

CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: JACOB FIGURES AND THEMES
IN THE NOVELS OF CHAIM POTOK

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

December 2010

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to the faculty and my fellow students in the English Department at UT-Arlington, especially to my thesis committee members—Dr. Tim Morris, Dr. Tim Richardson, and Dr. Jim Warren—and to Dr. Margaret Lowry, director of the first-year English program, for their support and help during my studies and the writing of this thesis. I also would like to thank my family, relatives, and friends—and of course most especially my wife, Jennifer Cochrum.

November 18, 2010

ABSTRACT

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The twentieth-century novelist Chaim Potok made central to his fiction what he called “culture war,” juxtaposing his Jewish-American characters’ inner spiritual lives with key elements of Western secularism. In five of his novels—*The Promise* (1969), *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davita’s Harp* (1985), and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990)—the protagonist comes under the influence of a character who can be styled “the Jacob figure.” This thesis argues that these characters not only echo various aspects of the biblical narratives about the Hebrew patriarch, thereby turning him into a meta-character in the novels, but also embody particular facets of the central culture clash in the individual books.

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CHAPTER 1

CHAIM POTOK AND *THE PROMISE*

Despite the monumental stature in Jewish history of the patriarch Abraham and the lawgiver Moses, the Jews have not historically been known as Abrahamites or the children of Moses. Rather, they are the Israelites—the descendants of Abraham's grandson who originally was called Jacob and later was renamed Israel. In the Genesis narratives, Jacob is a multifaceted figure—father, rogue, husband, mystic—who most famously sires the sons who become the progenitors of the traditional twelve tribes. And in the work of the twentieth-century Jewish-American novelist Chaim Potok, Jacob reappears, although not in his biblical persona. Beginning with the 1967 bestseller *The Chosen* and continuing with a number of other novels, Potok creates a series of young Jewish protagonists whose conservative religious culture clashes with elements of the broader Western society. In five of these books—*The Promise* (1969), *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), *The Book of Lights* (1981), *Davita's Harp* (1985), and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990)—the main character comes under the influence of an older man, often a teacher of some kind, named Jacob (or Jakob) who has a powerful effect on the protagonist's life. In *The Promise*, he is Jacob Kalman, a staunchly traditionalist teacher who threatens to block a student's path to rabbinic ordination. In the *Asher Lev* books, he is the modernist sculptor-painter Jacob Kahn, the artistic mentor of the young Hasidic title character. In *The Book of Lights*, he is the cool-minded academic Jakob Keter, who draws a seminarian into the esoteric world of the Kabbalah. And in *Davita's Harp*, he is the frail Jakob Daw, a war-wounded teller of cryptic stories who befriends the young daughter of American Communists.

This thesis will argue that the “Jacob figures” are marked by two distinct characteristics — the first related to their name, the second related to their literary-philosophical function in the individual novels. In the first aspect, these characters and the plotlines in which they are

involved echo various facets of the biblical Jacob narratives to such a degree that the patriarch becomes something of a meta-character for Potok. (Indeed, critic S. Lillian Kremer sees *My Name Is Asher Lev* as “overlaid with biblical allusion” [“Dedalus” 28].) In the latter aspect, the Jacob figures act as representatives or embodiments of the worldviews that clash in the individual books. According to Potok, his consistent theme is “culture war”: the face-off between the West’s secular humanism, with its lack of absolutes, and subcultures (specifically traditionalist Judaism) that possess unalterable givens (Ribalow 4). “*The Promise* is about the confrontation with text criticism,” he says. “*My Name is Asher Lev* is about a confrontation with Western art. *Davita’s Harp* is about the utilization of the human imagination as a way of coming to terms with unbearable reality” (Kauvar 69). Thus, in *The Promise*, Kalman embodies the ultra-Orthodox Judaism that rejects the intellectual tools that Western secularism brings to the study of religious texts; in *My Name Is Asher Lev* and its sequel, Kahn is the man whose ultimate concern is the art of the goyim, not the God of Israel; in *Davita’s Harp*, Daw crafts for the title character a series of stories that attempt to deal with upheaval in his personal and philosophical world. (And in *The Book of Lights*, Keter is a representative of religion and its possibility of spiritual illumination over against the science whose quest into the realm of nuclear physics is responsible for the lethal light of Hiroshima.)

In the exploration of these roles, students and critics of twentieth-century U.S. literature will gain fresh insights not only into Potok’s literary craft but also into a religious Jewish world that occasionally has been neglected by American writers and is unfamiliar to many readers. Kathryn McClymond asserts that “the most critically acclaimed Jewish American writers, almost without exception,” argue for “either a rejection or a secularization of Judaism” (13). Critics, she says, generally have focused on “a certain kind of Jewish American experience” typical of the works of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth (21); for these literary commentators, the choice is whether to be “a traditional Jew or a secularized American—implying that one could not be both” (18). Kremer somewhat dismissively speaks of “the constraints of the

immigration/assimilation theme” and “the popular Roth school of social satire with its cast of stereotypical suburban Jews composed of domineering mothers, ineffectual fathers, pampered daughters, and whining sons” (“Post-alienation” 589), as well as of authors “whose Jewish material enriched only their novels' sociological texture” (575). However, Kremer sees other writers in whose works “Jewish thought, literary precursors, and history” receive pride of place: “A significant portion of contemporary Jewish-American fiction is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts” (571). Chaim Potok, with his tales in which the study of Talmud and the observance of the commandments are taken as much for granted as eating and drinking, is this kind of writer—but one whose work, despite its frequent bestselling status, has been neglected by the academy. Greater attention to Potok’s novels will bring valuable nuance to the study of Jewish-American literature and also will help readers to understand communities in which faith is a decisive factor in daily life—an understanding that becomes all the more important in a world in which religion can wield powerful influence on the local, national, and even international levels.

The man in black

The Promise, Potok’s second novel, is notable for its juxtaposition of his sympathetic first protagonist with perhaps the most problematic of all his characters. In *The Chosen*, the young Reuven Malter befriends the brilliant and isolated Danny Saunders and passes a subtle, challenging test of his scholarship and worldview posed by his teacher, Rav Gershenson. As *The Promise* opens, he is in the last year of his studies for *smicha* (rabbinic ordination) at Hirsch University. A required class brings him into the orbit of Jacob Kalman—a survivor of Maidanek and a dark star of the Orthodox Jewish academic world who has recently joined the faculty at the Brooklyn school. Kalman is, on more than one level, a study in black and white. A short, compact, dark-eyed man with a heavy black beard and a pale countenance, he dresses in a lengthy black jacket, neatly ironed black pants, black skullcap and black shoes; his shirt is white

and starched (105). The crisp shirt and trousers, and their colors, are indicative not only of Kalman's sartorial style but also of his approach to scholarship, religion and life:

There was a grimness about him, a wall of stiff, humorless rigidity, an unbending quality of mind that placed everything it came into contact with into immediate and fixed categories of approval or disapproval where I knew they would remain forever. And his criterion of judgment was a rather harsh and inflexible version of Eastern European Orthodox Jewish law, which he applied to everything. (322)

Kalman's hard-line nature quickly becomes clear to his students, but the tension turns personal when he discovers Reuven's visits to the non-traditionalist Zechariah Frankel Seminary. Reuven has been helping his father, David Malter, with research for a book on the Talmud, but he also has met at the seminary with Professor Abraham Gordon, whose notoriously un-Orthodox writings have landed him in *cherem* (excommunication). "Gordon destroys Yiddishkeit with his books. . . . Such a man is a danger," Kalman tells Reuven (112). He demands that Reuven avoid Gordon and the institution as well, declaring: "The school is unclean and its books are unclean. My students will not go into their school" (114). Thus, the underlying clash between the teacher's entrenched views and those of the more liberal-minded student becomes direct.

The publication of David Malter's book, *The Making of the Talmud: Studies in Source Criticism*, exacerbates the conflict. Kalman has Reuven tutor him on the work's technical background without revealing his plans to attack David's views in an Orthodox weekly. Not surprisingly, Reuven is infuriated: "I had never in my life come across a man who was so zealous a guardian of Torah that he did not care whom or how he destroyed in its defense. I had never thought Torah could create so grotesque a human being" (259). Underlying the clash is the fact that Kalman's approval is necessary for ordination; Reuven feels himself being forced into a choice between Gordon's secularism and Kalman's ultra-Orthodoxy. Yet Reuven demonstrates during his oral exams that the Malter's intellectual tools do not preclude a love for

the Jewish tradition, thereby turning the tables on Kalman and leaving him with the options of approving the ordination or losing a dedicated and brilliant mind to the outside. The teacher chooses the former. "Your father's method is ice when one sees it on the printed page," Kalman tells Reuven later. "It is impossible to print one's love for Torah. But one can hear it in a voice" (340). The two part as impending academic colleagues and contenders in the fight for the Jewish soul.

The son of Jacob

Reuven is an alternate spelling of the more familiar (to English-speakers) name *Reuben*, known to readers of the Bible as the oldest son of the patriarch Jacob. On the basic level of names, then, Potok casts Kalman as a father figure to the young Malter—but how so? Not literally, of course, and certainly not in the standard emotional sense. The relationship between Reuven and David Malter in *The Chosen* and *The Promise* is consistently a respectful, loving, and nurturing one; in a psychoanalytic reading of the latter novel, Sanford Sternlicht remarks that "without a mother for unconscious combat [Reuven and David] have the warmest, least inhibited relationship" of the book's father-son pairs (68). Their emotional ties are evident; each shows concern for the other when illness or injury strikes. (Reuven's eyesight is threatened in *The Chosen*, and David's health is a problem throughout the two books.) David also is sensitive to his son's personal difficulties. "Little children little troubles, big children big troubles," he says upon finding Reuven brooding after a confrontation with Kalman. "When my big Reuven is so quiet, there are big troubles. Can I be of help to you, Reuven?" (*Promise* 117) There is no silence between the two; they get along and communicate well. And not surprisingly for Potok's characters, whose concerns often are rather cerebral, their intellectual closeness is a major part of their relationship. David teaches Talmud in a yeshiva high school in Brooklyn; Reuven studies with his father and plans to enter the rabbinate. Indeed, one of the climactic passages in *The Chosen* has Reuven using his parent's study methods to solve a knotty problem of Talmudic interpretation; after Reuven's bravura classroom performance, Rav Gershenson tells

him: "I have been waiting all year to see how good a teacher your father is" (*Chosen* 251). Kalman perceives the same intellectual influence. "I see you know this method very well, Malter," he tells Reuven after the two discuss parts of David's book. "Your father has taught you well" (*Promise* 166–67). Reuven, then, is not seeking a substitute father; he is quite content with the one he has.

Or is he? Late in the book, as Reuven contemplates the clash of the two worlds in which he is involved as well as Danny's impending marriage, he experiences an epiphany. "I found myself envious of Danny's solid-rootedness in his world—and discovered at that moment to my utter astonishment how angry I was at my father for his book and his method of study and the tiny, twilight, in-between life he had carved out for us"—a realization that leaves Reuven "frightened and shaken" (257). A similar situation between Abraham Gordon and his disturbed son, Michael, provides one of the novel's key plot lines. Unlike Michael, however, Reuven properly resolves his antagonism toward his father. "I would not have hated you that way, abba," Reuven tells his parent after describing an explosive confrontation between the two Gordons. "We would have talked about it" (361). Still, when David prods him further, Reuven hesitates before answering—a sign of the angst that his parent has unwittingly caused. Yet despite the strain, the underlying bond between biological father and son is strong—not frayed or broken in the ways that would send a young man in search of a replacement.

However, a father can be defined not only as one who "sires" by his own actions but also as one who does so by the reactions that he causes. David Malter shapes Reuven directly, in the ways typical of a loving father and also as one who is in intellectual sync with his son. Jacob Kalman does not do this—the relationship between him and his student certainly is not loving, and the two of them clearly are not confreres of heart or mind—but he nevertheless is indirectly responsible for who Reuven has become by the end of *The Promise*. "A teacher can change a person's life," David Malter says, but "only if the person is ready to be changed. A teacher rarely causes such a change, Reuven. . . . More often he can only occasion such a

change” (118). In his role of character-shaper, then, Kalman truly can be spoken of as Reuven’s father—or perhaps the proper term might be “anti-father.”

“A man must be forced to choose”

How does this “parental” status work itself out? First, family relationships (in contrast to friendships) notoriously are those that are *not* chosen, and this certainly describes the link between Reuven and Kalman. Neither seeks out the other. Kalman is not Reuven’s ideal teacher; he takes the Talmud class because it is required. “I wanted no personal relationship with Rav Kalman,” Reuven thinks, even before the atmosphere between the two becomes truly fraught (100). Nor is Reuven the “son” whom Kalman would have chosen. Sternlicht suggests that Kalman, who according to rumor saw his wife and three daughters shot by storm troopers during World War II (*Promise* 105), suffers from “unconscious jealousy of David Malter, whose brilliant son lives” (Sternlicht 69). Although this theory would add an interesting layer to the father-son issue, it is basically unsupported by the text; when Kalman waxes nostalgic about his life in Europe, for instance, he recalls a particularly talented student rather than his family (*Promise* 293). However, Reuven clearly does not hold such a privileged place in Kalman’s mind. “I am afraid I really do not know what to do with you, Malter,” he says. “I have never had such a problem” (168). In *The Chosen*, Gershenson views Reuven as an asset; in *The Promise*, Kalman sees him as an unwanted dilemma. This aspect of unwillingness also surfaces at the end of the book. “My sons have conquered me,” Kalman muses (340), quoting a Hebrew saying as he explains to Reuven his reluctant decision to give him *smicha*: He was persuaded by his colleagues and his sense of the needs of the post-Holocaust Jewish community (339). The relationship, then, is metaphorically father-son in part because the personalities involved get the luck of the draw; as with blood relatives, the two are forced upon one another. Yet Kalman’s part in the siring of Reuven’s psyche is most directly acted out in his self-appointed role as a catalyst of clarity.

When the socially awkward student Abe Greenfield comes to a Talmud session unprepared because he opted to study for a math final instead, Kalman publicly and brutally rakes him over the coals for his decision. One's choices reveal one's character, he says—not only to the world but to oneself as well. “A man must be forced to choose,” he tells Greenfield. “It is only when you are forced to choose that you know what is important to you” (147). Yet this face-off with Greenfield is merely one round in the all-too-serious game in which Kalman is engaged with those around him, including Reuven. Kalman wants to push others to see what they are and, in his view, what they should be. “Do you know yourself, Malter? Where do you stand?” he asks. “Do you stand with true Yiddishkeit, or do you stand perhaps a little bit on the path of Gordon?” (168) For this believer, the former is clearly distinct from the latter.

Kalman easily might be seen as a closed-minded inquisitor, a member of the religious thought police, an intellectual blackmailer. “I cannot give smicha to someone who does not stand with true Yiddishkeit, no matter how great a Gemora [Talmud] student he is,” he informs Reuven (168). For Kalman, when it comes to ordination, scholarly expertise in the tradition is not enough—one's attitude *toward* the tradition is all-important. Reuven perceives clearly his teacher's black-and-white attitude. “He's telling me to take a stand,” the young man says to his father. “I'm either with him or against him. All or nothing. I'm disgusted with the whole business” (189). Indeed, Kalman's version of Judaism and scholarship holds no attractions for Reuven; he sees it as hysterical (235), characteristic of the Middle Ages (194), and “musty . . . with the odors of old books and dead ideas and Eastern European zealotry” (257). Hatred for this man who has made his and his father's existence miserable comes easily to Reuven (206).

Yet even as the battle lines are drawn, Reuven betrays a certain understanding of the forces that drive his teacher. The symbolic clothing to the contrary, Reuven knows that there is more to Jacob Kalman than his black-and-white approach to life and Torah; although he bears certain hallmarks of the fanatic of faith, that is not all of the story. This quasi-empathy is suggested after a conversation with his teacher. “The Hasidim are not the only ones who guard

the spark,” Kalman says. “I too have an obligation” (168). Walking later through a cold, dark Hasidic neighborhood, Reuven reflects on that metaphor and the situation around him:

I . . . thought how these remnants of the concentration camps had changed the face of things. They were the remnants, the zealous guardians of the spark. . . . [M]en like Rav Kalman who were not Hasidim felt swayed by their presence and believed themselves to be equally zealous guardians of the spark, and no one at Hirsch would fight them because the spark was precious, it was all that was left after the blood and slaughter, and you dimmed it when you fought its defenders. (183–84)

It is difficult to say whether the last part of this passage—“the spark was precious, it was all that was left after the blood and slaughter, and you dimmed it when you fought its defenders”—represents merely the feelings of the majority at Hirsch or those of Reuven as well. The former interpretation is perhaps more likely, but the latter is certainly possible; if this is the case, these musings reflect a certain understanding on Reuven’s part of the complexity and ambiguity of the cultural battle. Reuven’s feelings about the Hasidim and their sympathizers are mixed, as the novel makes clear; however, as a witness of the Holocaust’s horror from afar, he understands the vulnerability of Judaism’s spark and the problematic nature of a pitched battle over it.

