

# The significance of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and suffering in the overcoming of 'core-to-core confrontation' in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*

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## ABSTRACT

One of the central issues in Chaim Potok's works is what he calls 'core-to-core [culture] confrontation', that is to say the clash between the core of an individual's world and the core of another wider world. Specifically, in *The Chosen* (1967), this confrontation occurs when the core of Danny Saunder's world—the son of an ultra-conservative Hasidic leader called Reb Saunders—collides with the core of a more general world in which he lives—Western secular culture. This clash, which results in the confrontation of Reb Saunders and Danny, is largely due to the Reb's opposition to his son's wish to study psychoanalysis.

In this article, I will focus on how Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue facilitates the mutual understanding between two opposing worlds in *The Chosen*. The conflict is finally resolved when, using Buber's terms, the characters' relationships move from an 'I-It' to an 'I-Thou' relationship. This process of coming to terms with each other inevitably brings about much suffering on Potok's characters' part. In the second part of the present article, I will try to show how suffering can transform them into more sympathetic human beings.

**Keywords:** Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*, core-to-core [culture] confrontation, Martin Buber, I-Thou, I-It, suffering, Hasidism/Hasidic.

La importancia de la filosofía del diálogo de Martin Buber y del sufrimiento para vencer la "core-to-core confrontation" en la novela *The Chosen*, de Chaim Potok

## RESUMEN

Una de las cuestiones fundamentales que se aborda en las obras de Chaim Potok es lo que este escritor solía llamar "core-core [culture] confrontation", es decir, el choque que se produce entre el "núcleo" (core) del reducido mundo de una persona y el núcleo de una realidad más amplia. Concretamente en *The Chosen* (1967), este enfrentamiento ocurre cuando el núcleo del mundo de Danny Saunders (el hijo de un líder jasídico ultraconservador llamado Reb Saunders) colisiona con un mundo circundante mayor (la cultura secular occidental). Este choque, que provoca el enfrentamiento entre Reb Saunders y Danny, se debe en gran medida a la negativa del padre a que su hijo estudie psicoanálisis.

En el presente artículo, me voy a centrar en cómo la filosofía del diálogo de Martin Buber facilita el mutuo entendimiento entre dos realidades opuestas en *The Chosen*. El conflicto queda finalmente resuelto cuando, en palabras de Buber, las relaciones de los personajes pasan de ser relaciones del “Yo-Ello” al “Yo-Tú.” Inevitablemente, este acercamiento requiere un largo proceso de sufrimiento por parte de los personajes de Potok. En la segunda parte del artículo, intento mostrar cómo el sufrimiento los transforma en unos seres humanos más compasivos.

**Palabras clave:** Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*, “core-to-core [culture] confrontation”, Martin Buber, Yo-Tú, Yo-Ello, sufrimiento, jasidismo/jasídico.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The works of the Jewish-American scholar, essayist and novelist Chaim Potok (1929-2002) explore the implications of an individual's decision to leave the Hasidic world in which he/she was born. Typically, this rupture provokes a conflict between the tradition in which that person was born and raised—conservative Hasidism—and the tradition of which he/she wants to be part—Western secular humanism. In what Potok used to call “core-to-core [culture] confrontation” (Morgan 2000: 56), he liked to present the clash between individuals and their traditions. In an interview with Laura Chavkin (1999: 154), Potok argued that Core-to-core culture confrontation occurs when an individual is located at the heart of his or her own culture, knows that culture thoroughly, constructs the world through the value system and frames of reference of that culture, and then encounters core elements from another culture; for example, Danny Saunders, situated in the heart of Hasidism in *The Chosen*, at the core of the Jewish tradition, encounters an element from the core of the general culture in which we all live—the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, which are central in Western secular culture. That's a core-to-core culture confrontation.

When an individual “encounters core elements from another culture”, s/he begins to question the background within which s/he was born and raised, to reflect on religious issues and therefore grow spiritually. As John H. Timmermann (1984: 515) claims, the central theme of Potok's books is “[...] the enduring and changing religious tradition of a people, and how that tradition shapes the present moment and is shaped by it.”

