

The Promise Study Guide

The Promise by Chaim Potok

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Plot Summary

Chaim Potok wrote *The Promise* in 1969 as a sequel to his previous novel *The Chosen*. The two main characters of the previous novel are Reuven Malter, an Orthodox Jew in the process of becoming a rabbi and his childhood friend Daniel Saunders, a Hasidic Jew who broke tradition by becoming a psychologist rather than following in his father's footsteps as a Rebbe. *The Promise* expands on this relationship and introduces others, all against the backdrop of a flood of Orthodox Jews coming to America after World War II to rebuild their lives.

There are two major conflicts within *The Promise*. First, Reuven finds himself torn between two worlds, a modern world and that of his traditional religion. His studies in school are pushing him towards orthodoxy. He has an incredibly rigid, fundamentalist teacher named Rav Jacob Kalman, who survived the Holocaust and now teaches Talmud at Hirsch University.

Kalman is incredibly orthodox and is highly suspicious of Reuven's father's method of historical criticism of the Talmud. He is far more suspicious and even openly hostile to Professor Abraham Gordon, a liberal professor of Judaism famous for his attempts to reconcile modern Jewish theology with modernity. Reuven finds himself trapped between two worlds as a result.

The second conflict occurs within the heart of Michael Gordon, the son of Abraham and Ruth Gordon and the nephew of Rachel Gordon, Reuven and Danny's love interest. Michael is fourteen years old, precocious, and very disturbed. He breaks out into fits of rage for no apparent reason. Michael hates orthodox Jews for their fierce criticism of his father and eventually must be checked into treatment, and for a long time he does very poorly there. Danny is his psychologist who works night and day to find a way to resolve Michael's internal turmoil.

The Promise is divided into three books, each of which mark out a major stage in both Reuven and Michael's conflicts, which appear to mirror one another. In Book One, both characters (along with all the others) are introduced. Their conflicts are revealed and the book ends with Reuven trapped between two worlds and Michael entering treatment at Danny's mental facility.

Book Two is a long and steady examination of the nature of both conflicts and expands upon the tension within both Reuven and Michael. Reuven is increasingly pressured to choose between his traditional faith and modernity. Michael is increasingly defiant in his treatment, and his behavior continues to baffle his family, Reuven and Danny. Reuven's encounters with Rav Kalman grow increasingly strained and Reuven struggles over what decision he will make.

In Book Three, the conflicts are both resolved. In the case of Reuven, he eventually decides to receive smicha from his university and become a rabbi, but he asserts his right to use his father's historical critical methods. In this way, he embraces his tradition



while reserving the right to criticize it, thus refusing to have a choice between the two worlds forced upon him.

Michael's conflict is also resolved when he realizes that he hates his father and mother for forcing him to withstand the criticisms that his father endures for his work. Reuven also realizes that he resents everyone who forced him to choose between his two worlds because they did so thinking only of themselves. In the end, both Michael and Reuven assert their individuality, which has been repressed by the choices their families impose upon them.



Introduction

Introduction Summary

In the first three pages, the narrator, as of yet unnamed, introduces the reader to his small Jewish neighborhood in the Jewish section of Brooklyn. It had been inhabited by a few Hasidic sects. But by 1950, the population had exploded, because Jews were migrating from lands where they were persecuted. The community began to rebuild and new institutions of education were created. The narrator decided to go into rabbinical school; he grew up among orthodox Jewish believers and his father was writing a book on the Talmud.

However, in the spring of the next year, the narrator met Rachel Gordon at a party. Rachel was the niece of Professor Abraham Gordon, who taught Jewish philosophy and was hated by the orthodoxy. However, they still began to date and were able to spend the summer of 1951 together in Peekskill, a small town thirty miles from New York. During this time, the narrator meet Rachel's cousin Michael, a sad, precocious young boy.

Introduction Analysis

This brief introduction sets the stage for the story as a whole. The narrator, a main character, is a Hasidic Jew and has grown up an orthodox Jewish believer. He is surrounded by other Hasidic Jews and his father was a rabbi. However, he begins to date the niece of an unorthodox teacher of Jewish philosophy, Rachel Gordon. They are able to spend the summer of 1951 together, and the narrator meets Rachel's cousin Michael. Thus the setting of the book and three of the main characters have been introduced.



Book One, Chapter One

Book One, Chapter One Summary

In Chapter One, Reuven (the narrator), Rachel and Michael find themselves at a fair during an outing. For whatever reason, Reuven and Rachel cannot decide whether they want to stay at the fair or leave, and they end up bickering about it at length. This creates a certain tension between them. However, Michael wants to stick around and play some games. During a roller coaster ride, Michael stands up in his seat. Reuven and Rachel become frantic and try to get him to step down. Michael refuses until he gets a nosebleed. Reuven and Rachel then have to help him stop the nosebleed.

After the roller coaster ride, Reuven, Rachel and Michael go to a dice game table at the fair. At first, a middle-aged man tends to the booth. Michael plays, increasingly betting more money. However, he continually wins. In the game, as winnings increase, the price of betting increases. The goal of the game is to win a large sum of money back along with the radio. As Michael bets more money, Rachel and Reuven get nervous because Michael could lose the money at any time. However, he continues to bet.

Rachel starts to protest that Michael should stop gambling, but Michael refuses, betting and betting until all of his money is gone. His money is not lost, however; he merely has to win another throw to get the points he needs to win the money. The tension between the three of them is quite high until the booth attendants father comes along.

The elder man, it turns out, is quite friendly to them. He is also Jewish, having emigrated from Russia. He also survived the pogroms against the Jews there. The tension is resolved during this conversation and Michael decides to keep playing with money lent to him by Reuven. He throws the final throw and gets enough points to win the trophy, but the elder man deliberately miscounts the dice throw so he doesn't have to pay up. Michael becomes livid and furious, and Reuven argues with the man. Eventually, Michael has a break down and the elder man forces them to leave. Despite winning, they lost a large sum of money.

On the drive home, Michael gets another nosebleed. The three of them are depressed. When they reach home, Rachel's aunt and uncle, the Gordons, tend to their son Michael. Professor Gordon is furious and the family is disappointed with Rachel because she let Michael gamble and did not stop him.

After Michael cleans up, he runs out under the stars. He comments to Reuven on the vast size of the universe and displays quite a bit of knowledge of astronomy. He then wonders why God made one hundred billion galaxies and says that God is "smoke" and that he can prove it. He then notes that he can't get God out of his head. Reuven and the others who find Michael are upset and go inside. Then Reuven leaves alone for home.



Book One, Chapter One Analysis

The first chapter reveals quite a bit about the three main characters, Reuven, the narrator, Rachel, his girlfriend, and Rachel's cousin Michael. Michael is very smart but also unruly. He doesn't acknowledge Rachel's authority when they are out together and refuses to obey Reuven and Rachel's wishes on various occasions. It is also clear that he is an emotional boy, particularly given how upset he gets when the elder man refuses to let him have the radio.

The reader should also notice tension between Rachel and Reuven. Neither is sure of their authority over Michael. Often Rachel tries to make a decision for what Michael should do, but she cannot enforce her demands. She then looks to Reuven for help, but he is not authoritative either. It is also clear that all three can become quite anxious, and in fact, the chapter is littered with anxiety.

When Michael reaches home, he makes a theological observation that God is "smoke" and that he can prove it. He also admits that he cannot get God out of his mind. This indicates that Michael has some sort of theological dilemma with which he is struggling.



Book One, Chapter Two

Book One, Chapter Two Summary

The next day Reuven decides to go sailing at the beach. He asks Michael if Michael would like to come with him, and Michael agrees. Reuven decides to teach Michael how to sail. When they reach the beach, Reuven takes a small little boat, a Sailfish, out into the water with Michael on it. They sail for awhile, and Reuven helps Michael learn the ropes and how to turn. For awhile they drift and watch the sun and the sea in a tranquil mood.

Then Michael and Reuven begin to have a conversation. First they talk about Michael's nosebleeds, which he apparently gets frequently. However, the nosebleeds aren't due to exertion. Michael got them the previous night at the carnival but not from exerting himself sailing. But Michael doesn't want to talk about it, save to say that the nosebleeds may occur because he's under weight.

The two watch the clouds and talk about what shapes they look like. Michael sees images from the previous night, such as the face of the old man. This leads to a conversation about the old man and losing the money. Michael feels bad and has blacked out the time between his breakdown and arriving at home. He comments that the old man is vile and reminds him of orthodox Jews with whom he goes to school.

While Michael and his family are observant, Michael's father is often slandered by a rabbi named Rav Kalman, who is a teacher of Reuven's. Michael comments that he hates orthodox Jews (except for Reuven) because they are fanatics and hypocrites and threaten the stability of the Jewish community. It is clear that he resents them for what happened to his father.

