

# My Name is Asher Lev



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHAIM POTOK

Chaim Potok was the eldest of four children born to Jewish immigrants from Poland. The family were observant Orthodox Jews, and each of the children either became a rabbi or married one. Although his parents discouraged secular literature, Potok read [Brideshead Revisited](#) as a teenager, which inspired him to become a writer himself. He began publishing his work while studying at Yeshiva University, from which he graduated in 1950. He then studied at Jewish Theological Seminary and was ordained as a Conservative rabbi. After earning a master's degree in English literature, he served as a U.S. Army chaplain in South Korea, which he described as a transformative experience. While working as the director of a Jewish summer camp, he met Adena Sara Mosevitzky. They were married in 1958 and had three children. Potok later earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania and worked for the magazine *Conservative Judaism* and the Jewish Publication Society. Over the years, the Potok family lived in Brooklyn, Israel, and Philadelphia. Of nine published novels, Potok's most famous is National Book Award nominee [The Chosen](#), which he published in 1967. His novels helped bring questions of Jewish identity and culture before a wider, non-Jewish audience. He also left a legacy of highly-regarded Torah commentary.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *My Name Is Asher Lev*, Asher's father, Aryeh, is involved in secretive missions to the Soviet Union to help Jewish people who are being persecuted under Stalin; most members of the family's Hasidic synagogue are described as having suffered under communism in some way. Judaism was, in fact, harshly suppressed under Stalin, though antisemitism was often expressed, in euphemistic terms, as opposition to "rootless cosmopolitans" or "bourgeois nationalism." Measures included Siberian exile, removal of Jewish people from leadership positions, and attempts to liquidate Jewish cultural institutions. Two specific events alluded to in *Asher Lev* include the Night of the Murdered Poets (August 12, 1952), when 13 Soviet Jews, many of them writers, were executed for alleged treason and espionage; and the so-called Doctors' Plot, when a group of mostly Jewish doctors were arrested and tortured on suspicion of trying to assassinate Soviet leaders. Also in the novel, Asher's family belongs to the Ladover movement, which is a thinly-veiled reference to the Chabad, or Lubavitch, movement. Chabad emerged in Eastern Europe in the late-18th century, emphasizing both a mystical and intellectual approach to the Torah and other sacred writings. After World War II broke out,

Chabad headquarters moved to Brooklyn, New York. The most recent Rebbe (leading rabbi), Menachem Mendel Schneerson, placed great emphasis on global outreach, especially to secular or unaffiliated Jews—the kind of work in which Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev are involved. The Rebbe in the novel is likely based on Schneerson.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Potok described [Brideshead Revisited](#) as one of his biggest literary influences, later striving to create a Hasidic "world out of words" much as Evelyn Waugh did with the aristocratic English Catholics in his novel. James Joyce's [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#), in which Stephen Dedalus leaves behind his Irish Catholic upbringing in order to pursue his calling as a writer, was another inspiration for Potok. Elie Wiesel, Potok's contemporary and an admirer of his, also came from an Orthodox Jewish background and described his personal experiences of suffering in a Nazi death camp in [Night](#), perhaps the most famous Holocaust memoir. Finally, Potok saw *My Name Is Asher Lev* as a continuation of his earlier novel, [The Chosen](#), in the sense that *Asher Lev* deals with the clash between different aesthetic worlds, whereas [The Chosen](#) deals with an intellectual clash.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Name Is Asher Lev
- **When Written:** 1972
- **Where Written:** United States and Israel
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Fiction, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Brooklyn, New York
- **Climax:** Asher's parents see his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings.
- **Antagonist:** Aryeh Lev
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Potok the Painter.** Chaim Potok, like his character Asher Lev, was an avid painter from boyhood onward. In an interview, he said that his father, like Asher's, "detested" the hobby. Potok even painted a "Brooklyn Crucifixion" similar to one of Asher's paintings.

**The Real Jacob Kahn.** Potok said that Asher's mentor, sculptor Jacob Kahn, was based on the Cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz. Like Kahn's character, Lipchitz came from a Jewish family, was

part of Pablo Picasso's circle in Paris, and settled in New York City after fleeing the Nazis.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Asher Lev introduces himself as “the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*.” He is also “an observant Jew.” Because Asher’s dual identity has generated gossip and myths, he will now offer a defense of himself.

Asher explains that he is descended from a “mythic ancestor,” the estate manager for a wealthy Russian nobleman. The nobleman had burned a village and killed people during a fit of drunkenness. After that, Asher’s ancestor began to travel, supporting Jewish scholarship and learning everywhere he went. As a child, Asher was taught that non-Jews—people of the *sitra achra*—behave like the Russian nobleman. Observant Jews, on the other hand, work to “bring the Master of the Universe into the world,” like Asher’s ancestor. Asher’s grandfather, an ingenious scholar, had also traveled as an emissary of the Ladover Rebbe, until he was brutally murdered by a Russian peasant. Unlike any of these ancestors, Asher, born in 1943 in Brooklyn, has a gift for drawing.

When Asher was small, his father, Aryeh, traveled extensively on behalf of the Rebbe. So did Asher’s Uncle Yaakov, older brother of his mother, Rivkeh. One day, when Asher is six, Rivkeh receives news that Yaakov has been killed in a car accident. Rivkeh is “almost destroyed” by Yaakov’s death; for months, she seldom leaves her room, and sometimes Asher hears her talking to Yaakov. Asher spends a lot of this time drawing pictures, which Aryeh feels are a waste of time. Eventually, Rivkeh decides she wants to resume Yaakov’s work. The Rebbe gives permission for her to enroll in college and study Russian affairs.

During his early years at yeshiva, Asher stops drawing. He often hears his father and the yeshiva’s mashpia talking about the persecution of Russian Jews under Stalin. He begins visiting Yudel Krinsky, a Russian Jewish refugee, to hear stories about this persecution and to admire the art supplies in Krinsky’s store. Sometimes, when Asher returns home late from these visits, his frightened mother screams at him in rage. After Stalin dies, the Rebbe asks Aryeh to move to Vienna to work with struggling Russian Jews. Asher, distressed at the possibility of moving, begins drawing again.

As he continues to insist that he can’t move to Vienna with his parents, Asher becomes increasingly absorbed in his drawing. One day, he’s frightened to realize he has drawn a menacing picture of the Rebbe in his Chumash. The mashpia meets with him and appeals to Asher’s sense of responsibility to his fellow Jews—Asher’s gift, he says, is causing him to think only of himself. The following summer, however, the Rebbe and Asher’s parents agree that Asher cannot go to Vienna; Aryeh moves

there alone.

Although Rivkeh throws herself into her master’s coursework, she and Asher are unhappy in Aryeh’s absence. Rivkeh buys Asher his first set of oil paints, and he becomes even more absorbed in his art, neglecting his Torah studies. Asher also begins visiting the art museum and copying pictures of Jesus and of nudes. When Aryeh comes home for a visit, he is furious to discover how Asher has been spending his time. He tells Asher that his drawing comes from the “Other Side” and must be resisted. After Aryeh returns to Europe, Asher begins working harder in school, though he doesn’t give up drawing and painting.

Just before his bar mitzvah, Asher meets with the Rebbe. The Rebbe has asked Jacob Kahn, a famous sculptor and non-observant Jew, to mentor Asher. Asher is overjoyed, but Aryeh feels ashamed of the growing distance between himself and his son; he can’t even rejoice at Asher’s bar mitzvah.

A couple of months later, Asher goes to Jacob Kahn’s studio for the first time. He also meets Kahn’s agent, Anna Schaeffer. Jacob Kahn warns Asher that he is about to enter a “*goyisch*, pagan” way of life. But he agrees to give Asher five years of his time. Asher spends that summer studying with Jacob, including learning to draw nude models.

Rivkeh, now with her doctorate, plans to move to Europe to assist Aryeh in his work, and, despite his protests, Asher is persuaded to move in with his Uncle Yitzchok. After his mother leaves, Asher spends the summer in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with Jacob Kahn. He continues praying and keeping kosher during the summer, and he celebrates the Jewish festivals with joy and fervor while working on his art.

When his parents come home for visits, Aryeh continues to be hostile toward Asher’s art, and Rivkeh feels caught between them. Asher enrolls in Brooklyn College and continues attending yeshiva. Asher has a couple of successful exhibitions, and his parents move back to Brooklyn. Critics have begun to say that Asher has surpassed his mentor, and he and Jacob drift apart. Aryeh makes an effort to connect with Asher, asking him questions about artistic concepts. However, he is pleased when Asher decides to spend time traveling in Europe.

In Florence, the works of Michelangelo have a profound effect on Asher. As he travels in Italy and Paris, he meets with some of his father’s Ladover connections and is moved to see the flourishing yeshivos Aryeh has established throughout his career. He decides to settle in Paris for a while. For the first time in years, he begins painting his mythic ancestor and scenes from his Brooklyn neighborhood. He also reflects on his mother’s lifelong anguish, as she felt pulled between himself, Aryeh, and her own fears and desires. He works on two paintings, both of them portraying the Brooklyn apartment **window** in a way that evokes the **crucifixion**. In the second painting, he portrays his mother bound to the cruciform shape,

her head divided into three segments looking upward and at the figures of himself and his father.

Anna Schaeffer takes Asher's Brooklyn paintings, including the two crucifixions, back to New York for an upcoming exhibition. A few days before the show, Asher returns to his parents' apartment. His parents welcome him warmly, and because Asher promises there are no nudes in his paintings, they plan to attend the exhibition. He visits Jacob Kahn for the last time.

In the days before the exhibition, Asher agonizes over the crucifixion paintings, knowing how much these images will hurt his parents. However, he can't think of a way to warn them of what they're about to see. At the exhibit, Aryeh and Rivkeh are shocked and horrified by the crucifixions; they immediately leave in silence.

Although most critical reviews are favorable, and most of Asher's art is sold for high prices, his family and community treat him coldly after the exhibition. Asher tries to explain to his mother that his use of the form of the crucifix was an aesthetic choice without blasphemous intent. She listens, but she cannot understand, nor can she explain it to Aryeh. The *Rebbe* meets with Asher and tells him that, although he understands what Asher has done, this community cannot accept it—Asher has crossed a line. The *Rebbe* asks Asher to leave the Brooklyn Ladover community. As Asher walks his beloved Brooklyn streets for a final time, he reflects that his creativity is both “demonic and divine.” The next day, Asher says farewell to his parents before catching a flight to Paris. As his cab drives down the street, he looks back and sees them watching him through the living room window.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Asher Lev** – Asher Lev is a Hasidic Jew and a gifted artist, a member of the somewhat insular and highly observant Ladover sect. He is the son of Aryeh Lev and Rivkeh Lev. From the time he is a little boy in Brooklyn, New York, Asher has ingenious instincts and a talent for drawing. He is also sincerely religious. Throughout his life, these two commitments create conflict in Asher's mind, as well as between Asher and his parents and yeshiva teachers. The Ladover community, and Asher's father in particular, believe that art is from the *sitra achra* and is therefore demonic in nature. Though he doesn't dislike his *yeshiva* studies, Asher struggles to have enough energy for both school and his art. Asher's mother Rivkeh is often caught between him and his disapproving father. As a boy, Asher befriends Yudel Krinsky during Aryeh's frequent travels to Eastern Europe to help persecuted Jews. After Asher's bar mitzvah, the *Rebbe* gets Jacob Kahn, a well-known Jewish sculptor, to mentor Asher in painting, and Asher spends many summers with Kahn and his wife Tanya. As Asher continues to

hone his skill as a painter, he still struggles between his conservative religious upbringing and his desire to portray the truth of his subjects—even if that means the final product is uncomfortable or provocative. After Asher starts college, Anna Schaeffer begins arranging exhibitions for Asher; he receives much positive critical attention, and his work is purchased for high prices. After graduating from college, Asher spends a year in Paris struggling to come to terms with his mother's lifelong suffering and the tension between himself and his parents, and he finally expresses himself through the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings. His controversial use of Christian **crucifixion** imagery in these paintings alienates him from both his family and his Ladover community, and in the end, he is exiled and leaves Brooklyn to move back to Paris.

**Aryeh Lev** – Aryeh Lev is Rivkeh's husband and Asher's father. He came to Brooklyn from Europe as a teenager, after his father's murder. He is descended from a long line of scholarly Hasidic Jews who traveled to promote Torah study. After studying political science at the Ladover *Rebbe's* request, Aryeh begins traveling himself to help persecuted Jews in other countries. He is especially concerned with the plight of Russian Jews and works to bring them to safety in the United States. Later, he travels to Europe himself to help rebuild devastated Jewish communities. Aryeh has a troubled relationship with Asher because he does not approve of Asher's passion for art, seeing it as coming from the *sitra achra* and as distracting Asher from his obligations to his fellow Jews. As Asher grows older, Aryeh becomes particularly concerned about Asher's incorporation of “*goyisch*” and Christian elements into his art, and he is distressed that Asher spends more time on drawing and painting than in studying Torah. He is never fully accepts Asher's choices, although he continues to love his son.

**Rivkeh Lev** – Rivkeh is Aryeh's wife and Asher's mother. As a young woman, Rivkeh is like a light-hearted older sister to Asher, but after her older brother Yaakov dies suddenly, she suffers a psychological and emotional crisis. She begins to heal by pursuing her brother's incomplete work of studying Russian affairs, eventually assisting Aryeh in his work among Ladover communities in Europe. She finds a measure of joy and fulfillment after achieving her doctorate and joining her husband abroad. However, because of the trauma of Yaakov's death, she suffers great fear and anxiety whenever either Aryeh or Asher is away from her. She is more accepting of Asher's art than Aryeh is, but she struggles to mediate between Asher's aspirations as an artist and Aryeh's anger and grief over his son's path. In adulthood, Asher begins to appreciate his mother's sufferings more deeply, but his controversial efforts to express them through the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings only cause Rivkeh greater pain.

**Mythic Ancestor** – The mythic ancestor is Asher's great-great-great grandfather on his father Aryeh's side. From early childhood, Asher hears stories of his ancestor's exploits—he

initially worked as the overseer for a Russian nobleman's estates, enriching himself and the nobleman in the process. After the nobleman burned down a peasant village, however, the ancestor began traveling the world to promote holiness and Torah study. Asher always hears of his ancestor as an example of holiness as opposed to non-Jewish wickedness. He also dreams vividly of his ancestor, especially after experiencing conflict between his artistic goals and his family's and community's expectations of him as an observant Jew. His image of his ancestor is usually ominous and threatening, casting judgment on Asher for wasting time. At the end of the book, however, Asher reinterprets his ancestor's story, imagining that he traveled in order to atone for his complicity in the nobleman's violence. The ancestor becomes milder and gentler in Asher's dreams, and Asher imagines that he is joining his ancestor in bringing greater balance to the world.

**The Rebbe** – The *Rebbe* is the leader of both the Brooklyn Ladover community and the worldwide Ladover movement. The *Rebbe* is a mysterious, somewhat reclusive, and larger-than-life figure. However, he is caring, thoughtful, and perceptive in personal interactions. He brought Aryeh to the United States after his father's death and directed Aryeh's studies and subsequent travels on his behalf. He later sends Aryeh and Rivkeh abroad to establish new Ladover communities, but, seeing Asher's emotional fragility, allows him to remain at home. He supports Asher's artistic aspirations by connecting him with Jacob Kahn, taking a more nuanced view of art than Asher's parents do. However, for the protection of the community, he sends Asher away from Brooklyn after Asher exhibits his controversial *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings.

**Jacob Kahn** – Jacob Kahn is a famous sculptor who was once part of Picasso's circle in Paris. He fled Nazi persecution to the United States during the Second World War. When Asher first meets him, he has flowing white hair and a "walrus mustache." Though he is not a religiously-observant Jew, he meets frequently with the Rebbe, and the *Rebbe* pairs him with Asher in the hope of directing Asher's artistic passion. He is 72 when Asher begins studying with him at age 13. He quickly becomes a father figure to Asher, who visits his Manhattan studio throughout the year and spends summers with him and his wife, Tanya, through his teen years. Jacob is blunt, especially when it comes to warning Asher about the perils and challenges of the artistic world, but he has a tender heart. He is occasionally given to depressive slumps, especially when he thinks about past sufferings and his artistic limitations. By the time Asher is a young man, he is beginning to surpass Jacob artistically, and they drift apart. The last time they see one another, Jacob is past 80, sick, and frail.

**Yudel Krinsky** – Yudel Krinsky is a man of Ukrainian Jewish origin who suffered an 11-year Siberian exile and lost his wife and children while there. He is characterized by his raspy voice and distinctive Russian-style skullcap. Aryeh helps move him to

the United States, and he becomes a father figure to young Asher, telling him about the plight of Russian Jews and letting Asher help out around his stationery shop. Yudel's sufferings give him a morose outlook even as he marvels at the freedom and plenty in his new home. Yudel is kind to Asher and supportive of his art, but he also urges Asher to honor his parents and community customs. Yudel eventually remarries and has two children.

**Rav Yosef Cutler (the mashpia)** – The *mashpia* is the religious instructor in Asher's yeshiva. He frequently speaks to the students about Hasidic doctrine, Ladover history, and the struggles of Jews in other countries. He speaks with Asher personally when Asher falters in his studies and starts drawing in class. He has a gentle, warm presence. He is the father of Avraham Cutler.

**Uncle Yaakov** – Uncle Yaakov is Rivkeh's older brother. He does not appear directly in the story, but his death in a car accident when Asher is six is devastating to Rivkeh, to whom he was a paternal figure. He was a gentle, scholarly man whose catchphrase was, "What's new in the world?" After his death, Rivkeh sometimes adopts his mannerisms or appeals to him in moments of distress.

**Mrs. Rackover** – Mrs. Rackover is a widow who starts coming to the Levs' apartment to cook and clean after Rivkeh is hospitalized following Yaakov's death. She only speaks Yiddish. Mrs. Rackover is "short, plump, stern, energetic, and fiercely pious." She is kind to Asher but frequently scolds him for coming home late and causing his parents distress.

**The pimply-faced boy** – The pimply-faced boy is Asher's bullying yeshiva classmate. He mocks Asher as a "desecrater" and a "goy" after Asher gets in trouble for drawing in his Chumash. After he leaves cruel limericks in Asher's textbook, Asher gets back at him by leaving him a terrifying drawing of the pimply-faced boy's head on the bodies of the dead in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*.

**Uncle Yitzchok** Uncle Yitzchok is Aryeh's brother, a jovial, down-to-earth, successful businessman who runs a jewelry and watch-repair shop. He teases young Asher about his future fame and later supports his art by setting up an attic studio for him. He even lets Asher live with him, his wife, and their several children when Asher refuses to move to Europe with his parents.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Anna Schaeffer** – Anna is a matronly older woman, an art dealer, who arranges exhibitions for Jacob Kahn and eventually for Asher. She is effusive, openly enjoying the riches her artists bring her, but she is also warm-hearted.

**Tanya Kahn** – Jacob Kahn's quiet wife. She nurtures him through his occasional depressive spells. Asher spends summers with her and Jacob.

**Aunt Leah** – Rivkeh’s sister who lives in Boston.

**Rav Mendel Dorochoff** – The Rebbe’s *gabbai*, or chief of staff.

**Avraham Cutler** – Avraham Cutler is Yosef Cutler’s son and the head of the Paris yeshiva established by Aryeh. When Asher visits Paris, Avraham welcomes Asher into the yeshiva community, helps him set up his studio, and introduces him to a girl whom Asher later desires to marry.

## TERMS

**Sitra achra** – *Sitra achra* refers to the “Other Side,” the “side of impurity,” or the “side of evil.” It is the opposite of the side of holiness. The term originates from Kabbalah, a school of thought in Hasidic Judaism that seeks inner, mystical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic texts. In the story, **Asher’s** father, **Aryeh**—and sometimes Asher himself—fear that Asher’s art is a gift from the “Other Side.” This creates tension, because Jewish people are expected to dedicate their lives to the pursuit of holiness and resist all that comes from the *sitra achra*.

**Shabbos** – *Shabbos*, or the Sabbath, is a weekly Jewish observance commemorating God’s rest from the work of creation. It is observed from around sunset on Friday evening until the following Saturday night. It includes synagogue services, festive meals, and rest from work.

**Ribbono Shel Olom/Master of the Universe** – *Ribbono Shel Olom* is a Hebrew term meaning “Master of the Universe.” The characters in the novel frequently use both the Hebrew and English terms to refer to God.

**Yeshiva** – A *yeshiva* (plural *yeshivos*) is a Jewish educational institution. In the Ladover community, *yeshiva* education is single-sex. Asher attends *yeshiva* from around age six through his college years, studying both religious and “secular” subjects.

**Chumash** – A *chumash* is a Torah in printed book form, as opposed to a scroll—thus, it’s what **Asher** and his classmates would study in yeshiva. The word derives from the Hebrew term for “five,” referring to the five books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).



## THE DIVINE VS. THE DEMONIC

In *My Name Is Asher Lev*, Asher, a young Hasidic Jew (part of the fictionalized Ladover sect) grows up with a fervent belief in the Jewish obligation to bring about holiness in the world. In fact, he and his community believe that there are two “sides” in the world—those holy things pertaining to religious, Torah-observant Jews, and those things that belong to the “Other,” hence “demonic,” side that opposes holiness. This strict division between divinity and perceived demonic influences causes confusion for Asher as he wrestles with his artistic gift and calling throughout his life. By showing how Asher finally comes to terms with this dichotomy, Chaim Potok argues that the distinction between the demonic and the divine is more ambiguous than human categories allow for, and that this ambiguity often generates strife for communities.

Asher grows up believing that Jews must constantly oppose all that comes from the “Other Side,” and he fears that his unsought artistic gift might originate there and is therefore demonic in nature. One day Asher’s father, Aryeh, tells his young son: “Asher, you have a gift. I do not know if it is a gift from the Ribbono Shel Olom or from the Other Side. If it is from the Other Side, then it is foolishness, dangerous foolishness, for it will take you away from Torah and from your people and lead you to think only of yourself.” His father’s words create a lingering fear that Asher will inevitably undermine his own community’s efforts at holiness, by virtue of his potentially demonic gift. Later, Asher asks God, “If You don’t want me to use the gift, why did You give it to me? Or did it come to me from the Other Side? It was horrifying to think my gift may have been given to me by the source of evil and ugliness. How can evil and ugliness make a gift of beauty?” Asher struggles to make sense of how he can be on the side of holiness and beauty if his gift has an evil source—how can his insatiable desire to draw be reconciled with his responsibility to make the world holy?

Asher also grows up hearing about his “mythic ancestor,” a man who had managed the estates of a Russian nobleman but, after the nobleman drunkenly burned down a village and killed many people, began traveling to establish Jewish schools and synagogues. Asher dreams most vividly of his ancestor when he fears his gift’s demonic potential, like after he illicitly draws in a Bible: “[M]y mythic ancestor thundered through the enshrouding fog, his dark-bearded face trembling with rage. There was the roar of moving earth and the roaring sound of his anger [...] I felt his words push against me.” Asher fears that his own ancestor, a larger-than-life campaigner for holiness, is somehow furiously opposed to a “demonic” gift Asher can scarcely control. Even if it’s just a dream, it reveals frightening possibilities about Asher’s role in the world, leaving him uncertain whether he is more aligned with God or the demonic “Other Side.”



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

As an adult, however, Asher questions the clear dichotomy drawn between holiness and the “Other Side,” causing him to believe that human beings are not entirely divine nor entirely demonic, and that he must strike a balance between these two sides. Asher ponders his ancestor’s complicity in the very horrors he dedicated his life to opposing: “You see how a goy behaves, went the whispered word to the child. A Jew does not behave this way. But the [mythic ancestor] had made [the drunken nobleman] wealthy, wondered the child. Is not the Jew also somehow to blame? The child had never given voice to that question.” As an adult, Asher questions whether people’s actions, and hence their moral status, can be as neatly categorized as childhood lessons suggest.

As Asher reconsiders the stark separations he took for granted as a child, he also wonders whether his artistic gift necessarily needs to be categorized as either “holy” or the “demonic”: “A balance had to be given the world; the demonic had to be reshaped into meaning. Had a dream-haunted Jew [his ancestor] spent the rest of his life sculpting form out of the horror of his private night? I did not know. But I sensed it as truth.” This need for “balance” and “sculpting” necessarily demands direct engagement with the “Other Side,” not avoidance or condemnation. Asher ultimately concludes that, “Creativity was demonic and divine. Art was demonic and divine [...] I was demonic and divine. Asher Lev, son of Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev, was the child of the Master of the Universe and the Other Side.” Just as his mythic ancestor undertook journeys to atone for the world’s horrors, so Asher, and his creations, are not the sole property of one side or the other. This is how he resolves his fears about the origins of his artistic gift—he cannot hide from the “Other Side” if he truly intends to redeem it. And by working to redeem it, he won’t undermine his community’s efforts at holiness, but will rather strengthen those efforts.

The tragic element of *My Name Is Asher Lev* is that, though Asher finds a degree of peace by concluding that his art is “both demonic and divine,” he can’t express that belief to his community in a way that restores harmony between himself and them. When he paints the controversial *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings, for example, his fellow Ladover Jews can only see the paintings as blasphemous and thus from the “Other Side”—whereas Asher sees himself as reshaping a “blasphemous” form in order to restore “balance” to his family, whom he’s caused so much pain. On the surface, that effort only produces estrangement between himself, his family, and the community he loves. Thus Potok leaves it ambiguous as to whether Asher’s “balance” between the demonic and the divine is meaningful in the long run.

vibrant, loving Hasidic Jewish community—not only his family life, but his ancestral memory and his expectations for the future. As his gift for drawing and painting becomes apparent, however, his art increasingly comes into conflict with his religious identity and the expectations of his community. Although Asher’s religious beliefs remain strong, and he even finds ways to reconcile his artistic calling with his religious calling, he is eventually asked to leave his Brooklyn synagogue community behind because of the pain some of his paintings have caused. Through Asher’s ultimately failed attempts to maintain harmony between his art and his religious identity, Chaim Potok suggests that, while artistic expression does not inherently threaten one’s personal faith, it can prove to be incompatible with the values of one’s larger religious community; thus, the two are not completely reconcilable.

When Asher is young, many warn him that his art will conflict with his Ladover Jewish religious identity and community. After Asher sketches in a sacred book, his mashpia cautions him: “Many people feel they are in possession of a great gift when they are young. But [...] [o]ne does with a life what is precious not only to one’s own self but to one’s own people. That is the way our people live, Asherel. Do you understand me?” In other words, even if there is not anything inherently bad about Asher’s artistic gift, that gift must be subordinate to the needs of the community. Asher’s mother, Rivkeh, tries to be supportive, but a museum visit persuades her that Asher’s passion will expose him to images that are inappropriate for a religious Jew: “[Your painting has] taken us to Jesus. And to the way they paint women. Painting is for goyim, Asher. [Observant] Jews don’t draw and paint [...] What would the Rebbe say if he knew we were in the museum?” In Rivkeh’s view, Asher’s art inevitably places him on a collision course with the values of his community. Asher’s *Rebbe* (a religious leader of the Ladover Jews) places him under the tutelage of a Jewish artist, Jacob Kahn. Even the nonobservant Kahn asks Asher, “Do you begin to understand what you are going to be doing to yourself? [...] You are entering a religion called painting. [...] Its way of life is goyisch and pagan. In the entire history of European art, there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter.” It’s not that art is merely a distraction from Asher’s religious obligations and identity, argues Kahn; art will establish itself as a direct rival to his religion, with directly competing demands and values.

