

Initiation in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*

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Rites of passage or initiation ceremonies are found in many cultures all over the world. They mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, or from being an outsider to being a fully initiated member of an inner circle or society. The initiation rites are usually preceded by a period of instruction and discipline, sometimes in separation from family and society.

In many cultures, children at the age of puberty are taken apart for a time of preparation, boys by older men, and girls separately by older women. Sometimes there is an initiation hut in which they are confined during the period of instruction and they may be subject to ordeals which may involve tattooing, scarification, or circumcision. These will mark them as members of the tribe. Along with these marks they may be given a new name as though taking on a new identity.

Inside the initiation hut it is dark. Some tribes think of it as a grave in which the initiates die to their old self and then come forth as new people. Sometimes it is thought of as a womb in which the initiate is prepared for a new birth. When the boys or girls come out of the initiation hut it is as though they were born again or raised from the dead. Then there is a celebration and they are welcomed into the community as full members with new responsibilities.¹

We can see traces of these patterns in the initiation rites of Judaism and Christianity, especially in their early forms. Modern Judaism practices circumcision, which is the mark of initiation into the covenant relationship, on the eighth day after birth for boys. This has been the custom since the time of the Bible, but there are indications that originally it was a part of a puberty initiation rite. In Genesis 17:25 we read that Abraham's son, Ishmael, was circumcised when he was thirteen years old. In view of the fact that circumcision was part of a primitive puberty rite, it seems likely that its later transference to an infancy rite was to assure membership in the covenant community at the earliest possible time. The same thing was later true in the case of infant baptism in Christianity.

In modern Judaism the bar mitzvah ceremony for boys at the age of thirteen marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, and Reformed Judaism has added bas mitzvah for girls. These ceremonies are preceded by a period of instruction and the bar mitzvah (son of the commandment) boy is required to read a portion of the Torah in Hebrew.

Christian initiation ceremonies seem to be closer to the pattern of primitive initiations. In the early church adult baptism by immersion was the rule. This was preceded by a long period of preparation, of instruction, and often of fasting and other hard disciplines. Baptism usually took place at night on Easter Eve, and the liturgy symbolized a death and burial in the water and a rising to new life and light on Easter Day. St. Paul expresses this clearly in Romans 6:3-4:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Baptism is also associated with rebirth. In a conversation with Nicodemus Jesus said, "...unless one is born anew, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Nicodemus then asked, "...can a man... enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Obviously this literal interpretation was not what Jesus meant but the imagery is suggestive. Jesus' answer was, "...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3-5).

Thus Christian baptism seems to have retained more of the symbolism of primitive initiation ceremonies with the ideas of rebirth and of death and rising again to new life. It is true that it no longer retains physical markings such as tattoo or scarification or circumcision, but a spiritual marking ceremony has been retained. Part of the ceremony involves marking the forehead with the sign of the cross in ancient traditions and in many churches today. This is done with oil or water so that it does not leave a permanent visible mark, but the spiritual reality is thought to be fixed.

Like Judaism Christianity moved the initiation ceremony to infancy some time in the first few centuries in order to hasten membership within the covenant, but a return to believers' baptism for adults or adolescents was seen in the Reformation in the sixteenth century and this pattern is followed by many Christians today. In many churches today, confirmation, which involves reaffirmation of

baptismal vows, is a kind of initiation ceremony for adolescents.

The process of initiation is found in many novels, especially in Bildungsroman. In Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* there is a description of an experience of a young boy which almost exactly parallels the steps in the initiation ceremonies of primitive tribes in Africa and other areas. Since initiation is an important theme in many novels, including almost all of Potok's novels, it may be useful to analyze different aspects of the initiation scene in *The Chosen* and their correspondence with primitive initiation ceremonies found in many different cultures.

