

My Name Is Asher Lev Study Guide

My Name Is Asher Lev by Chaim Potok

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Plot Summary

“My Name is Asher Lev” is a novel by the late Chaim Potok, author of *The Promise* and *The Chosen*, and traces the life of Asher Lev, “the notorious and legendary Lev of the Brooklyn Crucifixion.”

The reader is immediately made aware that Asher is both notorious and an artist, but is quickly taken back in time to Asher’s childhood, and introduced to his committed parents. The novel explores the palpable fear Asher experiences when his grief-stricken mother, Rivkeh, is barely there for him, and the many small ways in which he attempts to understand the persecution of Jews in Russia during this period.

Asher discovers that he is a gifted artist, which is also a curse, because his orthodox Jewish father, Aryeh, believes that his artwork is nothing but “foolishness.” Aryeh is an emissary for the Rebbe, the leader of the Ladover Hasidic community. During his earlier years and throughout his mother’s illness, Asher spends a lot of his time at his father’s office, where he is fascinated by the work his father does on behalf of persecuted Jews. He also meets and befriends Yudel Krinsky, a recent immigrant from Russia who was saved by Aryeh.

The Rebbe asks Aryeh to move to Vienna, Austria, so he can better serve Ladover Jews in Europe. Asher does not want to move to Vienna, and asks if he can live with his Uncle Yitzchok. Over the next year, Asher seems sad and his parents worry about him. He turns to his art, not only for solace but also to express himself, once drawing a frightening picture of the Rebbe in his holy book, only to be discovered by his teacher. The mashpia, the school’s adviser, has a talk with Asher, who breaks down. He also asks Asher to draw some pictures for him, which Asher leaves behind in a sketchbook. Eventually, Aryeh travels to Vienna alone, on the advice of the Rebbe.

Asher’s interest in art continues, and Rivkeh buys him oil paints. However, her son then neglects his schoolwork, which upsets his father. After visiting a museum, Asher begins to sketch crucifixions. Aryeh discovers these sketches on a visit home for Passover, and he is furious. When Aryeh returns to Europe, Asher works on improving his schoolwork. Rivkeh joins Aryeh in Europe for the summer while Asher stays with his Uncle Yitzchok.

Asher meets with the Rebbe before his Bar Mitzvah. Jacob Kahn, an artist, has also been called to the Rebbe’s office, and he introduces himself to Asher as they both leave. The Rebbe has asked Kahn to mentor Asher as an artist. At their first meeting at Kahn’s studio, Kahn introduces Asher to Anna Schaeffer, a gallery owner. He tries to scare Asher out of becoming an artist, knowing how difficult this will be for an orthodox Jew. During his first year with Kahn, Asher visits museums, see paintings of crucifixions, and even learns how to paint from a live nude model. Rivkeh decides to move to Vienna without her son, as he refuses to move there. After meeting with the Rebbe, Asher seems to have his blessing as an artist. He moves in with his Uncle Yitzchok, who eventually renovates his attic into a bedroom/studio for Asher.



Asher spends the next several summers with Jacob Kahn at his beach house in Provincetown, Mass. Asher loves spending time there, where he and his mentor paint, take walks on the beach, and where Asher learns to swim. Asher and Kahn also travel to exhibitions together. Asher is pressured by his family to visit Vienna for a summer, but on the way there, he falls ill. He returns immediately, after which Anna Schaeffer, the gallery owner, mounts Asher's first art show.

While Asher is in college, his parents return home, as Aryeh's work overseas is now done. Asher moves back in with his parents, but Aryeh and Asher still don't get along. His parents, disappointed that there will be nude paintings in his next show, do not attend.

Asher decides to go to Europe to study art; he visits Florence first, where he studies Michelangelo's Pietà, and then his David. Asher then travels to both Rome and Paris, eventually renting an apartment in Paris, where he can paint. In Paris, Asher thinks back on his life, his community, and his family. He remembers the anguish his mother went through when he was younger, always worrying about him and his father. Asher creates two paintings that symbolically show his mother in a crucifixion.

The two paintings are displayed at a show in New York, which his parents attend. They are shocked by the paintings, as are many other former supporters from his Ladover community. Asher's parents cannot forgive him, friends turn their backs on him, and the Rebbe asks him to leave Brooklyn. He moves back to Paris.



Book 1, Chapter 1

Summary

Asher introduces himself as the Asher Lev, “the notorious and legendary Lev of the Brooklyn Crucifixion.” Because he is an artist, particularly an observant Jew who painted a crucifixion painting, Asher has become, in adult life, “a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflictor of shame upon my family, my friends, my people...” At the same time, Asher says that it’s time he tried to defend himself by telling his story. “But I will not apologize,” he writes. “It is absurd to apologize for a mystery.”

Asher’s ancestors were all true believers in Judaism. His great-great-great-grandfather was, according to Asher’s father Aryeh, a most accomplished man, traveling the world to “do good deeds and bring the Master of the Universe into the world.”. As a young boy, Asher heard so many stories about this ancestor that later he often appears in his dreams, as his “mythic ancestor.”

Asher’s grandfather was a Russian scholar who eventually joined the orthodox Jewish sect known as the Ladovs, becoming an emissary of the Rebbe, and traveling throughout Russia to help other Jews. Asher’s mother, Rivkeh, could trace her family roots back to one of the saintliest Hasidic leaders in eastern Europe.

Asher’s earliest memories of drawing begin at age 4, when he remembers drawing pictures of his surroundings. “I grew up encrusted with lead and spectrumed with crayons. My dearest companions were Eberhard and Crayola. Washing for meals was a cosmic enterprise.” He describes his early years as happy, during which time he enjoyed a closeness with his mother. In fact, his mother was his favorite model and he loved drawing her throwing snowballs, rowing a boat in Prospect Park, and engaging in other activities with her son.

Asher’s father travels to other countries, and explains to the young Asher that he travels “for the Rebbe,” or Rabbi. Aryeh is a deeply religious man who spends his life working on behalf of the Ladover sect, establishing yeshivas, Jewish schools, in various locations and working to save Jews from imprisonment or worse. At a young age, Asher recalls his father almost constantly in prayer or studying the Torah. In contrast to his mother’s positive reactions to his artwork, Asher’s father tells him it’s a waste of time and calls it “foolishness.”

Shortly after Asher turns six, his mother’s brother, Yaakov, is killed in a car accident while traveling for the Rebbe. Asher describes his mother’s endless screaming and their house filled with visitors, including the Rebbe. The next day, Asher’s mother is taken to the hospital. When she returns home, she looks “skeletal” and does not speak to anyone. Asher barely recognizes her. “There had been a special relationship between my mother and her brother, and his death almost destroyed her.”



Desperate to make his mother happy again, Asher draws a scene of birds and trees, and shows her the picture while she is in bed one day. She does not respond, and he begins drawing pictures of dead birds. Because his mother continues to grieve, Asher begins spending his days at his father's office in the international headquarters of the Ladover sect. Although bored, Asher hears conversations about Russia in the office and when his father is on the telephone. He also hears Aryeh speak several different languages, including English, Yiddish and French. When he asks questions about his father's work, Aryeh changes the subject. In one conversation, Asher hears his father angrily speaking Russian. On the way home that evening, Aryeh tells his son that the conversation was about Russians "hurting Jews."

During dinner one night, Asher confronts his listless and disinterested mother and tells her that he won't draw pretty things any more, because "the world is not pretty." He then begins to pound his fists on the table and scream, "I can't stand it! I can't stand it!" He desperately wants his mother to get well.

Asher and his father walk one Sunday to the grocery store, where he meets Yudel Krinsky for the first time. Krinsky, who has just arrived in the U.S. from Russia, tells Asher that his father "is an angel of God." Asher notices that Krinsky wears a different kind of hat, called a kaskett, and his father later tells him that Krinsky will continue to wear the hat so that "everyone would see a Russian Jew who remained a Jew." Asher later learns from the family's housekeeper, Mrs. Rackover, that Krinsky was among many Jews exiled to Siberia under Joseph Stalin's regime in Russia, and that he spent 11 years there.

One evening, Asher's mother joins him and his father in the living room for a talk. She tells Aryeh that she would like to continue the work her late brother did, describing his work as "incomplete." She wants to attend college, but Aryeh reminds her that she has a child to raise. Aryeh later says he'll speak to the Rebbe about her request, and she gets angry, insisting that the Rebbe won't allow it. She insists that the Rebbe killed her brother, a statement that shocks Asher. Before he falls asleep that night, Asher feels like "raw flesh, connected to near and distant pain."

The following fall, however, the Rebbe gives Rivkeh permission to attend Brooklyn College, and Asher is enrolled in the Yeshiva.