Finally Michael goes into a long soliloquy about how men who fearlessly preach the truth are always persecuted, such as Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake for preaching that the stars were suns. He clearly sees something of his father and himself in this idea. He then comments that he regrets not being able to fight back over being cheated. After Michael returns home, Reuven sails alone.

Book One, Chapter Two Analysis

Chapter 2 is mostly a conversation between Michael and Reuven. Michael proves himself to be an odd but intelligent child once more. Apparently his nosebleeds are signs of stress rather than exertion or being underweight; at least this appears to be implied in the story. Further, it turns out that the reason Michael raged at the old man at the booth the previous night is because he reminded Michael of the vile orthodox rabbi who slanders his father.



It turns out, however, that the rabbi, Rav Kalman, is a teacher of Reuven's. Michael explains that he hates orthodox Jews and thinks they stop people from speaking the truth as they see it. Michael is clearly a serious and stressed child who has a dilemma. On the one hand, his family is religious; on the other, the extremely religious people he goes to school with disgust him.



Book One, Chapter Three

Book One, Chapter Three Summary

In Chapter Three, Reuven calls Rachel the day after he and Michael go sailing. It is Shabbat and Professor Gordon and his wife have just arrived home from a trip. Rachel says that it isn't a good day to visit. But Reuven still talks to Professor Gordon on the phone and arranges to meet with him. Abraham Gordon and David Malter (Reuven's father) are friends; although Gordon, it turns out, is a very liberal Jewish rabbi. But Reuven is still interested in him.

Professor Gordon and his family want to meet with Reuven's best friend Danny. They have arranged a meeting, but Danny had to delay because of an emergency with one of his boys.

In a flashback, Reuven is in January 1950. Reuven has become dissatisfied with the new rabbi teacher of his, Rabbi Rav Kalman, who is very orthodox, had come from a concentration camp and is very ideological. Reuven's distaste for Kalman leads him to read Abraham Gordon's books. Gordon advocates the opposite ideas of Kalman; he rejects a literal reading of the Talmud, accepts evolution instead of creationism, rejects the idea of revelation, and sees God as merely an ideal to follow.

Reuven decides he wanted to meet Gordon and goes to visit his friend Danny, who is studying at Columbia to get his PhD in psychology. He is still partially observant and very much impressed the members of his department. Danny seems to be socially awkward to an unusual degree. However, he still knows of an opportunity to meet with a member of Gordons' family, Rachel Gordon.

Two weeks later, Reuven meets Rachel and they start to spend time together. Reuven learns much about Gordon's views from her; he is apparently quite prominent. Reuven also hears of Michael for the first time and is very intrigued by him. Apparently, the family is having trouble with him and wants to talk to Danny about them.

Book One, Chapter Three Analysis

This chapter provides the background to how Reuven came to meet Rachel. He had a bad reaction to his new ideological teacher at seminary, Rav Kalman. This led him to read the books of a man with the exact opposite opinions, Abraham Gordon. Reuven then describes the events by which he came to know Professor Gordon. Reuven visited his friend Danny at Columbia, who told him about an opportunity to meet Rachel Gordon. Reuven and Rachel hit it off and Reuven used this connection to get to know Professor Gordon. He also learned of Michael and became interested in learning more about him.



In this chapter, the reader learns more about the connections between Reuven and the Gordons. Reuven had sought out both Rachel and her father because of his own theological issues. He also became interested in Micheal, for reasons that are, as of yet, unclear. Both Michael and Reuven appear to be embroiled in internal theological struggles.



Book One, Chapter Four

Book One, Chapter Four Summary

Chapter Four opens with Professor Abraham Gordon arriving at Reuven's home. Reuven feels overwhelmed. Gordon is exhausted from his worldwide travels but he and David, Reuven's father, have a long, scholarly conversation anyway. After a time, Professor Gordon turns to Reuven and asks him about the fair and Michael's tantrum. Reuven tells him about their conversation on the sailboat. Gordon responds that Michael does not like to talk about himself and has been to three therapists in the last fourteen months, to no avail.

Gordon claims that Michael is sick and wants to know how to get through to Michael. He asks Reuven to bring his friend Daniel Saunders over to their house as a mitzvah. Reuven agrees and the conversation winds down. Professor Gordon invites Reuven over with his sailboat to sail with him and Michael. After lunch, Reuven rents a boat and sails over to their home. When he arrives, he makes small talk with the family for awhile. They sail for two hours and Michael and Reuven talk some.

After sailing, Reuven and the Gordons sit talking in the living room. Rachel is not there but comes later. Rachel and Reuven walk down to the boat some time later. Rachel mentions that her aunt is around to take care of Professor Gordon, who had had a heart attack and needs someone to type of his manuscripts, and Michael.

The next day Danny arrives, seeming tired. He had had an emergency with a schizophrenic boy. Reuven calls Rachel to come over to see Danny, but it will be awhile. When Rachel comes, they take Danny to the Gordons', and Danny speaks to them privately and to Professor Gordon for three hours. Danny thinks he was able to help. The Gordons want to place Michael in the treatment center and Danny notes that he is quite mentally ill.

Danny and Reuven then talk to Reuven's father. Danny strongly disagrees with Gordon's theology. David is impressed that Gordon has a theology where Jews can fail to believe but remain observant. It then comes up that Danny was called on by Professor Gordon because he was known to have been raised by his father with a barrier of silence - they only spoke when they studied Talmud. This was to teach Danny suffering.

A while later Michael is taken up to the treatment center; Reuven is able to talk to Michael on the phone and they have a nice conversation. Michael's parents then bring him home. Rachel calls him and wants him to come over to keep her company. They spend the afternoon together. That Friday Reuven would return to seminary and Monday he returns to class. He would see Rachel each day in September and Michael would have trouble entering treatment. Danny had to intervene and promise to spend



time with Michael to get him to comply. Michael enters treatment in the second week of October.

Book One, Chapter Four Analysis

Chapter 4 features three major events, all of which help to uncover the plot of the story. First, Reuven meets Professor Gordon and observes his father and Gordon having a conversation. Reuven is brought into the discussion when it turns to Michael. Gordon is shocked that Michael will open up to Reuven. He also asks Reuven to send over his friend Danny when he arrives the next day.

The second major event comes when Danny arrives and visits with Professor Gordon for several hours. He offers to bring Michael into treatment. It turns out that Michael has been very sick, becoming increasingly mentally unstable. It becomes clear during this event that Danny disapproves of Gordon's unorthodox theology despite respecting him.

The third event occurs when the Gordons try to take Michael in for treatment. He resists forcefully and violently, refusing to acknowledge that he is "crazy." Ultimately, Danny has to promise to spend time with Michael directly at the treatment center for Michael to willingly go into treatment.

From these events, it is clear that two major themes will continue to suffuse the book: Professor Gordon's theological heterodoxy and Michael's mental illness.



Book Two, Chapter Five

Book Two, Chapter Five Summary

Weeks pass between October and December. Reuven sees Rachel only a little and Michael not at all. He settles into a steady rhythm of seminary and philosophy classes. He sees Danny briefly and hears that Michael is doing as well as expected. He sees Rachel, who asks him about the Kotzker Rebbe. Reuven asks his father about Kotzker, who it turns out is an eccentric rabbi who has shut himself up in a room for twenty years and has disagreements with many Hasidic sects.

During this time, Reuven's father finishes his manuscript and Reuven runs into Professor Gordon at the Zechariah Frankel Library, looking over a negative review of his work in the Orthodox profess. Reuven hears little about Michael.

Book Two, Chapter Five Analysis

Chapter Five opens Book Two and it transitions between the time period of Book One and Two. Book One occurs in the summer and before of 1951, whereas Chapter Five transitions through the autumn to early December.



Book Two, Chapter Six

Book Two, Chapter Six Summary

In the first part of Chapter Six, Reuven finds himself in class with Rav Kalman. Kalman is the intensely orthodox teacher at the Hasidic seminary. Reuven notes many rumors surrounded Kalman, such as that he watched his family shot during World War II, that he had been in a concentration camp and escaped, etc. He is a very harsh man and a very ideological and heavy-handed teacher.

After class, Kalman calls Reuven up to talk to him and asks him whether he was associating with Professor Gordon at the Frankel library. Reuven said he had spoken with him, and Kalman reminded him that Gordon had been excommunicated and demands that Reuven respect the excommunication by dissociating from Gordon. Reuven protests but eventually leaves without argument.