The Chosen is Potok's first published novel (1967). It is the shortest and continues to be one of his most popular.² It concerns two boys in Brooklyn, New York who are fifteen years old when the novel begins. One is Reuven Malter, the son of an Orthodox Jew who is a high school teacher of Talmud in an Orthodox yeshiva (Jewish parochial school). The other is Danny Saunders, the son of the leader (*tzaddik*) of a Hasidic group of Jews from Russia. Both boys go through a process of initiation in which they enter into the adult world, but it is Reuven who goes through a physical experience at the beginning of the novel which very clearly symbolizes and parallels the initiation ceremonies of primitive cultures.

The action of the novel begins with a baseball game between the teams of Reuven's Orthodox yeshiva and Danny's Hasidic yeshiva. The authorities of both schools are reluctant to allow students to take valuable time away from the study of Talmud to indulge in sports, but because of World War II and their wish to show their Americanism and patriotism in the war against Hitler and his an-

tisemitic Nazi aggression they agree to the formation of an inter-yeshiva baseball league.

Hasidism started in eighteenth century Poland and by the middle of the nineteenth century almost half the Jews of eastern Europe were part of the Hasidic movement. They were divided into many sects, each with its leader or tzaddik who was considered to have almost absolute authority, being an intermediary between the believers and God. Between the Hasidim and the Orthodox Jews there was often bitter rivalry. Many Orthodox Jews considered Hasidism to be a heresy, and many Hasidic Jews considered other Jews to be little better than Gentiles. Long before Hitler's rise to power, pogroms in Russia and persecution and discrimination in other parts of Europe had caused hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate to the United States, bringing many of their rivalries and divisions with them. Although the Orthodox are stricter followers of the Torah, the Jewish Law, than the other two major divisions of Judaism in the United States, Reform and Conservative, they are still not considered true Jews by the small separatist sects of Hasidim, many of which settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York.

For this reason Danny Saunders' baseball team is determined to defeat Reuven's team to prove their spiritual superiority. Danny himself has developed a remarkable ability to hit directly at the pitcher's head. The first pitcher on Reuven's team ducks when the ball comes at him allowing Danny a hit, but when Reuven takes over as relief pitcher he is hit in the eye by a ball Danny hits with a vicious swing. It is not a direct hit because Reuven managed to deflect the ball slightly with his glove, but his glasses are broken

and a piece of glass enters his eye, although he does not know it at the time. When the coach, Mr. Galanter, realizes how badly Reuven has been hurt he rushes him to the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital, and it is here that the initiation-like experience takes place.

First of all, as in many primitive societies, Reuven is taken apart by an older man to be in a state of separation from his family and the general society. The hospital is a place in which he is confined as young boys are confined in the initiation hut. The initiation hut is usually dark and is sometimes thought of as the womb from which the initiates will be born again. It is also in some cultures thought of as a grave in which the initiates will die to their old selves and be raised again to a new life and a new identity as adults. After Reuven is examined, he is put into an elevator which takes him slowly up to the operating room. By this time he is in great pain, and his eyesight is seriously damaged. He thinks he sees the lights in the elevator change from white to red to black, and finally "the light was suddenly gone."³

It is possible to think of the elevator as a womb, or on the other hand as a tomb from which light is excluded. Of course, it is in the elevator that Reuven loses consciousness or symbolically dies, and it is in the operating room that his body is "remade" for his new birth or his rising from the dead. In the operation Dr. Snyderman removes a piece of glass from Reuven's eye and repairs the damaged parts. This may correspond to circumcision in which a part of the flesh (the foreskin) is cut off and removed. Originally this was associated with the giving of a part of oneself to the god as a symbol of total self-dedication. Sometimes a tooth, or hair, or

some other part of the body was offered, or a substitute, such as animal sacrifice was made. In the Hebrew tradition and in many other traditions it was necessary to seal the covenant with blood, and this is fulfilled in circumcision, and in Reuven's operation blood is shed.

