Witness Through the Imagination

S. Lilian Kremer, Lilian Kremer

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CHAPTER NINE

Eternal Light: The Holocaust and the Revival of Judaism and Jewish Civilization in the Fiction of Chaim Potok

Chaim Potok is a rabbi, scholar, and novelist whose philosophic and ethical views are derived from Torah and Talmud and whose aesthetic theory is derived from Western philosophy, literature, and art. With Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, Arthur Cohen, and I. B. Singer, Potok rejects alienation in favor of the affirmative position of Jewish idealism in the face of evil and suffering. Jewish history, including repeated outbreaks of anti-Semitism and its 1939–1945 genocidal manifestation, resonates throughout Potok’s fiction. Because the author believes that “the Jew sees all his contemporary history refracted through the ocean of blood that is the Holocaust,”1 the Shoah is always in the background of his fictional universe. Rather than treating the Holocaust directly, Potok generally introduces the topic indirectly and focuses instead on Holocaust restoration through renewal of Judaism and Jewry in America and Israel. Potok’s characters are generally devout Jews, conversant in Jewish theology, liturgy, Talmudic studies, and rabbinic commentary and frequently presented in the context of synagogue, yeshiva, and
observant Jewish homes. Their pre-Holocaust mission—dedication to the religious life and adoption from and contribution to secular civilization—is enhanced by their post-Holocaust mission—renewal of Judaism and Jewry in the Diaspora and creation and sustenance of a Jewish homeland in Israel. Potok's fictional heroes thus aspire, as the novelist does in *Wanderings,* "to rebuild . . . [Judaism’s] core from the treasures of our past, fuse it with the best in secularism, and create a new philosophy, a new literature, a new world of Jewish art, a new community, and take seriously the meaning of the word emancipation."2

The year Potok's popular first novel, *The Chosen* (1967), was published, his short story, "The Dark Place Inside," appeared. "The Dark Place Inside" portrays an Israeli Holocaust survivor suffering the trauma of his losses sixteen years after their occurrence. On the joyous occasion of the birth of his fifth son, he mourns the loss of four sons who "had walked the narrow corridor and tasted the smoky waters of poison gas in the shower house, together with their mother."3 We learn that Levi Abramovich escaped death in a mass shooting when he fell into heavy brush a moment before the bullets met their mark; he survived as a fugitive in the barn of a Polish peasant. He had been hunted like an animal by the Nazis: "They had smashed his face in the hunting and bayoneted him in the killing so that his blood had run in dark pools. . . . But the killing had been poorly accomplished; the peasant’s herbs had sealed the wounds" (*DP*, 35). Holocaust memories become a dark force in Levi's being, generally suppressed, but occasionally emerging and overpowering his capacity for regeneration. Unlike the survivors in Potok's novels, who appear in brief cameos and largely in the restorative mode of commitment to Judaism and the Jewish community, Levi has not made peace with the God of the Holocaust. Like I. B. Singer's protestors, he voices his anger against the impotent or uncaring God: "I believe in God. I believe He is the paradigm for all the fools in the universe" (*DP*, 36). Receipt of his murdered wife's watch is the catalyst for Levi's transformation from a matter-of-fact dismisser of the ineffectual divine—"God is stupidity. God is comic. God is a fool" (*DP*, 36)—to the despairing protester. He is alienated from God and man: "There is no one to talk to now. . . . There is not even God to talk to he thought, trying to make it a calm thinking and failing miserably" (*DP*, 39). Tormented by the memory of four dead sons, he thinks the appearance of his dead wife's watch is an absurd cruelty
and charges God accordingly: "Master of the Universe, . . . if You are truly real, then You are powerless and cruel. If You are able to prevent evil but are unwilling, You are cruel. If You are willing to prevent evil but are not able, then You are without power. And if You are able and willing, why then is there evil?" (DP, 39). Because Levi regards the sudden appearance of the watch as an extraordinary burden, he dismisses the possibility of its potential to make the present meaningful by evoking the past. Now he hates God, hates Him with a cold passionless contempt. He expresses the utter despair of the believer, "I believe in perfect faith that You are unworthy of my perfect faith. You no longer merit consideration" (DP, 39). No bleaker moment exists in Potok's fiction.

Much more typical of Potok's treatment of the Holocaust is The Chosen. The novel, set in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, is the story of two sets of fathers and sons and their practice and study of Judaism, set against the backdrop of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. These historic forces remain in the novel's background while the religious issues dividing Jewish orthodoxy claim the novelist's central interest. Nevertheless, the Shoah remains a leitmotif and an important influence on the lives of the characters. David Malter, a yeshiva teacher, and his son Reuven are Orthodox Jews open to the influences of Western philosophy and scholarship. Reb Saunders, the dynastic Hasidic tzaddik, resists non-Hasidic thought and expects his son Danny to follow the prescriptions of the Hasidim and assume the religious leadership of his father's congregation. The novel's dramatic tension results from opposing interpretations of Jewish religious writing, worship, and practices by the groups. A measure of difference between the Orthodox and Hasidic fathers is the manner of their response to the Holocaust and the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel. Similarly, antithetical reactions to these two dimensions of twentieth-century Jewish history divide the sons.

In a rare instance of American fictional treatment of the Allies abandonment of the Jews, David Malter addresses Anthony Eden's 1942 House of Commons speech detailing the Nazi genocide plan and Eden's failure to move beyond rhetorical denunciation of the Final Solution. Malter is outraged by British moral failure:

the whole machinery of democratic expression had been set in motion to impress upon the British Government the need for action—
and not a thing was done. Everyone was sympathetic, but no one was sympathetic enough. The British let some few Jews in, and then closed their doors. America hadn't cared enough, either. No one had cared enough. The world closed its doors and six million Jews were slaughtered.4

Although the Holocaust is not in the forefront of Potok's young protagonists' discussions, they are deeply concerned about Jewish losses and refer to Hitler's war against Jewry in the context of general war news. With the end of war and release of news of the concentration camps, Reuven expresses bewilderment at the immensity of the Nazi crimes against Jewry:

The numbers of the Jews slaughtered had gone from one million to three million to four million, and almost every article we read said that the last count was still incomplete, the final number would probably reach six million. I couldn't . . . imagine six million of my people murdered. . . . It didn't make any sense at all. My mind couldn't hold on to it, to the death of six million people. (C, 180)

Reb Saunders spoke "of the Jewish world in Europe, of the people he had known who were now probably dead, of the brutality of the world" (C, 180), interpreting this catastrophe historically, "the world drinks our blood" (C, 181). He laments the slaughter of the six million in the context of an extraordinary history of persecution. Although Saunders reluctantly accepts the Holocaust as "the will of God" (C, 181), a Divine mystery of inaction, he expresses his bewilderment and petitions the Almighty, "Master of the Universe, how do You permit such a thing to happen?" (C, 181). Departing from his characteristic tendency to explain Jewish beliefs and attitudes, Potok allows the statement to stand without pursuing its theological implications.

