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Intro to Literature

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Against the World

Imagine the two most important aspects of your life completely opposing each other. An impenetrable wall stands between the two, and the chances of it breaking appears impossible. Each side pulls at you harder and harder, making you feel about to burst at the seams. You love both of these things dearly, and cannot choose sides between them. Rivkeh Lev feels this precise torment in *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok. Her son, Asher, and her husband, Aryeh, stand completely at odds in regard to Asher's drawing. Her husband loathes Asher's art, and fails to understand what his son spends his time doing. The two men seem to despise each other at some points throughout the novel; on the other hand, they both love Rivkeh unconditionally. Clearly, this would take a toll on any human being, Rivkeh included. She tries time and time again to resolve their conflicts to no avail. Throughout the novel, she goes through extreme lows, but manages to stay sane due to her strong character. This will not exist as a feminist reading of *My Name is Asher Lev*, rather, it stands as a close reading and understanding of the pain Rivkeh experiences caused by her son's art. Within the novel, Asher's art causes Rivkeh to suffer several trials impacting her faith, mental health, and family.

First of all, religion dominates every move the Lev family makes. Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev strictly practice Hasidic Judaism, and raise Asher to do the same. As a result, Asher feels an enormous amount of pressure from his parents to live as a successful and disciplined Jew. Potok asserts, "Asher Lev was the juncture point of two significant family lines, the apex, as it were, of a triangle seminal with Jewish potentiality and freighted with Jewish responsibility" (5). Potok

establishes the fact that both Aryeh and Rivkeh come from a long line of very religious and well-known families. Without a doubt, the Lev family will follow the path carved for them by their ancestors, and focus deeply on their religion. However, Rivkeh experiences a shift in her faith in some points of the novel, especially when her brother dies. Rivkeh exclaims, “The Rebbe killed my brother...The Rebbe sent him on a journey and he was killed...My brother would not have been killed if the Rebbe had not told him to travel” (Potok 47-48). At this point in the story, Rivkeh feels confusion and disappointment in the Rebbe and his decisions. She accuses the Rebbe of murdering her brother, and feels powerfully distraught. While this questioning of her faith does not occur solely because of Asher’s art, it certainly does not help Rivkeh’s situation. While she curses the Rebbe and questions her faith, Aryeh continues to criticize his son for his drawings, calling them foolish. Clearly, the ongoing conflict between her husband and her son fails to repair her wavering faith. Both her brother’s death, and Asher’s questionable art impact Rivkeh’s faith.

Another aspect of Rivkeh’s life that gets affected by Asher’s drawing involves her mental health. Throughout the novel, Rivkeh experiences highs and lows in regards to the severity of her mental health issues. The first factor that takes a huge toll on her mind involves the death of her brother. As aforementioned, Rivkeh’s brother’s death caused her to question very important pieces in her life, including her religion. Most importantly, though, his death threw Rivkeh into a serious mental illness, which almost took her life. For example, “I thought there had been an error, that somehow they had sent back the wrong person...She would not speak to anyone. I thought she had lost her voice until I heard her talking in the living room late one afternoon and found she was talking to herself” (Potok 16). This quote exemplifies the severity of Rivkeh’s illness, and the impact it has on her family. Asher goes so far as to question if this woman exists

as his actual mother. Her illness dissipates over time, and Rivkeh seems to return to normal. However, her mental stability wavers severely due to Asher's art in later portions of the novel. Asher comes home far after curfew several times while his father travels abroad, never telling his mother his location or when he plans to return home. Rivkeh's worries appear when she asks Asher, "Why didn't you tell me you were going? my mother said. Why didn't you call me? Asher, Asher, what are you doing? You went out of the school in the middle of the day and disappeared. Your father isn't home and you disappeared. What are you doing?" (Potok 140). Without a doubt, Asher's affinity for art sickens his mother with worry and fear. In the aforementioned section, Asher once again returns late from an art museum that he frequents far more often than he should. He never informs his mother about his whereabouts, instead diverting his full attention and concern with the art. Rivkeh spends a great deal of time waiting for Asher to return home much later than he should. Without a doubt, Rivkeh deals with an enormous amount of stress and torment on Asher's behalf. Without a doubt, Asher's drawing negatively impacts Rivkeh's health in multiple ways.

Last, but certainly not least, the Lev family suffers in a plethora of ways in results of Asher's artwork. Both of his parents grow increasingly more concerned as Asher continues to grow older, especially Aryeh. Asher's father fails to understand his son's talent, and constructs an ever-growing barrier between him and his son. Without a doubt, this conflict between father and son takes a toll on Rivkeh. Seeing the two most important people in her life at odds crushes her. On one hand, her marriage suffers greatly. At one point while Aryeh scolds his son, he snaps at his wife: "'Aryeh, Aryeh,' my father said. What are you Aryehing me for Rivkeh? How does it look when my son goes around drawing all day instead of learning? How does it look?" (Potok

129). Clearly, tension exists between Rivkeh and her husband, stemming from her son's obsession with his art. Another example of strain within the marriage occurs:

I was in my room when he came home. A few minutes later, I heard him in the kitchen talking to my mother. Then, suddenly his voice was loud. He spoke in Yiddish. In recent weeks, he had begun speaking Yiddish as frequently as English. I could not make out what he said. I heard my mother say, 'Aryeh, the boy.' Then their voices lowered. A moment later, I heard them go into their bedroom. (Potok 107)

Obviously, Asher's art continues to drive his parents deeper and deeper apart. His mother and father spend the time Aryeh has at home fighting about Asher's drawing. The tension between Aryeh and Rivkeh clearly causes stress and pain for the Lev family.

Another contributing factor to the family tension in the Lev family happens when Aryeh travels from home. He clearly wishes for his son to stop drawing, and insists that Rivkeh enforces the same rules on their son. However, many times Rivkeh goes behind Aryeh's back and acts against his wishes. For example, Asher would not dare come home after curfew, or let his father possess any knowledge of him visiting the museum, Rivkeh, on the other hand, acts differently: "I walked home in the last of the sunlight and saw my mother framed in the window of our living room as I came up to the house. She did not ask me why I was late. My father was not home" (142). This quotation clearly outlines Rivkeh's leniency on Asher's habitual late arrival. The main reason she does not punish her son happens due to Aryeh's absence. Rivkeh knows that Aryeh would scold his son and cause fights if he knew about the situation. However, Rivkeh also knows that her son will continue to disobey her and visit the museum anyway; eventually, Rivkeh gives up trying to follow Aryeh's wishes. The following conversation outlines this point: "I don't like Papa when he shouts at you. Why was he shouting at you?"

‘Your father wants me to promise I would not let you go to the museum.’ She shook her head sadly. ‘I can’t promise the impossible’ (Potok 180). In conclusion, Asher’s drawing causes Rivkeh to feel as if her family is crumbling before her eyes. She loves her husband and her son immensely, but she finds no way to successfully please one without hurting the other.

Without a doubt, narrative art matters to people’s lives. Art impacts lifestyles and personalities in ways scarcely imaginable. The Lev family exists as a perfect example of how art contains the potential to tear a family apart. The conflict between religion and art drives a nail between the family, and causes pain for each and every member, especially Rivkeh. Her husband and son pull her in two completely different directions; in result, her faith, mental health, and family suffers. The story ends with a complete separation of the family, instead of coming to a happy and resolved ending. In the end, Asher’s art caused far too much pain to those closest to him, and he was exiled by his community. Sometimes sacrifices must be made, and the Lev family experiences this first-hand.

Work Cited

Potok, Chaim. *My Name Is Asher Lev*. New York: Knopf, 1972. Print.