance to assimilate as fast as the other immigrant groups. Religious practices, even though only one aspect of being Jewish, plays a vital role in defining oneself as a Jew. The chapter will introduce the concept of assimilation and analyze the power of religion in defying the tendency to accept the American culture and mindset as Jewish and integrate it into the Jewish community in the USA. In both the discussed novels *The Chosen* as well as *My Name is Asher Lev*. Chaim Potok tackles the issue of religion and its importance in the adult lives of all three protagonists, Reuven, Danny and Asher. For all three of them Judaism is of crucial significance. In Reuven's case it is self-evident but even Danny and Asher, who avert the predestined path of their lives, are not capable of abandoning their religion and their roots, which are closely intertwined with Judaism as a belief system.

### **2.1. Introducing assimilation in relation to Judaism**

Assimilation as a phenomenon has been defined innumerable times. The majority of sources, among others the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, state that assimilation is "the absorption of a minority group into a majority population, during which the group takes on the values and norms of the dominant culture."<sup>4</sup> But that does not necessarily epitomize the true essence of the idea.

"Definition of assimilation in the Chicago school by Robert Park and E.W. Burgess claims that assimilation is a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life. When read closely, this definition clearly does not require what many

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<sup>4</sup> [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com), Web. 30 March 2014.

critics of assimilation theory assume, namely, the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins." (Alba 19)

Although such a definition incorporates the idea of cultural pluralism, it is crucial for understanding the concept of assimilation in this thesis because it not only allows some elements of individualism within the society discussed, it also encourages and praises diversity, enriching the cultural and social environment. It also helps the readers understand how the whole Western civilization obtains its moral and ethical codex from the Jewish one as Lipset notices: "Of course, a case can be made that Judaism provided the original base for these social beliefs, as they emerged in America, Christianity, and Western society generally" (54). Such a comment would not be relevant if complete assimilation occurred and the specific Jewish patterns and standards could not be adopted into the modern lifestyle.

Judaism as a religion provided the foundation for Christianity, a religion which prevailed in Europe and spread thanks to the colonization of America and elsewhere around the world. In the societies which are built upon the belief in Christ and God it left an essential trace and shaped their understanding of life, culture and society. Thus the question emerges whether Judaism can ever undergo the process of assimilation in its true essence. The changes, which took place between Judaism and other Western thinking concepts, over the course of history were radical and crucial in distinguishing the individual schemes. Among these changes, the view of the importance of religion, view of art and esthetics within the value system and approach to family and education must be considered. But the Jewish origin is inherent.

## **2.2. Significance of religion in the Jewish life**

### **2.2.1. The natural presence of Judaism in everyday life**

The religion is an inseparable element of what it means to be a Jew. The religion is part of everyday life. It is omnipresent, from dawn to dusk, from birth to death. Rosen portrays this notion in his work clearly. "According to the codes of Jewish Law the first thing one does on waking up is to thank God for being alive and conscious, even before leaving one's bed" (76). After that the day starts with prayer. The thought of God, or praying, follows throughout the day, in the synagogue, at meals, in the evening etc; it is as common as breathing and as natural.

The children, brought up in faith, tend to accept it automatically and consider it a part of their lifestyle. Even in the cases when the children or young Jews choose some occupation or interest, such as Asher or Danny, in discreditable or even unacceptable fields, they persevere and often treasure their Jewish identity. For Asher the dilemma of not being able to be the painter and a good Jew at the same time is the climax of *My Name is Asher Lev*. Danny despite disappointing his father and the congregation by refusing to become a rabbi, retains the aspects of Judaism and stays with the faith even in adulthood, promising to bring his children up in faith as well. To give up their faith proves unimaginable to both protagonists. Such devotion to one's origins and religion is unseen in the other immigrant groups.

### **2.2.2. The consequences of being "the chosen"**

The chosen plays an essential role in the religion since its origins. According to the Bible, Jews were the people, who received Torah from God himself. The religion "[...] is not a proselytising religion, meaning that Jews do not actively seek to make converts to Judaism" (De Lange 1). The lack of propagators makes Jews an exception among the monotheistic religions. Understandably, as De Lange notices, pious Jews are proud of their religion and

origin and enjoy the outsider's interest. But "the idea of mission essential in Christianity is not in Judaism. The main reason is that Judaism has not adopted the position that everyone has to be saved and that there is only one route to God" (Rosen 113). To give up such a privilege and strong foundation for self-identification is not painless for the assimilating Jews and it slows down their blending with the American cultural and intellectual mainstream.

### **2.3. The United States of America as homeland**

Another supporting argument for the reluctant acceptance of American culture for their own and eventually assimilating, is the freedom of belief granted by the US government. Jews experienced centuries of oppression and persecution in Europe and elsewhere around the globe for their uniqueness as well as for their different set of beliefs and distinct lifestyle. American society thus represents a place of final liberation of all limiting rules imposed on the Jewish community in the old world. Chaim Potok himself explains how crucial this notion is for the Jews in his interview with Elaine M. Kauvar. "For the first time in history, Jews participate in a seminal and central way in the umbrella civilization in which we live and in which they find themselves. It's a very different scene today from whatever it was in the past, and that's what I'm trying to explore, that kind of confrontation" (300).

Compared to the other immigrant groups, who reached the shores of the USA and attempted to start a new life and forget the misery of their native countries, the Jews were for the first time after centuries of living in the diaspora allowed to do as they pleased, worship freely and express their faith in all aspects of their lives. S.M. Lipset proves this point in the story of a dining room full of unresponsive although successful Jewish immigrants who became affluent in the USA but did not seem to enjoy the gala dinner prepared especially for them.