However, despite his resistance to moving abroad and an early lag in his Torah studies, Asher remains a faithfully observant Ladover Jew throughout the story. He continues to practice his faith alongside his studies with Kahn, and even reconciles his artistic pursuits with his community obligations. In Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Asher spends his summers studying with Jacob Kahn, he never neglects his spiritual practices: “Those mornings, the beach was my synagogue and the waves and gulls were audience to my



## ART AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

From the time Asher Lev is a small child, his entire life and identity is understood in terms of his

prayers [...] And sometimes the words seemed more appropriate to this beach than to the synagogue on my street.” Asher’s religious identity is not only intact in his new artistically-focused environment, but it thrives in new ways within those surroundings. Asher describes a year of devout religious observance—even after his parents have left him behind in New York and he’s immersed in his studies with Kahn—culminating in Simchas Torah, when the Ladover Jews dance joyfully with Torah scrolls. He pulls Kahn (who, as a nonobservant Jew, is merely looking on) into the dance: “His small dark skullcap was as awkward on his head as was the grasp of his fingers upon the Torah. But we held it together and we danced.” Asher’s religious commitment remains unwavering and heartfelt, even when external influences would seem to threaten it; and he doesn’t see his art and his religious faith as worlds that cannot touch. To the contrary, he actively tries to draw them together. Asher even comes to see himself as partnering with his “mythic ancestor”—who’d previously been an ominous fixture in his dreams—in setting the world right: “He came to me then, my mythic ancestor [...] [saying,] Who dares drain the world of its light? My Asher, my precious Asher, will you and I walk together now through the centuries?” The mythic ancestor is far from being Asher’s adversary, angry at him for wasting his time on art. The ancestor now seems to summon Asher to indispensable work for the sake of the world, and in continuation of family tradition, not in competition with it.

Ultimately, however, Asher’s commitment to his art results in exile from his community, suggesting that one’s personal creative pursuits cannot always be peacefully reconciled with one’s religious devotion. After Asher publicly displays a painting with a **crucifixion** motif, the Ladover community’s distress prompts the *Rebbe* to say, “What you have done has caused harm. [...] I will ask you not to continue living here, Asher Lev. I will ask you to go away.” Although Asher did not intend blasphemy with his painting, or even any inherently religious meaning, the painting has implications Asher can’t control, which cause an irreparable rift with his community.

Finally, then—even though the *Rebbe* has tried to create a space for Asher to explore his gift without compromising his religious commitments—Asher’s artistic choices place him at odds with his community. This suggests that, even if Asher’s personal faith remains steadfast, he cannot freely express his artistic gifts and remain answerable to his larger community at the same time. By presenting Asher’s lifelong quest to come to terms with his irrepressible artistic gift in light of his religious faith, Potok shows just how complex and heart-wrenching this process can be for all involved. He is sensitive to the sincere longings and doubts of all his characters, never presenting any of them—religious or not—as one-dimensional or wholly unsympathetic. This portrayal likely draws on Potok’s own youthful interest in secular authors as he sought to develop his

writing gift in an Orthodox Jewish context.



## CREATIVITY, SELF-EXPRESSION, AND TRUTH

From the time he is a small child, Asher Lev obsessively draws pictures of the world around him. As he grows older, however, various influences exert a strong pull on his art—especially the expectations of his family and community, to whom Asher feels responsible, yet whose perspectives he doesn’t always accept. As Asher grows up, his self-identity as an artist and his approaches to his art mature in tandem, especially as he questions the relationship between beauty, as understood by his community, and truth, as he sees it himself. By tracing Asher’s maturation as an artist, Potok argues that art must be primarily concerned with the truth, and that truth emerges from honesty about oneself and one’s view of the world.

When Asher is a child, he has a fairly simplistic view of art, but quickly learns that art isn’t reducible to “beauty.” When Asher’s mother, Rivkeh, is grief-stricken following the sudden death of her beloved brother, she asks Asher to draw her pretty things: “You should make the world pretty, Asher.” However, Asher notices that simply drawing cheerful birds and flowers doesn’t actually make his mother well; moreover, it doesn’t reflect the truth of the world around him, which is not “pretty.” Even as a little boy, Asher senses that it’s not his job as an artist to pretend that the world is other than it is. Later, Asher draws a picture of his father, Aryeh, speaking angrily on the telephone when Aryeh hears of the mistreatment of Jews in communist Russia. Asher tells his mother it was not a pretty drawing, “but it was a good drawing [...] I don’t want to make pretty drawings, Mama.” Early on, Asher begins to recognize a distinction between “good” and beautiful. A good drawing, in other words, can express something true, even if it isn’t “pretty.” In art, the truth is paramount, even if the truth is not beautiful.

As a teenager, Asher studies with famous artist Jacob Kahn, and his understanding of art as an expression of truth becomes more complex. In fact, his understanding of art develops as his identity matures, and he comes to better understand the relationship between his creativity and his self-concept. When Asher haltingly tells Jacob that he feels responsible to his Jewish community, Jacob replies, “Listen to me, Asher Lev. As an artist you are responsible to no one and to nothing, except to yourself and to the truth as you see it [...] Anything else is propaganda.” If the artist’s role is to express truth, in other words, Asher can’t simply be a representative for his religious community; sooner or later, his art will be compromised by the expectations of his community.

While Asher can’t reduce himself to a representative of his community, he also can’t expunge his identity from his art. This is apparent when Jacob scolds Asher for concealing his

earlocks (recognizable markers of a pious Hasidic Jew) in public: “Asher Lev, an artist who deceives himself is a fraud and a whore. You did that because you were ashamed. You did that because wearing *payos* did not fit your idea of an artist. Asher Lev, an artist is a person first [...] If there is no person, there is no artist.” Jacob Kahn doesn’t care about Asher’s religious self-expression one way or the other—his point is about the relationship between art and truth. He thinks that Asher is aspiring to a certain image of what an “artist” is, rather than allowing his art to grow organically out of the truth of who he is. The former, he wants Asher to understand, is a betrayal of art.

Jacob Kahn also encourages Asher to move away from a representational, storytelling form of art to a more abstract form that better expresses his reactions to the world around him: “I see the world as hard-edged, filled with lines and angles. And I see it as wild and raging and hideous, and only occasionally beautiful. The world fills me with disgust more often than it fills me with joy [...] The world is a terrible place [...] I sculpt and paint to give permanence to my feelings about how terrible this world truly is.” In keeping with Asher’s childhood instinct that “pretty” drawings don’t reflect the truth about the world, Jacob Kahn argues that abstract art allows a greater emotional range for telling the truth about the way the world really is. Art, then, is not primarily about beauty, but about expressing one’s feelings about the world and telling the truth in doing so. The truth about the world can only be expressed when the artist is secure in his or her stance toward the world—in Asher’s case, when he is neither embarrassed by his religious identity nor excessively beholden to the communal expression of that identity.

Early in his working relationship with Asher, Jacob Kahn says, “Art is whether or not there is a scream in [you] wanting to get out in a special way.” In other words, art is not a matter of mere technical mastery; it’s a question of whether Asher has something he must express, in a way that he alone can express it. This also suggests that art is an inherently individualistic and rather lonely quest to express the truth as one sees it, which seems to be borne out in Asher’s struggles to explain his art to his family and community, and his eventual estrangement from them.



## FAMILY CONFLICT

Asher Lev is born into a deeply religious and driven family—his father, Aryeh, travels around Europe helping to reestablish strong Jewish communities; his mother, Rivkeh, eventually assists Aryeh by earning her Ph.D. in Russian studies. While Asher shares his parents’ faith, his own ambition manifests as a passion for art, which places him at odds with his parents’ callings and even undermines their bonds. Although Asher eventually recognizes his similarity to his parents and develops compassion for them, he and his parents are unable to achieve full understanding by the

end of the novel. Through the Lev family’s loving but apparently irreparable relationships, Potok argues that, even where genuine love exists, the differences between parents and children are sometimes irreconcilable.

Asher’s calling as an artist creates conflict between himself and his parents, especially his father. The long-simmering tension between Asher and Aryeh comes to a head when Aryeh returns from six months in Europe, teaching Torah and establishing schools. After discovering that Asher has spent this time neglecting his own Torah studies and creating “pagan” art instead, “He was in an uncontrollable rage. [...] Whose son was I? [...] Did I want him to regret all the work he had done in Europe? Did I want to destroy the task he had chosen for himself? Did I want to shame him?” Aryeh sees Asher’s art as a direct affront to his own life’s work, even casting doubt on the reality of their father-son bond.

When Asher reaches the age of religious maturity and is about to celebrate his bar mitzvah, the community’s Rebbe intervenes in the family conflict and provides an artistic outlet for Asher by asking the famous sculptor Jacob Kahn to mentor him. This further grieves Aryeh: “My father’s right to shape my life had been taken from him by the same being who gave his own life meaning—the Rebbe [...] In some incomprehensible manner, a cosmic error had been made. The line of inheritance had been perverted.” Because of Asher’s failure to follow in his father’s footsteps, or even to follow a path that’s comprehensible to Aryeh, Aryeh feels that the family line has been disrupted in some inexplicable way. Thus what should be an occasion for paternal pride is a source of deeper estrangement.

Ironically, Asher and his father actually have an insatiable creative drive in common. When Asher, fearful of losing his artistic gift, refuses to move to Europe with his parents, his father takes this as an affront to his own dreams: “[Aryeh] carried, too [...] the burden of the years it would take him to realize his dream [of reviving Ladover communities in Europe]. He had his own dream. He needed all his strength for that dream. Interference drained his strength [...] It was clear enough that he now regarded me as a serious interference.” Much as Asher’s art demands all his strength, Aryeh’s work demands all of his; father’s and son’s shared drive nevertheless creates a stalemate between them, as each becomes an obstacle to the other’s irrepressible dreams. When Asher later travels in Europe on his own, he finally sees some of the Ladover schools that his father built from the ground up over decades of toil—“it was creation out of nothing,” a Ladover Jew in Rome tells him—and recognizes firsthand Aryeh’s own passion to create. Asher seems to have inherited this single-minded drive from his father, and it could therefore create an opening for common ground between the two of them.

However, despite their similar drive, and despite efforts to find common ground, Asher and his parents are ultimately unable to reconcile with one another. As a young man, Asher

painstakingly tries to explain his art to his father, but finds that “there was nothing in [my father’s] intellectual or emotional equipment to which he could connect my words [...] My world of aesthetics was as bewildering to him as his insatiable need for travel was to me.” While this is a genuine attempt to find common ground, Asher and Aryeh ultimately fail to speak the same language. This is portrayed as not really being the fault of either man; their natural frameworks are simply foreign to one another. When Asher travels to Europe and gets some distance from his parents, he’s able to gain a clearer perspective on the pain they’ve put each other through, especially when he considers Rivkeh’s mediating position between himself and Aryeh. “Standing between two different ways of giving meaning to the world [...] she had moved now toward me, now toward my father, keeping both worlds of meaning alive [...] I could only dimly perceive such an awesome act of will.” Asher is now able to appreciate both his and his father’s work as “different,” albeit equally legitimate “ways of giving meaning to the world,” and the toll both of these pursuits took on Asher’s strong, loving mother.

Yet the only way Asher, within his artistic framework, can express his feelings about his family’s shared torment is to paint the “crucified” figure of his mother at their apartment’s front **window**, tormented between the figures of himself and Aryeh: a picture of “the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other’s throats.” Naturally, this painting causes anguish to his deeply religious parents, forcing them further apart even as Asher attempts to express his hard-won empathy and gratitude. At the end of the novel, Asher bids his tearful parents goodbye before moving back to Paris: “I turned in the [cab] and looked out the rear window. My parents were still watching me through our living-room window.” Though the family members still look toward one another in love, Asher’s parents remain framed in the window he’d portrayed in his “Crucifixion” paintings—suggesting that, even if there’s some hope for ongoing relationship, the agony caused by their divergent callings will continue.

significantly, Rivkeh waits there whenever she longs for Asher or Aryeh’s return from school, work, or travel. Although standing at the window will not reunite Aryeh, Rivkeh, or Asher with each other any sooner, the act itself takes on a sort of religious, prayer-like devotion as they wait. It’s Rivkeh’s stance at the window that Asher specifically adopts in his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings, symbolizing Rivkeh’s anguish as she longs for her loved ones’ safe homecoming. At the end of the novel, both Rivkeh and Aryeh stand at the window, watching as Asher leaves them and Brooklyn behind for good. His parents’ somber position at the window ultimately represents the irreparable emotional and physical separation between Asher and them, after Asher has scandalized his family and his community with his provocative art exhibition.



## CRUCIFIXION

Crucifixion represents the tension between religion and art for the novel’s characters, as it takes on two levels of meaning. On a religious and historical level, the crucifixion has offensive connotations of the historical persecution of Jews by Christians; it’s also inherently blasphemous from a Jewish perspective. On an artistic level, however, Asher uses the crucifixion to symbolize maternal anguish, drawing on elements of Renaissance art and picturing his mother, Rivkeh, on a cruciform shape in his *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings. Though Asher does not intend a primarily religious meaning, the adoption of the religious form is an obstacle to his family and community’s ability to accept his artistic meaning. The collision of these two sets of meanings in Asher’s paintings symbolizes the ongoing conflict he feels between his Jewish roots and his artistic pursuits, and comes to represent his inability to integrate the two, as the offensive nature of *Brooklyn Crucifixion* results in Asher’s exile from his Ladover community.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor edition of *My Name is Asher Lev* published in 2003.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## WINDOW

The living room window in the Lev family’s apartment symbolizes the pain and longing of physical, emotional, an ideological separation among family members. Aryeh prays before the window when his wife, Rivkeh, is ill and he feels emotionally distant from her. Asher looks out the window to watch his father leave on trips. Most

## Chapter 1 Quotes

“I am an observant Jew. Yes, of course, observant Jews do not paint crucifixions. As a matter of fact, observant Jews do not paint at all—in the way that I am painting. So strong words are being written and spoken about me, myths are being generated: I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years.

Well, I am none of those things. And yet, in all honesty, I confess that my accusers are not altogether wrong: I am indeed, in some way, all of those things.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is from the opening paragraphs of *My Name Is Asher Lev*, introducing the central conflict and major themes of the rest of the book. The main issue in the novel is Asher’s dual identity as observant Jew and painter of things—namely, the form of the crucifix—that are offensive, even blasphemous, to a subset of his audience, especially to his own religious community. The force of the conflict is such that untruths are being circulated about Asher, particularly that he has betrayed his own devout Jewish heritage by adopting Christian forms in his art. Asher goes on to explain that, while some of the criticisms have merit, he’s not going to apologize for his artistic choices, because they’re rooted in a mystery, and one can’t apologize for a mystery. By introducing the book’s central conflict in this way, and offering a preview of the intensity of the reaction Asher’s climactic painting will generate, Potok draws readers into that “mystery” of Asher’s identity and reputation from the first page, inviting them to try to understand how Asher reconciles his religious observance and identity with his artistic self-expression.

“Asher, are you drawing pretty things? Are you drawing sweet, pretty things?”

I was not drawing pretty things. I was drawing twisted shapes, swirling forms, in blacks and reds and grays. I did not respond.

“Asher, are you drawing birds and flowers and pretty things?”

“I can draw you birds and flowers, Mama.”

“You should draw pretty things, Asher.”

“Shall I draw you a bird, Mama?”

“You should make the world pretty, Asher. Make it sweet and pretty. It’s nice to live in a pretty world.”

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev, Rivkeh Lev (speaker), Uncle Yaakov

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 17

**Explanation and Analysis**

When this exchange occurs between Asher and his mother, Rivkeh, Asher is only six years old. Rivkeh has just received the news that her beloved older brother, Yaakov, has been killed in a car accident—a tragedy that, for her, is like being orphaned for a second time. Even though Asher is still a small child, the exchange is significant for his self-understanding as an artist. Asher copes with his mother’s pain by drawing raw, twisted forms. Though he later agrees to his mother’s request for a “pretty” picture, he discovers that the innocent drawing of birds doesn’t actually make his mother better. This confirms Asher’s instinct that conveying the world as “pretty” or “sweet” is actually *dishonest*, and that if art is to be real, it must be a truthful reflection of what the artist sees and feels about the world. By this standard, Asher’s disturbing swirl of blacks, reds, and grays is better art than the “pretty things” his suffering mother wants to see. The rest of the book shows how Asher develops this aesthetic instinct as he grows up and matures as an artist. This exchange also anticipates a major motivation and theme for Asher’s art—his mother’s pain.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ “Is Siberia really very cold?”

He looked at me closely, his eyes clouding. “Siberia is the home of the Angel of Death. It is the place where the Angel of Death feeds and grows fat. No one should know of it, Asher. No one. Not even my worst enemies, all of whom, thank God, I left behind in Russia. Only Stalin should know of it. But even he should know of it only for a little while. I have a Jewish heart even where Stalin, may his name and memory be erased, is concerned. Now, what else do you need? Paper, pens, erasers? It is a big store and we have, thank God, everything.”

I did not need anything else. I thanked him and hurried home in the dark.

**Related Characters:** Yudel Krinsky, Asher Lev (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 69

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Asher is still a young boy, he befriends Yudel Krinsky, a Russian Jewish man whom Asher’s father helped bring to America. He begins spending time at Krinsky’s stationary store after school, asking him questions about his experiences in Siberia, where Krinsky was exiled under anti-Semitic policies. Asher’s friendship with Yudel Krinsky serves a few different purposes in the story. First, his friendship with Krinsky gives Asher certain insights into the nature and importance of his father’s work in helping Jews who have suffered under Communism. Having grown up within the shelter of the tightly-knit Brooklyn Ladover community, Asher has little concept of persecution and takes for granted the freedom and plenty that seem miraculous to Yudel Krinsky. Second, his frequent visits to Krinsky’s shop also give Asher a place where he can safely explore his artistic interests, away from the scrutiny of his disapproving father and teachers. Thus, Yudel Krinsky himself is a kind of substitute father figure for Asher, establishing a role that Jacob Kahn will later occupy. This relationship also underscores the fraught nature of Asher’s bond with his father throughout the book.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ “Asher, you have a gift. I do not know if it is a gift from the *Ribbono Shel Olom* or from the Other Side. If it is from the Other Side, then it is foolishness, dangerous foolishness, for it will take you away from Torah and from your people and lead you to think only of yourself. I want to tell you something. Listen to me, my Asher. About twenty-five years ago, all the *yeshivos* in Russia were closed by the Communists, and the students were scattered in different places in small groups. The only groups who continued to fight against this destruction of Torah by the enemies of Torah were the Ladover and Breslover Hasidim [...] Asher, we have to make passageways to our people in Russia. We have a responsibility to them. [...] They cannot make the opening on their side, so we must make it on our side. Do you understand me, Asher?”

**Related Characters:** Aryeh Lev (speaker), Asher Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 109

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this quote, Aryeh is trying to get through to Asher regarding the importance of Aryeh’s work among Russian Jews, having been offered the opportunity to move to Vienna in order to open more *yeshivos* (schools of Torah study). By this time, Asher’s artistic gift is well recognized. But Aryeh believes that, compared to the work of rebuilding Judaism in Russia, Asher’s art is trivial, and Asher, who resists moving to Vienna, must put it in proper perspective. Aryeh’s words set the pattern for ongoing conflict between father and son. Aryeh believes that Asher’s gift might originate in that which opposes the Master of the Universe (God), and, if that is the case, the gift will inevitably pull Asher away from his community and distract him from the needs of others. This is why he appeals so passionately to Asher regarding his Ladover heritage and his obligations to other Jews now. Aryeh’s attitude creates a tension in Asher’s life, whereby Asher must understand his Jewish identity and responsibilities in the same way Aryeh understands his own—or else, in Aryeh’s eyes, Asher sets himself in implacable opposition to his father, and even to God. This opposition haunts both Asher and his father throughout the novel.

●● I saw my mythic ancestor again that night, moving in huge strides across the face of the earth, stepping over snow-filled mountains, spanning wide and fertile valleys, journeying, journeying, endlessly journeying. I saw him traverse warm villages and regions of ice and snow. I saw him peer into the windows of secret *yeshivos* and into the barracks of Siberian camps. [...] “And what are you doing with your time, my Asher Lev?” I thought I heard him say [...] If You don’t want me to use the gift, why did You give it to me? Or did it come to me from the Other Side? It was horrifying to think my gift may have been given to me by the source of evil and ugliness. How can evil and ugliness make a gift of beauty?

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Yudel Krinsky, Mythic Ancestor, Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 119

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Asher often dreams of his “mythic ancestor,” his father’s great-great-grandfather, who traveled the world to support Jewish learning. From the time he is a little boy, Asher’s dreams occur especially when he is feeling conflicted over his artistic gift and his father’s expectations that he be primarily devoted to studying the Torah, not to creating art. Thus, this ancestor—portrayed here as being as much a figment of Asher’s imagination as of historical reality—is especially symbolic of Aryeh Lev’s insistence on the impermeable boundary between the side of holiness and the “Other Side,” the side of wickedness (and all things *goyisch*, or non-Jewish). Throughout the book, Asher struggles to identify himself with one side of this spectrum or the other, fearing all the while that his gift might originate from the side of evil—hence his anguished prayer in this quote. Ultimately, he is unable to reconcile his gift with his father’s inflexible binary. As this quote suggests, however, the weight of generations of familial and cultural expectation makes it extremely difficult for Asher to understand the role of his art alongside his religious faith, which is never shown to waver.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

●● I looked into my *Chumash*. I stared at the face staring back out at me from the page. I had slanted the eyes somewhat and given the lips beneath the beard a sardonic turn. The *Rebbe* looked evil; the *Rebbe* looked threatening; the *Rebbe* looking out at me from the *Chumash* seemed about to hurt me. That was the expression he would wear when he decided to hurt me. That was the expression he had worn when he had told my father to go to Vienna. I looked at the framed photograph of the *Rebbe* on the front wall near the blackboard. The eyes were gray and clear; the face was kind. Only the ordinary dark hat was the same in both pictures. I was frightened at the picture I had drawn. I was especially frightened that I could not remember having drawn it.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Aryeh Lev, The Rebbe

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

A *Chumash* is a Torah in book form, in contrast to the scroll that would be read in synagogue services. (The word *Chumash* derives from the Hebrew term for “five,” referring to the five books of the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.) This explains why Asher’s action is seen as doubly offensive—he has “desecrated” a sacred book by drawing in it, and he’s drawn the community’s leader in what could easily be viewed as a mocking distortion. This event is a turning point for Asher, because it brings to the surface the conflict between his art and his religious identity in a way that has mostly simmered beneath the surface until now. It’s also an illustration of the way Asher understands his art—as something that isn’t necessarily completely consistent with the truth (i.e., the Rebbe doesn’t literally intend to hurt Asher), but nevertheless reflects Asher’s feelings about the truth. That reflection of feelings isn’t readily understood by those around him, and gets Asher in trouble. This episode, then, previews on a childish level the more far-reaching conflict that occurs when Asher displays controversial paintings as a young adult at the end of the book.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

“What do they all want from me?” I said to my mother. “They want you to study Torah. A boy your age should be studying Torah.”

I went into my room and stood by the window, staring out at the melting snow. I did not hate studying. I had no strength for it. My drawing needed all my strength. Couldn't they see that? What did they all want from me?

I came into Yudel Krinsky's store one day in February. “You are a scandal,” he said to me in his hoarse voice. “The world knows you are not studying Torah.” He fixed his bulging eyes on me. “Your father journeys through Europe bringing Jews back to Torah, and here his own son refuses to study Torah. Asher, you are a scandal.”

**Related Characters:** Yudel Krinsky, Rivkeh Lev, Asher Lev (speaker), Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 165

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Asher refuses to move to Vienna, he and his mother remain in Brooklyn while Aryeh goes abroad to establish Torah schools among struggling Jews throughout Europe. But Asher continues stirring up trouble at home; he deals with his father's absence and his mother's sadness by obsessively drawing and neglecting his schoolwork. When his teachers and family intervene, Asher doesn't understand the problem. While Asher's incomprehension reflects his childish lack of perspective, it also anticipates what will become a lifelong struggle to manage the demands of artistic self-expression, personal faith, and community expectations. His art is all-consuming, and he doesn't know how to balance his family's expectations alongside it. His failure is seen by his community as all the more shameful because of his father's self-sacrificial labors abroad. For Asher, it's an early glimpse of the reality that in striving to be true to his art, he won't be able to please everyone in his life. Ironically, the all-consuming nature of Asher's art is a reflection of both his parents, who pour themselves tirelessly into their travel and study. Yet Asher's passion assimilates much less readily into the norms of his community, causing pain and division, where his parents' efforts reinforce community cohesion and pride.

“I heard her sigh. “I wish I knew what to do,” she said. “I hope the *Ribbono Shel Olom* will help me not to hurt your father. Look where it's taken us, Asher. Your painting. It's taken us to Jesus. And to the way they paint women. Painting is for *goyim*, Asher. Jews don't draw and paint.”

“Chagall is a Jew.”

“Religious Jews, Asher. Torah Jews. Such Jews don't draw and paint. What would the *Rebbe* say if he knew we were in the museum? God forbid the *Rebbe* should find out.”

I didn't know what the *Rebbe* would say. It frightened me to think that the *Rebbe* might be angry.

“I wish I knew what to do,” my mother murmured. “I wish your father was home.”

**Related Characters:** Rivkeh Lev, Asher Lev (speaker), The Rebbe, Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 171

**Explanation and Analysis**

While Aryeh is traveling in Europe, Rivkeh takes Asher to the art museum and is dismayed by some of the works they see. When Asher has questions about some of the paintings containing nude figures or depictions of Jesus, she tries to explain why such images aren't appropriate for him as a religious Jew. This quote highlights Rivkeh's lifelong efforts to mediate between Asher's passion for art and Aryeh's indignation over his son's “foolishness.” She wants to support Asher's passion as far as she can, but she also doesn't want to hurt Aryeh—and, here, she agrees with Aryeh that for a Torah-observant Jew, there's a hard limit to the enjoyment and creation of art. That's because some of the most significant works of the Western artistic tradition fly in the face of their religious sensibilities. For the rest of his life, Asher will have to negotiate that very challenge, but he will later come to a different conclusion than Rivkeh does—believing, for example, that Christian forms can be adapted without religious meanings. Also, Rivkeh's fear of the Rebbe's reaction is slightly misplaced, as the Rebbe goes to great lengths to support Asher's art. However, even for him, there will prove to be limits.

“Listen to me,” my father said. He was speaking suddenly in Yiddish. “I am killing myself for the *Ribbono Shel Olom*. I have broken up my family for the *Ribbono Shel Olom*. I do not see my wife for months because of my work for the *Ribbono Shel Olom*. I came home for *Pesach* to be with my family, to be with the *Rebbe*, to rest. And what do I find? You know what I find. And what do I hear? I hear my son telling me he cannot stop drawing pictures of naked women and that man. Listen to me, Asher. This will stop. You will fight it. Or I will force you to return to Vienna with me after the summer. Better you should stay in Vienna and be a little crazy than you should stay in New York and become a *goy*.”

“*Ribbono Shel Olom*,” my mother breathed. “Aryeh, please.”

“We must fight against the Other Side, Rivkeh,” my father shouted in Yiddish. “We must fight against it! Otherwise it will destroy the world.”

