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THE CHOSEN AND THE THEORY OF SILENCE

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***Abstract**: Two Jewish boys – Danny, with traditional views and Reuven with liberal views share a common struggle in finding their place in the world. Silence as a parenting technique can be damaging or a form of discipline for the sake of spiritual self-discovery and improvement.*
By experiencing one's pain and suffering, we can find our soul and destroy our indifference towards others. Unlike David Malter, Reuven's father, who has a relationship based on dialogue with his son, Reb Saunders, Danny's father teaches his son compassion and caring for the world through silence. For him, silence is a substitute for words in expressing one's inner self. His son's mind is excellent, but his soul is empty, and a mind with a soul is more important than knowledge.
While Danny feels the pain of silence due to his relationship with his father, Reuven feels the pain of silence when he no longer keeps contact with Danny.
The paper demonstrates that silence, if taught efficiently, is not a symbol of oppression and tyranny but a tool for achieving self-knowledge and taking the correct choices in life.

***Keywords** : Jewishness, the chosen, silence, Hasidism, secularism*

MOTTOS

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. . . . One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe. (*The Chosen* 261-262)

"We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon, and the sun, how they move in silence. We need silence to be able to touch souls." (Mother Teresa)

Introduction

The Boston Globe Newspaper September 3, 1982, regarded Jeremy Paul Kagan's film *The Chosen* (1981), "an exceptional viewing experience," "singularly brilliant, an impressive

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achievement that puts it in the select company of the best films of the year." The film is based on the best-selling *book* of the same name by Chaim *Potok*, published in 1967.

Both the novel and the film present the conflict between Jewish religion and secularism, Hasidism and secularism, Orthodoxy, and secularism. It is also an internal battle to make a choice which implies the sacrificing of other things. It is based on Potok's own experience, when in the late 1940s, while in college, "he broke with Hasidism and became a conservative Jew" (Fisher, 2006)

At the heart of the story is an unlikely friendship between Reuven and Danny, two Jewish boys who belong to very different worlds. The film starts with the image of Brooklyn Bridge which can be seen as a symbol of connectedness. In its denotational meaning, the bridge connects Manhattan and Brooklyn neighborhoods. The movie can be seen as a bridge between two Jewish families, one conservative and the other liberal. A random accident on a baseball pitch throws Danny and Reuven together. A deep connection and friendship are formed between the two adolescent boys, who share similarities and fundamental differences. It is also a meeting of two brilliant and very different minds. The critical point of conflict is Danny's struggle with his father's decision to become the next Rabbi and the leader of his people, an inherited position which Danny is seeking to escape due to his interest in psychology.

Hasidism is "a Jewish sect known for their extreme Orthodoxy and their adherence to Jewish rituals. The movement originated in central Europe during the first half of the 18th c as a reaction to changes in secular society and the Jewish community." (Fisher, 2006). It is "a product of modernity that forged its identity as a radical alternative to the secular world" (Biale, 2020).

The traditional Jewish orthodox family is represented by Danny Saunders, his father Reb Saunders, his mother, and his sister. The modern family is represented by Reuven and his father, David Malter. Interestingly, Danny is raised in a conservative Jewish family but has an American name, while Reuven from the liberal Jewish family has a traditional Jewish name.

Danny respects the Jewish traditions; he is dressed in black; he often wears the praying skullcap; he has traditional earlocks. He is brilliant and knowledgeable and spends a lot of time in the library reading secular books. He is raised in 'silence' by his father, having little communication except for the prayer moments. Reb considers that, by not talking to his son, he will make him search for his own soul: "he taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in the company of my soul" (*The Chosen* 261-262).

He explains this practice with the son's story from the Talmud who sent a messenger to his son: There is a story in the Talmud about a king who had a son who went astray. The son was told, "Return to your father." The son replied that he could not. The king then sent a messenger to the son with the message. "Come back to me as far as you can, and I will meet you the rest of the way." (the last lines in the film). Reb thinks that by not speaking to his son, he will produce pain in him, and pain experienced on his own will destroy his self-pride, arrogance, and indifference towards others.