One of the reasons why Potok always showed a great interest in this clash is that “[e]ach of us comes from one world and then encounters other worlds that present alternative ways of thinking about the human experience. Everybody goes through this. Each of my books is a different facet of this confrontation.” (Siegal 2000: 93)

In this article, I will focus on the ways in which Martin Buber's (1878-1965) philosophy of dialogue facilitates the mutual understanding between two opposing worlds in *The Chosen*. In the first part, “The influence of Buber's philosophy of dialogue on Potok's core-to-core confrontation”, I will attempt to show how Reuven and Danny initially relate to each other through perception, that is to say through an I-It relationship, but eventually, in order to come to terms with each other, their I-It relationship becomes an I-Thou encounter through dialogue. After analysing the I-It/I-

Thou encounter between Reuven and Danny, I will explain how the Reb Saunders/Danny Saunders relationship is also transformed into an I-Thou encounter.

In Potok's works the I-It, I-Thou process is carried out through suffering. For this reason, his characters can only become more sympathetic and be transformed into better human beings after they have suffered (for others). In *The Chosen*, it holds true because the relationship between the two main characters, which is a painful one due to the pressures put on both by Danny's father, finally leads them to mutual understanding and consolidation of their friendship. In the second part of this article, "Coming to terms with the other through physical and psychological suffering", I will approach the issue of suffering from two points of view: physical pain—Reuven's accident, David Malter's heart attacks, etc—and psychological pain—the Holocaust. As will be shown below, the former contributes to the dramatisation of the latter.

## 2. THE INFLUENCE OF BUBER'S PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE ON POTOK'S CORE-TO-CORE CONFRONTATION

Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* tells us about the friendship between two 15-year-old youths, Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders, who, belonging to two opposing worlds, meet and become close friends. Their encounter is anything but accidental, as the curious connection established between Reuven and Danny is related to a reference to the Talmud made at the beginning of the book. In a conversation between Reuven and his father David Malter, the latter tells the former that there are two things to be done: to acquire a teacher, and choose a friend.<sup>1</sup> Both things occur throughout the narrative.

Reuven and Danny meet for the first time as rivals in a baseball game organized by their respective schools that eventually turns into a holy war. There is a conflict between the schools because secular Jewish students like Reuven attend Danny's yeshiva school to study English, Hebrew and Jewish subjects. The Hasidic yeshiva boys are encouraged to consider the 'apikorsim'—i.e. Jewish goyim, or secular Jews—as worse Jews and lesser human beings than they are. The baseball game is not therefore a competition between Judaism and secular America, but rather between two different kinds of Judaism, conservative Hasidism and liberal Orthodox Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

The discrimination practised against Reuven and his peers, heightened during the game, leads Reuven to a gradual loss of innocence, to a first step into the adult

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<sup>1</sup>Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982 [1967]), p.74. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>See McClymond for an extended analysis of how the conflicts between the varieties of Jewish traditions in Mid-Twentieth Century America contributed to the development of Jewish-American identity. Kathryn McClymond, "The Chosen: Defining American Judaism." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25.2 (2007), pp.4-23.

world. Reuven probably experiences his first rite of passage in the baseball game when Danny throws a ball which hits him in the right eye. As a consequence of this, Reuven is partly blind. He perceives reality through his good eye. B.D. Tucker believes that Reuven's accident "very clearly symbolises and parallels the initiation ceremonies of primitive cultures."<sup>3</sup> (1991: 166)

Reuven's stay in hospital—the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital—helps him change his vision of life.<sup>4</sup> After his operation, he becomes more conscious of other people's problems, which show him the futility of his own worries. In effect, vision and perception, two dominant motifs in the story, epitomise the capacity to see the world, and that entails both seeing oneself and others beyond their surface. Significantly, the central characters' eyes do not simply show how well or badly they see, but they are also intended to reflect their states of mind. For instance, when angry, Reuven's father's eyes are dark; when happy, Reb Saunders' mist over, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of perception—in Potok's world, this entails learning to see both others and oneself from a different perspective—permits one to consider one of his major concerns not only in *The Chosen* but also in his other novels: relationships. Potok was deeply interested in the idea that everybody and everything in the world are connected to something else. For Potok, there can be no progress if we ignore this. His claim would account for the connection established between different characters in the novel. For example, what is the relationship between individuals who belong to two different backgrounds, as is the case with Reuven (a Jew) and Tony and Billy (Gentiles), and Reuven and Danny (an assimilated Jew and a Hasid, respectively)? Tony and Billy, who live in a world radically different from the one in which Reuven grew up, are his *reality instructors* in the hospital. These two characters symbolise Reuven's first contact with the outside world after the accident. Indirectly, they facilitate the protagonist's approach to Danny, whom the narrator resents at first. Here, I believe that Potok may have been influenced, among others, by Martin Buber's concepts of I-It and I-Thou as explained in his *I and Thou* (1922). According to Buber, there are only two possible forms of encountering the world: I-It and I-Thou. In both, the key element is the first person singular pronoun because it is the I that can engage with the outer world as if it was a simple object

