POTOK'S HERO JOURNEY

CREIGHTON PEDEN

In all cultures "the Hero Journey" is presented as the model to illustrate the human struggle of constantly seeking fulfillment and meaning. In brief, the hero journey usually begins in puberty, when the young person initiates the process of establishing his self-identity. An inner struggle ensues in which the youth desires to discover his true self, to discover that "good" which will fulfill his unique being. As this inner struggle manifests itself, most youth are confronted with parental and peer pressures which demand that they remain the persons which these forces conceive them to be. Due to these pressures, the majority abort the hero journey and seek fulfillment by playing roles foisted upon them by their culture, even though such role-playing negates the potential for authentic self-existence. For those who pursue the hero journey, it is necessary to break these parental and peer pressures, either symbolically or literally, and go into the "wilderness" of life to find that good which will make one a unique person. This is a long, fearful and anxious journey. Having discovered the fulfilling good, the person then must return to his people, either literally or symbolically, and share the good. This final step is necessary even though one's people will never be able to understand and accept fully the good which makes him whole.

Jewish literature offers numerous examples of the hero journey. When Moses kills the Egyptian and hides him in the sand he confronts his call to his hero journey. This leads him into the wilderness where he comes to terms with the good that makes him whole—the good of fulfilling his role as God's servant who will lead his people out of Egypt. Of course his people are never completely able to accept his good, for even in the Exodus they invariably break the Covenant each time Moses departs from them.

Jesus also offers an archetype of the Jewish hero journey. He begins his journey at puberty by teaching in the temple. In the tradition of Moses, every would-be Jewish leader announces his hero journey by going into the wilderness; Jesus shares his good with his people, knowing all the time that he will be rejected and killed.

Chaim Potok, a contemporary Jewish novelist with a rabbinical degree and a doctorate in philosophy, offers interesting insights into the hero journey in our society, especially for the intellectual from a more traditional or orthodox religious orientation. Whereas many intellectuals have rejected or dismissed their religious roots, Potok's characters love and respect these roots while at the same time modifying their religious participation in order to relate creatively to the modern scientific and technological culture. Potok's novels

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The Chosen, The Promise, My Name Is Asher Lev, and *In The Beginning* all illustrate the hero journey.

Potok's first novel, *The Chosen* (1967), depicts the hero journey of two Jewish boys. One is named Reuven, and his father, David Malter, is noted as a Talmudic scholar and teacher who uses scientific criticism in his scholarship. Reuven is very bright and is completing his high school education in a Jewish school, where a great deal of his time is spent studying the Talmud and related commentaries. At the same time he also studies secular subjects, being especially gifted in mathematics and logic. The school does not allow the use of his father's scientific approach, so Reuven must use two approaches in his study.

> I began painfully to unravel the puzzle. I did it in two ways. First, in the traditional way, by memorizing the text and the commentaries, and then inventing all sorts of questions that Rav Gersheson might ask me. I would ride the trolley, walk the streets, or lie in bed—and ask myself questions. Second, in the way my father had taught me, by attempting to find or reconstruct the correct text, the text the commentator who had offered the simple explanation must have had before him. The first way was relatively simple; it was a matter of brute memorization. The second way was tortuous. I searched endlessly through all the cross-references and all the parallel passages in the Palestinian Talmud. When I was done, I had four different versions of the text on my hands. I now had to reconstruct the text upon which the simple commentary had been based. I did it by working backward, using the commentary as a base, then asking myself what passage among the four versions the commentator could have had before him as he wrote the commentary.[1]

The central figure in this hero journey is the other boy, Danny Saunders, a brilliant youth with a photographic mind. He is a member of a large community of Russian Hasidic Jews. Although they live in Brooklyn, their way of life and view of reality are born of the soil of the land they had abandoned. Their lives have become frozen against anything that is not Jewish and Hasidic. Danny is not only the most brilliant student in this community; he is also the son and by heredity heir to the community leader—the tzaddik.

> The Hasidim had great leaders—tzaddikim, they were called, the righteous ones. Each Hasidic community had its own tzaddik, and his people would go to him with all their problems, and he would give them advice. They followed these leaders blindly. The

[1]Chaim Potok, *The Chosen.* Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1967., p. 230.

> Hasidim believed that the tzaddik was a superhuman link between themselves and God. Every act of his and every word he spoke was holy. Even the food he touched became holy.[2]

Danny's father fears the brilliance of his son, and fears that he will be tempted by the "evil one" and lose his soul. Therefore, he decides to rear his son as his father had done—in silence, never speaking to him except as they study and discuss the Talmud.