Danny is a Hasidic Jew, a member of an ultra-orthodox sect whose Rabbi is his own father. Reuven's father is a secular scholar whose 'modernist' writings anger Rabbi Saunders, Danny's father. Rabbi Saunders' "anger and rage are counterbalanced by his austere 'silence' he imposes over what should be a warm and loving relationship with his son" (*The Boston Globe*, 1982).

According to Bruce McCabe's *Boston Globe* newspaper (1982), the film is "a study in a father's inability to convey his love to (for) his son. He considers his son less a son than a disciple or student. Much of the dramatic tension of the film derives from the son's effort to break out of the rigid mold in which his father has cast him". The following lines will demonstrate that Reb Saunders loves his son and uses silence as a parenting technique to make him both knowledgeable and caring for the people around him.

The Theory of 'Silence'

"Silence is the Language of God" (Pope Emeritus benedict the 16th). Silence is much more than indifference as we are inclined to define it. Silence can also be a way to avoid a stand when one does not know how to solve a conflict.

"God is the friend of silence", says Mother Theresa. Silence is considered an acceptable and valuable way of raising a child in the Hasidic Jewish faith. Reb Saunders speaks about Danny's gift from God: he recites and memorizes whole stories from the Talmud[1]. His mind is excellent, while his soul is empty.

Ironically, silence can "speak" about the pain of the world. "The motif of silence reverberates throughout *The Chosen*. It implicitly insinuates the silence of God during the Holocaust." (Biale 380). Danny's father believes that only through intense pain and "suffering of our soul can we realize the suffering of others" (Koruth 1). The novel analyzes "how silence can act as a technique or a way of understanding one's self, as a substitute to words in expressing one's inner self." (Koruth 264)

We need "silence to be able to touch souls" (Mother Teresa). Similarly, Danny's father seems to believe that, through silence, he teaches his son the importance of the soul and compassion over intelligence: "I went away and cried to the Master of the Universe, 'What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, that I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!'" (*The Chosen* 260, italics mine)

Reb believes that silence, pain, and suffering will teach Danny how to become a caring person, which is more important than knowledge. According to Reb's beliefs, God is inside us, so words from the outside world can only harm our souls. Danny notes of his father:

"When his people would ask him why he was so silent with his son, he would say to them that he did not like to talk, words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart, they conceal the heart, the heart speaks through silence. One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain; he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is essential to know of pain, he said. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe (*The Chosen* 262)

On the other hand, Danny thinks differently: "because of his father's perpetual silence, except during Talmud study each Sabbat, Danny has no real outlet for his feelings until he befriends Reuven, with whom he shares an intellectual hunger and a need for friendship." (Bloom 17)

Silence as a Parenting Technique or a Tradition

Each father uses the best possible ways to teach his children to become both knowledgeable and compassionate. Reuven learns that Danny has been raised in imposed silence – the only time Reb talks to his son is when they study the Talmud together. Danny admits that he is interested in reading books at the public library. He is even interested in learning German to read and understand Freud. He tells Reuven that he will inherit his father's position as it is practiced in the Hasidic tradition and become a rabbi. Still, he also admits he would instead become a psychologist.

On the other hand, we have Reuven, who has a strong interest in math. While Danny must become a rabbi but does not want to be, Reuven does not have to become a rabbi but

[1] The *Talmud* is the collection of ancient Jewish laws which governs the religious and non-religious life of Orthodox Jews

inclines towards it. The names are also illustrative but also contradictory. Danny is associated with Daniel, which means "in the law of God", and Reuven means "the son".

Both boys fight with conflicts. Danny struggles with his desire for secular knowledge and his obligations to his father and the Hasidic education. Reuven also grapples with conflicts. Unlike Danny's father or his instructor at Hirsch College, whose orientations are traditional, his father teaches Judaism from a scientific perspective.