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<sup>3</sup>Tucker's (1991) interpretation that Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders, who go through a process of initiation similar to the initiation rites of ancient cultures, enter into the adult world. B.D. Tucker, "Initiation in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*." *Departmental Bulletin Paper*. Doshisha University (1991), pp.163-178.

<sup>4</sup>See Zlotnick for a study of the presence of Brooklyn in Potok's *The Chosen* (1967), *The Promise* (1969) and *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972). Joan Zlotnick, "The Chosen Borough: Chaim Potok's Brooklyn." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2.4 (1985), pp.13-18.

<sup>5</sup>This allusion to good and injured eyes was also used, among others, by Jewish-American novelist Saul Bellow (1915-2005) in his *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) where the protagonist, Artur Sammler, discriminates important from irrelevant information thanks to his good eye. Mr. Sammler's still-healthy right eye seems to embody the narrator's capacity to perceive the deterioration of the American society of his time. For a more detailed study of apocalypticism in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, see James Stanger, "The Power of Vision: Blake's System and Bellow's Project in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*." *Saul Bellow Journal* 12 (1994), pp.17-36.

(it) or an individual (thou). In other words, in the I-It relationship, the other is a mere object that the observer perceives, whereas in the I-Thou relationship, the encounter is immediate and direct: there are no intermediary beings because the encounter between the two occurs through dialogue.

To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*, wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* and *She* can replace *It*. Hence the *I* of man is also twofold. For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*.<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis in the original)

In the case of Reuven and Danny, their first encounter is clearly an I-It relationship, as both characters observe each other. There is an odd exchange of wordless glances between them. In the following passage, Reuven, the narrator of the story and perceiver in the act of perception, plays the role of the I, whereas Danny, the perceived, plays the role of the It.

*I saw Danny Saunders go over to the boy who had just struck out and talk to him. [...]* (14, emphasis mine)

The next pitch left Schwartzie's hand in a long, slow line, and before it was halfway to the plate I knew Danny Saunders would try for it. *I knew it from the way his left foot came forward* and the bat snapped back and his long, thin body began its swift pivot. [...] (16, emphasis mine)

[Danny Saunders] *looked at me curiously and said nothing.* (18, emphasis mine)

Using Buber's term, there is an *Urdistanz* (primal distance) between the two youths. This distance is not overcome when, a few minutes prior to the game, Danny asks Reuven if his father "writes articles on the Talmud?" (18) and, on receiving an affirmative answer, Danny replies: "I told my team we're going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon" (18). The distance between both antagonists is overcome—i.e. the I-It relationship transforms into an I-Thou relationship—when Danny visits Reuven in the hospital to apologise for his behaviour and Reuven shows a conciliatory attitude towards him.

"Hello," Danny Saunders said softly. "I'm sorry if I woke you. The nurse told me it was all right to wait here." *I looked at him in amazement.* He was the last person in the world I had expected to visit me in the hospital. "Before you tell me how much you hate me," he said quietly, "let me tell you that I'm sorry about what happened."

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1958 [1922]), p.1.

*I stared at him and didn't know what to say. He was wearing a dark suit, a white shirt open at the collar, and a dark skullcap. I could see the earlocks hanging down alongside his sculptured face and the fringes outside the trousers below the jacket. "I don't hate you," I managed to say, because I thought it was time for me to say something even if what I said was a lie. (61, emphasis mine)*

Despite Reuven's lie—probably an attempt not to make matters worse—it is the dialogue between Reuven and Danny in this scene that enables them to begin to break the I-It connection and realize the I-Thou connection of two people who will eventually come to terms with each other.<sup>7</sup>