A friend tells him that rumors about him are circulating that he is going to apply the Gordons' much more liberal seminary. But Reuven maintains he had only visited the more liberal library to help his father's research. Reuven is furious about Kalman and the rumors and talks to his father about it. His father is upset by the news. The next few days, during class, Kalman picks on Reuven by having him read Gemora aloud and critiques his interpretations. Reuven is angry and after class tells the other students that he is not leaving the seminary.

In the second part of the chapter, Reuven is studying late at night when Michael calls him from the treatment center and wants to see him. The conversation is odd and Michael makes Reuven promise not to tell anyone about it. Michael's father overhears and tells him to immediately call Danny. After some time, Danny picks up and Michael relates the phone conversation. Danny wants to see him; apparently, Michael is not doing well.

The next day Rav Kalman calls on Reuven to read again, and this time Reuven argues with him at length about a passage. Afterwards, Reuven is so angry he goes directly to the library to check out some books by Kalman. On the subway ride that night to Danny's, Reuven reads Kalman's book on ethics.

Book Two, Chapter Six Analysis

Chapter Six concerns the growing tension between Reuven and Rav Kalman. Kalman is an extremely orthodox Hasidic Jew, whose interpretations of Talmud are not influenced by modern readings at all. However, he also takes strong positions on disputes on even pre-modern matters of disagreement. He starts to pick on Reuven in part because Reuven is thought to be associating with the "heretical" Professor Gordon, and Reuven deeply resents the treatment. Something appears to be building between the two men.

In the middle of the chapter, Michael calls Reuven and wants to see him. Reuven calls Danny to talk to him about it. Apparently Michael is not well. The day after the call, Reuven checks out several books by Kalman and reads one on the way to see Danny.



Book Two, Chapter Seven

Book Two, Chapter Seven Summary

Reuven travels to see Danny, who has asked him to visit to chat about Michael. Most of the chapter consists of their conversation. It begins with light small talk and kosher coffee. They discuss the books on Danny's bookshelf. As the conversation moves forward, it becomes clear that during the last several weeks as Reuven has seen Rachel less, Danny has been seeing her more. Things have gotten serious between Danny and Rachel, but the two keep things civil. Reuven says he has no right to be angry and he maintains that there was "nothing there" between him and Rachel.

They then start speaking about Michael. Reuven will be able to visit him. Apparently, Michael is refusing to cooperate in therapy and will try anything. Michael has gotten into fist fights with the other kids, and has sex fantasies about Rachel. Michael had burned a copy of the Tanach his father gave him and one day had escaped into town. A month or two is left in treatment; if he continues to resist, he will have to be institutionalized.

They then discuss Reuven's trouble with Rav Kalman and then they talk about a rabbi, Nota Finkel, who quashed a secularist revolt in the Slobodka Yeshiva by excommunicating radical students and converting the others. He was a conservative revolutionary, and Rav Kalman wrote about him. He may have been involved. Apparently, Kalman sees himself as another Nota Kinkel. Reuven then maintains that the Hasid are at war with secularism, that it surrounds them, and that if they remain locked in a "mental ghetto", they will lose. Then the conversation trails off and Reuven leaves.

Book Two, Chapter Seven Analysis

Reuven's visit with Danny seems subdued but reveals several important events. First, Rachel and Reuven's relationship has more or less ended and Danny is now dating Rachel seriously. Both men are conservative, and it is odd for either of them to be dating the niece of Professor Gordon. There is some tension, but Reuven says that he has no right to be angry.

They also discuss Michael, whose condition is rapidly worsening. Reuven will be allowed to see him and they give him a month or two to help Michael, or Michael will have to be institutionalized. The discussion then turns to Rav Kalman and how he sees himself as trying to preserve Jewish theological orthodoxy. Reuven agrees with Kalman that the faith must be preserved, but he sees Kalman's approach as mentally narrow and leading to defeat in the fight against secularism.

Again, the personal conflicts in the book and the theological conflict both raise their heads.



Book Two, Chapter Eight

Book Two, Chapter Eight Summary

In the first part of Chapter Eight, the story is focused in on in Rav Kalman's Torah class. Kalman is finished picking on Reuven and has turned to another student, Abe Greenfield. Greenfield is something of a genius in mathematics and is pursuing a mathematics PhD at MIT. He had a major math final that day and had not come to class prepared. He is unusually quiet but had been prepared for class every day for the past year and a half.

But Kalman discovers Abe is unprepared. Abe is shaking, and Kalman asks him why he isn't prepared. He says he had a math exam, and Kalman attacks him for choosing math over studying the Torah. Abe eventually loses his temper and demands that Kalman apologize for shaming him in class. Kalman refuses, and Abe storms out of the class. On Kalman's request, Reuven goes after him and brings him back in. Abe has to stay behind and apologize for twenty minutes. When he gets out, he tells the other students waiting for him that he is still in the class, and then they argue about whether Kalman was a jerk.

When Reuven returns home, Danny calls again and asks him to return to see Michael. Michael had spoken about him to Danny for some time.

The next day Kalman apologizes to Abe; he maintains that Abe should have been prepared but admits he went too far. He says he wants to impress upon the class the importance of choosing Torah over all else. Kalman says that he could only give his approval to students who put it above all else because he had had one of the greatest teachers of Torah in the world, and since his teacher had been killed, as had all his European students, his approval is the lone approval of an entire great line of Torah commentators. The class is surprised.

Reuven's father receives copies of his book. His father is happy, and even he becomes even happier to find only one typographical error. Reuven is deeply impressed by his father's scholarship. Danny calls again and wants Reuven to see Michael again. Michael had talked about Reuven again for some time. Later, Reuven reports Danny and Rachel's relationship to his father, who is surprised.

Book Two, Chapter Eight Analysis

Chapter Eight focuses mostly on Rav Kalman. Kalman pushes a quiet and studious student, Abe Greenfield, over the edge in class. Greenfield was not prepared for class but had a perfectly understandable excuse. But Kalman said that Greenfield should have been prepared in any event.



Surprisingly, on the next day, Kalman apologizes to Greenfield in front of the class for stepping over the line. He claimed that he went too far because he wanted to impress upon his students the importance of putting Torah first. He then recounted the fact that his European students had been killed and that he wanted his American students to be the best they could be. He also wanted to honor his teacher and the tradition he was taught in.

At the end of the chapter, Danny asks Reuven to come see Michael again; apparently, his visits are helping him. Again, the twin themes of Michael's illness and theological orthodoxy arise.



Book Two, Chapter Nine

Book Two, Chapter Nine Summary

The chapter begins with Reuven in another of Rav Kalman's classes. After class, Kalman asks Reuven to stay behind. He has been trying to read Reuven's father's new book and has some trouble with the English and the Greek in the book. Reuven carefully takes him through the book. It turns out that Reuven's father and Kalman use different interpretative methods. David Malter believes he has the authority to re-interpret words based on his best understanding of scribal errors, but Kalman believes that only the great commentators of old had the authority to do this.

Throughout their conversation, Kalman exclaims that he does not know what to do with Reuven. Reuven is clearly a good student but he seems to Kalman to be wavering between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. He demands that Reuven find himself and make his decision before Kalman can give him his *smicha*, or scholarly approval.

Next Reuven visits Michael. Michael is overjoyed to see him and they go into his room to talk. Afterwards, they go outside. They first discuss Rav Kalman's article. Michael comments that it shows how vicious Kalman and the others are. He resents the orthodoxy for being critical of his father, because he sees his father as exhausting himself to "save religion." He then begins to ask Reuven why he can't leave, but Reuven does not tell him. This frustrates Michael. Then Michael's parents come and they all talk. Reuven promises to visit again and the Gordons invite Michael to dinner.

Finally, Reuven goes home. He tells his father of the encounter with Kalman. His father is frustrated, feeling as if the more orthodox among them are driving away their finest minds. Then Reuven goes for a walk, realizing that the decay of religious belief is causing the orthodox to harden in reaction in order to preserve the "spark" of true religion. He is caught between two methods of saving religion, one through entrenched loyalty to tradition, the other through engaging modernity and letting it affect tradition.

Book Two, Chapter Nine Analysis

Chapter Nine has a constant theme of balance between engaging with modernity and holding to traditional religion. When Reuven discusses his father's book with Rav Kalman, he finds that Kalman is moderately critical of his father's methods. This makes Reuven uncomfortable, but then Kalman makes things even harder when he tells Reuven that he must decide which theological camp he belongs to before he can graduate from seminary.

When Reuven visits Michael, Michael reads Kalman's article on his father and tries to get Reuven to see how vicious Kalman is. Michael sees his father as trying to save religion from disappearing. In this way, Professor Gordon and Rav Kalman have a similarity: both in their own way are trying to preserve the faith that they value. Kalman



hardens in his loyalty to tradition and forces students to choose sides so that those who remain will be theologically pure. Gordon engages modernity and allows theological orthodoxy to unravel in order to keep religion from losing all of its adherents.