'Finally, (the conductor) had recourse to what was apparently his last resort. He struck up the 'Star-Sprangled Banner.' The effect was overwhelming. The few hundred diners rose like one man, applauding. [...] But there was something else in it as well. Many of those who were now paying tribute to Stars and Stripes were listening to the tune with grave, solemn mien. It was as if they were saying: 'We are not persecuted under this flag. At last we have found a home.' Love for America blazed up in my soul. I shouted to the musicians, 'My country,' and the cry spread like wildfire. (1)

The foregoing citation illustrates the overall approach of Jewish community to their new home. The United States offered the Jewish communities their liberty and a pogrom free environment. For the Jews it meant that instead of having to adjust to another oppressive system, the Jewish immigrants were finally free to do as they saw fit.

The notion of America as '*the promised land*' where Jews as a religious group can enjoy unlimited freedoms has been expressed strongly and numerous in both of the discussed novels. In *My Name is Asher Lev*, Asher's father helps afflicted Russian Jews to the USA. Through his actions for the rabbi he further demonstrates not only his devotion to the rabbi as a respectable figure of his religion and community, but to the United States, which is paid great respect and endowed with immense trust. As the quote from the novel points out, the example of Asher's father also portrays the strong affiliation among the Jews everywhere in the diaspora, trying to save the unlucky ones by bringing them to the USA. "He searched constantly through his newspapers and magazines for news about the Jews of Russia. He seemed more connected to the Jews of Russia than to the Jews of our own street" (*My Name is Asher Lev* 53). Danny's father proves the same point as he is actively involved in establishment of Israel as an independent state after WWII even at the cost of his own health.

"He had become involved in Zionist activities and was always attending meetings where he spoke about the importance of Palestine as a Jewish homeland and raised money for the Jewish National Fund. He was also teaching an adult studies course in the history of political Zionism at our synagogue" (The Chosen 211).

Reuven's father does all of this for absolute strangers after suffering a heart attack and surpassing the limitations of his own physical strength.

Such determination cannot in either case originate from superficial belief but rather from a highly personal, profound devotion to a purpose higher than human beings. The involvement and sympathy of characters in both novels for the other Jews proves the previously mentioned point that Judaism is neither an ethnicity nor a religious community but a combination of both and much more with the highest significance for its followers. In both novels the protagonists identify with the victims of Hitler's extermination camps showing their unique sense of the community.

## **2.4. Role of the religion and value system of Judaism**

### **2.4.1. Judaism as a complex thought, tradition and belief system**

The first major aspect, aiding the Jewish community in defying assimilation is the affinity to Judaism as a complex thought, tradition and belief system. The reasons for Jewish people to feel so strongly connected are convoluted. One of the reasons is indubitably the religion but the shared history, culture and traditions cannot be omitted. The sense of belonging to Judaism is surely not built solely on either ethnic or religious conformity. Rather it is based on the unique, harmonious balance of both. Rosen states that "if religion is defined as system of beliefs then Judaism may well fail the test because behavior counts far more than commitment to a particular credo" (114). The connection of faith and lifestyle is thus clear.

Chaim Potok depicts Judaism exactly as that unyielding combination of faith and behavioral patterns. Potok's approach qualifies him as an exemplary author to prove the Jewish resistance towards the assimilation. In his novels, as well as in his opinion, Judaism is a system worthy of preservation, which he portrays through his characters. Judaism always provides a firm infrastructure on which to lean in times of hardship and loss of personal direction. The times of hardship are depicted in *The Chosen* through Danny's father as well as through Asher's father in *My Name is Asher Lev*. Both of them help to save vast numbers of people and they do it out of their belief and feeling of mutuality with the other Jews.

#### **2.4.2. Jewish value system**

The second major aspect in the process of assimilation in relation to the religion is the fact that the priorities of the newly developing business oriented democracy in the USA and the ancient religion of Judaism is as Edward Tiryakian states: "[...] in fact because of a deep-structure affinity of calvinist Puritanism for Judaism, it is in America that Jews have increasingly found full societal and cultural participation and acceptance, symbolized by widespread acceptance in recent years of the term 'Judeo-Christian'" (Lipset 5). The Jewish success in the USA is undisputable. The religion provides many of the answers to why. Among them Lipset created a list of four main reasons for the unprecedented Jewish success derived from the centuries-long development.

(1) a religiously inspired emphasis on education, which, secularized, has been linked to disproportionate intellectual preoccupations since the early Middle Ages; (2) a history as urbanites par excellence, which has given Jews an advantage in the centers of business, professional, and intellectual life; (3) a greater socialization in middle-class norms and habits, and a greater capacity to defer gratification; and (4) long-term

experience with marginality, which has taught them [Jews] how to form new social relations in different class environments. (Lipset 12)

### **2.4.3. Inner struggle of Potok's protagonists**

Based on the tension between the tendency to assimilate and the strong ties to their origins, Potok's characters, namely Asher and Danny, have to face the dilemma of whether to give up their faith or try to maintain it and at the same time modernize Judaism in combining their new occupation with their upbringing. Asher undergoes a personal endeavor in search of the true self. The great disparity between what he needs to do and what he feels is right is tearing him apart. The fact that he takes his parents' feelings into consideration shows the great significance of the family, which is a topic further discussed and analyzed in chapter 3.

Asher's struggle is greatly expressed in the following quote.

But it would have made me a whore to leave it incomplete. It would have made it easier to leave future work incomplete. It would have made it more and more difficult to draw upon that additional aching surge of effort that is always the difference between integrity and deceit in a created work. I would not be the whore to my own existence. Can you understand that? I would not be the whore to my own existence.

(My Name is Asher Lev 286)

The word choice clearly highlights the inner struggle of the main protagonist. Despite the pressure from the community and the religious rules, he could not resist, but that does not mean he was a worse Jew. Once he did not give up Judaism even after being expelled from his community proves the crucial role Judaism plays in Asher's life.