It should be mentioned here that relationships are always twofold in *The Chosen*. Apart from the aforesaid Reuven/Danny relationship, other key relationships are those between David Malter and Reuven, David Malter and Danny, Danny Malter and Reb Saunders, and Reb Saunders and Danny. The four characters, whose backgrounds significantly differ from one another, are skilfully contrasted. David Malter's and Reuven's world is modern, liberal orthodox, whereas Reb's and Danny's is ultra-conservative, Hasidic. This contrast or clash between them embodies Potok's interest in presenting the conflict between liberal Orthodox Judaism and Hasidism. The elder Malter, modelled on Potok's father-in-law Max Isaac Mosevitzky<sup>8</sup>, is the idealised teacher, a good, devoted scholar. Just as he combines Judaic scholarship with scientific writing, Reuven combines secular and sacred studies, complementing the study of Talmud and logic, mathematics and philosophy. David Malter is Potok's epitome of what a Jewish parent should be like. Edward Abramson explains Malter's role very clearly:

David Malter is Potok's ideal teacher because despite his Orthodoxy he does not eschew the twentieth century and what it can offer to his understanding of Judaism. This attitude extends to his method of teaching his son and to his expectations of the breadth of his son's interests. (Abramson 1986: 24)

The David Malter/Reuven Malter relationship, which is based on mutual understanding and trust, works because their encounter is always authentic and personal. In Buberian terms, father and son have an I-Thou encounter because they

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<sup>7</sup>The I-It/I-Thou relationships are also perceived in Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) in which both the protagonist, a Jew called Asa Leventhal, and his antagonist, a Gentile named Kirby Allbee, have a Buberian encounter when they meet in a park and, after a few minutes of mutual scrutinizing, they initiate a conversation. Saul Bellow, *The Victim* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1947), pp. 21-22. For an analysis of the presence of Buber's philosophy of dialogue in *The Victim*, see Gustavo Sánchez Canales, "Alienation and Marginality in Saul Bellow's Early Novels." *Evolving Origins, Transplanting Cultures: Literary Legacies of the New Americans*. Eds. Laura Alonso Gallo & Antonia Domínguez Miguela (Universidad de Huelva, 2002), pp.183-184.

<sup>8</sup>In an interview with S. Lillian Kremer, Potok answered: "My father-in-law was a Labor-Zionist; he was a very learned Jew, modest, traditional. He was not a Talmud scholar. That aspect of Malter's personality came from someone else. The character of David Malter, his humanity, was very much the humanity of my father-in-law, when I came to know him." S. Lillian Kremer, "An Interview with Chaim Potok." *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p.34.

meet in their authentic existence, without any objectification of each other. In their relationship, there is an encounter, a dialogue and an exchange promoted by their understanding of the importance of tolerance regarding the other.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Reb Saunders and his son Danny initially have an I-It encounter because the I—Reb Saunders—treats the other—Danny—as an ‘object.’ Their relationship does not seem to be based on mutual understanding and trust, because Reb is more interested in making sure that Danny serves his own goal than in truly engaging him on equal terms. The Reb’s wishes to see his son become a Hasidic spiritual leader after he retires. His behaviour is that of the authoritarian parent who expects to have a dutiful son that will never question his decisions. Unlike Mr. Malter, who demonstrates a friendly attitude towards Reuven, Saunders is a sullen father who uses silence—this leads to a monologue, rather than a dialogue—to teach Danny the value of heart and soul. William F. Purcell explains that Reb Saunders’ silence “prevents any communication between the two outside of the context of their religious studies.” (1989: 80); to B.D. Tucker, silence is “the ordeal to be suffered” (1991: 176). The Reb’s method proves to be a failure, as Danny, in spite of remaining an observant Jew, rejects the role of *tzaddik*—spiritual leader—and decides to become a clinical psychiatrist instead.

Potok strongly disagreed with the religious fanaticism and bigotry displayed by leaders like Reb Saunders, whose ardent defence of the Hasidic tradition Potok deplors. In the following passage, the narrator questions Saunders’ conception of the Law for having a narrow-minded view of life. The narrator considers that the Law, as interpreted by Saunders, boils down to a series of rules which are actually devoid of meaning. In this way, the Law becomes an end in itself.