Reuven is, of course, unconscious all during the operation and sleeps almost twenty-four hours after it. When he wakes and opens one eye, he finds himself in a hospital bed surrounded by curtains, but when the nurse pulls them aside he is dazzled by the sunlight. Darkness and light play a great part in many initiation ceremonies; and vision, the ability to see and comprehend new truth, is very important. At first Reuven can only see through one eye and everything looks blurred. On one side of his bed is Tony Savo who has a patch over one eye and eventually loses that eye entirely. On the other side is little Billy Merrit who is blind and who never recovers his sight in spite of an operation. Reuven had always taken his eyes and his vision for granted, but now he knows what a precious gift the ability to see is and he looks with new vision on the world.

In initiation ceremonies there were always older men to guide the boys, and older women to guide and instruct the girls. As we have seen, it is Mr. Galanter, the baseball coach who takes Reuven to the hospital, and while he is there he has many older instructors to help him on his way. Of course, the doctors, nurses, and orderlies are all helpers and instructors, and Reuven learns some things from Tony Savo and Mr. Galanter who comes to see him in the hospital. But it is chiefly David Malter, Reuven's father, who

guides him and brings him to a new level of understanding and maturity.

There are two main characters in the novel who are fathers, David Malter and Isaac Saunders. Both love their sons very much and both are good men, but they show their love in very different ways. For very strange reasons which we will consider later, Danny's father uses silence to "communicate" with him. Reuven's father, on the other hand, talks as much as possible with his son and tries to teach him and guide him on the way while still recognizing the need and the right which Reuven has to develop his own independent and autonomous personality.

When Reuven asks his father whether his eye will be all right, Mr. Malter tries to reassure him that there is nothing to worry about. However, Reuven sees that his father is worried about something and forces his father to acknowledge that the piece of glass was on the edge of the pupil and that when it heals the scar tissue might grow over the pupil causing blindness in that eye. In this case we see the father treating his son as though he were still a child not ready to face reality. Mr. Malter tries to give an evasive answer (*hoben*) at first, but Reuven is no longer a child. His initiation has begun and he seeks the truth. From then on Mr. Malter treats Reuven more and more as an adult and tries to help him find true maturity within the context of Orthodox Judaism.

The first thing David Malter teaches his son concerns forgiveness and friendship. Reuven is angry to the point of hatred at Danny Saunders. He tells his father that Danny deliberately hit him in the head and tried to kill him. This makes his father angry be-

cause he had already told Reuven that Danny had said he was sorry. When Reuven says that Danny *seemed* to hit him deliberately, Mr. Malter asks, "Things are always what they seem to be, Reuven?" (51) This also is a question of vision. We must learn to distinguish between appearance and reality.

This is a hard lesson to learn, however, for people tend to believe what they want to believe, and our perceptions of reality are influenced by our emotions and our preconceptions or unverified assumptions. Reuven's anger and hatred towards Danny distort his vision, and when Danny comes to see him and to say that he is sorry, Reuven insults him and tells him to "go to hell." (63) Later when Mr. Malter hears this he tells Reuven he did a foolish thing, and he reminds Reuven that the Talmud says, "If a person comes to apologize for having hurt you, you must listen and forgive him." (64)

This time Reuven learns his lesson, and when Danny comes again it is Reuven who says he is sorry for his anger and his unforgiveness. After this they become friends in a very short time and their friendship is one of the themes of the novel. Here again Mr. Malter's advice is important. Again he refers to the Talmud, the great Jewish commentary on the Torah completed about the sixth century C.E.⁴ The Talmud tells us that there are two things we should do for ourselves. One is to acquire a teacher. He asks Reuven if he remembers what the other thing is, and Reuven correctly answers, "Choose a friend." Mr. Malter quotes a Greek philosopher who said that "two people who are true friends are like two bodies with one soul," and he tells Reuven, "If you can, make Danny Saunders

your friend.” (74) Later we find that Mr. Malter already knows Danny, and we understand why he said this, but at the time Reuven could not understand why his father gave this advice.