Analysis

From the beginning of his story, Asher makes it clear that his work as an artist, particularly for one work titled Brooklyn Crucifixion, has made him an outcast in his own community and religion. Asher, a Hasidic Jew from the Ladover sect, feels the tug of war between his "gift" to make art and his deeply religious upbringing from the very start of his life. As a young boy, he finds that his father disapproves of his art, calling it "foolishness." At the same time, his mother encourages him to make "pretty pictures," and he does, drawing many pictures of her.



The first major turning point in Asher's life takes place when his

maternal uncle, Yaakov, is tragically killed in an auto accident while traveling for the Rebbe. Although young, Asher is scarred by this event and recalls his mother's blood-curdling screams after she received the news of her brother's death. For what seems like an eternity to young Asher, Rivkeh falls ill, refusing to eat or to rejoin the family with any sense of normalcy. Aryeh, who normally traveled frequently for the Rebbe, must stay in Brooklyn to care for his son and often takes Asher to the Ladover headquarters, where he works. During this time, Asher begins to understand the enormity of his father's work: to save persecuted Jews from eastern Europe, particularly Russia, and to spread the work of the Ladovers to other cities in the United States and Canada.

In spite of his father's disapproval, Asher can't help but continue to draw, although because of his growing fear and anger over his mother's strange grief, Asher's drawings begin to take on more ominous tones. His pictures of birds and blue skies are replaced by dark scrawls and even, at one point, dead birds. His belief that "the world is pretty" has been tarnished by his mother's illness and the death of his young uncle. He asks his father how God could let these events take place: "Why is God doing this to my Mama?" "Why should God do such a thing?" His father has no real answers for Asher, and the impressionable boy begins to grow skeptical about his own religion and its teachings.

Still, Asher is shocked when his mother says angrily, "The Rebbe killed my brother," as she attempts to persuade Aryeh to speak to the Rebbe about her wishes to attend college and carry on her brother's work. Asher is clearly torn between the world of his father, who carries a torch for his religion, and that of his mother, who suffered an unimaginable tragedy at least in part because of that same religion.

Asher describes his life as being "connected to near and distant pain," a reference to the larger world's persecution of Jews and his own mother's grief and its direct impact on him.

Vocabulary

citron, palm frond, sanctity, tefillin, tractate, tremulous, skull-cap, sidecurls, specterlike, Gothic, flagstone, mimeograph, indulgently, frenetically, ignoramus, sallow, translucent, periphery, matzos, kaskett

Book 1, Chapter 2

Summary

As he begins learning at the yeshiva, Asher recalls the constant gaze of the Rebbe from paintings of the Ladover leader on the classroom walls. Rav Yosef Cutler, the mashpia, or spiritual mentor of the yeshiva, comes into the classroom on a regular basis to speak to the students about “the development of [souls]” and to teach “the doctrines of Ladover Hasidism.” During his early years at the yeshiva, he loses interest in drawing. When his mother asks him why, he tells her he hates it. “It’s a waste. It’s from the sitra achra. Like Stalin.”

Asher and his parents spend their summers at a Hasidic colony in the Berkshire Mountains, on the shores of a lake. He remembers seeing his parents walking along the shore and talking, or spending time on the lake in a rowboat together. Asher enjoys the summers because his mother seems lighthearted and happy again, although he knows small things remind her of the loss of her brother, “when the dead look return[s] to her eyes...”

One summer, in 1952, Aryeh arrives at the Berkshire colony and tells Rivkeh “they’ve shot the writers.” Although Asher is not sure what his father means, he overhears their conversation and Aryeh is clearly upset. At one point, Asher hears his father say, “They’re dying, Rivkeh. Why am I here? Do you know how much work has to be done in Europe?” The following winter, the family hears about nine Jewish doctors who are arrested by the Soviet police and charged with deliberately misdiagnosing the illnesses of Soviet leaders.

During this period, Asher begins visiting Yudel Krinsky on a regular basis. Attracted both by Krinsky’s personal story and the supplies in his stationery store, Asher purchases a notebook and pencil and begins asking Krinsky a series of questions about his life and persecution in Russia. Asher’s mother tells him it’s OK to visit with Krinsky, as long as he doesn’t get home too late from school. Asher is clearly curious about Krinsky’s life in Russia, and asks him questions on every visit. Krinsky enjoys Asher’s company and gets him to help out in the stationery store. As he does, Asher begins to learn more about paints, oil paints, canvas, and other art supplies.

One snowy night, Asher arrives home from Krinsky’s store very late, and his mother screams at him when he finally gets home safely. He retreats to his room and hears his mother chanting from the Book of Psalms. He also hears her addressing her dead brother Yaakov, saying, “How can I do it? I am just a little girl. What do you want from me?” The next day, Rivkeh apologizes to her son for losing her temper. “You frightened me. I’m trying very hard to get used to it, Asher. I’m really trying.”



Analysis

In Chapter Two, it becomes clear that Asher is profoundly affected by what takes place in the larger world, constantly questioning his father, mother and his new friend Yudel Krinsky about Russia and its treatment of the Jews. Asher also feels abandoned by his often-absent father, and even by his mother, who now spends much of her time buried in her studies at Brooklyn College. The Levs are devoted to a larger cause, and are respected in the Ladover community for that reason. Their son, however, is often alone, and is discouraged from pursuing the one thing he loves the most: creating art.

Yudel Krinsky's store provides Asher with the opportunity to ask questions about Krinsky's life in Russia and Siberia, a second-hand way to learn more about his own father, to whom Krinsky owes his life. Asher's frequent visits to Krinsky also provide him with a chance to examine the art supplies carried there. At first, Asher purchases only a Hebrew notebook and pencil. But as he grows more familiar with the store and its wares, his curiosity about making art is resurrected, even though he creates no art during this period. Instead, he tells his mother that he hates art. "It's a waste. It's from the sitra achra. Like Stalin." Sitra Achra, mentioned often in the book by its characters, refers to "the other side," or the evil that lurks in the world.

Although Rivkeh seems to have recovered from her brother's untimely death, she continues to be fearful of her husband's long trips away from home, and admits to Asher that she is "a failure" when it comes to being frightened about his absences. She screams at Asher when he arrives home late after visiting with Krinsky in a snowstorm, and frets about her husband's trips home in bad weather. Asher overhears her pleading with her dead brother about not being able to continue his work, even though she does well as a student at the college.

Although Asher creates no artwork during this brief period, his mother often asks him about it. Asher is torn between his obsession with art and the obligations he feels toward his religion and his father's beliefs that creating art is frivolous and a waste of time. Asher wants to be "an observant Jew," and tries hard to resist the temptation to draw.

Because he is not drawing, Asher's parents notice a change in him. He is not doing well in school, and the mashpia tells Aryeh about it. Both Aryeh and Rivkeh ask Asher if he is sick, as he is so quiet and withdrawn. Knowing that his father expects him to improve his work at the yeshiva, he finds it difficult to even get out of bed.

Vocabulary

galoshes, ream, emissaries, peasant, fervent, interceder, persecution, bronchitis, cadmium, blotched, antibiotics, complications, tallis, immerse, ritual, stationery, rumbled, oppressed, redemption



Book 1, Chapters 3-4

Summary

Aryeh receives a call informing him that Stalin has had a stroke and is dying, news that won't hit the American newspapers until the next day. Stalin dies at the end of the week. Asher's parents are relieved, believing that the situation will improve for Jews in Russia. Yudel Krinsky tells Asher, however, that Stalin's death "will not bring back the dead," and notes that "there are many Stalins in Russia." Asher is transfixed by a photo in the New York Times of Stalin, dead in his coffin, and cannot get the image out of his mind.

Rivkeh tells Asher that the family might be asked by the Rebbe to move to Vienna, Austria, so that Aryeh can work for the Ladover sect in Europe. Asher informs his mother that he does not want to go to Vienna, but she tells him that if the Rebbe asks, they will have to go.

Asher becomes ill with a sore throat and fever for a week; while in bed, he has dreams about Yudel Krinsky, his Uncle Yitzchok, and his "mythic ancestor." In his dreams, Yudel Krinsky tells Asher that Vienna "is a city that hates Jews." When he gets better, he prays that the Rebbe will change his mind about sending the Levs to Vienna, but his father announces that the family will move there in October.

At the Yeshiva one day, Asher begins to draw again. He draws dots, connects them with lines, and eventually has drawn the dead Stalin in his coffin. He becomes obsessed with drawing and re-drawing the dead Stalin; Asher's father comes in one night and sees all the drawings strewn about his room. He disapproves, saying, "You can't study Chumash, but this you have time for." Later, Asher's mother tells him that his father is worried about his studies at the yeshiva. She also informs him that they will be having their photos taken for their passports the following week. Asher tells her he won't be going to Vienna and will stay behind with Uncle Yitzchok.

Asher, using charcoal crayons, draws a portrait of Yudel Krinsky in his store. They talk about the passports and Krinsky tells Asher he must honor his father and mother by going to Vienna. Still, when Krinsky sees his self-portrait, he says, "the son of Reb Aryeh Lev has a great gift."