It is in Reuven’s interactions with the young Michael Gordon, whose father has been bitterly criticized by Kalman and those like him, that Reuven most clearly indicates a certain understanding of his nemesis. When Michael asks him why he doesn’t abandon a school that is “full of spiders and cobwebs and old men who cheat you,” he counters: “They’re not evil. If they were evil it would be easy to get out of the school. They’re very sincere” (208). Reuven thus acknowledges that the ultra-Orthodox are not simply seeking power over their fellow believers; rather, this is a fight for principle. As critic Edward A. Abramson observes about the novel, even “those characters who exhibit fanaticism are seen to be fanatical in the service of deeply held, honorable beliefs . . .” (38). David Malter, beleaguered by conservative yeshiva colleagues,

sees the battle in part as an overprotective reaction to the Holocaust and tells Reuven that “it is different when you understand it. There is less of the—hatred” (*Promise* 294–95). The son appears to take in the lesson. “Rav Kalman is an angry person,” he tells Michael:

But he suffered. He lost his whole world and people who are suffering sometimes take out their suffering on others. They defend what the ones they loved died for. They become angry and ugly and they fight anything that’s a threat to them. We have to learn how to fight back without hurting them too much. (352)

Reuven thus demonstrates that he has come to a nuanced, truly adult view of this man. He has not changed his opinion of Kalman’s actions—they are pugnacious, “angry and ugly,” and should be actively opposed. At the same time, Reuven understands not only that much of this springs from suffering but also that even though fighting is necessary, a scorched-earth policy is not. (In this, he deliberately rejects the tactics of his professor, who is “so zealous a guardian of Torah that he did not care whom or how he destroyed in its defense” [259].)

In this way, then, Jacob becomes the father of Reuven. True, he does not sire the younger man in either body or soul; Kalman does not reproduce himself. However, by pressing his student to make a choice between what he sees as the genuine Yiddishkeit that he himself defends and the heresy/apostasy of David Malter and Abraham Gordon, Kalman creates in Reuven a more profound self-awareness. At story’s end, Reuven is what he is in part because of Jacob Kalman—which is one way of defining fatherhood. In a sense, Reuven still inhabits “the tiny, twilight, in-between life” that his biological parent whittled out (257); he approaches texts as a Western secularist might but is guided by those texts in a traditional manner. He is neither in Gordon’s nor Kalman’s camp. Yet he now owns that interstice more fully; during his oral examinations, he persuades Kalman (barely but successfully) that he can be trusted to pass on and guard the tradition—that in his hands, his method of study is a tool rather than a

weapon. Ironically, even against his own judgment, Jacob Kalman has succeeded in his mission of bringing about clarity; he has helped bring Reuven to a greater understanding of himself.

A deceptive stranger in a strange land

Jacob Kalman, then, echoes the role of his biblical namesake as the father of Reuven; yet this is not the only way that he does so. One of the best-known stories about the Hebrew patriarch is his theft of the blessing from his twin brother, Esau, who is the firstborn and the favorite of their father. The elderly Isaac sends out Esau to hunt some wild game in preparation for the bestowal of the blessing. At the instigation of his mother, who favors the younger twin, Jacob takes some well-prepared goat meat, impersonates his sibling, and fools the blind old man into giving him the blessing instead (*Tanakh*, Gen. 27). And like his ancestor, Kalman proves himself capable of connivance. When David Malter's book on the Talmud is published, Kalman persuades Reuven to tutor him in the volume's scholarly intricacies, among them its use of Greek. Only later does Reuven discover—ironically, through his father—that his teacher has been engaged to write an attack on the book. After the publication of the two-part review, which Reuven finds “vicious and sarcastic” (234), Kalman is unapologetic: “Tell me, Malter, who else should I have gone to in order to have your father's book explained to me? I did not want to attack your father for things he did not say. I wanted to understand clearly what he wrote. I went to his son because the son of David Malter understands his father's writings, and I know the son” (259). By concealing (or at least not revealing) his motives, Kalman enlists Reuven's help in an attack on his own parent. In Kalman's eyes, the end justifies the means. Unlike his biblical forebear, the latter-day Jacob does not lie outright, nor is he pursuing personal gain; even Reuven acknowledges that he acts out of theological conviction (259). Nevertheless, a “family resemblance” is at work in that the latter-day Jacob, like the one of old, is willing to mislead in pursuit of his goal.

A final way in which Kalman's life echoes that of the patriarch is his status of exile. The biblical Jacob spends much of his adult life in Haran, far from Canaan (Gen. 27–33). Originally

sent away both to avoid death at his brother's hands (his mother's motivation) and to marry a proper wife (his father's instructions), Jacob eventually spends twenty years in the employ of his uncle Laban. Yet his stay is not altogether happy. After arranging to marry one of his cousins, he is famously tricked into marrying her sister as well, and his business dealings with Laban also turn sour: "As you know, I have served your father with all my might," he tells his wives, "but your father has cheated me, changing my wages time and again" (Gen. 31:6–7). In similar fashion, Jacob Kalman is an often bewildered and unhappy exile from his homeland. Once an influential teacher in what is now Lithuania, he spent two years in the Polish concentration camp of Maidanek during World War II and later lived in Shanghai before moving to the United States (104–05). But "there was little about America he seemed to like," Reuven notes (107), including the lack of rigor in much of American Judaism: "A Jew travels to synagogue on Shabbos in his car, that is called Yiddishkeit," Kalman rants. "A Jew eats ham but gives money to philanthropy, that is called Yiddishkeit. A Jew prays three times a year but is a member of a synagogue, that is called Yiddishkeit" (109). When confronted by a colleague who says, "It is a different world here!," he barks: "It is a corrupt world! I will not be changed by it!" (265) More poignantly, he is fearful about pogroms in the wake of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg spy case. "He had been in the country about two years," Reuven thinks, "and he still didn't understand what it was really all about" (303). Like his namesake, Jacob Kalman finds himself a stranger in a strange land.

A guardian of the spark

As pointed out previously, Potok characterizes *The Promise* as concerning the confrontation of traditional Judaism with the tools of textual criticism (Kauvar 69), which is a stand-in for Western secularism. In the broader sense, the novel is about the confrontation of two Judaisms, each of which claims to be a valid version—indeed, one of which claims to be the *only* valid version. At one end stands Abraham Gordon, who ironically bears the name of the original party to the divine covenant but who has rejected traditional theism. (In one of the novel's flashes of humor, he says, "Sometimes I wish there *were* a personal God. . . . I would

have someone to shout at” [284].) Raised in Orthodoxy, he now is engaged in a naturalistic re-interpretation of the faith—revelation is no longer a viable concept; religion is a human construct; God is merely “a lofty human idea . . . an abstract guarantor of the intrinsic meaningfulness of the universe” (63–64). At the other end stands Jacob Kalman, not merely Orthodox but fiercely so, a full-bearded and black-garbed guardian of the holy spark. David Malter and Abraham Gordon are only two of the targets of his zeal; he often turns his classes into savage lectures on the corrupt American culture or even the university’s internal doings:

Students and teachers were attacked by name. A projected college course in Greek mythology was canceled because he labeled it paganism. A student was almost expelled because he caught him outside the school without a hat. . . . [H]e waged a vitriolic campaign against girls sitting together with boys in the yeshiva auditorium. The whole year was like that. (107)

One might expect a scholar or believer with strong convictions to adopt a certain take-no-prisoners approach to the field of his profession or faith. Kalman does this, and in a rather ruthless style—but he also employs the same tactics in student-related affairs that others probably would shrug off or simply grumble about. This signifies a particularly rigid mind-set that helps make Kalman a striking embodiment of a calcified Old World Judaism against which Reuven defines himself. At one point in the novel, the younger man muses: “I would enter Abraham Gordon’s world if I was forced into taking a stand. The world of Rav Kalman was too musty now with the odors of old books and dead ideas and Eastern European zealotry” (257). Such is the clash that Potok sets up for Reuven: On one side, Gordon and his intellectually free but overly humanistic philosophy; on the other, Kalman and the believing but restrictive forces of ultra-Orthodox theology. Thus the Talmud teacher, in addition to echoing the themes of fatherhood, deception, and exile in the Jacob narratives in the Bible, also plays a vital role in the culture clash that is key to *The Promise* and much of Potok’s other work.

CHAPTER 2

MY NAME IS ASHER LEV AND THE GIFT OF ASHER LEV

If Jacob Kalman is the “anti-father figure” of *The Promise*, Jacob Kahn is the more traditional father figure of *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Indeed, Kahn is in some ways the anti-Kalman. Unlike the vociferously Orthodox and very Eastern European defender of the faith, Kahn is an assimilated Russian Jew who has left behind much of his background. In *The Promise*, the Jacob figure represents the highly conservative center of the traditional Jewish culture that faces off with Western secularism, symbolized by modern textual criticism. In *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the Jacob figure is on the opposite side: Kahn represents the world of Western art, a sphere whose principles conflict sharply with the Hasidism of the book’s other principal characters; he is the painter-sculptor who fashions a conflicted Jewish artist.

The novel’s first-person opening sets up the clash in memorable fashion: “My name is Asher Lev, *the* Asher Lev . . . the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*. 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” (3). Looking back as a young adult whose name is tied to a scandalous piece of art, Asher sketches the paradox of his life: “Real” Jews do not paint, much less paint crucifixions—yet he is one, and does, and did.

Like many youngsters, Asher begins to draw in childhood: “I can remember, at the age of four, holding my pencil in the firm fist grip of a child and transferring the world around me to pieces of paper . . .” (5–6). Unlike many children, he is preternaturally talented. “This is a six-year-old boy?” his uncle Yitzchok murmurs as he gazes, startled, at drawings of himself; this nephew, he remarks, is a “regular Chagall” (31). Most important, unlike most children, Asher provokes a fierce antagonism with his art. He and his parents are Ladover Hasidim (a sect that

Potok modeled on the real-life Lubavitchers [Ribalow 17]); his father, Aryeh, is a professional emissary for the Ladover leader, the Rebbe. To Aryeh, art is a waste of time, or worse. “Asher, you have a gift,” he says at one point. “I do not know if it is a gift from the Ribbono Shel Olom [the Master of the Universe] or from the Other Side. 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” (109). Such are Aryeh’s priorities and his understanding of how they can be honored—not merely that God and one’s people come first, but that the pursuit of art has no contribution to make to these pursuits. Asher’s youth becomes an increasingly fierce tug of war: on one side a boy in the grip of an overpowering desire to capture and interpret the world on paper and canvas, and on the other a man who has dedicated his life to Torah and the Ladover and now faces rebellion and incomprehensibility in his own offspring.

Further complicating the conflict and making it even more poignant is the situation of Rivkeh Lev, the nurturing and supportive woman who finds herself torn between the husband of her youth and the child of her bosom. Her spouse’s compulsive traveling makes her enormously anxious (her beloved brother died in an accident while traveling for the Rebbe), and her son’s exploration of his undeniable talent (including the drawing of nudes as well as Jesus) engenders perplexity and consternation in her as well as fury in Aryeh. She buys art supplies for Asher but also pushes him to do better at his neglected studies—a recurring concern of Aryeh’s. “Papa yells at you because he doesn’t think you’re raising me [correctly]?” Asher asks, and Rivkeh replies: “Your father thinks I’m encouraging your foolishness” (174). The mother is caught between father and son, wanting to support both and agonized because of it.

The artist as a young man

The conflict changes irrevocably at the behest of the Rebbe, who when Asher is thirteen years old declares that the boy will study under an artist. The impact of this intervention is clear to Asher. “My father carried his burden of pain all through the celebration of my bar mitzvah,” he recalls. The decision was not to be questioned; their leader was the “representative

of the Master of the Universe. . . . My father's right to shape my life had been taken from him by the same being who gave his own life meaning—the Rebbe" (197). Yet while stressing to Asher the obligation to honor his parent, the Rebbe also tells him: "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 heaven. . . . But there are those who do not understand this" (192). The Rebbe does not question Aryeh's love for Asher but rather his view of how to deal with him. Sternlicht argues: "The young must rebel, and they must win. . . . If one of the young is lost either to life or family or community it is tragic. So rebellion must be allowed to a degree" (79). Hoping to save Asher for the Ladover community, the Rebbe chooses to override Aryeh's judgment in the hope that Asher's rebellion can be ridden out and the boy's talent nurtured within acceptable limits.

The Rebbe's chosen ally is Jacob Kahn, a former associate of Pablo Picasso—a modernist painter-sculptor whose father admired the Rebbe's father, a non-practicing Jew who still cannot quite leave the Ladover world behind. In the first extended conversation between the younger artist and the older one, Kahn gives Asher a preview of his apprenticeship that is drill-sergeant blunt. "This is not a toy," the crusty old man growls. "This is not a child scrawling on a wall. This is a tradition And I will force you to master it. Do you hear me? . . . Only one who has mastered a tradition has a right to attempt to add to it or to rebel against it" (*Name* 213). Asher's artistic eye can hardly be improved, but his ability can be honed—in composition, in the creation of tension, in "how to handle rage in color and line. You draw with too much love," Kahn says (215). In fact, he views Asher as something like a promising piece of stone. "All artists are selfish and self-centered," he says. "I am taking you on because I will derive pleasure in molding your greatness. . . . I will work with your faults and flaws and genius, as Michelangelo worked with the flaws and power of the marble that became his *David*" (216). In this world, the presuppositions are not Jewish—its values and concepts are "goyisch and pagan" (213). To Kahn, art is a moral universe unto itself: "The Rebbe asked me to guide you and to keep you

from evil ways. . . . I do not know what evil is when it comes to art. I only know what is good art and what is bad art” (216).

In the ensuing years, Asher remains observant; he prays, he fasts, he follows the kosher laws; but his thoughts and actions increasingly are colored by the world of Western art. He draws nude models (229–31); he participates in the shop talk of Kahn and his artistic colleagues as an equal (278–79); he cuts off his long earlocks (299); he works on a painting with curious “madonna and child” echoes (246); on a trip to Florence, he becomes fascinated by Michelangelo’s *Pietà* depicting Jesus, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin Mary (310). Finally, driven to capture his mother’s pain at being caught between husband and son, he paints her as crucified between figures of his father and himself, thereby becoming “an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment” (330). His parents are appalled, and the Rebbe reluctantly exiles him to Europe. “You have crossed a boundary,” the Ladover leader says sadly. “I cannot help you. You are alone now. I give you my blessings” (367).

The artist as an older man

The Gift of Asher Lev picks up the story twenty years later. Asher is a highly successful painter living in southern France, but now there are questions about artistic repetition and inertia. The critics find sharp words at an exhibit, and even his old mentor is concerned, remarking: “you do it too easily, Asher Lev. You are too comfortable. There is no sweat in your armpits” (3). Then his uncle Yitzchok Lev dies unexpectedly, and Asher and his family—his wife, Devorah, his daughter, Rocheleh, and his son, Avrumel—fly to New York for the funeral. The tension between Asher and Aryeh has stabilized but still simmers under the surface—“A sophisticated man,” the son muses, yet the “boundary of his artistic appreciation was the kitsch of a calendar scene” (39–40). Soon, however, new problems emerge. Asher discovers that his genial uncle, who was supportive of his nephew’s work during his youth, had put together a sizable collection of modern art: Paul Cézanne, Marc Chagall, René Magritte, Henri Matisse,

Amedeo Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Chaim Soutine, and Asher Lev as well (51, 53). His uncle's family is uncomfortable enough with both Asher and the collection—his pietistic, rancid-souled cousin Yonkel labels the latter as “idol worship” and “a desecration of the name of God” (62)—but the situation sours even further when it emerges that Yitzchok's will names Asher as the collection's trustee. Infuriated, Yonkel assaults his cousin in the middle of the Ladover synagogue and bloodies his nose, shouting, “Destroyer of Israel! Stand back from him!” (167) Asher thus continues to be a locus of turmoil for his family.

