

From Bluefarb's "The Head, the Heart and the Conflict of Generations in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*"

Directions: Go to Marian's library website and navigate to Bloom's Literature. Search "Bluefarb the Chosen" and click on "criticism" in the top bar. Locate the full text of this article there. You do not need to read the whole article (there are spoilers!), but I want you to go through the steps of finding it so that you know how to get there later. Then, read the following excerpt from Bluefarb's criticism carefully. Together with your group, identify his central arguments (thesis and contentions) and support or refute them with evidence from ch. 1-7 of the novel. Record your thoughts on paper. You will turn this in at the end of class.

In his essay on Chaim Potok's The Chosen, Sam Bluefarb details how the novel depicts "two generations and the Hawthornesque split between the obsessions of the head and the impulses of the heart." This tension results in the alienation of Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders: Both boys feel out of place in their own community; they are isolated, pulled between two Jewish sects. Furthermore, both are caught in a generational shift as the Jewish community, alienated from mainstream society, seeks to adapt to American culture. Thus, for Bluefarb, both boys are torn "between head and heart, tolerance and fanaticism."

Some Zaddikim serve the Lord in the old way: they walk on the state road. Others at times adopt a new way: they walk on the side road. Still others pursue a way of their own choosing: they walk on the path. The last reach their destination first.

—Hassidic saying

Jewish tradition contains many tensions.

—Irving Malin, *Jews and Americans*

The conflict in Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* functions at several levels. These are: the generational conflict; the temperamental; the conflict between head and heart; the opposition between a petrified fanaticism and a humane tolerance; and, finally, the split between two visions of God and man's relationship to Him. Of all of these, however, it is the opposition between the head and the heart which predominates.

The locale of the story is the Crown Heights section of Williamsburg in Brooklyn from the Depression years to the founding of the state of Israel. Although much of the story's direction is determined by the conflict between Hassidic and Misnagdic traditions in Judaism (as respectively represented by the Saunders and Malter families), it is the conflict between two generations and the Hawthornesque split between the obsessions of the head and the impulses of the heart that carry the major thrust of *The Chosen*.

The Hassidic view originated as a revolt against the arid intellectual concerns of 18th century scholastic (i.e., Misnagdic) Judaism with its tortuous explications in Talmudic *pilpul* and its

aristocratic disdain for the poor and illiterate Jew. This resulted in the Hassidic heresy (according to the Vilna Gaon) toward the stress on joy and the intuitions. Yet in its turn (especially as portrayed in *The Chosen*) Hassidism itself evolved into the very thing it had attacked. The distance between the *Ba'al Shem Tov* (or the *Besht*, as he was affectionately called by his followers) and his latter-day followers is relatively short, as history goes: a mere two hundred years or so; but the distance between the gentle piety of the founder of Hassidism and the fanaticism of his later followers qualitatively spans a greater distance than time alone can account for. Indeed, Reb Saunders, the Hassidic leader in *The Chosen*, has really reverted to the earlier arid scholasticism which Hassidism in its own beginnings had set itself up in opposition to.

However, in *The Chosen*, the quarrel between the Hassidim and the Misnagdim (these days, roughly those practicing Jews who are not Hassidim) though decreasing in intensity and bitterness after the slaughter of six million in the Nazi Holocaust, still makes up a substantial aspect of this novel. It is this group—the Misnagdim (or, to acknowledge Potok's Sephardic dialectal usage, Mitnagdim)—to which Reuven Malter, the young protagonist, belongs. We must of course remember that many Hassidim consider most Jews beyond their own circle *apikorsim* (heretics). While it is true that the Misnagdim in *The Chosen* did not actively oppose the Hassidim, the baseball game between the Misnagdic and the Hassidic schools on which the novel opens not only triggers the conflict but determines the direction the novel will take. In a sense, *The Chosen* is a kind of exercise in the "Hegelian" dialectic which the Hassidim and the Misnagdim have engaged in for the last two and a half centuries; however, in doing so, they have articulated their respective visions toward life and God, and, in a sense, have managed to exert some beneficial influence on each other.

One of the central problems in *The Chosen* is communication—or lack of it. Part of this is deliberate and "chosen." Reb Saunders, in his oddly "Talmudic" way, believes that he can best teach his son...by forbidding, or discouraging, what he considers "frivolous" discourse—what most of us might think of as the minimal conversational civilities. Thus Reb Saunders denies Danny what Mr. Malter the yeshiva teacher freely gives to his son Reuven: warmth, communication, and understanding. On those rare occasions when Reb Saunders permits himself to address Danny, these exchanges take place during the periodic quizzes on Talmud, which the *rebbe* subjects Danny to.

On the other hand, the relationship between Reuven and *his* father is a tender one, made all the more trusting by the easy and affectionate exchange of confidences that go on between them. They, at least, can do what Danny and his father seem unable to do: communicate. In the instance of Reb Saunders it is an admixture of pride and fanatic pietism that prevents any intimacy between himself and his son. In Danny's case it is simply fear of his father that prevents any viable relationship between the two. Conceivably, Mr. Malter, the yeshiva teacher, and Reb Saunders, the Hassidic Talmudist, are of a common generation, if not of a common age; yet it is Reb Saunders' rigidity, and his stiff-necked pride, that give the illusion that he is much older than Mr. Malter—even as Hassidism itself *appears* to be rooted in an older tradition than its Misnagdic counterpart.

Bluefarb, Sam. "The Head, the Heart and the Conflict of Generations in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*." *Bloom's Literary Themes: Alienation*, Facts On File, 2009. *Bloom's Literature*, online.infobase.com/HRC/Search/Print?assetId=1856&assetType=article. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.