

Conflict and other themes in the chosen



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In *The Chosen*, the setting of each scene contributes to our understanding of the book's central themes. The baseball field reveals the theme of conflict between two opposing forces, the hospital brings about different perceptions of the world, the library represents the characters' expanding minds, and so on. The combination of settings and the sub-themes that develop within them help develop the book's central theme - conflict between the secular and theological. The central theme of *The Chosen* is apparent from the beginning and takes place on a baseball field, inherently a place of competition that, if taken too far, can turn into outright conflict. A simple baseball game becomes a virtual holy war. Reuven's team, secular Americanized Jews, and Danny's team, extremely religious Hasidic Jews, compete in a brutal game of ball. The major underlying theme of *The Chosen*, conflict between two opposing forces and their different approach towards Judaism, secular and theological, reveals itself in this scene. At first Reuven notices nothing in particular about Danny's team other than that they wear the proper yeshiva regalia: " There were fifteen of them, and they were dressed alike...in the fashion of the very Orthodox, their hair was closely cropped, Some of them had the beginnings of beards, straggly tufts of hair that stood in isolated clumps on their chins, jawbones, and upper lips. They all wore the traditional undergarments beneath their shirts, and the tzitzit, the long fringes appended to the four corners of the garment, came out above their belts and swung against their pants as they walked. These were the very Orthodox, and they obeyed literally the Biblical commandments." Davey Cantor continually expresses that they have a "murderous" way of playing baseball, but Reuven ignores him. Finally, when Danny walks past Reuven with scorn and blatant arrogance, Reuven realizes

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and despises the “Hasidic-bred sense of superiority” that Danny carried. As the game goes on, both teams try their hardest but Danny’s team takes it to an extreme level. Danny tells Reuven “We are going to kill you apikorsim,” and means it almost literally. Danny’s Hasidic team places great value on their religious beliefs and its members always keeps to themselves. Very disapproving of anyone who has different beliefs than them, they have a “fanatic sense of righteousness” and believe that “every other Jew was wrong, totally wrong, a sinner, a hypocrite, an apikoros, and doomed, therefore, to burn in hell.” This, along with Reb Saunders’ order to never lose because losing shamed their yeshiva, explains their win-at-all-costs mentality. At the end of the game, Mr. Galanter puts Reuven in to pitch. When Danny comes up to bat, he hits the ball straight at Reuven, hitting him in the eye, smashing his glasses, and causing him immense pain. Another one of the central themes relating to conflict in *The Chosen* involves different ways of seeing and perceiving aspects of the world. Reuven’s injured eye, broken glasses, and hospital visit begin to suggest that he will perceive the world differently from then on. In the hospital, he meets two people also suffering optical injuries, Tony Savo and Billy. After the doctors examine Reuven, they discover a piece of glass in his eye that could become covered in scar tissue and cause Reuven to go blind in that eye. When Reuven receives this news, he ponders what the world would be like with only one good eye and feels empathetic for Billy for being blind in both eyes. This empathetic feeling sparks compassion in Reuven as he thinks about Billy before himself and deals very patiently and kindly towards Billy. He even shortens his name to Bobby just for that young, innocent boy. When Danny comes to visit Reuven in the hospital, Reuven seems surprised. Furious

despite Danny's apology, Reuven tells Danny to " go to hell, and take your whole snooty bunch of Hasidim along with you!" After Danny leaves, Reuven feels regretful about his own behavior. When Danny comes back the next day, Reuven greets him with pleasure. Reuven apologizes for his harsh behavior towards him. This scene reveals the real Danny. Since the start of the book, it seems that Danny and Reuven will be great enemies because of their totally different views of the world and approaches towards Judaism. In this key scene, Danny and Reuven actually become friends. This scene also shows Danny as human after all, with interests beyond his religion, and reveals Danny's difficult situation. Secular literature and psychology interest Danny but his father, very disapproving of such things, wants Danny to succeed him as a rabbi and the leader of the Hasidic sect. Ironically, Reuven is interested in becoming a rabbi while his father wants him to pursue mathematics. The different father-son relationships become evident in the hospital, a very important location in this book. Reuven and his father have a close relationship, talk freely, and communicate very well. In addition, Reuven's father advises, but does not dictate, the profession his son should pursue. Danny and his father, on the other hand, live in silence except when discussing the Talmud. Danny's father, Reb, is an authoritarian figure who demands strict obedience at all times. Reuven asks, " What would have happened if you'd lost?" and Danny replies " I don't like to think about that. You don't know my father." Because of Danny's father's authoritarian behavior and strong disapproval of any secular literature, Danny goes to the library in secret. He reads books by Hemingway, Darwin, Huxley, Freud, and many others concerning psychology and other ideas about humanism: " I read in the library so my father won't know. He's very strict about what I

read.” Danny says that he met a man at the library who gives recommendations on books to read. When Danny finishes the books, the man discusses the books with him and gives further recommendations. Very soon, Reuven’s father, actually the man in the library, begins giving even further recommendations. In the library, a very significant location in *The Chosen*, Danny gets educated, or e-duked; every book that Danny reads teaches him more and brings him further into the mainstream. This causes Reuven to have mixed feelings about Danny: “ I’m really mixed up about you...You don’t sound like what my father says Hasidim are supposed to sound like.” Danny, confused, says “ What do I sound like?” Reuven replies “ Like a—an apikoros.” Danny continues to read secular literature in secret. Later, Reuven and Danny start to spend Shabbat afternoons together with Danny’s father and study Talmud together. One afternoon, Reuven and Danny go to Reb Saunders’ office to study and discuss Talmud. They have a Talmudic text open and as Reb reads it out loud, Danny and Reuven take turns explaining each passage. Slowly, the Talmudic study session develops into a heated debate, “ a pitched battle between father and son about each passage. Reb Saunders’ office and what takes place there exemplify the book’s theme of conflict. Danny and his father agree on most ideas in the text, yet they argue over it without remorse. This conversation, though ostensibly about the Talmud, is really a way for them to discuss what they cannot elsewhere. Danny observes: “ There was no tension here at all but a battle between equals... [and] Reb Saunders was far happier when he lost to Danny than when he won. His face glowed with fierce pride and his head nodded wildly.” Shortly thereafter, Reuven ends up telling Reb Saunders about Danny and his secular reading. Reb expresses his fear that his son will

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not follow a path towards Hasidic leadership in one succinct message: " You will not make a goy out of my son?" Later in the book, Reuven and Danny both go to the Hirsch College. One of the only institutions that gives both secular and religious education, Hirsch College is another place of conflict. Zionism becomes a heated issue on campus, with most of the college supporting it and the minority in opposition. Reuven's father, an active Zionist, wants to make a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Reb Saunders disagrees; he wants to wait for the Messiah before establishing a Jewish homeland. Reb bans Danny from seeing Reuven because of their fathers' conflicting views and forces them to not speak to one another. This act, caused by a difference of opinion, almost breaks Reuven and Danny's great friendship. Reuven discovers his capacity for hatred: " I never knew myself capable of the kind of hatred I felt toward Reb Saunders... It was black, it leered, it was cancerous, it was death. I hated it." The Chosen's central subject - conflict between the secular and the theological - depends upon strong sub-themes such as compassion, different perceptions of the world, and father-son relations. The evocative nature of the places in which the plot of The Chosen unfolds - baseball field, hospital, library, Reb Saunders' office, and Hirsch College - support development of its themes and contribute to the whole, a meaningful commentary on how religious belief can transcend - and destroy - friendships.