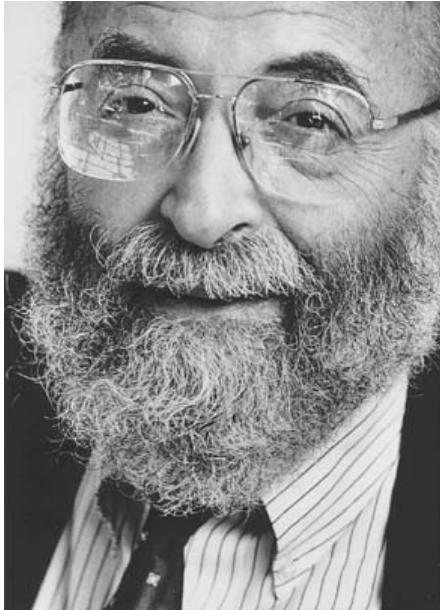


# Giving Shape To Turmoil

## A Conversation with Chaim Potok

Interviewed by Michael J. Cusick

Copyright © 1997 Mars Hill Review 7 Winter/Spring 1997 · Issue 7: pgs 64-83.



It would strike some as odd that an ordained rabbi who served a chaplaincy in the Korean War, later earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from an Ivy League university, earned a reputation as a world-class Judaic scholar, and wrote several best-selling novels along the way, would be known for his mapmaking abilities. But Chaim Potok has spent the majority of his life doing just that—mapping out the terrain of his Jewish past in novels which have transported both Jew and non-Jew into fictional worlds which transcend religious boundaries.

Perhaps best known as the author of *The Chosen*—which in 1981 was made into a movie starring Robby Benson and Rod Steiger, Potok is the author of eleven novels, two children's books, and several works of nonfiction including the critically acclaimed *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews*.

“Long ago, in *The Chosen*,” he writes, “I set out to draw a map of the New York world through which I once journeyed. It was to be a map not only of broken streets, menacing alleys, concrete-surfaced backyards, neighborhood schools and stores . . . a map not only of the physical elements of my early life, but of the spiritual ones as well.”<sup>1</sup> The result of such mapmaking has been an insider's look into opposing worldviews—conservative Jewish-American culture and twentieth-century secularism: clashing values, beliefs, ideas, and dreams. This has been the underlying tension in all of Potok's writing. And it has also been the story of his life.

Born in Brooklyn in 1929 to Polish immigrant parents, Chaim spent his early years in an Orthodox Jewish home and educated at parochial schools. At sixteen, he encountered serious literature and his life was forever changed. “Here was someone trying to give shape to turmoil I myself was experiencing,” he writes. “A growing sense of a world outside my own; pulsing sexuality; questions about God and the nature of my own self. Here was an author shaping his deepest thoughts and feelings with language, exploring an interior human terrain I had never thought possible to configure with words.”<sup>2</sup> Deeply touched,

he began to read ravenously and to write. At eighteen, after having a story accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly*, he received a letter from the editor, who inquired if he was writing a novel. His father—who had planned on his son's becoming a teacher of Talmud—was less than enthusiastic about the younger Potok's newfound career choice. In their conservative Jewish world, writers of fiction were looked upon with suspicion. Thankfully, Chaim continued to write, and has not stopped.

My first encounter with Potok occurred at a used bookstore where I found a mint first-edition copy of *My Name is Asher Lev*. Our most recent encounter took place in Philadelphia, where he graciously invited me to his home. As we met in person for nearly two hours, I was struck by this man's kindness and his staggering depth of knowledge.

In the room where we met, the author's own abstract paintings hang in contrast to walls of scholarly books—illuminating once more the tensions of his life and work: creativity and canon, progress and tradition, faith and reason. As is evidenced by his writing, such tensions are not easily manageable, though for the person of faith they are an essential part of finding one's way in the world. As Potok himself might say, “Such tensions are part of the mapmaking process.”

**Mars Hill Review:** Tell me about the transforming encounter you had with literature at the age of sixteen.

**Chaim Potok:** My first major encounter with contemporary serious literature was Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. It happened in high school one term, when I was reading the established canon of literature—the classics, especially the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was done with my exams, and I decided for a reason that is not clear to me to this day, to read a contemporary adult novel. I went to the public library and browsed around for a while and by sheer chance found *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh. I have no idea what attracted me to it. Maybe it was the fact that it was about upper-class English Catholics. I took the book home and at first found it difficult to get into. But once I grew accustomed to the prose I became utterly enchanted by that world, and by the prose. It was really the first time in my life that I understood the importance of language in the writing of a story. Most of the time I wouldn't want the language to interfere with the story. I preferred language that was transparent and didn't call attention to itself. But reading that novel gave me a very vivid sense of the rhythms of the English language, its texture, its cadences, the way sentences can be constructed to obtain certain effects.