**Related Characters:** Rivkeh Lev, Aryeh Lev (speaker), The Rebbe, Asher Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 177

### Explanation and Analysis

When Aryeh gets home from his travels in Europe, he is enraged by Asher’s continued obsession with art—especially his drawings of nude figures and “that man” (Jesus). This quote sums up his objections to Asher’s passion—namely, that engagement with art leads inevitably to the *sitra achra*, or the opposite of holiness. Because of Aryeh’s long, solitary labors among struggling Jewish communities in Europe, Asher’s art also feels like a personal affront to Aryeh—essentially a mockery of his efforts to instill Torah teachings among the persecuted. Added to the fact that Aryeh’s own father was murdered by a drunken Christian peasant, this is enough to convince Aryeh that Asher’s art (and particularly his use of Christian imagery) should be attributed to the “Other Side” and accordingly resisted. This view establishes the two as adversaries, and despite some efforts to reach common ground, Aryeh doesn’t soften until the end of the book—just before Asher unveils the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings that confirm Aryeh’s worst suspicions.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

“Now, between today and the middle of March is a long time. You will do something for me in that time. You will take a journey to the Museum of Modern Art, you will go up to the second floor, and you will look at a painting called *Guernica*, by Picasso. You will study this painting. You will memorize this painting. You will do whatever you feel you have to do in order to master this painting. Then you will call me in March, and we will meet, and talk, and work. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“It is in my nature to be blunt and honest. I shall ask you a question. You are entering the world of the *goyim*, Asher Lev. Do you know that? [...] It is not only *goyim*. It is Christian *goyim*.”

“Yes.”

“You should better become a wagon driver,” he said, using the Yiddish term. “You should better become a water carrier.”

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev, Jacob Kahn (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 194

### Explanation and Analysis

Just before Asher’s bar mitzvah, the Rebbe introduces him to famous artist Jacob Kahn. Despite being a secular Jew, Jacob has a long history with the Rebbe and understands Ladover piety, so the Rebbe trusts him to mentor Asher in his artistic gift. In this quote, Jacob Kahn addresses Asher with characteristic bluntness, both setting him a challenge and warning him about what he’s up against. During the time the story is set, Spanish painter Pablo Picasso was likely the world’s most famous living painter. His *Guernica* (1937), an abstract oil painting, was created in response to the bombing of a Basque town by Nazi German and Fascist Italian forces; its exhibition helped raise relief funds for those affected. Kahn wants to see what Asher makes of this challenging work before investing in a mentoring relationship. He also warns Asher not to underestimate the foreignness of the new world he’s entering. In his relatively sheltered religious world, Asher has rarely come into contact with non-Jewish cultural ideas, must less overtly Christian imagery. Being thrown into this new world will challenge Asher’s personal religious identity, but more than that, it will take a toll on his bonds with his religious community. Even if Asher has the makings of a great artist, Kahn argues, he will have a happier life doing almost anything else and not having to face such clashes.

●● My father carried his burden of pain all through the celebration of my bar mitzvah. People knew of the *Rebbe's* decision. No one dared question it. For the *Rebbe* was the *tzaddik* and spoke as representative of the Master of the Universe. His seeing was not as the seeing of others; his acts were not as the acts of others. My father's right to shape my life had been taken from him by the same being who gave his own life meaning—the *Rebbe*. At the same time, no one knew how to react to the decision, for they could see my father's pain. I had become alien to him. In some incomprehensible manner, a cosmic error had been made. The line of inheritance had been perverted. A demonic force had thrust itself into centuries of transmitted responsibility. He could not bear its presence. And he no longer knew how to engage it in battle. So he walked in pain and shame all through the *Shabbos* of my bar mitzvah and all through the following day when relatives and friends sang and danced their joy.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Jacob Kahn, The Rebbe, Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 197

### Explanation and Analysis

After the Rebbe sets up the meeting between Asher and Jacob Kahn, Asher is ecstatic: alongside his religious coming of age, he's being given an incredible opportunity to train and mature as an artist, too. But this development causes his father deep pain, on two fronts. For one, Aryeh is being asked to surrender some of his control over Asher's development—to concede that, when it comes to art, the *Rebbe* knows better what's best for Asher than he does. Given that Aryeh has sacrificed his entire adult life for the *Rebbe's* work, this is an especially painful demand to which Aryeh must reconcile himself. For another thing, and perhaps even more painfully, Aryeh must admit that he doesn't really know his son. Asher's passions are "alien" to him and to the ancestral path Aryeh had prided himself on following. Tragically, then, one of the happiest events of a father's life—seeing his son acknowledged as an adult in the eyes of his community—becomes an occasion for shame and estrangement. He doesn't recognize the man Asher is becoming, and he feels helpless against the supposedly "demonic" influences in his life.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

●● "You are entering a religion called painting. It has its fanatics and its rebels. And I will force you to master it. Do you hear me? No one will listen to what you have to say unless they are convinced you have mastered it. Only one who has mastered a tradition has a right to attempt to add to it or to rebel against it [...] it is a tradition of *goyim* and pagans. Its values are *goyisch* and pagan. Its concepts are *goyisch* and pagan. Its way of life is *goyisch* and pagan. In the entire history of European art, there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter. Think carefully of what you are doing before you make your decision. I say this not only for the *Rebbe* but for myself as well. I do not want to spend time with you, Asher Lev, and then have you tell me you made a mistake.

**Related Characters:** Jacob Kahn (speaker), The Rebbe, Asher Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 213

### Explanation and Analysis

When Asher and Jacob Kahn get together for the first time, Kahn tries to convey to Asher just what a difficult road is ahead of him if he chooses to proceed under Kahn's mentorship. If Asher truly wants to become a great painter, then he can't stand aloof from the tradition of Western art—he must fully engage with it, familiarize himself with its forms, and eventually adapt those forms for his own purposes. This poses a problem for a religious Jew like Asher, because a great many of these forms are antagonistic to Jewish sensibilities. If Asher does choose to engage with them, Kahn implies, he will be shaped by them to some degree. This is why Asher would be a trailblazer for his community—it's presumably not due to an absence of talent, but because devout religious beliefs don't dispose most Jews to seek out this tradition or to find value in it. In other words, he implies that even if Asher enters this new "religion" as a committed, observant Jew, he might not remain that way. As it turns out, though Asher's religious commitments don't waver, he does not emerge from this collision of traditions unchanged, and it does come at a high cost.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ I did not understand what had happened to bring on the idea [...] I drew with a pen, working slowly, calmly, and with ease, the segment from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* of the boat beached on the Styx and Charon striking at his doomed passengers with an oar, forcing them onto the shores of torment and hell. I drew much of it from memory, but I wanted to be as accurate as I could, so I checked it repeatedly against a reproduction in a book I had purchased on Michelangelo. I drew the writhing twisting tormented bodies spilling from the boat. I drew the terror on the faces of the dead and the damned. I made all the faces his face, pimply, scrawny—eyes bulging, mouths open, shrieking in horror. I exaggerated the talons and painted ears of Charon; I darkened his face, bringing out the whites of his raging eyes. I folded the drawing and went to bed. [...] He said nothing to me about the drawings. But he began to avoid me. His thin face would fill with dread whenever he caught me looking at him. I had the feeling he regarded me now as evil and malevolent, as a demonic and contaminating spawn of the Other Side.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), The pimply-faced boy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 241

**Explanation and Analysis**

When Asher is bullied by the pimply-faced boy at his *yeshiva* for being an artist, he eventually comes up with a perfect comeback. What's significant about his revenge is that it's also a good example of his emerging sensitivity as an artist. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, in Vatican City's Sistine Chapel, is a depiction of God's final judgment of humanity. Asher studies this famous work painstakingly, to the point that he can produce a recognizable version of his own—he achieves a darkly humorous adaptation of the masterpiece, featuring the pimply-faced boy himself. When the bully finds the drawings, he isn't amused; rather, Asher succeeds in confirming the boy's suspicions about him (that he's an agent of evil), and thereby convincing the boy that Asher is best left alone. This is Asher's first major attempt at adapting a traditional, Christian-themed work for his own purposes, and while it's basically a prank, it's also a precedent for his far more consequential adaptations in the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings to come. He establishes himself as an artist with a unique eye and the courage to use it.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ Often in the early mornings, I came out of the house and walked across the dunes to the beach. The dunes were cool then from the night. I wore sandals and shorts and a shirt and had on my *tefillin*. Those mornings, the beach was my synagogue and the waves and gulls were audience to my prayers. I stood on the beach and felt wind-blown sprays of ocean on my face, and I prayed. And sometimes the words seemed more appropriate to this beach than to the synagogue on my street.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Tanya Kahn, Jacob Kahn

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 252

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Asher and Jacob Kahn have been working with each another for a while, Jacob and his wife, Tanya, invite Asher to join them at their Massachusetts beach house for the summer. This environment enables Asher to come into his own as an artist, but it's significant for his maturity in other ways, too. This quote provides a good example—even though Asher is now living apart from his parents, he continues to be devoutly committed to his daily prayers. Not only that, but he adapts his prayers to his new surroundings, showing that he's taking ownership of the practices passed down to him as a child. The prayers on the sand dunes also show that his parents' fears about Asher losing his religious identity were unfounded. Even though he's exposed to many different non-Jewish and secular influences within the art world, Asher continues to uphold his faith as central to his identity, even finding joy and stability in it as he joins in Jacob Kahn's rigorous artistic regimen. The pattern Asher establishes on the beach holds throughout his career, whether he finds himself in Provincetown, Brooklyn, or Paris.

“Asher Lev, an artist who deceives himself is a fraud and a whore. You did that because you were ashamed. You did that because wearing *payos* did not fit your idea of an artist. Asher Lev, an artist is a person first. He is an individual. If there is no person, there is no artist. It is of no importance to me whether you wear your *payos* behind your ears or whether you cut off your hair entirely and go around bald. I am not a defender of *payos*. Great artists will not give a damn about your *payos*; they will only give a damn about your art. The artists who will care about your *payos* are not worth caring about. You want to cut off your *payos*, go ahead. But do not do it because you think it will make you more acceptable as an artist. Good night, Asher Lev.”

**Related Characters:** Jacob Kahn (speaker), Asher Lev

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 257

### Explanation and Analysis

One day, during the summer in Provincetown, Asher hides his *payos*, or dangling earlocks, behind his ears. In doing so, he conceals one of the more obvious markers of a pious Hasidic Jew. Jacob Kahn later confronts him for this. On the surface, this is an odd thing for a secular, non-observant Jew like Kahn to care about. However, he explains that the issue is not about religion, but about the temptation to alter one’s true self to conform to perceived expectations. This gets to the heart of Kahn’s conviction about being an artist—that this path must come from honesty about oneself and one’s view of the world. Kahn perceives that Asher faces unique temptations in this regard, as he comes from a distinctive, tightly-knit religious community with its own expectations about acceptable self-expression. Arguably, in fact, once Asher establishes the habit of honesty about his religious background in the art world, it also helps him withstand the pressure to compromise his identity as an artist in his religious world, even when that would be more convenient for his community. For example, he later makes the choice to include provocative images and themes in his public exhibitions, even when these create controversy at home.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

On Yom Kippur, I wept when I remembered my father’s weeping over the martyrdom of the ten sages. On Succos, I marched in the synagogue procession with the *lulov* and *esrog* my uncle had purchased for me. On Simchas Torah, I danced with a Torah scroll—and there on the edge of the crowd of thousands that always came to watch our joy on that day was Jacob Kahn. I pulled him into the line and we held the Torah together and danced. His small dark skullcap was as awkward on his head as was the grasp of his fingers upon the Torah. But we held it together and we danced.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Jacob Kahn, Uncle Yitzchok, Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 268

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage gives a vivid and moving depiction of part of the annual cycle of Jewish holidays and Asher’s fervent participation in them. It’s especially striking because, coming on the heels of a summer studying art with Jacob Kahn, it further proves Asher’s continued commitment to his religious identity, despite the “*goyisch* and pagan” forces he’s repeatedly been warned about. Notably, the memory of his father’s own piety moves Asher to tears on Yom Kippur, showing how much Asher treasures the heritage his father has passed down to him, no matter how much Aryeh fears the opposite. The *lulov* and *esrog* (palm branch and citron) are types of vegetation waved during the Sukkot harvest festival. And in the dance with the Torah scroll, Asher intentionally pulls Jacob into the celebration, even though, as a non-observant Jew, he tries to stay on the sidelines. Each of these examples highlights Asher’s enduring delight in his family and heritage, and his determination to hold onto them even when—as during the Torah dance—the pieces fit together somewhat awkwardly.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

●● The nobleman was a despotic goy, a degenerate whose debaucheries grew wilder as he grew wealthier. The Jew, my mythic ancestor, made him wealthier. Serfs were on occasion slain by that nobleman during his long hours of drunken insanity, and once houses were set on fire by a wildly thrown torch and a village was burned. You see how a goy behaves, went the whispered word to the child. A Jew does not behave this way. But the Jew had made him wealthy, wondered the child. Is not the Jew also somehow to blame? The child had never given voice to that question. Now the man who had once been the child asked it again and wondered if the giving and the goodness and the journeys of that mythic ancestor might have been acts born in the memories of screams and burning flesh. A balance had to be given the world; the demonic had to be reshaped into meaning. Had a dream-haunted Jew spent the rest of his life sculpting form out of the horror of his private night?

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Mythic Ancestor

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 323

**Explanation and Analysis**

During his year in Paris, Asher finds himself rethinking some of the formative myths from his childhood. The weightiest of these was the story of his mythic ancestor, who has always been held up as the pinnacle of righteousness and the stark opposite of “the way a goy behaves.” Now that Asher questions his ancestor’s complicity in the nobleman’s debaucheries, he also creates space to think differently about his father’s role and even his own. He begins to think of his father’s tireless travel as a way of righting some of the wrongs unleashed in the family’s past—an attempt to restore balance. At first, Asher thinks of himself as an anomaly in not sharing this work. But later, as he paints and exhibits his controversial *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings, he wonders if (like his ancestor) he, too, is a combination of demonic and divine. He thinks that perhaps his art doesn’t originate from one pole or the other, but contains elements of both “sides.” These reflections show Asher’s willingness to expand on the traditions handed down to him—much as he does in his adaptation of artistic forms.

●● Trapped between two realms of meaning, she had straddled both realms, quietly feeding and nourishing them both, and herself as well. I could only dimly perceive such an awesome act of will. But I could begin to feel her torment now as she waited by our living-room window for both her husband and her son. What did she think of as she stood by the window? Of the phone call that had informed my father of her brother’s death? Would she wait now in dread all the rest of her life, now for me, now for my father, now for us both—as she had once waited for me to return from a museum, as she had once waited for my father to return in a snowstorm? And I could understand her torment now; I could see her waiting endlessly with the fear that someone she loved would be brought to her dead. I could feel her anguish.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Uncle Yaakov, Aryeh Lev, Rivkeh Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 325

**Explanation and Analysis**

In Paris, Asher spends a long time wrestling with memories of his family, especially of his mother. Whereas his conflicted emotions about Rivkeh have stifled his art in the past, now they begin to give shape to his most significant artistic achievement. This is partly because his studies of classic Renaissance art, such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, have provided him with a new artistic language for suffering. He especially thinks about Rivkeh’s agonized waiting in this light, as she displayed a kind of crucifying, self-sacrificial anguish as she waited for her husband’s and son’s safe return home, and also tried to reconcile Aryeh and Asher’s fraught relationship. As he imagines Rivkeh’s torment in this way, he begins working on what will become the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings. In these paintings, he believes that the only proper vehicle for such torment is the crucifix—a symbol that is doomed to misunderstanding among his family and community, the audience he cares about most. Thus, this quote reveals something of Asher’s creative process, but it also anticipates the agony he will face himself as he shares his finished work with an uncomprehending world.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

“I understand,” he kept saying. “Jacob Kahn once explained it to me in connection with sculpture. I understand.” Then he said, “I do not hold with those who believe that all painting and sculpture is from the *sitra achra*. I believe such gifts are from the Master of the Universe. But they have to be used wisely, Asher. What you have done has caused harm. People are angry. They ask questions, and I have no answer to give them that they will understand. Your naked women were a great difficulty for me, Asher. But this is an impossibility.” He was silent for a long moment. I could see his dark eyes in the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. Then he said, “I will ask you not to continue living here, Asher Lev. I will ask you to go away.”

**Related Characters:** The Rebbe (speaker), Jacob Kahn, Asher Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 366

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Asher’s controversial but highly-acclaimed exhibition, he’s summoned to the *Rebbe*’s office for a final time. The *Rebbe* sums up the difficulty that Asher’s paintings have brought on himself and the community—even though the *Rebbe* himself understands Asher’s artistic choices to some degree, there is no way he can explain these choices to his devout community. The *Rebbe*’s decision to send Asher away at first glance seems surprising, as he has always tried to support Asher’s art within religiously acceptable bounds. On the other hand, the *Rebbe* also ensured that Asher studied French and Russian in school, and he takes care to recommend the Paris Ladover community to Asher. There’s an implication that the *Rebbe* has been sowing seeds for this possibility all along, anticipating that there would come a day when Asher’s artistic horizons would outgrow those of the Brooklyn community. In any case, like his father and ancestors before him, Asher will now travel at the request

of the *Rebbe*, too—taking his place within the family heritage, albeit in an unexpected way.

Asher Lev, Hasid. Asher Lev, painter. I looked at my right hand, the hand with which I painted. There was power in that hand. [...] The demonic and the divine were two aspects of the same force. Creation was demonic and divine. Creativity was demonic and divine. Art was demonic and divine. [...] I was demonic and divine. Asher Lev, son of Aryeh and Rivkeh Lev, was the child of the Master of the Universe *and* the Other Side. Asher Lev paints good pictures and hurts people he loves. Then be a great painter, Asher Lev; that will be the only justification for all the pain you will cause. But as a great painter I will cause pain again if I must. Then become a greater painter.

**Related Characters:** Asher Lev (speaker), Jacob Kahn, Rivkeh Lev, Aryeh Lev

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 367

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote represents the culmination of Asher’s self-conception as an artist in the novel. Ever since he was a child, Asher has been tormented by the question of where his art comes from—from the demonic realm or from God. As he takes a final walk around his beloved neighborhood, however, he thinks about his roots and about the hurt he’s caused and concludes that perhaps those two sides can’t be strictly opposed to one another. He is every bit as much a devout Jew as he is an artist, and his work has brought healing and beauty as well as pain and division. So he decides that, like his mythic ancestor, he must use his gift in order to restore balance in the world wherever possible. With this, Asher comes full circle to the beginning of the book, where he set out to “demythologize” his story, demonstrating how such an implausible dual identity came to be.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Asher Lev introduces himself as “*the* Asher Lev [...] the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*.” He is also “an observant Jew.” And observant Jews, he says, don’t paint **crucifixions**—or paint at all, for that matter.

Because of this double identity, much is being written and said about Asher Lev: “myths are being generated: I am a traitor, an apostate [...] a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians.” He is none of these things. And yet, at the same time, “I am indeed, in some way, all of those things.”

Asher says that “gossip, rumors, mythmaking [...] are not appropriate vehicles for [...] nuances of truth.” So it’s time for him to offer a defense, “a long session in demythology.” But it won’t be an apology, because “it is absurd to apologize for a mystery.” It’s a mystery because there was no indication in Asher’s family background that he would be born with “a unique and disquieting gift.”

Asher’s father’s family traces back to the 1300s in Europe. His father’s great-great-grandfather had been the manager of the estates of “a carousing Russian nobleman” who, in a fit of drunkenness, burned down a village and killed people. In connection with this story, Asher always heard, “You see how a goy behaves [...] The people of the *sitra achra* behave this way.” Jews do not.

Asher’s ancestor had transformed the Russian nobleman’s estates into immense wealth for both himself and the nobleman. But in middle age, he began to travel. Asher’s father always told him that his ancestor did this in order to “bring the Master of the Universe into the world.” His mother told him it was so that his ancestor could “find people in need and [...] comfort and help them.”

*From the beginning of the book, Asher’s controversial status is clear, which serves to pull the reader into the conflict as well—how does Asher resolve the tension between his artistic and religious identities? The crucifixion of Jesus would be an especially offensive image to an observant Jew, immediately raising questions about Asher’s choice of imagery.*



*Asher’s controversial artistic choices have sparked many unflattering and hostile evaluations by others, and Asher acknowledges a persistent tension between these two aspects of his identity—that of artist and observant Jew.*



*Asher explains what’s to come—he will debunk the myths that have arisen around him by defending his artistic choices. At the same time, he explains that there’s something fundamentally mysterious about his artistic gifts for which he can neither explain nor apologize.*



*To explain himself, Asher must dig deeply into his own past; his identity is bound up with ancestral stories. These stories have often been told to Asher in the guise of moral lessons, explaining the apparently impermeable boundary between Jewish and non-Jewish. The *sitra achra* is a Hasidic term for the realm of the impure and evil. Hence, non-Jews are, by definition, on the side of the impure and evil.*



*Part of Asher’s family mythology is embedded in the story of his ancestor’s sudden, unexplained journeys. In some way, his parents explain, this ancestor’s wanderings were meant to restore holiness to the world. Asher’s parents will use this mythology as a foundation for their own identity and work, too.*



Asher heard about this ancestor so often that he began to appear in Asher's dreams: "a man of mythic dimensions" who "left a taste of thunder in my mouth." In these dreams, Asher's mythic ancestor would echo his father's questions about Asher's childhood love of drawing.

*The stories of Asher's ancestor have a powerful effect on his psyche; in fact, from an early age, Asher begins to conflate dreams of his ancestor with his own father's disapproval of him—a notion that will haunt Asher as he grows up.*



Asher's grandfather, after whom he is named, was a scholar and recluse. By the age of 20, he had become known as a genius. Shortly before the age of 50, he became a member of the "Russian Hasidic sect led by the *Rebbe* of Ladov" and begun to travel around the Soviet Union as an emissary of that *Rebbe*. One night, while traveling home from the *Rebbe's* synagogue, a drunken peasant killed him with an axe. It was the night before Easter.

*The Ladover Jews in the novel are loosely based on the Lubavitcher group of Hasidic Jews, who were also founded in Eastern Europe under the leadership of a series of revered rabbis, or rebbes, and eventually came to be based in Brooklyn. The significance of Asher's grandfather's death is that Christian associations are not only foreign but viscerally threatening for Asher's father.*



Asher's mother is descended from a different Eastern European Hasidic family, all of them great scholars. Asher himself, born in 1943 to Rivkeh and Aryeh Lev in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, "was the juncture point of two significant family lines [...] freighted with Jewish responsibility. But he was also born with a gift."

*Asher's family history is a heavy weight in his life. Even as he's raised to treasure his Jewish heritage and assume his own responsibility for passing it down, he is also aware that, by virtue of his unprecedented artistic gift, he doesn't fit in. Family conflict, therefore, is present from Asher's earliest days.*



Asher remembers drawing at four years old—covering paper, margins of books, and bare walls with drawings. From his earliest days, he also remembers his neighborhood along the Brooklyn Parkway and the people he would watch on the street. He grew up "encrusted with lead and spectrumed with crayons."

*Asher's impulse to draw has been irrepressible from the time he was very small, and the growth of his artistic gift is inseparable from his love for his specific neighborhood. This deeply-held sense of place and local identity will remain important for Asher's art.*



When Asher was growing up, his mother had seemed more like an older sister; she was just 19 when he was born. They were happy days filled with laughter. Sometimes Asher and his mother would go rowing together in Prospect Park. Once Asher drew a picture of his mother after she fell in their boat while awkwardly pulling at the oars. Rivkeh told Asher that it wasn't nice or respectful to draw her like that. But she praised his creativity otherwise.

*Asher's drawing of his mother in a vulnerable, compromised position, and her discomfort with that image, anticipates events at the climax of the book. His mother's ambivalence about Asher's art also sets the tone for her attitude throughout the book: she wants to encourage him, but she's not always comfortable with the ways he chooses to express himself.*



In the days before Asher's mother became ill, his father traveled a lot, meeting with government representatives at the request of the Rebbe. Aryeh had come to America at 14 and had earned bachelor's and master's degrees in political science at the Rebbe's request. Rivkeh takes great pride in Aryeh's work, and Aryeh takes pride in continuing the work his own father had done for the Rebbe's father. Sometimes Aryeh would leave early in the morning, after preparing a glass of fresh orange juice for each member of the family. "Have a safe journey," Rivkeh would always tell him. Asher would watch him out the **window**—tall, neatly dressed, and walking with a slight of limp from childhood polio.

Asher often drew his father praying. Sometimes they would talk about Aryeh's studies of the holy books. One day, Aryeh explains a passage from the Talmud which says that if someone causes a single person to perish, it's as if he has killed a whole world. Aryeh explains that it's as if that person has killed all the descendants that might have come from the deceased person. He explains to Asher that his own father had often studied this passage, too.

Once, Aryeh tells Asher, who is almost five, that he shouldn't spend so much time on drawing. He calls it "foolishness." He thinks Asher will outgrow drawing in time. Asher continues to draw his father, especially pictures of his father weeping as he sings his own father's haunting hymn melody. But Asher no longer shows his father these pictures.

Asher vaguely remembers the January week that his mother was taken to the hospital; he was six. There had been a phone call, and his mother had begun screaming. The apartment had filled with relatives and friends. Asher had hidden in his room, not knowing what was happening to Rivkeh. She only quieted when the Rebbe came to the apartment. Later, Asher learned that his Uncle Yaakov, his mother's brother, had been killed in a car accident in Detroit, while traveling for the Rebbe. Yaakov was only 27, a gentle man. He had been studying Russian affairs in order to become an adviser to the Rebbe.

Two days later, Rivkeh is taken to the hospital. Asher remembers the "unearthly" sound of Aryeh singing his father's melody that Shabbos. Late that night, Asher hears his father singing the melody again while standing at their living room **window**. He vividly remembers the sight of his father, quietly, fervently singing in his pajamas in the dim light.

*The Rebbe is a very significant person in the family's life, even to the extent of helping determine career paths. There is also a strong sense of ongoing family heritage and the importance of maintaining it—with the implication that Asher, too, will be expected to carry on that line of work. Aryeh's absences ask a lot of the family, and even as a small child, Asher watches his father's departures from the window—a place that is symbolic of the physical and emotional rifts among Aryeh and his family members.*



*Asher's father makes a point of including Asher in his religious studies, and Asher takes an active interest even while young. This particular Talmudic passage (the Talmud is a collection of Jewish rabbinic teachings and biblical interpretations) holds special significance for Aryeh, though it isn't until much later in his life—when he rethinks the story of his mythic ancestor—that Asher begins to understand why.*



*Even when Asher is very little, his drawing becomes a source of family contention, as his father interprets drawing as something trivial, compared to explicitly religious pursuits. For Asher, though, art is an outlet for expressing his observations about the world, including those closest to him.*



*Rivkeh's tragedy dramatically changes the course of family life and makes a deep impression on Asher, even though he's too young to fully understand. Yaakov's sudden death makes it clear that working for the Rebbe is something that comes at significant personal risk and can impact others' lives, too.*



*Even as a boy, Asher is deeply sensitive to others' emotional states and observes details that others might miss. Here, the living room window becomes the site for Aryeh's expression of grief and worry in the midst of crisis—it's clear that Yaakov's death and Rivkeh's pain have created a rift in the family.*



After Rivkeh comes home from the hospital, Aryeh stops traveling. A Yiddish-speaking widow named Mrs. Rackover starts coming to the apartment to clean and cook. Rivkeh was “almost destroyed” by Yaakov’s death. Afterward, she is almost unrecognizably thin, and her eyes look dead. She avoids everyone. Asher hears her talking to herself, and it frightens him. He hears her singing a Hasidic melody in her brother’s voice.