*“Reb Saunders is a great man, Reuven. Great men are always difficult to understand. He carries the burden of many people on his shoulders. I do not care for his Hasidism very much, but it is not a simple task to be a leader of people. Reb Saunders is not a fraud. He would be a great man if he had not inherited his post from his father. It is a pity he occupies his mind only with Talmud. If he were not a tzaddik he could make a great contribution to the world. But he lives only in his own world. It is a great pity. Danny will be the same way when he takes his father’s place. It is a shame that a mind such as Danny’s will be shut off from the world.”* (147, emphasis mine)

Despite the narrator’s—and Potok’s—dislike for the Reb’s fanaticism and religious intolerance, David Malter clearly acknowledges his counterpart’s virtues. Conversely, Saunders, dazzled by his own radicalism, is incapable of welcoming ideas alien to his own.

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<sup>9</sup>I find that Friedman’s explanation of the I-Thou connection—an encounter “characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability”—is applicable to the David Malter/Reuven Malter relationship. Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960 [1955]), p.57.

The Malters/Saunders confrontation enables Potok to show the existing clash between the individual and his/her tradition—core-to-core culture confrontation—so that s/he can question, and be questioned by it. In effect, Potok's interest is focused on the premise that we are born and brought up in a reduced world—family, neighbourhood, community, town, city and country. At the same time, we are exposed to influences from beyond that little world. Typically these influences are at odds with those values we have been—and are still being—taught in our own world. We are bound to experience a clash of values or, using Potok's term, a core-to-core culture confrontation because influences come to our ideas from the core, that is to say from the heart of that outside, alien world. It is then that a person finds his/her inherited values to confront those of the mainstream culture. The fanatic, who is a zealous guardian of faith, fails to assimilate part of those outside values into his/her own tradition. In *The Chosen*, Reb Saunders is the clearest embodiment of the individual who refuses to accept those influences—e.g. David Malter's liberal Orthodox Judaism—that might jeopardize his own moral values. However, as perceived throughout the narrative, Saunders undergoes a spiritual evolution that culminates with his acceptance of other lifestyles.<sup>10</sup> The reader eventually finds that Reb Saunders' silence has always been intended as a selfless act to give his son compassion, respect and empathy for others, and an awareness of the suffering of others. It seems that his fanaticism and bigotry have never hindered him from feeling a deep, painful love for Danny and a strong sense of compassion and empathy. In his "Martin Buber and the Jews", Potok explained Buber's connection between evil and the It in the following terms:

In his ethical philosophy, Buber argued that evil is the constant viewing of a person as an It. Making one's own self the central element of a relationship—an act which renders it impossible to achieve the I-Thou relation—is the root-source of human sin. (1966: 47)

The Reb's deep love for Danny and his belief in the importance of empathy enable the father to see his son beyond an I-It relationship achieving, as Potok says, an I-Thou relation. When Reb Saunders finally sees for himself all the pain he has inflicted on his son, he realises that he was mistaken and lets Danny study clinical psychology.<sup>11</sup> Purcell points out that "Potok's heroes are reluctant rebels who have

<sup>10</sup>Interestingly, Mills proposes Potok's *The Chosen* to show why and how fiction can be used to make students aware of cultural diversity in modern society. Roxanne Mills, "Using Fiction to Enhance Multicultural Education." *Education* 118.1 (1997), pp.25-28.

<sup>11</sup>In "Love of God and Love of Neighbor", Buber makes an analogy which can be used to explain the Reb Saunders/Danny, I-Thou encounter: "The 'holy Yehudi' and his friends loved to draw an analogy between two Jews (Yude) standing side by side on an equal footing and drinking to each other in joyous love with the connection between two 'Yud'—Hebrew letters. The Yud is the smallest sign in the Hebrew alphabet, indeed a mere point, yet if one places two of them next to each other, then they express the name of God. If, on the contrary, you put two such points on top of each other, then all they signify is an interruption. Where two stand side by side on an equal footing and are open to each other without reservation, there God is." Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*. Ed. Maurice S. Friedman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International 1988 [1958]), p.242.

no desire to reject their fathers or their traditions, but who cannot completely submit themselves to their rule.” (1989: 79)

### 3. COMING TO TERMS WITH THE OTHER THROUGH PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING

B.D. Tucker explains that “[i]n initiation ceremonies there were always older men to guide the boys, and older women to guide and instruct the girls” (1991: 169). This seems to be the case with David Malter, a kind of mentor of, reality instructor for Danny. David is a major influence on Danny's life because he is largely responsible for the youth's decision to become a clinical psychiatrist. David has been secretly providing Danny with books on different subjects. Thanks to Reuven's father, Danny has become a voracious reader who reads Freud in the original, among other things. Danny thinks that German is “the most important scientific language in the world” (157). David Malter and Danny Saunders account for Potok's idea of the modern American Jew, who combines a traditional concept of spirituality with a more scientific view of the world.

