

# The theme of silence in chaim potoks the chosen essay examples

[Family](#), [Father](#)



In Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, Danny is a brilliant young Jewish child whose complex relationship with his Hasidic Jew father causes him to have conflicted views about his upbringing and the Jewish religious world. Meanwhile, he must forge friendships with his peer Reuven while struggling to understand and get along with his father. Silence is a substantial theme in *The Chosen*, both textually and subtextually. Danny often notes that he lives his life 'in silence,' and much of this is due to his upbringing by his father Rabbi Isaac 'Reb' Saunders. The lessons that the rabbi teaches him, and the ensuing father-son conflict, is at the heart of *The Chosen*. Potok uses silence as a method of communication between father and son in *The Chosen*, as they relate and react to each other chiefly in non-verbal ways.

Silence is most acutely discussed in the novel through Danny's and Reb Saunders' relationship - as father and son, they have a very tumultuous way of communicating. Here, silence manages to exemplify the kind of differences their generations have - they even express themselves differently. Reb Saunders, according to Danny, "wishes everyone could talk in silence" (p. 70). As the traditionalist Hasidic Jew, the rabbi finds value in silence; there are many instances throughout the book of him simply not talking, choosing to find the right moments in which to speak. When he does speak, the aforementioned silence makes his words all the more wise and meaningful; they seem to bellow out of him like God's word himself: "The silence that followed his outburst had a fungus quality to it, as though it were breeding malignancies, and I had the uncanny feeling that I had somehow been stripped naked and violated" (p. 188). Here, Potok emphasizes not just the venom and rage in Reb Saunders' words, but of the silence that furthers

that effect for him; the man knows exactly how to use his words for maximum effect.

The phrase 'talking in silence' is highly indicative of Reb Saunders' perspective on silence itself; it is not a lack of communication, but merely a different kind. By 'talking in silence,' one can communicate more with less than others can with whole speeches. Reb Saunders certainly lives this perspective wholeheartedly - even when not speaking, he expresses moments of great emotion and expressiveness:

"once, during a supper meal, I saw tears come slowly from his eyes and disappear into the tangle of his dark beard. He did not leave the table this time. He sat there weeping in silence, and no one said anything. And then he dried his eyes with a handkerchief, took a deep, trembling breath, and went back to his food" (p. 184).

In this particular instance of silence, Reb Saunders is able to compartmentalize his emotions; he experiences a moment of great sadness or profundity but does not feel the need to share it with anyone else. In this way, silence is almost a solemn admission that he is a human being and capable of feeling, without the need to comment on it or justify it to those around him. This is an extremely freeing perspective on silence that is enlightening in its simplicity. Reb Saunders' adoration of silence extends to Danny's upbringing, as he is trying to teach his son to do the same thing:

"My father believes in silence. When I was ten or eleven years old, I complained to him about something, and he told me to close my mouth and look into my soul. He told me to stop running to him every time I had a problem. I should look into my own soul for the answer, he said. We just

don't talk, Reuven" (p. 161).

Danny is often uncomfortable with this silence, but he eventually learns the value of said silence: " I admire him. I don't know what he's trying to do to me with this weird silence that he's established between us, but I admire him. I think he's a great man. I respect him and trust him completely, which is why I think I can live with his silence" (p. 192). Reb also believes that silence can bring about true listening and comprehension of the world around us: " You did not hear, you did not hear. You heard the first mistake, and you stopped listening. Of course you did not hear. How could you hear when you were not listening?" (p. 131). This is the lesson that Reb tries to teach all around him, and which he learned through his own experiences - it is only through remaining silent that we can listen and learn. Danny trusts in his father's wisdom, and so he follows through with the silence that his father teaches him.

Silence is tied to the Jewish experience, according to Potok, and is thought of as a fundamental tenet of traditional Jewish religious practice. Potok makes silence almost a ritual in the scene in the synagogue. The first time Reuven sees Danny's father, it is during the Afternoon Service: " I heard no signal and no call for silence; it simply stopped cut off as if a door had slammed shut on a playroom filled with children. The silence that followed had a strange quality to it: expectation, eagerness, love, awe" (p, 118). In this very same scene, Reb Saunders uses silence as a weapon, almost as if to arm himself for the sermon to come: " he had gone rigid, tense, as a soldier does before he jumps from shelter into open combat" (p. 123).

Through this stillness and silence, Reb Saunders exemplifies the Hasidic

ideal of the introspective, strong-willed and philosophical Jew, the fully-fledged human being who knows himself and can confidently share his wisdom with others. To that end, silence is most certainly a fundamental part of traditional Jewish faith. Even Reuven's father finds it difficult to dispute the value of silence, and he at least respects Reb Saunders' philosophy to a point, due to the history of the Hasids and their role in protecting the Jewish people from harm. To that end, silence is inescapably intertwined with traditional aspects of Jewish faith. The efforts of the younger generation to escape that silence parallels the increasingly secularized world of modern American society. Here, religious practices are falling by the wayside, and there is a struggle between those who wish to be part of that society (Danny, Reuven) and those who isolate themselves from that society to become closer to god (Reb Saunders).

The majority of the conflict regarding silence comes from Danny's best friend (and narrator of the book), Reuven. Unlike Danny, Reuven is not growing up in a Hasidic, traditional household, and so his father actively derides the idea of silence, thinking it a silly holdover from a backwards type of people.

Reuven is constantly frustrated at the idea of this 'silence' that Danny was raised in; by training Danny to be emotionally unavailable through this silence, Reuven finds himself growing further and further apart from his friend. Reuven, in many instances, blames Reb Saunders for doing this to him - he believes, as his father does, that the silence is counterproductive and actively harmful to his friend Danny. Every encounter Reuven has with Reb Saunders, he walks away even more frustrated than the last time, particularly for Danny's sake.