But now Reuven, and to a lesser extent his father, finds himself stuck between these two methods of fighting secularism, of saving the faith that he values.



Book Two, Chapter Ten

Book Two, Chapter Ten Summary

Reuven continues to explain his father's book to Rav Kalman, day after day. The book includes various discussions. Reuven informs his father of the discussions, and while David is frustrated and saddened, he claims that he is consoled by the fact that Rav Kalman is at least acting out of love for the Torah. David knows the attacks will continue to come. Reuven expresses distaste for Kalman, but his father encourages him to show respect.

On that Friday, Reuven travels to see Danny and brings him a copy of his father's book. They begin with small talk and transition to discuss Michael. Michael still refuses to speak about himself, but Danny wants him to keep coming. He talks only about Reuven, but at least he is talking. Danny tells Reuven that Kalman has written a review of his father's book and that it has already been published. Kalman's review is fair but very critical. Reuven is furious because he feels used by Kalman against his own father.

Before Reuven leaves, he asks Danny about the Kotzker Rebbe and solitude. Danny says that it is an idea for Michael but refuses to say more. Reuven is frustrated. He then goes to see Reuven's father, due to an invitation. Danny's father, Reb Saunders, suspects that he is involved with Rachel Gordon and Reuven is compelled to confirm it. His father is concerned but is happy to know that the Gordons at least obey the commandments. He also tells Reuven that he will not criticize his father's book but that the attacks have only begun. Reuven then storms back to Danny and tells him that he told his father about Rachel and then storms off.

When Danny gets home, he shows his father the article. His father is again saddened, but he expected the criticism. He is frustrated and also realizes the attacks will continue.

Book Two, Chapter Ten Analysis

Tensions flare in this book as two of Michael's relationships become strained. First, just as Reuven was getting along with Rav Kalman, he discovers that Kalman has used him to understand his father's book so that he could write an extremely critical review of it. Reuven is infuriated and desperately wants to leave Kalman's class and no longer be under his influence.

He also develops further tension with Danny. It is clear that he is still jealous that Danny is dating Rachel and is angered when Danny refuses to tell him what his interest is in the Kotzker Rebbe. They continue to discuss Michael, but otherwise their friendship seems to be decaying.

Reuven feels increasingly bad for his father. He sees his father's scholarship as that of a great man and cannot understand why men like Rav Kalman attack him, but his father urges patience and goodwill. Reuven seems increasingly pushed from orthodoxy.



Book Two, Chapter Eleven

Book Two, Chapter Eleven Summary

Chapter Eleven opens with Reuven in class with Rav Kalman, but their encounter is brief. Kalman says nothing to Reuven and Reuven feels hatred for him. Then he leaves to see Michael. Danny had given Michael the article Kalman wrote about Reuven's father's book. Michael comments to Reuven that he should be able to see how vicious and evil Kalman is now, but Reuven resists this description.

Michael then begins to talk about the stars, about red giants and white dwarfs. Reuven then says that he is cold and wants to go inside. Michael continues to talk about telescopes and stars. Then Michael walks off into the trees in the pagoda, pulls out matches and lights some leaves on fire. Reuven catches him and makes him stop but is cut in the process. Michael is screaming and kicking and has to be subdued. This gets the attention of the treatment center staff. Michael is taken away and Reuven explains the situation first to Mary, a therapist, and then to Danny.

Danny takes Reuven to Michael's room. Michael is okay but has had an awful breakdown. He is in bed pretending to be asleep, but when Danny tells him Reuven was there, he starts to talk and apologizes for sneaking the matches. He says he had them to light a fire to keep Reuven warm. He then begins to talk about using the matches for another purpose, to burn off red and white paint in the pagoda because he feels like a "toilet" and sees everything around him as dirty. He then begins to talk obsessively about many things being dirty. Eventually, Reuven and Danny leave Michael after Reuven promises to come back.

Danny and Reuven go to Danny's office to talk about Michael. Danny gives Michael the article to connect him emotionally with Reuven, and he believes that Michael is fixated on feeling dirty and needs purity because he feels emotionally isolated. Whenever the isolation is threatened, he erupts. Danny then begins to talk about the Kotzker Rebbe and his isolation.

Danny believes that everyone hates being alone and thinks that they can break Michael's isolation if they deliberately isolate him until he begs to talk with someone. But the experiment is new and Danny needs Reuven to convince Michael's parents. There is some literature on the experiment, but Reuven is hesitant. He says that he will consider it. Then Reuven leaves and the Gordons come in to hear about the incident.

Book Two, Chapter Eleven Analysis

Chapter Eleven builds towards the climax of the book. The conflict with Kalman wanes somewhat, but the difficulties with Michael flare up. While visiting Michael, Reuven has to forcibly restrain him from starting and fanning a fire. Michael's conversation with



Reuven seems to have led him to erupt into erratic behavior. Unfortunately, this incident has brought Michael one step closer to institutionalization.

The reader comes to see Michael's obsession with feeling dirty and his deliberate emotional isolation. Danny then explains his radical idea to deliberately isolate Michael to Reuven. The idea is to break Michael into coming out of his shell to reveal what his pain is all about. Reuven is skeptical of the idea but understands that it might be Michael's only hope.



Book Two, Chapter Twelve

Book Two, Chapter Twelve Summary

In Chapter Twelve, Danny and Michael discuss the treatment center's re-evaluation of Michael's situation given the previous night's incident. Reuven also notices that his father seems sick and depressed and Rav Kalman calm and subdued.

Abraham Gordon calls and asks Reuven to visit him at his seminary. They discuss Danny's proposed treatment for Michael. The teachers there love Reuven's father's new book and all are disgusted with Rav Kalman's attacks. But Professor Gordon wants to know Reuven's opinion of Danny's treatment. Reuven seems in line with everyone else, recommending the treatment.

Reuven reads the second part of Rav Kalman's article attacking his father. The argument, in brief, is that David Malter's method claims that there are errors in the transcriptions of the Talmud both unravels and destroys the Talmud's authority and accordingly the root of all religion; as a result, Malter's methods are dangerous. Reuven is furious.

Reuven realizes that Danny's attempts to treat Michael are really attempts to vindicate his own choice of career and to justify his disappointing his father by becoming a psychologist. Michael's recovery would show that he made the right choice.

Reuven and his father discuss David's anger and worsening condition. Apparently, Rav Kalman's article has upset the orthodox immigrant faculty where he works and the faculty is now divided about David's book and whether it should be published. David refuses to back down, and while he cannot lose his job, the orthodox will make his life miserable in any event.

Danny calls Reuven later in the same day and wants him to come to see Michael. Michael had organized a group of boys to take knives from the cafeteria and try to break free from the treatment center. Michael had discovered that Rachel and Danny were involved and he had become enraged and convinced that Danny was trying to take everyone he cared about away from him. Danny was called in, on Shabbat no less, to disarm Michael and is eventually successful.

The Gordons and Reuven are called in and they decide to go ahead with Michael's treatment. During this conversation, Reuven observes the deep love growing between Danny and Rachel; he and Danny also realize that Michael's pain may be caused by the fact that he hates his father and is afraid to talk to adults. Reuven also realizes that he is stuck between Kalman's world and Gordon's world and that if he were forced to choose, he would go with Gordon.



Rav Kalman asks Reuven to talk to him about the tension between them. Reuven defers to a later time. Danny and the child-care workers begin to implement Michael's treatment.

Book Two, Chapter Twelve Analysis

Many chapters keep the major story lines in the book separated, but this last chapter of Book Two weaves them together. The conflict with Rav Kalman is coming to a head. Reuven has read the second part of Kalman's article and is furious. Kalman's article is making trouble for his father and his father's new book because Kalman's review has divided the faculty.

During the chapter, Reuven realizes that if Kalman is right and he has to choose between Gordon and Kalman, Reuven would choose Gordon. However, he is not yet convinced that he has to choose, and in fact, he notices that Danny has avoided making such a choice.

Michael's conflict also reaches a breaking point. Michael discovers that Rachel and Danny are involved and he breaks. He organizes some boys to violently escape from the treatment center. Danny blames himself because he sees Michael's treatment as his chance to vindicate to his father his choice of profession. Michael's new treatment must begin and this signals the end of Book two.

Everything in life is a gamble, Gordon says. And this marks out the end of Book Two: Michael's treatment is a gamble and so is Reuven's choice to follow Kalman, Gordon or live in between them. Kalman is forcing Reuven to make a choice, and Michael will be forced to make a choice as well. Further, it becomes clear that Michael's problem is that he hates his father and this may signal a bridge between the two themes.