> My father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul. When his people would ask him why he was so silent with his son, he would say to them that he did not like to talk, words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart, they conceal the heart, the heart speaks through silence. One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe.[3]

Danny begins his journey around fourteen, when he starts going to the library and devouring books. Freud becomes the eyes through which he is introduced and drawn into the secular, scientific world. He teaches himself German in order to read Freud in the original. The more he reads, the more he is called to study and participate in the world of psychology—the world which repudiates the view of reality of his orthodox religion. In a conversation with Reuven, Danny explains how he feels about his father and himself.

> I don't know what he's trying to do to me with this weird silence that he's established between us, but I admire him. I think he's a great man. I respect him and trust him completely, which is why I think I can live with his silence. I don't know why I trust him, but I do. And I pity him, too. Intellectually, he's trapped. He was born trapped. I want to be able to breathe, to think what I want to think, to say the things I want to say. I'm trapped now, too. Do you know what it's like to be trapped?
>
> I shook my head slowly.
>
> "How could you possibly know?" Danny said. "It's the most hellish, choking, constricting feeling in the world. I scream with

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 265.

every bone in my body to get out of it. My mind cries to get out of it. But I can't. Not now. One day I will, though, I'll want you around on that day, friend. I'll *need* you around on that day."[4]

After much anguish, Danny finally decides to find that good—that for him is to be sought in the study of psychology—which will make him whole. Psychology and all secular subjects are evil, for they will lead one away from the Master of the Universe. Not only will Danny no longer dress as one of his people, but will begin to think, feel and act as part of the secular frame of reference. There is no way for him to fulfill the role of his religious heritage and also to participate as an authentic person in secular culture. Danny is gripped by the love-hate struggle of the hero journey—a struggle between his indebtedness to his religion and his commitment to being a realized person in the modern world.

Then he spoke his son's name.

There was silence.

Reb Saunders spoke his son's name again. Danny took his hand away from his eyes and looked at his father.

"Daniel," Reb Saunders said, speaking almost in a whisper, "when you go away to study, you will shave off your beard and earlocks?"

Danny stared at his father. His eyes were wet. He nodded his head slowly.

Reb Saunders looked at him. "You will remain an observer of the Commandments?" he asked softly.

Danny nodded again.[5]

In the opening sentence of *The Promise* (1969) Potok captures the essence of the continuing hero journey of Reuven and Danny. "All around us everything was changing in the order of things we had fashioned for ourselves."[6] The pace of change increases for Reuven on four levels as he engages in the rabbinical studies, part of his journey. On one level he comes to know a distinguished scholar named Gordon, who has devoted his life to developing "a theory for those who can no longer believe literally in God and revelation and who still wish to remain observant and not abandon the tradition."[7] Gordon becomes Reuven's friend and counsels him not to leave orthodoxy unless he is absolutely certain. Gordon points out that the crucial issue for his hero journey is how "to regard the tradition critically *and* with love . . . to love and respect what you are being taught to dissect."[8]

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 267-8.
[6] Chaim Potok, *The Promise,* Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1970, p. 13.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 100.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 312.

The second level of Reuven's journey concerns his father, whose writings are being attacked more and more as helping "the evil one" destroy the faith. This attack is increasing among his own faculty peers, as well as among the faculty of Reuven's college. In fact, Reuven's major professor leads the attack in print.

> He was writing about the implications of my father's method. . . . What were some of the insidious implications of this method of study? he wrote. If one accepted the possibility of changing the text of the Talmud, then what might happen to the laws that were based on these texts? Did one change the halachah—"halachah" is the word for Jewish law—every time one discovered a law based on a text that was thought to be incorrect? And where would such a system of study end? If one permitted oneself the right to emend the Talmud, then why not go on and emend the Five Books of Moses as well? Why not change the text of the Ten Commandments or the various other legal passages? What then would happen to the sanctity of the Bible? How was one to regard the Master of the Universe if one could simply go ahead and rewrite the Bible? How was one to regard the Revelation at Sinai? The entire fabric of the tradition would come apart as a result of this kind of method. It was a dangerous method, an insidious method; it could destroy the very heart of Yiddishkeit. And it was dangerous not only to Jews but to all religion. The gentile world also has sacred texts. What would happen to the religion of the gentiles if they used such a method upon their texts?[9]

Reuven now begins to understand the seriousness of the implications of the hero journey, for his father's attempts to share his "good" lead to his losing his tenured faculty position. Although his father is able to secure another position, the rejection by one's own is understood anew as the price for the search for truth in the hero journey.