In contrast to many writers' focus on the atrocities of the Holocaust period and burdens of Holocaust survival, Potok generally concentrates on the possibilities of Holocaust restoration. David Malter rejects Reb Saunders' acceptance of the Holocaust as God's will, arguing instead "We cannot wait for God. If there is an answer, we must make it ourselves" (C, 182). Instead, he works for "the education of American Jewry and a Jewish state in Palestine" (C, 213). Reb Saunders, bound by the belief in a religious and holy state ushered in by the Messiah, rejects Zionism because it is a
secular movement. For some Hasidim, the establishment of a secular state in Israel was regarded as a Torahic violation. For Malter, the way to derive meaning from the slaughter of six million Jews is for American Jews to replace the lost treasures of Judaism, to train teachers and rabbis to lead the people and to generate a religious renaissance among American Jews. He is heartened by a return to the synagogues, even by the Jewishly uneducated, believing that the mission of the religious is to educate the assimilated and return them to Judaism and to the Jewish people. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and before the establishment of the State of Israel, Malter is convinced that Judaism must be rebuilt in America or perish. When Zionism is resuscitated, David Malter responds enthusiastically and works assiduously to realize Zionist goals. At a massive rally in Madison Square Garden, Malter argues the need to arouse the world to the desperate requirement for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, particularly as a haven for those “that had escaped Hitler’s ovens” (C, 215). Furthermore, he counters that

the slaughter of six million Jews would have meaning only on the day a Jewish state was established. Only then would their sacrifice begin to make some sense; only then would the songs of faith they had sung on their way to the gas chambers take on meaning; only then would Jewry again become a light to the world. (C, 215)

When the United Nations voted for the Partition Plan, Malter reacts with an exhuberance common in the American Jewish community:

The death of the six million Jews had finally been given meaning. . . . After two thousand years, it had finally happened. We were a people again, with our own land. We were a blessed generation. We had been given the opportunity to see the creation of the Jewish state. (C, 226)

Sharing his father’s dreams, Reuven endangers his own safety to load smuggled arms for the Jewish Army, which must meet the Arab threat to destroy the new nation as soon as it is established. In deference to his father, Danny refrains from supporting the Zionist movement. As Arab anti-Jewish violence mounts and the toll of Jewish dead increases daily, Reb Saunders’ league becomes silent in its opposition to the secular state. Moved by the
similarity of Nazi and Arab anti-Semitism, Hasidic opponents lament Jewish blood being spilled again: "Hitler wasn't enough. Now more Jewish blood, more slaughter. What does the world want from us? Six million isn't enough? More Jews have to die?" (C, 227) Their pain over the new outbreak of violence against the Jews of Israel outweighs Hasidic opposition to the secular state, and they end their vocal campaign against the establishment and recognition of Israel.

The sequel to The Chosen, The Promise, continues to trace the lives of Reuven Malter preparing for rabbinic ordination and Danny Saunders pursuing a career in clinical psychology. Reuven is at the center of a theological conflict between fundamentalist-traditionalists and religious scholars who bring the tools of scientific textual criticism to the analysis of religious sources. The religious dichotomy dramatized between Hasidic and Mitnagdic orthodoxies in The Chosen is extended in The Promise to a philosophic conflict between Orthodox and Conservative approaches to Talmud study. The Conservative faction is represented by a new character, Abraham Gordon, and the traditionalist faction by several Holocaust survivors who teach at David Malter's yeshiva, and by Rav Kalman who teaches at Reuven's seminary. Gordon is an American scholar who suffered none of the European hardships that Kalman experienced. Yet the Holocaust changed the direction of his life. After experiencing a crisis of faith, Gordon went to Europe for two years of postdoctoral work in logic with the Vienna Circle positivists. He had been in Germany and reported that he "could smell the smoke of the crematoria even before anyone knew what a crematorium was."5 Realizing that not many Jews would survive Hitler's Europe, Gordon rejected an invitation from Harvard University to teach logic and entered a seminary to aid in rebuilding American Judaism, a Judaism free of fundamentalist dogma that would appeal to progressive thinkers. Although David Malter remains in the Orthodox community, his scholarly techniques of comparative textual analysis and emendation, like Abraham Gordon's, are often discredited by fundamentalists and associated with progressive thinkers. Malter's major antagonist is his son's teacher, a rigorous European Talmudist who has dedicated his life to traditional Talmudic explication.

Unlike Bellow, Wallant, and Elman who focus on physical and psychological traumas of survivorship, Potok, like Singer, examines the religious and theological implications of the concentrationary
experience. The reader perceives the survivors through Reuven's impressions of their responses to the unorthodox scholarship of Abraham Gordon and David Malter. Reuven attributes religious zeal of the neighborhood to the influence of the concentration camp traditionalists: "everything traditional was being drawn toward ... zealously. They had changed everything merely by surviving and crossing an ocean. They had brought that spark to the broken streets of Williamsburg, and men like Rav Kalman who were not Hasidim felt swayed by their presence and believed themselves to be equally zealous guardians of the spark (P, 195).