Danny represents a slightly different situation. He is not breaking the rules of Judaism as vividly as Asher. For Danny the major issue is the rejection of a prestigious social position of becoming a tzaddik. Even though he chooses a different path, and leaves his community he



remains a pious Jew and only disposes of the visible attributes. "His beard and earlocks were gone, and his face looked pale. But there was light in his eye that was almost blinding" (The Chosen 280). Nonetheless Danny is not leaving the faith nor the Hasidic community and he makes sure his friend Reuven understands that. "'You'll come over sometimes on a Saturday and we'll study Talmud with my father?' he asked" (The Chosen 281). Obviously the faith and contact with the family and the community is still of highest significance to Danny.

### **3. Family's role in defying assimilation**

#### **3.1. Exceptional position of family within Judaism**

Family occupies a central role within the whole of Judaism, being established already in the Bible as the core of the community. As was mentioned in the introduction "to honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12) is a part of the ten commandments, rules of the highest significance. Naturally the children must pay tribute to and honor their parents but at the same time the parents devote themselves to their children. As Burton mentions, "the love of children was always strong in the heart of the Jew, alike of father and mother" (453). This notion is crucial to the endurance of Judaism. The approach to children is exceptional throughout history, "destruction of children unborn or exposure of them after birth were almost unknown" (Burton 453).

The family as an institution provides two viewpoints to be approached from. The first one is the general interaction within the family unit and the role of a family for the functionality of the followers of Judaism. The second key aspect to be analyzed is the authority of the family and the role it fulfills as a mediator in maintaining Jewish tradition and preserving the continuity of Judaism.

##### **3.1.1. The social significance of the family as an aspect in defying assimilation**

Aside from this extraordinary relationship there are two main aspects to be discussed regarding the family's role in defying assimilation. The general, social interaction within the family and the role of family within the community, ensured by the law, which "enjoined upon the parents the duty of instructing their children both in the history and in the religion of their nation" (Burton 453), thus securing the continuity of Judaism from an early age. This notion is highlighted by the extraordinary relationships between fathers and sons and the awe shown to the fathers by their sons in the discussed novels.

### **3.1.2. Family as a mediator securing continuity**

The ties are proven indestructible even when confronted with the clash of expectations of the parents and their children. The authority of the family in decisionmaking of individuals is remarkable. It also ensures that Judaism will be cherished and embraced and thus the continuity is secured. "Intergenerational family continuity is a term used to refer to sustained emotional involvement and contact and the perpetuation of values and traditions passed on by the older generation to the younger ones" (Sands 102). Even Chaim Potok himself admits in an interview with Laura Chavkin that "I [Chaim Potok] come from a deeply religious tradition and have been contending with those beginnings all of my life" (Chavkin 148). These two aspects, the position in the social hierarchy and the role of continuity, create strong ties within the Jewish families, which causes the assimilation process to be exacerbated through fear of losing the tight connection with one's mostly beloved, the acquired appreciation of one's origin and the sense of belonging.

### **3.1.3. Exceptional attitude of parents to their children**

The devotion of parents to their children in Judaism is truly remarkable. The family is attributed the privilege of being the core of the Jewish society but at the same time is assigned immense duties within the Jewish community in terms of education and rules to be taught as was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The engagement of all members in the family is boundless. Lipset portrays the extent of parents' sacrifice by the example of "impoverished Jews earning 50 cents a day, spending 10 cents for coffee and bagels, saving 40 cents" (24). Since all the saved money was invested back in the family "the Jewish worker was neither the son of a worker nor would he produce a son who was a worker. Middle-class aspirations required that he earn more" (Lipset 24). The family as a unit is always on the rise,

with children attending better schools, being brought up to treasure work and family background and raising their own children in the same way.

Each generation, taught by the previous one, does everything it can to help the next generation in succeeding and achieving a better life. The United States of America provided the excellent environment for such a mindset and allowed the hard-working parents see their children rise and thus validate that their philosophy is the most efficient strategy. As Lipset states "they [Jews] wanted to save money in order to get their families out of the sweatshops and into more middle-class occupations" (24). They expected that the children repay them with more hard work and due respect. The need for assimilation was thus further diminished since the behavioral pattern set by the Jewish mentality proved the most effective causing any other strategy to be unproductive.

### **3.2. The families in *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev***

Both novels prove the point of significance of the family within the Jewish community. In *The Chosen* the central issue regarding the family are Danny's and Reuven's relationships with their fathers respectively. The reader notices that they are absolutely disparate, indeed being the exact opposites of each other with Danny moving further away from the faith while Reuven embraces it. Nonetheless both young protagonists love and respect their fathers and to disrespect either of them is inconceivable. Even a hint of disobedience causes an inner turmoil. Both fathers represent the wisdom thousands of-years of tradition.

#### **3.2.1. Acceptance of children's opinions**

No other religious or social community relies on the family to such extent as the Jewish one especially regarding the utter dedication of individual members of the family to each other. This extraordinary adherence of parents to children and respect of children to parents is apparent in *The Chosen* as well as in *My Name is Asher Lev*. In both novels the

parents have to overcome an unexpected, and in Asher's case even incomprehensible, turn of their children's destiny but are able to do that and in the end even support their children despite the pain it causes them. Nonetheless Asher's story is mainly based on the dilemma of not hurting his parents and dishonoring the community and the strong urge to express himself artistically. In the cases of Reuven and Danny the love and shared tradition with the prospect of continuity drives the families to stick closer together and focus on preserving the family, rather than endangering the unity and forcing the children to follow their parents' idea of their future.

### **3.2.2. Reuven**

Reuven's case is the least complicated regarding the defiance of assimilation as well as his exemplary relationship with his father. The ties are depicted vividly in the scene when Reuven wakes up in the hospital after a serious injury and his first thoughts belong to his father. "I thought of my father receiving the phone call from Mr Galanter and rushing over to the hospital, and I had to hold myself back from crying. He was probably sitting at his desk, writing. The call would frighten him terrible" (The Chosen 41). Such a consideration and sympathy for one's parents shows how extremely close the connection is. Reuven trusts his father boundlessly. It is also his father who brings Reuven his tefillin<sup>5</sup> to the hospital proving the point of ensuring continuity of religion and the Jewish spirit within the family.