One day, Rivkeh shows a flicker of recognition and asks Asher if he is drawing “sweet, pretty things.” Actually, he’s drawing “twisted shapes, swirling forms,” but he agrees to “make the world pretty” by drawing his mother flowers and birds.

About two weeks after Rivkeh’s return home, Asher finds her lying in bed, looking “shrunken” and “sallow.” He’s come to show her his drawing of two birds in a nest, but she doesn’t respond when he tells her, “I made the world pretty, Mama.” Mrs. Rackover finds Asher and scolds him for disturbing his mother. Later, Asher sits at his desk and makes a drawing of dead birds.

At one point, Rivkeh’s sister, Leah, comes to visit and tells her she is neglecting Asher and that the Torah forbids her to mourn in this way. Rivkeh says nothing. Aryeh begins taking Asher to work with him during the day. Aryeh works at the Ladover headquarters, a Gothic building containing a publishing press and conference rooms. The Rebbe and his wife also live there, in a second-floor apartment. Asher is curious to visit the *Rebbe* like so many others do, but he isn’t allowed. His father works in a small third-floor office. He often sits reading newspapers or talking on the phone. Asher often hears him speaking about Russia.

Asher isn’t sure what his father’s telephone calls are about. Aryeh sometimes speaks in English, Yiddish, Hebrew, or French. At the end of a workday, he looks weary and complains that he needs people, not telephones. One day he tells Asher that he’s helping Ladover families to move from Europe to the United States.

*Rivkeh is no longer the carefree young mother Asher remembers, and the entire shape of family life has been permanently altered. Rivkeh is emotionally and mentally unstable following Yaakov’s death, and Asher is unable to understand the full extent of what has happened. Rivkeh’s coping mechanism of singing a religious song in her brother’s voice suggests that her faith is a significant part of how she perceives and copes with life events.*



*Early on, Asher discovers a tension between what others expect of him as an artist (“sweet, pretty things”) and his own expression of his feelings (“twisted shapes”).*



*Asher learns that, despite his best efforts in trying to fulfill others’ expectations, he can’t transform reality through his art—creating something “pretty” doesn’t fix Rivkeh’s plight. He expresses his pain and disillusionment by drawing the dead birds.*



*Because Rivkeh is in such a helpless, grief-stricken state, Asher begins joining his father at the Ladover headquarters, where he gets firsthand insight into Aryeh’s work for the first time. Access to the Rebbe himself is carefully controlled, and Aryeh’s own work has a sense of mystery about it, too, for the young boy.*



*In post-Holocaust Europe, especially in Communist-controlled areas, many Jewish communities faced continued persecution and internal disarray. Aryeh’s father is involved in important international work, but sitting behind a desk nevertheless leaves him with a sense of restless unfulfillment.*



Late one afternoon, Aryeh takes a phone call. His face becomes rigid with anger, and his voice is filled with “cold rage.” Asher doesn’t recognize the language Aryeh speaks into the phone. Later, Aryeh tells Asher that he’d been speaking Russian. The man on the telephone told him that people in Russia are harming Jews. That night, Aryeh tries to get Rivkeh to eat supper with them, but she refuses. Later, Asher is awakened by the sound of his father softly chanting Psalms in front of the living room **window**.

The next day, there are more tense phone calls in Russian. Aryeh paces around his office, restless. Asher shows Aryeh a drawing he’s made of him talking angrily in Russian. Aryeh looks at the drawing but doesn’t say anything. At supper that night, Asher tells Rivkeh about the drawing. When Rivkeh asks if it was a pretty drawing, Asher replies, “No, Mama. But it was a good drawing.” He explains that he doesn’t want to make pretty drawings.

Rivkeh’s eyes narrow, and she whispers to Asher that he “should make the world pretty.” Asher replies that the world isn’t pretty, so he “won’t draw it pretty.” His mother tells him that it’s wrong to “dislike God’s world. Even if it is unfinished.”

Asher keeps asking his mother when she’s going to get well. The next thing he knows, he feels “something tearing wide apart” inside him, and he is screaming and beating his fists on the table. Someone puts him to bed. When he wakes up later, his father is standing there. Asher sleepily tells Aryeh, “My drawings don’t help [...] It’s not a pretty world, Papa.” “I’ve noticed,” his father tells him.

Aryeh’s brother, Asher’s Uncle Yitzchok, comes to visit. He owns a successful jewelry and watch-repair store in Brooklyn and has several children. He invites the family to his house for Passover, but Aryeh explains that Rivkeh can’t leave the house. Asher’s uncle tells Aryeh he should talk to the Rebbe. Aryeh asks Asher to leave the room. In his bedroom, Asher draws pictures of his kindly uncle. When his uncle sees the pictures, he calls Asher “a little Chagall.” He explains that Chagall is the world’s greatest Jewish artist. The world’s greatest artist, he says, is Picasso. He asks to buy one of Asher’s drawings. Aryeh’s face darkens at this, and after Yitzchok leaves, Aryeh returns with the drawing, saying that his brother “has a strange sense of humor.” Asher isn’t sure if he feels happy or sad to have the drawing back.

*Asher’s father likely has access to information about Russian Jews that the general public doesn’t yet have. What he learns weighs on him. In both his work and his family life, Aryeh has a sense of powerlessness and an inability to fix the crises at hand.*



*Asher already instinctively knows how to distinguish between “pretty” and “good” drawings. The drawing of his father might not be innocently “pretty,” but it reveals something true about his father’s anger. Asher wants to create truthful work—not necessarily work that others will find pleasing.*



*Rivkeh is still in an emotionally fragile state. After her brother’s sudden death, she is fixated on the “unfinished” nature of things. She interprets Asher’s words about the world as being impious, but Asher simply means that he doesn’t want to portray the world as being other than it is.*



*Rivkeh’s illness has placed Asher under a tremendous emotional strain that he’s too young to understand or express. All he knows is that the world is not “pretty,” and he can’t change that. In this realization, he and Aryeh have much in common.*



*The family continues to struggle with the fallout from Yaakov’s death and Rivkeh’s collapse. Both Chagall and Picasso were 20th-century artists, associated with the avant-garde Cubist movement and later influential on Asher’s own artistic development. He doesn’t know any of that yet, however, and his father is displeased by Yitzchok’s implication (albeit a joking one) that he will join their ranks. He takes Yitzchok’s purchase as an affront, in fact. For the first time, Asher feels the ambivalence associated with being recognized for his art and also having to give up his creations.*



As spring progresses, Asher sometimes spends whole days sitting in the living room with his mother and watching the sunlight change as it moves across the room. One day, Asher struggles to capture the contours of his mother's face in a drawing. He uses the ashes from her old cigarettes to get the contours just right. Later, he notices his father watching him with "fascination and perplexity," looking "angry and confused and dejected" at the same time.

That night, Aryeh tells Asher that he wishes he wouldn't spend all his time drawing. He asks Asher who taught him to use cigarette ash. Asher explains that he came up with the idea himself. He apologizes for making Aryeh angry with him. Aryeh just tells Asher to say his bedtime prayer and bids him goodnight. That night, Asher dreams of his mythic ancestor, raging and storming, telling Asher he's "wasting time." Asher wakes up and sees his father praying in front of the **window**. He vows to himself that through his drawing, he will "bring life to all the wide and tired world."

One Sunday morning, Asher accompanies his father to the grocery store. He meets a nervous-looking man with a strange cap and a raspy voice, Reb Yudel Krinsky. He has just come from Russia, Aryeh explains. Aryeh asks Yudel Krinsky how he is feeling. "How should a Jew feel?" Yudel replies. "There we went through the seven gates of hell for matzos. Here I stand in matzos over my head." Yudel tells Asher that his father is "an angel of God."

After they leave the store, Aryeh explains to Asher that he helped Yudel come to America from Russia. His strange hat is called a *kaskett*. The Rebbe asked Yudel to continue wearing it "so everyone would see a Russian Jew who remained a Jew." He tells Asher that Stalin is "from the sitra achra." Later, Mrs. Rackover explains to Asher that Yudel had survived 11 years in Siberia, "a land of ice and darkness where the Russian government sends people it hates."

*Asher is beginning to develop his awareness of light and also to display precocious instincts regarding color and line, trying different media in order to get the effect he wants. This self-led experimentation and careful attention to detail suggest that Asher is artistically driven by a desire to capture things as they truly are. Aryeh doesn't understand what his son is doing, however, and is disturbed by the way Asher chooses to spend his time and energy.*



*Aryeh feels uncomfortable with Asher's artistic ingenuity—he can't relate, and he doesn't understand its origins. Significantly, when Asher dreams of his mythic ancestor, he sees his father's disapproval reflected back to him. Already, he perceives that there's something about him that doesn't fit in with the rest of his family and even his heritage. But he also has compassion for his father and wants to bring about good through his art.*



*Asher meets someone who, unlike him, has endured severe persecution for being Jewish. His relationship with Yudel Krinsky will be significant for Asher, giving him indirect insight into his father's concerns. Here, Yudel compares the dizzying contrast between the privations of Russia (where matzos—the unleavened bread eaten during Passover—was a great scarcity) with the plenty and freedom found in the U.S., his new country.*



*Aryeh is responsible for Yudel's escape from Russia, so Asher gets a firsthand introduction to the fruits of his father's work. The implication of the Rebbe's request is that some Russian Jews did not withstand the pressures of persecution (and some became communists, it's revealed later). Stalin is the epitome of the "other side"—something that will stick in Asher's mind as he develops his idea of the demonic vs. the divine.*



As Asher eats the milk and cookies Mrs. Rackover has prepared for him, he wonders how Picasso might paint Siberia. It bothers him that he doesn't know what color ice is. Later, he pictures Yudel Krinsky—"not truly his face, but the way I felt about his face." He feels as though he and Yudel are brothers—Yudel knew ice and darkness in the past, outside himself, and Asher knows ice and darkness now, inside himself.

*Asher's aesthetic interpretations are maturing—while many children might portray ice as white or blue, Asher is already thinking in more advanced and specific terms, reflecting his deep desire to know the underlying truth of things. He is also beginning to think about the difference between art ("the way I felt about his face") and a straightforward presentation of fact. Asher's reflection that he feels cold and dark inside indicates that his family's struggle has had a deep and painful impact on him, even though he may not be able to express his pain in literal terms.*



That night, Rivkeh joins the family for supper. She asks Asher about his drawings. Then, she asks Aryeh, "What's new in the world?" She tells him, "It is a victory for the sitra achra to leave a task for the Ribbono Shel Olom unfinished." Later, Asher goes to his room and tries and fails to draw, "feeling the fear like a presence." He goes to the living room and stares out the **window**. Aryeh finds him. Asher asks why God is doing this to his mama. Aryeh hugs Asher and puts him to bed.

*Rivkeh speaks to Aryeh using her late brother's catchphrase ("What's new in the world?"), apparently taking on his voice and persona in her extreme grief. Asher is frightened and unable to understand, and Aryeh can't put it into words, either.*



The next day, Rivkeh sleeps all day. That night, she finds Asher and Aryeh in the living room and explains to them that she wants to finish Yaakov's work. It would be a victory for the sitra achra, she says, if Yaakov's work remained incomplete. Soon Asher will be starting yeshiva. Aryeh could travel again. She begs Aryeh to let her call the college tomorrow. Aryeh asks Rivkeh to wait until he's spoken to the Rebbe. Rivkeh's eyes darken again, and she says harshly, "The Rebbe killed my brother." Aryeh and Asher are horrified.

*Rivkeh feels obligated to counteract the sitra achra by picking up where Yaakov left off. This impulse to bring balance and to finish what's incomplete will recur in each family member's life. In spite of her resolution, Rivkeh is clearly still suffering and has not reconciled with the tragedy. Her blaming the Rebbe, who is essentially their community's reason for existence, sounds blasphemous to Asher and Aryeh.*



Asher vividly remembers lying awake that night, feeling connected to his mother's pain and hearing her angry words as if they were "demonic words, from the sitra achra." He decides that drawing is "a futile indulgence in the face of such immutable darkness." He must grow up.

*Asher's deep empathy is apparent again—his mother's pain has an ongoing influence on him. For now, in fact, his mother's pain is such that his art seems pointless in the face of it. It's almost as though his emotions are too big and incomprehensible to be expressed.*



The Rebbe gives his permission for Rivkeh to start college. In September, Asher enters the Ladover yeshiva, his mother enters Brooklyn College, and Aryeh begins traveling for the Rebbe once again. Asher quits drawing.

*The family comes to a crossroads, with each member starting a new season that will pose fresh challenges for each of them and for the family as a whole. Most significantly for Asher, his art lies fallow in the midst of it all.*



## CHAPTER 2

Asher starts school at the Ladover yeshiva. He is treated with special respect because of his father's status as an emissary of the Rebbe and his mother's illness, as well as the fact that Rivkeh is one of the few Ladover women who's been permitted to attend college. Asher doesn't remember much of his early years at school, although the *mashpia*, Rav Yosef Cutler, made an impression on him. The *mashpia*'s job is to teach the boys Ladover doctrines and to oversee "the development of [their] souls." He also talks to them about Jewish persecution under the Communists. He reminds Asher vaguely of his "thunderous mythic ancestor." He is taught religious subjects in Yiddish and secular subjects in English. While some of his secular teachers are Gentiles, there are no non-observant Jews at the *yeshiva*.

During these years, Asher's "gift lay buried." When his mother asks him why he's stopped drawing, Asher claims that he hates it—"it's from the *sitra achra*. Like Stalin." Rivkeh says nothing else. Aryeh, meanwhile, assumes that Asher's obsession with drawing has faded away, like other "ills of my childhood."

In the summers, the family lives in a private Hasidic bungalow colony in the Berkshires in Massachusetts. Aryeh comes up during the weekends. Mostly, Rivkeh seems happy during these years, although occasionally the "dead look" will return to her eyes. Rivkeh no longer seems like Asher's older sister. Rather, she is "an efficient organizer of the temporal traffic" of their lives. Both Asher and Aryeh must adhere to strict schedules, and Aryeh doesn't travel very far. One day, when Asher returns home from school late, Rivkeh screams at him in rage. But mostly her days revolve around her studies.

Now that Aryeh has resumed his travels for the Rebbe, "he glowed with new life." He helps establish new Ladover communities and acts as the *Rebbe*'s representative at events in other cities. At home, he obsessively searches for news about the Jews of Russia. In the Ladover building, his office is moved to the second floor (closer to the *Rebbe*'s). The Ladover community in Crown Heights continues to grow, with many new faces from across Europe, but none from Russia.

*The yeshiva is a school where Asher is educated alongside other boys in both religious and secular subjects. Even though he has contact with non-Jewish teachers, Asher doesn't encounter Jewish people who are not devoutly religious; he remains in a fairly sheltered Ladover world. He's particularly influenced by the mashpia, who functions like a religious instructor or chaplain. His teachings have a particular resonance during this time of strife for Jews around the world—perhaps why he has that "thunderous" aura for Asher.*



*Rivkeh has continued to take an interest in Asher's art, showing that she's trying to leave room for self-expression in Asher's world. In Asher's mind, though, art is confusedly tangled up with the pain of the past years—his mother's illness and the stories he's heard of Stalin's persecution. All Aryeh knows, though, is that art seems to be a phase that has faded away—meaning that Asher is growing up the way Aryeh wants to see.*



*Even though family life has fallen into more predictable, healthy rhythms, Yaakov's tragedy still haunts them. In particular, Rivkeh—even though she's found a fulfilling outlet in academics—feels the need to closely manage everyone's lives, as if to ensure their safety by knowing their whereabouts at all times. When things go wrong, her anxiety shows through in a visceral way.*



*Like Rivkeh's college classes, Aryeh's participation in travels for the Rebbe gives him a renewed sense of purpose and identity, and his importance within the larger community grows. However, things are still grim for persecuted Russian Jews, who are conspicuously absent from the thriving community.*



One weekend in the summer of 1952, Aryeh arrives at the bungalow community, looking as though he's in pain. He tells Rivkeh, "They shot the writers." He says it's the work of the *sitra achra*. "I shouldn't be here, Rivkeh," he tells her. "I should be there."

Throughout the weekend, Asher hears his parents talking. Aryeh "cannot reconcile" himself and feels that his father's work is "incomplete." He says that there is so much work to be done in Europe. Later, Asher asks his mother about what happened. She explains that Stalin ordered Jewish writers to be shot. Asher asks if his father is going to Europe, and Rivkeh, alarmed, quickly says no. Asher says he wishes his father wouldn't travel so much. Rivkeh says he'll get used to it, and that it's a tradition in their family.

Sometimes during these years, Asher can't sleep. When this happens, he goes into the living room and looks out the **window** at the parkway. One night he sees a man "with a beard and an ordinary dark hat" walking alone among the trees in the middle of the parkway. Some distance in front of the man, two tall, bearded men are walking, and another pair walks behind him.

One snowy Shabbos afternoon, Asher and his mother sit in the living room and talk. Asher asks if Siberia has this much snow, and Rivkeh says it has much more. Asher wonders how anyone could survive 11 years in such snow, the way Yudel Krinsky did. The next day, Aryeh goes on a journey to Boston. That night, Asher finds his mother in the living room, looking out the **window** at the snow. When the phone rings, she answers, trembling. "I warned you," she says in a strange voice. Later, Rivkeh tells Asher that Papa is stranded in Boston because of the snow. He is staying with Rivkeh's sister, Leah. At supper, Rivkeh has "a little of the dead look" she'd had after Yaakov's death. Asher asks her about it, and she apologizes to him for being "such a mother." She'll get used to Aryeh's travels, she says. She doesn't want Asher to be frightened like her; she wants him to be happy. Right now, she can see that he's unhappy.

*Aryeh refers to the so-called Night of the Murdered Poets, when 13 Soviet Jews were executed for supposed treason and espionage. Aryeh agonizes over his inability to help in some way, reflecting his ongoing struggle with feeling disempowered in trying situations.*



*Aryeh, like Rivkeh, feels obligated to complete a family member's unfinished work. This drive demonstrates the importance of familial roots and legacies in the close-knit Ladover community. Rivkeh explains to Asher that Aryeh, like his forebears (his scholarly father and the mythic ancestor), feels compelled to travel—a reality she struggles to accept herself. Her quick denial suggests that Aryeh will likely go abroad, and that she's yet to accept this inevitable truth.*



*The apartment window continues to be a place where family members take their personal burdens. The man with the "ordinary hat" is later revealed to be the Rebbe himself, walking with a bodyguard. His nighttime walk suggests that he, like Asher, carries heavy burdens.*



*For Rivkeh, Aryeh's detainment in Boston is a terrifying reminder of Yaakov's death in a previous winter, again bringing her suppressed fears to the surface. Rivkeh also fears that her anxieties burden Asher, and she doesn't want him to be similarly constrained—she can tell he is under stress.*



After Aryeh returns from Boston, they soon hear that six Jewish doctors were arrested on the charge of planning to murder Soviet leaders. Aryeh fears that Stalin will use this to “start a blood bath.” He goes to a meeting with the Rebbe. Rivkeh fears that this means Aryeh will begin traveling more often.

That day at school, the mashpia calls a special assembly. He talks about the centuries of Jewish suffering under “the Russian bear” and leads the boys in prayer. After school, instead of going straight home, Asher walks to the stationery store where Yudel Krinsky now works. While he waits for Yudel Krinsky, he notices that the store has a display case filled with art supplies. He asks Yudel for a notebook and pencil, which Yudel cheerfully sells to “the son of Reb Aryeh Lev.” Asher asks Yudel about the Russian doctors and about Siberia. Yudel tells Asher that Siberia is “the place where the Angel of Death feeds and grows fat,” and that even Stalin should only have to experience Siberia for a short time. When Asher hurries home, Mrs. Rackover is disappointed in him for coming home late.

The next day, Aryeh tells Asher that the mashpia has given him a disappointing report: he says Asher is not studying. Asher doesn’t know what to say. It’s a school day, but he’s so tired he struggles to get out of bed.

After school, Asher visits Yudel Krinsky again. He buys another notebook, but he has more questions about Siberia. He asks Yudel what the world did when Stalin sent millions of people to Siberia. Yudel answers that the world did exactly what it did when Hitler killed Jews—that is, nothing. When Asher leaves, Yudel tells him that he doesn’t have to buy something just to talk to him.

Later that week, Rivkeh asks Asher why he didn’t tell her that he’s been visiting Yudel Krinsky’s store. Asher explains that he was afraid she would be angry. His mother says she is sorry and that she doesn’t want Asher to be afraid of her. Then they talk about Aryeh’s role in trying to help the Jews in Russia. While Rivkeh doesn’t like Aryeh to be away from home so much, it’s what the Rebbe has asked of him. And Rivkeh must also focus on her schoolwork. Finally, she says that Asher may visit Yudel Krinsky after school, but he must come straight home afterwards. Her eyes look dark.

*The so-called Doctors’ Plot is a real historical event in which the Jewish doctors were imprisoned and tortured on false charges, though eventually released. Because of Aryeh’s position, events like these have implications for the family’s future. Aryeh’s ties to the internal plight of Jews demonstrates how the Jewish community is broad and interconnected—his loyalties lie not just with his blood relatives, but with all those of his faith.*



*Asher has a lot of questions about the sufferings of the broader Jewish community, and he instinctively gravitates to Yudel Krinsky to answer them. Although he’s also drawn to the art supplies in Krinsky’s store, he feels more comfortable asking Krinsky for perspective on weighty matters than he does his own father—suggesting that there’s still a sense of distance and mistrust between Aryeh and Asher. Asher begins to establish a pattern of coming home late, which symbolizes this sense of distance and the growing conflict that Asher’s interests outside of his family and his faith will generate.*



*Even though he’s no longer drawing, Asher is not keeping up with his schoolwork and appears to be depressed after his talk with Aryeh, again suggesting the emotional weight he feels and his inability to express his feelings about it. Without art, Asher is clearly missing an important outlet to understand his own emotions and make sense of the world around him.*



*Yudel continues to give Asher insight into the sufferings of the Jewish people and also encourages Asher to feel comfortable visiting him without making transparent excuses. After the confrontation with his father over his grades, Asher appears to need a sympathetic adult in his life.*



*Rivkeh regrets that her fears and anxieties have unintentionally alienated Asher, and she seeks common ground with her son. Allowing him to go off on his own after school is a sacrifice for her, but one she concedes because it’s clearly something Asher needs. This is an example of the many painful compromises Rivkeh will make for Asher’s sake, even at great personal cost.*



One Shabbos, as Asher and Aryeh walk to synagogue together, they talk about the Jews in Russia and Aryeh's travel. In the synagogue, Aryeh sits near the Ark while Asher sits in back with some of his classmates. Usually, the Rebbe only joins the service for those parts that must be prayed communally. In the service, the *Rebbe's* head is completely covered with a *tallis*, and unlike most people in the synagogue, he prays without swaying or moving at all.

After the service, Aryeh goes to bed with a fever. Rivkeh calls the doctor, even though Aryeh insists it's "foolishness." The doctor comes and prescribes antibiotics for Aryeh's bronchitis. That night, Rivkeh falls asleep while studying for an upcoming test. When Asher wakes her the next morning, she says, "Yaakov, I will pass the examination." When her mind clears, she checks on Aryeh and sends Asher to buy newspapers for his father. Asher answers the telephone while his mother studies all day. The next morning, his father leaves on a scheduled trip, because, Rivkeh says, "The Ribbono Shel Olom wanted him to go."

That afternoon, Asher goes to Yudel Krinsky's store. Asher helps Yudel wait on customers by fetching a few items for him. Then Asher asks Yudel questions while helping him stock shelves. He asks Yudel if the Russians would send his papa to Siberia if he lived in Russia. Yudel says they certainly would, or they might even shoot him. At home, they eat a celebratory dinner because Rivkeh did well on her Russian history test. But as it starts to snow heavily, Rivkeh frets, staring out the **window** and asking Yaakov to be an interceder for her with the Ribbono Shel Olom. Aryeh returns home, exhausted and snow-covered, two hours later.

The next day in school, the mashpia talks to Asher's class about Ladover history. The Rebbe's grandfather, he says, had been imprisoned under the Bolsheviks. After his release, Jews came from all over the world to settle at Ladov and learn from him. That *Rebbe* sent out emissaries throughout Russia. His son and successor did the same, and some of those emissaries were exiled to Siberia. One of them (Asher's grandfather) was murdered. The mashpia says that the Ribbono Shel Olom remembers these men's suffering and that it will be rewarded in the next world.

*This synagogue scene conveys a sense of the Rebbe's powerful presence within the community. To Asher, he looks aloof under his prayer shawl, and his stillness contrasts with the more expressive mode of prayer common in Hasidic communities. He is a forbidding, larger-than-life figure.*



*Rivkeh strives to hold her family together while keeping on top of her own studies. The toll is evident in her half-awake words to Yaakov—her late brother is still a looming presence. And even though he's quite ill, Aryeh remains committed to his travels for the Rebbe. Each member of the family is doing what they have to do for the sake of their respective work. Asher alone lacks an outlet.*



*Yudel Krinsky continues to be a confidant and sounding board for Asher in the midst of family stress. Rivkeh is pulled between various fears and duties—her own academic success and her anxieties for Aryeh. She falls back on speaking to Yaakov when under such strain.*



*Asher hears about the weighty heritage of struggle and sacrifice for the sake of bringing Ladover teaching to the world. The mashpia takes care to impress these stories on the young boys because it's implied that they, too, are expected to do their part in advancing this heritage. It's especially poignant for Asher, since his own grandfather died during one such journey.*



After school, Asher returns to Yudel Krinsky's store. It's storming again, and Yudel says that Asher should go straight home. But Asher likes the warmth of the store and the way it smells of new paper and pencils. So Yudel lets Asher help him sort through paintbrushes, since "A Jew should not only talk, he should also do." As they work, Yudel tells Asher about his former life in Russia. He had lived with his wife and children in a city in the Ukraine. With other Ladover Jews, he had worked in a hatpin factory with a Ukrainian boss who allowed Jewish workers to take the Sabbath off. Eventually, a Russian boss was brought in, and some of the Jewish workers were arrested as "enemies of the Soviet state." Yudel was one of the ten exiled workers. At this point, he stops telling the story. He peers at the heavy snow as he begins closing down the store. He tells Asher that when it snowed in Siberia, it was sometimes colder indoors than out. He tells Asher to be careful walking home—"Snow is an enemy."

The streets are icy, and it takes Asher a long time to walk home. When he reaches his street, he sees his mother at the **window**. When she meets him at the door, she screams at him. She asks Asher, "What did I do to you [...] Didn't it occur to you what it means to wait?" She asks, "Ribbono Shel Olom [...] What do You want from me?" Then she disappears into her room. Asher feels horrified. He lays on his bed and tries to stop trembling. Later that night, he hears his mother in the living room, chanting the Psalms and asking Yaakov, "I am only a little girl. What do you want from me?" They have no supper that night.