His parents, enjoying their first lengthy stay with their grandchildren, press Asher to remain in New York for a while, but he is determined to return to France as soon as possible. “They're trying to suck me back in, and then they'll kill whatever I've got left,” he tells his wife. “We're going home, Dev. We came for my uncle's funeral, not for mine” (74–75). Yet he is persuaded otherwise by the Rebbe, who in public and private makes cryptic remarks about the importance to the Ladover community of “three” and “the third” (22). Eventually Asher realizes that the aging, childless Rebbe wants Aryeh, his chief aide, to don the mantle of leadership upon his death—but only if Asher will allow Avrumel (the third in the Levs' male line) to remain in New York and eventually succeed his grandfather, thus ensuring a clear line of succession and saving the Ladover from internal chaos. Asher is angry—“What kind of God creates such situations?” he asks (365)—but in a strangely symbolic dance at a Simchas Torah celebration, he yields: “. . . I felt all the eyes in the crowd looking at me and all the eyes of all the generations of Ladover looking at me . . . and I reached up and lifted Avrumel over my head and handed him to my father . . .” (363–64). Asher's brethren thus conquer him; the artist gives up his son for the community.

Another son of Jacob

As in *The Promise*, the father theme in *My Name Is Asher Lev* begins with the names. Like Reuven/Reuben, the Asher of the biblical accounts is a son of Jacob. Reuben is the patriarch's firstborn, the child of his first wife, Leah; Asher is the eighth son, the child of the

concubine Zilpah (Gen. 29:32, 30:12–13). The relationship between the biblical Jacob and Reuben is thus more “legitimate” than that between Jacob and Asher. Ironically, the reverse is true in Potok’s novels: The fictional Asher is a truer son of his Jacob figure than the fictional Reuven is of his. In *The Promise*, Kalman essentially “sires” Reuven in a negative sense, repelling the latter rather than reproducing himself theologically and scholastically. In contrast, Kahn hands on his artistic techniques, knowledge, and worldview to the title character of *My Name Is Asher Lev*, thereby perpetuating his professional and philosophical DNA.

Further, the father-figure motif is more straightforward in the later novel because of the nature of the parent-child relationship. In *The Promise*, this theme is fairly subtle because the bond between Reuven and David Malter is strong; it is only late in the novel that stresses emerge, and even then Reuven assures his father that a rupture would not have occurred (*Promise* 361). The possibility that Reuven will choose his teacher over his parent is never a real one. Writing about Asher and Aryeh, S. Lillian Kremer asserts, “Aside from their disagreement about the importance of art, Asher respects his father; admires his selfless devotion to Jewish survival . . . [and] celebrates his father as a creative force” (“Dedalus” 31). However, the relationship between the two is strained almost from the beginning; when Jacob Kahn arrives on the scene, he and Aryeh (or rather their ways of thinking and living) clearly are rivals for Asher’s loyalty. “I know your father,” the adult artist tells the young one in their first conversation. “He will become my enemy” (194). And ultimately, the namesake of the biblical Jacob proves to be the “true” father of Asher Lev. Sternlicht would question this assertion; paraphrasing critic Henry Ahrens, he argues that Aryeh’s professional absences and lack of sympathy for Asher send him searching for another father but that the aging and egocentric Kahn cannot provide “the intimacy that only a loving father in a home can provide. Thus Asher fails in his quest for a father” (Sternlicht 81). However, this overplays the emotional connection between the two artists. There is no indication that Asher weighs his relationship with Kahn and finds it wanting; although stresses sometimes develop between the two, they are resolved.

Placed between the literal father of his upbringing and the figurative father of his artistic soul, Asher eventually casts his lot with the latter. "A choice tells the world what is most important to a human being," Jacob Kalman says in *The Promise* (147). When Asher faces the choice between his artistic vision (by creating and then showing the crucifixion painting) and his familial and spiritual heritage (which would have pressed him not to paint it, or at least not to exhibit it), he tells the world that the former is more vital. He thus proves himself to be the spiritual son of Jacob Kahn rather than Aryeh Lev.

A man and two women

Kahn also emulates his biblical namesake in his personal life. The patriarch Jacob is known as part of one of history's most famous love triangles. Upon fleeing to his uncle's family, he encounters Laban's two daughters. The older Leah has "weak eyes"; the precise meaning of this is unclear, but not so the description of the younger Rachel, who is "shapely and beautiful" (Gen. 29:17). Jacob is smitten with Rachel, for whom he agrees to work seven years. However, on the wedding night, Laban sneaks Leah into the bed instead; after an angry Jacob confronts his father-in-law, Laban blithely tells him that custom does not allow the younger to marry before the older. Nevertheless, at the price of another seven years of service, Jacob gets the bride of his heart as well, thereby ending up with two wives (Gen. 29:14–30).

Potok's fictional Jacob also has a pair of women in his life, one of them more alluring than the other. Anna Schaeffer is Kahn's art dealer. "She was of medium height, matronly, with an oval face, sharp blue eyes, and short silvery hair," Asher sees when he meets her. "She wore a dark-blue wool dress and a long necklace of white beads" (*Name* 207). Kahn is a vigorous seventy-two at this point in the novel, but Anna seems to be the younger of the pair. As perhaps befits her long-term association with the artist, she displays a certain protectiveness toward Kahn. "Many have hurt him," she tells Asher. "He is like a monk. There are so many things he does not understand" (210). The connotations are almost maternal. However, Anna is quite capable of taking Jacob in hand if she feels the need. Midway through the artist's opening

harangue to Asher about the nature of his world, the dealer takes him aside; when they return, Kahn softly says, “Anna has scolded me severely for my bluntness” (215). In contrast to her earthy client, she is well-dressed, well-spoken, sophisticated, urbane—a creature of the salon rather than the studio. At an ornate black-tie exhibit of Kahn’s work, the uncomfortable artist grumpily declares: “I wish I had Picasso’s gall and could stay away from these things. They destroy me. A few more of these and I will never make it to eighty” (269). Anna, on the other hand, is quite at home, calling the affair “a grand success . . . a magnificent day” (269). Despite their differences, the two work well together; in fact, Asher will recall Anna as Kahn’s best friend (*Gift* 106).

The other woman in the artist’s life is Tanya Kahn, his wife. “She was a shy quiet woman with short white hair and soft brown eyes . . . and she spoke English with a heavy Russian accent,” Asher recalls (*Name* 252). Those “soft brown eyes,” a phrase that recalls the description of Leah as having “weak eyes,” stand in contrast to Anna’s sharp blue ones. Asher’s view of her seems to change later (or perhaps Tanya herself does)—he sees her as “a woman of striking appearance, high cheekbones, silver hair drawn back into a bun, dark-eyed, aristocratic” (*Gift* 274). She is more than fifteen years younger than her husband (*Gift* 273), and perhaps about the same age as Anna, but the latter’s worldliness gives the art dealer a younger air. Like Anna, Tanya is quite capable of rebuking her spouse; when he says, “Ambivalence in art is like piss in coffee,” she curtly remarks: “Old age should not become an excuse for vulgarity” (*Gift* 276). When present in a scene, Tanya often is part of the background as her husband and his protégé talk. She is something of a laconic, contented babushka, a woman who shares her creative spouse’s life despite showing no artistic tendencies herself. At the black-tie exhibit, Asher sees her “smiling and talking calmly to a woman in diamonds but looking as if she would rather be reading one of her Russian or French books” (*Name* 269). She is simultaneously part of Jacob Kahn’s world (as witness her presence at the show—indeed, she is more at ease than he is) but distanced from it; she would prefer to be off in a quiet corner.

These two women—one a part of his professional life, the other a part of his personal life—are both integral to Kahn's existence; in that sense, his situation echoes that of his biblical forebear. Yet unlike the Jacob of the Bible, the Jacob of *My Name Is Asher Lev* does not create an emotional or sexual triangle fraught with angst and rivalry. The Genesis account says flatly that the original Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah” (29:30), and the latter clearly senses this. She accuses her younger sister of stealing her spouse (30:15), and after one pregnancy she says with heart-tugging hope, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons” (29:34). Indeed, the two siblings essentially engage in a baby-making contest for Jacob's favor, even dragging in their handmaidens in an early form of surrogate motherhood. In contrast to this domestic strife, Jacob Kahn orders his life more wisely. There is no hint of unfaithfulness involving Anna, nor does Tanya show any jealousy toward her. At one point, Kahn suffers one of his occasional fits of depression while summering in Provincetown, Massachusetts; a couple of days later, Anna arrives (presumably from New York) and goes off with Tanya. After some time, the art dealer leaves, and Tanya remarks: “He is better. Anna has a way of helping him” (*Name* 262). The fact that the art dealer comes all the way to Cape Cod (seemingly at Tanya's behest) to rally Jacob's spirits, that she apparently has done this before (“Anna has a way of helping him”), and that the wife is unperturbed by the other woman's arrival indicates a relationship among the three that is both intimate (although not in the sexual sense) and lacking in tension—two qualities that do not necessarily go together. Although the fictional Jacob and the biblical one both are involved in triangles of sorts, the existence of the former is far less contentious than that of the latter.

Surrounded by the work of his hands

Two basic issues of human existence are mortality (“How long will I live?”) and legacy (“What can I create? What will I leave behind?”). In both areas, Jacob Kahn proves to be similar to his Hebrew ancestor, whose awareness of age and death emerges particularly in the latter part of Genesis. When Jacob's sons need their younger brother Benjamin to accompany them

to Egypt at the order of a demanding Egyptian official, Jacob cries: "If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol [the realm of the dead] in grief" (Gen. 42:38). Jacob, who erroneously believes that Benjamin's sibling Joseph died years ago, pleads against his sons' request on the ground that he is an old man who already has been bereaved and could not survive another such blow. Later, when the family discovers that the Egyptian official is actually the long-gone Joseph, Jacob says, "My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die" (Gen. 45:28). When they arrive in Egypt, Jacob tells Pharaoh in answer to a question: "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns" (47:9; brackets in orig.). The patriarch believes, with good reason, that he has little time left and must take advantage of it, and although his statement to the Egyptian monarch has a ritualistically self-deprecatory ring, his mortality clearly weighs heavily upon him.

Similarly, Jacob Kahn is all too aware of passing time. When he initially takes on Asher as a student, he tells the teenager that he will work with him for five years. "I am seventy-two years old," he says. "I do not have five years to give to anything that is less than a marble for a *David*," comparing Asher to a potential masterpiece of sculpture (216). (Interestingly, the subject of Michelangelo's statue was a descendant of the biblical Jacob—another instance of the Jacob theme.) As the apprenticeship proceeds, Kahn remains aware of his biological clock. Just before the fit of depression from which Anna helps rescue him, he walks with Asher and remarks, "I would like not to die too soon. There are many things I still want to do. I would like to live beyond eighty." But moments later, looking at the afternoon sunlight of Cape Cod, he seems daunted by the weight of his past and the impossibility of capturing what he sees and wants to express. "Even Monet could not do it. And he had the greatest eye of all," he says (260). A black mood swallows him—but it lasts only a few days, and then he returns to the easel. "I will make it past eighty," he declares, "if I can keep from thinking too much about the past" (262). Like his ancestor, Jacob Kahn feels the burden of his years—but the artist wrestles

with the burden, not dying until he is almost one hundred (*Gift* 273). His life expectancy becomes a wry, recurring motif over the years as he debates whether he will or will not reach a particular age, or enjoy reaching it. “Sometimes I think it is not wise to grow too old,” he muses amid the ascendancy of a nihilistic art movement that he detests. “But I am not aware that we are given a choice in this matter” (*Name* 286). Neither the biblical nor the fictional Jacob is eager to die; one has a long-lost son to see, and the other has work yet to do. Yet both also are aware of the disadvantages of a long life.

Further, the two men are alike in their deaths. The patriarch Jacob passes away in Egypt, an alien land, but (presumably because he was the father of the highly positioned Joseph) his death is treated as that of a great man. The Egyptians mourn him for seventy days, and when Joseph takes the body to Canaan for burial, along with him go “all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt’s dignitaries Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him . . .” (Gen. 50:3–9). The funeral procession is that of an important figure. Kahn, a Russian Jew by ethnicity, also dies in a land not his own (France) and is treated as a great man, but not because of his blood: “The windows of great French cathedrals shimmered with his luminous colors and forms. His sculptures adorned public places in a dozen European cities” (279). The French have reason to remember and honor their resident artist, and so they do. His funeral is attended by the national minister of culture and the mayor of Nice; also present are “painters, sculptors, writers curators, dealers, printmakers, radio reporters, television crews, journalists” (279). Prominence crowns both Jacobs upon their deaths, although only with Kahn is that predictable.

In addition to worries about mortality, Jacob Kahn displays an implicit concern with legacy that also can be detected in his forebear. For the biblical Jacob, this embodies itself in progeny. In ancient Hebrew culture, childlessness was a major disgrace—a problem faced by Jacob’s grandmother Sarah as well as his wife Rachel. The propagation of the family line was so important that the Law of Moses called for the brother of a man who died sonless to marry

the widow; the “first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel” (Deut. 25:5–6). (This institution of “levirate marriage” actually figures in Potok’s fourth novel, *In the Beginning*.) The patriarch Jacob famously sires twelve sons as well as at least one daughter, Dinah (Gen. 30:21). In the narratives, the driving force behind this manic going-forth-and-multiplying is the rivalry between Leah and Rachel; after the latter’s handmaiden delivers a son, Rachel declares: “A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed” (Gen. 30:8). The family continues to swell because the two wives keep the game going. Yet one can hardly imagine that Jacob’s ego, or his desire to establish a great house, had nothing to do with the increase; otherwise he certainly could have rejected at least the ongoing involvement of the two concubines. And seventeen years after the reunion with Joseph in Egypt, he calls his sons together, bestows a parting word to each, and dies, perhaps literally encircled by the family he has created (Gen. 49).

Potok’s text hints that Jacob Kahn, too, feels the tug of legacy. When Asher first visits the artist’s studio, Anna remarks that she has often asked Kahn for a particular pair of large bronze sculptures. “But he parts with very little now,” she notes. “He says he wants in his old age to be surrounded by the work of his hands” (*Name* 211). Her remark evokes a side of the sculptor that finds comfort not merely in the knowledge that he has created something lasting but in the visible, tangible signs of it—the artistic counterpart of the twelve sons, the living results of Jacob’s generative power, physically surrounding the patriarch at his death. Kahn also knows how precarious even the life of his artwork can be. Formerly a resident of France, he was forced to flee the German threat of World War II. “Once in a while, he remembers the sculptures he left behind in Paris when we ran from the Nazis,” Tanya tells Asher in explaining her husband’s bout of depression. “They melted it all down. Ten years of sculpture” (261). The Kahns’ four-year-old daughter died of influenza in Paris (272); the now-childless Jacob’s artwork is the mark that he will leave on the world, and he does not view it casually. With the products of

his hands and his musings on his age, then, the artist reflects the concerns with mortality and legacy shared by the patriarch.

Of the four fictional Jacobs under consideration, Kahn perhaps bears the closest resemblance to the biblical figure, and thus is the clearest pointer toward what the patriarch becomes for Potok: a meta-character, an overshadowing presence in the five novels. Father, deceiver, leaver of legacies, companion of multiple women—the fictional namesakes repeat all of these aspects of the original Jacob. And just as that Jacob became responsible for the existence of those known as the Israelites, so his novelistic descendants are key to the lives and natures of Potok's protagonists, who are children of their particular Israel. In Jacob Kahn's case, that role consists of his shaping of Asher's artistic soul.