Book Three, Thirteen

Book Three, Thirteen Summary

Chapter Thirteen occurs in a series of brief passages. In the first, Reuven notes that Kalman wrote nothing more about his father's book, but that Kalman and Rav Gershenson had a major argument that was the talk of the seminary. In the second passage, the Dean asks Reuven if he will take the smicha examination, and Reuven says that he will. In the third passage, David's book is published and it only adds to the quarrel within his school.

The fourth passage consists in a double date between Rachel and Danny on the one hand and a friend of Rachel's, Eileen Farber, and Reuven on the other. They see *Death of a Salesman* and Danny and Rachel begin to discuss it. Danny observes that the play shows that, at least for many people, they must decide between whether they will stay within their communities and reshape them or strike out on their own.

Danny and Reuven then are left alone and discuss Michael's treatment. It is going as planned, with Michael becoming increasingly angry until he reveals what his anger is about. He is to be deprived of any means of channeling his rage save to express it directly. The next passage consists in a conversation between Rachel and Reuven about whether Rachel can marry Danny without committing to the odd, silent mode of upbringing that Danny was forced into. Reuven assures her that this will not be a problem.

The next passage consists of a meeting between Reuven and Abraham and Ruth Gordon. Abraham shows Reuven his scrapbook of hate, which contains all the criticisms of his work. Gordon explains that he disengaged from his religious tradition early in life, but while he abandoned the theology, he could not abandon the ritual. It became his life's goal to create a theology to sustain the rituals, a theology that no intelligent person could laugh at.

In the following passage, Abraham, Ruth and Reuven discuss Rav Kalman and Abraham notes that his orthodoxy is fed by his horrific experience during the Holocaust, which makes it more understandable. The subsequent passage reports that David Malter may be leaving his embattled Yeshiva. Hirsch, where Kalman teaches, is probably going to offer him a position and Reuven is overjoyed.

Reuven meets with Rav Kalman and Kalman notes that he has been seeing Gordon again. Reuven tells him that he can break the cherem for medical reasons that he cannot explain. Danny shows up and has a positive argument with Kalman about whether the Talmud can justify breaking excommunication in such cases. Danny wins the argument, pleasing Kalman enormously. After they leave, Danny tells Reuven that he can have the same effect on Kalman if he stops using his counterarguments as weapons. Apparently, Michael's treatment is forcing him closer to the breaking point.



The next two passages are brief, the first of which David defends Kalman's orthodoxy to Reuven on the grounds of his experience in the Holocaust and points out that David's methods are dangerous in the hands of those who do not love the tradition. In the next, Kalman asks again about Gordon and cannot understand why Gordon exhorts Jews to remain true to their traditions despite not believing in God.

The third brief passage has Reuven talking with Gordon, and Gordon is happy that his association with Reuven has been approved by Kalman. Gordon tells Reuven not to abandon his smicha examinations unless he has no alternative. Gordon says that Kalman doesn't understand his idea of God and that he cannot take the traditional idea of God seriously in a world of modern science. He then says that he wants Reuven as a student. The fourth brief passage has Reuven at home with the Gordons, with Michael suffering alone and Ruth commenting that she cannot believe in the tradition she was raised in.

The next passage shows Kalman furious that Hirsch will establish a rabbinics department which will include his father. He vows in front of the class to stop it. Gordon says to Reuven that he does not blame Kalman for trying to save his world. A man cannot trust anyone but God after the Holocaust in Kalman's mind, but Gordon cannot believe in God after the Holocaust.

A passage follows that lasts for some time. It involves a visit to Rebbe Saunders's synagogue. The Gordons are present and the engagement of Danny and Rachel is announced. Rebbe Saunders and Professor Gordon sign the betrothal agreement. David has heard of Gordon's offer to Reuven and Reuven does not know whether he will accept it. His father is also unsure as to whether he will join the faculty at Hirsch. Danny must also speed off to Chicago because Michael hasn't moved in days.

Two passages remain. In the penultimate passage, Kalman asks Reuven if he is still seeing Gordon. Reuven says he is and that he is going to take his smicha examinations. He says that he will show Kalman his decision at the exam. Kalman realizes that now it is Reuven who is forcing him to make a choice. He decides to give Reuven his exams. In the final passage, Reuven sees the Gordons, and Ruth is angry that Rachel is marrying a Hasid. Professor Gordon notes that Rachel is probably attracted to Daniel's God and Daniel to Rachel's twentieth century.

Book Three, Thirteen Analysis

Chapter Thirteen, like Chapter Twelve, interweaves all the main characters and conflicts of the book. However, Michael's problems fade into the background and become a kind of symbol. The main passages flit back and forth between Reuven's interactions with Kalman, Gordon, his father and Danny, all of whom have their own perspectives and all of whom in their own way draw Reuven in.

The chapter somewhat softens the character of Rav Kalman. Both David and Gordon defend Kalman's orthodoxy on the grounds that it was hardened by the Holocaust. All



three men are fighting to save the Torah, Kalman from those liberals who would corrupt it, Gordon from intellectuals who scoff at Jewish tradition, and David from both excessive liberalism and excessive conservatism.

Reuven's conflict is made all the more severe, as Kalman demands that he make a decision prior to his smicha examinations and Gordon invites him to be part of his seminary faculty. Reuven seems to want to straddle both worlds and understands that both men want him to make a decision. The decision is reflected in the offer his father receives to teach at Hirsch and Kalman's resistance to the idea.

It appears that Michael's conflict has faded into the background, but it has no become a symbol of internal struggle and isolation. Michael isolates himself because he is afraid of something; he cannot express who he is because of some sort of terror. Isolation will force him to choose. In some ways, Reuven's situation is analogous. He is isolated from all the differing forces in his life, trapped between them. And this isolation is also reaching its breaking point and may indeed force him to choose, or at least to change.



Book Three, Chapter Fourteen

Book Three, Chapter Fourteen Summary

The chapter opens as the weeks pass and Reuven focuses on preparing for his smicha examination. He does not see Rachel or Michael and talks to Danny only occasionally. The reviews of David's books continue to come out and they are uniformly positive and substantially raise David's profile. This intensifies the debate at Hirsch, with Kalman giving tirades against the formation of a rabbinics department. But he continues to meet with Reuven after class, asks him if he is still seeing Gordon and asks about Michael, in whom there is no change - Michael simply sits motionless on the mattress in his room.

Eventually, Kalman refuses to come to class, apparently in protest against the actions of the Dean and the formation of the department. He is out during the time when Reuven is to take his smicha exams.

In the second section, Michael shows a hint of progress, commenting to a nurse that he knows what he must do but he finds it too hard. Ruth Gordon wants the experiment stopped, but Abraham presses on. Passover passes through and Reuven studies for smicha and for his MA in philosophy. Then he enters his smicha exams.

Book Three, Chapter Fourteen Analysis

Chapter Fourteen is short and builds towards the final climax of the book. Michael shows little change, save a brief expression of the realization that he must change but that he finds it too hard. The days pass quickly for Reuven as he studies and the conflict between Kalman and his father intensifies, although Reuven's relationship with Kalman remains unchanged. During this period, both Reuven and Michael lie in wait before the conflict that forces them forward comes upon them. Chapter Fourteen is a period of quiet tension-building. In what comes, both must make their choice.



Book Three, Chapter Fifteen

Book Three, Chapter Fifteen Summary

The first section of Chapter Fifteen covers Reuven's smicha exam. The exam starts off easily, with Rav Gershenson asking questions on his area of expertise and Reuven passing easily. When Kalman begins, he deliberately asks about a passage that Reuven was not supposed to be tested on. The Dean in the room and Rav Gershenson express dismay, but Reuven is prepared. He goes out of his way to show how the passage could not be interpreted according to commentary sources internal to the Talmud but instead the various sources had to be supplemented with commentaries from outside the Talmud.

This argument shocks all three men because it suggests that the Talmud did not entirely contain the principles of its own interpretation. This, they thought, threatens the completeness of the Talmud. Reuven notes that this external commentary (which he found in Gordon's seminary's library) does not disrespect the Talmud, and the method he used would not apply to Torah, and he was not sure whether it applied to the Old Testament Prophets. Rav Kalman seems shocked and appalled. Reuven is to be called back again for another day of examination, but Kalman and Gershenson claim they don't need to hear anything further.

In the next section, Reuven spends his days working on his MA thesis. Danny reports that Michael has asked to see him but has otherwise remained in a trance. Reuven's father is offered a position at the Frankel Seminary and goes there to avoid spending the rest of his days fighting. Rav Kalman calls and tells him he would receive smicha, and Reuven is overjoyed, as is his father. But Kalman wants to see him.