The next morning, Rivkeh tells Asher that he must remember to return home at a reasonable time, and he must come straight home when it snows. She apologizes for losing her temper. Asher apologizes for frightening her. She looks at him tearfully and says that she's "trying very hard to get used to it." Then she walks him to school, kisses him, and wishes him a good mark on his arithmetic test. But Asher fails the test.

## CHAPTER 3

In March, Aryeh receives a phone call: Stalin is dying of a stroke. Later that week, Stalin dies. As Aryeh and Asher walk to the synagogue, Aryeh asks Asher if he knows where Vienna is. Asher doesn't know. Aryeh says, "Geography you don't know. Chumash and Rashi you don't know [...] Sometimes I wonder whose son you are, Asher."

*Asher continues to be drawn to the warmth of Yudel Krinsky's store, because it feels like a safe haven for him in comparison to the strain and stress he finds at home. Yudel also puts a personal face on the Jewish heritage Asher hears about in his school lectures. Yudel's personal history of persecution and exile exemplifies the suffering undergone by Russian Jews—facing the loss of everything they knew and being forced into a life of uncertainty, struggle, and pain.*



*Asher's late arrival feels like a personal affront to Rivkeh, who struggles to mask the strain of worry about her loved ones. Asher doesn't mean to cause his mother pain, and her raw pain—which comes through frighteningly in her appeal to Yaakov—makes a deep impression on him. There's a sense that each member of the family is just barely holding things together—perhaps especially Asher.*



*Rivkeh and Asher reconcile, as Rivkeh tries to explain the incredible toll that her loved ones' absence takes on her. Asher's anxieties are further beneath the surface—but his failure at school suggests that all is not well with him.*



*Stalin's death immediately signals a huge shift not only for the Jewish community, but for the Lev family as well, opening up work opportunities for Aryeh that didn't exist previously. But this moment also highlights Asher's academic weakness—he's familiar with neither the traditional religious subjects (Rashi was a medieval Torah commentator) nor basic geography, and Aryeh takes this as a personal affront to their family and their faith.*



With few exceptions, “every adult inside [the] synagogue had experienced the tyranny of Stalin” in some way. Prayer is especially fervent that morning, “a tremulous crescendo of sound.” But the Rebbe remains still and silent. Soon, his quietness penetrates the rest of the synagogue. Asher concentrates on his prayers, feeling as if the words are “alive and moving inside me.” But after the service, when he greets Yudel Krinsky, Yudel says, “The dead do not return to life because a tyrant dies. The Ribbono Shel Olom was late.”

The next day, Asher can’t take his eyes off of a photo in the *Times* of Stalin in his coffin, surrounded by mounds of flowers. When he helps Yudel Krinsky in his store after school, Yudel says that “There are many Stalins in Russia.” But that night, Rivkeh says that while Yudel has a point, Stalin’s death does make a difference for Jews.

The following Shabbos, while Aryeh is attending the Rebbe’s afternoon talk, Rivkeh has a talk with Asher. She tells Asher that they might move to Vienna. There is certain work—different work—that Aryeh must now do with Russian Jews. Stalin’s death has made this possible. Asher says that he doesn’t want to go to Vienna. Rivkeh caresses Asher’s face and tells him that if the *Rebbe* asks, they must go. Asher lays on his bed and feels tired, resentful of the fact that Stalin died when he did. Aryeh returns late that night and leaves early the next morning.

That week, Asher is sick. Through a fog, he sometimes sees his parents standing at his bedside. Yudel Krinsky comes to visit. He mentions that he visited Vienna once—“Before the war, it was known as a city of cafes and waltzes. It is a city that hates Jews.” Asher doesn’t want to move away from his street. He knows the people there and all the details of the neighborhood. He prays that the Ribbono Shel Olom will change the Rebbe’s mind. On Shabbos, after Asher is well, he asks his mother about Yudel Krinsky’s visit. Rivkeh says that Yudel was never there. On Monday, Aryeh comes home and informs them that the Rebbe is sending them to Vienna in October.

The next day, Asher asks Yudel Krinsky about Vienna. Yudel explains that, like many people, he came to Western Europe from Eastern Europe by way of Vienna. He says, again, that Vienna hates Jews. That night, Asher asks his father why the Rebbe chose him to go to Vienna. Aryeh explains that they’re going to teach Ladover Jews all over Europe, opening new yeshivos in many cities. They will live in Vienna because it’s the center of Europe. He tells Asher that he will learn to like Vienna.

*Asher’s fervent piety, as well as the significance of Stalin’s death for the community as a whole, is obvious in the emotional worship service that morning. But Yudel, whose memories of suffering under Stalin are fresh, tempers the scene with a reminder of what can’t be undone, even suggesting that God’s timing was late.*



*For Asher, Stalin is an emblem of all that’s evil, so the photo has a big impression on him. While Yudel makes the point that the evils of antisemitism remain alive in Russia, Rivkeh is aware that this is also a historic turning point.*



*As both Rivkeh and Aryeh have hinted to Asher before, Stalin’s death means big changes for the family. But the news of Aryeh’s likely move is a crisis for Asher, seeming to trigger depression in him. He already feels conflicted about his father and cut off from his art. The possibility of leaving behind everything he knows feels like an exile of sorts.*



*Asher’s sickness seems to be at least partially triggered by his fears and discontentment, similar to what happens to Rivkeh under stress—even to the extent of imagining people who aren’t really there. He imagines Vienna as a place where he will find only hatred and exile from what he loves. Asher’s distress signals the importance of physical locale to his sense of community and identity—the notion of leaving his familiar scenery and insular Brooklyn Ladover sect seems to shake his very sense of self.*



*From Yudel Krinsky and his father, Asher gets two different perspectives on Vienna. On one hand, it’s an antisemitic place. On the other hand, it’s a gateway for reaching disconnected, struggling Jewish communities across Europe. Asher feels caught between these perspectives—in a way, caught between Vienna’s “divine” and “demonic” potential—and can’t fully grasp why his familiar world must be shaken up in this way.*



After synagogue that week, Uncle Yitzchok tells Asher it's an honor for his father to go to Vienna and travel for the sake of Torah, much as their own father had done. "My little brother is now a great man," he adds thoughtfully.

During the Shabbos meal, Asher asks his father questions about Vienna—where he will study, what languages are spoken there. Later, he tells his mother he is afraid. He doesn't want to fly, and he can't speak German. Later, Rivkeh explains that there are more important considerations. They're going to Vienna no matter what.

That night, Asher dreams of his mythic ancestor, "pounding his way through the trees [...] thunder in his voice." Asher wakes up and looks out the **window** at the parkway. He sees a man "with a dark beard, a dark coat, and an ordinary dark hat" walking through the trees, and he isn't sure if he's dreaming or not. The next morning, he tells his parents he thinks he dreamed of the Rebbe, and he's afraid to walk to school by himself. "It's not a pretty world, Mama," he tells Rivkeh.

That day, when the mashpia comes to speak to Asher's class, Asher finds himself drawing in his notebook during the lesson. When he realizes what he's drawn, his hands tremble. It's a picture of Stalin dead in his coffin.

## CHAPTER 4

Asher draws Stalin's corpse over and over again, in many different ways: hollow, bloated, distorted, disfigured. When Aryeh sees the piles of drawings, he says, "You can't study Chumash, but this you have time for." Asher just keeps drawing. For the first time, he uses charcoal, bought at Yudel Krinsky's store, to add depth to the portrait of Stalin. His mother comes in and admires the drawing, though she agrees with Asher that "it isn't pretty." She tells Asher that he must study. She also tells him that next week, they will be getting their passports for Vienna. Asher continues to insist that he won't be going to Vienna. He'll be staying with Uncle Yitzchok. Rivkeh asks him not to be a child.

*Asher's father is decisively taking his place within the succession of figures who've traveled and suffered for the sake of Torah. But Asher, too young to fully grasp this perspective, only knows that he's losing what's familiar to him.*



*Asher has lots of misgivings about Vienna and its unknowns. However, those childish expressed fears mask deeper concerns. Rivkeh sees the move to Vienna as nonnegotiable—meaning the stage is set for full-blown conflict.*



*As often happens when Asher feels fearful or conflicted about his position in the family, he has an ominous dream of the mythic ancestor. He sees the Rebbe walking outside. Again, in his young mind, the Rebbe and Asher's fears of the unknown are tangled up in a way that's hard to express. He remembers his discovery, earlier in childhood, that the world is not beautiful. Yet without art, Asher is unable to effectively make sense of what he's feeling. This hints that he's at a breaking point, needing to expression his fears in one way or another.*



*After not drawing for years, Asher finally draws again—without even realizing it. Because Stalin is a symbol of evil in his mind, and Stalin's death has caused such upheaval in his family life, the drawing shows how fearful and conflicted Asher feels about the different forces pulling on him—his desire to please his family, the struggles of persecuted Jews, his own unexpressed pain. Art is the only way Asher can express all this.*



*Once Asher starts drawing again, he can't stop. Aryeh is dismayed, seeing the revival of drawing as nothing but a distraction from the more important work of studying the Bible. Asher also expands his artistic horizons by exploring different media, showing his independence. His continued insistence that the move is impossible for him reinforces this, suggesting that there is a rift between what Asher's parents' expectations and his own sense of what the proper path is for himself.*



The next day, Asher works on a portrait of Yudel Krinsky. Yudel shows Asher how to spray fixative on the drawing to keep the charcoal from rubbing off. He tells Asher that he has a great gift. Asher gives him the drawing.

*For the first time, Asher gets affirmation of his artistic talent from outside of his family, and gifts his art to someone else. Significantly, he freely gives his art to Yudel, who by now is something of a father figure, a contrast to how he once felt threatened and confused by Uncle Yitzchok's joke about buying Asher's artwork. This suggests that although Asher is deeply tied to his family, he also feels a need to explore and find fulfillment in the wider world outside his insular community.*



Later, Asher goes into Uncle Yitzchok's nearby jewelry and watch-repair shop. Asher normally avoids the store because he doesn't like its cold, fluorescent brightness. Yitzchok is pleased to see Asher, but his smile disappears when Asher abruptly asks, "Can I stay with you when [my parents] go to Vienna?" Yitzchok seems dumbfounded and tells Asher he must think about it.

*Asher's childish self-absorption is evident in the fact that he drops his request on Uncle Yitzchok with no warning to him or his parents. At the same time, he's serious about the threat that a move to Vienna poses in his mind—he is clearly willing to risk disappointing his parents if it means getting to stay where he feels comfortable and safe.*



That night, Aryeh tells Asher he needs to stop "this foolishness." At bedtime, Rivkeh tells Asher that he's hurting his father by behaving this way. Asher tells her, "I don't want to lose it again, Mama. I don't care about anyone." She leaves without saying goodnight.

*Aryeh sees Asher as simply being obstructive, and Rivkeh appeals to him regarding the pain his resistance is causing. But Asher is fixed on not losing "it"—his drawing—again. In his mind, this loss of self-expression poses a threat to his very survival.*



The following week, Asher works on a portrait of his mother. Rivkeh asks Asher why he draws: "What does it mean to you, my Asher? [...] Because it may hurt us." Asher is so focused on his drawing that he barely hears her and doesn't respond. Rivkeh says, "Ribbono Shel Olom, what are we going to do?"

*Rivkeh continues to occupy a mediating role—modeling for Asher and trying to understand his feelings while also mindful of the difficulty they pose. But art demands so much of Asher's attention that he doesn't have room for anything else.*



That Shabbos evening, Asher realizes that something is happening to his eyes: he "saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes." He can feel texture and color, too, as if "with another pair of eyes that had suddenly come awake." He feels frightened.

*As he continues to mature as an artist, Asher's ability to see literally transforms—a latent talent that only needed to be awakened. But, since art has largely been portrayed by the authority figures in his life as something dark or demonic, he has no frame of reference for making sense of his creative drive.*



Aryeh pauses in his Shabbos hymns to praise Asher's drawing of Rivkeh. Then he says that Asher has a gift. It might be from God, or it might be from the Other Side. If it's the latter, "then it is foolishness [...] for it will take you away from Torah and from your people." He tells Asher about the suppression of the yeshivos in Russia under Communism. Hasidic groups, like the Ladover, were the only ones who fought back. Even Jewish Communists tried to destroy the religious Jews, Aryeh says.

*Somewhat confusingly, Aryeh tells Asher that his talent might originate from the side of evil and impurity rather than the side of holiness. The evidence for this, in his mind, will be that art pulls Asher away from the most important things—his faith and his community. To bring this home, he tells Asher about the resistance of Ladover Jews, even to other Jews who turned on their people. His implication is that Asher could end up betraying his people in this way, too.*



Aryeh goes on to explain that it's up to people to take the first step toward a connection with the Master of the Universe. When that is done, the Master of the Universe moves in and "[widens] the passageway." Aryeh believes that the Ladover have a responsibility to make passageways for Russian Jews, because they can't do it from their side. That's why the Rebbe is sending him to Europe. In his view, nothing in the world is more important than these Jewish lives and fulfilling their hunger for Torah. Asher sees "the strong dream that filled" his father's eyes and says he understands.

*Aryeh goes on to explain the nature of religious duty. He conceives this duty as having to do with creating opportunities for Russian Jews. He implicitly includes Asher in this obligation and doesn't allow room for any other conception of a religious obligation. While Asher doesn't really understand his father's passion itself, he understands having a "strong dream"—he has one of his own.*



At bedtime, Asher tells his mother that he, too, is "a Jewish life" who's precious in God's eyes, and doesn't someone have a responsibility to *Him*? Something inside Asher tells him he shouldn't go to Vienna, he insists. Rivkeh tells him he's being a child. Asher asks why no one is listening to him. Rivkeh replies, "Everyone is listening [...] There would be no problem if no one were listening to you, Asher."

*Asher struggles to express his sense that going to Vienna will compromise his art. This comes out sounding quite childish and self-centered, and Rivkeh, always absorbing both Aryeh's and Asher's pain while bearing her own, points out that his objections really are being taken seriously.*



During the Passover Seder, Uncle Yitzchok looks at Asher's drawings. He tells Asher, "Millions of people can draw." Asher needs to grow up and stop driving his father crazy, Yitzchok says. Asher gives up asking if he can stay with Yitzchok's family, but he still feels he can't leave his street.

*Although Uncle Yitzchok has been supportive of Asher's drawing in the past, he's making the point that Asher must think of something besides his desire to draw—it doesn't make him unique. The conflict between the demands of Asher's art and his faith are building to a climax.*



When Asher next visits Yudel Krinsky, he asks if his father's claims about the Ladover and the Jewish Communists were true. Yudel says they're true. He tells Asher stories about the secret police arresting Jews on the Sabbath, and accusations that Jews were trying to subvert the Communist government. Many were tortured, and some starved because they refused to eat non-Kosher food. Yudel is eating matzo, and he offers Asher some, telling Asher how strange he finds it—in Russia, people went to prison for matzos, but here, it is abundant.

*Asher hears from Yudel Krinsky about the sacrifices many Jews have endured under external pressures. While these conversations help answer Asher's questions about his heritage and strengthen his sense of religious identity, they also constitute additional pressure, as he tries to create a space within his religious and familial identity for the artistic drive that's deeply part of him.*



Asher slowly walks home along the parkway, enjoying the spring warmth and the familiar sights of his street. In particular, he notices a little girl of about three walking with a boy of about seven. The siblings are laughing together. When Asher gets home, Mrs. Rackover scolds him for dawdling and being late. She tells Asher that he's driving everyone crazy "with your pictures and your stubbornness" and that he should be ashamed. Asher just continues thinking about the siblings he saw and about the change he's noticed in his eyes. He spends the day drawing a series of pictures of the pair. When his mother sees the drawings, her eyes grow moist, and she leaves in silence. Asher notices that she has brought home a pile of books about Russia.

The next day, Aryeh observes that Asher seems unhappy. He asks if it's because Aryeh travels so much. He used to feel the same way about his own father's travels. But he says that the work must be done in this way, because "to touch a person's heart, you must see a person's face." The early Hasidic Jews did their work in the same way. Before Aryeh's father was killed, he'd been making plans to travel to the Ukraine to start underground yeshivos. When his father was killed, Aryeh was 14, and that's when the Rebbe's father brought Aryeh's family to America. He felt that plans had been left unfinished.

At bedtime, Rivkeh asks if Asher understands what his father told him—"Do you understand what it means to leave a great work incomplete?" She explains that she is studying Russian history because Uncle Yaakov was supposed to become a professor of Russian history. After she graduates from college, she will accompany Aryeh to Vienna to help him.

That night, Asher dreams of his mythic ancestor, "endlessly journeying." His ancestor says thunderously, "And what are you doing with your time, my Asher Lev?" Asher wakes up and looks at the drawings he'd made that day. They look childish and frivolous to him—"What was a drawing in the face of the darkness of the Other Side?" He goes back to bed and, sensing he's not a normal 10-year-old boy, asks God what is wanted from him. "It was horrifying to think my gift may have been given to me by the source of evil and ugliness." During Passover, they learn that the surviving Jewish doctors have been released from prison, and that the charges against them had been lies. The following Thursday, Asher goes with his parents to get passports.

*Even when Asher is scolded for his apparent obliviousness and lack of consideration, he's really just distracted by the consuming pressure of rediscovering his world through his "new" eyes. Asher's drawings of the young siblings remind Rivkeh of herself and her brother Yaakov when they were children. This hints at what will be an ongoing tension in Asher's art—he is a sensitive observer of the world, and is highly perceptive to underlying truths. That same sensitivity and perceptiveness causes unintended pain to others, who are not as willing to confront uncomfortable realities.*



*Drawing on his own childhood experience, Aryeh assumes that Asher's distraction and low spirits are because of his travel. As before, he tries to get through to Asher by talking about Ladover and family history—specifically his father's brutal death and the sense of incompleteness it brought. Asher does understand what it's like to miss one's father and to feel "incomplete"—but his own attempts to deal with that, ironically, undermine his bond with his father.*



*Rivkeh, too, tries to appeal to Asher by talking about her own sense of work left "incomplete." Like Aryeh, she feels obligated to pick up the mantle of someone dear to her. Unlike Asher's, Rivkeh's work complements Aryeh's goals.*



*All the talk of journeys—and of his lack of a clear role in those journeys—prompts another ancestral dream. Asher continues to feel the pressure of the "other side" in his family's story and feels that his art is feeble in the face of that evil. What's worse, he fears his art might originate from the Other Side. The complex duties and priorities of Asher's family are baffling for him to navigate as a 10-year-old boy—he can scarcely understand his own family's problems, let alone the plight of others in faraway countries. The fast pace of events for Russian Jews sweeps him along, leaving little room for him to make sense of his place in it all.*



## CHAPTER 5

Asher continues drawing. Many of the drawings include books and buildings burning, including the Ladover headquarters. Rivkeh takes Asher to the family doctor, but he can find nothing wrong with Asher. Rivkeh takes Asher to another kind of doctor who asks him questions and makes him play games. Asher also draws for him—a picture of a cat he'd seen that had been struck by a car. Rivkeh is subdued after she speaks to the doctor.

The next day, at school, a classmate keeps asking Asher what he is doing. Asher doesn't understand. Soon there are murmurs and stares. Then, a pimply-faced boy shouts in horror, "You defiled a Chumash!" Asher realizes he has drawn a face on his *Chumash*. It's a drawing of the Rebbe, and his face is "vaguely menacing." The teacher asks Asher what he's done. He looks more sad than angry. He tells Asher that drawing on his *Chumash* is a desecration of the Name of God.

Asher looks at his drawing of the Rebbe. The face looks threatening and evil. Asher imagines that this is the face the Rebbe had worn "when he decided to hurt me"—when he told Asher's father to go to Vienna. Asher looks at the photograph of the *Rebbe* on the classroom wall; the Rebbe looks kind. He's frightened by the drawing he's made, especially by the fact that he can't remember having drawn it.

After school Asher goes to Yudel Krinsky's store and asks him questions about oil paints. He tells Yudel about the Chumash drawing. Yudel looks horrified. Asher wonders how he could have done such a thing, when the doctors said there is nothing wrong with him. He realizes he doesn't have enough money to buy all the supplies he would need in order to make an oil painting. He tells Yudel he doesn't feel well and leaves the store. He walks home looking at the familiar scenes along the parkway and thinking about Vienna: "I don't know enough about this street to really draw it yet; how can I draw a strange street in a foreign land full of people who hate me?"

When Asher gets home, it's almost dark. He didn't realize how much time had passed. His mother's face is frightened, and her voice is strained. She tries to get Asher to eat supper, but he goes to bed. All he can think about is how to get enough money to buy the supplies he needs for an oil painting. Rivkeh comes in and tells him that the mashpia called; he wants to speak to Asher the next morning. Asher falls asleep and dreams of his mythic ancestor, "[thundering] with rage."

*Under the weight of all this rapid change, Asher's art takes on an increasingly dark tone, prompting Rivkeh to take him to a psychologist. Rivkeh's quiet withdrawal after the appointment suggests that the psychologist apparently gave a negative assessment. More and more, art is Asher's way of expressing his inner conflict, but that expression isn't easily interpreted by those around him.*



*Just as he'd unconsciously drawn Stalin weeks before, now Asher draws the Rebbe without realizing what he's doing. Both pictures are an expression of Asher's fears and frustrations about his family's summons to Europe. He doesn't intend to "desecrate" his Bible, but his classmates and teacher don't know how to interpret the drawing as anything other than a sacrilegious act.*



*Asher draws the Rebbe in the way he feels about him, not as he looks in reality. Again, this shows Asher's childish perception of things—the Rebbe doesn't really intend to harm Asher, but it feels as if that's the case. Asher will continue to find that the contrast between inner perception and outward reality is an ongoing issue in his art.*



*Even sympathetic Yudel is alarmed by what Asher has unintentionally done. Asher is feeling mentally and emotionally scattered, clearly shaken by the strange drawing and the horror it's sparked in others. Underneath all this is his fear of leaving the place he knows and loves to explore through his drawing—something he fears will be interrupted beyond repair if he goes to Vienna.*



*When Asher is preoccupied by art, especially while distressed, he becomes oblivious to the passage of time. He channels his distress into thoughts about painting. In his sleep, the distress is channeled into threatening dreams of the mythic ancestor, angry at Asher for his apparent sacrilege.*



The next morning at breakfast, Aryeh is upset about Asher's drawing and how it looks for his son to be behaving in this way. Asher asks his father to stop calling drawing "foolishness." Foolishness means that something is harmful and a waste of time. He's never spoken to his father that way before. Rivkeh tells him he mustn't be disrespectful. Though his voice is "tremulous with anger," Aryeh just tells Asher to drink his orange juice.

When Asher gets to the mashpia's office, Rav Yosef Cutler warmly asks how he's doing. They speak only in Yiddish. Asher looks out the window behind the *mashpia* and wonders how he would paint the rain dripping off the branches. The *mashpia* is talking to him, but Asher isn't listening. He feels that his street is crying and is distressed that he can't paint it. When the *mashpia* finally regains Asher's attention, he looks alarmed.

When Asher is finally listening, the mashpia explains that he's talking to Asher out of love for his whole family. He was with Asher's own grandfather the night he was killed. He tells Asher that the Jewish people are one body and soul; when one part hurts, the rest of the body must come to its aid. Asher wonders who is coming to *his* aid. The *mashpia* says he understands that a gift like Asher's can't always be controlled. But one can't always give in to such a gift—"One does with a life what is precious not only to one's own self but to one's own people."

The mashpia tells Asher that his gift is causing him to think only of himself and his own feelings. If these were "normal times," it would be okay, but these aren't normal times. Asher wonders when times have ever been "normal" for Jews. Does the *mashpia* mean he's expected to stifle his gift? If his gift is truly from the Ribbono Shel Olom, then why is it less important than his father's work?

The mashpia says that he believes that Asher didn't know what he was doing when he made the drawing. He regards Asher with a gentle expression and continues talking, but Asher is no longer listening. He's looking out the window at the street and thinking that if only he could paint the beauty he sees in the world, he would be willing to paint the suffering that exists, too. He asks God to show everyone that art is God's gift to him. The *mashpia* interrupts Asher's thoughts, asking him how he feels about the move to Vienna. Asher says that of course he will go with his family to Vienna in the fall. But he starts to cry, afraid that the gift will leave him when he leaves his street, and he will never get it back. Yet he can't not go.

*For Aryeh, Asher's behavior is deeply offensive, even shameful for his own reputation within the community. For the first time, though, Asher defends himself to his father. He feels that Aryeh, too, is attacking what's precious to him. This impasse between Asher and Aryeh hints at the deeper one that's to come.*



*Even while talking with the mashpia, who's trying his best to be sympathetic, Asher has trouble paying attention to anything except for art. For him, the desire to paint his "crying" street is not an intentional slighting of anyone or anything else, but a frustrated desire to express his own deep grief.*



*Much like Asher's father, the mashpia uses the sense of Jewish heritage to try to get through to Asher. There's perhaps a generational difference in play—Asher can respect the experiences of his father's generation but simply can't identify with him; he only fully understands his own pain. The mashpia, likewise, can't fully understand the pressure Asher's gift exerts on him, no matter how he tries. He wants Asher to understand that sometimes, the needs of the whole must overpower one's own ambitions.*



*Fundamentally, the view of the mashpia and of Asher's father is that Asher's artistic preoccupation is selfishness. To Asher, this sounds like a demand to suppress his very self. Moreover, he has begun to think of his art as just another expression of his father's own drive to serve God. Therefore, it feels as though he's being told not to use his gifts in the service of God.*



*Having arrived at this impasse, Asher tunes out once again. It's clear that he thinks of his art as a means of serving God, as he prays about his desire to portray what he sees around him. But when the mashpia brings up the subject of Vienna, Asher finally breaks down. This is the heart of the impasse for him—he believes he's being asked to surrender his God-given gift in order to make his family and community happy. Whether or not this is accurate, Asher perceives that he's in an impossible position.*



The mashpia gives Asher a drink of water and an empty notebook. He asks Asher to make some drawings for him and leaves the office. Asher doesn't feel like drawing; he just wants to go home and go to bed. But he begins drawing in the notebook, scenes from his family, street, and neighborhood. He draws until he has to dig at the pencil for more lead. But when he leaves the office, he hates the notebook—the drawings “were lies, stagnant creations done to someone else's demand.” Asher finds himself walking to a museum. He spends the whole day there.

When Asher gets home, Mrs. Rackover tells him she had just called the police. Rivkeh has gone to bed, sick with fear. Aryeh is on a trip to Washington. Asher doesn't respond; he's thinking about the fact that, out of all the drawings he'd made earlier that day, not one of them was of his father. His mother comes in, wearing her nightgown; she looks frenzied and frail. Asher tells her that he liked Robert Henri and Hopper the best of the artists he saw in the museum that day. She asks why Asher didn't call; he just disappeared from school in the middle of the day. Asher isn't listening. He gets into bed and falls asleep.

The next morning, Aryeh is home, looking tired. He tells Asher he must never do that again. He must come straight home from school, and cannot even go to Yudel Krinsky's store. He asks Asher if he understood what the mashpia told him. He says that he would understand if Asher were a genius in mathematics, writing, or *Gemorra*. But “drawing is foolishness, and I will not let it interfere with our lives.” Asher says he understands.

The next day at school, some of the boys, including the pimply-faced boy, ask Asher if they should let him, “this goy, this destroyer of Jewish books,” into the classroom. Asher pushes past them without responding. After school, he goes to Yudel Krinsky's store. He steals five tubes of oil paint and other supplies. He doesn't tell his mother why he is home late, and she doesn't ask.