Artist and Ladover

As stated previously, Kahn's function in *My Name Is Asher Lev*—his significance fades considerably in the sequel—is that of an avatar of the Western secular culture that Potok sees as clashing with the core of traditional Judaism. Paralleling the familial tug-of-war involving Asher, Aryeh, and Rivkeh is a philosophical one involving Aryeh, Jacob, and Asher. Just as Rivkeh is the rope wrenched between Asher and Aryeh in their contest for her support and attention, Asher is tugged from one direction by Aryeh and from the other by Kahn in their bid for his loyalty. The clash begins to flower even during Asher's first visit to Kahn's studio. "In the entire history of European art," the artist says, "there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter" (213). In similar fashion, Anna Schaeffer hesitantly tells the religious teenager: "Art is not for people who want to make the world holy. You will be like a nun in a bro— in a—theater for burlesque. Do you understand me, Asher Lev? If you want to make the world holy, stay in Brooklyn" (209–10). In Crown Heights, religious observance and holiness are vital concerns; in Kahn's studio and the wider artistic world, they are not. Telling the teenager that he has a responsibility and asking him what he thinks it is, Kahn reacts angrily when Asher quotes a piece of Talmudic wisdom, learned from Aryeh, that Jews are responsible for one

another. “As an artist you are responsible to no one and to nothing, except to yourself and to the truth as you see it,” the old man snaps. “Do you understand? An artist is responsible to his art. Anything else is propaganda” (217–18). Thus, one of the first assertions of Asher’s new teacher is that he must think of himself primarily not as a Jew who is bound to others of his people but as an artist who is bound to his craft and his personal vision. Significantly, the denigrated view is not merely an ethical commonplace. It comes from the Talmud, a foundational source of Jewish thought and practice; further, Asher learned this aphorism directly from his father. Kahn, therefore, is not merely pushing Asher to reconstruct his basic identity but at the same time implicitly questioning the authority of both Talmud and parent.

Kremer enlarges on this idea of Kahn as an instructor in artistic ethics; his name, she says, “suggests *kohen*, signifying membership in the priestly class of Israel, and *Lev* represents the *Leverite* [sic] group which assisted the priests in the sanctuary” (“Dedalus” 33). Thus, Kahn is a member of the artistic Aaronic priesthood, guiding Asher the painterly Levite in the correct rituals and right paths—rebuking him, for instance, when the young man tucks his earlocks behind his ears for what Kahn sees as the wrong reasons (“Dedalus” 34). Kremer’s idea insightfully implies that Art is a rival deity for Asher’s affections, with Kahn playing the part of cult leader—a depiction with which Aryeh certainly would agree. However, the comparison between the names is somewhat forced at best, and the wordplay involved, which ironically uses *kohen* to describe someone devoted to an alien “god,” is rather un-Potokian. (“I find it difficult thus far to be fashionably comedic or ironic about the world,” Potok writes in an essay. “Nor have I ever been especially interested in mirror-games with words . . .” [“First” 105].)

In his initiation of Asher into the artistic world, Kahn also draws him toward a distinctly non-Hasidic view of the human body. Asher notes that “out of modesty the women of our group never wore short-sleeved garments” (7), and the married women wore wigs over their hair for the same reason (6). His parents “never embraced in my presence” (10), nor did they swim

while summering by a small lake in the Berkshires (53). When Asher copies paintings of nudes in a museum prior to his apprenticeship, his father is furious:

[D]idn't I know that the body was the gift of the Ribbono Shel Olom; that the Torah forbade us to treat it without modesty; that such drawings were vile, that they followed in the ways of the goyim; that Jews, Torah Jews, would never think of drawing such things? The body was a private and sacred domain. To display that privacy in a painting was disgusting. (173)

The Hasidic view is not that physical love and the body are contaminated but that they are not public property—they are, in a sense, holy. However, the naked body is a longstanding subject of art in the Western tradition, and a few months into Asher's lessons, Kahn asks him to draw a beautiful young woman. Speaking "gently but with tense insistence," he describes the human body as "a glory of structure and form" that turns the artist into "a battleground between intelligence and emotion, between his rational side and his sensual side"—a struggle responsible for artistic masterpieces. "To attempt to achieve greatness in art without mastering this art form is like attempting to be a great Hasidic teacher without knowledge of the Kabbalah," he argues (229). When Kahn looks at the body, he sees not "a private and sacred domain" but rather "a glory of structure and form"—not something that should never be displayed publicly but rather something that begs not to be shrouded. (And in his effort to convince Asher of this, Kahn proves that he is not merely a talented artist—his reference to his listener's Hasidic background demonstrates that he also is no mean rhetorician.) The appeal succeeds, although after the session the teenager feels "hot and irritated and unclean" (231). (Potok's word choice of *unclean*, with its resonances in Jewish law, instead of *dirty* can hardly be an accident.) As Asher notes, "I drew her again the following Sunday, and it was easier. I drew her again the Sunday after that, and it was easier still" (231). Thus he slips from a world where even copying a picture of a nude woman is reprehensible into a world where creating such works from life (and then exhibiting them in public) is expected and even seen as necessary.

Yet what marks the victory of the world of painting over the world of Hasidism—what completes Asher's journey to the art side of the Force, so to speak—is the display not of naked bodies but naked souls. Even before Asher's foray into nude studies, Kahn blasts a painting of a bullying classmate that he sees as ambivalent and timid: "If you hate him, paint your hatred or do not paint him at all. One must not paint everything one feels. But once you decide to paint something, you must paint the truth or you will paint green rot" (226). It is this attitude—the whole truth or nothing—that guides Asher when he is moved to capture his mother's fearful waiting for her traveling spouse and son and her painful suspension between the two of them. He is initially at a loss for an aesthetic framework for his subject. Then one presents itself to him—one alien to his spiritual world, one that will horrify and enrage his community, but one that he feels driven to employ. "No one says you have to paint ultimate anguish and torment," he argues to his invisible listeners. "But if you are driven to paint it, you have no other way" (326). He paints his mother symbolically semi-crucified in a window, the kind of window at which she often waited for Aryeh to return from his journeys, and in the picture he places telephone poles suggestive of crosses. But the painting is not enough, and he creates a companion piece, one that makes the crucifixion explicit and adds flanking images of Asher and Aryeh. "Yes, I could have decided not to do it," he acknowledges. "Who would have known?" (328) His answer is that he would have, and that by not making his vision explicit, he would have committed artistic fraud.

Oddly enough, this course might not appeal to Asher were it not for the standards with which his parents imbued him. Abramson writes:

The values fostered in his home by both his mother and father are brought to bear upon the values of the creative artist: honesty, completion of what one has begun, integrity, and the acceptance of the need to push oneself to the limits of one's ability in order to achieve the maximum possible. (79)

Asher is sensitive to the incomplete nature of his artistic project because of the emphasis during his upbringing on completing the unfinished (particularly his mother's insistence that she somehow continue her dead brother's work for the Rebbe). Ironically, Asher's family makes possible the very act that estranges him from it. When the two crucifixion paintings eventually are exhibited, his parents and the rest of the Ladover are stunned. "Your naked women were a great difficulty for me, Asher," the Rebbe says. "But this is an impossibility" (*Name* 366). What ultimately forces Asher's exile from Ladover Brooklyn, then, is not his revealing of bodies but his insistence on revealing his soul, his feelings, his vision of reality—an insistence that the artist must place this above all other considerations, including his closest relationships. One critic, noting Asher's overall "selfish behavior toward his parents," describes him as "one of the least sympathetic of Potok's protagonists because he struggles less with his own anguish than with his need to express his artistic gift at whatever cost" ("Chaim Potok" 182). The author himself corroborates this view; when Elaine M. Kauvar suggests that "Asher's aesthetic rebellion has got a very dark side to it, a hostile side," Potok replies, "Absolutely" (79). In the wake of his estrangement from his parents and his exile from his New York community, Asher will continue to be an observant Jew—but he will be an artist who is a Ladover, not a Ladover who is an artist. He is ultimately a son of Kahn.

The Jacob figure of *My Name Is Asher Lev*, then, essentially takes the child of another man as his symbolic heir—an act that contains echoes of the rivalry between the biblical Jacob and Esau, a man who saw his brother appropriate what should have been his. Jacob did not merely steal the patriarchal blessing meant for his twin brother; another familiar story is his barter for the older son's birthright. In Gen. 25:29–34, a ravenous Esau comes in from the outdoors and requests some of the lentil stew that Jacob is cooking. Jacob, smelling an opportunity, asks for Esau's birthright in exchange—a demand to which the latter inexplicably agrees. "Thus did Esau spurn the birthright," the biblical narrator comments (25:34), apparently weighing the older brother's actions and finding them wanting. After Jacob later successfully

impersonates Esau, Isaac tells his favored son, “Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing,” leading Esau to cry, “First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!” (27:35–36) Jacob twice takes what originally belonged to his kinsman, just as his fictional descendant acquires an “heir” at the expense of another Jew. One of Potok’s figures even indicates that such actions are characteristic of artists. In adulthood, Asher becomes subject to visions—of his uncle Yitzchok, of Kahn, even of Pablo Picasso, whom he generally refers to simply as “the Spaniard.” In one such vision, Picasso remarks: “You know what a painter really is, Lev? A painter is a collector who wants to create a collection for himself, and he does this by painting himself the pictures he loves by other artists” (*Gift* 192). In this character’s view, painters take what is made by others and reshape it according to their desires. This is precisely what Jacob Kahn does; playing the collector and shaper of artistic genius, he takes the creation of another “artist”—Aryeh—and makes his own version of it. Kahn, then, is both a clear embodiment of the Western artistic tradition as well as a character who in multiple ways echoes the life and ways of his biblical namesake.

CHAPTER 3

THE BOOK OF LIGHTS

Light clarifies—it makes visible, it reveals, it differentiates. It is thus ironic that Potok's fifth novel, one that is marked by "[p]ervasive light imagery" (Sternlicht 108), should focus on a young man whose life is *not* one of clarity, one that is riven by ambivalence and hesitation. A certain intellectual and creative energy characterizes Reuven Malter, Danny Saunders, and Asher Lev—they want to receive ordination, do great things in psychology, master the world of art. Such is far less the case with Gershon Loran, the protagonist of *The Book of Lights*. And just as Gershon is something of an anomaly when compared to the main characters of *The Promise* and *My Name Is Asher Lev*, so too is Jakob Keter, the Jacob figure of *Lights*, when compared to his counterparts in Potok's other novels. The other Jacobs are visceral beings: Kalman in his seething zeal, Kahn in his earthy creativity, Jakob Daw of *Davita's Harp* in his world-weary fragility. In contrast, Keter is detached, cool, intellectual. And where the Jacob figures of the other novels often find resonance with their biblical namesake primarily in the latter's interactions with other human beings, Keter's role in *The Book of Lights* evokes the Jacob who dreams of the stairway to heaven and wrestles with the mysterious heavenly figure who changes his name to Israel—one who has struggled with the divine.

Waiting for light

Gershon Loran sometimes seems to exist in a mist of ambivalence, randomness, brokenness. Orphaned at age eight in 1937 when his traveling parents are cut down by Arab-Jewish gunfire in the Holy Land, he is raised by the aunt and uncle with whom he happened to be staying at the time. Their only son dies in World War II when Gershon is an adolescent, and chaos and death also manifest themselves in the lives of others around him: "The world seemed

a strangely terrifying place when you really thought about it" (5). Yet one night on the roof of his apartment house, he sees a dog giving birth.

Life was being created before his eyes. He trembled, soared, wanted to shout and weep, and remained very still. . . . He felt all caught up in the life of heaven and earth, in the mystery of creation, in the pain and inexhaustible glory of this single moment. . . . [H]e reached up and brushed his hand across the sky and felt, actually felt, the achingly exquisitely cool dry velvet touch of starry heaven upon his fingers. (6)

Gershon later finds no trace of dog or puppies, but the vision haunts him. "He felt he would be changed in some extraordinary way if it ever returned. He began to wait for it" (7). By his teens, then, this young Jew is marked by a desire for insight into the mystery of life but also by a curious passivity—having experienced something wondrous, he awaits its return rather than actively seeking it. He attends a traditionalist yeshiva, high school, and college; he receives rabbinic ordination but is still adrift. "He did not know what he wanted to do. He had majored in mathematics but could not see himself going on to graduate school. He could not see himself teaching or doing anything" (7). In the summer of 1950, as the Korean War is breaking out, he enters the Riverside Hebrew Institute, a non-Orthodox seminary in Manhattan; a year later, he finds himself under the tutelage of the newly arrived scholar Jakob Keter, an expert on Jewish mysticism.

A recent widower, Keter is tall and almost bald, with "a sharp straight nose and bright clear gray eyes and thin lips. His face was clean-shaven, pinkish and curiously unlined. He seemed of no definite age, certainly not the fifty-five he was known to be" (10). No wrinkles, no beard, no unkempt hair, no blariness of eyes—Keter's appearance is almost artificially clean of line. It is as if the smooth body reflects the cerebral soul within, for although Keter's specialty is Kabbalah, he is no emotional visionary; "he taught only the history of mysticism and the reading of texts, textual analysis, a dry and technical method of study. Also it turned out that he was a

dry teacher with a mirthless razor intelligence. . . . To come unprepared to his class was to court a low-voiced, German-accented public flaying” (9). Keter finds Gershon unprepossessing: “An aura of melancholy radiated from his pale and delicate features like some dark nebula. . . . Gershon’s jacket and trousers were unkempt, ill fitting; he badly needed a haircut; there was dirt under his fingernails” (10–11). Yet twice his are the only papers to receive an “A”; as Gershon reads aloud in class, he finds himself “slowly warming to the words and the web of images they were spinning before his eyes. . . . toward the end he was no longer aware of the passage of time” (11)—a reaction curiously similar to Keter’s when the professor reads his first paper. For Gershon, a light is dawning, slowly; the study of Kabbalah touches something in him that nothing else has.

Soon, however, the ivory tower is shaken. The students learn that because of the lack of Jewish military chaplains, their acceptance into their senior year will be predicated on their agreement to serve a term in the armed forces. (“We’re going to be drafted into the voluntary chaplaincy corps?” Gershon asks in dismayed irony [38].) Gershon’s entry is delayed after he unexpectedly receives a fellowship for graduate work set up by the family of Arthur Leiden, an urbane friend and fellow student who is obsessed with his physicist father’s role in the development of the atomic bomb. Yet even given Gershon’s emerging knack for Kabbalah, enthusiasm is still a stranger to him. “He wondered how long it would take him to do a dissertation with Keter. . . . It seemed an interminable travail, and he felt no force impelling him to undertake it. Was that what most people did—drifted uncertainly into a patch of world to which they offered with doubting hearts much of the fire of their lives?” (88–89) Gershon’s motto is not “Carpe diem.” Rather, the day seems to seize him; like the title character in the movie *Forrest Gump*, he surfaces amid events rather than deliberately diving into them. He spends the ensuing months studying Kabbalah at Keter’s apartment and languages at Columbia University; “I feel like a *Zwischenmensch*,” he tells Karen Levin, a young woman with scholarly ambitions whom he wants to marry. “A word I’m coining. Remember it. A between-person. I don’t belong

anywhere. Not Columbia, not the seminary, not Brooklyn” (114). Again, Gershon feels afloat, disengaged. And when the fellowship time runs out, he dons his Army uniform and, after a ten-day journey, finds himself in Korea.

Light in the East

After he arrives, a young man greets him with grateful relief: “I never thought we’d get a Jewish chaplain this far up north. Boy. Welcome” (131). But the country itself is not as cordial as some of its human occupants. “He slept in a cot in a crowded Quonset, and in the night the oil stove died, and he had in his life never believed such cold could exist” (132). These initial experiences foreshadow much of his stay. The landscape is inhospitable—cold so severe that soldiers drink antifreeze in their efforts to keep warm (137), heat so brutal that they swim in polluted streams to cool off (176), flooding so swift that it fills a riverbed (and nearly swamps Gershon’s jeep) in almost the blink of an eye (158–59). Yet in large part, the people around him warm to him:

He had thought little about the things he had done here; mostly he had tried to live with his books and records and letters. Yet now in this summer a clear and palpable resonance of regard echoed around him. . . . In ways mysterious to him others were seeing in him what he could not see in himself: a strength he knew he did not have, a certainty he knew he was far from possessing. This was his battalion. These were his men. (171–72)

Gershon’s life again is marked by the seemingly accidental; his interactions with others and his fulfillment of his duties appear unremarkable to him (and, for that matter, to the reader), but they nevertheless strike a chord with his fellows.

His days are interrupted by visions—of his aunt and uncle (138), of his parents’ graves (220), of Arthur and his family (148–49), of Keter (172), of his former Talmud professor, Nathan Malkuson (194–95), and sometimes of the two academics together (198–99). And he is badgered by a sinister “silken voice”:

When in all the history of your species have you ever produced so vast and panoplied a parade of great minds across so large a portion of your planet in so short a time as you did in the first decades of this century? . . . How you trusted them. What heritage have they given you to hold in your hands? . . .