Reuven is the only character of the three characters, who moves in the opposite direction, closer to the religion. Despite his father's expectations, who "wants [Reuven] to be a mathematician" (The Chosen 61). Reuven decides to become a rabbi, in spite of his father's wishes. Even though it does not endanger the importance of Judaism, but rather strengthens it, the clash of wishes and views is essential. In Reuven's situation the clash serves as yet

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<sup>5</sup> As the glossary in *An Introduction to Judaism* states, the tefillin or else phylacteries are black leather boxes containing parchment texts, and attached with straps to the forehead and upper arm of an individual during prayer.

another proof that the family is capable of overcoming even the most unexpected obstacles and to still stay intact. Reuven's father, who envisaged his son in an academical position is at first surprised but remains supportive. In Reuven's life both family as an essential background of support and family as religious mediator functions impeccably.

### **3.2.3. Danny**

Danny's storyline within *The Chosen* is of totally different nature. Although his father desires to offer Danny the best he is possibly able to, Danny's wishes for his future move further away from the faith. The strong family ties are evident in Danny's family as well as in Reuven's. Although his father opts for a rather peculiar silent way of upbringing, his motives reveal his true affection for his son, whose soul and faith were supposed to flourish from the silent treatment in the attempt to raise a tzadikk.<sup>6</sup> Danny awes his father and appreciates his wisdom and immense knowledge. However, this cannot stop, not even diminish his desire for secular knowledge especially on the subject of literature and particularly Freud's psychology. Despite all the discrepancies Danny's father finally gives him a blessing, overcomes his disappointment and grief and lets Danny get his education in the secular subject of psychology.

During the Morning Service on the first Shabbat in June, Reb Saunders announced to the congregation his son's intention to study psychology. [...] Whereupon Reb Saunders further stated that this was his son's wish, that he, as a father, respected his son's soul and mind - in that order, according to what Danny later told me – that his son had every intention of remaining an observer of the Commandments, and that, therefore, he felt compelled to give his son his blessing. (The Chosen 208)

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<sup>6</sup> As is mentioned in *The Chosen* as well as in *The Introduction to Judaism* it is a term meaning "the righteous one". In Hasidism it describes a spiritual leader or the rebbe of the community who is highly respected among his followers. There are several possibilities of spelling the word, among which also tsaddik is possible.

In Danny's situation the risk of assimilation is much more relevant than in Reuven's case. The detachment from the faith and the culture adds greatly to the fear of the community that he would stop being an observant Jew or even worse, convert. The essential point that Danny intends to stay observant is what makes his father approve of his acquiring a secular education and refusing his role of the leader of his congregation. It confirms how the continuity of Judaism is absolutely crucial to the Jews. The meaning of continuity is further highlighted by Danny himself making the decision to bring his children up in the silent way, despite all the distress it caused him. His father being able to approve of his decision and the congregation accepting the approval is a proof of the family being priority over anything else in Judaism. Thus in Danny's case both the affiliation with the family and the continuity of the Jewish heritage is once again proven unshakable, making assimilation a rather unwelcome option.

#### **3.2.4. Asher**

Asher's case is rather perplexing in both of the discussed aspects. The novel *My Name is Asher Lev* shows the possibility of combining presumed counterparts here externalized in Judaism and art. Asher is the protagonist most susceptible to giving up his religion. In contrast to both protagonists of *The Chosen* he lacks the firm family background providing him with support to fall back on. His father travels excessively for the rabbi, devoting his time to Judaism but at the same time depriving his family of his presence. The mother suffers from the loss of her brother and before she fully recuperates a long time passes. Asher is thus left in a void without any guidance. This non-functional family unit, which does not fulfil its role for some time, allows Asher to lose his tracks. Nonetheless the reader still perceives great devotion of the parents to Asher.

However hard his parents eventually try, he is not willing to follow in his father's tracks nor is he willing to study Judaism in depth. What is also a significant difference compared to the situation in families of *The Chosen* is that Asher's father is not at all approving of Asher's decision to become an artist. Asher not only has to decide for himself but he also has to persuade his parents, which is much harder than in cases of either Danny or Reuven.

Nonetheless, even Asher proves the significance of continuity in Judaism, based on his respect for his father and mother. Despite the fact that his father is trying to suppress Asher's urge to express himself artistically, Asher pays him due respect and being a Jew is crucial for him as he himself states right in the beginning of the novel: "I am an observant Jew. Yes, of course, observant Jews do not paint crucifixions. As a matter of fact, observant Jews do not paint at all – in the way that I am painting" (My Name is Asher Lev 9). Asher is capable of praying even at the beach with his mentor, he does not succumb to the tendency of giving up Judaism, though it would have made his life easier, because he was brought up as a Jew.

Asher's family interactions are of different nature. Although the father is absent a lot from the picture, Asher is tightly attached to his mother. The tie between the two is exceptional and portrays the family and its function from a different angle. Asher's extreme affection for his mother is expressed by his refusal of her departure for Europe. "She became angry when I continued to plead that she stay. Pink spots coloured her high cheekbones. Her voice became strident. She called me a child. She said that half a dozen children would not have made more demands on her than I had" (My Name is Asher Lev 212).

Although the father is personally not present as regularly as the fathers of Danny and Reuven, his role is not completely omitted. In Asher's life the role of the father is presented to a great extent by the rabbi, who helps him on his way to establishing himself as a painter. The



rabbi is the highest authority when the father travels and cannot invest his time in his sons upbringing. As was stated previously, dissimilar to Danny's and Reuven's fathers, Asher's father strongly and openly opposes his son's career causing the relationship with his son to suffer. Asher's mother attempts several times to reestablish the relationship and thus proves how important the family is. And Asher realizes that his roots are essential for his painting. Without the dilemma he might have never created such exceptional pieces of art.