*The mashpia attempts to find common ground with Asher, seeming to understand that he would express himself better by drawing than through speech. However, Asher has an instinct—just as he did as a little boy, when asked to draw by his mother—that drawing to fulfill someone else's expectations isn't real art. His desire for real art is so strong that he walks out of school in search of some.*



*This time, Asher's disappearance has crossed a line; in her terror, his mother has regressed to the time around Yaakov's death. But Asher, clearly in distress himself, doesn't grasp the gravity of the situation or his complicity in it. He's still shaken by the events of the past days, and his only solace is in the new art he saw that day.*



*Wearily, Aryeh tries to make Asher understand the situation—but it's another instance of mutual incomprehension. Aryeh could make sense of a talent for traditional academic subjects or *Gemorra* (rabbinical commentary), but drawing doesn't fit into his world; it's not a legitimate preoccupation. But for Asher, anything else is a interference in drawing. He doesn't know how to make room for both.*



*At school, Asher begins to face bullying because, by drawing on a sacred book, he's marked himself in their eyes as a non-Jew, an enemy. The distress caused by this apparently drives Asher to steal from his own friend. It's clear that Asher is struggling to make sense of whether he's on the demonic, as his father suggests, or that of the divine. Finding no answer and no appropriate outlet for his frustrations, he is propelled to commit uncharacteristic acts.*



Over the next week, students, especially the pimply-faced boy, continue to bully Asher as a “desecrater.” One day, after this happens, Asher goes to the museum for the rest of the afternoon. Mrs. Rackover and his mother say nothing to him about it. When Asher knows that his father will be home from traveling, he comes straight home. One day it looks as though the desk drawer containing his oil paints has been hurriedly searched. It’s spring, and Asher draws the trees on his street, filled with “the fearful awareness that I would soon lose it and have nothing I loved that I could draw.” Sometimes Asher hears his parents laughing together as Aryeh helps Rivkeh study Russian. Whenever his father leaves town, Asher goes to the museum after school.

That week, a Washington-New York airliner crashes in the East River on approach to LaGuardia. Even after the flight number is announced—and it’s not Aryeh’s flight—Rivkeh’s eyes look “dead.” Asher begins to understand the toll his father’s journeys take on his mother. When Rivkeh says, “Have a safe journey, Aryeh,” Asher used to just hear “a simple formula for departure. Now I began to hear the muted tonalities within the words.”

That night, Asher asks Rivkeh why she lets Aryeh travel so much. She doesn’t understand: “It’s your father’s life, Asher. How can I ask him to stop?” After Aryeh gets home, he and Rivkeh are jubilant, talking and laughing as the three of them walk along the parkway together. But that evening, Aryeh is subdued and sullen, singing the Shabbos hymns with an intensity that recalls the time of Rivkeh’s illness. When Asher asks his mother what happened to change his father’s mood, she doesn’t respond.

At synagogue the next day, Asher prays intently, but he soon feels eyes upon him. He sees the Rebbe looking at him under the fringe of his *tallis*. After the service, Aryeh is silent. That night, while his parents are at Uncle Yitzchok’s, Asher takes out the oil paints he’d stolen, but he is filled with horror: “The gift had caused me to steal. I hated the gift.” He falls asleep hating the way the gift is causing everyone in his life to suffer.

The next week, Asher returns the oil paints while Yudel Krinsky isn’t looking. He talks to the mashpia again about his reluctance to go to Vienna. Someone asks Asher if he wants to have a private talk with the Rebbe, but he screams that he hates the Rebbe. He remembers “subdued conversations between my parents, the distant whispering of people in the synagogue, and the way my classmates shied away from me in school.”

*Still tormented both externally and internally, Asher continues to disobey his parents, although it’s only his father that he really fears. There’s a sense of disjunction between his parents’ hopeful anticipation of the upcoming move and his own distress and sense of loss. Love and drawing are closely connected for Asher—he draws those people and things he cares about, in order to express his love for them. Thus he fears that the move to Vienna would, in a real way, cut him off from what he loves.*



*Perhaps because he’s been dealing with his own anxiety—and he’s always been sensitive to his mother’s pain—Asher begins to understand something of the pain and fear Rivkeh endures each time Aryeh goes away. Like Asher, Rivkeh lives in constant fear of losing what she loves most.*



*Asher seems to think that his mother can ask his father to stop traveling for her own sake, much as he’s being asked to give up his art for their sake. Meanwhile, his parents’ hopeful anticipation is inexplicably disrupted, adding further confusion and stress to Asher’s situation.*



*Even in the midst of everything that’s happening, Asher’s piety hasn’t faltered, showing that in his mind, there’s no intentional conflict between his faith and his art. But the conflict is there nonetheless, as he recognizes the way it’s causing pain to his family, but doesn’t know how to resolve it.*



*Various people try to intervene in the family’s impasse, and Asher’s intransigence is beginning to be noticed and judged by the broader community. He still scapegoats the Rebbe for bringing this difficulty on his family, not knowing how else to make sense of it.*



That summer in the Berkshires, Rivkeh explains to Asher the choices the Rebbe has given Aryeh: Aryeh can stay in America, he can go to Europe with Rivkeh and leave Asher in Uncle Yitzchok's care, or he can leave Rivkeh and Asher in America and go to Europe by himself. Asher's teachers, the mashpia, and the *Rebbe* believe that Asher cannot go to Vienna. Rivkeh explains that she and Aryeh do not believe they can give Yitzchok this responsibility. Asher listens but does not understand. He feels fatigued and draws little that summer.

But Asher begins to understand the situation when Aryeh leaves for Vienna in October. Aryeh tells Asher, "Only be well. Everything will be all right, my son. We are doing the work of the Master of the Universe." Rivkeh cries and says over and over, "Have a safe journey, my husband."

## CHAPTER 6

That fall and winter, Asher misses his father. They receive letters from all over Europe. Sometimes Asher lies awake and pictures his father journeying across Europe much like the mythic ancestor. He feels horrified at what he's done and repeatedly promises himself that the next morning, he will tell Rivkeh that he wants to go to Vienna. But when morning comes, he can never do it.

Missing Aryeh, Asher finally begins to draw him—reading the newspaper, sitting on the parkway, walking with Rivkeh—"in all the small and quiet ways I had never thought to draw him before." Asher feels closer to his father than ever before.

The same week that Aryeh left for Vienna, Rivkeh bought a small table and placed it in the living room to use as her desk. She wants to be able to look out the **window**, she says. She is now working toward a master's degree in Russian affairs. She talks about her brother Yaakov. After their parents had died when the children were young, Yaakov had been like a mother and father to Rivkeh. Losing him was like losing her parents all over again.

*Asher finally finds out what has upset his father so much—the consensus is that he's in no fit state to move to Europe, so one way or another, his father's dream is compromised. Asher once again descends into a fog of depression at the seemingly irresolvable pain he's causing everyone.*



*Asher's emotional breakdown has driven his family apart. Even in their distress and inability to understand, however, Asher's parents don't force him to move; they're doing their best to help Asher while keeping Aryeh's dream alive. Rivkeh bears the brunt of this, left behind and living in fear for Aryeh.*



*Now Asher feels the weight of his parents' sacrifice for his sake, but he continues to feel powerless to fix it. His father is conflated with the mythic ancestor in his mind—journeying for the sake of Torah and judging Asher from afar.*



*Because Asher expresses love through art, Aryeh's absence gives him a better opportunity to express that love. Although Aryeh views Asher's art as something negative that detracts from Asher's devotion to family and religion, it's clear that drawing is how Asher makes sense of these things and expresses his appreciation for them.*



*Rivkeh, meanwhile, presses on to support Aryeh as best she can while trying to fulfill Yaakov's work. Like the rest of the family, she is drawn to the apartment window because it allows her to watch out for her loved ones—albeit symbolically much of the time, since Yaakov has passed away and Aryeh is overseas.*



Rivkeh's bookshelves begin to fill with volumes on Russian history. She writes many papers for her courses, and she tells Asher he must learn to fall asleep to the sound of her typewriter. Sometimes Asher finds her in the morning having fallen asleep over her books. Sometimes Asher draws her peacefully sleeping in order to balance out the drawings of her standing unseeing at the **window**—moments when he knows that he is the cause of her unhappiness.

One day, Rivkeh brings home a gift for Asher—12 tubes of oil paints, brushes, an easel, canvases, and other supplies. After the next Shabbos, Asher sets up the easel and begins to experiment with the oil paints. By the next night, he finishes his first oil painting, of his mother looking out the living room **window**. “It was as if I had been painting in oils all my life.”

One January night, Rivkeh comes into Asher's room as he's working on a painting of Yudel Krinsky. Aryeh has written, asking about Asher's schooling. She asks Asher what she should tell him. His teachers and the mashpia say that Asher isn't trying. Asher barely responds; he is completely absorbed in the shapes and angles in his painting.

In school, Asher draws a picture of the teacher in his Hebrew notebook. The teacher asks him sadly when he will grow up—he is 11 years old. He explains that Asher does no honor to Aryeh with this behavior. The mashpia and Uncle Yitzchok also speak to Asher. Asher asks his mother, “What do they all want from me?” She tells Asher that a boy his age needs to study Torah. Asher thinks that he doesn't hate studying; it's just that his drawing demands all his strength. He doesn't understand why they all can't see that.

When Asher goes to visit Yudel Krinsky, Yudel tells him that he is a “scandal”: “Your father journeys through Europe bringing Jews back to Torah, and here his own son refuses to study Torah.” Mrs. Rackover refuses to speak to him. Asher hears about his father—and his failure to be a good son—everywhere he goes. He feels as though his father “was more in my life now than he had been before his journey.”

When Asher is off school for Purim, Rivkeh accompanies him to the Parkway Museum. Asher likes seeing the huge statue of Moses in a niche near the roof. Asher's mother has never visited the museum before, except to see an exhibit of Jewish manuscripts with Yaakov. “We never thought it was important,” she says. They go upstairs to the galleries; guards look at them curiously. When Asher asks his mother questions about certain paintings, her face flushes, and she looks away uncomfortably.

*Asher is acutely aware of his role in his mother's pain, and he expresses this through drawing. It's the only thing he can do to express his own pain, the love he feels for his family, and his sorrow over a situation he feels helpless to fix.*



*Rivkeh tries to meet Asher halfway by gifting him art supplies. Showing his genius, Asher instinctively picks up on oil painting. His first choice of subject is his mother's pain and longing, a continuation of the dominant theme in his art.*



*Asher is still so absorbed in his art that he doesn't have energy or attention left over for other subjects, or even for the things that seem most pressing to those around him—it's clear that his creative drive is causing a rift between himself and the people around him.*



*Everyone around Asher continues to press him to mature and take responsibility for the more important things in life. Asher is unable to understand. He isn't trying to be obtuse; rather, he can't see why everyone else fails to understand the tremendous drain of his art. Because the all-consuming experience of being an artist is so unique and specific to him, he doesn't know how to articulate it to anyone else. As a result, they just see him as being stubborn.*



*Even Yudel Krinsky, Asher's substitute father figure, is disappointed in him, trying to explain to him how bad it looks that he's rejecting the very things to which his father is devoting his life. It's clear that Asher's community, as well as his family, view his art as a betrayal of his father's efforts overseas and of Asher's faith.*



*Again trying to get through to Asher and understand his art, Rivkeh makes an effort to enter that world, even though it makes her uncomfortable. The statue of Moses feels culturally affirming to Asher, but the prominence of this biblical figure contrasts sharply with the decidedly non-Jewish art they see inside.*



When they look at some paintings containing nudes, Rivkeh explains that she's embarrassed to stand in front of these paintings, and that it's against Torah to paint women in this way. They look at some abstract paintings, and Asher says that he likes Picasso very much, although he does not understand him. When they get back to the subway platform, Asher asks his mother about the paintings they saw that included Jesus. Rivkeh explains that Jesus was killed by the Romans because he thought he was the *moshiach*, but he wasn't. She says that she doesn't begin to understand the belief of the "goyim" about Jesus.

Later, Rivkeh and Asher talk more about the museum. Rivkeh says that she hopes God will help her not to hurt Aryeh. Asher's painting has "taken us to Jesus. And to the way [non-Jews] paint women. Painting is for goyim, Asher [...] Torah Jews [...] don't draw and paint."

The following week, Asher goes to the museum alone and "[spends] an hour copying paintings of Jesus into [his] sketchbook." He's aware of curious stares, and only later does it occur to him how strange he must have looked. When Asher gets home and shows his mother his drawings, Rivkeh is horrified. "Do you know how much Jewish blood has been spilled because of him, Asher?" she asks. Asher tries to explain that it was necessary to make these drawings; he couldn't find the right expression anywhere else.

Over the coming weeks, Asher visits the museum many times. He copies paintings of nude women until he can draw the figures from memory. He doesn't show any of those drawings to his mother. Rivkeh is busy preparing for Passover and writing her master's dissertation, so she doesn't ask him about the museum.

In the middle of April, Aryeh returns home. He looks "weary and gaunt." He doesn't greet Asher. He knows everything that's happened—about the museum visits, the drawings of Jesus and nudes. He has just spent half of the past year establishing yeshivos and teaching Torah all over Europe. Now he comes home and "discovered that his own home was now inhabited by pagans." He is in a rage unlike any Asher has seen before.

*When Asher and Rivkeh discuss what they saw in the museum, points of conflict become clear. Some of the key elements of the Western artistic tradition are offensive from an observant Jewish perspective, especially the portrayal of nudity and of Jesus as messiah. Though Rivkeh has made a genuine attempt to appreciate Asher's interests and share them, these things are insurmountable obstacles for her.*



*Rivkeh clearly feels torn between her desire to support Asher and her dread of hurting Aryeh. Like Aryeh, she expresses fear of the trajectory of Asher's love of art. The kinds of things they saw at the museum are off-limits for religious Jews, and seem to put a hard limit on how far Asher can pursue his passion.*



*Undeterred, Asher is drawn back to the Jesus paintings—not out of any religious feeling whatsoever, but because of the artistic expression. When he tries to share this with Rivkeh, she only sees the reason for centuries' worth of anti-Jewish violence and persecution. Asher, however, sees no inherent connection between these things. It's not the last time this conflict between religion and artistic form will flare.*



*Asher instinctively understands that even these religiously suspect paintings contain forms that he must master if he hopes to become a better artist. But he now knows he won't find a sympathetic hearing, so he keeps his explorations to himself.*



*Aryeh's solo travels have taken an immense toll on him, and Asher's artistic studies just add insult to injury, in his eyes. To him, Asher's choice of subjects is further evidence of a stark divide between Torah holiness and the "Other Side"—Asher's art clearly belongs to the latter.*



Asher's drawings "had touched something fundamental to [Aryeh's] being." He keeps referring to "that man," refusing to say Jesus's name. He asks Asher if he understands how many Jews were killed during the Crusades and the Holocaust in the name of "that man." Asher's own grandfather, he reminds him, was killed by a Russian peasant celebrating "that man's" holiday. Regarding the nudes, he says, the body is a gift from God; the Torah forbids drawing it in an immodest way. Not to mention how much time Asher has wasted when he should have been doing his schoolwork. In the coming days, he continues to shout at Asher and even to fight with Rivkeh.

Later, when Aryeh is at a meeting with the Rebbe, Asher asks Rivkeh why Papa yells at her. She explains that he thinks she's failing in her responsibilities to raise him, by "encouraging your foolishness." She tells Asher that she had hoped he would thank her for the gift of oil paints by studying harder. She also bought them so that Asher wouldn't steal from Yudel Krinsky again.

One morning at breakfast, Asher unthinkingly uses his fork as a drawing instrument. He's suddenly aware that his father is squeezing his wrist. Aryeh squeezes so hard that Asher starts to cry. Aryeh is "quivering with rage." Soon his parents are screaming at each other. Asher keeps saying that he can't help it. Aryeh tells him that God gives every person a will; "only a sick man can't help it."

If Asher's will makes him want to draw, Aryeh tells him, then it comes from the Other Side, and he must fight it. If he doesn't, next he'll "become a goy. Better you should not have been born." When Rivkeh gasps, Aryeh tells her, "We must fight against the Other Side, Rivkeh [...] Otherwise it will destroy the world." These words echo in Asher's mind throughout Passover.

By the next Shabbos, Aryeh is gentle and apologetic. Before synagogue the next morning, Rivkeh looks radiant. But Aryeh walks to synagogue without Asher. During the first Passover seder, Aryeh involuntarily glances at Asher during the seder reading about the evil son. Asher sees instant regret on his father's face; nevertheless, he remembers nothing else of the seder.

*Aryeh tries to make Asher understand the sense of religious betrayal conveyed by Asher's willingness to draw images of Jesus; it flies in the face of what his very own family has suffered. Deepening the insult is the fact that all of this has taken Asher away from the religious studies, which is family and community believe should be the primary concern of a boy his age. Aryeh's shame and anger concerning Asher's activities translates into tension in his marriage as well, demonstrating how the conflict between two family members can spread to impact the family as a whole.*



*Asher doesn't understand why his parents are upset with one another, or his mother's motivations toward him. While he doesn't intend to create conflict, his drive to deepen his craft and express himself dominates him mentally and emotionally, leaving little room to empathize. This suggests that developing one's creativity has a dark side—even if it's not inherently bad, its immature form can stifle consideration for others.*



*Aryeh continues to see Asher's behavior as a direct insult to himself, and Asher's helplessness as a rejection of his free will. The family conflict has reached a pitch of open hostility.*



*By associating Asher's art with the Other Side, Aryeh places it unambiguously in direct conflict with his own work, which the Jewish community considers holy. Thus, he and Asher are locked in conflict, too, and Asher's path will inevitably lead to non-Jewishness. Thus while Aryeh's words about "destroying the world" sound extreme, the connection is logical in his view.*



*Awhile Aryeh and Rivkeh have clearly reached a measure of reconciliation, Asher is still in the position of being his father's enemy, although it's not something he has sought or desired. This grieves him and robs him of the joys even of religious festivals.*



On the following night's seder, Asher drinks a little too much wine and is put to bed. He finds himself slowly drawing the contours of one of museum nudes in his mind, feeling the colors, lines, and shapes. At one point, the image spins crazily in his mind and bursts into a brilliant white light. Asher is frightened, telling himself that it really is the Other Side.

*Asher doesn't feel completely in control of what his artistic vision makes him do, and it's unsettling to him. He assumes that means he really is being influenced by something demonic.*



Later, on one of the intermediate days of Passover, Rivkeh tells Asher that he shouldn't be frightened when she and Aryeh fight. People who love each other sometimes fight, and Aryeh yells because he's frightened. He has many responsibilities and now fears that Asher might "become a goy." Asher just asks if he can go to the museum again. Rivkeh sighs and asks him to wait until Aryeh returns to Europe.

*Asher remains unable to make sense of the conflict between his parents and the sources of their fear. Rivkeh continues working hard to mediate between Aryeh and Asher, but even if she manages to be a buffer, she can't make them understand one another.*



The next time Asher hears his parents fighting, he tries to promise himself he'll go to Vienna, but he knows he can't. Later, he asks his mother why they fought. Rivkeh explains that Aryeh wanted her to promise she wouldn't let Asher go to the museum. She told Aryeh she couldn't promise the impossible. Nevertheless, she's not sure that Aryeh is wrong. Asher doesn't respond. He goes to the museum later that day. He stares at one of the Jesus paintings, wondering how the artist made the wounds so lifelike.

*Asher finds it impossible to—as he sees it—surrender his art, the only thing that's entirely his, to make his parents happy. Even though Rivkeh thinks Aryeh is right, she finds herself in an impossible position, caught between the two of them. Asher is drawn to images of suffering, perhaps the only way he can make sense of the pain he's seeing around him.*



Asher remembers little else about that Passover—just "the menacing darkness" that fills the formerly beloved festival. He notices how gray and burdened his father looks. He knows that Aryeh has his own dream for which he needed "all his strength. Interference drained his strength." Asher is one such interference. When there's another quarrel after Passover, Asher feels both fearful of his father and angry at his own helplessness. After the holiday, he isn't unhappy to see Aryeh leave.

*Ironically, Aryeh's single-mindedness about his work is exactly the kind of single-mindedness Asher displays when it comes to his art, which is why they're so helpless to understand one another.*



Asher chooses the two subjects Aryeh cares about most—Talmud and Bible—and begins to study them. He draws a bit less than before. He uses the memory of his parents' quarrels as motivation. His mother, the mashpia, and his teachers are pleased.

*Despite his sense that it's impossible to make Aryeh happy, Asher is sufficiently troubled by the family disharmony to make a token effort in school—a small compromise, but one that goes a long way in encouraging his family and teachers.*



In June, weeks pass without a letter from Aryeh. By the end of that month, Rivkeh is sick with worry. Asher finds her chanting Psalms in front of the **window** in the middle of the night. He hears her begging Yaakov for intercession. Finally, a few days later, the Rebbe calls with the news that Aryeh is safe in Vienna. Asher says that his father must have been in Russia. Rivkeh doesn't reply, but she happily suggests that they go to Prospect Park and then the museum.

*The strain on Rivkeh is immense, as she copes with Aryeh's long, mysterious absences and Asher's continued stubbornness. When she's happy, however, she regains some of the youthfulness Asher remembers in her during his childhood.*



They spend summer in the Berkshires. Asher paints, draws, and studies Talmud and Bible. His mother seems happy. When his father returns from Vienna in the fall, his eyes “glittered with achievement.” Yeshivos are opening in Vienna and Paris. During Succos, Aryeh asks Asher if he might want to come to Vienna next year. But Asher is afraid to be where Aryeh is, “for he had set himself up as an adversary to me.”

The following summer, Rivkeh sails to Europe to join Aryeh. She is working on her doctorate, and she misses Aryeh. That summer Asher lives with Uncle Yitzchok and spends a lot of time at Yudel Krinsky’s store. Yudel is now remarried and no longer wears his *kaskett*. Asher runs errands for both of them.

That summer, three new Russian Ladover families move to Uncle Yitzchok’s street. They look bewildered and fearful. Asher approaches one of the boys his age and greets him in Yiddish. When he introduces himself, the boy’s eyes narrow. He says that everyone knows the son of Reb Aryeh Lev. When Asher asks if his father helped the boy’s family escape Russia, the boy is frightened. He explains that in Russia, pious-looking Jews might be government spies. He won’t tell Asher anything more.

## CHAPTER 7

The mashpia calls Asher into his office and explains that the Rebbe wants to meet with him, as he meets with all yeshiva students who are about to become *bnai mitzvah*. Asher starts meeting with the *mashpia* daily to review Torah and *Hasidus*. Asher doesn’t understand much of the material, but he enjoys the time spent with the *mashpia*. Before Asher’s meeting, Aryeh is “tense and apprehensive,” and he tells Asher, “Remember with whom you will be speaking.” Rivkeh looks proud.

When Asher reaches the Rebbe’s waiting room, he sees Rav Mendel Dorochoff, the Rebbe’s *gabbai*, or chief of staff. He also sees “a tall, heavy-shouldered man in a dark winter coat and baggy brown trousers,” with a “walrus mustache” and flowing white hair. He wears a beret and is writing on a pad. While Asher sits and waits, he realizes that the man is actually drawing.

*The family has achieved a certain balance—everyone is engaged in fulfilling, successful work. Nevertheless, there’s no genuine reconciliation between Asher and his father. If Asher is relegated to the “Other Side” in Aryeh’s eyes, then such reconciliation doesn’t seem possible.*



*Asher’s parents compromise by letting him stay in Brooklyn while they’re reunited for the summer. Yudel Krinsky has assimilated into American life more. His abandonment of his Russian hat signals that the crisis surrounding his arrival has subsided.*



*This encounter between Asher and the newcomer underscores the drastic difference between Aryeh’s world and his son’s, and to a lesser extent, Asher’s alienation from his peers in general. It drives home the sense that other people don’t know quite what to make of Aryeh’s son, and that he doesn’t quite understand his place in his community, either.*



*Asher is about to reach his religious coming of age. His parents’ reactions underline the family tensions—his mother is happy for him, but Aryeh senses that things are coming to a crisis between him and his son. With Asher’s coming maturity, Aryeh likely fears that he is losing his opportunity for authority and influence in his son’s life.*



*Asher sees something unexpected as he goes to meet the Rebbe for the first time. Though the man isn’t identified, he is clearly someone who straddles different views—he doesn’t appear to be a religious Jew, and he’s an artist, yet he’s here in the Ladover headquarters.*



Finally, Mendel Dorochoff ushers Asher into the Rebbe's office. The *Rebbe*, wearing an ordinary dark hat, "seemed more a presence than a man." He greets Asher softly in Yiddish. Asher is nervous but manages to reply to the *Rebbe's* questions. The *Rebbe* blesses Asher in the name of his grandfather. He tells Asher that one man isn't superior to another because of his vocation; "a life is measured by how it is lived for the sake of heaven." Not everyone understands this, he adds; even those who love Asher don't all understand this. He reminds Asher that honoring his father is one of the Ten Commandments. Asher feels bewildered as he bids the *Rebbe* good night.

When Asher leaves the *Rebbe's* office, the man in the beret quickly gets up and goes inside. On Asher's chair, the man has left a pencil drawing of Asher's face, signing it "Jacob Kahn." Asher sits down and quickly draws a sketch of Jacob Kahn's face, signs it, and leaves it on the chair the man had occupied. Asher goes outside and sits on the porch and looks at the parkway. When Jacob Kahn comes out, he introduces himself to Asher with a slight Russian accent. Kahn asks Asher if he has any idea what he's getting into.

Kahn sighs. He tells Asher that they're all crazy. Asher's father will become his enemy. But the *Rebbe* is clever. He tells Asher that he doesn't have time for him now, as he's finishing a sculpture, but Asher must call him in the middle of March. Then he explains to Asher that he's not what Asher would consider to be "a Torah Jew," although his father was a follower of the *Rebbe's* father.

Kahn tells Asher that between now and March, he must go to the Museum of Modern Art and study Picasso's *Guernica*. Then they will meet, talk, and work. He then asks Asher a blunt question. He asks Asher if he knows that he's entering the world of the *goyim*; not only that, but Christian *goyim*. The *Rebbe* asked him to make this clear to Asher.

When Asher gets home and tells his parents what happened, Aryeh is pained. Rivkeh "wavered apprehensively between my father's pain and my dazed joy." Aryeh bitterly tells Rivkeh that he's not "reconciled" to the *Rebbe's* decision. He says that when a son wanders from his father in this way, there can only be trouble. He tells Asher that there's something inside Asher that he doesn't understand: "I don't know what you are. I am ashamed of my own son."

