

# The Chosen

by Chaim Potok



**ABOUT THE READING** Chaim Potok was born in New York City in 1929 to Polish immigrants and raised in an Orthodox Jewish home. His first novel, *The Chosen*, was the first book from a major publisher to describe Orthodox Judaism in the United States. It tells the story of a friendship between the son of a rabbi and a more secularly-minded Jewish boy in Brooklyn.

## VOCABULARY

**compulsory** required  
**unanimity** agreement  
**emancipated** freed  
**gentile** non-Jewish



*As you read the passage below, look for differences between your school and a yeshiva.*

Every Orthodox Jew sent his male children to a yeshiva, a Jewish parochial school, where they studied from eight or nine in the morning to four or five in the evening. On Fridays the students were let out at about one o'clock to prepare for the Shabbat. Jewish education was **compulsory** for the Orthodox, and because this was America and not Europe, English education was compulsory as well—so each student carried a double burden: Hebrew studies in the mornings and English studies in the afternoons. The test of intellectual excellence, however, had been reduced by tradition and unvoiced **unanimity** to a single area of study: Talmud. Virtuosity in Talmud was the achievement most sought after by every student of a yeshiva, for it was the automatic guarantee of a reputation for brilliance.

Danny attended the small yeshiva established by his father. Outside of the Williamsburg area, in Crown Heights, I attended the yeshiva in which my

**Shabbat** is the Hebrew word for Sabbath. It is a holy day in which Jews observe important rituals.

The Talmud is a book that expands on the earlier writings of the Jewish holy book, the Torah. The Talmud has two parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara.

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father taught. This latter yeshiva was somewhat looked down upon by the students of other Jewish parochial schools of Brooklyn: it offered more English subjects than the required minimum, and it taught its Jewish subjects in Hebrew rather than Yiddish. Most of the students were children of immigrant Jews who preferred to regard themselves as having been **emancipated** from the fenced-off ghetto mentality typical of the other Jewish parochial schools in Brooklyn.

Danny and I probably would never have met—or we would have met under altogether different circumstances—had it not been for America’s entry into the Second World War and the desire this bred on the part of some English teachers in the Jewish parochial schools to show the **gentile** world that yeshiva students were as physically fit, despite their long hours of study, as any other American student. They went about proving this by organizing the Jewish parochial schools in and around our area into competitive leagues, and once every two weeks the schools would compete against one another in a variety of sports. I became a member of my schools’ varsity softball team.

What was unusual about the narrator’s yeshiva?

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## ANALYZING LITERATURE

**1. Main Idea** Why was it unlikely that the narrator and Danny would ever have met?

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**2. Critical Thinking: Drawing Conclusions** What is the importance of the Talmud in Judaism? Why is it important to the narrator and his peers?

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## ACTIVITY

Read the rest of *The Chosen*. Write a review of the novel. In your review, explain the role religion plays in the book.