Asher refuses to get his passport photo taken, so the Levs postpone the appointment. At dinner one evening, Aryeh explains to Asher why he must continue his work on behalf of the Ladover Jews in Europe. He tells Asher that all the yeshivas in Russia were closed by the Communists about 25 years earlier, and that only the Ladover and Breslover Hasidim fought against the destruction of the Torah in Russia. The Rebbe's father was sent to jail by the Communists and almost lost his life during this time. The Rebbe was sending him, Aryeh, to Europe to establish centers for Torah, he says, and to make "passageways" for Jews in Russia. "This is more important than anything else," he explains. "These are Jewish lives, Asher. Nothing is more important in the eyes of



the Master of the Universe than a Jewish life.” But when his mother is saying good night to him, Asher tells her, “I’m also a Jewish life, mama. I’m precious in the eyes of the Ribbono Shel Olom (God).”

Asher’s parents aren’t the only ones in his tight-knit community who are worried about him. On the first Seder of Passover, the Levs are joined by Uncle Yitzchok and his family. Asher desperately asks his uncle if he can live with him instead of traveling to Vienna, and his uncle is harsh: “Everyone is saying that you’re behaving like a child.” Later, when Asher visits Yudel Krinsky, Krinsky tells him, “Everyone is talking about you.” Even Mrs. Rackover, the family’s housekeeper, scolds Asher. “You are driving us all crazy with your pictures and your stubbornness,” she says. “What kind of Jewish boy behaves this way to a mother and father? You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” After Passover, Asher goes with his parents to get his passport.

Analysis

Asher’s illness, during which time he is often in a dream-like state, helps the reader understand the things that bother him. He is terrified of Stalin, but is also morbidly fascinated by his death and draws the photo of him in his coffin over and over again.

Although Rivkeh is more encouraging, Aryeh continues to view Asher's drawings as foolishness. The separation of father and son begins here, and only grows with time as Asher grows.

When Asher defies his parents’ wishes to move to Vienna, it seems that the entire Ladover community knows about it. When Asher visits Krinsky, he tells the boy that he is a major topic of conversation. His Uncle Yitzchok admonishes Asher and tells him to grow up. The close-knit community is a comfort to Asher, but can also become stifling.

Vocabulary

traverse, entombed, frivolity, protruded, matzo, passageways, furrows, eyepiece, pungent, bloated, distorted, disfigured

Book 1, Chapter 5

Summary

Asher's mother takes him to be examined by the family doctor and an eye doctor. Neither can find anything wrong with him, although Asher draws a disturbing picture for the eye doctor of a cat he had seen get struck by a car. The doctor looks at the drawing and speaks to Rivkeh about it after the appointment. Asher's mother is quiet and subdued on the way home.

In class one day, other students sitting around Asher suddenly notice that he is drawing in his Chumash, the holy book that contains the Torah. One of the students, a "pimple-faced boy with an endlessly running nose and a high nasal voice," shouts that Asher has defiled a holy book. The boy gets out of his seat and backs away from Asher, horrified. When his teacher approaches him and looks at the book, he tells him that he is "surprised and upset that the son of Reb Aryeh Lev should do such a thing." When Asher looks down at the Chumash, he realizes that he has drawn an evil depiction of the Rebbe in the book, and doesn't remember doing it.

Asher's father tells him the next morning that the mashpia told him about the drawing, and wants to speak to Asher at school. Aryeh tells Asher to be respectful with the mashpia, and once again calls Asher's drawing "foolishness." This time, Asher speaks back to his father. "Foolishness is something that's stupid," Asher says. "Foolishness is something a person shouldn't do. Foolishness is something that brings harm to the world. Foolishness is a waste of time. Please don't ever call it foolishness again, Papa."

Asher meets with the mashpia, who tries to explain to him why it's so important for his father to work on behalf of the Rebbe in Vienna. But Asher is distracted by the rain outside the window, and only hears part of what the mashpia is saying. When he finally engages in the conversation, Asher breaks down, telling the mashpia that he has no choice but to follow his parents to Vienna. The mashpia asks Asher to draw a few pictures for him in a sketchbook and leave them on his desk, and he leaves Asher alone. Asher draws dozens of pictures in the sketchbook, including Yudel Krinsky, his mother's face in a window, and scenes from his neighborhood. When he is done, he leaves the sketchbook in the office and walks out, leaving school. Instead of going home, he visits a museum and is there for hours. When he arrives home, Mrs. Rackover tells Asher his mother was "sick with fear" and called the police to report him missing. When he sees his mother, all Asher can do is tell her about the artists whose works he had just seen in the museum. While his mother and Mrs. Rackover are still speaking to him, Asher falls into bed, turns his face to the wall, and falls asleep.

The next morning, Asher's father forbids him to visit Yudel Krinsky or go to the museum after school. But Asher, knowing that his father will be out of town, visits Krinsky anyway and steals some tubes of oil paint from the store. Rivkeh says nothing when he arrives home late. Aryeh returns from Washington in a jubilant mood, talking about the State



Department with Rivkeh. Although Asher doesn't understand what's going on, he is happy that his father is in a good mood. But shortly after his return, Aryeh goes to see the Rebbe and returns in an angry and sullen mood. Although Asher doesn't understand why, he learns several months later that the Rebbe and the mashpia had informed Aryeh that Asher should not go to Vienna. In October, Asher and Rivkeh say their goodbyes to Aryeh at the airport, as he leaves for Vienna without them. Rivkeh cries when her husband leaves, telling him to have a safe journey.

Analysis

Asher's behavior during this period is sullen, withdrawn, and self-involved. His drawing of a dead cat at the doctor's office upsets both the doctor and Rivkeh. Later, he draws a menacing looking Rebbe in his holy book, the Chumash, which not only shows the hold that art has on Asher's life, but is a way of expressing his anger over the impending move to Vienna. Asher seems to have no recollection of drawing the Rebbe in the book, even though the action itself horrifies his classmates.

While meeting with the sympathetic mashpia, Asher has trouble concentrating on their conversation. Instead, he focuses on the rain outside the window and wonders how he would draw the scene. Asher leaves behind a sketchbook of pictures at the mashpia's request, but feels angry and disgusted about doing so. He already knows that his art comes from inside him and is a way to express his feelings, not something he creates because someone asks him to. He is torn by the guilt he is made to feel about art, and by his obsession with making it.

As a boy who is self-involved, Asher also upsets Rivkeh by staying out late, visiting a museum without her permission, and doing poorly in school. He has tested his parents' limits and is acting out of frustration and powerlessness.

The Rebbe's decision to send Aryeh to Vienna without his family further separates Aryeh from his son. Now the father feels powerless and resentful, but he nevertheless agrees to travel without his family.

Vocabulary

glade, pastels, defiled, desecrated, pivoted, sardonic, turpentine, guardian, enshrouding, asphalt, rivulets, diagonals, concave, rectangular, tributaries, goy, conjugations, pronunciation, luminosity



Book 2, Chapter 6

Summary

Asher misses his father once he's gone, and he and his mother receive Aryeh's letters from many of Europe's cities, including Geneva, Zurich, Paris, Budapest, and Vienna. Asher recalls childhood conversations with his father, including one in which he learned that Aryeh had no interest in reading the arts or sports sections of *The New York Times*, only the news section. For the first time, Asher begins drawing his father, as a way to remember and understand him.

During Aryeh's absence, Asher and his mother grow close again. She tells him about her dead brother, Yaakov, and Asher watches as she works on getting her master's degree. She moves a small table into the living room as a desk, as well as shelves for her books. Asher draws constantly during his father's absence, often pictures of his mother. One day his mother brings home a gift: - tubes of oil paints, canvases, an easel, and other items he needs to paint. His first oil painting is of his mother, looking out the living room window.

Asher continues to do poorly in school, and his mother, Uncle Yitzchok, the mashpia, and even Yudel Krinsky all speak to him about doing well in school, studying the Torah, and living up to his father's reputation in the Hasidic community. Rivkeh takes Asher to the Parkway Museum, where he is eager to show her the paintings there. She becomes concerned and upset when she sees paintings of Jesus and of nudes. She tells Asher, "God forbid the Rebbe should find out."

At home, Asher works on paintings of Jesus, and of nude women, trying to mimic what he has seen in the museum. But one morning, he wakes to find that his father is home for Passover and has seen Asher's sketches of nude women and of Jesus. Aryeh goes into an uncontrollable rage, angry about the paintings of "that man," meaning Jesus, and asking Asher if he knows "how much Jewish blood had been spilled because of that man." Aryeh's disappointment and anger continues for days, and Asher hears him shouting at his mother at night.

At breakfast one morning, when Aryeh sees that Asher is tracing something with his fork, he grabs Asher's wrist and squeezes hard, hurting him. The family erupts in shouting, and Aryeh explodes, telling Asher to stop his painting or he will force him to move to Vienna with him. "What next? Next you will become a goy," says his father. "Better you should not have been born."