Reuven's third level of experience focuses on his relationship with his major professor, Rav Kalman, who has recently come from Eastern Europe and the intense repressions there. Kalman represents European Jewry who, because of the concentration camps cannot believe in the goodness of humanity and must rely totally on God. In his attack on religious scholarship employing secular methods, he is attempting to save what is left of his world. For Reuven to pass the final oral exam, he must have Kalman's approval. Kalman's condition for approval is that he never again see the heretical Gordon or ever use his father's method in his future teaching and writing. As he tells Reuven: "I cannot give smicha to someone who does not stand with true

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Yiddishkeit, no matter how great a Semora student he is."[10] Although Reuven struggles tremendously with these issues, he feels compelled to be his true self—to employ his father's method where he thinks appropriate and to associate with Gordon and others with whom he chooses to associate:

> "If his signature is on your smicha it will be a great smicha, Reuven. You will have a right to be very proud of the smicha."
>
> "I'm not going to be proud of a smicha I have to lie for."
>
> "No," he said soberly, "I do not expect that you will lie in order to receive smicha. You will have to make a choice."
>
> "What choice? There is no choice. I realize tonight while you were out that I have no choice at all. He's not asking me to make a choice. He's telling me to take a stand. I'm either with him or against him. All or nothing. I'm disgusted with the whole business. I don't want smicha if the price I have to pay for it is to stop thinking. He can keep his smicha."[11]

What Reuven does is to force Kalman to make the decision whether to give him smicha, knowing that if he turns him down Reuven will move to Gordon's seminary. The teacher learns that his student approaches the Torah with love and respect, even though he is committed to living in the secular world. Kalman allows Reuven to receive smicha and also to remain and teach in the college, but warns him that "it is a dangerous method. And I will fight you if I learn you are using it too much in your classes."[12] What Reuven and Kalman both learn is that each orientation has an important contribution to make, as explained by Reuven's father.

> "There is so much about them that is distasteful to me. But they are remarkable people."
>
> "I wish they weren't so afraid of new ideas."
>
> "You want a great deal, Reuven. The Messiah has not yet come. Will new ideas enable them to go on singing and dancing?"
>
> "We can't ignore the truth, abba."
>
> "No," he said. "We cannot ignore the truth. At the same time, we cannot quite sing and dance as they do." He was silent a moment. "That is the dilemma of our time, Reuven. I do not know what the answer is."[13]

Reuven's final level of experience refers to his relationship to Danny and Danny's journey. Danny is now in his final period of graduate study in clinical

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 180.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 200-1.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 353.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 325-6.

psychology, with his dissertation research developing around the therapy of a young boy named Michael. It is because of Reuven that Danny has been requested to treat Michael, for Michael is Gordon's son. Reuven has dated Gordon's neice, Rachel. Rachel and Danny become friends, initially centered around the common friendship with Reuven and the common concern and interest about Michael. Danny's relationship with Rachel develops, and they are finally married in an Hasidic wedding.

The intrigue of Danny's journey is intense. He is wrestling with the conflict between his orthodox religion, which views God as the directing Master of the Universe intimately involved in the struggle of individuals and groups, and his chosen psychological life-orientation, which views humans as animals struggling in the evolutionary process of natural selection. This conflict deepens on an intellectual level, but it also is very visible on a practical level, as Danny must violate many religious rules (i.e., use of Sabbath, etc.) in order to practice his profession.

The marriage between Danny and Rachel adds other dimensions of conflict, for their coming together combines families representing the most orthodox and liberal elements of religion. This is well illustrated in the conversation between Abraham and Ruth Gordon, Rachel's aunt and uncle.

> She could not understand Rachel marrying a Hasid, even a Hasid like Daniel Saunders. She grew quite heated and her eyes became bright with anger and her voice filled the room with scorn.
>
> Abraham Gordon pulled at an ear lobe and sat listening to her patiently. "The attraction of opposites," he said finally with a smile.
>
> "That is nonsense!" she snapped. She was really angry. I had the feeling that Rachel's coming marriage to Danny was presenting her with some kind of bewildering challenge.
>
> "I would wager," Abraham Gordon said quietly, "that Rachel is attracted to Daniel's God, and Daniel is attracted to Rachel's twentieth century. Is that nonsense, Ruth?"
>
> "There is a great deal of beauty in that sort of faith," Abraham Gordon murmured.
>
> "I find no beauty in nonsense," she said coldly.[14]

The hero journey leads Reuven and Danny into the secular world to discover themselves, but at the same time their love for the tradition keeps them within its scope and compels them to share their good with their own. A conversation about the pending wedding provides an insight into Danny's mind.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 329.

