

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

My Name is Asher Lev

by Chaim Potok

written by Amanda Otten

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Introduction

My Name is Asher Lev is the story of a Hasidic boy who discovers at an early age that his talent as an artist is both a tremendous gift and an enormous burden. The novel chronicles Asher's struggle to meld his instinctive need to create art with his human desire to please his family and his religious community.

At the heart of this novel lies a story about family, choices, and the harsh realities of life. One need not be Jewish to identify with Asher Lev. An effective study of the novel will challenge students to look beyond both themselves and their own cultural heritage to see the common struggles that face humanity.

Because the book revolves around a Jewish boy and his struggle with his faith, it contains numerous references to Jewish culture. All necessary terminology is defined within this unit, and a strong reader will find that a lack of knowledge in the area of Judaism does not diminish the deep, universal meanings in the novel. However, a weak reader may become frustrated by the appearance of so many unfamiliar terms. Some reassurance may be necessary that it is possible to read and understand the novel without a complete understanding of the Jewish faith. Of course, a brief overview of Jewish culture prior to beginning the novel will enrich the experience.

All references come from the Anchor Books edition of *My Name is Asher Lev*, copyright 1972.

Objectives

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

1. define and use vocabulary words from the novel.
2. discuss the blessings and burdens of having an amazing talent.
3. discuss the problems that result when one's own dream conflicts with the dreams of one's family.
4. discuss the nature of art as presented in the novel.
5. discuss Asher's ongoing struggle between his art and his faith.
6. discuss the use of cold and dark as motifs in the novel.
7. discuss the use of travel as a motif in the novel.
8. discuss the use of water as a motif in the novel.
9. discuss the use of dreams as a motif in the novel.
10. analyze the author's use of diction to create a distinct voice and create meaning in the text.
11. identify and discuss examples of imagery within the text.
12. identify and discuss examples of irony within the text.
13. identify and discuss examples of personification within the text.
14. discuss the author's use of symbolism.
15. discuss the author's use of foreshadowing.
16. distinguish between internal and external conflict and discuss the way Asher's desire to paint is both an internal and external conflict.
17. compare and contrast the reactions to Asher's crucifixions, including his parents', the Rebbe's, and the art world's.
18. compare and contrast Asher's mother and father, with specific reference to the ways they respond to Asher's gift and his desire to pursue painting as a career.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Why does Asher hold on to his Jewish faith?
2. Discuss Potok's use of imagery in the novel.
3. Discuss Potok's use of irony in the novel.
4. Discuss Potok's use of symbolism in the novel.
5. How is Rivkeh Lev affected by the death of her brother?
6. Why does Rivkeh Lev spend so much time waiting at windows?
7. Discuss the role of the Rebbe in the Ladover community and specifically in Asher's life.
8. Analyze the use of travel as a motif in the novel.
9. Analyze the use of water as a motif in the novel.
10. Analyze the use of dreams as a motif in the novel.
11. Discuss the relationship between Asher and Jacob Kahn.
12. Discuss the impact of Yudel Krinsky on Asher.
13. Analyze the following characters
 - Asher Lev
 - Rivkeh Lev
 - Aryeh Lev
14. Discuss the concepts of "aesthetic blindness" and "moral blindness" and the characters to which these terms apply.
15. Discuss the ways in which Asher's desire to paint is both an internal and external conflict.
16. Analyze Potok's choice of setting. Do you think the setting is important to the story?
17. Discuss Potok's use of structure. How is the plot affected by the fact that the novel is circular?
18. In the book Rivkeh Lev gives her son, it says that an artist must "[free] himself from his family, his nation, his race." Do you agree with this statement?

My Name is Asher Lev

Jewish Terminology

bar mitzvah – a Jewish boy's transition into adulthood at the age of 13 when the Ten Commandments must be followed

Borchu – a traditional Jewish prayer

bris – ceremony celebrating circumcision; traditionally performed on the eighth day of life

Chumash – first five books of the Hebrew Bible

esrog – special fruit eaten during the Succos festival

farbrengen – a Hasidic gathering

goyim – Gentiles

Hasidism – orthodox Jewish movement which emphasizes mysticism and creativity

kibud ov – honor your father

kosher – food that meets the guidelines of Jewish dietary laws

Krias Shema – affirmation of faith to be recited when going to bed and when getting up

lulov – palm branch

mashpia – yeshiva teacher in charge of students' spiritual growth

mazel tov – Yiddish for "congratulations"

Midrash – anecdotal or allegorical material used to teach a moral

mikveh – ritual bath of purification

Passover – festival celebrating the Jewish exodus from Egypt

payos – traditional hair worn long at the temples; also called earlocks or sidecurls

Pesach – Hebrew for "Passover"

Reb – title of respect

Rebbe – spiritual master and advisor of a Hasidic group

Ribbano Shel Olom – reference to the Master of the Universe

Rosh Hashonoh – the Jewish New Year

Seder – feast celebrating the Jewish exodus from Egypt

Shabbos – day of rest which begins every Friday at sunset and lasts until nightfall on Saturday

shofar – horn sounded on the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashonoh

sitra achra – literally "the other side"

Succos – holiday on which Jewish people leave their homes to live in temporary dwellings

tallis – prayer shawl

Talmud – collection of interpretations and commentary on the Torah

Tisha b'Av – day of fasting in recognition of the misfortune that has plagued Jews throughout history

Torah – definition varies with context; can refer to the Hebrew Bible or the five books of Moses

tzaddikim – Hasidic authorities

yeshiva – school in which Torah is primary focus

Yom Kippur – the holiest of Jewish holidays

zemiros – songs sung at the Shabbos table

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

VOCABULARY

acrid – sharp-smelling
affluent – wealthy
apostate – someone who no longer believes
blasphemous – mocking God or something thought to be sacred
brooding – deep in thought
cloying – very sweet smell
dejected – defeated
erratic – making irregular movements
fetid – smelling of decay
frenetically – frantically
futile – pointless
immutable – permanent
morosely – in a depressed state
notorious – well-known
nuances – slight differences
periphery – the outer edge
perplexity – confusion
pious – religiously devoted
protruded – stuck out
sallow – pale
specterlike – like a ghost
theologians – religious scholars
tonalities – variations
traitor – someone who betrays a group to whom allegiance is sworn
tremulously – with fear

1. Describe Potok’s use of contrast in introducing Asher’s gift.

Chapter Five

VOCABULARY

arabesques – elaborate decorations
conjugations – lists of the different tenses of verbs
conscious – aware
defiled – dirtied
desecrated – made impure
menacingly – threateningly
preliminaries – introductions; small-talk
resonant – echoing
rivulets – small streams of liquid
sardonic – malicious
stagnant – lifeless, still

1. Characterize Asher’s mental state at this point in the novel.

2. What does Asher’s drawing in his Chumash foreshadow?

3. Describe the conversation between the mashpia and Asher.

Chapter Nine

VOCABULARY

chasm – a large hole, as a canyon or gorge
degenerate – immoral
gaunt – very thin
Gestapo – Nazi police
hideous – very ugly
malevolent – intending to cause harm
oppressive – overwhelming
ornate – decorative
pendulous – hanging as a pendulum
pictorial – graphic
sanctifier – someone who attempts to cleanse or purify
stifling – suffocating
strident – harsh
subversive – revolutionary; rebellious

1. Discuss Kahn's insistence that a great artist cannot be happy. Do you agree?

2. Why does Jacob Kahn sculpt and paint?

3. Explain the symbolism in the following sentence. "My half-naked painter with dangling payos and a paint-smearred skullcap."