I remember that as I was reading it I found myself thinking about the characters during the times I was away from the book. I would try to anticipate what their thoughts and feelings might be when I returned to the book. I was utterly taken by the character of the mother—her tenacity, her odd personality, her faith. I remember closing the book when I finished reading it and feeling bereaved

because all the people I had read about were gone. I remember sitting there saying to myself, “What power there is in this kind of creativity.”

Very soon afterward I read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Here was a picture of a middle-class Irish Catholic family. And Joyce was telling a story about ideas-confusions of the head and the heart-that I myself was experiencing and couldn't put into words. I was only sixteen at the time, but here was a man mapping all that dark territory with the power of words and the imagination. Those two books did it for me.

**MHR:** And it was then that you knew you wanted to write stories?

**CP:** Yes. When I was done with Joyce, I said to myself, “This is what I want to spend my life doing-writing stories.” I was only a kid, so I had no idea whether I would succeed or fail. I didn't even have an idea as to how to go about doing it. I just knew that I wanted to write stories. It unlocked something very deep inside of me and transformed me, no question about that. And writing stories is what I've done ever since that time.

**MHR:** As you began writing from your Orthodox Jewish background, you discovered that your culture collided with others. And you've described this as a “culture confrontation.”

**CP:** My first culture confrontation was with literature. Later on in my twenties it was with the core ideas of western culture, because I went ahead and got a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. I didn't want a doctorate in literature because I was afraid it would make me too self-conscious about my writing. But I did want to know what western culture was all about at its core, so I chose philosophy. I thought western culture would be something I would want to write about, and I wanted to know it well.

**MHR:** You didn't set out to confront cultures, but it naturally happened?

**CP:** My particular natural life experience has been that of cultures clashing in a certain way—confrontation of core elements. From my Jewish culture to literature, for example. I grew up at the heart, at the core, of one culture. And then I encountered an element from the core of the general culture in which I was living, and that element was modern secular literature.

That confrontation of cultures, from the heart of one culture to the heart of another culture, is what I have been calling a “core to core culture confrontation.” There are many ways in which we encounter other cultures. We can encounter the periphery of another culture-its noise, its passing fads, its pop culture, superstitious elements, and so on. Those are-without sounding too elitist-more or less peripheral elements of a culture in the sense that they are the easiest elements of a culture to acquire. They demand the least of the person acquiring

them. They are interchangeable elements which come and they go. They don't effect the essential direction of a culture in any profound way.

All cultures have these elements. And yes, it is an elitist view of culture. But the fact of the matter is that cultures are really made by the more creative elements in their midst. Those creative elements drag everyone else along willy-nilly in their wake. Unless, of course, there is a cultural inundation from the periphery, which is what some people think we may be suffering from these days, especially in the United States.

Others had other kinds of culture confrontations. Friends of mine encountered the world of science that they found stunning, and to no small degree overwhelming. Others encountered Sigmund Freud. I remember one of my friends reading Darwin, and that was the end of his view of Genesis.

That was the world that I grew up in. And the subject of my writing then became this confrontation: What happens? How do you feel? What do you think? What are your dreams? How do you relate to human beings around you? What are the dimensions of this confrontation? How does it affect families? It's my feeling that in the modern period we're all going through this sort of confrontation one way or another.

**MHR:** And this is regardless of religious background-believer or unbeliever?

**CP:** Absolutely. And now in a major way the Islamic world is going through this kind of confrontation. But they are resisting it mightily, just as Judaism and Christendom did—and as many Christians and many Jews still do.

**MHR:** You wrote your first novel, *The Chosen*, to come to terms with your past. What elements of your religious upbringing did you need to come to terms with?

**CP:** The fundamentalism; the very structured way of seeing the world. The “givenness” of tradition; the inability to maneuver and question. The legacy of the past that you are expected to absorb, master, and give back to the coming generation untouched, unaltered.

That was pretty much my beginning. And the first crack in that wall was literature. Literature presents you with alternate mappings of the human experience. You see that the experiences of other people and other cultures are as rich, coherent, and troubled as your own experiences. They are as beset with suffering as yours. Literature is a kind of legitimate voyeurism through the keyhole of language where you really come to know other people's lives—their anguish, their loves, their passions. Often you discover that once you dive into those lives and get below the surface, the veneer, there is a real closeness.

**MHR:** Is this the idea that underneath the differing beliefs, religions, and cultures, there is a sense of underlying basic humanity?