The relationship and friendship between Danny and Reuven dramatically colors Reuven's perception of silence. When the two first meet, Reuven is not used to silence: " His silence made me all the angrier" (p. 60). Unlike Danny with Reb Saunders, Reuven has an easygoing, comfortable rapport with his father, Mr. Malter. When Reuven has an issue, he finds it simple and effortless to talk to Mr. Malter, who listens intently and offers pointed advice. This is how Reuven believes relationships between fathers and sons should be - talkative, open and sharing. As a result, he has never had to fully confront silence, believing it to be incredibly uncomfortable and awkward; to that end, he has a hostile relationship with silence: " The silence became unreal and seemed suddenly filled with a noise of its own, the noise of a too long silence. Even the child was staring now at his father, his eyes like black stones against the naked whiteness of his veined face" (p. 123). The emptiness of silence makes Reuven upset, and so he gets upset for Danny's sake because of his silence with Reb Saunders: " Silence was ugly, it was black, it leered, it was cancerous, it was death. I hated it, and I hated Reb Saunders for forcing it upon me and his son" (p. 219). According to Reuven, this continued silence was unhealthy for Danny, as it poisoned his relationship with his father and brought about a great, uncomfortable distance: " There was never any simple, intimate, human kind of conversation between him and his son. I almost had the impression that they were physically incapable of communicating with each other about ordinary things" (p. 184). Even by the time the novel ends, and the silence is explained and justified to Reuven, he and his father are still completely unsure if the advantages are worth the potential pain of silence.

Reuven's frustration at the idea of silence is an indicator of the increasing modernity of younger generations, and the conflict between silence and speaking is a parallel to the changing communication methods of generations. When Reuven finally joins a yeshiva, his rabbi Rav Gershenson seems to be yet another silence-valuing figure just like Reb Saunders; his classes are filled with icy silences, which are particularly felt whenever there is a long silence following one of Rev Gershenson's icy and complex religious questions. Says one of the students in his class, "The tzaddik sits in absolute silence, saying nothing, and all his followers listen attentively" (p. 248). This calls back to Reb Saunders' call to 'talk in silence'; in many ways, Rev Gershenson becomes the equivalent of Reb Saunders for Reuven, as both he and Danny now have figures who intimidate and teach using their silence. For Reuven, the silence is deafening; it is indicative of his insecurity, his lack of knowledge, and his inability to communicate. This is why silence is so uncomfortable for him - he sees it not as a boon, but a reminder of his failings.

Potok uses the word 'silence' many, many times throughout the novel; it is a constant presence. It is not enough that characters are not speaking - there must be a silence inserted into the text, making that silence just as important as dialogue. The ambiguous use of silence, and its many meanings throughout the text, challenge the reader to make sense of each instance and figure out its context. For example, in Chapter Four, Reuven notices a silence pass between him and his friend: "It was a warm silence, though, not in the least bit awkward" (p. 79). This justification he gives for the silence is important, as it notes Reuven's ability to distinguish between types of

silences – he does not see the silence between Danny and his father, for example, to be healthy, like the non-awkward silence that passes between him and Danny: “ your father, with his bizarre silence--which I still couldn't understand, no matter how often I thought about it--is torturing your soul” (p. 208). However, Reuven soon learns that silence can also be a valuable way of communicating: “You can listen to silence, Reuven. I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own. It talks to me sometimes. I feel myself alive in it. It talks. And I can hear it” (p. 248).

Much of this theme of silence plays into one of Potok's biggest subjects with his works (including *The Chosen*), which is the intersection of religious Jewish life with modern American life. The tale is a classic look at changing social dynamics amongst generations; Reb Saunders wants to remain traditionally Jewish, while Danny wants to eschew the faith to follow his ambitions in a world that permits that. To that end, a rift forms between them, as Reb Saunders believes that Danny's intelligence is getting in the way of his compassion. This is where the silence starts; Reb Saunders believes that, by making himself emotionally unavailable, Danny will learn the pain of human suffering that one human being can inflict on another, and will become a more sensitive person as a result. Says Reb Saunders of this moment, “ In the silence between us, he began to hear the world crying” (p. 266).

In essence, Reb Saunders uses deprivation of senses to allow Danny to become perceptive in other ways. By imposing this silence upon Danny, Reb Saunders pushes him to become more mature; by forcing this introspection, Danny becomes more perceptive and empathetic as he turns inward for



insight: " My father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul" (p. 264). The result is Danny becoming a much more fully-fleshed individual, with a concrete understanding of how he fits into the world. In conclusion, silence plays an integral part of the philosophical and/or religious experience of knowing oneself, according to Potok in *The Chosen*. On the whole, Potok uses silence as a great equalizer - it means many things to many different people in *The Chosen*, and its primary utility is as a tool for introspection. The overall lesson learned is that youth need to temper their anxious energy and enthusiasm with moments where they can stop for a second and look inside themselves. Silence brings out many emotions in the characters of the book (anger, fear, confusion, solace, happiness, etc.) but all of these things lead them eventually to discover what it is about themselves that brings out those responses. Reuven's primary conflict is not being able to see anything but the negative in silence - he simply cannot fathom that there can be nuances to silence where it is helpful to people. There is a point between every character in the novel where they share a silence, which is a significant move on Potok's part; it is everywhere, and we cannot avoid it. There is an intimacy to silence that allows these characters to get closer together, while at the same time know themselves all the more. Silence speaks just as much as words do in the world of *The Chosen*, and Chaim Potok uses that to explore complex issues of family, friendship, and faith - by stopping for a moment and taking a silence, we can learn more about ourselves, each other, and God.

## **References**

Potok, Chaim. *The Chosen*. Simon & Schuster, 1967. Print.