

Chaim Potok and Hasidism

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Abstract

In my paper I would like to deal with Chaim Potok's two novels *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990). The hero of the novels, Asher Lev, is an artist who has to find his own identity within the boundaries of the Ladover Hasidim community. Jews consider art as a waste of time that would take the individual from his community and God. My scope is to show how the individual can handle this situation and if there is future for the Jewish community in the 21st century.

Keywords: Identity, Jewish American identity, Ladover Hasidim, artist, Jews

In my paper I want to concentrate on Chaim Potok's two novels *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Gift of Asher Lev*. Chaim Potok is not only a prolific writer of Jewish origins but he is a Jewish rabbi and a painter as well. His works present Jewish life and Judaism from the point of view of an observant Jew. His insights are from the inside of the Hasidic Jewish community, we become part of the Jewish community through his works. Judaism is at the heart of Potok's works.

Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) deals with the ultimate irreconcilability of art and Jewish Orthodoxy. The main character of the novel, Asher Lev, struggles with coming of age and tries to form his own identity as an artist in a Hasidic community. The novel is the story of a difficult childhood of a Jewish boy who happens to be born with the gift of drawing and with his early manhood. The father of the boy thinks that this gift is actually from the *sitra achra* (the other side) and that it is only a waste of time. The Orthodox Jewish environment in which Asher Lev was born did not want to recognize the existence of such a gift and tried to take it as a childish thing that disappears with age. "Many people feel they are in possession of a great gift when they are young. But one does not always give in to a gift...The gift causes you to think only of yourself and your own feelings" (118). The hero has to struggle for his freedom with his parents, community and even with himself in order to develop his own identity as an artist of Jewish origins. The novel starts with Picasso's statement "Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth" (5). The demands of art with the demands of an ancient religious tradition have to be reconciled. The true artist has the possibility of creating truth. Asher has to learn from an early age that as an artist he has to be perseverant and has to have the necessary strength to become a true artist, otherwise his work and sacrifice is going to be without any reason.

Asher is torn between the duty to obey his parents and on a larger scale his community and his own self as an artist. He is helped by the Rebbe (spiritual leader) of the Jewish community in his quest for his own identity. The Rebbe, a former European immigrant, asks Jacob Kahn a well known fine artist, to take him as his student and help him to become a real artist. Jacob Kahn becomes like a surrogate father for Asher, a father who he never had. His relationship with his father is filled with tension. Aryeh Lev, his father, is dedicated to the rescue of European Jews and to the setting up of *yeshivas* (Jewish schools) across Europe. He cannot understand his son's ardent feeling for art and there is a continuously growing distance between them. His father travels to help other Jews to escape

the horrors of European anti-Semitism while his son wastes his time on drawing. He says about the gift: "If it is from the Other Side, then it is foolishness, dangerous foolishness, for it will take you away from Torah and from your people and lead you to think only of yourself" (98). Asher's father moves for a while to Europe to be closer to those in need and his family has to follow him. Asher refuses to move to Europe because he fears that he might lose his gift. Without his usual and normal background he would be lost and his gift as well. He is aware of the fact that he puts his mother in a very sensitive position but he cannot escape his own fate.

Their small family cannot find peace and actually his mother is torn between the two men of the family. His mother, a fine and subtle Jewish woman, who has lost her brother while working for the Rebbe and the community, tries to strike a balance and make the two men come closer to each other. All her efforts are without any results and there is no chance for a normal family life. Rivkeh, Asher's mother, at the beginning of the novel appears as a young woman born and raised in the Hasidic community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. She becomes mentally ill after her brother's accident with whom she communicates even after his death. She gets better only when the Rebbe allows her to study further and so be able to finish her brother's unfinished work. She finishes university and starts her career as a university teacher. She does her work for the benefit of her community. Her actions are never done for her own sake but for the sake of the community. She has undertaken the work of her brother for the benefit of her coreligionists; she says "Nothing is more important in the eyes of the Master of the Universe than a Jewish life" (99).