**CP:** Right, and that was astonishing to me. It was astonishing because I had always been taught, and therefore believed, that Jews were different in kind. We had a very unique destiny. And yes, Jews are different. But, at the same time, what I was coming to learn was that we all are very much the same in our passions, in our lusts, in our loves, in our drives, in our fears. The differences are interesting because they lend texture and richness to the human experience, but it's the similarities that might just save us as a species.

**MHR:** Save us?

**CP:** We are in a race with our own worst selves. We've always been both a killer species and a cooperating species. There have always been these two sides to our being. And we now have the capacity to kill ourselves with consummate ease. It's touch and go as to whether we will survive as a species on this planet. So, my hope is that we can learn more and more about the similarities. I think that this is one of the happy by-products of literature. I'm not sure that literature aims for that. I think that serious literature aims for good sentences, good writing, and more or less serious subject matter—not filled with frivolity. But a by-product of that is the effective making of maps—of other paths of life that I as a reader can then walk. That brings me closer to another world, and I then say, “That's interesting, I can relate to that.”

**MHR:** Does that explain why your novels have such a broad appeal, though limited to Jewish culture?

**CP:** James Joyce was once asked why he only wrote about Dublin. Even though he wrote about other places, we know Joyce as the writer of Dublin in the same way we know Dostoevsky as the writer of Saint Petersburg, and Kafka as the writer of Prague. So when he was asked why he only wrote about Dublin, Joyce responded by saying, “For myself I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”

The greatness of the novel is that you are taken into the specifics of other worlds by the mapmaking abilities and the language abilities of another human being. So that if I spell out my particularities and you're reading them, and if the language is okay, and the story is interesting, what you end up doing inside yourself is taking those particularities and linking them to your own. And those two generate a universal. You as the reader can then function inside that universal.

**MHR:** That reminds me of a sentence from *The Gift of Asher Lev*: “Art happens when what is seen is mixed with what is on the inside of the artist.”

**CP:** That's exactly right. It's a relational experience. Art happens somewhere along a relational arc, between what you are and the object of creation. And that's why art is very often a different experience for each and every person. I am convinced that the readers who come to my books experience them differently because they are not sitting back as passive individuals with this thing called a book being pumped into them, filling their empty reservoir. That's not the way it works. They're coming to a book with a whole life. And it's the relationship between their life and the life inside the book that forms the experience of reading-the arc.

**MHR:** There's something very mystical about that.

**CP:** Yes, but then there's something very mystical about gravity too, which we can't quite see [laughing]. True, you can do mathematics on gravity, and it's harder to do mathematics on the relationship between a work of art and the person experiencing it. Both are invisible and both are very real.

**MHR:** Throughout your work there is a strong thread of autobiography. As a Jew, what has been the role of remembering?

**CP:** I think Judaism is a memory religion par excellence. We are told to remember. Americans generally don't remember much beyond five years in the past. Who remembers the Persian Gulf War today?

**MHR:** I think Christians struggle with forgetting our past. Will you say more about the idea that Judaism is a memory religion?

**CP:** We have about four thousand years of history to remember. And what you are really bidden to do as an intelligent Jew is to remember and incorporate that history into your essential being. The biblical images of Abraham and Jacob are real. The story of the binding of Isaac is real. The story of Joseph is real. The story of David and Solomon, that's a real story. It all becomes a part of the way you think of the world.

A cartographer doesn't make maps out of the imagination. He surveys, he looks at previous maps, he checks the roads, he gets information, he uses tools. An individual who makes maps of the human experience—and we all do that consciously or unconsciously—make it with information, or with tools. What Judaism wants Jews to do is to map the world with certain kinds of information. And that information consists of the value systems, the tensions, the successes and the failures, the dreams and the terrors of the Jewish past.

Now, I have to be very careful with all of this, because you can be so freighted with history that you can become paralyzed. That's the tension that we all live under—how to use the history and not get weighted down to such a degree that

you can't function.

**MHR:** You've talked about the past on the collective level, but what about on the individual level? Is it important to have a knowledge of your own story?

**CP:** I think that in one way or another all of us have a story. And people who don't know their story are devastated individuals. Narrative is what holds life together. But narrative ought to be flexible enough so that you can insert new sentences here and there. And sometimes we begin the serious process of rewriting at certain points of our lives. A person who doesn't have a narrative is a sorry person indeed.

**MHR:** Do you mean they don't know where they have come from or where they are going?

**CP:** They have no map. They are stumbling around, and they are terrified. And terror ultimately leads to rage—either rage at yourself with an inclination toward self-destruction, or rage at the outside world, and you hurt somebody.