The survivors of the "sulfurous chaos of the concentration camps ... eyes brooding, like balls of black flame turned inward upon private visions of the demonic" (P, 13), remain steadfast traditionalists, staunchly opposed to modern tampering with orthodox worship, practice, and scholarship. Undefeated by the physical enemy in Europe, they are prepared to do battle with those they perceive to be Judaism's spiritual enemies in America. Representative of the survivors' intolerance for other expressions of Jewish learning and worship are the "newcomers" at David Malter's yeshiva, who denounce his publications as a threat to scripture and support Abraham Gordon's excommunication. Reuven's teacher, Rav Kalman, also rejects other methods in fealty to his teachers and students who died martyrs' deaths. The survivor-purists perceive American Jewish schools, where students do not wear skullcaps and teachers do not believe that the Torah was given to Moses by God, as being ritually "unclean." Such a school in their opinion is "a desecration of the name of God." Potok's survivors bear witness to the Holocaust through their determination to live religiously pure lives, to live according to the commandments, to defend the Torah, and to revitalize the Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) that the Nazis sought to destroy. Against the Nazi program of death and destruction, these Jews defiantly stand for the sanctity of life. Potok's survivors are engaged in the restorative process, regenerating Judaism and the Jewish people.

Here, in Williamsburg, they set about rebuilding their burned-out world. Families had been destroyed; they remarried and created new families. Dynasties had been shattered; elders met and formed new dynasties. Children had been killed; their women now seemed forever pregnant. (P, 13)
Unlike the survivors in Singer's fiction who rant against an unjust God, the characters in Potok's novels neither protest God's Holocaust silence nor question their faith in God and dedication to Torah Judaism. As zealous "guardians of the spark," they may be disruptive to progressive American Jewry but even those Americans who have the most to lose from their irresoluteness, understand the zealots' determination to guard the Torah their comrades died for. Despite Hitler's racial ideology, Potok's characters never speak of Jews dying in Hitler's racial war. Their perception is religious, and the victims died *kiddish ha-Shem*, religious martyrs sanctifying God's holy name.

Rav Kalman, the only survivor individually developed by Potok, fiercely protects his scholarly approach to the sacred texts in order to honor God's word and the memory of those Jews who lived their lives and lost their lives in devotion to Torah and God. Through student speculation about his past, we learn that he had been a teacher in a highly reputed yeshiva in Vilna, a city famed for the superiority of its Jewish institutions of learning. It is known that he spent two years in a German concentration camp in northern Poland, the rest is rumor. Some think storm troopers shot his wife and three daughters before his eyes in the woods outside Warsaw. Other speculations focus on his escape and capture:

he had escaped from a concentration camp, been caught, and escaped again; he had crossed the Polish frontier into Russia and fought with Russian partisans for a year. One rumor had it that he had organized a group of Orthodox Jewish partisans that specialized in blowing up the tracks of German trains carrying Jews to the concentration camps. Another rumor had it that he had been concealed in a bunker for more than a year by a Polish farm family, had been discovered, had been forced to watch the execution of the family, and had somehow escaped again. He was said to have made his way across northern Russia into Siberia and from there to Shanghai, where he had waited out the war under the eyes of the Japanese, who were not possessed of Hitler's feelings toward Jews and who left the few Jews under their rule alone. According to this version of the life of Rav Kalman, he was brought to America by the administration of Hirsch University and was promptly invited to teach in the rabbinical department. *(P, 117)*

In marked contrast to the fictional characters of Wallant, Malamud, and Singer who either speak directly of their Holocaust
experiences or think about them, in Potok's fiction nonsurvivors speculate about the Holocaust suffering of survivors. It is unclear why Potok includes these student speculations rather than incorporating direct survivor commentary. Perhaps they offer the writer a means of briefly referring to multiple holocaustal experiences and avoiding the need to create other characters with full biographies and dramatic roles in the manner of Singer, Bellow, and Cohen. Rather than dwell on past atrocities, Potok's survivors concentrate on living. Reuven's father verifies the Shanghai episode. The elder Malter comments on the excellence of Rav Kalman's Talmudic reputation and cites Kalman's establishment of a yeshiva in Shanghai as the cause of delay in bringing him to America where his services were coveted as "a great Talmud scholar" and "one of the great men in Orthodoxy" (P, 200).

David Malter, who served as Potok's voice of reason in The Chosen, continues in that fashion in the sequel, and it is his observation that Kalman is to be respected as a champion of the Torah. Malter draws an analogy between Kalman's resistance to Nazism and his resistance to weakened religious observance: "He was not of those who believed in going willingly to the crematoria. He was with the partisans and killed German soldiers for Torah. Now he defends it with words" (P, 280).

Just as we discover Kalman's heroism, first in student speculation and later confirmed by David Malter, so we also first learn of Kalman's suffering under Nazi medical experimentation through an exchange he has with Reuven's friend Danny Saunders regarding his treatment of a withdrawn patient. Kalman becomes rigid at Danny's mere mention of the word experiment to explain Michael Gordon's psychological therapy. Later we learn that because of the experiments he endured Kalman has not remarried and started a new family. This indirect means of suggesting holocaustal atrocity is typical of Potok's reluctance to use graphic description of torture or direct or dramatic references to the concentrationary universe. The reader can assume from ample historic reference the types of medical experiments Kalman may have witnessed and endured. In addition to Kalman's response to the word experiment and speculation about that which he experienced, one of the novel's most sympathetic characters, the modern scholar and victim of Rav Kalman's fierce orthodoxy, Abraham Gordon, addresses the philosophic implications of Kalman's Holocaust suffering:
The concentration camps destroyed a lot more than European Jewry. They destroyed man's faith in himself. I cannot blame Rav Kalman for being suspicious of man and believing only in God. Why should anyone believe in man? There are going to be decades of chaos until we learn to believe again in man. (P, 315)

The progressives of Potok's fiction, like their Orthodox and fundamentalist brothers, consistently respond to the Holocaust with determination to rebuild Jewry through a revitalized and strengthened Judaism. Unlike the debilitated survivors of Wallant's, Bellow's, and Singer's novels, Potok's survivors are developed not in terms of their physical and psychological disabilities but as Jews strengthened in their commitment to Judaism. They are ever vigilant, ever dedicated, whether as rabbis, scholars, or Zionists, to the survival and flourishing of Judaism and the Jewish people. Beyond Holocaust horror looms a Jewish renaissance.