When Kalman and Reuven meet, Kalman congratulates him and warns him not to use his method of anything but the Talmud in his teaching. He says that David's method of interpreting Talmud is wrong, but that in Reuven's voice the method came alive and expressed a love of Talmud that he had not heard since working with his students in Europe. He admits that he disagrees with Reuven, but that he had realized that he could not afford to push a talent like Reuven away and that he had pushed too many away before. The Dean tells Reuven that he is a troublemaker and that he should teach there but cannot teach Talmud in the yeshiva. The graduate school, however, would retain him as a teacher.

Reuven realizes that he may have to continue his father's battle against Kalman, but his father is happy because Reuven can fight him from within the school, which is the only way that Kalman could possibly be reasoned with. Reuven is now a rabbi.

In the third section, Reuven realizes he is now part of the chain of Hasidic tradition. Professor Gordon calls him to invite him over and Ruth and Gordon congratulate him. He is sad that Reuven will not accept his job offer but happy to have an ally in the



"enemy camp". He is struck by the irony that Reuven's father is at the liberal seminary and that he is at the conservative seminary, as matters are usually the other way around. He then tells Reuven that it was the concentration camp that ultimately convinced Kalman to give him smicha. The chapter ends with Reuven congratulated by those in the seminary; and finally, a phone call comes from Danny summoning Reuven to see Michael.

Book Three, Chapter Fifteen Analysis

Chapter Fifteen is the first of two of the book's climaxes. It contains Reuven's smicha exam and his ultimate choice of which path to take. Reuven decides to defend his father's method in the smicha exam, much to the chagrin of Kalman and the other examiners. However, after some fighting among the examiners, Reuven receives smicha. It is clear now what choice Reuven has made: he wants to remain within his tradition but with his heterodoxy intact. He will use his father's method of reaching outside of the Talmud to interpret it but will accept a position teaching in the graduate school at Hirsch. Kalman admits that he would be wrong to lose Reuven's talents to a more liberal institution, despite his disagreements with Reuven. This is a triumph for Reuven: Kalman has been placated and conceded smicha to him.

Gordon is happy for Reuven too. His father has accepted the seminary's offer, but Reuven will be an "ally in the enemy camp". Thus, Reuven will not only remain true to his tradition and take his place as linked to the past, but he will be a bridge between tradition and free thinking. At the end of the chapter, Michael has broken his silence, pointing towards the resolution of the book's major conflict. It appears that now that as Reuven's decision has been made, Michael's has been as well.



Book Three, Chapter Sixteen

Book Three, Chapter Sixteen Summary

Reuven travels to see Michael. The Gordons are there, as are Danny and Michael. Michael is catatonic. Before entering the room, Danny tells Reuven to say whatever is on his mind. And so Reuven does. He tells Michael that he resented having to make a choice between two worlds and hated the people who made him choose.

Reuven said that he understood the man, Rav Kalman, who made him choose because of his own suffering, and says that he must learn to fight back without hurting men like Rav Kalman too much. Reuven was "inside a small room too", fighting against those who hurt him. You have to fight back even when it hurts those you respect and love, Reuven claims. He then says that he received smicha from Kalman.

Michael erupts, furious with Reuven for accepting smicha from such an evil man. Then Danny pushes on Michael, asks him why he is enraged with Reuven. It turns out that it is because if Reuven had refused smicha and retreated into a world of rage, he could have shared something with Michael and Michael could have expressed himself to him. Michael hates his father and mother because they fought his father's battles without considering how it would affect him.

Every time one of Gordon's books came out, Michael would be subjected to ridicule at school and his family would be shamed. His parents continued to fight and did not notice how much he suffered. At this point, Michael is screaming that he both hates and loves his parents at the same time, and his parents are horrified. But then he embraces his parents, the hatred and love expressed, along with the pain.

Danny takes Reuven, who is in a daze, out of the room. Danny relates Reuven and Michael's stories and explains that Michael balled up his anger in order to feel powerful when he felt powerless against his parents' lack of love. He wanted to share but he couldn't because he wouldn't admit his helplessness. Danny now thinks Michael is ready for therapy.

In the next brief section, Reuven admits to his father that he hated him for putting him through the same pain that Gordon put Michael through. His father understands and regrets this. In the third section, Rachel reports that the Gordons are still shattered, and when Reuven sees Michael, Michael realizes how badly he hurt his parents. In the fourth section, Reuven receives his MA in philosophy and he is ordained. In the fifth section, Danny and Rachel are married in a Hasidic wedding. Michael is there and is tired and again realizes he has hurt his parents. Danny tells Reuven that he will write his dissertation on Michael.

In the sixth and seventh sections, most of the major characters find themselves back at the lake: all of the Gordons, Danny, Rachel, Michael, and Abraham, Ruth, Joseph and



Sarah. Reuven and his father are there too. The book ends with small talk and volleyball. Reuven and Michael go sailing and Michael looks into the sky and says that he sees clouds now rather than faces.

Book Three, Chapter Sixteen Analysis

In the final chapter of the book, Michael's catatonic silence finally breaks. It turns out that his silence and rage is caused by pain inflicted on him by his parents. His parents' work on Gordon's books brings hatred upon the family, which is transferred to Michael. He endures the hatred but his parents seem to not care.

Reuven brings Michael to his final breaking point by telling Michael how he dealt with his anger against those who forced him to choose between two worlds, how he fought back without hurting those he loved and carved out a place in the world for himself. He also reports that he received smicha from Kalman. Michael erupts and eventually expresses his rage against his parents.

Once the rage is expressed, the final theme is expressed. The battles of the previous generations often affect the younger generation. The parents fight to protect their values and express their own pain, but in doing so, they impose their values on their children and cause pain to them as well. Reuven realizes from this that he too is mad at his own father for imposing his struggles on him.

The core theme of *The Promise*, then, is the cycle of pain and control that parents, be they liberal or conservative, impose on their children without realizing it. These processes are formative and repetitive because by breeding the same anger and pain in their children, parents ensure that their children will fight battles like theirs.

The theme pops up everyone. Kalman is fighting to protect his values and imposes them on his students as a result, but he ultimately realizes that he cannot keep doing this. The Gordons do not understand that they are doing this to Michael until he erupts and tells them. And Reuven realizes that all the people in his life who were forcing him to make a choice were hurting him. His father was hurting him too by forcing him to share in his father's battles.

But Reuven discovers something important: the cycle can be ended by a conscientious child who is willing to fight back against the pain and values imposed upon him. But he does not fight back too hard, because this perpetuates the cycle. Instead, he stands firm and comes to understand his place within his tradition and heritage. In this way, he neutralizes his own rage and comes to embrace his own combination of values that no one imposes on him.

Thus, the individual resolves his rage from having his life and values forced upon him and become his own person. Reuven spent the book thinking that he had to choose between two worlds, but he didn't. That choice was forced upon him by others. Instead, he went his own way; in the end, it was the only way he could go and grow to become his true self.

Michael, should he choose health, must follow the same path.



Characters

Reuven Malter

Reuven Malter is *The Promise's* main character. He is also one of the major characters in Chaim Potok's most famous book and prequel to *The Promise*, *The Chosen*. Reuven Malter is the son of Rabbi and widely renowned Talmudic Scholar David Malter. He grows up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, which has become a largely Jewish neighborhood. After World War II ends, floods of Jewish immigrants come to the United States and substantially change the neighborhood, along with the theological community.

Reuven is studying to become a rabbi like his father, although he has interests of his own, particularly in philosophy and logic. Reuven deeply respects his father and helps him to research his book on Talmudic interpretation; he must also deal with the tirades and ideological teaching of his Talmud teaching Rav Kalman.

Early in the book, Reuven develops a strong interest in the work of liberal rabbi Abraham Gordon and goes out of his way to meet Gordon's daughter, Rachel. He also encounters Gordon's son, Michael, who he develops a close friendship with. His childhood friend from *The Chosen*, Danny Saunders, also plays an important role in the book because he remains Reuven's friend, dates and marries Rachel and is Michael's psychologist.

As the book progresses, Reuven feels increasingly forced to choose between the traditional world of Rav Kalman and the modern world of Abraham Gordon. The conflict is set up in Book One and builds throughout Book Two. As Reuven's smicha exam in Book Three, he decides to follow his father in staying with his tradition but modifying it somewhat in light of challenges he faces.

Michael Gordon

Michael Gordon is the fourteen-year-old precocious son of Professor Abraham Gordon, a liberal Jewish professor who wants to retain Jewish traditional religious practices while abandoning Jewish theology. Abraham and Michael's mother Ruth spend their days mostly defending Abraham's heterodox views against the many attacks leveled against him. As a result, Michael spends most of his time with his cousin Rachel, who babysits him. When Reuven gets to know Rachel as a means to acquaint himself with Abraham Gordon, he gets to know Michael and they develop a close friendship.