At the next meeting of Reuven and Danny the two talk together as though they were old friends. While they are talking Mr. Malter enters. Danny is astonished to find that a man who had helped him find good books to read in the public library is Reuven’s father, and Reuven is amazed to learn that his father already knew Danny. As a result of his accident and experience in the hospital, Reuven’s whole life is changed, he acquires new conceptions of life, and he forms a friendship with someone who lives in a completely different world from that which he has known until now.

Reuven enters the hospital on a Sunday, the first day of the week for Jews. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday evening, and on Friday morning Reuven has his final eye examination. When the bandage is removed from his left eye he is able to see clearly through both eyes and the doctor tells him he can go home, although he will have to come back for a check-up in ten days. It is not certain that the scar tissue will not cover the pupil, but the doctor thinks that it will probably be all right. As Reuven leaves the hospital he learns that Tony Savo has lost his eye completely and that Billy has had an operation but the result is not known yet. Reuven realizes how lucky he is, but his experience in the hospital has helped him to understand the suffering of others and to know that his own life and vision are dependent on many circumstances over which he has no control.

After this week in the hospital during which Reuven had under-

gone an operation, had emerged from darkness and unconsciousness into light and vision with one eye, and had received instruction from many older people, he returns home with his father late Friday morning. In the cab Mr. Malter hands Reuven his other pair of glasses and Reuven puts them on. "The world jumped into focus and everything suddenly looked bright and fresh and clean,...and there was newness everywhere, a feeling that I had been away a long time in a dark place and was now returning to home and sunlight." (93) This clearly symbolizes the end of the initiation experience and the acquisition of new vision and understanding. Of course it does not mean that Reuven will cease learning or that he has perfect vision yet, but symbolically he has crossed from childhood into young manhood.

Reuven's new vision is confirmed and further emphasized by several other details in Chapter Five, the first chapter of "Book Two." After entering the apartment where he and his father live, Reuven walks slowly through it and says, "I had lived in it all my life, but I never really saw it until I went through it that Friday afternoon." (94)

Somehow everything had changed. I had spent five days in a hospital and the world around seemed sharpened now and pulsing with life....I felt I had crossed into another world, that little pieces of my old self had been left behind on the black asphalt floor of the school yard alongside the shattered lens of my glasses. (96)

After the Shabbat (sabbath) meal, and after Reuven and his father had chanted the Grace After Meals, Mr. Malter tells his son something of the history of the origin of Hasidism in Poland in the eighteenth century, the persecutions that went before this, and the struggles that followed. (98–106) Here again Reuven is receiving instruction and the next day he will go to Danny's synagogue and will hear Danny's father's sermon and teachings. After all this experience and new knowledge it is not surprising that when Reuven returns to his school his classmates' talking about the baseball game seems "silly" and "childish." (142) It is doubtful whether Reuven and Danny will ever be able to take a baseball game as seriously as they did that one and yet that game changed both their lives. Neither one would ever be the same again.

Although there are many initiatory experiences in Potok's other novels, none of them parallel primitive initiations in the same way as in this book. It would be very artificial if they did. Danny's initiatory experience is also unlike Reuven's. Whereas Reuven must face darkness, the inability to see, as part of his ordeal, Danny must face silence. Although his father speaks to him when they are studying Talmud together, he does not speak to Danny at all at other times. There is not space in this short paper to explain this in detail, but a few words may give some idea of why Rabbi Saunders adopted this apparently cruel and cold attitude towards his son.

Danny was a genius with a brilliant mind and photographic memory. At the end of the novel Rabbi Saunders explains to Reuven the reason for his silence to Danny:

A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure, it must be nurtured, it must be fanned into flame....