According to the teachings of Judaism, the individual has to give up his/her own wishes for the benefit of the community. Jewish life in Europe was based on this idea, and after the Jews' getting to America, this was their only way of preserving their own culture, heritage and religion. But I think that in America the Jews experienced total freedom in speech, in life and, most importantly, in thoughts. The bounds of their past life were forgotten and a new set of values had to be elaborated in order to fulfill the needs of this assimilated, acculturated and Americanized individual. The question of individualism appeared within the Jewish communities. Jewish families and communities were no longer the most important things in the life of the individual. The individual came to the foreground and left no place for other things. Asher is the representative of this new type of Jews. In the novel there is a conflict between the Orthodox Jewish values and the values of a secular way of life of an artist. Judaism requires from the individual to keep the Ten Commandments, regular attendance at the synagogue and follow dietary prescriptions. On the other hand, there are the demands of a secular American way of life. The Ladover community was set up by European immigrants who escaped the Holocaust and the horrors of the World War II and tried to preserve their own community. The needs of the community have to be put before anything else but of course this changes in America and a new viable way of life has to be developed and implemented.

Asher's father dedicates his life to the community while his son turns against it. Asher does not care for the needs of the community. The Rebbe helps him to become a true artist with the help of Jacob Kahn for the benefit of their community. Only later does he realize that Jacob Kahn, whose belief in individualism and success at any cost has a negative impact on Asher, is only interested in his own fame rather than in the well-being of his own community:

You have a gift, Asher Lev. You have a responsibility... 'Do you feel you are responsible to anyone? To anything?' 'To my people,' I said hesitantly...As an artist you are responsible to no one and to nothing, except to yourself and to the truth as you see it. (191)

The Rebbe does not want to turn Asher against his community but rather would like to understand him and his gift. In the community of Ladover Hasidim the Rebbe could decide the role of each member. He meets several times with the young Asher to get to know him much better and to turn him to those things that are really important:

A life should be lived for the sake of heaven. One man is not better than another because he is a doctor while the other is a shoemaker. One man is not better than another because he is a lawyer while the other is a painter. A life is measured by how it is lived for the sake of the heaven (168).

The Rebbe wants to make Asher understand the importance of God in his life. Without God he would be lost forever with no hope of a happy afterlife. But Asher cannot live according to the expectations of the community and his parents. His gift and his teacher, Jacob Kahn, urge him to follow his own way. His need to become a true artist comes before everything. He cannot be the good, obedient Jewish son. His father does not and cannot understand him. He thinks that art, which in the light of Judaism is considered a waste of time, comes from the *sitra achra*. In the life of a true, observant Jew, there is no place for art. The most important thing is to live for the benefit of their community. Art is too individualist and it is only for the sake of the individual, there is no space for the community. In the end Aryeh Lev says to Asher "Do not forget your people, Asher. That is all I ask of you. That is all that is left for me to ask of you" (204).

Asher, the artist and the observant Jew, does not want to offend his community. He tries to behave as he is expected to from his community, but as an artist he cannot escape his fate. His chosen path is different from the one of his fellow coreligionists, but it is the path of a fine artist. At the beginning of the novel he says:

I am an observant Jew....So strong words are being written and spoken about me, myths are being generated: I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years. (9)

He does not want to go to Europe with his parents because he thinks that his gift would be lost; but after the years of apprenticeship with Jacob Kahn he feels the need to travel to Europe in order to better understand the world's most famous artifacts. I think that this also suggests that he as a Jew is no longer interested in the fate of the Jewish communities on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, unlike his father, who travels and helps these communities to survive, because this is the only way to preserve their own identity. He travels to his own benefit, the individual is on the first place. He is alone against the surrounding world. During the years spent with Jacob Kahn he changes and the visible signs of his Jewish origins are gone. He cuts his payos and does not wear a skullcap. He does not want to be identified as a Jew but rather as a normal, American boy. On Jacob Kahn's suggestion, he travels to Europe to learn from the ancestors. He spends time in Italy, in Florence and Rome and later in Paris. His parents do not want him to get away from his

people, so they give him names of people whom to visit or addresses where he could eat kosher food.