After his father leaves for Vienna again, Asher decides to study hard in two subjects: Talmud and the Bible. His grades begin to improve and the mashpia is happy with him. When his father returns for Rosh Hashonoh, he asks Asher if he'd like to move to Vienna. Asher says no because he now believes that his father has become "an



adversary.” After Rivkeh earns her master’s degree, she decides to spend the summer in Europe with her husband. Asher lives that summer with Uncle Yitzchok.

Analysis

In this chapter, Asher is notably happy about being home with his mother Rivkeh, who supports him as an artist by purchasing oil paints for him. As challenging as it is for her, she also takes Asher to the museum, where he sees Christian paintings of crucifixions, and depictions of nude women. Rivkeh is shocked by what she sees.

A violent argument takes place between Asher and Aryeh when Aryeh returns from Vienna late at night and sees his son’s paintings while the boy is sleeping. In the morning, Aryeh is in a rage, and tells his son that his art is “goyim,” a pejorative term meaning “non-Jewish,” indicating it is unworthy. He is also offended and angry at Rivkeh for buying Asher art supplies and taking him to the museum. When Aryeh grabs Asher by the wrist as he traces something with his fork, and squeezes Asher’s wrist so hard that he cries, it’s clear that father and son will not be able to easily mend the hurt that has transpired. Once again, Rivkeh is caught in the middle of the war.

Asher now sees Aryeh as an adversary, and refuses to even think of going to Vienna when his father asks him once again.

Vocabulary

N/A



Book 2, Chapter 7

Summary

Asher learns from the mashpia that the Rebbe wants to meet with him. In preparation for the meeting, Asher spends a week reviewing the Torah with the mashpia. He learns that there are three levels of Jews: those who sin and have evil thoughts, those who live a pious life but can't control their sinful thoughts, and those who have complete control over their hearts and lives. He also learns that Jews strive to become one with God, while Gentiles only strive to become independent beings. He also studies the sitra achra, "the realm of darkness and evil given life by God..."

When Asher shows up for his meeting with the Rebbe, he sees a white-haired man in the waiting room who is wearing a beret and writing in a notebook. As Asher waits, he notes that the man is not writing in the notebook, but drawing. In the meeting, the Rebbe tells Asher that he wanted to bless him before his bar mitzvah. He also tells him that "one man is not better than the other because he is a lawyer and the other is a painter. A life is measured by how it is lived for the sake of heaven." When Asher leaves the meeting, the white-haired man goes into the Rebbe's office. Asher sees a small piece of folded paper on his seat and retrieves it. It is a pencil drawing of Asher, signed "Jacob Kahn" and dated. Asher sits down and draws a small likeness of the man, signs his name to it, and leaves it on the man's seat.

Outside, Asher waits for the man, who eventually appears. He introduces himself to Asher, and hands him the sketchbook he filled years earlier after his meeting with the mashpia. Kahn tells Asher that he knows his father, and that "he will become my enemy." When Asher asks why, Kahn simply says, "I will watch you. We have a clever Rebbe." He then explains that he will meet with Asher in March, and gives him instructions to visit the Museum of Modern Art and study Picasso's renowned piece, Guernica. When Asher returns home and tells his parents about Jacob Kahn, they don't seem surprised, but Aryeh is angry and bitter; it soon becomes clear that the decision to have Jacob Kahn mentor Asher has been imposed on his father by the Rebbe. All through Asher's bar mitzvah, his father seems upset, even humiliated, over the Rebbe's decision. Immediately after, Aryeh leaves again for Europe.

Once Aryeh is gone, Rivkeh takes Asher to the museum twice, once purchasing a reproduction of Guernica for him to study. Asher visits the museum on his own every Sunday until his meeting with Kahn in March.

Analysis

Asher's meeting with the Rebbe is the most important turning point in his life. Although the Rebbe never mentions it, Asher learns from Jacob Kahn that he has been asked by the Rebbe to serve as Asher's artistic mentor. Not only does this turn of events



symbolize the Hasidim acceptance of Asher's gift, but it instills self-confidence in the boy and gives him hope. Jacob Kahn, a Jewish artist, represents Asher's future.

Asher is less excited about his Bar Mitzvah, usually an important milestone for a Jewish boy, than he is about his prospects and acceptance as an artist. Aryeh is sullen about the Rebbe's decision to enlist Jacob Kahn's help; he warns his wife that this decision will only bring trouble, as, by encouraging Asher's artistic dreams against his father's desires, it only serves to widen the division between father and son.

Asher can see that the Rebbe, the very person Aryeh has devoted his life to serving, has taken away the father's right to shape his son's life. This causes a conflict within Aryeh, and as a result, he walks "in pain and shame" all through the festivities of Asher's Bar Mitzvah.

Vocabulary

resonant, entity, Gentile, arabesques, chandelier, Gothic, bar mitzvah, exquisite, reconciled, apprehensively, incomprehensible, transmitted, perverted, reproduction



Book 2, Chapter 8

Summary

When Asher calls Kahn to make an appointment, the artist gives him more homework. He tells him to study another painting and to read a chapter and verse from the Book of Matthew in the Christian Bible. Asher is disturbed by the reading, wherein King Herod orders his soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem who are two years old or younger, believing that a child has been born who will become King of the Jews.

Rivkeh gives Asher a book about the artist Robert Henri, which he reads right away. In the book, certain passages resonate with Asher, including one that says, "...every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a 'universal' without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere."

When Asher arrives for his first meeting with Kahn, the artist is in his Upper West Side apartment with a woman named Anna Schaeffer, a gallery owner. When they are introduced, Anna stares at Asher's earlocks and seems surprised to meet him. Kahn tells Anna that "it is impolite to stare," and calls Asher "a prodigy in payos," a reference to his earlocks. Anna studies him, and asks Asher if he has ever been beaten for painting, noting that "orthodox Jews do not care much for painting, I understand." She also asks Asher if he is religious, and he tells her that he is "an observant Jew." After Asher explains to her what that means, she tells him, "If you want to make the world holy, stay in Brooklyn."

Anna looks through Asher's sketchbook, and tells him his work is "magnificent." She also notes that the artist Goya was 12 when he started making art, and that Picasso was only 9 when he started. "Why not?" she says. "It could happen in Brooklyn to a boy with payos." Kahn tells Anna that he will be working with Asher for five years to help him hone his craft as an artist. But he also warns Asher that art "is a tradition of goyim and pagans. Its values are goyische and pagan. Its concepts are goyische and pagan. Its way of life is goyische and pagan. In the entire history of European art, there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter."

After Anna leaves, Kahn tells Asher that he has both a gift and a responsibility as an artist. "As an artist you are responsible to no one and to nothing, except to yourself and the truth as you see it." Kahn goes on to say that artists should create their work free of guilt, and that painting is not storytelling, but "line and color and shape and texture." Kahn sketches a street and house in Paris, and tells Asher that he used to live there with writer Max Jacob and artist Pablo Picasso. There, he explains, "we changed the eyes of the world." He also notes that Max Jacob, a Jew, was eventually killed by the Nazis.



Asher is informed that no one has heard from his father in quite some time, and that he won't be home for Pesach. Asher fears that Aryeh is in Russia.

Analysis

Kahn constantly emphasizes the ways in which Asher will be interacting with a different world as an artist. He mentions to Asher that he does not keep kosher, and assigns Asher to read the Bible, and specifically about the Massacre of the Innocents. In this way, Kahn forces Asher to move outside the box of the Hasidim, a move that threatens to alienate him from his family and community.

Kahn also advises Asher to return to the Hasidic world of Brooklyn unless he intends to go all the way and become a serious artist. Kahn makes it clear that it is not possible to be both Orthodox and a great artist; he can't even keep kosher. It is clear that Kahn has endured deep emotional conflict to become an artist, and wants to offer Asher the opportunity to protect himself from the same pain. But instead of being frightened away, Asher remains committed to his need to create art.

Rivkeh makes an effort to support Asher, even if it means he will be exposed to things outside of the "safety" of his Hasidic life. She borrows a book, *The Art Spirit*, for him, even though it explicitly notes that most great artists are rebels who break free of their family and religious traditions. This further opens the door, foreshadowing the resultant alienation of the artist from his familial culture.

Vocabulary

exhibition, massacred, individuality, adherence, intoxicated, dungarees, matronly, paraphrase, Sabbath, burlesque, chisels, mallets, pagan, fanatics, mythology, sensuousness, sentimentalism, cobblestone, dilapidated

Book 2, Chapter 9

Summary

Aryeh sends his family a letter, assuring them that he is safe and asking Rivkeh to consider spending the summer in Europe with him. When summer arrives, she leaves and Asher moves in with his Uncle Yitzchok. Asher spends three days a week all during the hot summer, painting with Jacob Kahn at his apartment; both stripped to the waist. Asher learns that there are two kinds of painters: those who paint the world as a flower, and those who paint it as geometry.