Do you flee from the shadows of the giants of your century, the great ones whose lights blind the eye and whose faults numb the heart? . . .

You are the bereaved children and grandchildren of a broken century. There are no more dreams. There is nothing to wait for. Nothing. (305–07)

The Kabbalah speaks of light, but Gershon also hears the voice of darkness, of the Other Side, a whisper that tempts him to despair in the face of his smallness in comparison to the great minds of his time and in the knowledge of the brokenness and chaos in his world.

Korea changes Gershon Loran, but Japan, where he takes his leaves, alters him even more. “He . . . thought of the waterfall roar he had heard the day before. Sound and sight had yielded a single vivid representation of power and beauty; it had freed him from himself He was being taught the loveliness of God’s world by a pagan land” (249). And aside from the physical beauty that greets him, he also encounters a culture that knows nothing of his own. “I was taught when I grew up that the Jewish religion made a fundamental difference to the world,” he tells a Christian soldier. “You know what I mean. Well, more than half the world is on this side of the planet. They don’t even know what Judaism is, and they’re perfectly and marvelously content without it” (247). Sighting a bespectacled old man in a hat and coat swaying in prayer at a shrine, Gershon asks his companion: “Do you think our God is listening to him, John? . . . If He’s not listening, why not? If He is listening, then—well, what are we all about, John?” (248) In Japan, Gershon encounters an implicit challenge to his culture and theology—this is a world that knows not the God of Israel yet sails on, placidly and even beautifully.

However, the country’s tug on Gershon is nothing compared to its pull on Arthur Leiden, who unexpectedly appears in Korea as his former roommate’s fellow chaplain. The first time

they re-encounter each other, he repeatedly asks Gershon about the possibilities of traveling to the islands. "He will certainly want to go to Japan," Arthur's physicist father tells Gershon in poignant self-accusation. "He will want to see the handiwork of his parents" (232). In a climactic journey, he accompanies Gershon on a journey to that land as well as Macao and Hong Kong. "He had journeyed the farthest distance he could from his own world," Gershon reflects in Hong Kong, thinking: "They had entered the city that lay on the overlapping rims of two warring cultures, each seen as barbarous by the other. This was a between-world. He wanted to look at it" (276). Gershon, by his own description, is a between-person (114), not fully rooted anywhere; in Hong Kong, he encounters an echo of himself. The two young men visit Kyoto, the exquisite city that (Gershon later discovers) Arthur's mother had helped save from nuclear eradication and that Arthur greets "with all the tender and gentle adoration one brings to a first love" (312). They journey to Hiroshima, where a shaken Arthur prays at the monument to the bomb victims. "He stood there now and began to recite the words to the Kaddish. Gershon listened to the awesome words of the prayer for mourners—the public sanctification of the name of God; the affirmation of meaning in the very presence of the most unassimilable of darkneses—and a coldness of terror brushed against the back of his neck" (334).

They return to Korea, and shortly thereafter Gershon receives word that Arthur has died in a plane crash on yet another flight to Japan. A few weeks later, Gershon's tour ends; after reaching America, he returns to the roof where he saw the dog, and as his friend did shortly before, he says Kaddish: "This is for you, Arthur . . . so we can somehow mend the world or hold it together and then have it broken again in new acts of creation" (368). Although Gershon cannot articulate the exact rationale for some kind of action in the face of chaos, death, and the threat of meaninglessness, he understands its necessity (369). And despite the possibility that Jakob Keter will be too much for him, he decides to take up his studies once more. "He did not think he had made a mistake," he reflects after he meets his teacher in Jerusalem. "He would

know soon enough" (370). Gershon is open to the possibility of meaning, even in the face of the silken voice's warning and in the shadow of the intellectual giant who is taking him on.

Teacher in exile, brethren in conflict

The Promise, *The Book of Lights*, *Davita's Harp*, and the *Asher Lev* novels have a thoroughly American flavor. All the protagonists are Americans; *The Promise* takes place entirely in the United States; almost all of *Davita's Harp* does so; much of *The Book of Lights* and the *Asher Lev* books is set there. Yet, strikingly, all of the Jacob figures come from the Old World. Jacob Kalman made his name in Lithuania before coming to New York; Jacob Kahn is of Russian extraction; Jakob Daw hails from Vienna; Jakob Keter's background is German. This underscores the parallel to the biblical Jacob, who spends two decades away from Canaan; like him, his fictional namesakes are men far from their birthplaces. In *Lights*, this is underlined in an early episode that strongly echoes Kalman's savaging of Abe Greenfield in *The Promise*. When Arthur comes unprepared to Keter's class, he receives a tongue-lashing:

In Berlin I read five times the amount I ask you to read each week. Five times. Are all Americans so lazy or is it merely the Americans in this school? . . . If I required that you read Kant or Hume, you would no doubt do your reading. This is the literature of your own people. You have so much contempt for it, Mr. Leiden? (*Lights* 39)

Keter sees in Arthur's neglect a disrespect for his heritage. In *The Promise*, Kalman berates Greenfield for giving other studies priority over Talmud, and he later tells his class: "In Europe I had a student who was a great mathematician. But he never came to class unprepared. . . . I do not expect that my American students will be like my students in Europe. But I expect that everyone will come to the shiur [class] prepared. If there is a choice, I expect everyone to choose the Gemora" (157). In both books, the foreign-born teacher sees a slackness in young Jewish scholarship compared to that of his homeland, a fact that underlines their exiled status.

Keter's life echoes that of his biblical forebear in other ways. Both have lost a spouse; in Genesis, Jacob's wife Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin, the last of the twelve sons (35:16–18), and Keter is described as “recently widowed” when he arrives at the Riverside Hebrew Institute. However, a far more prominent Jacob theme in *Lights* is Keter's ongoing dispute with one of his fellow Jewish scholars. The biblical Jacob is well-known for the strife between him and Esau. As discussed previously, the scheming younger twin acquires his brother's birthright and blessing, and even after he spends two decades in exile, one of his chief concerns upon his return to Canaan is his sibling's possibly violent reaction. “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau,” he asks God; “else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike” (Gen. 32:12). The conflict between the two overshadows much of the biblical narrative. Similarly, one of the recurring factors in Potok's novel is the clash between Jakob Keter and Nathan Malkuson, a professor of Talmud. Of course, this fight is philosophical and spiritual rather than familial and (potentially) physical, but it is still evocative of the internecine struggle between Isaac's two sons.

The conflict first emerges during and after an elevator ride taken by Gershon and Malkuson. The professor—like Keter a clean-shaven man in his fifties, but shorter and with “silvery hair and cold blue eyes” (17–18)—spots the titles of some books that Gershon is carrying. “Much better you should study Talmud,” he says. “This is such foolishness. You wish to become a scholar of foolishness?” (18) Later, in his office, the academician muses:

Surely they knew that Talmud was the only consistently honorable subject worthy of study in Judaism; it alone affected one's life, one's daily behavior. . . . To uncover the original smoothness and clarity of an ancient passage of Talmud Smooth, clear, coherent, with a depth that was three-dimensional and lovely. Not the murkiness of Kabbalah with its bizarre flights of fancy, its God of divine nothingness, its emanations and angels and numerology and dark magic that bordered on oriental paganism. (19)

Malkuson has a pragmatic streak; he believes that Jewish study should concentrate on that which guides Jewish life, and Kabbalah clearly falls outside this circle. But Keter has his own views. In a dispassionate discourse on Kabbalah as an academic discipline, he tells his students that in contrast to those who would see the subject as either “nonsense” or “an untouchable sanctity,” he sees it as central to the culture:

It is the heart of Judaism, the soul, the core. Talmud tells us how the Jew acts; Kabbalah tells us how Judaism feels, how it sees the world. . . . I do not tell you to believe it, I ask only that we understand it, that it not be lost to scientific inquiry. What right does any talmudist have to consign to—how do you say it?—to oblivion two thousand years of a Jewish way of thinking? (22–23)

To Keter, Malkuson is less pragmatic than reductionistic; he believes that his colleague is too dismissive of a component of theology, thought, and history that is admittedly “irrational, illogical” (22), but nevertheless key to the Jewish soul. According to one critic, the face-off between these elements of Judaism is actually signaled in Gershon’s rooftop encounter: “The vision of pups being born . . . represents the entrance of fertile Cabala mysticism into a world of strict Jewish law” (“Chaim Potok” 181). However, the suggested symbolism does not survive scrutiny. If anything, the puppies do not emerge into “a world of strict Jewish law” but rather one of decay and chaos. The roof where Gershon sees the dogs is “sodden” and “smelly,” covered with “cracked and reeking tar paper” (*Lights* 6); the house beneath is in such poor repair that it is the subject of neighborhood conversation (3). There is certainly an element of mysticism in the rooftop scene, but Torah and Talmud make not obvious appearances.

Potok may have subtly signaled the eventual winner of the contest between Keter and Malkuson in their very names. Abramson argues that the monikers echo *Kether* and *Malkuth*, the first and tenth of the primordial rays of light, aspects of the divine, that are known in the Kabbalah as the *Sefirah*. In this system of thought, *Kether* occupies an “almost supreme position,” Abramson says: “The terms used to describe it—‘King,’ ‘creation,’ ‘knowledge’—and

the quality of containing 'all which will eventually flow forth from it' gives it, and the teacher with whose name it is associated, great stature" (120). In contrast, *Malkuth* is associated with passivity and the created world and occupies a lower position. As Abramson concedes, Malkuson's personality is not particularly passive (and thus the symbolism has its limits), but he clearly is this-world-oriented (120). Abramson's view is supported by Malkuson's practicality—"A Jew molded his life according to talmudic law," the professor muses, and clearly scholarship should focus on such matters rather than "foolishness" (*Lights* 19). Thus, the association of the professors' names with hierarchically situated Kabalistic elements, Kether's occupying a higher place than his colleague's, hints at who will come out on top.

Despite this rivalry, the tug-of-war between the two remains polite—at least in Gershon's mind, for Keter and Malkuson appear frequently in his visions. In one of the first, Gershon sees the two walking in the New York night. Keter remarks, "I am a threat to you, my friend, am I not. You would like our world to be smooth and rational, would you not. . . . The irrational completes us" (25–26). Malkuson is unconvinced; he accuses Keter of exaggeration ("You have taken a tiny tributary and made of it a mighty river") and argues that his colleague will be unable to consolidate his hold on Gershon's interest: "I will wager you will yet lose him. . . . He is too intelligent for Kabbalah" (26). Gershon thus becomes a point of contention between the two men, but it is a low-key contention, for even in the vision the two remain civil. ("Shall we stop off somewhere for a coffee?" Keter asks his colleague [26].)

This contest between the two men underlines the Jacob-Esau connection in an oblique and implicitly humorous fashion in an episode involving Gershon and Malkuson. A few hours before Gershon's comprehensive examination for his Talmud class—an appointment that he faces with great apprehension—he again finds himself in an elevator with Malkuson. The professor casually questions him about the relationship between thoughts and contracts and about a story in the tractate *Avodah Zarah* (thus surprising Gershon: "One was not asked about tales in a Talmud test," he thinks [78]). Malkuson then says, to his student's astonishment, "You

have just taken your comprehensive. Good afternoon, Loran" (79). Gershon's candidacy for the scholastic Leiden Award is looming in the background, and Malkuson's actions certainly can be seen as nothing more than a somewhat dubious way of providing a boost to the family's preferred recipient. But given the implicit contest between Keter and Malkuson for Gershon's academic soul, this somewhat amusing incident also has echoes of the birthright episode in Genesis 25. As mentioned previously, this narrative describes how Jacob's brother casually gives up his status as the firstborn in exchange for a quick meal. As a defender of Talmud, the principal focus of traditional Jewish scholarship, Malkuson is in a sense the "firstborn," the owner of the cultural birthright as compared to Keter, who focuses on the less-reputable Kabbalah. The examination gives Malkuson the opportunity to assert this right vigorously, to ensure in Gershon's instance that priorities are maintained. Instead, he gives a perfunctory test. (In contrast, Keter examines Gershon far more thoroughly.) Thus, in the scholarly tussle between the two men, Malkuson yield his "birthright" to his ethnic kinsman—the Jacob figure. Like Esau of old, he is strangely uninterested in maintaining his cultural prerogatives.

Upon Gershon's graduation and acceptance of the Leiden Award, Malkuson concedes to his colleague. "Loran forsakes the Torah for the Kabbalah," he says. "You have won the wager, Keter" (112). However, the latter says merely, "We will wait a little longer before declaring the winner" (112), and indeed the discussion continues—in Gershon's visions in Korea. The two men appear in the *succah* that Gershon designs for the Sukkot festival and offer to study with him. ("A little Talmud cannot hurt," Keter says, to which Malkuson replies: "Not nearly as much as a little Kabbalah" [199].) They reappear in Gershon's hotel room during one of his trips to Japan. Malkuson seems unhappy with Gershon's Kabbalistic choice of devotional study: "You read the Zohar as a commentary on the Torah portion? Rashi, Ibn Ezra, the Midrash—all are inadequate?" (249) Warning Gershon about Japan's spiritual seductiveness, he says, "This is a beautiful world, Loran. Beware of its allure. The Mishnah is clear on the matter of paganism"—to which Keter replies, "The Mishnah is old. We need a new Mishnah"

(250). The secularist Kabbalah expert is less concerned with a potential drift toward heterodoxy than the Talmudist. Just as strife forms the background of the biblical story of Jacob and his brother, so the conflict between Jakob Keter and his academic/ethnic kinsman forms part of the backdrop of *The Book of Lights*. Yet whereas the twin brothers of Genesis eventually reconcile, the intellectual combatants of Potok's novel may still keep fencing.

Ascending to heaven

Two of the better-known stories about the biblical Jacob have supernatural overtones. During his journey from Canaan to Haran, Jacob stops for the night and, with a stone for a pillow, has a dream: "a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it" (Gen. 28:12). (The word here rendered *stairway* is classically translated as *ladder* in the King James Version.) God appears to Jacob and identifies himself as the deity of his grandfather Abraham and his father, Isaac; he promises Jacob the land on which he is lying as well as numerous descendants and says that humanity will be blessed through his offspring. "Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land," God says. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (28:15). An unsettled Jacob declares: "This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven" (28:17). In this narrative, the Hebrew patriarch glimpses a connection between the divine and earthly realms, a place of descent and ascent, and is reminded of God's continuing involvement with the house of Abraham.

The second familiar story occurs years later, as Jacob is returning to Canaan with his family. One night Jacob wrestles until daybreak with a mysterious stranger who, when Jacob does not relent, injures the Hebrew's hip and demands to be released. "I will not let you go, until you bless me," Jacob replies (Gen. 32:27). The stranger then declares: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed"—the new name being connected to the Hebrew for "striven with beings divine" (32:29 and footnotes). Jacob later says, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been

preserved" (32:31). Once again the patriarch interacts with the supernatural world, this time not merely conversing with but physically striving with (and in some sense prevailing against) the being whom he encounters, and being renamed as a result.

Given Keter's first name and his prominence in a novel that deals with Kabbalah, one might expect the professor's experiences to somehow parallel those of his namesake—yet Keter is no mystic. However, he is a scholar of mysticism. For him, Kabbalah is not something to be lived out, but it also is not something to be forgotten or neglected; rather, it should be studied and analyzed. (As has been pointed out, this is the heart of his dispute with Malkuson.) Further, it is under Keter's influence that Gershon truly delves into the study and experience of visions. Early in the novel, Malkuson notes Gershon's lack of interest in Talmud. "You are without *éntheos*," the professor says. "You know what that means in Greek? No? You are without the feeling of possession by the divine. There is no fire [for Talmud] burning in you" (18). Keter, however, helps to stoke in Gershon an *éntheos* for Kabbalah. Instead of being subject to visions, Keter is the subject of visions, and Gershon becomes the person who sees strange sights and strives with beings supernatural and human.