The time spent in Europe makes him grow into a real artist. His anguish and sorrow felt over his problems with his parents and on a larger scale with his own community make him look for an artistic vessel to convey the message. Judaism unlike Christians lacks the necessary symbolism to express sacrifice. This might sound very strange mostly if we think about the history of Jews, which is filled with pogroms (official slaughtering), expulsions and killings. The Christians with the sacrifice of Jesus and his crucifixion could represent much better the idea of sacrifice for the others. During his time in Paris he starts to work on the painting called *Brooklyn Crucifixion*. Potok himself painted with the same title a picture while finishing the last chapters of the novel. Asher's usage of the Christological imagery is justified by the need to show his mother's torment. Judaism contains nothing to express individual anguish and martyrdom despite centuries of recorded pain, because in earlier times and even after that Jews were taken as a whole group, as a community and not as individuals. We can also see in this that the individual and the concept of the individual did not play an important role in Judaism.

Asher's mother stays between the two men and there is no reconciliation. Asher wants to present his mother as the victim of two worlds. On one side we have his father who stands for the old world values, for the religious community, for his people and on the other side we have Asher who stands for the new world values and a secular way of life. It seems that there is no possibility for reconciliation. Potok's novel brings the secular life into the religious one. Through the painting Asher wants to alleviate his real suffering because of being rejected by his own family and community. The artist is isolated from his community, he has been isolated since his early childhood and the gap between the community and the individual is getting deeper and deeper. Jacob Kahn says to Asher after he returns with the paintings to America "Be a great painter, Asher Lev.'...'That will be the only justification for all the pain your art will cause" (305). But of course he cannot understand the rage and rejection of the community on seeing his show. He as an artist does not want to hurt the feelings of the community or does not want to destroy the community itself but to find the right vessels to exteriorize his own feelings. The Christological imagery is only such a vessel and nothing more. But this unconsciously will destroy his relationship with his parents and community. He will be rejected and even more sent away from his beloved neighborhood so as not to offend and cause suffering to the members of the community. The novel ends with his departure and we might think that there is no future for the two sides.

The second novel about which I would like to speak is *The Gift of Asher Lev*. It is the continuation of the above discussed novel and we can follow the further development of our hero. In the first novel we could follow his development from childhood into manhood and his way to becoming a true artist. He has to use his gift wisely and as an artist. He left his Hasidic community twenty years ago and started a new life in Paris. This novel starts with the words of Rainer Maria Rilke: "Surely all art is the result of having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further" (1). Asher has been in danger all his life from his early childhood because he feared he might lose his gift. The repressive environment of the Ladover Hasidim community together with his parents tried to make him change his mind and forget about art. From his childhood on he is visited by his Mythic Ancestor who calls on him from time to time as a result of his troubled consciousness. Art requires sacrifices and Asher, at the end of the first novel, makes the necessary sacrifice so to show his feelings and express his anguish. In this

new novel we find him at the crossroads. He has a comfortable life, there are no sacrifices and somehow his talent is gone. His teacher and surrogate father Jacob Kahn says: "But you do it too easily, Asher Lev. You are too comfortable. There is no sweat in your armpits" (3). Art, as I have mentioned, requires the whole being. There is nothing without sacrifice.

The world of art changes with the death of Picasso. The center is lost. "Who replaces the king, Asher Lev? No one. In art, chaos is now king" (4). Asher himself feels dislocated; he cannot find his new place. His works do not match his earlier fame. The critics consider him an artist who has lost his talent. Though his personal life is a happy one, he as an artist does not find his place. He needs new experiences, new sorrows, new problems to be able to work and to produce new artifacts. He has chosen to leave his people and community but he is not repressed by the Rebbe. He continuously follows his life. Actually he is part of Asher's life:

Two or three times a year the Rebbe would write me and send his blessing. He wrote when Rocheleh became ill, and Devorah framed the letter and hung it on the wall near the bed in Rocheleh's room. He wrote when Avrumel was born. 'I give your son my blessing, Asher Lev. May he grow up to be a leader of his people. (4)

The Rebbe plays an important role in Asher's life and in his family's life as well. We can see that the gap between the community and the artist might disappear through Asher's son. This idea is reiterated at the funeral service of Asher's uncle Yitzchok. The Rebbe's sermon contains a riddle: "Three will save us. The third is our future. Do you hear me, my people? Three will save us. The third is our future" (21). The whole community feels that Asher has an important role in preserving the Ladover community. Though he has been sent away because of his paintings the Rebbe still believes that he has to work and make sacrifices for the benefit of the community. The community needs Asher's help to survive and to continue to live on. Asher will have to make a sacrifice because of all the pain and sorrow his works have caused to his parents and on a larger scale to his community. The question is whether he is willing to make this sacrifice or not? Will the individualist artist be able to give up on his son for the community or not?