In Danny's view, his growing up in silence indicates "the lack of a shared personal language with his father" (Greenstein 19). He tells Reuven that his father believes in silence: "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." (*The Chosen* 161-162)

Reb Saunders uses Reuven as a go-between between himself and his son. When he speaks to Reuven, he asks Danny to leave the room. To support his idea, the reviewer Bruce McCabe describes the scene in which the Rabbi, "incapable of apologizing directly to his son for his creation of their gothic relationship, apologizes by explaining to his son's best friend, hoping that the friend will interpret them to his son. What makes the scene powerful is that the son is present at the meeting, listening to his father apologize to him through his friend". ("Chosen is A Glory", 1982)

The Hasidic traditions presented in the book stand as the foundation from which the conflicts and tensions spur. These traditions do not stand only as guidelines for one's lifestyle, attitude, and behavior but also as the cause and consequence of silence. Both the Hasidic traditions and silence can be rooted down to their origin. *The Chosen* presents the male figure as an overall power over his Jewish community and home. Such a figure is often associated with respect and discipline in traditional societies such as the Hasidic communities.

The father figure is often related to that of universal power. In both Daniel and Reuven's case, the father figure is associated with silence, although silence is perceived from two different perspectives. While Daniel believes silence to be greater than words as words destroy what one truly feels inside, Reuven sees silence as a force that has the actual ability to destroy the individual. From both characters' perspectives, silence is associated with either beauty or pain, depending on the tradition in which they were raised. Thus, silence represents the idea of identity as both a loss and a gain.

Through the restrictions imposed by religion, both Danny and Reuven use silence as a means to achieve self-discovery. Words can prevent or can interfere with decisional factors.

However, from the perspective of the two boys, silence is apparently linked with only negative connotations. In the scene where Daniel invites Reuven to have dinner with his family, both characters experience the damaging effects of silence, Daniel, by speaking to his father through religious practices. At the same time, Reuven feels ashamed for the lack of information he holds about spiritual practices.

Another critical moment is when Danny invites Reuven to stay at their home while Reuven's father is away. Danny's sister attracts Reuven, but he has to withdraw in silence when Danny tells him that his sister is already engaged according to the Hasidic laws. Reuven also sees Reb Saunders devastated by the slaughter of millions of Jews during WWII. He notes that Reb Saunders is silent due to the pain and suffering of the Holocaust Jews. Apparently, he alone could see.

Dany and Reuven have talks about the Holocaust and the relationship between Freud and religion. However, when they reach different opinions about Freud, Danny refuses to talk about it, retiring in his silence with his pain. While Danny's father thinks that only God can know when the Jews must act and establish a Jewish state, Reuven's father believes that the Jews cannot wait for a Messiah sent by God to solve this Jewish problem.

On the other hand, Reb Saunders perceives silence as a form of discipline for the sake of spiritual self-improvement or correction, a tool towards discovery and fulfillment through

pain and compromise. For Reb Saunders, silence is itself a means of communication used to teach his son essential lessons. On the other hand, for Daniel, the father reminds him of his connection with the past and present religious doctrines that hinder his self-discovery and self-expression. For Daniel, events such as going to the cinema, reading literature and philosophy, going to a college of his own choice and not to a Yeshiva university, or even kissing a girl before marriage are sources of conflict with himself.

To follow his strict Jewish laws, Danny must keep such thoughts hidden and silent from his father. In Bruce McCabe's view, Edwin Gordon's script for the film is "a model of stylization and economy. Time after time, characters reveal themselves in spare verbal gestures that convey powerful sentiments. In a typically understated scene, Danny and Reuven discuss sex in their unique ways while admiring a nude statue in a museum. Reuven is a red-blooded adolescent who admits to lust. Danny is oppressed by a sense of shame for his carnal thoughts. The conflicting emotions emerge in what is pretended to be a discussion about form in art." (*The Boston Globe* Newspaper September 3, 1982).