Reuven, the Master of the Universe blessed me with a brilliant son. And He cursed me with all the problems of raising him....Reuven, when my Daniel was four years old, I saw him reading a story from a book. And I was frightened. He did not read the story, he swallowed it, as one swallows food or water. There was no soul in my four-year-old Daniel, there was only his mind. He was a mind in a body without a soul. It was a story in a Yiddish book about a poor Jew and his struggles to get to Eretz Yisroel [the land of Israel] before he died. Ah, how that man suffered! And my Daniel *enjoyed* the story, he enjoyed the last terrible page, because when he finished it he realized for the first time what a memory he had. He looked at me proudly and told me back the story from memory, and I cried inside my heart. I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, 'What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, *that* I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!'

I looked at my Daniel when he was four years old, and I said to myself, How will I teach this mind what it is to have a soul? How will I teach this mind to understand pain? How will I teach it to *want* to take on another person's suffering? How

will I do this and not lose my son, my precious son whom I love as I love the Master of the Universe Himself? How will I do this and not cause my son, God forbid, to abandon the Master of the Universe and His Commandments?...And when he was older, the years I drew myself away from him... 'Why have you stopped answering my questions, Father?' he asked me once. 'You are old enough to look into your own soul for the answers,' I told him...He was bewildered and hurt. The nightmares he began to have....But he learned to find answers for himself. He suffered and learned to listen to the suffering of others. In the silence between us, he began to hear the world crying. (263-67)

Thus for Danny the ordeal to be suffered was silence, not darkness as it was for Reuven. And Danny learned from silence. He tells Reuven, "You can listen to silence, Reuven. I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own. It talks to me sometimes. I feel myself alive in it. It talks. And I can hear it....It doesn't always talk. Sometimes—sometimes it cries, and you can hear the pain of the world in it. It hurts to listen to it then. But you have to." (249)

The ordeal which Danny suffers is no less painful than Reuven's, and it lasts not a week, but many years. His instructor is silence, but behind "the sound of silence" we can hear the father's voice—the suffering father who told Reuven, "In the silence between us, he began to hear the world crying." (267) Though the father's long silence to his son may seem cruel, Danny did gain a soul, and he learned to suffer and to feel the suffering of others. In the end his father re-

leases him from being tzaddik for the Hasidim and allows him to become a psychiatrist with his blessing. As Rabbi Saunders says, Danny "will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik." (167)

The Chosen presents Reuven's initiation with great symbolical clarity. Danny's initiation takes place over a longer period of time and is wrapped in mystery. Both are integrated effectively into the story of how two boys overcome a series of conflicts and obstacles to achieve their goals. At the same time we see the world struggling against the evil of Hitler and his Nazi oppressors to achieve victory, and the Jewish people passing through ordeals and suffering to attain the birth of the new nation, Israel. Chaim Potok has given us an initiation story which is archetypal so that it may help us to see other initiation stories with greater clarity and understanding.

NOTES

- 1 "Initiation," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) vol. 7, pp. 224-238.
- 2 For the surprising popularity and critical reception of Chaim Potok's first five novels, *The Chosen* (1967), *The Promise* (1969), *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), *In the Beginning* (1975), and *The Book of Lights* (1981), see Leshe Field, "Chaim Potok and the Critics: Sampler from a Consistent Spectrum," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, No. 4, Daniel Walden, ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985) pp. 3-12. Field shows that each novel has consistently received the highest praise from some leading critics, and at the same time dismissal from others who did not consider Potok's novels to be "serious literature." This dismissal is clearly connected with Potok's insistence on taking religion very seriously as

a central theme of each novel. The reading public has been consistent in buying and reading Potok's books, and all have been on the best sellers list for long periods. Potok has published two later novels: *Davita's Harp* (1985), and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990).

- 3 Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Fawcett Cress, 1967) p. 40. Subsequent references will be to this text with page numbers in parentheses.
- 4 For a short description of the Talmud see Edward A. Abramson, *Chaim Potok* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) p. 7. In accordance with modern usage, I have used "C. E." (Common Era) rather than "A. D." for the date.

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