However, in Book One, it becomes clear that Michael has a serious mental problem that is only getting worse. He often flies into fits of rage with seemingly little provocation and will black out entirely during these periods. He is obsessive, particularly about feeling dirty or "like a toilet" and in his hatred for the Orthodox Jews who attack his father. He also has a strong interest in astronomy.



Michael's disorder forces him into treatment, particularly the treatment center where Danny Saunders works. Danny observes Michael and helps him, but for most of the book Michael makes little progress. Only when Danny conceives of a radical isolation treatment to force Michael to share his emotions and the treatment is implemented does Michael break (although not before an extended period of catatonic isolation). He realizes that he hates his parents for forcing their battles on him despite loving them, and it is with this realization that Michael's genuine therapy can begin.

Daniel Saunders

Danny Saunders is Reuven's childhood friend and a brilliant psychology who shocked his father and community by refusing to become a Rebbe like his father and choosing psychology instead. He retains his theological orthodoxy but pioneers brilliant new psychological methods to cure Michael. He also dates Rachel after Reuven and marries her.

Abraham Gordon

Abraham Gordon is a professor and liberal teacher of Judaism who forms one of the major poles of conflict in the Promise. His work deeply influences Reuven and he ultimately invites Reuven to be his student. Gordon is also Micheal's father and Kalman's enemy.

David Malter

Reuven's father and a widely-renowned Talmud scholar who is torn between tradition and modernity.

Rav Kalman

Reuven's Talmud teacher, who survived the concentration camps and is rigidly orthodox in his theology, criticizing anyone who deviates.

Rachel Gordon

The niece of Abraham Gordon and cousin to Michael, she briefly dates Reuven but then falls in love with Danny and marries him.

Ruth Gordon

The wife of Abraham Gordon and mother of Michael.



Manya

Reuven and David's housekeeper and caretaker for David.

Rav Gershenson

One of Kalman's enemies at Hirsch who, while remaining theologically orthodox, is not orthodox enough for Kalman.

Rebbe Saunders

Danny's father who is saddened by Danny's decision to become a psychologist. He is also orthodox but refuses to criticize Reuven's father.

Dr. Altman

Danny's supervisor at the treatment center.



Objects/Places

Hirsch University

The university where Kalman teaches and Reuven is getting ordained as a rabbi.

Frankel Seminary and Library

The seminary where Gordon teaches and where David Malter eventually takes a job. Reuven studied there in an effort to help his father's research, but his appearance there started rumors at Hirsch.

Reuven's House

Reuven and his father have a home in Williamsburg, where some of the book's major events take place.

Daniel's Apartment

Daniel's apartment serves as a meeting ground between Reuven and Daniel at several points throughout the book.

The Gordons' Home

Reuven often visits the Gordons' home, sometimes with Rachel and other times just to speak about Michael or to talk about Abraham's work.

The Treatment Center

Michael eventually has to enter the treatment center where Danny works.

The Torah

The first five books of the Bible thought to have been written by Moses.

The Talmud

A record of discussions by rabbis about Jewish Law, ethics, customs and history, etc. It contains two elements, the Mishnah and the Gemara.



The Smicha

Smicha or Semikah refers to the ordination of a rabbi.

The Experimental Treatment

Danny decides to forcibly isolate Michael until he begs to communicate his feelings. The radical treatment is based in Freudian psychology.

David Malter's Book

Reuven's father's book is widely regarded as a great work of Talmudic scholarship, but many orthodox Jews are fiercely critical of the book.

Abraham Gordon's Books

Abraham Gordon has written many books defending heterodox Jewish theological views, and the books, in Reuven's mind, ask the right questions but give the wrong answers.

Rav Kalman's Reviews

Rav Kalman writes routine nasty reviews of Gordon's books and wrote a two-part forceful review of Malter's book with Reuven's (unsuspecting) help, which infuriates Reuven.

David Malter's Method

David Malter includes some historical-critical methods in his reading of the Talmud, where he attributes some passages to scribal errors.

Liberal Judaism

Liberal Judaism tends to emphasize the historical conditioning of Jewish tradition and allows it to change according to differing historical circumstances. Abraham Gordon is a member of this tradition.



Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism emphasizes that Jewish tradition is handed down from God and is therefore infallible; it resists change according to circumstances and out of a desire to honor God. Rav Kalman is a member of this tradition.

Secularism

Secularism means many things, but in *The Promise* it is the rising tide of unbelief that Malter, Gordon and Kalman are all fighting against in their own way.

The Sailfish

Reuven sometimes rents a small sailboat that he and Michael sail in. Michael very much enjoys the outings.

Michael's Telescope

Michael's telescope is thought by Danny to be a way of expressing a sense of control and masculinity.



Themes

Faith and Modernity

Chaim Potok, the author of *The Promise*, was a rabbi and went to rabbinical school during a time when Judaism was undergoing a deep theological upheaval. In the mid nineteenth century, a variety of German Biblical Scholars had created a school of Biblical studies that relied heavily on secular historical accounts of the origins of the Scriptures.

They thereby came to view the Scriptures, including the Torah and the Talmud, as historically fluid and not reflecting or at least not wholly reflecting the revelation and commands of God. This led to a broad secularization of European and, to a lesser extent, American intellectuals.

Consequently, many theologians were challenged to defend their faith in the light of this "higher" criticism. And they reacted in various ways. Some dug in their heels and fought for religious orthodoxy, refusing to compromise with a tradition of criticism that they regarded as starting with bad methodological assumptions.

Other theologians took on some of the methodological assumptions of the higher critics and liberalized their traditions as a result. With the challenges of modern science and later the two World Wars, things looked bad for faith, with modernity on the rise and the horror of World War II secularizing many intellectuals.

The theme of faith and modernity is reflected throughout *The Promise*. The major conflicts all concern this important divide. Rav Kalman, a survivor of concentration camps, fights to defend Jewish Orthodoxy to save Judaism. But Abraham Gordon fights to save Judaism by adapting it to modern scientific assumptions. David Malter, Reuven's father, finds himself in between, wanting to adapt Jewish tradition but not abandon traditional Jewish belief.

The conflict is forced upon Reuven when Kalman forces him to choose a side. And the conflict is also imposed upon Michael, since his father's decision to fight for his beliefs has led Michael to feel isolated not only from his family but from his community as a whole.

Isolation

The theme of faith and modernity leads to the second theme, the theme of isolation. David Malter, Abraham Gordon and Rav Kalman are all fighting to save Judaism and the Torah from some enemy. Abraham Gordon is fighting to save Judaism from total destruction by secularism, whereas Rav Kalman is fighting to save Judaism from destruction at the hands of liberals like Gordon and moderates like Malter. Malter is fighting to save Judaism from both liberals and fundamentalists.



But these battles have consequences. Because they become personally engaging, the conflicts divide many in the Jewish intellectual community and thus their families, students and those they influence. The conflicts have emotional casualties, among them Reuven and Michael. Reuven feels forced to choose between the world of Abraham Gordon and the world of Rav Kalman. He also feels that he is bound up in his father's alienation from the Orthodox community of which he is a part. As a result, he feels profoundly emotionally isolated because he is torn between two communities and two worldviews.

Michael is in a worse situation. His father Abraham Gordon and his mother Ruth fight constantly, both against being labeled heretics and also to save secular Jews from abandoning their ancient religious practices. But this brings great scorn upon their family and much ridicule upon him from his fellow students. Michael feels that his parents are ignoring him and are so busy fighting their own battles that they have no time for the emotional needs of their son. This isolation leads to Michael's rage and erratic behavior that can only be resolved when Michael's isolation is ended.

Bearing the Burdens of the Father

Again, *The Promise* primarily concerns the interface between faith and modernity and how members of the Jewish community react to the challenges that modernity poses. The major characters, David Malter, Abraham Gordon and Rav Kalman, all react in their own ways, Kalman by taking a fundamentalist attitude, Malter by abandoning traditional Jewish theology, and Malter by trying to retain Jewish theology but allow historical-critical methods to be used in rabbinical schools.

As mentioned in the isolation theme, these battles cause great animosity and lead to bitter personal conflicts. Rav Kalman writes bitter reviews of Gordon's work and more measured, but still forceful criticisms of Malter's work. When Hirsch offers to hire Malter on staff, Kalman protests and refuses to teach if Malter is hired. Ultimately, for his psychological health, Malter decides not to take the position at Hirsch but to take the position offered to him at Frankel Seminary.