Danny's attitude shocks Reuven. As Danny delves into the study of psychoanalysis, he finds it more and more difficult to understand the Austrian physician. Danny starts using translations which confuse him. Significantly, there are references to two words—*Unlust* and *Schmerz*—which, translated as ‘pain’, he fails to distinguish. This reference to ‘pain’ is important in underscoring one of the cornerstones of the story: suffering. In effect, suffering is at the centre of the novel because it pervades the narrative and affects virtually all the characters: Reuven's accident, David Malter's two heart attacks, Danny's confrontation with his father, Reb Saunders' concept of life, Billy and Tony Savo's hospitalisation, etc. Their suffering—and their awareness of other people's pain—turn them into more sympathetic beings because ache and grief facilitate a sense of responsibility towards others.

Throughout *The Chosen*, there is a clear relationship between suffering and spiritual growth. For instance, when Reb Saunders explains that our knowledge of other people's suffering makes us more selfless, sympathetic and understanding, on the one hand, and more conscious of our fragility and dependence upon the “Master of the Universe”, on the other:

*“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 fragile and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe.”* (284, emphasis mine)

At this point, Reb Saunders' reflection on suffering is particularly significant for Potok's concept of culture confrontation. When Saunders says that “[i]t destroys

our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others”, he is alluding to everybody’s pain, his own pain included. He is suffering from his son’s refusal to follow his steps as *tzaddik* and from his determination to become a psychiatrist instead. However, Reb Saunders eventually manages to overcome his arrogance and lets Danny follow his own path. Reb Saunders has finally become a more sympathetic—and therefore more generous—individual. The issue of suffering reaches its climax in the explicit allusions to the Holocaust (189-191). The previous references to ‘pain’—Reuven’s accident, Billy and Tony Savo’s hospitalisation, etc.—which operate on a physical level help to set the novel within a World War II context. It is worth mentioning here that the most explicit reference to the War (the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944) coincides with Reuven’s and David’s respective hospitalisations. (David enters a hospital following a heart attack.)

The war ends late in 1945, a couple of months after the dropping of A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By that time both David Malter and Reuven have fully recovered and left the hospital. Unquestionably, the characters’ physical and psychological sufferings run parallel here to anticipate the tragic theme of the Holocaust. The Holocaust first contributes to the separation of the central characters, but later on it facilitates their encounter. David Malter, who has been previously responsible for his son’s approach to Danny, inadvertently causes the separation of the two friends. The reason is that David Malter has prepared a pro-Zionist speech that he reads out publicly. This speech leads Reb Saunders to break with the Malters. What really disturbs him is that “his son be the friend of the son of a man who was advocating the establishment of a secular Jewish State run by the Jewish goyim” (231). Malter’s speech helps to connect the question of the Shoah to the creation of the State of Israel. Unlike Reb Saunders, an anti-Zionist who believes that the Messiah has to re-establish the nation of Israel, David Malter thinks that the Jews have to establish a Jewish state despite the opposition of the British. Unlike Reb Saunders, David Malter believes that the Holocaust can be meaningful if it is interpreted as God’s way of facilitating the return of the Jews to their land. Therefore, for Reuven’s father, the destruction of one-third of the world’s Jews will be the rebirth of a nation, the Zionist goal of the establishment of a Jewish state in its ancient territory. Conversely, Reb Saunders fosters the idea of a post-messianic Israel and denounces secular Zionism, whereas Malter defends the latter.<sup>12</sup> In his aforementioned “Martin Buber and the Jews”, Potok recalled that Buber envisioned the future establishment of a Jewish State in terms of an I-Thou community. However, as Potok concluded, Buber was soon disillusioned with this project and had to accept the harsh reality of life.

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<sup>12</sup> S. Lillian Kremer explains that “[i]n 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.” S. Lillian Kremer, “Eternal Light: The Holocaust and the Revival of Judaism and Jewish Civilization in the Fiction of Chaim Potok.” *Witness through the Imagination: Jewish-American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 303.