### **3.3. Family at the core of defying assimilation**

Through all three characters the position of the family in the defying process has been proven unshakable. It plays a crucial role for all three of them and the support and awareness of their background is what allows them to achieve their goals and the feeling of accomplishment. Danny's father decides to nurture "the tiny spark of goodness in him [which is] God" (The Chosen 272) and the decision proves the best he could have possibly made. Danny prospers from the religion and what he has learned at home as well as from his father's love and support. Reuven is a total exception in his uncomplicated respectful relationship with his father, with whom he is brought even closer by the absence of the mother figure. Despite Asher's complicated relationship with religion as well as with his family. The continuity and strong ties still prevail and cause him to embrace his background and the Jewish tradition.

#### **4. Position of education in the process of defying assimilation**

The last chapter focuses on the topic of education and its significance for Judaism as a belief system and consequently for the defying of assimilation. Education closely correlates with both the religion and the family analyzed in the previous chapters. Family's role and importance in delivering high quality education is essential, which is mentioned in the fundamental Jewish religious text as De Lange proves. "The education of children is the responsibility of the parents, and specifically the father. The instruction to teach the Torah 'to your children' is repeated twice in Shma.<sup>7</sup>" (109). The education can be divided into two distinct types, the religious education and the secular education. In the orthodox communities the religious education is highly praised but as the the modernization of the community progresses the secular education gains gradually more prestige as well.

##### **4.1. Significance of education**

Mentioned innumerable by scholars preoccupied with the topic, Friedman summarizes the impact of education accurately, "establishment of formal educational subsystems in an attempt to insure the continuation and preservation of their [Jewish] culture" (104). Friedman's summary is a clear proof of what role education plays in resistance to assimilation. Friedman even perceives education as "an educational subsystem of one segment (the Jewish religion)" (104), stressing the utter inseparability of the two.

##### **4.1.1. The function of family and the community in obtaining education**

All the authors, who engage in the study of Jewish religious education stress the necessity of the involvement of the home and the devotion of the parents. "Parents deny themselves many a luxury to give their children a good education" (Simmons 75). The family and the community play an essential role. Education, both secular and religious, is so

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<sup>7</sup> Shma is a term describing passages from the Torah prescribed to be recited twice daily, and named from the opening words, 'Hear, Israel.' (De Lange 232)

meaningful in the discussion of assimilation among Jews because, as Rosen points out it was "one of the factors that has revived the Diaspora" (120), and led the Jews to the rise in their social position. It also led them to appreciation of their roots and faith, since "there is only one road by which a Jew can learn to love his faith. He must know the traditions of his faith not merely as a matter of antiquarian information, he must see them in his home from his childhood; he must be taught their significance by his teachers" (Simmons 78).

## **4.2. Religious education**

In both novels the significance of the family, and the fathers in particular is significantly stressed. The strong recognition of the value of education is apparent by the word choice in the adjectives referencing to the fathers and rabbis. Mostly adjectives like wise, intelligent, educated, well-read and brilliant are used. The word choice draws the readership's attention to realize how highly praised the great mind of a man is. The traditional, religious education is a natural part of the world of all three protagonists, Danny, Reuven and Asher. They all study Talmud and Torah as part of their everyday school attendance and later on at home as well.

### **4.2.1. Talmud and Torah**

These two texts are absolutely crucial for the Jewish faith. Torah, as De Lange defines it can be one of two things. Either "The Five Books of Moses, or by extension the entire sacred scripture or the whole religious teaching of Judaism."<sup>8</sup> Torah is the most oftenly used religious text in Judaism and the most sacred one at the same time. As was mentioned in the introduction to the 4th chapter (Shma), it defines the duties of everyday life and clarifies the basic facts and origin of the religion. Talmud is a text studied extensively by Danny and Reuven and provides grounds on which Danny's relationship with his father is maintained. It

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<sup>8</sup> This is a notion of Torah, expressed by De Lange in *An Introduction to Judaism*, 233.

is as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of English as "the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprising the Mishnah and the Gemara."<sup>9</sup>

#### **4.2.2. Danny**

In *The Chosen* the religious education plays a crucial role. Although the students of Danny's school are to a limited extent exposed to the study of English subjects, the religious education is irreplaceable. "Jewish education was compulsory for the Orthodox, and because this was America and not Europe, English education was compulsory as well. [...] The test of intellectual excellence, however, had been reduced by tradition and unvoiced unanimity to a single area of study: Talmud" (*The Chosen* 12). The Talmud is the core of all education and the knowledge of it is a source of great pride and acknowledgment.

Danny's knowledge of Talmud and the commentaries is the proof of his brilliance. When he speaks to Reuven in the hospital, Danny brings up awe in Reuven, just by admitting how much of Talmud he is capable of studying daily. "I have an agreement with my father. I study my quota of Talmud every day, and he doesn't care what I do the rest of the time." "What's your quota of Talmud?" "Two blatt." "Two blatt?" I stared at him. That was four pages of Talmud a day. If I did one page a day, I was delighted" (*The Chosen* 72). The religious education provides the grounds for the limited relationship between Danny and his father. The fact that for the great rebbe Saunders the Talmud is of such an importance proves the point of the necessity of religious education within the community.

#### **4.2.3. Reuven**

Although not as brilliant as Danny, even Reuven is an excellent student. In his case the involvement of his father is the easiest to discern. They study the text of Talmud thoroughly, together and regularly. When Reuven is faced with the extraordinary debate, which he

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<sup>9</sup> www.oxfordreference.com; Web. 30 March 2014.

witnesses in Danny's house, he is not surprised. From his home discussions he is prepared to step in and participate in a quarrel about the Talmud, attaining a social position based on his knowledge. "[...] I suddenly found myself on the field of combat, offering an interpretation of the passage in support of Danny. Neither of them seemed surprised to hear my voice [...] and from that point on the three of us seesawed back and forth through the infinite intricacies of the Talmud" (The Chosen 164). The religious education provides an irreplaceable ground on which sophisticated social interaction can thrive. It is thus vital for the community as a type of social glue.