They take a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Asher sees paintings of Christ's crucifixion for the first time. He is disturbed by what he sees, but Kahn tells him, "We will see more crucifixions and more resurrections and more nativities and more Greek and Roman gods and more scenes of war and love – because that is the world of art, Asher Lev." One Sunday morning, Asher visits Kahn and learns that he will be drawing a nude from a live model. Although Asher is nervous, he draws pictures of the girl all day. He draws her again the following two Sundays.

When Asher's parents return from Europe in September, his father looks exhausted and old. Speaking with Asher one night in his room, Aryeh tells him that he is still disappointed that his son wants to become an artist. "This is not what I wanted from my son. In this matter, I do not care what the Rebbe tells me. You are my son, not the son of the Rebbe."

When Aryeh returns to Europe, Asher begins to notice a change in his mother. She seems distracted and lonely, spending evenings staring out the living room window, and Asher hears her talking to herself at night. Rivkeh, who has finished her Ph.D. dissertation, discusses the possibility with Asher that she might join his father in Europe for a year. She asks Asher if he would mind living with Uncle Yitzchok for that year, and Asher says he does not want to live with his uncle for an entire year.

Later, however, Rivkeh tells Asher that she will be joining Aryeh in Europe and that Asher will live with his uncle. She says the plan has the blessing of the Rebbe, and becomes angry with Asher when he pleads with her to stay. Rivkeh admonishes Asher for being childish and for making so many demands on her. She insists that Aryeh needs her now, and it is time for her to be with him.

When Asher tells Kahn about it, he has no more sympathy for him, saying that the world can only indulge a person for so long. The Rebbe calls Asher to his office and tells him that he must go along with the plan. He also warns Asher to be careful, as he "is entering the world of the Other Side."

Asher visits Anna Schaeffer's gallery for the first time, where an art show is taking place. She recognizes Asher and tells him that Kahn is planning to invite him to his summer



home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. . Asher spends much of the spring painting pictures of his mother and himself, especially pictures of them spending time together when he was younger. He sometimes leaves out the faces.

Rivkeh earns her doctorate degree and seems to be invigorated. She rents the Levs' apartment to a family from Russia. In late June, Asher accompanies his mother to the ship that will take her to Europe for the next year.

Analysis

Asher paints without a shirt while he is working at Kahn's apartment, but must wear a shirt while painting at his uncle's home. The difference between the freedom he experiences while working Kahn and the restrictions on his life in the Ladover community is not lost on Asher. Each step he takes towards the artist's life, is a step away from the hassidim.

Kahn criticizes Asher's paintings of his mother during this period, which reveal his confusion and sadness about her departure to Vienna. Asher loves his mother, but is angry that she wants to leave him behind.

The events that take place in Chapter 9 show Asher's development from a boy into a young man. The Rebbe has decided that Rivkeh may join her husband in Europe, leaving Asher behind. Anna and Jacob Kahn have decided that Asher will soon be ready for his first art show. By the end of Book 2, Asher is ready to move on in his life as an artist.

Vocabulary

Baroque, Le Havre, oppressive, ritual, sanctifier, permanence, cowardice, doctorate, crucifixions, pictorial, nativities, resurrections, pendulous, gaunt, primal, indulgent, ochre, ultramarine, talons, malevolent



Book 3, Chapter 10

Summary

Asher spends the summer living with Jacob Kahn and his wife, Tanya, at their home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Asher and Kahn set up their easels on the beach dunes and paint together; as they do, Asher learns more about art from his mentor. Among other things, he learns about impressionist painting and tries to understand abstract expressionism, which is how Kahn paints in two dimensions, as Picasso did.

Asher learns to swim in Provincetown, and Kahn takes his protégé to the galleries in the area, where everyone seems to know the local artist. When Asher self-consciously tucks his payos behind his ears, Kahn criticizes him, telling Asher that artists don't care what they look like; they only care about their art.

While he's living with Kahn, Asher continues to be an observant Jew, fasting on Jewish holy days and reading from the book of Lamentations. During a walk on the beach, Kahn tells Asher that it's admirable to hang on to his religious customs and beliefs, although he never saw the need for fasting. "I do not have many things that are meaningful to me," he says.

On the beach, Kahn takes wet sand and sculpts his own face, while Asher watches. He tells Asher he'd like to live until he's 80, and notes that both Monet and Renoir lived that long. He also says that he expects Picasso and Chagall to live into their 80s as well. In a somber mood, Kahn tells Asher that his presence is unsettling and that he reminds him too much of his own past. "I do not enjoy myself when I am like this," he says. "But there is nothing to be done."

The next day, Kahn remains in bed and his wife tells Asher that he is "in a mood." Asher watches as well-known artists from the area, many of whom he recognizes, stop to visit with Kahn. Anna Schaeffer visits, stopping briefly to speak with Asher. "Be especially kind to your teacher," she says. "He is filled with memories of unpleasant things these days." Kahn recuperates the next day, and takes a refreshing swim in the ocean.

Before Asher leaves Provincetown for home, he spends a day alone on the busy docks, where he sketches boats, seagulls, and swimmers. At the local aquarium, he sketches sharks and a small group of people gathers, admiring his work. He signs one of his sketches and gives it to a small boy, who is thrilled. He is pleased, too, as his gift is appreciated. He tells Kahn that he expects to be a great artist someday, and Kahn tells him he already is a great artist. The pieces that both Kahn and Asher have been working on all summer is picked up by a truck and carted off to Anna Schaeffer's gallery.



Analysis

Asher is formally introduced to the secular world of Jacob and Tanya Kahn when he begins spending his summers with the couple at their home in Provincetown. This marks the beginning of Asher's freedom from the oppressive Hasidic world.

At the Provincetown house, Asher is able to focus his attention on painting and is supported in his efforts. He continues to learn from Kahn, and they take walks along the beach, where they discuss art. Asher also learns to swim in the ocean, something he never could have enjoyed in Crown Heights.

At Kahn's beach house, Asher is free of judgment as well, and continues to paint stripped of his shirt and sometimes putting his earlocks behind his ears. He sees his work admired by others when he draws a crowd as he sketches on the Provincetown docks, and feels a strong affinity to the fishing families of the seaside town.

Vocabulary

fluidity, illusion, dimensions, voids, plywood, indistinct, flecked, conviction, circumspect, testament, prophylactic, contemplate, futility, sienna, crimson, kinship



Book 3, Chapter 11

Summary

Enrolling at the yeshiva high school, Asher visits the registrar's office to inquire why he was registered to take French, which he believes is a mistake. The man at the registrar's office tells Asher that the decision to enroll him in French class was the Rebbe's.

Asher attends the opening of Jacob Kahn's art show at Anna Schaeffer's gallery. The gallery is packed with people, and Asher sees a bronze sculpture of two heads, facing each other. The heads are his and Kahn's. Asher notices that the sculpture has already been sold. When he finds the artist, Kahn is clearly uncomfortable being the center of attention at the opening, and says, "I wish I had Picasso's gall and could stay away from these things. They destroy me." When Asher asks who purchased the sculpture of the two heads, Kahn just shrugs. Anna Schaeffer tells Asher who purchased the sculpture and on his way home, he says, "It was a queer feeling to know that a likeness of my head would soon be in the home of one of the wealthiest families in America."

Asher's parents arrive home for a visit, and stay with him at his Uncle Yitzchok's house. When Asher's uncle takes Aryeh up to the attic, which has been remodeled as Asher's room and studio, Aryeh becomes angry, accusing Yitzchok of "encouraging" Asher to paint. Yitzchok says that Asher can't help but create art, but Aryeh answers coldly, "Only an animal cannot help what he does." When Rivkeh asks Asher to return to Europe with them, he adamantly refuses.

Asher spends the following two summers with Kahn, learning more about art and engaging in conversations with Kahn and his artist friends. When his parents visit again for the holidays, Rivkeh and Asher's aunt and uncle urge him to spend the following summer in Vienna since Kahn will be spending the summer campaigning for John F. Kennedy. Asher relents, and agrees to spend the summer in Vienna even though he doesn't want to go.

On the way to Vienna, Asher falls ill. When he arrives, he is so ill that he doesn't remember much of what happened, although he has vague memories of his father shouting, and quarreling between his mother and father. "Someone had me by the arm," he says. "There was a quarrel. It swirled poisonously around me. I felt its rage and hate." Asher is returned immediately to New York, where he recuperates after three days in bed.

Asher is told by the registrar's office that the Rebbe would like him to study Russian language when he heads off to college, but . But Asher refuses. He's called in to see Rav Mendel Dorochoff, the Rebbe's assistant, who also tells him to enroll in a Russian language class at college. Asher again refuses, saying, "One is enough. Leave me alone." After that meeting, Asher is summoned to see the Rebbe directly, who calmly



notes that Russia has great museums. "Russia is a land rich in art and you will one day wish to travel there. That is for me a glimpse, my Asher." The Rebbe also says that "seeds must be sown everywhere. Only some will bear fruit." After the talk with the Rebbe, Asher enrolls in college and begins to learn Russian.