"Aha!" Danny said, grinning as he came over to us and sat down on the other side of Rachel. "My friend. My best friend. I turn my back and suddenly my best friend reminds me I'm in the twentieth century."

"I'm practicing for the wedding."

"That's not the kind of wedding it's going to be, best friend."

"A Hasidic wedding," I said in a tone of mock despair. "I will have to dust off my caftan and fur-trimmed cap."

Danny and Rachel laughed.

"I will have to dust off my caftan and practice some dances and songs. It's been a long time."

"Yes," Danny said, suddenly serious. "For you. But it's my world, best friend. And I haven't seen anything outside that's better."

"Nothing?" I said.

"Nothing I can't use and still stay inside."

"As long as you take some of the good things."

"I'll see to that," Rachel said softly.[15]

For Reuven there is the understanding that the struggle will continue, but that he now carries the responsibility of contributing to the tradition.

> I did not understand them and they did not understand me, and our quarrels would continue. But I was part of the chain of the tradition now, as much a guardian of the sacred Promise as Rav Kalman and Hasidim were, and it would be a different kind of fight from now on. I had won the right to make my own beginning. And I thought I might try to learn something from the way Rav Kalman and the Hasidim had managed to survive and rebuild their world. What gave them the strength to mold smoke and ashes into a new world? I could use some of that strength for the things I wanted to do with my own life.[16]

In *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), Potok shifts the hero journey to the world of an artist. In order to understand Asher Lev's journey, it is necessary to keep in mind that drawing and painting are a waste of one's time and energy which should be devoted to tasks approved in the orthodox religion. This rejection of Asher's compelling artistic self is repeatedly seen in comments by his father.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 269.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 355.

> He said to me once, gazing at one of my drawings, "You have nothing better to do with your time, Asher? Your grandfather would not have liked you to waste so much time with foolishness."[17]
>
> "Many people feel they are in possession of a great gift when they are young. But one does not always give in to a gift. One does with a life what is precious not only to one's self but one's own people. That is the way our people live, Asherel. Do you understand me?"[18]

Although Asher grows up as a gifted child who is constantly drawing and later painting, his father and mother both are on the staff of the tzaddik (leader) of an international Hasidic community. The father is assigned the task of developing educational centers across Europe in order to strengthen the bonds of the faithful and to preserve and pass on the traditions to future generations. Asher does not want to move to Europe, so the father goes alone. After several years of being in Europe most of the time, the father is joined by the mother, leaving Asher to live with an uncle. All these decisions are made with the advice of or at the direction of the tzaddik.

Keeping in mind this general plot structure, let us focus on Asher's hero journey. He understands very young that he is different as an artist in the manner he views reality:

> That was the night I began to realize that something was happening to my eyes. I looked at my father and saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes. I could feel my eyes moving across the lines around his eyes and into and over the deep furrows on his forehead. . . . I could feel lines and points and planes. I could feel texture and color . . . I felt myself flooded with the shapes and textures of the world around me. I closed my eyes. But I could still see that way inside my head. I was seeing with another pair of eyes that had suddenly come awake. I sat still in my chair and felt frightened.[19]

His school work, both religious and secular, suffers because his view of reality leads him away from these areas of concern to dealing with ways of expressing the feeling-tones of life. As Asher moves into puberty, the tzaddik arranges for him to be taught and directed in his artistic development by Jacob Kahn, an

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[17]Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev,* Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1972, p. 17.

[18]*Ibid.,* p. 128.

[19]*Ibid.,* p. 105-6.

old Jewish sculptor who is internationally famous. Kahn still respects his religious heritage but is true to his secular role as an artist. He does not try to destroy Asher's faith, but he does lead him into exploring and mastering various facets of artistic expression, such as the nude. Painting and displaying the nude form is forbidden in Asher's religious tradition, so his parents and friends cannot view his first show.

By the time of the first show, Asher is a young man. He needs to leave Kahn and his supportive environment and go and develop in isolation his own style. After exploring European art, he settles in Paris near one of the schools begun by his father. Eventually he begins to paint from his childhood experiences. He paints his "mystic ancestors" about whom he has heard so much. A most vivid scene in his mind is his mother always standing at the window waiting on him or looking and worrying as she awaits his father's return from one of his many trips.