These fights are forced upon Reuven, who is Kalman's student, Gordon's friend and Malter's son. Kalman directly forces Reuven to choose between traditions and worldviews before his smicha examinations and Reuven deeply resents having the choice pressed upon him. But it turns out that all three men were imposing pressure on Reuven to give answers to their questions and not his own. In the same way, Michael was co-opted into the struggles of his own father to save Judaism but avoid the nastiness and excesses of Jewish "fundamentalism."

Michael resented bearing his father's burdens and this resentment produced a mental disorder. Reuven also realized that he resented bearing his own father's burdens, and after witnessing Michael's breakdown, he realizes that he too has resentment towards his own father.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *The Promise* is that of its author, Chaim Potok, and its main character, Reuven Malter. Chaim Potok was born in 1929 and died in 2002; he was an Jewish and American author who was also a rabbi. Potok was born in the Bronx to Polish Jewish immigrants. He was raised with an Orthodox Jewish education and graduated from Yeshiva University with a degree in English Literature; he then got his MA in Hebrew literature and his rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

The Jewish Theological Seminary was an important site of the conflict between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. And apparently, this conflict deeply shaped Potok's point of view. Many of his novels concern the conflict between those Jewish thinkers who wanted to adapt Jewish tradition to modernity and to see tradition as fluid and responsive to historical circumstance, and the more orthodox Jews who saw tradition as handed down from God to man and who resisted attempts to make Jewish tradition more fluid.

This point of view pervades the book. The conflict between Orthodox and Reform Jews is represented in the conflict between Rav Kalman and Abraham Gordon. Reuven's father David straddles the line, wanting to adapt Orthodox Judaism to modern historical criticism without abandoning traditional Jewish beliefs. Potok's views come through in Reuven's point of view as well, because Reuven is the embodiment of the theological struggle within Judaism.

Setting

The Promise is set in 1950s New York. Reuven Malter, the main character, grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. When he was young, the section contained only a few Hasidic families, but after World War II, the community was teeming with Jews of all sorts, particularly Hasid.

The book takes place just after World War II and the Holocaust, which obviously had an enormous historical impact on the Jewish community. Many of the Eastern European Jews who emigrated to New York at that time were quite orthodox and had been willing to go to their deaths for their faith. This made them extremely rigid because their loyalty to their theological ideas had helped them to survive the concentration camps.

The period following World War II was also a high-tide of secularism; modern science was widely thought to threaten the veracity of all religious texts and, consequently, many intellectuals' faith was challenged. The hardening of orthodoxy among Eastern European Jews led to the mindset of Rav Kalman, the "fundamentalist" figure in the book.



The threat of modern science led to the "liberal" and secular mindset of Professor Abraham Gordon. Both men are products of their time and location and both see themselves as trying to save a tradition they love. The same is true of Reuven's father, David Malter.

The book has other minor settings, such as Hirsch University, where Rav Kalman teaches, and Frankel Seminary, where Professor Gordon teaches. Various events also take place in the treatment center where Danny works, the Gordons' home, the Saunders's apartment, Reuven and David's house, and the lake where Reuven sails.

Language and Meaning

Chaim Potok was a famous American Jewish author and rabbi. Many of his novels discuss conflicts with Judaism, particularly between Liberal Judaism and Orthodox Judaism. Potok received an orthodox Jewish education. However, in later interviews, Potok expresses the view that modern scientific Biblical criticism is an important gift to human civilization. He shows his characters as struggling with the challenges of modernity and adapting by modifying their traditions, apparently as Potok himself did.

These themes are deeply reflected in the language and meaning of *The Promise*. Since Potok is a well-trained Orthodox rabbi, he fills the pages of *The Promise* with Hebrew and Yiddish language, ideas and texts. First, Potok will often have Reuven mention that a character spoke some sentence in Hebrew or Yiddish. He will initially give the sentence in English and then report that it was said in Yiddish or Hebrew and explain the meaning of the terms. In other cases, the author will have one of his characters speak a Yiddish or Hebrew word and then will have Reuven explain the meaning of the term.

In other passages, Potok will spend time explaining Jewish ideas, such as the distinctions between various Jewish sects, the types of schools within the Jewish community, and the various methodological differences between schools of Judaism, methodological differences that in fact play an important role in the book. Potok will also discuss the details of Jewish sacred texts like the Torah and the Talmud, along with obscure medieval commentaries of these texts and even their authors.

Structure

The Promise is in many ways structured like an ordinary novel. It has an ordinary introduction, plot build and resolution. But the book has several distinctive elements. First, it has two major plot lines that mirror one another, rather than one single plot line.

The first thread in the book, and perhaps the main one, is Reuven's struggle to choose between his traditional faith and the attraction of the ideas of modernity as represented by the struggle between the ideas of Rav Kalman and Abraham Gordon. As the book progresses, Reuven becomes increasingly fed up with Rav Kalman's stolid orthodoxy,



but while he agrees with Professor Gordon's questions, he disagrees with his answers. Kalman and Gordon want him to choose between tradition and modernity.

The second thread in the book is Michael's psychological conflict. Michael's rage and erratic behavior force his parents to place him in a mental health treatment center where Danny works as a psychologist. Michael makes little progress through much of the book, and grows steadily worse. Eventually, Danny and Michael's family feel forced to try a radical treatment on him, which ultimately works, forcing Michael to break down and express his hatred for his parents.

The book has sixteen chapters but they are divided into three books. The three books map both Reuven and Michael's conflicts. In Book One, the reader watches Reuven and Michael's problems take shape, with the book ending as Michael enters treatment. Book Two builds the tension within Reuven and Michael's emotional lives; Book Two ends with Michael starting Danny's radical therapy. Book Three resolves both conflicts and has Michael finally break down.

Quotes

"All around us everything was changing in the order of things we had fashioned for ourselves." Introduction, p. 3

"Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked." Book One, Chap. 1, p. 8

"You have to get killed sometimes but you can't cheat." Book One, Chap. 2, p. 56

"This is the book of an apostate. Those who fear God are forbidden to read it." Book One, Chap. 3, p. 62

"In the second week of October, two days after Yom Kippur, Michael entered the residential treatment center." Book One, Chap. 4, p. 93

"The enemy surrounds us. The evil forces of secularism are everywhere." Book Two, Chap. 7. p. 139

"A man must sometimes be forced to make choices, for it is only by his choices that we know what a man truly is." Book Two, Chap. 8, p. 146

"I must know where you stand before I can give you smicha." Book Two, Chap. 9, p. 165

"He's afraid religion is going to die." Book Two, Chap. 9, p. 172

"At least it is for Torah. We are fighting for Torah. ... There is some consolation." Book Two, Chap. 10, p. 183

"Almost everything of importance that a person does is a gamble, isn't it? Every crucial decision is a gamble." Book Two, Chap. 12, p. 227

"All beginnings are difficult." Book Three, Chap. 13, p. 255

"A person can do one of two things in that kind of a situation He can stay inside his world and try to reshape it somehow, or he can leave it and make his life over again elsewhere. Either choice involves further suffering, but it would be a creative suffering that might ultimately give rise to something worthwhile." Book Three, Chap. 13. p. 262

"When we went to our deaths to sanctify the Name of God, we died for an idea?" Book Three, Chap. 13, p. 289

"I would like you as a student." Book Three, Chap. 13. p. 291

"Michael had muttered something to her about knowing what he had to do but it was too hard—and had returned to his frozen silence." Book Three, Chap. 14, p. 316



"No, Reuven. You will be fighting him from within. That is the only effective way to fight a man like Rav Kalman." Book Three, Chap. 15, p. 333

"Do you hear me, Michael? I fought them and I won. You can win too if you learn how to fight. You have to talk if you want to fight." Book Three, Chap. 16, p. 343

"I hate you!" Book Three, Chap. 16, p. 348



Topics for Discussion

What is Reuven's central conflict in the beginning of the book? What does he dislike about Rav Kalman? What does he like about Abraham Gordon?

Why does Rav Kalman make Reuven so angry? How is that anger resolved in the end?

Why doesn't Reuven become Abraham's student?

Why is Danny trying so hard to cure Michael?

What is Michael's mental problem? How does Danny set out to cure it? How does Michael finally break?

How is Michael isolated? How is Reuven isolated? How are their experiences similar? Is the isolation of one a proxy for the isolation of another?

When Rav Kalman forces Reuven to choose which world he wants to live in, how does Reuven respond? What is his ultimate decision?

Why does Michael hate his father?

How does Reuven's father relate to the ideological conflict between Kalman and Gordon?

Reuven has three primary father figures in *The Promise*: his own father, Rav Kalman, and Abraham Gordon. The three men see themselves in conflict. And yet one might see them as having the same goal? What might that goal be?