As the story of the novel unfolds, we find out that the Rebbe would like to have Aryeh Lev as a leader after his death for a short period and to be followed by Avrumel. So actually the riddle is solved because the three who would save them are Asher, then his father Aryeh, and his son Avrumel. The Ladover community's future depends on these three people. This community is different to some extent from the one that Asher left behind. Now the members of the community became rich, they moved from tenement apartments to large houses or started chains of shops like uncle Yitzchok. They became influential in politics within the United States and in Israel as well. They tried to support conservative candidates in order to preserve their communities. They do not want to change their way of living but cannot reject the material success. Asher is different because he has shown that not only within the boundaries of the community can a Jew live a normal life. He has kept the Commandments in a foreign community and could find success and respect not only in his community.

In this second novel Asher's torment continues. He feels his duty to obey his community and to obey his urge to express his feelings as an artist. He cannot give up on his belief in Hasidism. This allows him to believe that there is a meaning in life and a plan for the universe. Without this belief he cannot go on. His life would be worthless. As the story unfolds, he starts to realize his son's role in the future life of the Ladover community. He also

sees that they have changed since his childhood, though they still pretend to be the same poor, suffering community of immigrant Jews. During the years they have become greedy and materialistic. They no longer care for the sufferings and persecutions of the other Jews but keep on speaking about their own sensitive and uncomfortable situation. This sounds very strange mostly when we know that after 1948 they could freely move to Israel and live among their own people. Asher senses the truth but does not want to cut his connections with this community. He is one member of this community that sent him away because they feared what they could not explain and grasp. He does not want to break with his parents and culture because they connect him to God. The Rebbe with his blessings somehow bonds him to his people and community. I think that though Asher is an individualist and an artist he can be a whole person together with the Brooklyn Ladover community. His suffering and torment comes from this unsolvable problem. His self-exile is part of his atonement for the pain caused by his paintings to his parents and to his community. He is considered by the members of the community as an apostate, as he mentions at the beginning of the novel, because he makes graven images and because he has used the Christological imagery in order to show his mother's continuous, individual sacrifice. But, unlike the end of the first novel under discussion here, in this second novel there is hope. His son as the next leader of the Ladover Hasidim would redeem him. Asher throughout the novel struggles within himself with the need to take his son home and to give him to the community that hates him, Asher Lev, the painter. He cannot break the ties with his childhood culture because it is a very strong one. He can get away, he can paint in exile but he has to return to it. The individual cannot survive without the community. Though he struggles for a change in the mentality of the members of the community, Asher, the rebellious observant Jew, cannot give up on them.

The gift which has caused many problems and sufferings for Asher Lev from his early childhood and for his community in the end has to be ransomed with Asher's sacrifice. His painting "The Sacrifice of Isaac" and this motif of sacrifice which appears already in the first novel somehow project the future. Asher has to give to the community as a gift his own son Avrumel. There is no other way to find his peace and to be able to continue his work as a fine artist. He is haunted somehow by the Rebbe throughout the novel. His artistic soul is hidden deep inside himself and only with Avrumel's sacrifice can he free himself.

I think Chaim Potok tries to show us this unsolvable problem, of how the Ladover Hasidim respond to the challenges of the new age. They have to change in order to be able to accommodate to the needs of their members. The individual can survive in this faceless, urban setting only within the boundaries of the community. On the other hand, what he presents on the level of his well-known background can be extended to the whole world and to all nations. On a smaller or on a larger level we, human beings, face the same problem: is there life for the individual without the community? Is there future for the solitary being? At the end of the first novel under discussion there was no hope for the individual and the ending was a bleak one. In the continuation of the novel there is hope and the ending is an optimistic one. The community changes so as to fulfill the needs of the individuals and to convince them that there is indeed a future. This might not be a beautiful or a bright one but there is one. The son who has turned against the hand that raised him actually saves the community.

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