*The Rebbe's message to Asher is multi-layered, and, with respect to the family conflict, it cuts both ways: he implies to Asher that not everyone in his family (namely, Aryeh) understands that an explicitly religious vocation is not inherently superior to an artistic vocation. Yet it's also important for Asher to honor his parents. Asher doesn't understand what he's heard, yet his place within the community has been quietly affirmed in this interaction, and, significantly, his art hasn't been condemned by this religious authority.*



*Asher and Jacob Kahn exchange greetings of a sort through their drawings, suggesting that both of them rely on art to communicate and make sense of other people. Even before his role is made explicit, Jacob's unexpected appearance and abrupt manner signal that he's going to unsettle Asher's world in surprising ways.*



*Jacob Kahn has been assigned to mentor Asher in his art. Like Asher, Jacob has connections to the Ladover community, but unlike him, he's left the world of Torah-observant Judaism behind. Nevertheless, the *Rebbe* trusts that this man, with his ability to speak to both the religious and artistic worlds, might be able to smooth over some of the conflict in Asher's life.*



*Jacob Kahn's blunt question means that, before Asher embarks on the serious study of modern art, he must understand that he's stepping outside the familiar bounds of his religious world. In other words, if he's serious about becoming an artist, he must assume certain risks.*



*Rivkeh, again, is caught between her husband and her son. Aryeh can only see that Asher is on a path leading away from him—and the *Rebbe's* endorsement of this makes it all the more painful for him. He doesn't know how to categorize Asher, and that pains him.*



Aryeh is pained all through Asher's bar mitzvah celebration. But neither he nor anyone else dares to question the Rebbe's decision. Aryeh feels that, somehow, "the line of inheritance had been perverted" by the demonic, but he doesn't know what to do about it. So he feels pain and shame during Asher's joyful bar mitzvah and as he flies back to Europe.

At the end of January, Rivkeh takes Asher to the Museum of Modern Art so that he can study *Guernica*. She also buys him a large reproduction of the painting. Asher studies the reproduction during the week and visits the museum each weekend. In March, he calls Jacob Kahn.

## CHAPTER 8

When Asher calls Jacob Kahn, Kahn grills him about his study of *Guernica*. Then Kahn gives his address and invites Asher to come that Sunday afternoon. He also tells Asher to look up the story of the massacre of the innocents in the New Testament, "the Bible of the *goyim*," and read it before Sunday. He should also study Reni's or Poussin's painting of the Massacre of the Innocents.

The next day Asher goes to the library and reads the New Testament passage. He also studies Reni's and Poussin's paintings. At home, he looks at the reproduction of *Guernica*. By now, he knows the painting by heart. He feels unsettled and "vaguely unclean" after having read from the Christian Bible. He doesn't understand what the Bible passage and the paintings have to do with one another. He thinks of his father and the mashpia.

When Rivkeh gets home, she brings Asher a book that a professor at her university gave her. It's about Robert Henri. Rivkeh remembers that Asher had mentioned liking his work. The professor also told Rivkeh that Jacob Kahn is one of the world's greatest living artists. He'd worked with Picasso in Paris before World War I. Everyone seems astonished that Asher is studying with him.

*The moment that should be triumphant for Aryeh—his religious maturity—is instead a grievous one. Asher is not a conventional young Jewish man, and this makes Aryeh feel that he has fundamentally failed in some way, or has even been cheated by the Other Side.*



*With his father gone, Asher eagerly jumps into the new world that's been opened up to him, with Rivkeh's help. *Guernica*, painted in 1937, depicted the bombing of a Basque town by Nazi Germany—the implicit antisemitism of the Nazism portrayed in the painting likely has deep resonance for both Kahn and Asher as Jewish people.*



*Jacob Kahn wasn't kidding when he warned Asher about what he was getting into—reading the New Testament would be seen as religiously transgressive, to say the least. *The Massacre of the Innocents* is a story found in the Gospel of Matthew, relating King Herod's attempt to murder all boys under two years of age in the effort to destroy Jesus; it was a frequent theme in Renaissance art.*



*Asher unhesitatingly takes on the assignments Kahn gives him, but he's also uncomfortably aware of the strangeness of what's being asked of him as a religious Jew. But this is only a preview of the prominence of Christian themes in the artistic world he's entering.*



*Rivkeh continues to offer to Asher what support she can—taking an interest in the artists he likes and the caliber of artist who's mentoring him. Jacob Kahn is based on a sculptor named Jacques Lipchitz who, like Kahn, came from a Jewish background and had worked alongside Picasso.*



Asher leafs through the book, *The Art Spirit*. The author recommends that one study with a kindred spirit in order to learn how to become an artist. He also says that an artist must be well acquainted with himself and a “rebel” who has “freed himself from his family, his nation, his race.” The next morning, Asher tells his mother that he doesn’t think he wants to free himself in that way.

On Saturday night, Jacob Kahn calls. He tells Asher to bring his *Guernica* drawings and any others he wants. Rivkeh wants to accompany him into Manhattan the first time, but Asher refuses. He stays up late thinking about everything he’s studied over the past week. After school the next day, he takes his sketchbooks onto the subway. He notices that the farther he travels from Brooklyn, the more other passengers stare at him with his dangling earlocks.

Asher finds Jacob Kahn’s building and signs in. The doorman takes Asher up to the fifth floor, commenting that Asher doesn’t look like “one of them artist fellers.” Asher hesitates outside Kahn’s apartment for a long time, hearing voices within. At last he rings, and Kahn answers. He greets Asher warmly and introduces him to a woman, Anna Schaeffer, a “matronly” older woman. When Asher hesitates to shake Anna’s hand, Kahn steps between them and joins their hands himself, saying, “to the future.”

Anna’s eyes are fixed on Asher’s sidecurls. She tells Jacob that he is “tricky and nasty” for not having told her. Jacob tells Anna that Asher is “a prodigy in *payos*.” When Jacob leaves the room, Anna leads Asher through a maze of sculptures and easels so she can look at his face in the light. She tells Asher that she has been wondering “which of the three”—Modigliani, Soutine, or Pascin—he might become. Each of these three artists was Jewish.

Anna continues to regard Asher with interest, asking him questions about his religious beliefs and practices. Asher struggles to articulate his beliefs to her. When he mentions that he believes it’s the task of humanity “to make life holy,” Anna interrupts, “Asher Lev, you are entering the wrong world.” She tells him that if he wishes to make the world holy, he should stay in Brooklyn; *this world will “destroy” him.*

*The Art Spirit was a collection of the reflections of American artist Robert Henri, published in 1923. Even at a young age, Asher reads this book with a critical mindset—in particular, he observes that he doesn’t really want to be liberated from the community in which he’s rooted. This further shows how precocious Asher’s mindset really is, and suggests that although he wants to forge a different path than his ancestors, he doesn’t want to abandon his community or his faith altogether.*



*Asher is determined to take on this new challenge independently. As he journeys into Manhattan, that sense of crossing boundaries and entering a new world is even starker—he’s entering a world that finds him surprising and unexpected. He doesn’t entirely fit in here, either.*



*Even Jacob Kahn’s doorman observes that he doesn’t fit in with the stereotypical image of a Manhattan artist. Asher is shy and hesitant—especially when it comes time to take the hand of a woman, which, according to religious practices, he might never have done before with anyone besides close family. In his pursuit of art, he continues to cross frontiers that are new and unnerving for him.*



*Jacob has surprised his agent, Anna, by not telling her that in advance that Asher is a Hasidic Jew. He gives the two a chance to get to know one another, and Anna at first tries to lump Asher in with other known Jewish artists—of which there aren’t many.*



*Because Asher’s beliefs are so intimate to him, it is hard for him to put them into words for an outsider. But Anna immediately senses what a stretch it will be for Asher to survive in the art world—it’s completely foreign to what he’s known and has been taught to value.*



Anna tells Asher that Jacob has seldom taken students, not since Hitler, when the students became unkind. She tells Asher that Jacob is “like a monk”; there are “many things he does not understand.” She is “possessive” and worries about her painters. Then Anna asks to see Asher’s drawings. While she looks at them, Asher walks around the room and admires Jacob’s work. Eventually, Anna joins him and says that Asher is “bluntly put, magnificent.” She is shocked that he is only 13 years old, but adds, “Why not? [...] Picasso was nine.”

Jacob returns then with a drink for Anna and asks if they’ve become acquainted. Anna tells Jacob, “Whenever you tell me, Jacob. Anytime you feel he is ready.” Jacob tells her it will take five years. “Millions of people can draw. Art is whether or not there is a scream in him wanting to get out in a special way.”

After Jacob Kahn reviews Asher’s drawings, he looks sad. He tells Asher that he could paint portraits or greeting cards; why does he need *this*? “Do you begin to understand what you are going to be doing to yourself?” he asks. “You are entering a religion called painting” whose values, concepts, and way of life “are *goyisch* and pagan.” There’s never been a great painter who was also a religious Jew. He doesn’t mind frightening Asher, he tells Anna, because he doesn’t want to waste his time, and he would rather that Asher remain in Brooklyn as a “nice Jewish boy.” Anna takes Jacob aside to talk for a moment.

While Asher waits, he studies Kahn’s paintings and observes that none of them include representational forms; their subject, rather, is “color and texture,” which Asher finds “sensuous [...] raw, elemental.” Then he picks up a dry canvas and some oil paints and begins making a painting of Jacob Kahn and his own face on a canvas. Then he stumbles backward into Kahn, who’s watching. Kahn tells him that Anna has scolded him for being blunt and that he doesn’t know what else to tell Asher, who “[sees] better at thirteen than I did at eighteen.” Perhaps when Asher is 18, he will see better than Jacob did at 25. Anna speaks up to point out that at 25, Jacob had survived two pogroms. Jacob says, “The eye inside a man is not improved by pogroms.”

Jacob goes on to tell Asher that there’s not too much else he can teach him about seeing. He will teach him some tricks, and then Asher “will throw the tricks away and invent your own.” He adds that Asher draws with “too much love,” which will lead to sentimentalism, which is “death to art.” He tells Asher that he will give him five years of his time, at which point he should be ready for Anna.

*Anna explains to Asher that Jacob, in his own way, has suffered deeply as a Jewish artist, even if those sufferings are quite different from those of Asher’s Ladover forebearers. She also acknowledges Asher as a prodigy.*



*Jacob already has a plan for developing Asher as an artist. For him, it’s not so much a question of skill (in this, he echoes Uncle Yitzchok’s words years before), but of whether Asher has something he’s burning to express.*



*Jacob seems pained by the tension Asher will face as a religious Jewish artist, hence his attempt to talk him out of it. There are other ways, he says, that Asher could put his skills to use, and he would rather protect Asher from the potential erosion of his religious faith by the “pagan” world he’s about to enter. Thus everyone in Asher’s life—both religious and not—acknowledges that there’s a deep chasm he’s about to cross. Religion and art are cast as direct rivals.*



*In Kahn’s abstract work, Asher sees a type of art he’s never tries before. Kahn agrees with Anna that Asher is a prodigy. He also says that his suffering as a Jew, in and of itself (pogroms are sudden outbreaks of violent persecution against Jews), hasn’t made him a better artist. He regards an artist’s “eye” as something that’s more or less inherent.*



*Jacob argues that there’s a difference between sentimentalism and art, and that Asher will need to learn to express a wider range lest he fall into the trap of sentiment. Otherwise, there aren’t many skills he can convey to Asher—Asher already has most of them instinctively.*



For the sake of honesty, Jacob adds that he isn't really doing this for the Rebbe's sake. He's doing it because he is selfish, for the pleasure of "[sculpting] you and [bringing] out of you what is already inside you," much as Michelangelo worked with the marble that became *David*. At 72, he doesn't have time to spend on anything less. When Anna bids Asher goodbye, she says that one day his art will make him famous and her rich. When she offers her hand, Asher shakes it unhesitatingly.

After he sees Anna out, Jacob returns and tells him that Anna found him in Paris when he was starving. But he doesn't think Asher will ever starve. Then he tells Asher that he has a gift and also a responsibility. He asks Asher if he feels he has a responsibility to anyone. Asher says that he feels responsible to his people, because all Jews have a responsibility for one another. This seems to make Kahn angry. He says that as an artist, Asher is only responsible to himself and to the truth as he sees it; anything else will be "propaganda." He is only responsible to art. He thinks Asher already understands this; if he didn't, he would not have done what he did to his family. If he feels guilty, he should only use the guilt to make better art.

Kahn and Asher spend the rest of the day talking about art and watching each other make drawings of their respective streets. When they are finished, Kahn invites Asher to come every Sunday afternoon. Asher prays the afternoon service outside before taking the subway home.

When Asher gets home, his mother is at an emergency meeting with the Rebbe. When she gets home, she tells Asher that Aryeh won't be home for *Pesach* and that nobody knows where he is. Asher is sure that his father must be in Russia. That night, Asher has horrifying dreams about his father being in danger in Russia. Everyone at school and in the neighborhood is kind and gentle to Asher as he waits for word of his father. In the meantime, Asher studies Michelangelo's *David* and returns to Jacob Kahn's once again.

## CHAPTER 9

A week after Passover, they get word from Aryeh, who is safely in Vienna. Later, that summer, Rivkeh travels to Europe to be with her husband, and Asher moves into Uncle Yitzchok's house. Asher spends the summer traveling to Jacob Kahn's studio two or three times a week. It's an oppressively hot summer in New York. At Uncle Yitzchok's house, Asher paints wearing an undershirt and his ritual fringes; at the studio, he paints stripped to the waist.

*At the twilight of his career, Jacob is looking upon Asher as a kind of artwork in himself; he wants to mold what is already present in raw form. Asher's readiness in shaking Anna's hand this time shows that he is already more at ease in this world and ready for the uncomfortable challenges it has in store.*



*Jacob pushes Asher to make a distinction between his identity as a Jew and an identity as an artist. If he draws out of a sense of religious responsibility, in other words, sooner or later Asher's art will be compromised; he will no longer be portraying the truth as he sees it himself. Jacob thinks that this instinct has already been at work in Asher's willingness to distance himself from his family.*



*Asher's prayer shows how much his sense of religious identity still thrives, even alongside this unprecedented step into a "pagan, goyisch" world. Although others view Asher's religion and his creativity as being mutually exclusive, it's clear that Asher doesn't feel this way.*



*Interestingly, where Asher might be expected to dream about his mythic ancestor, he dreams instead of the very real danger his father might be facing—it's as if his freedom to explore his art has enabled him to face reality more clearly. In any case, Jacob Kahn now comes to occupy the role of a father figure in Asher's life.*



*Asher has more and more freedom to explore his art on his terms, but there are limits—while under his uncle's roof, he's expected to maintain a certain modesty, while at the studio, he feels free to discard those standards. This shows that Asher is increasingly comfortable adapting to the different worlds in which he now moves.*



One day Jacob Kahn tells Asher that there are only two ways of painting the world—the geometric approach favored by artists like Picasso, and the way which “sees the world as a flower,” favored by those like Chagall. Kahn himself is a “geometrician,” because he sees the world as “filled with lines and angles [...] wild and raging and hideous,” filling him with disgust rather than joy. He tells Asher that someday he will understand this. When he sees Asher painting a classmate (the pimply-faced boy), he tells Asher that the painting “reeks of cowardice and indecision.” He must paint the truth about his hatred. Later, Kahn looks at Asher’s revised painting and tells him, “I would not like to be hated by you, Asher Lev.”

One day in July, Kahn takes Asher to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and they spend the day looking at paintings of **crucifixions**. The next day, Asher tells Jacob that he doesn’t want to see any more crucifixions. Kahn is angry. He tells Asher that he’s not telling him to paint crucifixions, but that he must understand the form in order to become a great artist. He will also have to see resurrections, nativities, Greek and Roman gods, and nudes, because “this is the world you want to make sacred.”

One Sunday morning at the end of July, Asher comes to Kahn’s apartment and finds a young woman there. Kahn explains that Asher will draw this woman in the nude. Asher is trembling and feels a “choking heaviness.” Kahn gently but firmly explains that “the human body is a glory of structure and form,” and that when an artist paints it, he is “a battleground between intelligence and emotion,” a battle which yields some of art’s greatest masterpieces. The Rebbe had asked Kahn never to make Asher paint this way. However, Kahn believes that to try to become a great artist without mastering the nude “is like attempting to be a great Hasidic teacher without knowledge of the *Kabbalah*.” After a long silence, Asher agrees to try.

Asher is bathed in sweat as he begins drawing the girl, and his first attempt is shamefully bad. But Asher spends the whole day drawing the girl repeatedly in various poses. Kahn shows Asher the vast improvement between the first and last drawings. He tries to tell Asher that he is not “defiled.” Asher, dazed and feeling “unclean,” isn’t convinced. But he draws the girl again on subsequent Sundays, and it becomes easier.

*Kahn continues to challenge Asher’s artistic timidity and tendency toward sentimentalism. When Asher allows himself to express his anger toward his bully, the difference is striking. Asher continues to refine his understanding of the importance of truth to art, which has been in process ever since, as a little boy, he observed that the world isn’t “pretty.”*



*Kahn intentionally takes Asher into the pagan, Christian “goyisch” world that is precisely what his parents and community have feared. This has nothing to do with religion, in his view; it has to do with mastering traditional forms in order to be able to build on those forms. Asher, thinking guiltily of his family’s objections, is still struggling with this distinction.*



*Yet another line is crossed when Asher is asked to draw a nude model—and presumably to see a naked woman, for that matter—for the first time. While this is a strictly artistic exercise, it’s unavoidably an affront to Asher’s religious sensibilities, as modesty is heavily emphasized in the Ladover sect. Asher’s consent is a major step in his development as an artist—and also a significant step toward further conflict with his community.*



*The exercise of drawing the nude model is stressful for Asher, and even after he’s done it successfully, the sense of conflict between his worlds lingers. But the more he is immersed in the norms of the artistic world, the easier it becomes to reconcile himself to those norms.*



Aryeh returns to the United States in the fall. He is gaunt, gray, and limping. When he and Asher finally talk, Aryeh says that his work in Europe “was nearly creation out of nothing,” but is beginning to succeed. He tells Asher that he is still “not reconciled” to what Asher is doing. He says that the Ribbono Shel Olom is “sometimes unkind.” He doesn’t understand why God couldn’t have kept the *sitra achra* away from Asher. He asks that Asher never forget his people. When Asher asks Aryeh if he was in Russia, Aryeh says that some questions should not be asked. Looking at one of the nude drawings on Asher’s desk, he said that he, too, has questions he doesn’t ask.

Later that fall, Rivkeh tells Asher that Aryeh needs her. She asks if Asher could move in with Uncle Yitzchok next year so that she could accompany and support her husband full time. Asher doesn’t want to. Rivkeh says that they’ll discuss it later, telling him, “you are not the only member of this family with special needs.”

That fall and winter, Rivkeh misses Aryeh and is lonely when Asher spends his evenings studying art reproductions in the library. She finishes her dissertation and tells Asher that the university is asking her about her plans for next year. Asher continues to refuse to consider the possibility of Rivkeh leaving New York. Asher dreams about his mythic ancestor again and, overwhelmed by confused feelings, struggles to paint.

Rivkeh continues to bring up plans for next year. She tells Asher that it might be time for him to concern himself with others’ needs. He dreams again of his mythic ancestor shouting at him, and the next day, he falls asleep in class and is mocked by the teacher. The pimply-faced boy starts leaving cruel limericks about Asher and famous Jewish artists inside Asher’s *Gemorra*. Kahn tells Asher that his attempts at expressing his feelings are producing failures; he should spend some time painting still-lives and self-portraits instead.

One night, Asher looks out at the familiar parkway and thinks that his street feels “quietly hostile [...] as if resentful of my journeys away from it and of the alien skills” he brings back from Kahn’s studio. Then he has a sudden idea. He draws a scene from Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, and he places his classmate’s pimply face on the faces of all Michelangelo’s damned, tormented dead. He makes a similar drawing the next day and places both of these in the pimply-faced boy’s *Gemorra*. The boy says nothing to him, but he stops tormenting Asher. At Kahn’s, Asher makes a painting of the boy’s face when he saw one of the drawings. Kahn proclaims this painting “evil and excellent.”

*In his own way, Aryeh is a creator, too—albeit in a very different mode from Asher, and the similarity is one that the two of them can’t easily recognize. This is shown by the fact that Aryeh still sees Asher as being on the “Other Side,” and believes the only hope for Asher is to hang on to a sense of his Jewish identity. In light of this irreconcilable conflict, for both of them, there are aspects of their work that are best kept private.*



*Rivkeh confronts Asher with the reality that Aryeh, too, needs her, and she can’t indefinitely sacrifice his needs, as well as her own, for Asher. Though Rivkeh has been protective of Asher’s art, she is also protective of Aryeh, as well as her own calling to continue her brother’s work.*



*This time, it’s Rivkeh, not Aryeh, who prompts disturbing dreams for Asher. Rivkeh’s departure would mean that the breakup caused by Asher’s art would have reached completion, bringing out the conflict between his art and his family even more starkly. Asher doesn’t want to face this, and it even baffles him artistically.*



*Family conflict continues to spur disturbing dreams, and Asher’s feelings are so confused that he can’t convey them in artistic form. This shows that art isn’t a straightforward expression of one’s feelings—there must be a coherence and clarity in the expression, and Asher’s feelings about his family are all too messy for that.*



*Now that Asher has entered a different world, his street—the beloved subject of virtually all of his early art—no longer looks the same to him. Asher’s twisted adaptation of the Michelangelo painting is a vindication of Kahn’s view that the old masterpieces must be assimilated before someone can make an artistic progression.*



Rivkeh tells Asher that this summer, she will be moving to Europe for a year to be with Aryeh. She becomes angry when Asher pleads with her to stay. When Asher talks to Kahn about it, Kahn tells him that there's only so long the world will indulge him. Later, Asher is again summoned to meet with the Rebbe. The *Rebbe* tells him that although Jacob Kahn can make him an artist, only Asher can "make of [himself] a Jew." He tells Asher he must accept his parents' decision and behave respectfully toward his aunt and uncle. He concludes that Asher is entering the world of the "Other Side" and must be careful. As Asher goes home, and throughout the next weeks, he feels that his street has turned "cold."

As Rivkeh defends her dissertation and prepares for the journey to Europe, she seems "filled with new energy" and "fulfilled." During these weeks, Asher paints many paintings of himself and his mother. Jacob Kahn watches in silence. When Asher bids his mother goodbye at the dock, he tells her, "Have a safe journey, mama." Then he goes back to his street and spends awhile looking up at the living room **window**. Finally he walks to his Uncle Yitzchok's house.

## CHAPTER 10

That summer, Asher goes with Jacob Kahn and his wife, Tanya, to Provincetown, Massachusetts. In the mornings, he stands on the beach and prays. He prepares his own kosher food in his room. In the mornings, he and Kahn set up easels at the edge of the sand dunes and paint.

Asher begins to understand Kahn's approach to painting. Kahn believes that trying to convert three-dimensional objects onto a two-dimensional canvas results in a falsehood. Therefore, it's necessary to either represent objects two-dimensionally or else paint using only color, texture, and form. Asher cannot yet paint this way himself. Kahn tells Asher that he is "too religious to be an Abstract Expressionist." Asher is too much a mix of the emotional, sensual, and rational—the latter coming from his Ladover background. Kahn tells Asher that a person doesn't need to give up his background in order to become a great painter, and that in fact, painting should reflect or comment upon a painter's background in some way.

Jacob Kahn also teaches Asher how to swim in the ocean. It reminds Asher painfully of his summers in the Berkshires with his mother. In the afternoons, they paint. In the evenings, they often walk through the art galleries in town. One evening, an artist introduces himself and rambles about the art world's impending shift to Tokyo. After the man leaves, Jacob tells Asher, "Every trade has them [...] they are called whores."

*Asher is torn between his desires to have a semblance of familiar family life and to immerse himself in Kahn's artistic world. The message of Rivkeh, Kahn, and the Rebbe is essentially the same—now that he's maturing, Asher must take responsibility for navigating those worlds himself. In light of this simmering tension, Asher's neighborhood continues to feel inaccessible to him as an artistic subject.*



*Now it's Asher's turn to bid his mother a painful goodbye, and the emptiness of the apartment window is symbolic of the gaping absence Rivkeh leaves behind. The conflict more or less resolved, Asher finally feels free to pour his complex feelings into paintings of himself and his mother.*



*In his parents' absence, Asher becomes a kind of adoptive member of the Kahn family. Even apart from his parents, he maintains his religious practices, showing his commitment to bridging the gap between his creativity and his faith.*



*Kahn teaches Asher that he's not trying to make Asher a clone of his own style or methods; art must be based on a person's background in order to be authentic, and it might be that Asher's devoutly religious identity doesn't lend itself to Kahn's abstract approach. In no way should he muffle his religious identity in order to suit his art; if he did that, he couldn't produce real art.*



*Jacob Kahn continues to occupy a parental role in Asher's life, teaching him life skills like swimming. He also teaches Asher how to navigate his new world—for example, whom to emulate and whom to avoid.*



As they stand on the beach later that night, Jacob tells Asher that he must not become a “whore.” He says that Asher is already on the way to becoming one—he observes that Asher has started tucking his earlocks behind his ears. He tells Asher that Asher did this out of shame, because earlocks didn’t fit his idea of an artist. He tells Asher that an artist is an individual before anything else. He is glad to have spoken bluntly and upset Asher in a matter as important as this.

Asher feels ashamed. After this, he wears his earlocks loose once again. He also remains Sabbath-observant, refraining from painting and spending his time reading the Torah and Hasidic works. He fasts on Tisha b’Av. That day, Jacob invites him on a walk. He tells Asher that he has never understood fasting, despite many discussions with the Rebbe about it. He says it is good that Asher has not abandoned the things that are meaningful to him. Jacob himself has little that is meaningful to him besides his art. He sculpts his self-portrait in the sand and remarks that he hopes to live past 80. He tells Asher that sometimes Asher reminds him upsettingly of his own past.

The next day, Jacob doesn’t get out of bed. Tanya calmly says that her husband is “in a mood,” and she won’t let Asher see him. She tells Asher that the Nazis melted down a decade’s worth of Jacob’s sculptures. The next day, several local artists come to see Jacob. Even Anna Shaeffer comes. She assures Asher that although Jacob’s spells are unpleasant, he always comes out of them within a few days. Tanya adds that one must “[learn] to live with [the] fear” that he will not. That evening, Jacob emerges from his room and begins painting again. He and Asher don’t discuss his mood. He tells Asher that he will make it past 80, if only he can stop thinking about the past.

One day as Jacob and Asher visit a Cubist exhibit in Boston, Jacob shares some memories of Picasso. He says that Picasso was “frightening” in his genius, able to “use up a lifetime of ideas of an ordinary good painter in a few weeks.” People would hide their work so that Picasso wouldn’t see their ideas. Jacob says that “there is something demonic about such a gift [...] or divine.”

*Jacob explains to Asher that becoming a “whore” means aspiring to a certain image of an “artist” that isn’t a truthful reflection of one’s individuality. By hiding obvious signs of his Hasidic piety, Asher risks become such a pretender, in Jacob’s view. Although Jacob isn’t a religious Jew, himself, he clearly cares about authenticity and staying true to one’s identity, echoing Asher’s own desire to capture truth in his art.*



*Asher remains conscientious about his religious observance, showing that this remains central to his identity, not something that can be sidelined or muffled for the sake of his art. Jacob admires this about Asher. Asher’s fasting on Tisha b’Av (a day commemorating major calamities in Jewish history such as the Holocaust) seems to spark painful memories for Jacob; though he is not an observant Jew, Asher’s piety leaves Jacob wistful and conflicted.*



*Jacob’s pensive mood spirals into a depression. Much as Rivkeh has learned to cope with Aryeh’s absences, Tanya Kahn has learned to live with the fear that such an episode will prove to be Jacob’s undoing. This suggests that, no matter one’s particular background, reckoning with one’s past is often a lifelong, painful process.*



*Jacob observes that one’s artistic gift might have elements of both the demonic and divine in it. This conflicts with Aryeh’s notion that Asher’s art is from the “Other Side,” and is an idea that Asher will come back to later in the process of understanding himself as an artist.*



A few days later, Jacob drops off Asher at the Provincetown docks for a day of sketching. Later Asher sketches sharks in the town aquarium. People gather and gawk. Asher signs one of his drawings and gives it to a little boy. He walks through town and sketches old women and wrinkled fishermen “with whom [he] felt a strange kinship.” He gives away some of his sketches. When he rejoins Jacob later that day, he tells Jacob, “I am going to be a great artist.” “You have been an artist for a long time, Asher Lev,” Jacob replies. Not long after, the summer comes to an end.