Potok's fourth novel, *In the Beginning*, continues to evidence his interests in Judaism and Jewish history. The subject is the Jewish encounter with anti-Semitism, including European, Arab, and American variations. Like Bellow, Epstein, Wallant, and Singer, Potok makes a strong case for a causal relationship between the Holocaust and historic Christian anti-Semitism. He departs from some of the others in the extent to which he develops the American and Arab varieties. Although the Holocaust was of import in the earlier fiction, Potok had presented it as a haunted presence in the lives of American Jews and survivors and as further motivation for their commitment to Judaism and Zionism. *In the Beginning* brings historic anti-Semitism, "the dark underbelly of Western civilization," and its holocaustal manifestation to the thematic core and dramatic center of the novel. Addressing the importance of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust on the American-Jewish consciousness, Potok said:

Probably the American Jew feels . . . quite guilt-ridden. . . . For whatever reason, he never did enough at a crucial point in time by way of an effort to get the thing stopped, or to protest it . . . . I don't see how it is possible to think the world through Jewish eyes without having the blood-screen of the Holocaust in front of your eyes as part of the filtering. I'll go even further and say that for thinking people, Jew or non-Jew, I don't think it is possible to think the world anymore in this century without thinking Holocaust.
Readers of Potok's earlier novels will find much that is familiar in the fourth work: narrative that is presented from the point of view of an intelligent, sensitive young boy; a positive and supportive relationship between two males; and vital father-son and teacher-student character constructs. Departure from the previously established patterns is seen in a sustained antagonism between two boys and the significant intrusion of the secular world in terms of economic depression and social conflict.

David Lurie, the first-person narrator tells his story chronologically from childhood through early adulthood revealing his initiation to anti-Semitism through his father's European memories and his own victimization at the hands of anti-Semitic neighborhood bullies. The narrative is set in an immigrant Bronx neighborhood where transplanted Europeans have retained their Old World fears and prejudices and passed them on to their American-born children. Here Potok offers an unusual double exposure to anti-Semitism, superimposing a child's American experience on the adult European manifestations. The bustling multiethnic neighborhoods of the Bronx, where Potok spent his childhood, provide the realistic backdrop for antagonistic encounters between Jew and gentile. Urban experience impinges more forcefully on David Lurie than it had on Reuven Malter, Danny Saunders, and Asher Lev. In addition to a yeshiva classroom, a synagogue, and an observant home, the novel's settings include streets, schoolyards, business districts, and a local zoo. Eddie Kulanski, son of Polish immigrants, is described by his Jewish victim as hating Jews with "a kind of mindless demonic rage." Although still a child, this hooligan acts like an adult, expressing prejudice that "bore the breeding of a thousand years" (IB, 11). The novel's Jewish protagonist, named for an uncle who died in a pogrom, has been educated in the history of European anti-Semitism and knows of his family's persecution, but is nevertheless surprised to find it prevalent in America. Eddie learns that David's family is from Poland and he spews the Old World venom in his mother tongue, using the Polish epithet *Anonymowe Panstwo*, ("Anonymous Empire") reiterating the slander outlined in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—namely, that Jews secretly conspire first to destroy Christian countries and then to dominate the world. Exemplifying Potok's method of using the novel to inform the reader of Jewish history is the expository speech on the Jewish conspiracy by David's older cousin, Saul:
This group is supposed to be able to make all kinds of problems for the goyim because it owns most of the banks and newspapers in the world. These old Jews can do almost anything because they have so much money and control the news and what people say and think. They have plans for all the goyishe governments to get into such bad trouble that they'll fail—and then these Jews can take over the world. My teacher said that in Poland they call this secret organization Anonymowe Panstwo. It's even in the Polish dictionary, he said. Almost everyone in Poland believes it. (IB, 62)

Variations of anti-Semitic attitudes expressed in all historic periods reappear in the microcosm of David's childhood world. In a scene that would be comic were it not for its sinister implications, David is watching his sleeping infant brother when Eddie and an older cousin, who shares his anti-Jewish prejudices, insist on inspecting the baby's horns. Disappointed to find the child hornless, they question David about the age at which he lost his horns. Eddie parrots the oft-repeated Christian charge of Jewish influence and affluence, albeit in childish overtones: “You own all the money, but you don't own this here sidewalk” (IB, 55). Paralleling the European model, but on a smaller scale, violent words lead to violent action. After David accidentally rides his tricycle over Eddie's hand, which was poised on the sidewalk in a street game, Eddie seeks revenge. Nothing short of David's Jewish life will suit him. He tries repeatedly to push the tricycle and rider into oncoming traffic. Unable to inflict his murderous desire on David because an adult intervenes, Eddie arranges for his cousin to slash the tire of David's tricycle. On another occasion Eddie and his cousin conduct a surrealistic chase and assault on David, in an environment suggestive of primitive brutality. The cousins ambush the unsuspecting David in the Bronx Zoo. With the rallying cry “for Christ's sake,” they molest David, satisfying their lurid curiosity about the appearance of a circumcised penis. During the attack, David suspects the young anti-Semite's pleasure in Jewish pain and asks rhetorically: “Eddie. Have you seen a concentration camp? Did they look good, all those corpses of dead Jews?” (IB, 400)

Emphasizing the Christian source and sustenance of anti-Semitism that is dramatically manifested in the conflict between the boys, a Christian neighbor cites the deicide libel as the fuel for nearly 2000 years of murderous Christian anti-Semitism and in-
forms the Jewish innocent of church doctrine and books that perpetuate the infamy. David is persistently puzzled by the motivation for Christian anti-Semitism. As he looks out the window of his small synagogue at a large local church, he wonders "how a statue whose face was so full of love could be worshipped by someone whose heart was so full of hate" (IB, 121). To understand why Christians hate Jews so vehemently, David goes to the library to read the New Testament, the ur-text for anti-Semitism. In Matthew, he finds "rage and scorn directed at the scribes and Pharisees. The rabbis of the Talmud . . . called hypocrites! . . . the word Jews in the account of the crucifixion (IB, 305). In Mark he finds further expression of hatred for the Pharisees and similar invectives on the crucifixion in Luke and John. Further, David finds corroboration for early Christian anti-Semitism in current Catholic textbooks that he finds in the playground of a nearby parochial school. In Religion: Doctrine and Practice by Francis B. Cassilly, S. J., he reads "The widespread popularity enjoyed by this text since its appearance in 1926 is evidence that our Catholic schools consider the fundamental truths of Faith essential to the high-school course in religion" (IB, 307). He turns to the index to search for references to Jews and finds the following: "The Jews as a nation refused to accept Christ and since His time they have been wanderers on the earth without a temple or a sacrifice, and without the Messias" (IB, 307). Next he finds a Catholic distortion of the Jewish rejection of Jesus: "The Jews rejected Christ mainly because they expected Him to found a never-ending kingdom, as was foretold in the prophecies. This He really did, but the kingdom He founded—the Church—was a spiritual one, not a temporal one such as the carnal Jews were hoping for“ (IB, 307). The causal link between Catholic anti-Semitism and the success of the Holocaust is manifested in Potok's documentary incorporation of propaganda disseminated by Father Charles Coughlin and his supporters during the Holocaust.