In the biblical Jacob's vision of the stairway, God says, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Ironically, Jakob Keter becomes a kind of God figure to Gershon, occasionally appearing to the chaplain in Korea as if to remind him that he is not alone. "This is not a place for Jews," one of Gershon's colleagues remarks upon his arrival (130), and Keter's intermittent presence provides him with a certain ethereal companionship. Yet this presence is not guaranteed. Just before Gershon's trip to Hong Kong and Macao, he experiences a nighttime vision of Keter. "There is a chance I may not accompany you," the professor tells him. "It is a descent that may not only be difficult but also menacing" (267). (Why this is the case is not clear, although critic Sanford E. Marovitz's work suggests a possibility. Commenting on the frequent appearances of birds in the book, he says that "their noted absence or death"—which Gershon notices at Hong Kong's harbor (*Lights* 277–78)—is

“ominous” [Marovitz 76]. Thus, Keter may be hinting at some spiritual barrenness in Hong Kong that constitutes a barrier to him.) Despite this, however, the professor does appear briefly during a dinner party in Hong Kong, although he does not enter the room (*Lights* 284–85). The Jacob figure’s accompanying of Gershon, then, can be seen to correspond to God’s promise of presence to the biblical Jacob.

A notable parallel between Gershon and Jacob the biblical visionary comes just before the former leaves for Korea. Having bid farewell to Keter and seeing the past year of study as “a murky, indistinct betweenness,” Gershon stands on the roof where he saw the dog giving birth:

The sky seemed cold, as if its galaxies and debris mirrored an ancient abandonment. No one could really climb the transcendent heaven now. The rabbinic mystics with their strange ascents—a different time, a different place. . . . If he were to climb now, attempt the ascent, storm the palaces with all the things he knew, he would perhaps see the Throne. Yes. And upon it would be the Essence of all Being—encased in dark shrouds of melancholy. (123–24)

Jacob sees a stairway to heaven after leaving his family and beginning a journey to a faraway land. Gershon has bid farewell to his academic “father” and is about to travel to Korea—but rather than touching the heavens, as he once did on this same rooftop, he feels the impossibility of such an experience. “No one could really climb the transcendent heaven now”—the times have changed. And even if he were able to make his way through the supernatural realm to the divine seat, there he would encounter not glory but “shrouds of melancholy.” At this point, Gershon is an anti-Jacob, one who has waited for a recurrence of ecstasy but is instead plodding through a gloomy night of the soul.

Finally, just as the Jacob of Genesis wrestles valiantly with a supernatural being, Gershon also contends with a messenger from beyond. While studying a Polish text dealing with “the *sitra achra* . . . the demonic realm of evil,” Gershon has a vision in a library: “The doors flew open, and death entered the room in the form of an impenetrable icy blackness. . . . It felt

wet and it encompassed him and he was left entirely without sight and it was icy and smelled of cold raw earth” (46). Late in the novel, a “silken voice” from the Other Side speaks to him in the darkness of the early morning. “They cast vast shadows, your century’s giants,” whispers the voice. “From whom do all of you flee—Karen to Chicago, you to the rim of the world, Arthur to Hiroshima? . . . How far will all of your generation flee to escape the shadows cast by the parents of your century?” (305) The picture is bleak, and Gershon sees truth in the words despite their source. The voice suggests a pact: “In truth, we are all you have left if you wish to attempt new answers. . . . There is already so much of me in your Kabbalah. . . . Consider me with care as you journey through your broken century” (308). In the face of his parents’ long-ago death, his professors’ intimidating intellects, and the destruction that Arthur Leiden’s father and others helped wreak with the atomic bomb, Gershon is tempted toward despair. Then, after he has returned to America in the wake of Arthur’s death, he finds himself again on the apartment roof, and in a trance he hears the silken voice and that of Arthur. Bending the messenger of the *sitra achra* to his will, he forces it to say “amen” to his Kaddish for Arthur (368). The silken voice is not finished, however: “You will go to [Keter], and he will eat you alive. . . . He will break you.” But Gershon is uncowed. “No, he won’t. Others stronger than him have tried,” he says. “You” (369). Although Gershon is an anti-Jacob in that he sees no possibility of an ascent to the heavens, he parallels his ancestor’s experience in wrestling with the supernatural and successfully demanding a “blessing.” Not only does the silken voice say the “amen” to Gershon’s recitation of the Kaddish, but Gershon also is able to declare that the messenger has failed in its attempt to break him. Thus, the biblical Jacob’s mystical experiences find echoes not only in Keter, the Jacob figure of the novel, but in Gershon as well.

“Very different sorts of light”

In *The Promise*, Jacob Kalman represents the ultra-traditionalist Judaism that opposes the secularism-prone tools of Western scholarship; in the *Asher Lev* novels, Jacob Kahn is the citizen of the world of Western art whose values stand at odds with those of the Hasidim. In *The*

Book of Lights, Jakob Keter has the distinction of simultaneously participating in two dichotomies. In terms of Gershon Loran's inner life, he is the counterpart of Nathan Malkuson; he represents the world of Jewish mysticism versus the world of Jewish rationality, the Kabbalah over against the Talmud. Yet he himself is not a mystic; indeed, he is a secularist. Keter argues for the place of mysticism in Jewish scholarship; he represents it as a lawyer might a client. But somewhat less obviously, Keter also is the counterpart of Charles Leiden. Leiden is one of the Jewish physicists whose work culminated in the atomic bomb and its use on Japan—a fact that overshadows the life of his son Arthur and severely strains their relationship. The contrast between Keter and Leiden is suggested in a scene in which Gershon encounters Arthur's parents and former President Harry Truman at the Riverside Hebrew Institute. Upon Gershon's acknowledgement that he studies mysticism, Charles Leiden remarks, "We have a mutual interest in light then, don't we?" Elizabeth Leiden interjects: "Very different sorts of light" (67). This is the second dichotomy in which Keter participates: the contrast between the spiritual light seen in Kabbalah and the lethal light of nuclear weaponry and, by extension, of Western science.

Ironically, Keter's background is that of "erstwhile mathematical genius and theoretical physicist" (9), but he tells Gershon that a premonition led him to change his focus:

I had a vision one day that science in our century would lead to death. There were many roads in my vision, all marked with the word for science. The roads twisted and turned and became a huge road marked with the word 'death.' . . . I did not wish to become what I beheld. . . . And so I decided to explore the demonic that leads to life, rather than the demonic that leads to death. It seemed to me that nothing was more demonically creative in all of Jewish history than Kabbalah. I was not mistaken. (118–19)

In his earlier years, Keter foresaw the lethal uses to which science would be put in the twentieth century. In words that echo the silken voice's assertion that there is "much of me in your

Kabbalah,” the scholar recalls his decision to study the creative “dark side” rather than the destructive one—the mysticism of the Jews rather than the scientific field in which many Jews became prominent, a field that birthed the atomic bomb. Interestingly, Keter frames his decision in terms of “a vision,” but it is unclear whether he is describing a mystical experience or a metaphorical one. The latter is more consistent with his characterization throughout the book, but the words he uses (“There were many roads in my vision, all marked with the word for science. The roads twisted and turned and became a huge road marked with the word ‘death’ ”) seem more applicable to the former possibility. Either interpretation is viable.

In contrast to Keter, Charles Leiden is the seeker of scientific knowledge who now finds himself stricken by the use to which his findings were put. He once experienced the same kind of uncertainty that plagues Gershon: “I remember that for the longest time I also wondered what I would do. I am not entirely certain to this day why I chose physics” (358). (In contrast, Keter says, “I am able to recollect clearly why I left mathematics and physics” [118].) Leiden recalls the time of his work at Los Alamos as a time of moral and scientific dreams:

In many ways those were our finest years. . . . We traversed frontiers every day. We were Olympians to ourselves. Titans. Prometheuses of physics. We were searching for a bomb to kill the Germans before the Germans killed us. Simple, yes? Good and evil. . . . Invent the bomb, punish the Germans, save American boys, end the war. A benevolent apocalypse. Arthur senses nothing of that. (234–35)

Leiden sees virtue in both the work he was doing and the purpose to which he thought it would be put: scientific discovery (the good of knowledge for its own sake) that will help vanquish a warlike regime with a particular prejudice against Jews. His son, he says, does not understand the context in which he labored.

Commenting on whether individual scientists are accountable for the immoral use of their work and on whether Jews have “a special need for expiation” because many of the

physicists involved in the bomb project were Jewish, Sternlicht argues that Potok “indicts the scientist, Jewish and Gentile, but implies that Jewish scientists . . . must be more sensitive than others to human suffering” because of their history. This novel, Sternlicht asserts, is “Potok’s contribution to Jewish expiation” (107). This view has a certain merit, but ironically, the novel’s characterizations actually work against it. The mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki clearly have cast a pall over the life of Charles Leiden, Potok’s fictional embodiment of Jewish involvement in the bomb’s creation, but Leiden has a more nuanced view of his labors than one might expect. “Not for a moment do I regret the work that we did on that bomb,” he says. “And not for a moment am I without remorse over our having used it on the Japanese” (*Lights* 235). For Leiden, the sin of which he inadvertently became a part consisted in the way the bomb was used, not in the fact of its use; his remarks suggest that had the device been used against some German industrial burg, he would feel far less guilt. Further, although Arthur Leiden can be viewed as an emotional casualty of the bomb, and therefore as an indictment of it, his victimhood can also be seen as self-induced to some degree. As Sternlicht himself puts it, Arthur “internalizes the guilt and is poisoned by it” (107)—yet he clearly bears no responsibility for the existence or use of the bomb, and therefore his feverish obsession has the air of a dog gnawing at a sore that might otherwise have healed but now threatens the animal’s health. In addition, Charles remarks that “Arthur senses nothing” of the full context in which the elder Leiden worked; if so, the son becomes an even less compelling symbol of the wrongness of nuclear weaponry. Thus, the characterizations of the two male Leidens work against a clear-cut view of the novel as an indictment of the bomb-makers and a “contribution to Jewish expiation.” Nevertheless, science certainly is not a pure and shining beacon in the novel.

In a very broad-brush sense, *The Promise* and the *Asher Lev* novels are tales in which the worldview of the secular West gains ground against that of “religion” as represented by traditionalist Judaism. Reuven Malter makes a successful case for the use of textual criticism; Asher Lev becomes an artist who is a Ladover rather than vice versa. Yet in *The Book of Lights*,

the opposite holds true: religion seems to gain ground over the secular West as represented by science. Abramson writes, “The light provided by science is seen to be discredited because it has led to the creation of a weapon which J. Robert Oppenheimer called the ‘death light’ ” (126). At the end of the novel, Charles Leiden—the man who bought into the promises of technology—is emotionally broken; his life’s work has been betrayed (as he sees it), and his son Arthur is lost to him, at first emotionally and then physically. In contrast, Jakob Keter—who turned from science to the study of the spiritual—is alive and well and living in Jerusalem, anticipating further study with his protégé, Gershon (*Lights* 370). Keter is no believer, but in the novel, he represents the possibilities of faith vis-à-vis those of science. “In the atomic age,” Abramson observes, “religion offers the only light available” (128). Keter’s role in *Lights* not only evokes the mystical aspects of the biblical Jacob’s life but also comments on the pitfalls of science and the positive possibilities of religion.

CHAPTER 4

DAVITA'S HARP

“One of these things is not like the others”—when comparing *Davita's Harp* to the novels thus far examined, one might recall that song from the children's TV show *Sesame Street*. These books feature young male protagonists—practicing Jews reared in traditionalist circles and living in the World War II era or later; in their worlds, secular politics come in a distant second (at best) to theological differences. Not so with *Davita's Harp*. For much of this 1985 novel, the circle is not traditionalist, the main character is not practicing, and theology is not a primary concern. The narrative begins in the late 1920's, and politics is a key element. But most important, the central figure is not male—*Davita's Harp* boasts Chaim Potok's first female protagonist, Ilana Davita Chandal. (Indeed, with the exception of a Korean woman who shares the spotlight in the 1992 novel *I Am the Clay*, Ilana is the only female protagonist in Potok's novels.) Critic Victoria Aarons, in an essay on female Jewish-American authors, notes a penchant for characters who “find themselves paradoxically alienated from and drawn to a heritage from which they are excluded Often, such characters are torn between a longing for the past, for a sense of absolutes (rituals, traditions, beliefs), and a determination to forge ahead . . .” (393). Although not written about Ilana, Aarons's description fits her in several ways. As *Davita's Harp* progresses, Ilana is both drawn to and alienated from her Jewish heritage; she is affected by her past and also faces her future with a certain determination.

Nor is the protagonist the only way in which *Davita's Harp* is “not like the others”; the novel's Jacob figure is distinct as well. In *The Promise*, the *Asher Lev* books, and *The Book of Lights*, these characters are teachers either by profession (Jacob Kalman and Jakob Keter) or in their role (Jacob Kahn). They also are not emotionally close to the main characters (unless one counts the antagonism between Kalman and Reuven Malter as a sort of negative intimacy).

Again, not so in *Davita's Harp*. Jakob Daw is a European writer, a friend of the young Ilana's mother, and he initially appears as the parents' fellow political activist. But almost immediately, the child and the writer begin to cultivate a certain familial relationship; he becomes "Uncle Jakob." And as the narrative progresses, the stories that he creates for her spark her imagination—a faculty that Potok sees as a tool for "coming to terms with unbearable reality" (Kauvar 69) and one that is intertwined with the clash between traditionalist Judaism and Western feminism that is key to the later part of the book.

"We are going to build a new world"

If Asher Lev's fellow Hasidim want to make the world holy, Channah and Michael Chandal, Ilana's parents, are no less ambitious. Zealous advocates for Communism, Channah is an intellectual social worker and lapsed Jew, and Michael is a journalist and lapsed Episcopalian. When Ilana complains about her mother's habit of answering queries about word meanings by going into a term's history, Channah replies that "everything has a past. . . . If you don't know the past, you can't understand the present and plan properly for the future. We are going to build a new world, Ilana. How can we ignore the past?" (10) The Chandals have a burning vision for the future of America and the world, but they (and indeed all of the novel's principal adult figures) are individuals with a past—a past that gradually emerges as the narrative progresses and that helps the reader to "understand the present" in which they exist.

Ilana's childhood world is a somewhat unstable one. "We moved often, every year or so One winter we moved twice in three months" (5–6). These uprootings often are linked to the Chandals' activism, and particularly their penchant for noisy home gatherings marked by leftist political discussions and music. "Sometimes the singing was so loud I was sure it could be heard all through the house and perhaps even in the street," Ilana notes (9). One meeting ends in "shouts, arguments, threats, and the sounds of things breaking Two weeks later we moved again" (10). (This episode foreshadows the party fractiousness that will loom large later in the novel.) Ilana's childhood also is marked by the death of a sickly infant brother and the

subsequent illness of her mother. For a few weeks Channah is cared for by Sarah Chandal, Michael's sister, a devoutly Christian nurse who tells her niece stories about novelist George Sand, Pocahontas, and pioneer women who had to cope with their husbands' long absences. "What do you think the women did in all that lonely time? . . . They used their imagination," Sarah tells Ilana (16). The aunt's tales link two key themes of the book: women (notably women whose lives are made more difficult by the actions of men) and the use of the imagination.

When Ilana is eight years old, the writer Jakob Daw appears in her apartment:

He had a wide forehead, straight black hair, thin arching dark eyebrows, and an aquiline nose that seemed almost knifelike. . . . The chin was pointed, the cheeks slightly concave. His smooth face and forehead were shockingly pale. I had never before seen anyone with such chalky features. . . . He was a small man, not much taller than my mother, thinly boned, with delicate features and white hands and narrow shoulders. He looked fragile and infirm. (34–35)

The description evokes an almost elfin quality; this, along with a chronic cough and a "raspy" voice (35)—Daw was a victim of poison gas during World War I—gives him the air of being much older than he apparently is. Yet the effects are not always negative: "A quality of intense power seemed to radiate from his fragility, from his hooded eyes and hoarse voice, from his occasional cough," Ilana thinks upon hearing him speak at an activist meeting (38). He also displays a certain Old World formality in his speech. "Your parents did not do you justice when they told me about you," he says to Ilana when they meet. "A Viking beauty. Clearly your father's side dominates, at least on the outside" (35). He and Michael embark on a multi-city series of lectures and meetings for leftist causes, but one night he comes to Ilana's bedroom and tells her a story about a little bird that finds itself in a beautiful land that is haunted by both war and a pervasive music. The bird, deciding that perhaps the melody clouds the people's understanding of their cruelties and thus enables them to continue, decides to search for the source of the music and halt it if possible (41–42).

