

## Essay on *My Name is Asher Lev*

By Jeffrey Mays

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First a bit of biography of the author: Herman Harold Potok was born in the Bronx in 1929. His Jewish name was Chaim. He was inspired to write fiction after reading Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* as a teenager. He studied literature in college graduating summa cum laude. He went to Jewish seminary and became a conservative Jewish rabbi, serving as an army chaplain during the Korean War. He earned a doctorate in Israel and, other than his novels, he was the editor of Conservative Judaism magazine. Potok was discouraged by his family from reading non-Jewish literature but he did anyway, holding high regard for Joyce, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann. Although his family was not Hasidic, the Potok's were orthodox and the author's experience is mirrored somewhat in *My Name is Asher Lev*.

It is axiomatic to say that reading is a mind-broadening activity. It is acknowledged by all to be a source of new perspectives, leading readers into new worlds to which they don't normally have access, to new ideas, new places, new experiences and new ideologies. If ever there was a book that promised to have a transformative effect on our group, it is *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Potok brings our group of primarily of middle- and upper-class Protestant and atheist scientists into two unfamiliar worlds with great poignancy: the worlds of strict Hasidic Judaism and the life of the artist.

Our book showed us how distinctly "other" the Hasidic lifestyle is. Of course everyone has seen the dress style, the side curls, the yarmulke on the head. But the book immerses the reader into the moment-by-moment pervasiveness of Judaism and its deep impact upon speech, diet, family life, schooling, social life and daily religious worship. We get a glimpse into the global network that existed during the time of Stalin and the peril in which mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Jews lived. We also get a clear picture of the great hostility that many Jews feel toward Jesus and the historic Christian church.

The other world into which the book takes us is that of the life of the artist, specifically those whose art brings them into conflict with their community. Asher Lev's break with his Hasidic community is the ultimate sacrifice and ends with his banishment from his beloved hometown of Brooklyn and separation from his family and friends. He sacrificed everything for his artistic vision, which was an inner compulsion that seemed at times out of his control. At points, he seemed to be possessed by some spiritual force, and his story is a kind of a devil's bargain that gave him wealth, fame, and set him in the company of other artistic legends, but at the cost of his Jewish soul.

Such personal sacrifice need not be the experience of every artist, even every great artist. But the power of Asher Lev's story is the fact that this prodigy arose in a family and community that formed the strongest barrier against the realization of his talent. It is difficult to think of a community that would be more resistant than Brooklyn Hasidics. It is also difficult to imagine a community that would be more wounded, in which the sense of betrayal would be greater than

they. A community that was focused on and mobilized to save lives of their people and keep their faith and tradition alive, with a long history of persecution and spilled blood, one to whom the artist's life seems worse than mere frivolity, it was an outright disgrace.

In fact, a third new perspective this book gives us is the ability to stand in between the Jewish community and the arts community, to see and appreciate both and appreciate the utter incompatibility of each to the other. We watch as the unstoppable force strikes the immovable object and the result is artistic transcendence at the price of irreparably broken relationships.

This reader cannot help but ask himself Would I have the strength to make the same sacrifice? If the answer is No, is it merely simple courage that I lack? Most of us probably hail Asher Lev's bravery and his choice of great art over participation in his Jewish community which we probably do not envy or appreciate. But we should still entertain the question Was Asher Lev right to choose art over his family? Is the cause of artistic greatness a higher calling than faithfulness to family and tradition? What did the world gain by Asher Lev's art? And finally, I know we would all champion the production of artistic works, but wherein lies the importance of art? Maybe our discussion can begin with these questions.