In Buber's thought, prophetic Judaism, Hasidism, and Zionism are all interrelated. Both prophet and Hasid envision as the goal of Judaism the establishment of an I-Thou community of men on this earth. Modern Zionism, in turn, is the means by which the Jew can realize this prophetic vision in the land to which he is inextricably linked by the Covenant. Buber regarded the kibbutz as a potential I-Thou community, and though he was disillusioned with it later in life, he never abandoned his original hope for it. His position in favour of a bi-national Palestine was more controversial, and caused him to be looked upon with suspicion and resentment by many Israelis. Here, too, Buber longed for the establishment of a dialogical relationship—this time between Jews and Arabs. Reality proved to be stronger than the dream. (Potok 1966: 48)

When Danny addresses the issue of the Holocaust, he says that “Six million Jews have died [...] He's—I think he's thinking of them. He's suffering for them” (199). “He” refers to his father, the *tzaddik*—the spiritual leader—who stayed with his people, suffering for what the world did to the Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Inevitably, the separation of Reuven and Danny can only be but temporary because, for Potok, everything and everybody are related and so are the Malter and the Saunders. Time passes, and Reuven and his father are euphoric because in 1947 the United Nations voted for dividing Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab.<sup>14</sup> It is then that David suffers his second heart attack. This suffering restores the friendship between Reuven and Danny.

The last chapters of the novel do not only help bring the two characters—i.e. the two opposing backgrounds—together, but they also show a role reversal in each protagonist: Danny, who was to become a *tzaddik*, is permitted to study clinical psychiatry, whereas Reuven, who was initially more interested in secular studies—logic, mathematics, and others—ends up becoming a rabbi. Reuven's rabbinate will give his life more meaning and purpose. One of his main goals as rabbi will be to give spiritual guidance to secular American Jews.

In an interview with Lynn Hinds (2000: 89), Potok talked about the religious-secular dichotomy in the following terms:

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<sup>13</sup>This issue of suffering for the others is clear in Bernard Malamud's (1914-1986) *The Assistant* (1957). In this novel, the initial encounter between the two central characters, Morris Bober and Frank Alpine—a Jew and a Gentile, respectively—provides keys to the progression of the plot. In fact, it is a turning point in the story as it presupposes Frank's awareness of the issue of suffering and its implications for Jewishness. Morris' way of living—confined to his claustrophobic grocery—leads him to reflect on what a Jew's life is like, and then to ask Morris about his motives for suffering. [Morris] “Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews.” [Frank] “That's what I mean, they suffer more than they have to.” [Morris] “If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew don't [*sic*] suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing.” [Frank] “What do you suffer for, Morris?” Frank said.” [Morris] “I suffer for you,” Morris said calmly.” Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980 [1957]), p.125.

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed discussion of David Malter's and Reb Saunders' respective attitudes towards Zionism, see Andrew Furman, “Zionism in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, Messianic Complications, and Current Crises.” *Israel through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel 1928-1995* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), pp.109-126.

In *The Chosen*, Danny's father tells him that he is going to be a kind of TZADDIK for the world. That is to say, a secular version of a spiritual leader. A pre-modern psychoanalyst, one might say, is the secular counterpart of the spiritual leader, to whom people would come with their problems.

The idea that Hasidism and psychoanalysis are two sides of the same coin is also advocated by Martin Buber. According to him, Hasidic teaching is somehow like psychoanalysis in that "it refers one from the problematic of external life to that of the inner life, and it shows the need of beginning with oneself rather than demanding that both parties to a relationship change together" (Friedman 1960 [1955]: 189). Hasidic teaching differs, however, from psychoanalytic theory in that it does not proceed from the investigation of individual psychological complications but rather from the whole individual. In order to heal the individual, the psychoanalyst must not forget that the real healing should be based on treating the whole individual and his relationships. Apparently, Reb Saunders' deep love and empathy for Danny have enabled him to understand the compatibility between Hasidism and psychoanalysis as explained by Buber.

It is not accidental that the novel concludes with chapter eighteen—eighteen in Hebrew is transcribed *chai*, which also spells the word *chaim* (life). According to Sanford Sternlicht (2000: 31), "[t]he novel is a paean to life and it ends with optimism. Jewish life goes on in America, and the younger generation is solid and well prepared for success and leadership." It seems that Potok, like other Jewish-American writers such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, believed in the human being and in his/her capacity to come to terms with him/herself.

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