**MHR:** We've touched on art somewhat. What are your views on the distinction between sacred and secular?

**CP:** Sacred art depicts meta-historical moments by and large. It is fixed. It is an expression of the core of the church, its doctrines, its transcendent history. Nothing much changes in this art through the centuries. In the modern period anything is possible, even with a crucifixion. That's the nature of a modern secular world. The individual makes his or own paradigms. And my feeling is that the richer the individual's awareness of the tensions of the past, the richer the modern paradigm he or she is going to present to us.

**MHR:** So the more an individual is aware of the past, the richer the art?

**CP:** The deeper one's awareness of one's roots in the past, the richer will be the tensions of the present, and the way one presents any particular art. For example, there is a texturing to Dostoevsky that you just don't find in most modern writing—especially American writing, because Dostoevsky has this enormous tension with the past of Russian religion and history. I might not care for his anti-Semitism, or his passion for Russian glory, or the sense he had that Russia was the greatest culture in the world and that he didn't need the west. But that's not the issue here, the issue is what it did for his work. It added to it immeasurably.

**MHR:** Dostoevsky spent years in prison. Asher Lev, David Lurie, Danny Saunders, and several other characters of yours suffered and went on to enormous creativity. How does suffering affect one's output of creativity and art?

**CP:** Well, it will either mature you or destroy you. If it destroys you, we won't hear about you anymore. But if it matures you, then you might make a contribution. All of us, at one point or another in our lives, have suffered-if not in our own flesh, then in the flesh of those we love. We will experience suffering.

It's the task of the artist to take that experience and map it through her or his own way of seeing the world. That's what I tried to do with the individuals I was writing about.

**MHR:** What would you say about the idea of encountering the sacred in the midst of the secular?

**CP:** My sense of it is that the sacred is everywhere. And by that I mean we are surrounded by mystery, we are surrounded by beauty. A child is born and it's a mystery. A person dies and that's a mystery. What are we doing here? That's a mystery. I have to respond to that one way or another. And that's what I mean by the sacred-things that are given, yet oddly given. I have to respond to that and ask myself, "What map do I make of this? What relationship do I have to this?" I'm a writer, and I have to deal with such givens.

You might tell me that the smile of a child is biologically and genetically driven, and I will say, "Fine." But even that statement is in many ways a mystery. Man's propensity toward killing is a mystery to me. Those aspects of ourselves that tend to drive us up and out of ourselves in a search for realms of being beyond our mere mortality-those are what I call the sacred. The constructive, the cooperative, the creative—those are the sacred. The destructive—that is the demonic. As I said earlier, we are in a race with our own selves. And we have no guarantee as to which of those two elements of our selves is going to win. That's why those of us concerned with the sacred have to work hard. We have to lobby for it, because we can be sure of one thing: those taken up by the demonic are very good at what they do.

**MHR:** When you talk about what could be, is there a sense of the original "image of God?"

**CP:** Yes, absolutely—there is a sense of an origin to things. And my feeling is that the biblical image is a magnificent metaphor of that feeling or sense that we have of the mysterious origin of things. That is the quintessential mapmaking. It's so rich that it has forever changed the mindset of our species. Is it ontologically true? Well, the fundamentalists will say yes. Someone who knows a great deal about the history of Jewish thought will probably say that it has profound value in the way it has set the human mind in a certain direction—that that is its truth. And for me that's truth enough.

**MHR:** Whether or not the ontological reality is there?

**CP:** That's right.

**MHR:** Are you saying that whether or not the existence of it all is real isn't as important as the metaphor that guides your life?

**CP:** It's the richness of it. That is an awesome reality. I can't step beyond the richness of that and move to the other side. Do you know that in the Hebrew Bible there isn't a single mention of God as he, or she, or it truly is? There is only the mention of the creator God who is constantly trying out new plans and failing. He creates the world and fails. He creates Adam and Eve and fails. He creates the Garden of Eden and that doesn't work. He creates a human species and fails, so he brings the flood. He saves a human being whose first act is to get drunk. He chooses a people with whom He constantly quarrels. That's the creator God. The God utterly infinite, utterly unapproachable, utterly spiritual—we don't hear of that God. That God won't turn to us. It is inconceivable that he would ever turn to us. That God is all that ever was and is and will be, into infinity and eternity. How could that God conceivably relate to us? It is the God of the Bible that we relate to? So I can't make the step beyond creation to the infinite God. But I can certainly relate to the God of the Bible. I talk to him all the time and complain all the time.