#### 4.2.4. Asher

Asher is an exceptional character. Asher's father does not represent a religious authority to his son like the fathers of Reuven and Danny, although he is deeply religious and devoted to Judaism himself. Nonetheless throughout the novel, the references made are only of him singing *zemiros*<sup>10</sup> during Shabbat or studying and praying alone.

Thus Asher, unlike the protagonists of *The Chosen*, must struggle with the complexities of Talmud at school and his father does not aid him with his studies to the extent Reuven's father does. This distance of the family from the religious education is mirrored in Asher's approach to Talmud, which is appreciative as well as in Danny's and Reuven's case, but it takes Asher some time to embrace it the way Danny and Reuven do.

Asher's attitude to religious education is expressed many times in the description of his studies. He does not pay attention at school, he forgets his homework easily and he daydreams during his classes. His artistic talent possesses him. The climax of the expression of his obsession comes when he draws the Rebbe's face into his religious textbook. "Please be so good as not to do it again, Asher. Drawing in a Chumash<sup>11</sup> is a desecration of the Name of

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<sup>10</sup> As De Lange defines them, they are "table songs that enliven the Sabbath meals." (234)

<sup>11</sup> Also known as the *humash* is a term used for a volume, containing the five books of the Torah, used in schools

God" (My Name is Asher Lev 110). Such a behavior is unacceptable, yet the family does not really employ any preventive measures and Asher's nature is untouched by the event and he goes on acting the way he had up to that point.

### **4.3. Secular education**

So far the religious education has been discussed but the secular education has just as long tradition in the Jewish community even though sometimes a little more complicated than the religious one. Nonetheless as Rosen states the secular non-Jewish education uplifted the traditional education and forced even the traditional Jewish authorities to maintain the comparable level with the non-Jewish, secular institutions of education.

The general term for the movement to encourage secular learning was the Haskalla<sup>12</sup> (the enlightenment). It affected Jewish life in two ways. It allowed many Jews to acquire a secular education, but this also led to greater assimilation. On the other hand, it pushed Jewish religious life in the opposite direction, a far cry from the Golden Age of Spain where Jews had participated in the life of the realm, yet remained loyal to their own values. Another by-product of Haskalla was the conscious attempt of the Yeshiva world, the traditional schools for further Jewish religious study, to raise their own academic level to compare with the universities. (Rosen 55)

#### **4.3.1. The Importance and usefulness of secular subjects**

Despite the risk of assimilation due to secular education, the enrichment and encouragement of Yeshivas to maintain the academic level of universities enhanced the education provided by the Jewish scholars to Jewish students and thus balanced the risk of assimilation. As Lipset notices it was the natural, Jewish relationship to education that caused the rise in their secular knowledge as well. "Survey research indicates that secular intellectual

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for teaching the religion. (De Lange 227)

<sup>12</sup> As Rosen states Haskalla took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moses Mendelsohn and Naftali Wessely were the inspiration behind a move to relate Judaism to a secular, modern world.

achievement is linked to holding liberal values. [...] And among Jews, the religious emphasis on learning has been transmuted into a stress on secularized education" (Lipset 150).

Actually the high priority and accentuation of education is evident even in present times. Despite the primal fear of raising the risk of assimilation the education that Jews provide for their children proved to be an effective antidote.

The collapse of standards in much of state education has turned Jewish education into an attractive alternative. Graduates of Jewish schools have shown themselves just as capable of succeeding academically, professionally and socially as graduates of other schools. A desire to keep Judaism alive has led to the realization that only a good Jewish education can really help turn the tide. Jewish education has expanded exponentially. Even sections of Judaism previously opposed to the idea, such as Reform Judaism, are now beginning to see the benefits. (Rosen 121)

#### **4.3.2. Reuven**

In Reuven's situation the reader witnesses an absolutely exceptional relationship between father and son in terms of support, as well as in terms of guidance. Reuven's father would even envision his son's career in the secular field of mathematics. The occupation of a professor at a university is highly valued and prestigious. Reuven's interest in secular studies is nourished and developed at home as well as at school. Reuven's father's devotion to his son is apparent when he helps Reuven to study for his final exams after the injury. "Remember you must not read. I will read to you in the evenings and we will see if we can study that way. But you must not read by yourself" (The Chosen 149). The utter devotion and unconditional love, proving the point of inseparability of family and education, is proven by the use of first person plural "we" in "we can study", even though it is only for Reuven's exams.

### **4.3.3. Danny**

Danny must fight much harder for his father's approval to study secular subjects. It is not a highly praised department at his yeshiva nor does his father desire him to put the secular studies ahead of the religious ones. Danny is a brilliant, extraordinary student, who is able to find a mentor in the person of David Malter (Reuven's father). The fact that Danny at a very early age finds an advisor and a guide is a proof of how important the community is, in the development of individuals within the Jewish community.

Danny's absolute devotion is remarkable. Despite his father's disapproval he feels an urge that he must satisfy with knowledge and particularly the knowledge of psychology. "You've heard about Freud. He started psychoanalysis. I'm teaching myself German, so I can read him in the original" (The Chosen 157). To go so far as to learn a new language in order to gain more knowledge is yet another irrevocable proof of the centrality of education in Judaism.

### **4.3.4. Asher**

Asher is an exception in that his school results are not as good as those of Reuven and Danny. Because of his obsession with painting he forgets to study and do homework. He does not pay attention at school and once his gift comes to life he is unable to focus on anything else. "I stayed up late that night, drawing sections of Guernica from memory. [...] I had an algebra test the next day that I had forgotten to study for, I did not do well" (My Name is Asher Lev 179).