During a visit to Anna Schaeffer's art gallery, Anna and Kahn tell Asher that they are planning to display his art in a show sometime that year. An ecstatic Asher tells his aunt and uncle, who are thrilled for him. He tells Yudel Krinsky, who is also pleased. Asher's mother writes to say that she, too, is happy for him. The show opens to moderate success, and most art critics write favorable reviews. One critic, however, calls Asher a fraud with "a menacing affinity for Picassoid forms." Asher is struck by the emptiness he feels when he sees later that most of his paintings, which portray his life in Brooklyn, have been purchased and removed from the walls.

Rivkeh and Aryeh return to New York for good, and move back into their apartment. Asher joins them, but is permitted to keep his attic studio at his uncle's house.

Analysis

The most telling section of Chapter 11 is when Asher travels to Vienna and falls ill even before his plane has touched down. Through the barely awake lens of Asher, the reader must figure out that his dreamlike state is an apparent illness. "Somewhere along the edge of the fog, I sensed my father's rage."

The scene continues with only the snippets of information that a feverish Asher can hear through his dazed state. "Food poisoning, someone said. Virus, someone said. Nervous shock, someone said. I hear my father shouting."

One must wonder then, what is truly at the core of Asher's malady? Perhaps it stems from a psychosomatic root.

Finally, "a man with a beard led me gently into a silver bird and sat with me through the clouds," the giant bird being the flight that returns him home.

Asher feels the contrasts between what the art world offers him and what his Hasidic community provides. He decides to show nude paintings at his art show with Anna Schaeffer, because it is part of the artistic tradition; however, such traditions clash with those of the pious community in which he was raised. His decision to include nude paintings in the show essentially precludes his parents or other orthodox Jews from attending, yet he learns that his work appeals to many others outside of the Hasidic community.

Vocabulary

registrar, podium, shofar, aesthetic, visionary, gall, uniformly, rhythmic, enormity, intolerable, intermediate, frivolity, frenzy, brood, bleak, nomination, gabled, spectacles, gaunt, sown, nihilism, canvases, fraud, banality, affinity, retrospective



Book 3, Chapter 12

Summary

When Asher's parents return, he feels like a stranger around them. They speak about events and places he knows nothing about, and they laugh often about their memories of Europe. Aryeh seems different to Asher, happier and more at ease with the knowledge that he was successful in Europe. Asher watches as people speak to his father, and knows that his success in helping the Ladovers is common knowledge in their community.

Aryeh also seems to have mellowed about Asher's art. He is proud to read the many reviews of Asher's shows, and asks him questions about the reviews. However, when Asher explains to his father that he paints his feelings, rather than using art to paint a story, his father doesn't understand. "Sometimes feelings are dangerous, Asher," he says. "Sometimes they are from the sitra achra."

When Asher flies with Kahn to see an art show in Chicago, Aryeh tells him to let him know when he plans to travel to other cities, so that he can send messages with Asher to other Ladover communities. On a trip to Minneapolis, Aryeh gives him an envelope. A man meets Asher in the airport and takes the message, which Aryeh explains is from the Rebbe. Asher continues to bring messages with him when he travels.

Asher spends the following summer in Provincetown, returning home without his sidecurls. Aryeh seems to barely notice, and seems content that Asher kept his beard and the tallit, the ritual fringes that hang below his shirt. Rivkeh repeatedly asks Asher whether his next art show will include nude paintings, and he tells her that the show will most likely include some nudes. He hesitates when Anne and Kahn choose some nudes for his next show, but ultimately allows them to be included. The three-week show is a success, but Asher's parents don't attend.

During a discussion with Aryeh about why he paints nudes, Asher tries his best to explain that the ability to paint nudes is part of the artistic tradition. "Every important artist who ever lived drew or painted the nude." When Aryeh tells Asher that nude paintings offend him, his son tells him that he can't respect Aryeh's "aesthetic blindness." The discussion erodes into an argument, with Aryeh accusing his son of "moral blindness."

At one point, Aryeh asks Asher to explain what he does, so that Aryeh can better understand the art reviews he reads in the newspaper. Asher makes a sincere attempt to explain art to his father, but eventually realizes that Aryeh doesn't understand any of it, and that his aesthetic world is as bewildering to his father as Aryeh's need to travel is to him. When it becomes clear that trying to understand his son's passion is useless, Aryeh stops talking to Asher about his work.



After he graduates from college Asher tells his parents that he will spend the following summer in Europe. Although his mother is sad about his departure, Aryeh tells Asher that he has many friends in Europe who can help Asher out while he's there.

Analysis

Asher is finally able to stand up to his father in Chapter 12, defending his decisions to create art and especially the need to create nude paintings, a tradition in the art world. He does his best to explain art to his father, and criticizes him for his “aesthetic blindness.” Aryeh, however, tells Asher that “moral blindness” is a far more serious flaw than aesthetic blindness.

Both of them make an honest effort, however, when Aryeh asks Asher to explain artistic concepts to him. Ultimately, Asher realizes that his father does not seem to understand any of it, and will probably never understand his world.

Asher's decision to spend the summer in Europe is also a critical juncture for him. He is officially cutting his ties to the Hasidic world and wants to travel to Florence, Rome, and Paris to study art, much of it Christian art. He remembers that Jacob Kahn once said, “Florence is a gift,” and wants to absorb all that the city has to offer. Aryeh, however, sees the trip as a way to bond with his son. He gives him the names of Ladover families who can help him and provide him with housing, and prepares a list of places where Asher can eat kosher. He seems blissfully unaware that Asher's reasons for traveling to Europe have nothing to do with the fact that he's a Jew, and everything to do with the fact that he's an artist.

Vocabulary

grimaces, concierge, indifferent, sociology, aesthetic, afflicted, courier, matrix, planar, illusion, insatiable, bleak



Book 3, Chapter 13

Summary

Asher loves Florence and its art, treasured as masterpieces by the rest of the world. He is especially inspired by Michelangelo's Pietà and sketches it often. Asher is approached by a Ladover man in Florence and asked to bring a package to Rome. When Asher arrives in Rome, he is met by a man who invites Asher to visit the yeshiva that his father helped to build..

In Paris, Asher meets up with Avraham Cutler, the head of the yeshiva Aryeh built in the city. On the way to the Yeshiva, Cutler takes Asher to Montmartre, where he sees Picasso's old studio. Asher stays for dinner at the yeshiva, and meets people who are grateful to his father for all the work he has done on their behalf.

Asher decides to stay in Paris where he rents an apartment and converts a room into a studio.

Asher becomes engrossed in his work, thinking often about his family and the Ladover community. Asher thinks most about his mother and the pain she experienced after her brother died, and about how much of her life was spent in the middle of the dispute between Asher and Aryeh. He is inspired to paint Rivkeh in a way that reflects her lifelong feelings about love and loss. The result of his work is two paintings of crucifixions, with his mother as the central focus. Anna Schaeffer visits Asher in Paris and takes his work back to New York for an upcoming show. Five days before the opening of his show, Asher returns to New York.

Analysis

Alone in Paris, Asher is overcome by memories of his past. Given the solitude he needs to think, Asher finally understands the pain his mother experienced when she lost her beloved brother, Yaakov. Asher also reflects on her life, caught between the two men she loved the most: her husband and her son. He remembers seeing his mother in front of the living room window, waiting for his return and Aryeh's return from the outside world.

Asher has grown into an artist, reflecting back on his past, his family's tragedies, and his mother's pain. As result, as Jacob Kahn taught him, his sorrow, anger and empathy is translated into a pair of paintings that will become lightning rods for both admiration and criticism. But that is what good art is all about: controversy and interpretation.

Vocabulary

Florentine, rippled, chancel, savagery, musty, Renaissance, blaspheme, dimension, arena, spatial, temporal, vengeance, multilingual, disengaged, screeched, gendarme, portly, pilgrimage, contour



Book 3, Chapter 14

Summary

Asher does not tell his parents exactly when he'll return to New York, as they are visiting Chicago for a few days. During their absence, Asher visits Yudel Krinsky and his Uncle Yitzchok, both of whom greet him warmly and express their pride in Asher as a successful artist.

In a phone call with Anna, Asher learns that most of his paintings in the upcoming show have already been sold. When he visits the gallery later, he learns from Anna that the two crucifixions will be the climax of the art show, tucked into the back of the gallery. He is worried about how his family and friends will react to the paintings, but it is too late to turn back.

When Rivkeh and Aryeh return from their trip, Rivkeh asks if Aryeh will be able to attend the show and Asher tells her there will be no nudes in the show. Asher can barely stand the thought of his parents seeing the crucifixion paintings.