**MHR:** What do you mean by “God failed” at these different steps?

**CP:** He creates the world and then he has to destroy it by flood. He gives Adam and Eve a garden to till, and they ruin things—and in many ways that's his failure too. He sends a flood and saves a family, but in the aftermath there is the horrible scene between the sons, the grandson, and the father. Then he chooses a people and they are constantly at odds with Him. That's the role of God in history; making plans and seeing plans foiled. There's constant tension between God and the human beings he has created. That's not a terribly glorious picture of a deity, is it? Well, that's the God that we relate to, the Jews anyway. Beyond that God, there's got to be some infinite being. The Bible doesn't talk about it, although Jewish mysticism does. Kabbalah—oh, yes.

**MHR:** In *The Book of Lights*, where you deal with Kabbalah, the mentor of the main character Gershon says, “You do not care to know of the great rabbis who were filled with poetry and contradictions.” What kind of poetry and contradictions does he mean?

**CP:** The rabbis of the Talmud were filled with poetry and contradictions. They had a very open-eyed, hard-nosed way of looking at the world. They were not fundamentalists. They were open to all kinds of ideas. And they said things that would upset us today. One of the great things about learning the Jewish tradition is that you come to understand the notion of maximum flexibility inside a closed world. The daring of some of those rabbis is really astonishing. The poetry has to do with flights of the imagination and how they interpreted the Bible in the broadest way conceivable. There is an enormous spectrum of thought in rabbinic

literature, from absolutely literalist readings of the text to the most imaginative readings. It's a very rich system of ideas, filled with contradicting views, which is very exciting for a writer.

It all fell to pieces in the modern period when it faced secularism. And in the wake of Darwin and Nietzsche came Jewish fundamentalism, which didn't exist in the pre-modern period. Newton and Darwin did it to Judaism just as they did it to Christianity. Fundamentalism is a western religious reaction to Darwin. The text freezes, ideas freeze, because the alternative is a real terror, the terror that we are not the center of the universe and that it's all a series of odd accidents.

**MHR:** Because for it to be a series of odd accidents contradicts the entire history of Judaism.

**CP:** Absolutely . . . absolutely. Therefore, you have the development of Jewish fundamentalism. It comes along and says, "This isn't a series of odd accidents. Just read the first chapter of Genesis." Then the modernist says, "The first chapter of Genesis is a metaphor." And the Jewish fundamentalist answers, "It's not a metaphor, it's the word of God. A metaphor means that somebody else can come and write another metaphor, but the word of God you can't change." This is one major discourse in contemporary Judaism.

**MHR:** Is that part of the reason you named your history of the Jews *Wanderings*?

**CP:** Yes, we have wandered a great deal and been in contact with most of the great cultures of the world in a variety of ways. I also wrote *Wanderings* before I wrote *The Book of Lights* because I wanted to know who I was when I got to Korea—that's what *The Book of Lights* is all about. It's my encounter with another culture—a non-western culture. It's also my encounter with the horrible event that western culture dropped on eastern culture, the atomic bomb. I did all that exploring for *Wanderings* before I wrote *The Book of Lights* because I needed to know who I was.

**MHR:** How did your two years in Korea shape you?

**CP:** It transformed me totally. Totally. I'm still trying to figure out what that was all about. I know when I went to Korea I was a very coherent human being in the sense that I had a model of what I was—I had a map. I knew who I was as a Jew. I had been through Jewish Theological Seminary and was ordained. I knew who I was as a member of western culture. And I knew who I was as an American. I had a passion for America; when I was in high school history I was one of the winners of the *Hearst National American History Contest*—about thirty thousand kids participating, with nine winners.

When I went to Asia—Japan, Korea, and the other parts of Asia I visited as an American soldier—it all came unglued. It all became relativized. Everything turned

upside down. And that “upside down” is what I explored in *The Book of Lights*, which was written from an American point of view. The next book about Asia, *I Am the Clay*, was written from an Asian point of view. Those two books so far are my explorations of that world. My time in Asia utterly transformed me and left me with nothing but questions for which I'm still struggling to find answers.

**MHR:** What are some of the questions?

**CP:** Let me give you an example. I remember realizing one day in Japan, after just having gone through some of the temples in Kyoto, that I was in a world that didn't hate Jews. Even today with all the anti-Semitic books that are in bookstores, the Japanese don't hate Jews. It was a very exhilarating experience to find myself in a world where I wasn't being judged for what I was. I was only another white face. The irony was that this was a pagan world. It was a world that my scriptures told me to avoid, to condemn.

**MHR:** So, in one sense, the named enemy was the one who embraced you the most?

**CP:** Exactly. I remember a scene where I was visiting a temple and I saw an old Japanese man praying. He had a long white beard and a fedora hat, and a long brown coat. He was praying with such intensity that the first thing I recalled were the old men in the synagogue I grew up in. On the night of Yom Kippur, the most sacred night of the year they would pray this way with the same intensity. I remember saying to myself at the time, “What am I seeing here? Is this man praying to an idol? And what is the God that I pray to doing at this moment? Is he answering his prayers? If not, why not? When are you ever going to see greater devotion in prayer? And if the God I pray to is listening, to this old pagan's prayer, then what are Judaism and Christianity all about?”