Such irresponsible behavior could be viewed as disdain regarding education. The fact is that the other subjects do not interest Asher to any particular extent. He is keen on painting and invests all his energy into studying painting, practicing the technique and learning the theory. The participation of the family and community proves vital again, even though in



Asher's case, the role of the father is divided between the mother who supports him and the rabbi, who represents the guidance. "Early in the afternoon of the third Friday in March, my mother and I went to the Parkway Museum" (My Name is Asher Lev 146).

The rabbi decides that Asher should get a proper education from the established artist Jacob Kahn. Since the rabbi possesses the authority of his office, he arranges the meetings and Asher attends them religiously. These lessons are Asher's true secular education, provided by the Jewish community. For his classes at Jacob Kahn's studio, Asher is always well prepared and studies systematically. "On the last Sunday in January, my mother took me by subway to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. The following Sunday, my mother went with me again. She bought me a large reproduction of Guernica. I studied the reproduction during the week, then went alone to the museum the following Sunday" (My Name is Asher Lev 173).

All three characters undergo a course of both, religious as well as secular education and they benefit from it. As the quotes throughout this chapter show the appreciation of education is what makes Judaism exceptional and aids in defying assimilation. What is essential for educational development and its success is the choice of a good mentor and the support of both family and community. In all three cases the boys are forced to study the religious texts.

Even Asher cannot deny his Jewish roots and whether consciously or subconsciously he cannot suppress his origin. "I would not paint on Shabbos. I spent Shabbos mornings praying and reviewing Torah reading. I spent Shabbos afternoons studying a book on Hasidus I had brought with me" (My Name is Asher Lev 225). To keep the Shabbat is natural to him despite his rather indifferent approach to school. In Danny's and Reuven's case the religious studies are natural and undisputed, so further analysis is not required. Except to mention that in their case the fathers actively enhance their sons' skills and religious awareness.

Regarding the secular studies, the mentors are essential for navigating the student's way through immense amounts of information and sources, and guide them in the right way. Reuven's mathematics is not as tricky as Danny's psychology and the two are in much less danger of leaving their faith for their secular passion than Asher is for painting. Nonetheless, they all retain their Jewish identity mainly due to the involvement of the community and family since their early childhood. The appreciation of one's origin is central to all three characters, Danny, Reuven and Asher. As Friedman states " they (Jews) have simply wanted it (education), according to the National Study, to impart Jewish knowledge and to foster a sense of Jewish belonging and identification" (107). At that they succeeded.

## 5. Conclusion

The thesis analyzed reasons and motives for remarkable resistance, compared to other immigrant groups, to assimilation of the Jewish immigrants in the USA. The three main motives were established to be Judaism as a complex belief, value and traditional system, the family background and the deeply rooted emphasis on education. These three motives were analyzed on the basis of psychology, cultural studies, sociology, literature studies and the focus on Judaism as a religion. This point was proven on the basis of two novels by an orthodox Jewish writer Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Provided the fact that the religion of Christianity emanates from Judaism, assimilation on the religious ground in the form of an erasure of distinctive signs, value system and priorities seems to be rather impossible, regarding the fact, that the community is based on the Jewish value system. As the oldest monotheistic religion, Judaism proved its resistance to assimilation during the period of diaspora in the past 2000 years. The fact that Jews have not assimilated into any of the European cultures not even under major threats of violence and at times extermination proves the central significance of the religious and behavioral wealth the Jews perceive to possess in Judaism. Since the USA provided religious freedom to all its citizens, for centuries before the establishment of the modern state of Israel, the USA was the long awaited homeland, praised and cherished by the Jewish community. Finally being allowed to express their religion freely, the Jews did not feel pressured or forced to abandon their beliefs.

The issue of the USA as the alternative homeland and much appraised country is addressed in both of the discussed novels. The notion is proved by the fathers' conduct regarding the Jewish nation. In *My Name is Asher Lev* Aryeh Lev works tirelessly for the rabbi, helping him bring oppressed Jews to USA and aiding them to settle down in the New

World. David Malter, Reuven's father, from *The Chosen* gives lectures to the Zionists and participates in the organization of establishment of the state of Israel. He enjoys the safety and firm background from the one state where Jews had firm ground under their feet and could assemble freely and organize and educate as large number of people as necessary.

The answer to the remarkable resistance in terms of religion is offered by the notion of Judaism not solely as a belief system, which the Jews comply to with so much appreciation and which could have been modified or reshaped by the ages as a marginal social group. The answer is provided by the social aspect of Judaism. The true essence of Judaism is found in community solidarity, organization and the rules for behavior, which are essential for a functioning Jewish society as well as for Judaism as a religion. The firmly founded values of respect to the elders, to the educated and to the wiser is the key element, which caused Judaism to survive in relatively unchanged form over the period of several thousand years. Even though Judaism has developed into three distinct groups, however each group still shares the core value system, which grants each of them right to be termed Jewish.

From the sociological and psychological point of view the significance of family and the Jewish community is essential for individual's self identification. As Leo Drieger states "Kurt Lewin proposed that individuals need a firm clear sense of identification with the heritage and culture of their ingroup in order to find a secure basis for a sense of well-being" (131). This identification is extremely strong in the Jewish society, rooted in the Old Testament as well as in the additional holy texts such as Talmud and Mishna. Breaking away from the community to assimilate into the mainstream American society would "result in self hatred" (Drieger 131). Thus the family and community contribute to the resistance to assimilation. Basis for the community's values and tradition was traced back to the shared religion.

The family is perceived as a centre of the community. It is the basic unit responsible for educating the future generation and ensuring the continuity of the religion and value system, which is built on the nuclear family structure. The major responsibilities are carried by the father, who is engaged in the his son's or rather his children's education both religious and secular. The father's role is replaceable only by the traditional authority of the rabbi as a head of the community, which proves the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of individual members of a community on each other. Such a cooperating, interlinked group is hardly manageable if not impossible to leave since from the psychological point of view it provides the individual with a firm foundation to build one's self-esteem, and the closely related concept self-identity on, providing the followers not only with firm background socially, but with a perspective of a certain socially appraised position in the general mainstream society and the security that the priorities and standards will be maintained objectively.