Potok skillfully juxtaposes David's American anti-Semitic experiences with his father's European encounters, demonstrating how each generation is shaped by this social pathology. Although Max Lurie's animosity for Christians has been regularly and amply refurbished through repetitions of anti-Jewish actions, the Tulchin massacre looms largest in his consciousness as a touchstone of Christian betrayal of Jewry and Jewry's misplaced trust in Christian
decency. Max begins his account of the attack on the city objectively and concludes in a passionate denunciation:

There were in it Jews and Poles. Cossacks attacked it. The Jews fought well. The Poles wanted to surrender. The Jews could have taken over the city from the Poles and continued fighting. But their rabbi would not let them do it. He was afraid that Poles all over Poland would take revenge on all the Jews in Poland. So the Jews of Tulchin gave all their possessions to the Poles to give to the Cossacks. They hoped the Cossacks would take the money and jewels and gold and not destroy the city. The Cossacks took it all from the Poles and then asked the Poles to hand over the Jews. They handed over the Jews, the same Jews who had fought with them to defend the city. The bastard Poles. . . . A nice story, yes? The courageous Jews! What Martyrdom! They could have lived if they had converted to Christianity. Not one of them accepted the offer. What was there in Christianity? It is the idolatry of butchers and murders. (IB, 117–18)

It is from this experience that Max knows it is naive for Jews to expect help from gentiles in the Nazi era. As a descendant of a Tulchin massacre survivor, Max rages against the passive Jewish mentality, which tries to negotiate peace when armed resistance is needed to counter enemies bent on slaughtering Jews. Max Lurie shares the contempt for Poles that is common among many of Singer's Jews, because of their extensive experience with Polish anti-Semitism. Certainly the bitterness of Lurie's tone is unprecedented in the fiction created by American-born novelists, but it is authentic in light of Polish-Jewish history. Lurie rages equally against Catholic murderers and Tulchin's rabbi, who trusted Christians to be true to their Jewish neighbors and prevented the Jews from defending themselves.

The ex-machine-gunner spares no details when telling his son of the wholesale butchery of Polish Jews by Russians, Ukrainians, and fellow Poles during World War I. He teaches David about Jewish suffering under Marshall Pilsudski, a national hero, who refused to discomfort Polish peasants by interfering with their violence against Jews. Like Potok's father, Max Lurie returned from serving his country in World War I to the native enemy eager to exercise its anti-Semitic prejudices. Emblematic of traditional Polish anti-Semitism is the scar Max bears from a wound he sustained on a postwar troop train. The train was detained by bandits who
stole only from Jewish soldiers. Max refused to surrender his prayer shawl, and a bandit slashed his face. Not one comrade with whom Max served came to his assistance. It is this kind of pervasive Polish anti-Semitism that leads Max to unite the surviving Jews of his unit into the Am Kedoshim Society, a Jewish self-defense group. For Max Lurie, two thousand years of Christian betrayal and indiscriminate slaughter of Jews make the formation of aggressive Jewish self-defense units the only viable response to anti-Semitism.

Photography and the visual imagination offer means through which David Lurie engages in his people's suffering. The Am Kedoshim photograph and the history it represents serve for Potok as connective tissue for David's comprehension of historic anti-Semitism and as a structural link connecting the microcosm of Lurie family history to collective Jewish experience. Lurie founded the society in the aftermath of World War I to combat Polish anti-Semitism. Opposing passive acceptance of persecution, the men of Am Kedoshim

learned never to forget the harm our enemies inflict upon us. We have learned that when we work together we can defeat our enemies. We will not stand by with our arms folded when our enemies attack us; nor will we do as some of our families did almost three hundred years ago in Tulchin when they decided not to attack the Poles in that city because they feared what Poles in other cities might do to Jews. We leave such righteousness to other Jews, . . . to Jews whose pure souls make them unable to shed goyishe blood. (IB, 71)

Growing Depression-era anti-Jewish violence and the rise of Nazism lead the Am Kedoshim to send a representative to get Jews out of Europe and to assist those facing the mounting terror.

David's education in anti-Semitism takes a particularly sinister turn with the news of the Hebron Massacre. He expects outbursts of persecution against Jews in Europe, but he is astonished by the slaughter of Jews in Palestine. Although he learns of violence against Jews in Jerusalem, Safed, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, it is the Arab massacre of yeshiva students in Hebron that troubles David most intensely. Max makes the historical analogy between the Tulchin rabbi and the Hebron Jewish leadership. He voices ire against the Hebron leaders who had anticipated Arab violence, yet refused the protection of the Jewish self-defense organization in order to avoid antagonizing the British commander who guaranteed community
safety on the condition that the Jews do nothing to provoke the Arabs. As Lurie's response to Hebron becomes a free association with Tulchin, the novelist superimposes a forward glance at the Holocaust in the Hebron Massacre:

On the fifteenth of August, Tisha B’Av, there had been Arab disturbances in Jerusalem. The British said these had been in reaction to the demonstration staged by the followers of Jabotinsky at the Western Wall protesting new British regulations that interfered with Jewish religious services at the Wall. But we knew all about the British, he said. Our dear friends, the British. They announced that they washed their hands of the Jews as a result of this demonstration, and the Arabs took the hint. The day after the demonstration, on Tish B’Av, a group of Arabs beat up Jews gathered at the Wall for prayers, and then burned copies of the Book of Psalms. . . . Then the Mufti of Jerusalem spread the rumor that the Jews were ready to capture and desecrate the holy mosques on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The Arabs began coming into Jerusalem from all over the country. In Hebron, Arabs who were friends of the Jews reported that messengers of the Mufti had been in the city and had preached in the mosque . . . that the Jews had attacked Arabs in Jerusalem and desecrated their mosques.