Jakob Daw stopped. There was silence.

I asked quietly, "Did the bird find the music?"

"He is still searching."

I thought a moment. "I don't think I like the story." (42)

The bird's cryptic adventures become an ongoing element in the relationship between the two.

The family spends the summer of 1936 at the Brooklyn community of Sea Gate, where Ilana attends a political meeting during which Michael comments on trouble brewing in Spain:

My own feeling is that we're seeing the start of a long civil war. I think that Germany and Italy will probably come in on the side of Franco. The only power that will stand against the Fascists will be Russia. . . . The alternatives are going to be an active alliance either with communism or with fascism, or neutrality—which will be the same as a passive alliance with fascism. And we know what choice decent people will make. (76)

The Chandals fervently believe that the Soviet Union and Communism represent the future and (although they do not express it this way) that Fascism is the political version of the *sitra achra*. Thus, it is no surprise when Michael leaves his family to cover the Spanish Civil War. "He will be hurt if he is not more careful," says a letter from Daw, who is also in Europe. But the journalist is consumed by his cause, Daw says: "He answers that all the world is in peril now and if the Fascists win we are all doomed" (125). Soon Michael does return, trying to recover from grenade shrapnel and jaundice (128), but he is determined to go back to Spain as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Ilana has been quietly investigating her Jewish heritage, going to synagogue services and talking with David Dinn, the young son of Ezra Dinn, her mother's devout cousin. As her parents discuss Michael's return to Spain, Ilana thinks:

If there was no snowstorm tomorrow morning, I would go again to the synagogue. That was better than sitting home listening to all the talk about Spain and Franco and Hitler and Stalin and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and

the bombing of Madrid and the battle for the Jarama and seeing in my mind pictures of arms and legs everywhere. (143)

A rift is forming between Ilana's values and those of her parents—religion on one hand and politics on the other.

Separations

After Michael returns to Spain, Ilana and Channah get word of an attack near his last known location. Soon their fears and a third-hand story by another journalist recently in Spain are confirmed: "My mother turned the pages of *The New York Times*. Again there was my father's picture and a headline: JOURNALIST MICHAEL CHANDAL, 36, DEAD IN GUERNICA RAID" (189). The Communist Party members in New York honor him, but that is not enough for Ilana, and she finds herself standing and praying for him during a synagogue service. "There has to be more for you, Papa, than just one memorial service," she thinks. "Can one recite the Kaddish for a father who wasn't a Jew? I didn't care. I went on" (200). Ilana's journey to her mother's old faith, then, is marked by a certain unorthodoxy—not merely her saying Kaddish for a Gentile but also her recitation of a prayer traditionally reserved for men.

Shortly after Michael's death, Jakob Daw returns to America from Spain; one Friday evening he requests that Ezra Dinn lead the traditional Havdoloh ceremony that marks the beginning of the Sabbath. "In Madrid," Daw recalls, "I once said to myself that if I came out alive I would do something that would make my grandfather happy. . . . Once I said it very loudly in Barcelona so I should be heard above the machine-gun fire by whoever or whatever listens to such promises" (210). As Ezra begins the ceremony, he notes that its name means *separation*—"We separate the Shabbos from the other days of the week" (211). And separations are at work: for Channah and Ilana in the form of Michael's death, and for Daw in the form of Communist politics. Explaining to a distressed Channah why he has left the party, he recounts a bloody episode among leftists in Barcelona: "They slaughtered anarchists, Trotskyists, P.O.U.M. people. Stalin's hand purged Barcelona. . . . It was more important for the Communists in

Barcelona to kill anti-Stalinist workers than to kill Fascists” (214). But his renunciation of Stalinism makes no difference to his foes in the U.S. government, and he is arrested and deported. Ilana, stunned by this second loss within months, suffers a nervous breakdown and is nursed back to health by her Aunt Sarah at the Chandal farmhouse in Canada. She later begins to go to school at the yeshiva attended by David Dinn. Channah fills her hours with work and other activities in an effort to stave off loneliness; she dates a leftist history scholar and even plans to marry him—but then comes word of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, a handshake between the avatars of Communism and Fascism that shatters Channah’s faith in the party. “In the weeks that followed she seemed to grow old before my eyes. . . . She seemed to be growing smaller and smaller,” Ilana recalls. “She went to work, prepared our meals, wrote letters . . . but all the light was gone from her, and I barely knew who she was. There were no more meetings in our apartment” (297). The marriage plans evaporate; now it is Channah’s turn to break down, and like her daughter, she spends time recovering under Sarah’s ministrations in Canada while Ilana stays with neighbors. “Davita, how can you know what it means to have your dreams collapse all about you?” Sarah writes in a letter (302).

Upon her recovery, Channah becomes closer to Ezra; the two marry, and Channah returns to being a practicing Jew. “She had two pasts now,” muses Ilana, who welcomes her new stepfather and family life. “On occasion I saw returning to her eyes the old dark brooding look. During her years with my father she had thought often about her religious past; now she reflected upon her Communist past. She seemed unable to bring together those two parts of herself. And that haunted her” (315). Then news reaches the family that Jakob Daw has died in Marseilles, and Channah announces her determination to say Kaddish for him. Ezra quietly objects: “But you don’t have to. You shouldn’t. It falls into the category of a Commandment that doesn’t need to be performed. It has no meaning in the eyes of God.” Channah, however, is determined—“It has meaning in my eyes, Ezra” (322)—although her husband’s prediction that it will cause trouble at the synagogue comes true. Yet the final face-off between nascent feminism

and Jewish traditionalism involves Ilana rather than her mother, when she is passed over for her yeshiva's highest academic prize, the Akiva Award, because of her sex. A perturbed Ezra probes the matter and discovers the reason:

Authorities in high academies of learning . . . had let it be known through intermediaries that they would look with disapproval upon a yeshiva where a girl was publicly shown to be the best student of a graduating class that had boys in it. . . . [This had been] a statement of strong policy from some of the most powerful figures in the Torah world. What sort of future students of Torah would come out of a class where the best student was a girl? And how could a high academy of Torah learning accept any boy from such a class? (363)

The entire family is appalled by the incident; after graduation, Ilana thinks: "I had wanted to enter Jewish history. I had wanted to be part of that warm and wondrous world—and they wouldn't let me. . . . An injustice had been performed by a world that taught justice. How could I live in that world now? How could I be part of its heart and soul, its core?" (366) Yet, using her imagination, she gains a small bit of solace by giving her undelivered graduation speech to Jakob Daw, her father, and her Aunt Sarah, and later begins to tell a story to her new baby sister. If Ilana finds a way to live in the world that has so greatly disappointed her—and that is far from clear—it appears that her imagination will be her helpmeet.

The daughter of Jacob

Of the four Jacob figures examined here, Daw is probably the least similar to his biblical forebear. Unmarried, childless, and atheistic (210), he clearly is not a modern mirror image of a polygamous patriarch with a large family and a record of interactions with God. Nevertheless, certain parallels exist. Like Jacob of old, Daw is part of what might be called (for lack of a better term) a romantic polygon. As mentioned before, Jacob inadvertently acquires two wives (Leah and Rachel), who in their battle for domestic and reproductive dominance send their handmaidens (Bilhah and Zilpah) to Jacob's bed in an early version of surrogate motherhood.

Jacob is the one man connected with four women in a single household. Jakob Daw, as noted, is unmarried—but like the other principal male characters in *Davita's Harp*, he also is part of Channah's romantic history. "Uncle Jakob knew Mama in Vienna, and Mr. Dinn knew Mama in New York," Ilana says to her father, talking about her mother's youth. "That's right," Michael replies. "The three of us were in love with your mother, and she married me" (140). Thus, in a sexual reversal of the situation in Genesis, Jakob Daw is one of four men (including the leftist historian Charles Carter) connected to one woman. Further, like the biblical figures who share a household, all of the men linked to Channah share space with her in some sense—Michael and Ezra because she is married to them, Jakob because he is a houseguest. (Carter does not live with Channah during their relationship, but it is strongly hinted that the two are physically intimate at her home on at least one occasion [291].)

Jakob Daw does become something of a father figure to Ilana, but in a manner different from that of his counterparts in Potok's other books. Kalman, Kahn, and Keter play teacher to the protagonists in *The Promise*, the *Asher Lev* novels, and *The Book of Lights*; their "father" relationship is one of direct academic, theological, or artistic influence. With Daw and Ilana, the link is primarily an emotional one; Daw is the uncle whom Ilana has never had, and the two develop a bond. The fact that Jakob and Channah share a romantic past may play a part in this. "Mama, would you have married Papa if Jakob Daw had been in America?" Ilana asks at one point (105). There is no indication that she finds this possibility unpleasant—in contrast to her negative feelings about her mother's romance with Charles Carter—which along with her consternation at Daw's deportment suggests that she views him as a surrogate father.

The primary "Jacob theme" in *Davita's Harp* is actually embodied not in Daw but rather in Davita and two other characters in their mirroring of Dinah, the only named daughter of the biblical patriarch. Dinah is the child of Leah and the full sister of Simeon and Levi, among others. Jacob and his family settle on a piece of land purchased from the family of the Canaanite leader Hamor. One day, Dinah catches the eye of Hamor's son Shechem; he rapes

her, but being “strongly drawn” to her, he speaks “tenderly” to Dinah and then asks his father to arrange a marriage. Dinah’s brothers are infuriated but deceptively acquiesce to the request on the agreed-upon condition that every male in the town be circumcised (Gen. 33:18–34:24).

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi . . . took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and went away. The other sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled. (34:25–27)

In an epilogue, Jacob tells Levi and Simeon that this wholesale revenge has made their small clan vulnerable to united retaliation on the Canaanites’ part. However, the brothers simply retort, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” (34:30–31) In terms of Potok’s novels, the vital factor in this narrative is the rape rather than the slaughter—the committing of a crime or injustice against a woman (in this case, a daughter of Israel) that involves her sex in some way.

In *Davita’s Harp*, the echoes of Dinah appear first in the minor character Teresa, a young girl about Ilana’s age, a refugee from the Spanish Civil War who speaks briefly at a political meeting. Ilana later follows her out of the room and finds her in a bedroom:

I stepped inside and peered behind the door and saw her sitting on the floor against the wall near the corner of the room, her arms around her legs, her chin on her knees, her eyes closed. She was rocking slowly back and forth, hugging herself tightly. A low, soft, tremulous wail came from her lips and filled the dimness of the large bedroom like an icy mist. (81)

Ilana attempts to comfort her, but she cries, “No touch me!” (81). As Ilana, her parents, and Daw are walking home later, Ilana asks about the meaning of the word *raped*, which she overheard applied to Teresa during the meeting. Channah’s reaction is significant: “ ‘It means to hurt someone very, very badly,’ my mother said in a voice I could barely hear” (82–83). Channah’s manner suggests that she has more than a theoretical understanding of the word, and this

indeed proves to be the case. When Ilana reveals that her Aunt Sarah has given her religious storybooks, her mother says she doesn't like to see her reading such material. "Christians once hurt me," she says. "I don't—," but then she stops. Ilana questions her further. "'During the big war. Cossacks and Poles. Christians.' She seemed to shrink into herself, to grow smaller and smaller before my eyes" (135). Channah once again uses the word *hurt*, and her reticence indicates that she is thinking about more than simple injury. Further, her posture echoes that of Teresa—the Spanish girl has "her arms around her legs, her chin on her knees, . . . hugging herself tightly," and Channah seems to "shrink into herself, to grow smaller and smaller." Later in the novel, she and Ilana go to a movie in two men attack a young woman. "Nothing of the brutality was shown," Ilana recalls; "the gaps were left to the imagination. Afterward my mother came out of the theater and hurried away as if I were not there" (261–62). Channah apologizes to her daughter, criticizing "capitalist exploiters of the working class" who "show movies like that to make money" (262). As in the episode with Teresa, Channah's reaction suggests a personal experience but like the film, Potok's narrative leaves the details to the imagination. Further, in both this incident and her remark to Ilana about being "hurt," Channah links the violent deed to something beyond itself—to capitalism in the former case and Christianity in the latter. This last is borne out even further in Channah's most explicit discussion of what happened to her. Recalling why she went to study in Vienna, she tells Ilana how Russian soldiers attacked her and killed her sister and grandfather during a pogrom. "They hurt me very badly, Ilana. . . . How I hated those soldiers!" she says. "I remember one of them wore a cross on top of his tunic, and when he—when he—" (268). She does not finish the sentence, but the implication of rape is clear, as is her association of it with Christianity. Thus, Channah's experience clearly is a mirror of Dinah's, especially given that both women are Hebrews attacked by Gentiles.

Ilana's participation in this theme is metaphorical rather than literal; unlike her mother and Teresa, she is not physically assaulted. However, she is the subject of a personal injustice that is attributable to men and specifically linked to her sex: Even though a top official at her

yeshiva acknowledges that she is the best student in her class, she does not receive the prize because she is a girl. An upset Ezra Dinn discovers that influential Jewish figures had made it clear that no respectable yeshiva would honor a girl as its most capable student. Ilana wonders:

What else would they steal from me in the coming years? I would accomplish something, and they would tell me I couldn't have it because I was a girl. I had made this community my home, and now I felt betrayed by it. It was like turning a corner in one of the neighborhoods where I had lived as a child and never knowing if that gang leader with the pimply face and glittering eyes would suddenly come upon me. (365)

Ilana compares the uncertainty that she now faces with the fear of a vicious boy from her childhood. In both cases, male figures threaten to prey upon her vulnerability. Further, as with Dinah, the wrong done to Ilana springs from the community around her—in Dinah's case, the influential local family that sold her father the land on which she lived; in Ilana's case, the religious community that she had joined and to whom she is linked through her mother and stepfather. Interestingly enough, Potok drew this episode directly from life—in this case, that of his spouse, Adena, who was bereft of a class valedictory award. "My wife has never fully gotten over that experience," Potok says in a 1986 interview. "It's one of those scars that just stay with you for the rest of your life, and my wife was thirteen years old at the time" (Kauvar 82). As *Davita's Harp ends*, it appears quite likely that like Adena Potok, Ilana will be permanently affected by the injustice done her by male authority figures. Thus, the attack on the daughter of the biblical Jacob is mirrored directly in the lives of Teresa and Channah (a physical descendant of Jacob) and metaphorically in the life of Ilana (a physical descendant of the patriarch and an emotional "child" of Daw), thereby establishing another Jacob theme in Potok's work.

"Things from his imagination"

One of the themes of *Davita's Harp* is the use of imagination—particularly how it can be employed to cope with reality. The concept initially surfaces when the visiting Sarah Chandal

tells her niece “stories about Pilgrims and Indians and lonely women who used their imagination to fight their loneliness. . . . [S]ometimes I saw the women inside my eyes.” (16) As noted before, this episode links women and imagination, but it also depicts imagination as a method of dealing with difficult reality—specifically the loneliness experienced by American pioneer women. Further, Ilana’s own imagination is fired by her aunt’s stories: “I saw the women inside my eyes.” She also notes that her mother would tell her stories about “Poland and Russia and sometimes about an evil witch named Baba Yaga” (16), and that her father would regale her with tales of “Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Baron Munchausen, and other such gentlemen of fabled accomplishment” (19). (It may not be coincidental that in a novel dealing with male-female issues, the aunt and mother tell stories about women and the father tells stories about men; perhaps this is Potok’s way of saying that each sex tends to favor its own.) However, in keeping with the link between the Jacob figures and the key themes of the novels, the primary wielder of imagination in *Davita’s Harp* is Jakob Daw.

When the eight-year-old Ilana first hears that a writer is coming to visit, she asks, “Is Jakob Daw from Maine?” and “Does Jakob Daw write ideas?” (22) This suggests that she defines *writer* in terms of her father, a Maine-born practitioner of what might be called advocacy journalism. But Channah quickly sets the record straight. “You could say that he writes ideas” but also “things from his imagination,” she tells her daughter (22). From the novel’s first mention of Daw, then, he is linked to the use of the imagination. When he and Ilana meet, she asks him, “Mr. Daw, do you write stories?” (36), and his tales indeed prove to be a key factor in their relationship. Over the course of the novel, Daw tells (orally or via letter) a number of parable-esque stories—generally to Ilana herself, although he reads one aloud at the political meeting at which the girl Teresa appears. These stories can be briefly described thus:

The Bird Story—“A little bird with black feathers and short wings and a small red spot under each of its large dark eyes” finds himself in a beautiful land haunted by both war and a

lovely, lulling music. Believing that ending the music might awaken the land's inhabitants to the nature of their cruelties, the bird begins to search for the melody's source (41–42).