All three fathers of the main characters in both *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev* are key in their sons' lives. They are greatly respected and all three Reuven, Danny and Asher take their families into consideration at all times. Even when the relationship between Asher and his father as well as Danny and his father are not by definition conventional they still perceive the parents as an authority and pay them tribute. Such an approach of the children to the parents represents the overall recognition as well as appreciation of the younger generations who thus pay tribute to the older generations and it demonstrates the overall Jewish tendency to embrace their roots.

The community is yet another element in strengthening the Jewish resistance to assimilation. The community as an extended family unit, a close group of people with a precise hierarchy and structure, which is only rarely disrupted. At the head of the community

stands a rabbi, who is cherished and respected without rejection within the community. His judgement is not questioned or discussed and in return the rabbi is usually wise, responsible to his people, fair and always available and willing to help to the people of his community. The Jewish community thrives when it has a good rabbi. In the orthodox, Hasidic communities, where the position of a tzaddik is inherited from father to son, the sons are prepared exquisitely to perform the most demanding role of the social group. They are answerable for developing their community and guaranteeing that the community advances. The individuals are thus psychologically as well as sociologically discouraged to leave such a well functioning group only to face the insecure and unknown of the majority society.

The essential nature of the Jewish community is portrayed in the case of Rebe Saunders, who enjoys the immense popularity and respect within his community. His decisions are shown many times to be undisputable. His community comes to him for advice, to seek wisdom and comfort. Rebe Saunders is an irreplaceable figure of his community who holds it together, draws it to synagogue regularly, and gives the whole a sense of unity, key to the continuous adherence of individuals. The fundamental importance of his office is further stressed by the upbringing, which Danny is subjected to in order for his soul to develop in such a way that he would eventually be capable of taking over the rabbinate. The case of Saunders family is a great depiction of the role of community in defying assimilation.

The individual members are greatly encouraged by the community to attain a certain level of education and acquire a certain social position. The education is essential in both secular as well as religious form. In the orthodox communities, which are the least accessible and mainly withdrawn from the society, the religious education, study of Torah and Talmud, is a sign of social standing and it raises the entire family and community respectively in the eyes of the mainstream society and culture. Resulting directly from the religious education, the

prayers, synagogue attendance and culture, derived from the rich religious background, provide another reason to stay within the boundaries of Jewish community. The individual might also opt for the wider, by Judaism inspired or to Judaism inclining, society since it offers the individual an attested set of traditions to derive self-pride from.

The focus on secular education is also remarkable. It is derived from the general tendency within the Jewish circles to acquire higher social status and the habit of living not only in the urban areas but in the middle class environments for centuries. The Jews are stable participants in the complex social structures around the world, often achieving to become doctors, lawyers, businessmen and teachers and thus further deepening their influence on the future, including non-Jewish generations of the society. The concentration on education is inseparable from one's social status and thus from what it means to be Jewish, having this motivation to achieve wired into them.

This notion of appreciation of education is once again portrayed in all three characters of *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev*. Rebe Saunders' approach to secular studies of his precious son were analyzed in terms of their significance and subordination to the study of Talmud, which is most valued by his father. The fact that Rebe Saunders allows his son to study non-religious texts under a wise mentor is a proof of the general importance of education even in a highly orthodox community. Other evidence of this is Asher's case when the rabbi ensures Asher is provided with an education in painting. To guarantee that education will be received in a not-affirmed field was crucial for the analysis of fundamental importance of education. Reuven's case was the simplest to comment on since his father as an educated man provided guidance to him both in religious and secular subjects.

The USA provided the perfect environment - Judaism needed – in order to finally flourish and develop in its utmost potential. The community is thus not forced or otherwise

supported in the process of assimilation. From the cultural, psychological and social point of view it proves to be advantageous to be a part of the Jewish American society because it ensures a person's growth and the firm ground for self-identification needed in order to succeed in the modern society. It also raises the chances of fulfilling the American dream for which the same characteristics are needed as are those emphasized by the Jewish community. From the religious point of view Judaism is enjoying this unprecedented freedom. All these attributes of the American community enhance the sense of belonging within the Jewish community. Today's collapse of identity and the challenging of the priority system, which the Jewish people do not have to face in its full scale having a thousands-year long tradition to return to in case of need, is another fact supporting the notion to remain in the Jewish community.

The thesis came to a conclusion that Judaism reached a state of unique balance between all three of the main motives, leading to such a deep rooted appreciation of the Jewish values within each individual, that to suppress it or even renounce it proves close to impossible. This however does not mean that Judaism is not subjected to any changes in its development. At first sight the assimilation is progressing even among the Jewish people especially due to intermarriage and lack of observance in adulthood. Nonetheless as Lipset remarks:

In examining Jewish continuity [...] American exceptionalism may threaten the future of the Jews. [...] Some analysts protest against them [the prophecies of doom] pointing out both that some American Jews are intensifying their religious observances and education, and that many others are not so much disappearing as just changing to less stringent forms of observance and group cohesion. (47)



The orthodox, more closed and distant communities are understandably more resistant to the outer influences since their contact with the gentile world is highly limited. The novels showed the generally inapproachable world of Hasidism in great detail from the inside perspective proving the point. The most endangered are the reform and eventually even the conservative groups, who are in close contact with the mainstream culture on a day to day basis. Nonetheless the strong sense of belonging and the need for community, which has been a particularly Jewish lifestyle for the past 2000 years is a major obstacle in the way of assimilation. What is then more probable, than the branches would eventually assimilate, is the general tendency towards more lenient forms of Judaism, which do not interfere into such extent with the everyday life of an American citizen.

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