I had dozens of experiences like that every week—cultural encounters. The Koreans had lost over a million people during the war, which is staggering. I remember saying to myself, “Why did these people suffer? They were just in the way of empires.” It's one thing to read about it in the newspapers, but it's another thing to actually stand there and see it.

I remember my father once saying, “Jews suffer because they decided they were different. You're going to be different, people are going to point at you, and they are going to make you pay the price for it.” He believed we were different, and though he didn't like to pay the price, he said he would pay the price if he had to. That's the sort of thing that happened to me again and again for the sixteen months I was in Asia. I was totally transformed by it. It not only relativized my Jewishness, it relativized my Americanness and my westernness simultaneously. It set everything into specific culture contexts and at the same time taught me that my culture could be viewed from outside its perimeters by another culture, and be seen in an altogether different way. What

happened was that I began to see my culture from the outside. When that happens to your head, you are never the same again.

**MHR:** Once you were outside your culture with a different perspective, what did you learn?

**CP:** You have to get outside of your culture for a significant period of time and get inside the culture that has brought you outside of your own culture. I did just that. I read, I talked to Asians, I befriended them, I listened to them. Once you cut through the veneer of the politeness, and their own hesitations, you get close to them and see the sameness, even though it's another world.

**MHR:** You spoke of complaining to God, and in your writings there are characters who shout at God. It seems to be more acceptable for Jews to do this than for non-Jews.

**CP:** The tone is set immediately in the Bible with Abraham. He has a long talk with God and tries to change God's mind regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. "Suppose there are some decent people there. What are you going to do—kill them all?" Well that's pretty audacious, I think. After all, it's God he's bargaining with. It may be the creator God who doesn't get his or her way all the time, but it's still God.

Of course, the first grave lament—the one that sets the tone for all the laments in Jewish history—is the book of Job. Now, the book of Job is about one thousand years into Israelite history. That's quite a note to strike, the book of Job. It was struck because there was a sense that the covenant relationship wasn't working. At least it certainly wasn't working in this world.

**MHR:** Not working in terms of reciprocity?

**CP:** That's what covenantal relationships are all about. I do something, you do something. If I do something and you don't, you've broken the covenant. It's as blunt as that. It's a treaty—I keep my end, you keep your end. If you don't, the treaty is broken.

By the time of the book of Job, there was a sense that the covenant was not working. Much of it had to do with the Maccabean Wars and the awful suffering that Jews went through. But for whatever the reason, the writer of the book of Job said, "The covenant isn't working." It is one long complaint. It amounts to Job taking God to court. In the Jewish worldview, the metaphor for complaint to God is the idea of taking God to court because Judaism is a legal system. "Now I know I'm going to lose this case, because you're God and I'm a simple human being, but I'm going to take you to court anyway, and I'm going to let the judges know how I feel and what the charges are. I'll lose, but it's what I'm going to do anyway."

Remember, the book was canonized, which already tells you that this attitude is acceptable to the rabbis of the Talmud. To canonize a book in the ancient world was to guarantee its permanent existence. Not to have it canonized was to virtually guarantee its oblivion. We've had complaints like this all through Jewish history. Books of complaint were written in the wake of the Crusades, the massacres in the 1600's in eastern Europe and the Ukraine. This is now part of the Jewish tradition, complaining against God.

I once talked about this to Norwegian clergy. They invited me to a conference, and I told them about this tradition of Jewish complaint. Some of them were aghast over it. But then they said, "I wish we had done this a year or so ago." They had an awfully tragic ferry accident where hundreds of Norwegians perished, and when their parishioners came to them, they didn't quite know how to handle it. My response, and the Jewish response, is to yell at God. There used to be a tradition, which may still be in existence in some Jewish communities, where if you had a complaint against God you stopped the service on Saturday. You went up to the ark, you opened the ark, and you stood there shouting at God until the rabbi finally led you away.

**MHR:** The thing that's so fascinating about this is that it happens inside a system of faith. If you're going to rage against the master of the universe, you had better have some kind of faith as to what he is essentially like.

**CP:** You shout out of faith, not because you don't have any faith. If you don't have faith, you don't have anyone to shout at.

**MHR:** There's so much richness to the Jewish traditions. I'm fascinated by it.

**CP:** Yes, well, remember how old it is!

**MHR:** As you think about the big picture of the book of Job, is there anything else you glean from it, other than the court-docket concept?

