

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Chosen

by

Chaim Potok

Book Information

Chaim Potok, The Chosen
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This story of Jewish family life reveals optimism and good humor.

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Main Characters

Billy a blind little boy Reuven rooms with in the hospital

Danny Saunders a son of a Hasidic Jew, a genius who desires to break Jewish tradition and become a psychologist

David Malter Reuven's father, a teacher and a dedicated Zionist

Mr. Galanter Reuven's baseball coach

Reb Saunders Danny's father, a rabbi deeply committed to Jewish tradition

Reuven Malter a Jewish young man and principal character of the story

Tony Savo an injured ex-fighter whom Reuven meets in the hospital

Vocabulary

earlock a curl of hair hanging in front of the ear

goy gentile or a person of a non-Jewish faith

kashruth the Jewish dietary laws

kosher selling or serving food ritually fit according to Jewish law

samovar an urn with a spigot at its base to boil water for tea

Talmud the collection of Jewish civil and religious laws, including commentaries

Zionism plan or movement to establish and promote a Jewish nation in Palestine

Synopsis

Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders are bright and ambitious teenagers living in Brooklyn during the turbulent years of the Second World War. Although both boys attend Jewish schools, or yeshivas, and are serious students of the Talmud, their backgrounds and experiences are significantly different.

Reuven is the son of David Malter, a dedicated teacher at Reuven's yeshiva. David, though a serious scholar, has raised his son in a warm and sensitive manner. Consequently, father and son have an open and honest relationship. David represents a new generation of Jews in America. Although his religious beliefs are strong, he is less traditional than the Hasidic Jews in the neighborhood. For instance, he encourages secular studies instead of relying heavily on the Talmud. He even criticizes passages of the Talmud, an unthinkable idea to other Orthodox Jews. His approach to religion and life is mirrored in Reuven.

Danny's upbringing is almost completely the opposite of Reuven's. He has been raised in a Russian Hasidic Jewish family. His father, Reb Saunders, is a highly respected rabbi and a firm believer in tradition. The Saunders dress in "somber garb," drink tea from samovars, and speak fluent Yiddish, a Germanic language used by Jews of eastern Europe. Danny is expected to follow in his father's footsteps and become a rabbi. As is the custom, his wife has been chosen for him as well. Danny's relationship with his father is strained. Reb Saunders has raised his son in silence. The only time he speaks to him is during their Talmud study sessions. Danny is fearful of his father's temper "explosions." Knowing that his father would strongly oppose his curiosity about forbidden secular subject matter, Danny secretly reads novels and researches psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in the library. Danny has a photographic memory, and his quest for

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knowledge beyond the Talmud is strong. He feels torn between satisfying his thirst for knowledge and pursuing the path his father has set for him.

Both Danny and Reuven are proud of their backgrounds and beliefs. During a baseball game between Danny and Reuven's respective yeshiva teams, their pride gets the best of them. The game becomes not only a competition of athletic skill but of religious convictions. Reuven is angered by Danny's smugness, and Danny is determined to outdo Reuven. In one play, Danny hits a baseball straight at Reuven's face. Reuven's glasses break, and glass penetrates his eye, resulting in a serious eye injury. During Reuven's hospital stay, Danny visits him several times, and an unlikely friendship begins.

Unexpectedly, their friendship strengthens the characters of both young men. Reuven respects Danny's genius and determination. He marvels at his ability to master the German language from textbooks. After Reb Saunders accepts Reuven as Danny's friend, he invites Reuven to join them in their Talmud study sessions. Reuven is awestruck with the intensity and brilliance shown by both father and son as they discuss the Talmud. Meanwhile, Danny appreciates Reuven's mathematical intelligence. Most importantly, in Reuven, Danny finds a trusted confidant.

The friendship, however, is tested. When World War II ends, shocking news reports tell of the six million Jews murdered in German concentration camps. David Malter and Reb Saunders both grieve and take two very opposite approaches to the horrifying information. While David becomes impassioned and dedicated to the Zionist cause, Reb Saunders remains strictly anti-Zionist and forbids Danny to communicate with Reuven. During this period, both young men suffer. Reuven resents Danny's cold indifference to him, especially when David Malter becomes ill and Reuven is alone. At the same time, Danny becomes increasingly nervous. He has no one to confide in about his decision to become a psychologist and his fear of telling his father of his wishes. Gradually, a Jewish homeland becomes a

reality, and Reb Saunders, realizing that his fight has been lost, allows Reuven and Danny to socialize again. In fact, the rabbi encourages Reuven to join their Talmud study sessions again.