The leaders of the Jewish community of Hebron met secretly. They were informed that the Jewish self-defense organization had sent a message from its headquarters in Jerusalem that it was prepared to dispatch a group of armed young men to defend the Jews at Hebron. At the same time, the leaders were informed that the British district commander had guaranteed the safety of the Jews of Hebron on condition that the Jews do nothing to provoke the Arabs and that no one who was not a resident of the city should enter it. . . . The Jews decided to reject the offer of the self-defense organization. They believed the goyim. They were possessed by the mentality of Tulchin. . . . A band of Arabs returned to Hebron from a mass meeting led by the Mufti and his followers in Jerusalem. They ran through the city attacking Jews. They killed a student they found in the yeshiva. . . . On Shabbos morning, . . . Arabs began coming into the city from all over. They carried rifles and revolvers and knives and swords. The Jews locked themselves in their houses. The police warned the Jews to remain inside. Like sheep, they remained inside. And like sheep, they were slaughtered. They were shot and stabbed and chopped to pieces. They had their eyes pierced and their hands cut off. They were burned to death inside their homes and inside the Hadassah Hospital in Hebron. (IB, 162–64)
Bernard Malamud's treatment of the Russian persecution and incarceration in the Beiliss case is an analogue for the Holocaust. So, too, Potok's description of the Hebron Massacre includes elements in common with the Holocaust. Lurie's description of the Hebron Massacre incorporates all the elements of European Holocaust betrayal. False claims of Jewish intent to destroy Islamic holy places parallels Nazi lies about undue Jewish political and economic influence in Europe. Staging the attack on Tisha B'Av, a day of fasting, mirrors Nazi "special actions" on Jewish holy days—like the Passover offensive against the Warsaw Ghetto. Britain's betrayal of Jews in Hebron foreshadows Britain's betrayal of the Jews in the concentration camps and Britain's sabotage of the Joel Brand mission to save a small portion of Hungarian Jewry in 1944. Potok's lengthy history lesson, like I. B. Singer's use of the Chmielnicki Massacre in The Satan of Goray, corresponds to the holocaustal violence and the methods of deceit used to stir up violence against the Jews—the attacks with armed units, which are then protected and inspired to further atrocities by the government in power.

The recitation of anti-Semitic history and David's experience of anti-Jewish street violence converge in the recesses of his imagination as he juxtaposes his father's militant response with his impotent fear. Introduction of the Holocaust in this novel is an organic outgrowth of Potok's focus on Polish and Arab anti-Semitism. Representative of the novelist's increasing skill and sensitivity for integrating liturgy and theme is his invocation of the Holocaust theme in relation to a Yom Kippur memorial service. As David chants a lament for Torah sages martyred during Roman dominion, he grieves for an anonymous Jew, whose murder in Berlin by uniformed Nazis was witnessed from a passing cab by an Am Kedoshim member. The witness later read that "the man, a Jew, was found dead the next morning in an alley near a bookstore" (IB, 223). During a subsequent trip to Germany to help Jews, the Nazis inform the witness that they will look kindly neither upon his presence in Germany nor his efforts to rescue Jews. American Jewish efforts to aid European Jews is given scant attention in American Holocaust fiction, but Chaim Potok, like Arthur Cohen, acknowledges the central role of immigrant Jews in this endeavor.

Complementing the theme of the continuum of anti-Semitic persecution through reference to the lamentation liturgy is the introduction of biblical and folkloric material. Am Kedoshim's foiled
efforts to save Jews, culminating in Max Lurie's rage, find parallel in David's withdrawal into biblical and mythological constructs. He conceives of a flood that would cleanse Lemberg, Warsaw, Lodz, the cities of ancestral persecution, and then the site of his own victimization. Rather than a destructive flood, however, it would be a purging flood in whose aftermath “everything outside would be clean and white and the Angel of Death would have less of a job to do because goyim would not kill Jews and the entire world would be free of accidents. Perhaps the Angel of Death himself would die in the flood; the only one to die” (IB, 96). On the occasion of the Hebron Massacre, David retreats into a stream of consciousness revery in which he assumes his father's militant personality, raging as his father has against Jewish passivity in the face of gentile violence. Recalling Russian and Polish anti-Jewish atrocities, the boy soldier rants against the Cossacks, for having “Jewish blood on their sabers. And the Jewish flesh on their whips” (IB, 166). He also rebukes the Jews: “You are going to sit there reciting Psalms? When did a Psalm prevent a throat from being torn open?” (IB, 166). David imagines taking his father's role: the Jew who fights the oppressor, the machine-gunner and cavalryman, the founder and organizer of the Am Kedoshim Society, a holy order for the defense of the Jewish people.

In The Last of the Just, Andre Schwarz-Bart incorporates the legend of the thirty-six righteous men as a means of relating the history of anti-Semitic persecution from the eleventh to the twentieth century, culminating in the Holocaust. Potok takes a similar approach in his incorporation of the Golem of Prague myth. Jewish folklore created a mythic golem, fashioned from lifeless, shapeless matter by a person who knew God's ineffable name and who could, by its mystic means, breath life into the homunculus. The sixteenth-century golem was characterized as a huge and very strong figure with a propensity for exercising its physical power, even in indiscriminate destruction. Although the oral tradition inevitably generates variations, most share commonalities including the golem's supernatural capacity to discover and foil anti-Jewish violence and the golem's enormous strength, used most often to protect powerless Jews from potent enemies. Viewed within the historic frame of European anti-Semitic terror, it is the golem's protective role that appealed to the collective imagination of an oppressed people. For his Legend of the Golem of Prague, Rabbi Loew endowed the figure
with communal responsibility and moral conscience and thus fashioned “a national protector of persecuted Jews, a God-sent Avenger of the wrongs done to a helpless people.”