**CP:** The Book of Job is a metaphor par excellence of the Jewish tradition of complaint against God. A poet—a great poet—must have suffered terribly. And he took one of the oldest stories known to him and used it for his own purposes. The story was about a man who was tested by the gods. The author of the book of Job made that ancient story the framing device for his poem. Here's a man of faith. God destroys his family, and virtually destroys him, but the man of faith doesn't lose his faith. He is restored by God, lives on, enjoys a new family and new wealth. That's the epic.

Between those two elements of the story the poet inserts what we call the book of Job. Job is sitting in torment, comforted by his friends, lamenting his sorry state, hoping to die. He pours his heart out. And the response of the poet was,

“You're right, the covenant isn't working—not visibly, and not on this earth. But it's working in some cosmic fashion, and we don't fully understand it.” That was not the biblical view. The biblical view was that the covenant was working visibly. In the time of David, in the time of Solomon, in the time of the kings, if you disobeyed you were punished, and if you obeyed you expected to be rewarded. The book of Job insists that covenant was not working anymore, that it was no longer effective for some reason on the earthly scheme of things, though it was working in some cosmic fashion. First of all, that's not terribly satisfying to the earthling. And second of all, it's very intellectual; it satisfies the head but not the heart. That's the answer of the writer of the book of Job. That's one answer to the breakdown of the covenant. The second answer was the rabbinic one. And that is, “The covenant may not be working, but it's going to work again in the future, and we have to live our lives in the meantime in accordance with God's laws.”

**MHR:** That's the idea of the Messiah?

**CP:** Yes, redemption was deferred to some future time. The third answer was an apocalyptic one. That is, “It's not working, but it's going to work next week, because God is sending somebody to get it to work right.” That's what I call “hot messianism”. The rabbinic version is cooled down messianism, deferred messianism. Hot messianism became Christianity. There is no such idea as loss of faith because you complain against God.

**MHR:** What do you mean that there's no such thing as a loss of faith?

**CP:** As far as I can recall, there's only one instance in all of Talmudic literature of a rabbi who lost faith in God. That's seven hundred years of Talmudic literature! The rabbi was Elisha Ben-Abuyah. He once saw a man send his son up a ladder to chase away a mother bird so he could get the fledglings. He did this because the biblical law is that you are not allowed to catch both the fledglings and the mother bird at the same time. As the boy did this, he fell and broke his head and died.

Now, the problem in this particular instance is that in the biblical verse you are promised that if you do this you will have long life. Elisha Ben-Abuyah was with another rabbi when he saw this. The other rabbi was aghast, but said nothing and ran away crying. Elisha Ben-Abuyah shouted out, “There is no judge, and there is no justice,” which was his way of saying, “God doesn't work the way he claims”. He maintained that attitude, and he was excommunicated. But even so, some of his students still followed him.

There is no such thing in the ancient world as not believing in God, or the gods, unless you were a member of one of the Greek intellectual societies. Even Socrates believed in some form of a deity. He didn't believe in the statuary of Athens, but he had his own notion of what a deity was and how it functioned. To

believe that there isn't any deity is a modern idea.

**MHR:** I read the Old Testament and there are images of sacrifice, ritual, slaughter, law-keeping to the minutiae. Then through the centuries, the most conservative branches of Judaism tried to follow that. What do you do with the idea of sacrifice and the law-keeping?

**CP:** Mamoneides was a 12<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and philosopher who was born in Spain and lived in Egypt. He was very uncomfortable with all the rules of the sacrificial system. He said it was just a stage in Israelite development. The fact of the matter is that Mamoneides probably didn't grasp the notion that there was no other way to worship God in the ancient world. You worshiped God through giving gifts, and the gift was something precious to you. One of the most precious of possessions was the cattle you owned. If you felt you had sinned, you offered God a gift by way of propitiation.

That was the notion behind the sacrificial system. Blood in the ancient world was considered a cleansing liquid because it was the liquid of life. They saw that if you lost blood, you died. Therefore, it was the blood of life, and it was used to purify. As far as we can gather, that was the notion behind the sacrificial system. It was part of the way Jews worshiped until the destruction of the second temple. I know Jews who are sophisticated scholars and very religious, who want to see the sacrificial system reestablished. I don't.

**MHR:** What does it mean, then, for you to worship?

**CP:** To ask, to remember, to lament, to complain, to seek one's own self and that which is beyond the self. Prayer is the trajectory and the perspective, enabling you to locate your own sense of self in this trajectory. If you don't have a sense of where you are from, you don't know where you are at! And if you don't know where you are at, you have no sense of self. And if you have no sense of self, you are a very frightened human being.