The Horse Story—“A young, strong, gray horse” lives in a valley that borders a mountain range inhabited by a herd of powerful black horses as well as a plain that is home to beautiful white horses. The gray horse, dissatisfied with his own “very dull between-world” but ignored by both herds, searches for other gray horses. Unsuccessful, he returns to his valley and decides to join the dark herd. However, during a storm he is struck by lightning that burns him “black, all black,” killing him (62–64).

The Girl Story—A beautiful and mysterious young woman who hails from a distant land lives on a grassy slope near a river and sells fragrant powdered flowers in a village. One day the bird from the first story arrives and finds that the lulling music he hears seems especially strong near the village and the girl's cottage. He watches the girl, who gradually seems wearied by her work. At last she goes down to the river and puts her hand into the water, which becomes polluted. The young woman leaves and is never seen again; the bird concludes that she is not the source of the music and continues his quest (78–80).

The War Story—The bird flies across a “stormy ocean” and comes to “an even stormier land.” Terrible fighting and the distracting music are everywhere. He discovers a dead white horse and sees troops kill children and elderly people who are reportedly sympathetic to the soldiers' foes. Believing that the music's source cannot possibly be here, he decides to return to “the land of mountains and rivers and plains and great forests” and so begins “his westward journey back across the great sea” (151–52).

The Door Harp Story—The bird flies across the ocean, but he is pained by “bits and pieces of broken dreams that kept piercing his troubled heart like shards of glass.” Weary and no longer interested in the strange music, he becomes smaller and smaller as he flies. When he arrives in the land, he hears a different melody coming from a house on a quiet lane; when a little girl opens the door, he flies inside and finds that a door harp is the source of this new

music—"sweet but not false, a comfort but not a deceiving caress; a music of innocence." The bird, now tiny, builds a nest inside the door harp, and "there he lives to this day" (226–27).

When read in light of the rest of the novel, these stories clearly are Daw's allegorical versions of events in his own life. The horse and the bird both represent him; the bird in particular, with its "short wings" and "large dark eyes," evokes Daw's frail appearance. (Sternlicht, commenting on this "sickly, unkempt" character, notes his name and compares him to "a jackdaw, a crowlike bird that is unattractive to humans but very intelligent" [113]. In similar fashion, Michael Chandal refers to Daw as "a strange guy" a few weeks after meeting him [*Davita* 43].) The Bird Story can be seen as Daw's comment on his politics. The haunting music reflects the Marxist concept of a false consciousness that blinds human beings to the truth about the world, in this case enabling the continuation of war and other violence. The bird (Daw) hopes to quench this distraction and awaken people to their plight. The Horse Story suggests a young man confronted by two ways of life—probably secularism (the black horses) and faith (the white horses)—neither of which he finds fully comfortable. Alienated, he tries to find others like himself but fails. He opts to cast his lot with the "black" way of life but pays a terrible price—presumably the loss of his "white" side. The lightning may also function as a foreshadowing of Daw's eventual and utter disillusionment with Stalinist Communism, in that he joins a group but also finds metaphorical death therein.

The Girl Story is less clear than the others, but it obviously reflects the role of Channah in Daw's life, most likely their years together in Vienna. (Significantly, after Channah hears the story, she sits "white-faced and motionless" [80].) Like the girl in the story, Channah is a beautiful young woman from another land (Poland) who settles near a village (Vienna) by a river (the Wien or the Danube). The lulling music is unusually strong around the village and the girl's cottage (Daw finds Vienna and Channah particularly intoxicating). However, something goes wrong, the setting is spoiled, the beautiful girl leaves, and the bird continues his quest. Here the parallels between the bird's story and Daw's are more difficult to discern, but the pollution of the

river may correspond to the effects of World War I, in which Daw was wounded. The War Story clearly allegorizes Daw's experience in battle-torn Spain; after encountering widespread fratricidal violence, the bird decides to go "westward . . . back across the great sea" to "the land of mountains and rivers and plains and great forests." (Reflecting a growing understanding of Daw, Ilana asks her mother after reading this tale, "Is Uncle Jakob coming back to America?" [152]) The Door Harp Story is Daw's final word. Wearing by war and politics, he returns to the United States; like the bird, he is diminished. However, in the house of a little girl he hears a "music of innocence" unlike the haunting societal melody whose riddle he cannot solve. The end of the story is not a "happily ever after," but the girl's presence clearly provides a refuge that has been sorely lacking.

In these tales, Daw uses his imagination to cope with the wrenching events in his life: the sociopolitical problems of society, personal alienation and philosophical angst, lost love, loneliness, and the horrors of war. Early in the novel, he remarks, "A writer is a strange instrument of our species, a harp of sorts, fine-tuned to the dark contradictions of life" (77). Daw thus links himself and his craft to the titular door harp, which Sternlicht sees as a symbol of "the receptive, creative, individual imagination" (121). The door harp, he points out, "is played by the motion [of the door], not directly by human hand" (121). This idea suggests the indirect and unpredictable nature of the imagination; just as the human action of opening a door sets the balls of a door harp in motion but cannot dictate the sounds that arise, so circumstances give rise to products of the imagination—yet those results cannot be predicted or perhaps even explained satisfactorily. Imagination's processes and products are sometimes opaque. Talking with Ilana about the then-unfinished Girl Story, Daw says that because it is not yet done, he himself does not yet know what it is about. "Perhaps I will not know what my story is about even after I complete it," he muses. "Others may have to explain it to me" (69). As the Jacob figure in *Davita's Harp*, Daw acts as a locus for this key element in the novel, modeling for Ilana the possibilities of using one's imagination to cope with life. A prominent instance of this comes at

the very end of the book. After losing the Akiva Award and the chance to speak at the graduation ceremony, feeling an “anger like a boiling juncture of tides” (366), Ilana visualizes herself flying through the door harp as well as through a picture of horses that has long been a fixture in her house. After arriving at the Chandal farmhouse in Canada, she talks about what she would have said, saluting the dead Michael and Jakob and her Aunt Sarah and discussing her fears and disappointments. “I wanted to say that I’m very frightened to be living in this world and I don’t understand most of the things I see and hear and I don’t know what will happen to me and to the family I love. . . . But they wouldn’t let me say it” (368–69). Potok remarks about this scene:

Every time Davita confronts something unbearable, she restructures it through the power of her imagination. Finally at the end of the novel when she suffers this terrible indignity, she restructures the graduation ceremony by having her uncle, her father, and her aunt there along with everything that she has imagined. . . . So you have this seesawing back-and-forth between reality that’s unbearable and the imagination that tries to rethink reality. (Kauvar 69)

As a prime example of this restructuring of reality, Potok cites Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*—the painting inspired by the Fascist attack in which Michael is killed in the novel, a painting that Ilana encounters and that she incorporates into her imaginative life. For Potok, *Guernica* is an embodiment of “the redemptive power of art. The artist, in strange fashion, redeems the horror of reality through the power of his or her art” (Kauvar 70). This is what Daw does with his stories, and what he implicitly teaches Ilana to do.

“I don’t like my imagination”

However, in *Davita’s Harp*, Potok is not merely presenting the imagination as a tool with which to re-envision reality and make it endurable; he also is contrasting the mind-set that does this with those that find the use of the imagination to be more problematic. This contrast is suggested in the same passage, cited in part previously, that introduces the overall topic:

In the chill darkness of my room I lay in my bed and listened to my Aunt Sarah from Maine telling me those stories about Pilgrims and Indians and lonely women who used their imagination to fight their loneliness. My mother never told me stories like those; her stories were about Poland and Russia and sometimes about an evil witch named Baba Yaga. I listened to my Aunt Sarah's stories and sometimes I saw the women inside my eyes. (16)

This passage draws a contrast between Sarah and her sister-in-law. In part, this can be attributed to culture; Sarah comes from the American Northeast, and Channah from Eastern Europe. But there may be more to the contrast between the two women's choices than first meets the eye. One of Sarah's ways of connecting with her niece is with stories (whether told or in the form of books), often those about religious figures. Channah, however, is of a practical bent, and by having her tell stories about "Poland and Russia" (i.e., places), Potok may be underlining a certain disregard for imagination on her part. (On the other hand, he specifically notes her familiarity with folktales about a witch, so this suggestion cannot be pressed too far.) Unlike Sarah's pioneer women who fight loneliness by using their imaginations, Channah responds to Michael's absences by keeping busy. "We have to work hard, Ilana," she says shortly after her husband leaves for Europe the first time. "That way most of the time we can forget the loneliness" (104). She also cuts her daughter off when Ilana asks whether she might have married Jakob Daw if he had been in the United States: "I don't like if questions, Ilana. They're upsetting and turn your head away from your work" (105). Channah is not an explorer of alternate realities. Unfortunately, her way of handling stressful solitude seems not always to serve her well. Her abortive relationship with the politically impeccable but uncharismatic Charles Carter, whom Ilana detests, springs at least in part from her loneliness, and Ezra Dinn indicates that (at least in his opinion) her marriage to Michael can be traced to a similar source. "Isn't one mistake enough?" he snaps in a fight with Channah over her romance with Carter, which he blames at least partly on her fraught relationship with her Hasidic father (278).

Channah rejects his assessment of her marriage as an error, but the exchange does support the implication that, ironically, choosing activity over imagination may have its downside.

An exchange between Ilana and David Dinn further develops the theme of contrasting views of imagination. After David expresses disdain for fairy tales, Ilana asks, “Don’t you like stories that come from your imagination?” The boy replies: “No. I don’t like my imagination. It keeps me awake at night. Sometimes it keeps me from studying. . . . Sometimes it shows me my mother in her grave” (207–08). Two attitudes are reflected in David’s statement. The first is that imagination’s products are not always pleasant. The other is that imagination can be seen as antithetical to the work of the intellect; in fact, David later says of his visions of his deceased mother, “It helps if I study a lot. That keeps my imagination away” (208). David thus indicates that intellect and imagination are sufficiently separate, even opposed, that he engages in academic work for the specific purpose of shutting down his imagination. In addition, because it is likely (given the culture) that the study mentioned by David is theological, the face-off that is hinted at is not merely intellect versus imagination but spirituality versus imagination. (Critic Daniel Walden comments that during Potok’s youth, the future author “realized that Rabbinic Judaism of the Talmud was rational; imagination was pagan, imagination was Greek” [20]. Thus, the tension that David describes is quite personal for his creator.)

David Dinn’s comments foreshadow the higher-profile differences over imagination that occur between Ilana and her teachers at the yeshiva. In two different episodes, Ilana uses her imagination to come up with an explanation for a particular line in the Torah—one in Genesis involving the presence of Canaanites in the Promised Land, the other in Deuteronomy noting the site where Moses speaks to the gathered Israelites. In both cases, Ilana approaches the text as she might an ordinary story, and both times her teachers find her hermeneutic unacceptable. “If people wrote the Torah, why should we bother with it?” one instructor asks her, saying: “The Torah is not stories, Ilana. The Torah is not a piece of make-believe. It is not like Shakespeare or like—what is his name?—James Joyce or like your good friend Jakob Daw” (330–31).

Ironically, the explanation that Ilana uses in each instance is one favored by Abraham ibn Ezra, an honored twelfth-century Jewish commentator. However, her instructors are so bound to a particular theory of divine inspiration that Ilana's proposals are dismissed out of hand. Thus, in the novel, imagination is presented not only as a way for dealing with life's hardships—a presentation in which the book's Jacob figure plays a central role—but as yet another battleground in the clash of traditionalist Judaism and Western secularism. For the former, the unbounded use of imagination is a theological danger; for the latter, it is a tool whose usability is hardly to be questioned. Potok's sympathies clearly lean toward the latter approach, although one of the final remarks in the novel may hint at some boundaries. As Sarah Chandal is bidding her niece farewell after her imaginary graduation speech, she says: "Be discontented with the world. But be respectful at the same time" (370). Perhaps Potok would say that even such a valuable faculty as imagination must be used with a grain of salt, so to speak.

The children of Israel

In his novels, Chaim Potok creates a fictional representation of a world unfamiliar to much of American society and literature. Writing about his portrait of one section of New York City, Joan Zlotnick states that "the borough portrayed in Potok's early novels was memorable. It was a Brooklyn never before depicted in American literature and never made familiar in the dominant American culture . . ." (17–18). Nor is it a matter of Potok's merely capturing a snapshot of life in a particular time and place. On the question of whether his work made possible a "greater emphasis on Jewish thought, theology, philosophy, scholarship, than was hitherto the case," Potok asserts: "No one tackled this material before. Or if someone tackled it, it was presented in some arcane fashion, as the ultimate in exotica" (Kremer, "Interview" 44). In his groundbreaking narratives, Potok's work offers up both the outer and inner lives of a distinctive U.S. community. To the degree that his novels suffer from scholarly neglect, our picture of Jewish-American life and literature is diminished. Critiquing the academic tendency to

concentrate on the fictional Jewry of authors such as Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, Kathryn McClymond says:

By highlighting this stream of fiction, *without noting divergent streams of writing*, critics were not just evaluating fiction. They were also glossing over the diversity of Jewish experience in America. Orthodox, particularly Hasidic Orthodox communities, were treated as throwbacks to the past, remains of the initial waves of Jewish immigration, but certainly not representative of modern Jewish life. (21, emphasis in orig.)

However, Potok's Orthodox characters are representative not only of modern Jewish life but indeed of all modern individuals for whom religious belief is a guiding force in daily life. This fact not only widens the books' possible audience but also increases their potential value to scholars. Assessing the popularity of *The Chosen*, McClymond points out that

readers of all backgrounds could see themselves in Potok's world. Potok managed to convince mainstream American readers that the personal religious crises that Orthodox, even Hasidic Jews struggled with were not unlike their own. It was not the [Jewish] *content* of the conflicts that resonated with them . . . rather, it was the *scope* and *tenor* of the conflict. (17–18, emphasis in orig.)

Catholics, Methodists, and others can find sympathetic echoes of their own spiritual struggles in Potok's stories. Further, these fictional portraits of the pious are worthy of academic attention because deep religious belief shapes society on every level from the local to the international, from the establishment of community food ministries to the chronic unrest and bloodshed in the Middle East. An academy that forgets or airily dismisses communities in which faith is central to existence is neglecting opportunities for understanding.

In his depictions of such communities, Potok shows their inhabitants as actively and emotionally engaged with the values of the secularist Western tradition that pervades their surroundings and questions their presuppositions both implicitly and explicitly. Textual criticism,

artistic philosophy, science, imagination—all of these come into play. “My subject in all my books is the interplay of the Jewish tradition with the secular twentieth century. . . . [T]he Jews that I write about are at the very heart of their Judaism and at the same time they are encountering elements that are at the very heart of the umbrella [Western] civilization,” Potok says (Kremer, “Interview” 32). In *The Promise*, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, *The Book of Lights*, *Davita’s Harp*, and *The Gift of Asher Lev*, Potok engages these issues via the Jacob figures: Kalman, Kahn, Keter, and Daw. In their interaction with the novels’ protagonists, these men embody and represent societal forces—in Kalman, textual conservatism; in Kahn, artistic freedom; in Keter, mystical religion; in Daw, imagination—that clash with other, opposing philosophical views, thereby shaping the souls of the young. Moreover, in Potok’s echoes of the Genesis narratives in his plots and characters, he has turned the biblical Jacob into a meta-character, a figure of the ancient past whose life re-emerges in the lives of his fictional descendants. Reuven Malter, Asher Lev, Gershon Loran, Ilana Davita Chandal—in their fictional bloodlines and their interactions with the Jacob figures, these are the children of Israel. Yet as Potok himself observes, Gentile readers identify with his stories as well: “they are simply translating themselves into the particular context of the boys and the fathers and the mothers and the situation that I’m writing about. So instead of being a Jew, you are a Baptist; instead of being an Orthodox Jew, you are a Catholic; and the dynamic is the *same*. The culture war is the *same*” (Ribalow 5–6). Thus, Potok’s themes are universally significant—the biblical patriarch haunts the lives of Jew and Gentile alike, and Jacob figures crop up not just in New York boroughs but elsewhere as well. In one sense or another, we are all children of Israel.

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