The next day, when Asher arrives early at the gallery, he is still troubled by the pieces depicting the crucifixions. A crowd of art patrons arrives at the gallery, complimenting Asher on his work. But Asher can only see his parents arriving and stepping of the elevator. As they move through the exhibition, it becomes clear that some people in the crowd seem to recognize Rivkeh. Asher's confused parents finally arrive at the crucifixion painting and are horrified by what they see. They hurry out of the gallery, followed by Asher. Rivkeh says to Asher, "there are limits," before getting into a cab with her husband and leaving.

Asher quickly finds that he is now an outcast in the Ladover community. All the people who were once proud of him now refuse to speak to him.

The Rebbe asks to meet with Asher, and tells him that he understands that sculpture and painting "are gifts from the Master of the Universe," but only if they are used wisely. The Rebbe tells Asher that he has hurt people and caused harm in the community, and must leave Brooklyn. The Rebbe advises Asher to move to Paris, where he can live in a yeshiva.

Asher books a flight to Paris the next day, leaving behind his parents, who watch his departure from the living room window.

Analysis

As Asher frets about his parents seeing the crucifixion paintings, he falls asleep and sees his mythic ancestor, who tells him, "Asher, my precious Asher, will you and I walk



together now through the centuries?" By now, Asher already knows that he will go ahead and show the paintings to his parents.

The depiction of his family in a crucifixion scene is a major artistic achievement for Asher, even though the painting will bring his parents unbearable pain. At the same time, without the ability to understand his mother's pain, Asher could not have produced the painting at all. The crucifixion, Asher knows, is the ultimate image of suffering.

For the Ladovers, however, the crucifixion is the symbol of Christianity, which they believe has lied about Jews and persecuted them for centuries. It also is the root cause of Asher's grandfather's death, as he was killed by a Russian peasant on the night before the Christian Easter.

Asher makes a conscious decision to place his art above his religion, by permitting Anna Schaeffer to include the crucifixions in his show. In portraying his mother's pain, he inescapably creates more pain for her. However, he knows that in order to be true to his art, a gift from the Master of the Universe, he must cause pain as well as create beauty. He must be willing to "Paint the anguish of all the world."

Vocabulary

linoleum, acrid, stooped, galoshes, solitary, industrialist, prodigy, garish, chaos, primal, pedestal, preoccupation, justification, exultation, reputation, puerile, disarray, cumulative, regal, smorgasboard



Characters

Asher Lev

The narrator and main character, Asher is a Hasidic Jew. He opens the book explaining that he is notorious for creating something called the Brooklyn Crucifixion, and is about to tell his story. Asher is a devout and observant Hasidic Jew, heavily influenced by his community and especially by his devout father, Aryeh. He is obsessed with drawing and painting, becoming an artist against great odds. Asher is banished from his Hasidic community and from the lives of his parents after painting two crucifixions portraying his mother.

Rivkeh Lev

Asher's mother, Rivkeh, is a loving and nurturing mother whose life is forever changed by the tragic death of her brother in a car accident when Asher is just a young boy. Although she is initially portrayed as emotionally fragile, Rivkeh recovers and earns several college degrees in Russian history, following in the footsteps of her dead brother. She spends her life caught in the middle of an ongoing battle between Asher, who wants to be an artist, and her husband Aryeh, who believes that Asher's art is the work of the devil.

Aryeh Lev

Aryeh is a serious, devout Hasidic Jew who works for the Rebbe and constantly travels, opening yeshivas for the Ladover sect around the country and in Europe. Aryeh also works on behalf of Jews being persecuted by Joseph Stalin in Russia. As the novel's main antagonist, Aryeh disapproves of Asher's interest in art and, as a result, his relationship with his son deteriorates over time. He is a fundamentalist who believes that man's every action should reflect his life as a Jew, and this inflexible view leaves no room for artistic creativity, which he considers "foolishness."

Yudel Krinsky

Krinsky is a former Russian Jew who is able to escape Stalin's regime after serving eleven years in Siberia. He is forever grateful to Aryeh Lev for arranging for his escape, but also befriends Asher, who visits him often as a young boy. Krinsky, who runs a stationery store, is able to supply Asher with many of the things he needs to create his artwork, but he ultimately turns his back on Asher after he learns about the Brooklyn Crucifixion.



Jacob Kahn

Kahn is a renowned Jewish artist who agrees to mentor Asher when asked to do so by the Rebbe. He warns Asher about how closely tied art is to Christianity, and about how life as an orthodox Jew is counterintuitive to life as an artist. Kahn has clearly undergone his own trials as an artist, including being saved from the Nazis as they marched into Paris.

Anna Schaeffer

Anne Schaeffer is a wealthy gallery owner and a close friend of Kahn. She encourages Asher as an artist, even though she is shocked by his appearance when she first meets him. She mounts a number of well-attended art shows on his behalf, and takes 30 percent of his sales as the gallery owner. Anna understands artists, and is protective of Kahn, who occasionally suffers from bouts of depression.

Uncle Yitzchov

Uncle Yitzchov, Aryeh's brother, provides Asher with a home when his parents are away and during the period of time that Aryeh and Rivkeh both live in Vienna. A jeweler, Yitzchov has the money to provide Asher with supplies, and even renovates his home to give Asher attic space for a bedroom and art studio. Yitzchov often mentions that he hopes to someday benefit from his relationship with Asher, but ultimately shuns him, along with everyone in the community, after the Brooklyn Crucifixion is revealed.

Sheindl Rackover

Mrs. Rackover is the Lev family's housekeeper when Asher is young. She also is a devout Jew, and is protective of Rivkeh when she becomes ill after her brother's death. Mrs. Rackover frequently scolds Asher for defying his father and for continuing in his quest to become an artist.

The Rebbe

As the leader of the Ladover sect, the Rebbe is little more than a legend to young Asher, whose father works for the Rebbe around the world. However, when Asher first meets the Rebbe, he is charmed by his encouragement and ecstatic that the Rebbe has enlisted Jacob Kahn to mentor him as an artist. The Rebbe ultimately comes to believe that Asher has crossed over to "the Other Side" when he depicts his mother in a crucifixion painting, and he asks Asher to leave the Ladover community.



Objects/Places

Crown Heights, Brooklyn

Crown Heights is the neighborhood in which Asher Lev and his family live for most of the novel, until Asher moves on as a young man.

Yudel Krinsky's Store

Yudel Krinsky, a Russian Jew who was exiled to Siberia for eleven years before Aryeh Lev arranged for his escape, owns a stationery store and befriends the young Asher. Asher spends much of his free time in the store, helping Krinsky with small tasks, questioning him about Russia and Stalin, and learning about the tools for making art. Asher buys all of his art supplies from Krinsky, and once steals tubes of oil paints from the store, which he then returns out of guilt.

Russia

Soviet Russia plays a central part in "My Name is Asher Lev", which is set in the 1950s, a time when Stalin persecuted Jews and forced them into "gulags," labor camps, many of them located in Siberia, one of the coldest and most inhospitable regions of the world. Aryeh Lev is devoted to improving the plight of Russian Jews, and works through intermediaries in Europe to rescue them. When Stalin dies, Asher sees a photo of the dead dictator in the New York Times and makes his own drawing of what he saw. Although Stalin's death is a hopeful sign for some, Yudel Krinsky warns Asher that there are many Stalins in Russia.

Florence, Rome and Paris

For Asher, traveling to Europe as a young man is critical to his development as an artist and signifies his most important break with his Brooklyn Hasidic community. He studies Michelangelo's Pieta and the David in Florence, the Sistine Chapel in Rome, and visits the place in Paris where Jacob Kahn and Picasso once lived together. It is in Paris where Asher conceives of the Brooklyn Crucifixion, a set of two abstract paintings of his mother standing at the family's living room window, hanging as if being crucified.

Venetian Blinds

The venetian blinds that hang in the family's living room become center stage in the novel, and symbolize many things. For one, Rivkeh spends much of her time worrying as she stands peering out of the blinds and waiting for either her son or her husband to arrive safely home. Because she lost her beloved brother in a car accident, Rivkeh



waits for her men and worries constantly when they're late. For Asher, the venetian blinds are often askew when he tries to open them to see his street as a young boy. In a way, the blinds imprison Asher behind the window of his faith. He also sees his father in front of the window, often late at night, praying or singing songs of faith. The venetian blinds ultimately become a symbol of Rivkeh's lifelong pain and suffering, and of her life caught between two warring men: her son and husband.

Themes

Hasidic Judaism

The Levs are Hasidic Jews who observe the Torah as the word of God, also referred to in the book as the Master of the Universe. Hasidic Jews pray often, before eating, in the morning, at night before sleep, and even before they wash their hands. Asher's father works on behalf of the Ladover Jews, opening yeshivas throughout Europe and working to rescue Jews being persecuted in Russia.