**MHR:** For you, worship involves prayer and Jewish tradition. But is worship bigger than that? Is it part of your everyday living—your writing, for example?

**CP:** Yes! Absolutely. Writing is an act of worship too. And learning. For some Jews, learning is more of an act of worship than worship itself. There is an issue in Jewish law as to whether or not you may interrupt someone for prayers when they are learning. Some rabbis say yes, some say no.

**MHR:** You said writing is an act of worship. You have also written that nothing is sacred to the writer save the act of writing. Is that a paradox?

**CP:** Well, there is a difference between worship and sanctity. In worship you enter into a relationship with somebody or something. The worship is in the

relationship. I don't think there is something objectively sacred about anything that I write, but the act of creating has an aura of sanctity to me. The moments when I lose myself—that's what I dream of, to get lost in the writing—those relational moments, that arc of relationship between my being and the writing, the thing being created, is as close as I can get to the essence of worship. I feel the same way, for example, when I'm in a synagogue and I'm lost in prayer. I don't think there is any intrinsic sanctity to the particular words, because if circumstances dictate, I would have no objection to changing the words. There is a major discussion going on in my synagogue right now as to whether to change the words in a prayer that is 2,000 years old. That prayer only mentions the patriarchs. Well, what about the matriarchs? The discussion is whether to include not only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. Now that's a major change. But there is no frozen sanctity for me in that old formula; the sanctity lies in the relationship between myself as a human being and the text in the act of worship. That arc, again, that trajectory—that is the sacred moment. The same thing occurs to the writer. That is the mystery. That's the lone moment of awe. That's where we somehow come out of our mortal self. That's the moment of the transcendent.

**MHR:** In *Davita's Harp*, Jacob Daw says to Davita, “A writer is a strange instrument of our species, a harp of sorts, fine tuned to the dark contradictions of life...”

**CP:** That's what I'm talking about. A harp is a bunch of strings, and it is nothing unless someone is playing it. It is the melody of the harp that is the mystery. Sometimes if you leave a harp out in a strong wind, the wind will make the melody.

In Los Angeles somewhere, there is a harp that is a sculpture which reacts to winds. The harp is physical, the wind is physical, even though we can't see it. The music—what's the music? The music is the relationship between the harp and the wind. The writing is the relationship between the writer and the piece of paper. Worship is the relationship between the worshiper and the text.

**MHR:** Can a writer, such as yourself, ever retire?

**CP:** I don't know how writers retire. You see, I don't know how writers are made. Somebody who is in a profession and transfers at a certain point and climbs the ladder, gets to the top. The profession dictates the time frame. Writing doesn't dictate a time frame. There can be long periods of time when you are not writing at all and you are sitting there looking out a window and thinking. It's as mysterious to me now as it was when I was sixteen, seventeen years old.

I don't know what retirement means, because there is no time frame for a writer. I may decide I don't want to write anymore—so, okay, I'm finished writing. But that

doesn't mean it's going to turn off. All it means is I'm going to lie there and toss and turn, and sentences are going to go through my head as they always do, and sooner or later I'm going to pick up the pen and write. I have no illusions about writing. It's not something I do, it's something I'm driven to do. I don't understand it.

**MHR:** Writing seems to be more than just writing on a pad of paper, or typing at a keyboard. When you are looking out the window and imagining, that's part of writing too.

**CP:** Yes, and it's the fact that anytime you encounter anything, you are always looking to see if you can use it or rephrase it or restructure it. The head works constantly in terms of structure, creating form. I don't know that anyone who is a writer can get out of that. If you wake up one day and you don't have that anymore—that's the time that you retire.

**MHR:** What do you see on the horizon for humanity as we approach the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

**CP:** Well, it's generally our fate as human beings that as we approach the end of a century, we go collectively mad. And as we approach the end of a millennium, we grow collectively even madder. That is what is happening to us today: More fundamentalism. More visions, more insecurities, more madness. And you can see it all over the planet.

We just have to get over this hurdle of the next few years. What's interesting to me is that these calendrical cycles are entirely artificial. Nature knows no calendar. Nature simply hums along. We are the ones who have created the calendar, and we react to it. So we think some enormous event is about to occur, because of some map we've imposed on it.

In all candor, what I'm hoping is that we make it to the end of the century and turn the corner. The last century has been the most awful century in the history of the millennium. I hope and I pray that we are at the beginning of the end of that awfulness as we turn into the next millennium.

<sup>1</sup>Chaim Potok, "The Invisible Map of Meaning: A Writer's Confrontation," Triquarterly, Spring 1992

<sup>2</sup>Potok, "The Invisible Map of Meaning."