These unexpressed thoughts lead to Daniel's partial loss of his true self. However, at the same time, it can also be seen as a gain due to his accumulation of knowledge in the library that eventually helps a lot in the development of his personality.

Meanwhile, he cherishes those dreams of silent thoughts that help him reveal what is inside his subconscious as an individual.

Reuven does not experience silence the way Daniel does. His father allows him to speak out his mind and take decisions alone. While Daniel feels the pain of silence due to his relationship with his father, Reuven feels the pain of silence when he no longer keeps in contact with Daniel. The more pain he feels, the more understandable towards Daniel he becomes.

When Danny and Reuven make up after Danny tells him that "the ban has been lifted" (*The Chosen* 240), they discuss their period of forced silence. "Welcome back to the land of the living" (*The Chosen* 240) suggests that silence equals death. It is like Reuven's father's comments about the non-action of the Jewish people waiting for God to send a Messiah on the Earth to create a Jewish state. Although the silence between Reuven and Danny was not "as drastic as Danny and his father's extended silence" (Greenstein 32), Reuven learns from the bad experience of not being able to speak to his friend.

The end marks a metamorphosis due to this silence theory. Each character's dreams and life expectations metamorphose into the other character's goals. Daniel's father, from a symbol of oppression and tyranny, becomes a facilitator of self-discovery. Danny leaves abroad to study psychology, while Reuven intends to become a rabbi.

Conclusion

Silence is more than an absence of language when one empathizes with people's sufferings or pains of the world. According to Greenstein (32), "a person who talks about his problems hears only his own words", but a person who silently hears other people's pains is more than that. When you hear the silence, you have a mind in a body with a soul, i.e., understand the world's pain. The heart speaks through silence, not through words. Reb accepts Danny's decision to leave the Yeshiva School and go to a College to study psychology because he knows now that Danny has a soul, not only a mind and knowledge. Reb raised his son in silence to enable his son to empathize with people who suffer. Danny has become now a tzaddik[2] for the world:

"There is a story in the Talmud about a king who had a son who went astray. The son was told, "Return to your father." The son replied that he could not. The king then sent a

[2] a righteous and saintly person by Jewish religious standards

messenger to the son with the message. "Come back to me as far as you can, and I will meet you the rest of the way." [3]

The Chosen is much more than a story of the collision between the secular and non-secular worlds. It is a coming-of-age story between two boys who share a common struggle in finding their place in the world; it is a story about transformation and tradition, growing up and growing wise, and finding yourself - even if that might mean leaving your community. Even the title is significant in this sense: it tells us that the two boys have been 'chosen' for this role in the traditional Jewish community. Using the method of silence, irrespective of belonging to two different Jewish cultural mentalities, the two boys managed to discover themselves and find their ways in life. Their choices are unexpected: Danny, although raised in rigid religious practices, shaves off his beard, cuts off his earlocks as symbols of entering a new, secular world, while his friend, Reuven, leaves the secular world to become a rabbi. They chose what they saw in their souls, guided by God. The fathers had an essential role in this final decision of their sons: "Come back to me as far as you can, and I will meet you the rest of the way." (Pesikta Rabbati[4] 184) What seemed a silent and reticent relationship (Danny's relationship with his father) proved, in fact, as efficient or even more efficient than the direct and warm relationship of Reuven with his father. Two different parenting techniques, each successful in its own way. At the end of the book, Danny's father smiles at him warmly and tells him that "Columbia is not that far… We will see you on Shabbat" (*The Chosen* 267). The seeds he planted through silence were there, ready to give fruits. The father and son were going "to meet" midway through the power of empathy. Both mind (knowledge) and soul (compassion) are what solidifies their father-son relationship.

Both boys are defined by the type of education they receive from the family and the power of pain they experience as sons and as friends. They represent the 'chosen' in its ambivalent, apparently confusing, meaning: the Jewish as a chosen race by God and the 'chosen' understood as an option in life that, once selected, will trigger the loss of other things in life. But if they are both knowledgeable and caring, they can mingle the traditional and the liberal harmoniously.

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