> But I could begin to feel her torment now as she waited by our living-room window for both her husband and her son. What did she think of as she stood by the window? Of the phone call that had informed my father of her brother's death? Would she wait now in dread all the rest of her live, now for me, now for my father, now for us both—as she had once waited for me to return from a museum, as she had once waited for my father to return in a snowstorm? And I could understand her torment now; I could see her waiting endlessly with fear that someone she loved would be brought to her dead. I could feel her anguish.[20]

It was this scene that Asher felt compelled to paint. He struggles to get on canvas his mother's feelings but cannot discover the form which will work. Finally he is forced to use the only form in western culture that will convey the pain and suffering his mother has experienced—that form is the crucifixion:

> With charcoal, I drew the frame of the living-room window of our Brooklyn apartment. I drew the strip of wood that divided the window and the slanting bottom of the Venetian blind a few inches from the top of the window. On top—not behind this time, but on top—of the window I drew my mother in her housecoat, with her arms extended along the horizontal of the blind, her wrists tied to it with the cords of the blind, her legs tied at the ankles to the vertical of the inner frame with another section of the cord of the blind. I arched her body and twisted her head. . . . I split my mother's head into balanced segments, one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upward. The torment, the tearing anguish I felt

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 309.

in her, I put into her mouth, into the twisting curve of her head, the arching of her slight body, the clenching of her small fists, the taut downward pointing of her thin legs. . . . For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other's throats. For the Master of the Universe, whose suffering world I do not comprehend . . . for all these I created this painting—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. [21]

His European paintings make up Asher's second art show. Since there are no nudes, his parents and friends come. He has returned to share with his people that good which makes him whole, but he knows they cannot accept his contribution. Although his paintings are bought by important galleries and collectors, Asher's parents and friends feel betrayed. The tzaddik calls Asher in and tells him he must leave the community, for he no longer belongs:

> "Go to the yeshiva in Paris. You did not grow up there. People will not be so angry in Paris. There are no memories in Paris of Asher Lev."
>
> I was quiet.
>
> "Asher Lev," the Rebbe said softly, "You have crossed a boundary. I cannot help you. You are alone now. I give you my blessings."[22]

The final novel to be considered, *In The Beginning* (1975), is more autobiographical than Potok's other writings and offers essential insights into the childhood foundations of the hero journey. The main character, David Lurie, is raised in a form of Jewish fundamentalism that vibrates in a state of complex tensions. These tensions include the Depression, the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the growing power of secular culture in all aspects of life. As in *The Chosen* and *The Promise,* the hero journey involves a confrontation between scientific Biblical criticism and his orthodox religious tradition. David feels compelled to consider whether the Torah was created by Jews or by God. Almost all his spare time is devoted to reading books in Biblical scholarship, mostly books not acceptable to his tradition. His parents, teachers and peers all protest such reading, believing "that no one can read such books without

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 312-3.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 347-8.

being affected by them.'"[23] David is much hurt by this rejection, for he believes that his journey is a necessary contribution he must make in fulfilling himself and being responsible to his religious heritage.

> It hurt me that no one believed me. It hurt that they thought me close to or already beyond the borderline of orthodoxy because I was reading scholarly books about the Bible. It hurt that no one understood I had entered a war zone, that the battlefield was the Torah, that the casualties were ideas, and that without the danger of serious exposure the field of combat could not be scouted, the nature of the enemy could not be learned, the weapons and strategy of counterattack could not be developed. It hurt that no one around me seemed to understand any of that. I felt myself a lone combatant on a torn field of battle advancing fearfully and without support against a dark and powerful foe.[24]

Although David's studies lead him to a new respect for the Torah, he comes to understand that while the Torah is not the Word of God to Moses, neither is it infantile stories, fables, legends and borrowed pagan myths. He wants to find out just what it is and what it has to say in contemporary culture, so he decides to study for a doctorate in Bible at a secular university. The response of his family is expressed by his father: " 'I could forgive you anything,' he said without preliminaries. 'But I cannot forgive you going to the goyim to study Torah.' "[25]

Chaim Potok offers in his novels the constant and repeated structured motif of the hero journey, which is as important today as this archetype has been important throughout human culture. The youth is called upon to discover his unique fulfillment in a process which places him in a state of tension with his contemporary elders and peers, as well as with his historical tradition. This process is never smooth or easy, but Potok does remind us that the hero journey is essential for the becoming of intellectuals and for the becoming of culture.

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[23]Chaim Potok, *In The Beginning,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975, p. 353.
[24]*Ibid.*, p. 354.
[25]*Ibid.*, p. 401.