David’s *golem* fantasies coincide with the Third Reich’s heightened anti-Jewish violence. Gazing into the dark rectangle of his window shade David imagines a Nazi demonstration, flags and banners waving, torches smoking, and twenty-thousand brown-shirted men shouting and saluting. As the news from abroad becomes more violent, ever more menacing visions appear in David’s window shade. He consults with the *golem* and envisions himself performing heroically, shouting down the Nazis, quelling demonstrations, and spying on Nazi strategy sessions. The shadow glows red and the boy imagines a German building ablaze. Another time, he imagines a holocaustal conflagration, a synagogue aflame, and himself plunging swiftly through smoke and fire toward the ark to save the endangered Torah scrolls:

> Golem, look what they’ve done, the brown-shirted servants of the Angel of Death. We must save the Torah scrolls! He came then out of the invisibility in which I had left him and stood beside my bed in the darkness. He bowed in mute acknowledgment of my words, bringing his face close to mine, the face I had molded, my face; then he straightened his massive seven-foot frame and in a leap my eyes could barely discern was suddenly inside the window shade. . . . Through the flames! Into the smoke and through the flames! The flames tore at me but I felt nothing and I moved swiftly through smoke-filled corridors and burst into the heart of the synagogue where the pews were burning and the flames licked at the curtain of the Ark. . . . I tore at the flames with my fingers, beating them away from the sacred words. I gathered the scrolls into my arms and left them with startled sleepy-eyed men on the street. The flames roared in my ears. I slipped from the rectangle and lay in my bed listening to the long clattering of an elevated train. You did well, I murmured. Slowly, the Golem bowed. (*IB*, 254–55)

Dreams commonly used in European Holocaust literature here, too, reflect anxieties of the impotent while adding mythic elements to link historic brutality and contemporary travail. As Nazi harassment of German Jews escalates, the *golem* recedes. During the Passover season—the celebration of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage—David retreats into silence. The *golem* having failed, David now longs for another Moses to deliver
the Jews from the German Angel of Death. Potok closes this section of the novel by juxtaposing the end of the *golem* reveries with the German invasion of Poland and cessation of the delivery of mail to or from the family in Poland. "The silences deepened and grew lengthier as the Nazi darkness spread itself across Europe" (*IB*, 322).

The final segment of the novel, set in the Holocaust era and its immediate aftermath, deals with heightened American anti-Semitism as exemplified by the followers of Father Charles E. Coughlin and his Social Justice Movement. Coughlin spewed anti-Semitic propaganda on his regularly scheduled radio broadcasts and in his tabloid, *Social Justice*. As with the Third Reich, rhetoric inspired action. Roaming gangs of American hooligans ambushed yeshiva boys and old Jews: "platoons of goyim numbering about twenty-five each walking the streets of New York looking for Jews. They would try to sell a copy of *Social Justice* to someone who looked Jewish and if he refused to buy it they would start taunting him and pushing him and then they would beat him and run off" (*IB*, 289). Max Lurie had assured his son that the great difference between European and American anti-Semitism was that anti-Semitism was supported and sponsored by the government in Europe, but the American government rejected such behavior. Yet David is a witness to the collaboration of police officers' anti-Semitism, when they passively stand by as a Jew is assaulted in a blatant anti-Semitic attack. Incorporation of the Father Coughlin episode suggests both the Christian foundation upon which Nazi racial anti-Semitism thrived and the support given the Nazis' program of genocide by the churches in Europe.

While hooligans attacked Jews in American streets, genteel anti-Semites in Congress blocked Jewish immigration despite their knowledge of the mass murders occurring in Europe. Although Potok fails to develop this matter at length, he alludes to it in the *Am Kedoshim* rescue worker's assessment of Jewish emigration from Nazi-occupied Europe: "Europe and England will take in a few. So will America. But no country will want many of them" (*IB*, 300). As Germany's Final Solution becomes ever clearer, Max's despair gives way to fatalism. In response to his son's inquiry about assistance for the Jews, Lurie explains: "It is not officially known as yet. When it becomes officially known, then governments will meet and decide that nothing can be done" (*IB*, 335). Since the Jews of America can do little during the war to save European Jewry, the
members of the *Am Kedoshim*, like Arthur Cohen's Jews of the Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of Jewry, begin to plan their strategy for helping the surviving remnant. Max advocates the need for a Jewish army in Palestine to counter the anticipated British resistance to Jewish immigration.

Through David's mother, Potok registers the impact of the Holocaust on American-Jewish immigrants whose families were being destroyed in Europe. Ruth Lurie continues to care for her American family's physical needs, but withdraws from them emotionally. Having failed to convince her parents to come to America from Poland when they actually had visas and when exodus was possible, she fears they will not survive the war. Eventually Ruth stops reading the old letters from her parents and, for periods lasting several days, avoids speech. The Luries knew during the second year of the war of the massive death toll of Eastern European Jewry, but it is at war's end that they learn the full impact of the concentration camp atrocities and mass murders. Confirmation is received that the families were transferred from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen and no one survived. Over 150 family members perished, a fate similar to that which the Potoks suffered. The novelist, who was David's age at war's end, draws on his own history for David's reaction to "newspaper photographs, the memorial assemblies, the disbelief in the faces of friends, the shock as news came of death and more death."12 Potok writes, "I remember my father's rage, my mother's soft endless weeping."13 Predictably, Max rages and Ruth weeps.

Only when he writes of the Bergen-Belsen photographs does Potok treat Holocaust atrocities graphically. "Grotesque forms with skeletal arms and legs and rib cages and heads lay stacked like macabre cordwood on a stone ramp" (*IB*, 408). The enormity of the crime is suggested by "hills of corpses, pits of bones, the naked rubble of the dead and the staring eyes and hollow faces of the survivors" (*IB*, 400). David is overwhelmed by a photograph of dead children, "eyes and mouths open, bodies twisted and frozen with death" (*IB*, 400). From the photographs, David understands the truth of his teacher's assessment of the German contribution to the technology of death and the full implications of the Nazi crime against Jewry: "They destroyed an entire civilization. The Nazis have taught Western civilization that not only making cars but also committing murder can become a mass production industry" (*IB*, 401). In addition to realistic rendering, Potok composes an imag-
istic revery in which David imagines the Bergen-Belsen newsphotos while walking along a parapet overlooking the Hudson River. As he looks at the railroad tracks and a shanty town across the river, he falls down a rocky bluff and cuts his finger, which bleeds profusely. The river begins to flow red—all the world is red. As a freight train passes, he imagines the central holocaustal vision of the trains that crisscrossed German-occupied Europe, behind whose sealed doors he envisions “a multitude of writhing human beings packed together riding in filth and terror” (IB, 412). The photographs of Bergen-Belsen atrocities catapult David from traditional to secular biblical scholarship and to a determination to dedicate his life to fighting what these accident-makers are doing with . . . the most beautiful photograph of all; that is to say, the picture of my people in the Bible. As a result of the fusion of these two metaphors, he leaves his Orthodoxy, enters one of the metaphors: the secular world, in order to understand better the other metaphor: the photograph, the Bible, which is the picture of his people at a certain period of time.14

