
Review of My Name is Asher Lev, by Chaim Potok

A ruling passion in an individual's life has the ability to demonstrate an effect on a person's life including the atmosphere surrounding them. In the novel *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok, the author traces the making of a great painter from the time of Asher being an ordinary boy, to his response to his ruling passion, leading to his successful yet controversial exhibitions of being a distinguished painter. The book centers on the growing separation between Asher and his family and his community as he devotes himself to painting. Asher's commanding gift of art has resulted in Asher alienating himself from his family and community, his ruling passion comes in conflict with their values.

Asher's devotion to painting is at odds with the values of his family and community. Asher states at the very beginning of the novel; (p.3) As a matter of fact, observant Jews did not paint at all -- in the way that I am painting. So strong words are being written and spoken about me, myths are being generated.. Asher confesses that he is a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon his family, his friends, his people. Painting human figures is not a tradition among religious Jews. Asher's mother bluntly says, Painting is for goyim. Jews don't draw and paint. His dedication to paintings distracts Asher from his Torah study, which the community sees as the proper way for a boy to spend his time, and that is defined by the episode in which he draws on a page of the Chumash. Also, Asher's continuous devotion to his art turns him away from the service to the Rebbe and Russian Jews, leading to Asher's members of his family accepting it as their responsibility. His everlasting dedication to his paintings sends Asher against his family and community, but it isn't just the act of painting that has accomplished negativity upon their values, the subject matter Asher chooses makes it worse.

Asher chooses to paint nudes at a point in his life. This subject matter makes it worse for the situation between him and his family and his community. He paints nude women, first copying pictures in the museum, then using live models in Jacob Kahns studio. This results in Asher violating the religious standards of his community, which do not agree with paintings at all, never mind nude paintings. The nude paintings also increase the distance between himself and his parents. His father wants to support Asher by attending one of his exhibitions, but repeatedly says that he cannot go because of the Hasidic insistence against showing off. Asher even says to his father; (p 304) Because I'm part of a tradition, Papa. Mastery of the art form of the nude is very

important to that tradition. Every artist who ever lived drew or painted the nude. . . . I don't want to sit in a room painting for myself. I want to communicate what I do. And I want critics to know I can do it. . . . I respect you, Papa. But I cannot respect your aesthetic blindness. Asher speaks

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about his father, seeing the though him, reasoning that his father has no appreciation for art, seeing no beauty, therefore not understanding Ashers work. Ashers paintings of nudes soon enough lead to the Brooklyn Crucifixion, which opened up for more values being broken. At the opening and showing of his Brooklyn Crucifixion, Asher brings negative public attention to his parents, which are present, and to the Hasidic community. Asher had adopted the crucifixion to express the anguish of his home life, Asher uses an image that disturbs many of the Jews who associate it with Christian anti-Semitism. The image has painful implied meanings for Ashers father, who feels that the crucifixion had been in a way responsible for his own fathers murder on a night before Easter decades ago (p366). Ashers art of painting nudes and the crucifixion tears apart his family and goes against their beliefs and values, along with the communitys.

Ashers ruling passion for art consumed him. He couldnt control it himself, he states to his father that he cant help it and his father responds an animal can't help it,...Do you understand me, Asher? The Ribbono Shel Olom gave every man a will. Every man is responsible for what he does, because he has a will and with that will he directs his life. There is no such thing as a man who can't help it. (p166). The father doesnt understand that Ashers gift consumes him, his talent has possessed him, making it hard for Asher to realize the hurt he has caused. Asher is not driven by the family and community values that a typical Jewish boy is supposed to grow up with. It is his art that has captured his imagination and energies. His ruling passion for artistic expression seems to draw him away from Jewish concerns and family values.

A ruling passion, as demonstrated through Ashers devotion to art, is capable of undermining an individual to what may be considered tradition, important or valued in society. Asher was brought up with strong Hasidic values, yet his talent and gift of art consumed him and made him look past the effects it created. His family and community were against painting, Ashers gift tore his own family apart. The effects of a ruling passion are determined by the nature of the passion itself. In Ashers case, the profoundness of his nature dominated his life, in some ways for the better, and in some ways for the worse.

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