

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Chosen

by Chaim Potok

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Notes

The Chosen, written in 1967, is the story of two Jewish boys. It explores their relationships with their fathers, their commitments to their religion, and their friendship with each other. The novel seamlessly incorporates lessons from the history of the Hasidic community and the controversy among Zionists and anti-Zionists over the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine after World War II. The novel also provides many real-life lessons Danny and Reuven must learn in their struggle to become men. The characters of Danny and Reuven continue their growth in the sequel to this novel, *The Promise*, written in 1969.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, a student will be able to

1. define vocabulary words relating to the Jewish faith.
2. cite events in the story that support the following themes in the novel:
 - Things and people are not always what they seem.
 - Sometimes the most important events in life come as a result of ordinary things.
 - If a person has a contribution to make, it must be made in public.
 - It is important to understand the history of your people.
 - The quality of life is more important than its length.
 - Sometimes, an issue has many sides, which are equally valid; understanding is possible only through hard work and study.
3. point out how the political atmosphere of the time complicates the lives of the characters—specifically, how the existence of both Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews puts pressure on Danny and Reuven’s friendship.
4. cite incidents from the story to support the following theme:
A person must experience hardships to gain compassion for others and learn to appreciate the good things in life.
5. explain what it means to be a Hasidic Jew and point out how Danny feels about each of these elements of Hasidism:
 - history of the sect
 - mission in life
 - views on Zionism
 - the fact that a tzaddik is an inherited position in his community
 - physical appearance of Hasids
6. contrast the father-and-son relationships of David Malter and Reuven with the relationship of Reb Saunders and Danny, including
 - the way they talk to each other;
 - the reasons and methods for studying the Talmud;
 - their expectations for their futures
7. discuss the overall theme of friendship and point out how the friendship between Danny and Reuven supports the following generalizations:
 - Friends are two bodies with one soul.
 - Honest differences of opinion must not be permitted to destroy a friendship.
8. relate incidents from Reuven’s life to support the following theme:
It is important to listen to people when they want to talk.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Describe the two ways to study the Talmud presented in the story. Which method does Reuven use and why?
2. In what way does Reuven begin to mature after nearly losing the sight in one eye?
3. Define Zionism. How do the activities of the Zionists impact Danny and Reuven's friendship?
4. Why does Reuven change his mind about Danny's culpability in causing the eye injury?
5. Since Danny has a photographic mind, why does he have trouble reading Freud?
6. Why is Danny concerned about his father's health?
7. What are the two things the Talmud says a man must do for himself? How does Reuven accomplish each of these things in this story?
8. For what reasons does Reb Saunders decide to accept Reuven as Danny's friend?
9. Write a brief character sketch of Reb Saunders. Be sure to include the kind of man he appears to be to Reuven, David Malter, and Danny.
10. In what ways is Reb Saunders's Hasidic Community different from the way of life proposed by Israel (Ba'al Shem Tov)?
11. Define "tzaddik." Why does Reb Saunders believe his son is a tzaddik even though Danny has decided to become a psychologist at the end of the story?
12. What is Reb Saunders's opinion of the world outside the Hasidic community?
13. Why is it ironic that Reuven is planning to become a rabbi?
14. In the end, Danny says he would raise his own son in silence if it were necessary. Why do you think he would put his own child through the same torture he has experienced growing up?
15. Discuss blindness as a possible symbol, standing for the limitations in people's lives.
16. Which incidents from the story support the theme that it is important to listen to people when they want to talk?

6. How does Danny learn “two blatt” of Talmud each day?

7. Why is Danny surprised Reuven wants to be a Rabbi? What does Danny want to be?

8. In what way is Reuven partly responsible for his own injury?

9. Why does Reb Saunders not like to write? What does he mean when he says, “he wishes everyone could talk in silence”?

10. What is ironic about Danny’s answer that his father is “quite a man”?

BOOK TWO

Chapter Five

1. Briefly describe Manya.

2. What does the following passage from the novel tell the reader about how Reuven’s experiences during the last five days have changed his life?

“I felt I had crossed into another world, that little pieces of my old self had been left behind on the black asphalt floor of the school yard alongside the shattered lens of my glasses....I lay very still on the lounge chair and thought a long time about Danny.”

Chapter Nine

1. Find the extended metaphor in this chapter about the spider and the fly. How does it relate to Billy, his blindness, and his unsuccessful operation? What does Reuven learn about life from Billy's situation?