The book has numerous references to the Hasidim way of life, and Asher lives in a tightly knit community of Ladover Jews in Brooklyn, all ruled by the same Rebbe and all attending the same yeshiva for their schooling, where they study the Torah. For that reason, Asher's interest in art and his unwillingness to move to Vienna with his father and mother becomes an issue for many, including the Rebbe, the mashpia, and even his uncle and Yudel Krinsky. That also explains Asher's eventual banishment from the community, although he calls himself "an observant Jew" up until the end of the book.

Persecution of Jews

Persecution of Jews, particularly in Russia, is a predominant theme in the book and dominates much of Aryeh's life, and by association, the lives of Rivkeh and Asher. From the outset, the reader knows that Asher's frame of reference are his ancestors, about whom he had heard stories passed along by his father. Asher's legendary great-grandfathers have both had a major impact on improving the lives of Jews and Aryeh is working on behalf of the Rebbe to do the same.

During the time that his mother is ill, Asher experiences his father's job in the Ladover headquarters first hand. Here, he sees how hard his father works helping Ladover Jews, especially those being persecuted in other countries. He hears his father speaking Russian on the phone, and Aryeh tells him that "goyim" are hurting Jews in other parts of the world. Asher notes that his father "seemed more connected to the Jews in Russia than to the Jews of our own street."

Mrs. Rackover, the housekeeper, tells Asher that Siberia, where Yudel Krinsky spent eleven years in the gulag, is "a land of ice and darkness where the Russian government sends people it hates." She tells him that the Rebbe's father was sent to Siberia for three years and one of her cousins died there.

One summer, Aryeh arrives to the summer bungalow colony looking dazed. He tells Rivkeh, "They shot the writers," a reference to the 1952 "Night of the Murdered Poets," when Stalin orders the deaths of a number of Jewish intellectuals, including writers. Asher has heard about Stalin often enough that now just the name reminds him of "the demonic agent of the sitra achra. I felt cold hearing that name."



Art and Religion

The clash between Hasidic Judaism and the creation of art is a constant theme in “My Name is Asher Lev”. Asher is a born and gifted artist, and everyone is in agreement about that fact. Despite the fact that his father calls his drawing and painting “foolishness” throughout his childhood, Asher continues. His father’s adamant refusal to accept Asher as an artist continues until the Rebbe steps in and gives his blessing to Asher, asking Jacob Kahn, a renowned Jewish artist, to work with him.

Aryeh is most disturbed to learn that Asher has been copying famous works of Christ’s crucifixion. Aryeh criticizes his son for painting pictures of “that man,” noting that many Christians believe Jesus was killed by Jews. He argues with Rivkeh about it, alienates his son, and even questions the Rebbe’s decision to allow Asher to study with Kahn.

When Aryeh realizes that Asher has become a well-respected artist whose work has been purchased by collectors, and whose exhibitions are trumpeted by the press and the art world, he softens. But Asher’s depiction of his mother in the Brooklyn Crucifixion is the final straw for Aryeh and Asher is finally banished from his entire Hasidic community.

Kahn, for his part, is a non-practicing Jew who warns Asher that his creativity will not mesh with an orthodox life. Kahn also tries to teach Asher to leave his Jewish guilt and sentimentality out of his work.

Style

Point of View

Asher Lev tells the story in first person, so we see the world through his eyes. In the book's introduction, Lev explains that the book is a look back on his life and why he decided to create *The Brooklyn Crucifixion*.

Setting

Much of the early part of the book takes place in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, an Hasidic Jewish neighborhood and home to the international headquarters of the Ladover sect, where Asher's father works and where Asher attends the yeshiva. The book also takes the reader to Manhattan, Provincetown, Massachusetts, Rome, Paris, and Florence. The time period is 1943 through the 1970s, over the course of Asher's childhood and into his adult years.

Language and Meaning

In Book 1, much of what transpires is seen through Asher's young eyes or heard through his young ears. The most graphic example of this is when Rivkeh receives the devastating news of her brother's death. Asher is only six, so the events that transpire are frightening and confusing. He can hear his mother screaming, but can't see her. During the long period of her depression, Asher can only ask about her and can't understand her illness or her indifference. Asher also overhears her speaking to her dead brother often.

In Book 2, as Asher matures, his view of the world and the events taking place around him also mature. He is able to understand, even at a young age, that his parents often argue about him and his artwork. He also becomes keenly aware of the struggle between his religion and his obsession with making art. It is during this period that his father becomes an antagonist, disapproving of the one thing he loves to do.

Throughout the novel, Potok repeats familiar scenes. Asher is often "visited" in his dreams by his "mythic ancestor," his great-great-grandfather who became legendary in his work on behalf of the Ladover Hasidim. His visits are mostly frightening, representing the guilt that Asher feels about his "gift." Potok also repeats scenes in which Rivkeh, Aryeh, and Asher himself stand in front of their living room window, looking out on the world through venetian blinds.

Structure

The story is told in fourteen chapters and three “books.” Book 1 consists primarily of Asher’s life as a young boy, his resistance to moving to Vienna, and his father’s eventual departure for Europe. Book 2 marks the beginning of Asher’s life as an artist in the absence of his father. Book 3 is Asher’s emergence as an adult and as an artist, in which he must make some of the most difficult decisions of his life.



Quotes

I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years. (chapter 1)

To this day, I have no idea what happened then. There was a sensation of something tearing wide apart inside me and a steep quivering climb out of myself. I felt myself suddenly another person. I heard that other person screaming, shrieking, beating his fists against the top of the table. 'I can't stand it! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!' the other person kept screaming. (chapter 1)

The Rebbe killed my brother,' I heard my mother say, and it was as if the words came hurtling through the black face of the universe, searing words, demonic words, from the sitra achra, the Other Side, from the region of blackness that spawned the horror and evil and the stone hell that enclosed the light. (chapter 1)

I could feel lines and and points and planes. I could feel texture and color. I saw the Shabbos candles on the table glowing gold and red. I saw my mother small and warm and silken in a Shabbos dress of pale blue and white. I saw my hands white and bony, my fingers long and thin, my face in the mirror above the buffet, pale with black eyes and wild red hair. I felt myself flooded with the shapes and textures of the world around me. (chapter 4)

If You don't want me to use the gift, why did You give it to me? Or did it come to me from The Other Side? It was horrifying to think my gift may have been given to me by the source of evil and ugliness. How can evil and ugliness make a gift of beauty? (chapter 4)

I saw a folded piece of paper on the chair I had occupied earlier. I stopped and picked it up and unfolded it. It was a pencil drawing, a photographic likeness of my face made with an exquisite economy of line and without light and shade. The lower right-hand corner of the drawing contained a signature: Jacob Kahn. Below the signature was the date: 1-10-56. (chapter 7)

The world is a terrible place. I do not sculpt and paint to make the world sacred. I sculpt and paint to give permanence to my feelings about how terrible this world truly is. Nothing is real to me except my own feelings; nothing is true except my own feelings as I see them all around me in my sculptures and paintings. (chapter 9)

I sketched the faces of old men, wrinkled leathery faces, the faces of fishermen who knew intimately the kind of universe far from the street where I had grown up. Here on a street of Provincetown fishing families, I sketched people I had never known before but with whom I felt a strange kinship. (chapter 10)



He thinks you are wasting your life. He thinks you have betrayed him. It is not pleasant for a man like your father to see his son painting nudes and the other things you paint. It is for him at best a frivolity and at worst a desecration. (chapter 11)

But it would have made me a whore to leave it incomplete. It would have made it easier to leave future work incomplete. It would have made it more and more difficult to draw upon that additional aching surge of effort that is always the difference between integrity and deceit in a created work. I would not be the whore to my own existence. Can you understand that? I would not be the whore to my own existence. (chapter 13)

For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other's throats. (chapter 13)

He opened his mouth to speak. His lips were parched and his teeth were black. Do you hear the pain carried on the wind? It is the cry of wasted lives. Who dares add to that cry? Who dares drain the world of its light? My Asher, my precious Asher, will you and I walk together now through the centuries? (chapter 14)

I looked at my right hand, the hand with which I painted. There was power in that hand. Power to create and destroy. Power to bring pleasure and pain. Power to amuse and horrify. There was in that hand the demonic and the divine at one and the same time. (chapter 14)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Asher's "mythic ancestor," and what do his "visits" to Asher mean in the book?

Topic 2

Discuss the significance of the Levs' living room window and the venetian blinds? Which characters look out the window, and why? In what way does the window become symbolic at the end of the book?

Topic 3

What hints does the reader receive regarding the events of Jacob Kahn's past experiences as a Jewish artist?

Topic 4

Does Asher do the right thing or not by portraying his mother in a crucifixion painting? Discuss.

Topic 5

Aryeh's religious beliefs clash with his son's love of art. Explain why Aryeh reacts the way he does, and how his reaction impacts his relationship with Asher.

Topic 6

What role does the Rebbe play in Asher's life?