The final confrontation with anti-Semitism comes to this boy from modern Bible criticism.15 David follows the path of Potok’s colleagues who entered the field of Bible scholarship “to change the attitude of that discipline toward Jews.”16 He loves the Torah and decides to join the ranks of its detractors to prove them wrong, to discredit their insertion of anti-Semitic innuendo in their writing, to use textual criticism—the scholarly method abhorrent to traditionalists—to save the Torah from its detractors. The child who sought to save the Torah from the flames of the anti-Semites in his golem fantasies has matured and found a substantive way to contribute to Torahic preservation. However, his method distresses his father who objects to textual criticism because of its association not only with all that he hates about modern Germany but with nineteenth-century German Jewish scholars’ creation of Reform Judaism, which he regards as the destruction of Torah Judaism.

The novel’s final Holocaust reference appears in the postwar era. David, a biblical scholar, travels to Germany to inspect a manuscript. There he sets out on his quest “into the final beginnings” of his family. In the land of annihilation, standing at the entrance to Bergen-Belsen, David is seized by paralytic terror. Inclined to flee, he is urged forward by his Uncle David’s voice and by a vision of his
teacher commanding him to view the remains of a family devoted to Torah. Out of the wind, his Uncle David, the victim of the Lemberg pogrom, urges him to a new beginning, implying that out of the ashes Judaism will arise again. For David the revitalization takes the form of biblical scholarship. He reads the numbers of the dead, the dead in the hundreds of thousands in Bergen-Belsen, and laments his family losses: “Who lies beneath my feet? I am walking on the dead of my family’s beginnings” (IB, 431). In this place of barbarism, Potok celebrates Jewish dignity in a superimposed dialogue between Max and his brother, David. They celebrate the living David, who, carrying his uncle’s name, will bring new life to old roots. In an allegoric juxtaposition, Potok contrasts the poison of one civilization with the fruit of its victims. Germany’s use of modern technology to exterminate millions of Jews and the millions they would have begotten is contrasted with the ancient Jewish Leverite marriage, which symbolizes Judaism’s will to survive despite the world’s effort to destroy it. Young David is living testimony to the Torahic encouragement that a childless widow may marry her husband’s brother and name the first son of the union for the dead husband, thereby perpetuating his name in Israel. David follows his uncle’s scholarly path and is perceived by the family as “the resurrection of the dead” (IB, 219). Unlike the ghost of the murdered in Renaissance and Jacobean drama who returns to demand vengeance, Uncle David’s ghost demands devotion to Judaism and Jewry. At Bergen-Belsen Uncle David strengthens his nephew’s commitment to Jewish scholarship. The novel concludes with David’s recitation of the Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer for the dead, but a prayer filled with hope for Jewish survival on the site that witnessed the murder of so many Jews.

The continuity suggested by David’s incantation of the Kaddish is given dramatic realization in this novel, as in all Potok’s fiction, through the renewed vigor of Jewish-American education, manifested in David Lurie’s scholarship, and through building and sustaining a vibrant Israel, the mission Max Lurie adopts as his own. Recalling David Malter’s turn from Holocaust defeat to Zionist promise in The Chosen, Max Lurie rejects passivity in the wake of the European debacle. Like Potok’s father, Max is also a fervent Irgunist and supporter of Vladimir Jabotinsky’s militant approach to Jewish immigration and survival in Israel. “With grim and silent satisfaction” that Benjamin Max Potok possessed, Lurie supports Irgun raids for Jewish rights in Palestine.
Illustrative of Potok's growing craft as a novelist is his successful integration of biblical and sacred textual matter with the historic themes of the novel, particularly the incorporation of Genesis subjects, language, and imagery. The Genesis parallels operate structurally, thematically, and allusively. The title is derived from the first word of the Hebrew Bible, Bereshith. As Genesis traces the history of the Israelites and their relations with other peoples, so too does Potok now abandon the closed societies of his early fiction, the parochial enclaves of Williamsburg and Crown-Heights, for a multiethnic Bronx neighborhood; this neighborhood serves as a microcosm for twentieth-century Jewish interaction with the gentile world. Toward the end of Genesis, Joseph recapitulates the lesson of his career: that God brings good out of evil, and that He will bring the Jewish people out of Egypt and to the land He promised the patriarchs. Potok invokes this redemptive voice to celebrate the remnant's emergence from European Holocaust bondage and its going forth to rebuild and to restore the land and people of Israel. Similarly, during the worst period of Holocaust suffering, the nineteen-year-old David recalls his Bar Mitzvah Torah reading: the entry of the Jews into Egypt and its accompanying prophetic reading from Amos regarding restoration of the fortunes of the Jewish homeland and those who would rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them. Potok's Jews, survivors and American Jews, are determined to make a new beginning after the Holocaust, a beginning that rejuvenates Judaism and Jewry. Whether the new beginning is in Israel or in the Diaspora is unimportant to them; however, that it support Israel as the Jewish homeland and maintain Judaism in Israel and in the Diaspora is of paramount significance. Chaim Potok's dedication to the State of Israel, Jewish scholarship, and the creation of fiction addressing the dynamics of Jewish civilization testify to his celebration of Judaism and Jewry. Potok adds his voice to Emil Fackenheim's affirmation for Holocaust restoration through commitment to Judaism and Jewry, since, like Fackenheim, Potok believes that "the alternative [to Jewish commitment] is to say Hitler succeeded, that everybody really died for nothing."