It is during one such Talmud study that Reb Saunders speaks to his son through Reuven. In a poignant speech, the rabbi explains that he has kept silent with his son to encourage Danny to become soulful. He also recognizes Danny's need for wider knowledge and for a career as a psychologist. He gives his son permission to follow his dream, and Danny weeps with joy and relief. In the end, Danny prepares to begin his study of psychology at Columbia, and Reuven makes plans to enter the rabbinate. Both men look forward to bright and meaningful futures.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

A moment before Danny's ball strikes Reuven's eye, Reuven makes the decision not to duck. Why?

Reuven's decision not to duck is based on his pride. He detests Danny's smugness about both his athletic talent and his religious convictions. Reuven is not going to bow or "duck" before Danny. He wants to show his own courage and strength. He wants to stop Danny's ball with his mitt and put him in his place.

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Literary Analysis

Several times in the book Danny quotes the Talmud. Reuven admires Danny's ability to memorize the technical writings, but many times, he notes that Danny recites the passages in a "cool" and "mechanical" way. What do you think Danny's style of delivery means?

Danny has a photographic memory, so it is not a challenge to remember the passages. In fact, he might actually find the recitations boring. Also, Danny's heart is not really in his Jewish education. Becoming a rabbi is not his aspiration, so he does not feel inspired.

Inferential Comprehension

The second time Danny visits Reuven in the hospital, Danny tells him that he has been trying to understand why he wanted to kill Reuven during the baseball game. He adds that his violent feelings had nothing to do with the baseball game itself. He says that he is puzzled by his own actions. After reading the book, what do you think caused Danny to behave so violently?

Although Danny is reverent toward his father and his religion, he feels trapped because his future has been decided for him. He is expected to become a rabbi and to marry the woman already chosen for him. He is jealous of Reuven knowing that he is not burdened and bound by traditions. Reuven represents someone who is able to make choices in his life and for his future.

Constructing Meaning

Throughout the book, references are made to Reb Saunders raising Danny in silence. Reuven finds the rabbi's treatment of Danny cruel and calls him a tyrant. Danny tolerates the silence but suffers with it as well. At the end of the book, David Malter asks Danny if he intends to raise his son in silence, and Danny answers: "Yes, if I can't find another way." How do you feel about his answer?

Answers to this question may be split. Some students may disagree completely with the silent approach to raising a child, thinking as Reuven did that it is cruel and may be harmful to emotional and social development. They may also be horrified that Danny would even think of repeating the silent treatment with his own child. Other students may comment that Danny did learn through his suffering and became more soulful, inclining him to see the benefits of raising a child in silence.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Throughout *The Chosen*, both Reuven and Danny are asked to interpret passages from the Talmud. When Reuven is asked to discuss a section of the Talmud in class, he takes days to deliver his interpretation. The Talmud is clearly a document for scholars. Invite a person of Jewish faith into the classroom to further explain the importance of the Talmud. Ask the guest to give students information about Jewish culture: the Torah, the calendar, customs, dress, etc. If it is difficult to find a guest speaker, divide the class into small groups and have them research these topics.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors *The Chosen* is a book rich with Jewish history. In Chapter Six, David Malter outlines the "centuries of horror" the Jews experienced in the Slavic countries of eastern Europe. In Chapter Seven, he explains Reb Saunders's background to Reuven and the persecution the Jews suffered in Russia. Later in the book, WW II ends, and news reports telling of six million Jews murdered in German concentration camps are released. Near

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the end of the book, Reuven and his father rejoice when a Jewish state is born in Palestine. Ask the students to create an outline labeling the significant events in Jewish history mentioned in the book.

Extending Meaning David Malter and Reuven are elated when a Jewish state is established in Palestine and called Israel. The existence of the state has been a complicated and controversial issue for years. Ask the students to research Israel's history focusing on the issue of land ownership between the Palestinians and the Jews. Divide the class in two, with one half identifying with the Jews and the other half identifying with the Palestinians (Arabs). Have the two sides debate the issue of land ownership, using their research material to support their answers.

Identifying Reading Strategies *The Chosen* is filled with interesting Jewish vocabulary. Ask the students to note these Jewish words as they read the book. Bring a dictionary which includes Jewish words into the classroom. Make definition cards and display them. As an extension activity, create a word game that challenges the students to recall the vocabulary of the book.

Responding to Literature Many references to Jewish customs and traditions are present throughout the book. Jewish eating customs are described frequently. Readers learn that Russian Hasidic Jews drink their tea from samovars and sip the drink through sugar cubes held between their teeth. References are made to eating kosher foods as well, and in one scene, Reb Saunders and his followers eat chalah bread. Ask the students to research Jewish foods and eating customs. Schedule a day when different foods can be brought into class and tasted.