*Asher’s day of sketching shows his growth as an artist in that he’s no longer constrained to his own familiar environment; he’s able to improvise and create sought-after pieces, even in a place very different from what he’s used to. After this summer of mentoring and growing independence, Asher is comfortable claiming himself as an artist in the making—something he didn’t do while living with his parents.*



## CHAPTER 11

Asher goes to see his high school registrar, demanding to know why he has been signed up for French. The registrar patiently explains that the Rebbe has specifically requested that Asher take French. Asher submits.

*The Rebbe continues to orchestrate things for Asher’s benefit. The advantage isn’t clear to Asher now, but he will later come to appreciate the Rebbe’s foresight in his education.*



On Rosh Hashonoh, Asher prays fervently in the synagogue. He weeps on Yom Kippur when he remembers his father’s own weeping on the holy days. On Simchas Torah, he dances with a Torah scroll and sees Jacob Kahn standing on the edge of the watching crowd. He pulls Jacob into the line, and they dance awkwardly together with the scroll. Asher continues studying with Jacob, painting, drawing, and sculpting. He continues making an effort with his yeshiva studies, too.

*The succession of holy days showcases Asher’s continued piety, even without his parents’ oversight. Not only does he believe that his religious life can exist alongside his art, but by pulling Jacob into his religious celebration, he actively connects the two. Again, his relative independence gives him the space to grow both artistically and religiously.*



That October, Asher goes to the opening of Jacob Kahn’s gallery show, a black-tie affair. He sees a sculpture that consists of his and Kahn’s heads facing in the same direction; it has been purchased. He circulates through the crowd, listening to the intelligent talk. Anna Schaeffer is exuberant, but Jacob himself looks stiff and uncomfortable. Later, Anna tells Asher that a famous collector purchased the sculpture, and he is shocked when he hears the name. He congratulates Jacob on selling all his pieces, but Jacob looks “bereaved.”

*Kahn’s sculpture of himself and Asher shows that he sees himself occupying a fatherly role in Asher’s life. The sale of his art, however, is a deeply ambivalent, and even upsetting, experience for him—a personal loss, accompanied by the fear that he will never surpass his past work.*



Uncle Yitzchok fixes up his attic so that Asher will have more space to paint, and Asher quickly begins filling up the room with paintings. In February, both Asher and Jacob attend the Ladover *farbrengen* commemorating the death of the Rebbe’s father. At one point, Jacob leads Asher outside and tells him that he will soon be going to Europe for a month. He bids Asher a quick farewell and leaves. Asher goes home to bed. He later tries to work in Jacob’s empty studio but finds this “intolerable.” Instead he goes home and makes many paintings of Jacob. After Jacob returns, he reports having seen Asher’s parents. They resume working together as if Jacob had not left.

*Asher feels bereaved even when Jacob leaves on a very short trip. Jacob’s absence seems to tap into Asher’s feelings about his father’s travel as well as his affection for Jacob himself—he grieves in his mentor’s absence.*



When Asher's parents return at the end of March, Aryeh looks much healthier, strengthened by Rivkeh's presence. However, he says little to Asher; there is "a permanent high wall of uncertainty and hostility." When Uncle Yitzchok shows him the attic filled with paintings, Aryeh looks angry. Yitzchok begs Aryeh to be reconciled to his son. Later, Rivkeh's eyes look sad. She says it is impossible to speak to Aryeh about Asher, and it is painful for her to be caught between them.

*Aryeh is thriving now that Rivkeh is working alongside him. However, the barrier between him and Asher remains in place—confronted by the evidence of Asher's thriving in his absence, Aryeh is angry. Rivkeh continues to feel the strain of trying to mediate between her husband and son.*



After Asher's parents return to Europe, Jacob tells Asher that he, Jacob, has made an enemy of Aryeh. Aryeh is convinced that Asher is wasting his life, but Jacob says that nothing can be done about this—Aryeh and Asher are simply "two different natures." Asher shouldn't try to understand this; rather, he should focus on becoming a great artist: "That is the only way to justify what you are doing to everyone's life."

*Jacob tries to help Asher understand that, on some level, the conflict between himself and Aryeh cannot be fought—they are just different, and rather than pointlessly dwelling on the pain, Asher should dedicate himself to fulfilling his potential.*



Nevertheless, Asher continues to brood about his family. He does not want to hurt anyone. He simply wants to paint. He wants to paint much as Aryeh wants to travel for the Rebbe, for the sake of "a truth I did not know how to put into words" and can only bring to life through his art. He dreams again of his mythic ancestor.

*Asher now understands that he and Aryeh do have something in common: their shared passion for pursuing the truth, albeit in very different ways. Dwelling on this conflict evokes dreams of the mythic ancestor once again, suggesting that finding common ground with his father is crucial to Asher making sense of how he relates to his family line.*



The next two summers, Asher goes to Provincetown with the Kahns. The second summer, he begins to join in the conversations with Jacob and other artists. After that summer, his parents return briefly. They urge Asher to come to Vienna the following summer. Asher is afraid that they will talk him into staying longer. Plus, he has come to enjoy living with his uncle's large, noisy family, and he doesn't want to live with his father. Finally, he relents. However, the coming months are filled with brooding for Asher. As he paints and talks about art that year, he sometimes notices Jacob giving him a "strange and curious look."

*Asher continues to mature and take his place as an artist among other artists. By this point, he has been living at a distance from his parents for quite a while. The prospect of living with them, even temporarily, brings up old fears of losing his gift. Meanwhile, Jacob's "strange look" hints that he sees Asher breaking unprecedented ground as an artist and isn't sure how to react.*



En route to Vienna, Asher becomes ill. He is sick the whole time he is in Vienna. His thoughts are incoherent while there. He is back in New York by the end of July. A few weeks later, he goes to Provincetown to join the Kahns. "[Jacob] missed you," Tanya tells Asher.

*As he expected, Asher is unable to cope with Vienna—to the point that he remembers almost nothing of having been there. The nature of his illness is not explained. Feeling disconnected from his art and his home is literally a nightmare for him.*



At yeshiva, the registrar explains that the Rebbe has asked that Asher be enrolled in Russian, but Asher resolutely refuses to take the class. Rav Mendel Dorochoff asks to see him. He asks Asher about his college plans and brings up Russian again. Asher still refuses. Later, the Rebbe himself wants to see him. He tells Asher that sometimes, the Master of the Universe gives glimpses into his greater plan. He tells Asher that one of these glimpses is the promise of Asher's future greatness. Asher will someday travel the world. For that reason, he thinks Asher should study Russian. The following fall, Asher enrolls in Brooklyn College and registers for a class in Russian.

Asher continues painting and attending college and yeshiva. One day he and Jacob visit Anna Schaeffer's gallery. As Asher admires the current exhibit, Anna tells him that his own exhibit will hang here in the spring. Asher is shocked. Jacob explains that he didn't let Anna exhibit his work already because "a boy should not rush to make his soul naked." He later tells Asher to be happy; these are the good times in an artist's life. That winter, Jacob comes and selects the pieces that will be included in the show. He insists on including two nudes, because these have been important in Asher's artistic development. Asher, he says, must "enter in truth or you will not enter at all."

That spring, the show is "a moderate success." Asher stares at "all the years of [his] life summed up on the walls of a gallery" and then watches as some of these disappear by the end of the show. The show is kindly reviewed, except for one critic who calls Asher a fraud, with "a menacing affinity for Picassoid forms." Jacob Kahn is amused by this expression.

The following spring, Asher has another successful show. His father finishes his work abroad and is reassigned to work in the Ladover building. His parents move back into their old Brooklyn apartment. Asher moves back in with them, but there's not enough space in his bedroom for him to paint. His father suggests that he paint at Uncle Yitzchok's house.

## CHAPTER 12

Now that Asher's parents have lived for years without him, he observes that "they possessed a language of shared experience in which I was nonexistent." They have private jokes and a "knowing intimacy." Aryeh displays a reviewed vigor, and his success is respected by the Ladover community. Even Rivkeh has put on weight and looks "luminous."

*Asher resists what he sees as the Rebbe's meddling, which prompts another encounter with the Rebbe himself. The Rebbe reveals that he has greater insight into Asher's gift than Asher has given him credit for, and is trying to prepare him to become a world citizen—and, as he'll later find out, to be more useful to the Ladover community as well. Though Asher resists anything he perceives as interference in his passion, he also reveres the Rebbe and ultimately does as he advises, showing that his Ladover piety is real, not superficial.*



*Asher has matured to the point that Jacob believes he's ready for his first public exhibition. Asher has been so focused on creating art that this comes as a genuine shock to him, showing that art, not fame, really is his object. The inclusion of the nude paintings will inevitably lead to controversy with Asher's community, and Jacob knows this, too. Jacob's point is that Asher must be true to who he is as an artist, or he it's not worth presenting himself publicly as an artist at all.*



*Asher has his first taste of selling his art and of being critically reviewed. Though the experience is bittersweet, he is coming into his own as an artist, showing that Jacob's investment in him—and the Rebbe's foresight in putting them together—has been worthwhile.*



*While Asher outwardly resumes life in his parents' home, much has changed. Although his father's suggestion is a pragmatic one, it's also a rejection of Asher's art; he doesn't want Asher to pursue such work under his roof. Their conflict remains unhealed.*



*In his absence, Asher's parents have come into their own as well. They have both been able to pursue their callings without the strain of dealing each day with what they view as Asher's rebellion, and Asher has thrived in his own pursuits. However, this doesn't necessarily resolve lingering conflicts.*



Now that Aryeh has achieved so much, he is able to be “indifferent” and unthreatened by Asher’s art. Rather, he dislikes Asher from afar. Nonetheless, he shares Asher’s indignation about the harsh critic and says that he’s glad Asher’s work “didn’t shame us.” Rivkeh asks Asher about his next show—will there be nudes? Asher says yes. Rivkeh says that Aryeh won’t attend the show if there are nudes.

Later, Rivkeh approaches Asher to talk about a neighborhood family with a daughter. When Asher realizes what she’s getting at, he bursts out laughing. Rivkeh looks hurt.

Aryeh tries to talk with Asher about his painting. Asher explains that he doesn’t paint stories; he expresses his feelings. Aryeh says that sometimes feelings are from the *sitra achra* and should be concealed. Asher says that some people can’t conceal their feelings. Aryeh says that such people can be dangerous. When Asher brings up this conversation with Jacob, Jacob says that Asher should not be surprised by his father’s “aesthetic blindness.”

When Asher flies to other cities to attend art exhibits, he begins carrying messages to other Ladover Jews at his father’s request. Jacob smiles at the Rebbe’s cleverness in recruiting Asher in this way.

That summer, Rivkeh tries to get Asher to come to the Berkshires for a couple of weeks. Asher explains that he needs every minute to prepare for his next exhibition. Rivkeh says that Asher has no idea what it’s like “to be standing between you and your father.”

After the summer, Asher returns to New York without his sidecurls, but still with his beard and ritual fringes. Aryeh seems relieved. Later, as they walk to the subway together, Rivkeh asks Asher why he must paint nudes. Asher explains that he is an artist. Rivkeh says that Aryeh will be hurt. When the time comes for the show, the nudes are included. His parents do not attend.

*Aryeh’s attitude suggests that at least some of his anger about Asher’s art was rooted in a kind of envy. Successful in his own sphere, he no longer feels this way, but he still isn’t reconciled to the person his son has become—especially the ways in which Asher’s art clashes with community norms.*



*Rivkeh is gently nudging Asher toward the possibility of dating and marriage. This is clearly not a priority for Asher. For Rivkeh, though, his reaction feels like a rejection of community expectations, and perhaps especially of her motherly role.*



*Aryeh makes an attempt to connect with Asher over his art. However, in light of his religious background, he construes Asher’s talk of “feelings” in terms of either holiness or the *sitra achra*. Jacob continues to argue that Asher should expect nothing more—his father just doesn’t see the world in the same way.*



*The Rebbe’s ploy is a way to ensure that Asher remains engaged with his community even in the midst of art-related activities, as well as allowing him to be genuinely useful to the community.*



*Rivkeh, feeling torn as ever, continues to make overtures to Asher, but Asher is uncomfortable being part of his father’s life, and the Berkshires are no longer home for him in the way that Provincetown with the Kahns has become.*



*Aryeh’s relief is due to the fact that, although Asher has given up one external marker of his faith, he has not abandoned all of them. Rivkeh tries to understand Asher’s artistic choices, but the nudes are an impasse—anticipating a greater one to come as Asher continues to experiment and mature through his art.*



After the show, Jacob and Asher take a walk. Asher feels empty and horrified, not wanting to repeat himself in his future work. Jacob just tells Asher that the critics believe he has surpassed his master. He tells Asher that it's time for him to "find other worlds." The next day, Jacob falls ill. Asher later hears from Anna that Jacob has requested an exhibition for that fall and is hard at work. "The master is jealous of the apprentice," she tells Asher.

That Shabbos evening, the subject of the nude paintings comes up. Asher tries to explain that there's a distinction between a naked woman and a nude. A nude is an artist's "personal vision" of a body. Aryeh maintains that displaying such things in public is still offensive. Why does Asher have to paint them? Asher explains that he is "part of a tradition" in which the form of the nude is very important. Aryeh says that respect for one's father is also a tradition. Asher says that he can't respect Aryeh's "aesthetic blindness." Aryeh asks, "And what about moral blindness, Asher?" He warns Asher that someday, his attitude will hurt people; he'll be doing the work of the *sitra achra*.

A few days later, Aryeh questions Asher about some of the artistic concepts mentioned in the reviews of Asher's last exhibition. Aryeh listens carefully, but "he possessed no frames of reference for such concepts. He could not even ask intelligent questions." Eventually, they give up the discussion as futile. Rivkeh asks Asher if he is still seeing Jacob Kahn. Asher says that he hasn't recently. When he looks out the **window** of his parents' apartment, the street seems "colder" than ever.

Aryeh begins traveling for the Rebbe again. Rivkeh tells Asher that she thought she'd grown used to this: "How many **windows** have I waited at? But I'm not used to it at all." Asher chooses this moment to tell Rivkeh that he'd like to travel to Europe this summer, after he graduates from college. While his mother is subdued, Aryeh is "elated" to hear of these plans. He promises to give Asher the names of Jews in Florence, Rome, and Paris. "Europe is something I happen to know about," he adds.

## CHAPTER 13

That summer, Asher lives in a hotel room in Florence. He eats his meals in the home of a Jewish woman in her 70s with whom his father connected him. During the day, he wanders the city, exploring its history and studying art in the churches and galleries. "Florence was a gift," as Jacob Kahn had told him it would be. Watching evening descend on Florence is a "loveliness" unmatched again in his life: "hours in a Renaissance city lived by a man born in a Brooklyn street."

*Asher's success threatens Jacob, and from this time forward, they are no longer as close. This is a father-son conflict in its own way, suggesting that such conflicts come up even in loving relationships—Jacob no longer has anything to teach Asher and feels the need to prove himself again before he dies.*



*Asher and Aryeh come to open conflict as well. Aryeh doesn't understand the role that nudes play in Asher's art; to him, it's simply religiously offensive, part of the *sitra achra*. Asher doesn't see his work as morally or religiously problematic in any way. This exchange shows how far apart their perspectives are, suggesting that there's a limit to the reconciliation between Asher's art and the expectations of his community. They are two different traditions with their own ways of interpreting the world.*



*Despite their argument, Aryeh continues to make an effort to understand, but the two men continue to talk past one another. At this point, no longer seeing Kahn, Asher doesn't really have a father figure. Even his beloved street has taken on a certain strangeness that no longer inspires him, reflecting the alienation he feels in all realms of life: artistic, familial, and religious.*



*Rivkeh's fears about her loved ones' travel never fully subsides, making Asher's decision to leave all the more painful. But for Aryeh, this is finally a chance to have something in common with Asher. His eagerness to help Asher with his travels shows that Aryeh still loves his son and longs to be involved in his life, despite their differences.*



*Asher sets out on his own to find new inspiration. He recognizes that as a devout Jew, he is somewhat conspicuous in this setting, but he nevertheless finds ways of fitting in, thanks to his father's many connections.*



Asher has a profound emotional response when he sees Michelangelo's *Pietà* for the first time, "like the echoing blasts of the shofar." He returns to the cathedral over the next few days to draw the sculpture. Then he walks to the Accademia to draw the *David*, observing the ways it rebelled against artistic tradition. As he alternates between these works of art, he begins to dream of his mythic ancestor once again, "but he was less thunderous than he had ever been."

A Russian Ladover man gives Asher an envelope to convey to a man in Rome. As Asher takes the train to Rome, he draws the *Pietà* from memory and is horrified to notice that the figure of Mary resembles Rivkeh. When Asher connects with the Jewish man in Rome, the man offers to give Asher a tour of the yeshiva his father built there. On his last day in the city, Asher calls him. As they drive to the *yeshiva*, Asher is surprised to learn how rapidly it has grown in just five years. "Your father did it," Asher's companion tells him. "It was creation out of nothing."

The night Asher arrives in Paris, he dreams again of his mythic ancestor, "thundering his rage." As he eats breakfast the next morning, he draws the *Pietà* on the tablecloth and reflects that, "The dread was gone [...] I would have to let it lead me now or there would be deeper and deeper layers of the wearying darkness."

When Asher gets back to the hotel, there's a message from Avraham Cutler, the head of the Paris yeshiva and the son of Asher's old mashpia. On the way to the *yeshiva*, Asher asks if they can stop in Montmartre so that he can see Picasso's old studio. The building is dilapidated. Before he leaves, Asher draws his mother's profile in the dust of the adjacent square. He isn't sure why he feels the need to do it.

When they get to the yeshiva, Avraham Cutler tells Asher that six years ago, there was nothing here, but now there are 169 students. Asher is welcome to stay and eat at the *yeshiva* whenever he likes. At dinner, Asher is repeatedly introduced as the son of Reb Aryeh Lev. Avraham asks Asher where he learned his French. When Asher tells him, Avraham smiles and says, "The Rebbe is a very wise man."

Over the next week, Asher exchanges letters with his parents, explaining that he wants to stay longer in Europe. They don't understand, but they respect his wishes. Asher rents a furnished apartment and converts one room into a studio. Avraham Cutler helps him carry canvases and easels up the stairs to the fifth-floor apartment.

*The Pietá is a Renaissance sculpture depicting Mary holding the body of the crucified Jesus. Needless to say, then, it's surprising that such a work would attract a Jewish artist. But observing this work and other Renaissance masterpieces begins to inspire Asher's own departure from tradition. And, contrary to expectation, the mythic ancestor is muted—suggesting that Asher is making peace with his artistic identity and its relationship to his family.*



*Asher continues to make connections with his religious community, even while pursuing religiously questionable artistic explorations. His adaptation of Michelangelo's images continues to evolve. Asher finally sees his father's own creative work firsthand—an example of a certain creative genius they have in common, even though it looks very different.*



*Asher's mythic ancestor reappears, and is angry this time. However, unlike his previous appearances, the ancestor prompts Asher to go forward with his art instead of feeling conflicted about it. This suggests that Asher feels at peace with the cost that his artistic choices might have.*



*Asher's worlds collide as he travels to Picasso's old studio in the company of a yeshiva teacher with a connection to his old school. His drawing of his mother is a tribute to her sacrifice and pain in getting Asher to where he is today.*



*Asher sees another example of his father's creative genius and is invited to share in its fruits—his father is famous here. Ironically, Asher is able to feel at home in Paris because of his father's pioneering work here—something he was only aware of indirectly and often shied away from when he was growing up.*



*Asher begins to make himself at home in Paris, and his new friend at the Paris yeshiva helps him set up his studio—another example of his artistic and religious worlds coming together.*



Over the coming weeks, Asher paints in the apartment, eats meals in the yeshiva's dining room, and attends its synagogue. Freed from "memories and roots," Asher begins to reconnect with old, buried memories. After spending years painting his visible street, now he must "paint the street that could not be seen."

Asher thinks of his mythic ancestor. As a child, he was told stories about the Russian nobleman whom his ancestor had enriched—"a despotic goy, a degenerate." Asher wonders if his ancestor, by enriching him, was complicit in the nobleman's debaucheries. Were the mythic ancestor's subsequent journeys an act of atonement—an attempt to reshape the "demonic [...] into meaning"? Asher senses that this is true. He begins to paint his ancestor, "a weary Jew traveling to balance the world."

Asher also thinks about his reclusive grandfather. Had the mythic ancestor's wanderings been passed down to him? Asher paints him, too—his studies, his journeys, and even his gruesome death. He thinks about his father during his mother's illness, especially his torment at being unable to travel. He wonders if that same impulse to travel was passed down across the centuries by the imbalance created during his mythic ancestor's life. Asher wonders if his need to create art rather than "give meaning [...] to people and events" had "interrupted an act of eternal atonement."

Asher begins to understand something more of his mother's anguish over the years. She had stood "between two different ways of giving meaning to the world" and tried to keep both alive. She had encouraged Asher's drawing, kept herself alive by resuming her brother Yaakov's work, and kept Aryeh alive by allowing him to resume his own journeys. He thinks about his mother's endless waiting at the **window**.

Asher wanders Paris that winter and cannot paint. At last, early in the spring, the idea begins to emerge—an idea he'd repeatedly been "choking [...] and hoping it would die [...]" No one says you have to paint ultimate anguish and torment. But if you are driven to paint it, you have no other way." He makes preliminary drawings and, after Passover, begins the painting. He draws the central vertical strip of the Brooklyn apartment **window** and the slanted horizontal of its Venetian blind. He draws his mother behind those lines. Afterward, he feels "vaguely unclean, as if I had betrayed a friend."

*Asher both paints and worships with devotion. At a distance from his upbringing, he feels better able to see and portray the beloved scenes of his early life. This wasn't possible while Asher was still struggling as a young artist under his parents' roof.*



*Asher's newfound space and distance also allows him to rethink the story that was passed down to him regarding his mythic ancestor. In other words, as he's starting to experiment artistically, he's also claiming the freedom to rebel from his familial inheritance and reject the tidy categories he's been given. His painting of the "weary Jew" no doubt summons memories of his father, too.*



*Continuing his rethinking of tradition, Asher speculates that the impulse to travel is an intergenerational attempt to repair the world, and he wonders if his lack of the same impulse is somehow a failure. He feels compelled to obey a very different impulse and, up to now, has been unable to reconcile these seemingly divergent paths.*



*This line of thought inevitably leads to Rivkeh, who tried so hard to understand and sustain her husband's and son's views of the world while also pursuing her own work. Alone with his own pain, Asher understands a little of the torment Rivkeh has endured over the years.*



*The glut of new ideas keeps Asher from painting. But he finally faces the controversial idea that's been percolating ever since the previous summer: his mother at the window, with a clear reference to the crucifix. This image is controversial both because of the raw emotion and the blasphemous religious implications—his mother has never liked being portrayed in a vulnerable light in Asher's work, and she is certainly not sympathetic to Christian forms.*



The next day, Asher looks at the painting again and finds it fraudulent. It doesn't "reflect fully the anguish and torment" he had wanted to convey. He remembers his mother once saying, "Can you understand what it means for something to be incomplete?" He finally understands. Dreading what he must do, Asher prays at the yeshiva, sleeps, and prays again. He knows that his feeling of "incompleteness" would matter little to anyone else. Only Jacob Kahn would have been likely to detect it. But leaving the painting incomplete "would have made me a whore" and made it easier for Asher to leave future work incomplete.

Asher prepares a second canvas. Again, he draws the horizontal and vertical from the Brooklyn apartment **window**. This time, however, he draws his mother with her arms tied to the horizontal with the cords of the blind and her legs tied to the vertical. He draws his father on the right, dressed for travel. He draws himself on the left, outfitted for painting. He divides his mother's head into "balanced segments, one looking at me, one looking at my father, one looking upward." He paints this "for the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other's throats." He paints this way because "there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition" that would allow him to convey such torment.

One day in summer, the painting is complete. Asher knows it is a good painting. He prays at the yeshiva and walks through Paris, realizing he wants to paint Brooklyn once again. He spends the summer feverishly painting his memories of his old street. Meanwhile, Avraham Cutler introduces Asher to a family, and he befriends a girl in that family. He chooses to write no more about their interactions that summer.

That fall, Anna Schaeffer comes to Paris and marvels at Asher's **crucifixion** paintings. She sends Asher on a long walk, and when he returns, the paintings are gone. He weeps. A show is scheduled for February in New York. The two big paintings will be titled *Brooklyn Crucifixion I* and *Brooklyn Crucifixion II*. Asher spends the winter wandering Paris and spending time with the girl he met, then finally flies to New York with a feeling of "dread and oncoming horror."

*Asher has internalized lessons from both his parents and his mentor, understanding the importance of honesty in art and of pursuing completeness in life. His artistic choice is completely surrounded by prayer—an important point of the later reception of his work as blasphemous.*



*Asher portrays his childhood using the artistic form of the crucifixion—not intending any religious meaning, but wanting to convey the conflict and pain in his mother's life as she was torn between himself and his father. While an explicitly Jewish image might have made more sense, Asher decides that nothing equivalent exists in his tradition, so he borrows from another. He believes that the shocking nature of this image is the only way to convey mystery effectively and honestly.*



*Now that he has completed this painting, Asher feels freer to paint old scenes from Brooklyn—and to pursue a serious romantic interest. He remains firmly tied to the yeshiva community and committed to marrying within his faith.*



*Having poured so much of himself into the conception and execution of his idea, Asher feels devastated to let the work go public. But that bereavement pales against the dread of the controversy he knows is coming—his family and community will never understand the crucifixion paintings.*



## CHAPTER 14

Asher arrives home in a snowstorm and finds the apartment empty. He wanders through the apartment, alone with his memories. He remembers his childish belief that the Master of the Universe gave him the power to “make the world pretty” for his mother. Around midnight, he finally calls Rav Dorochoff and learns that his parents are attending a campus conference in Chicago.

The next day, Asher walks along the parkway in the snow. He prays in the synagogue and is warmly greeted. He talks with the mashpia, who is now stooped and elderly. Later he finds Yudel Krinsky shoveling snow outside his store, and they talk inside. Yudel says that the Master of the Universe has been good to him. He has a daughter and is expecting another child. He looks old and tired to Asher. Then Asher stops by his uncle’s store and greets him. Uncle Yitzchok asks if he should come to the exhibition. Asher assures him there are no naked women in the paintings, but doesn’t know how to tell him that he will see **crucifixions**.

At home, Asher calls Anna Schaeffer and learns that most of his paintings, including the **crucifixions**, have already been sold. She also tells him that Jacob Kahn is recovering from major surgery. Asher thinks about how quickly everyone ages. He feels very tired and falls asleep. He dreams of his mythic ancestor, “bent with grief.” His ancestor “smiled sadly and beckoned”: “My precious Asher, will you and I walk together now through the centuries?”

Asher wakes up and takes the subway to Manhattan. He and Anna talk about the upcoming show; she tries to talk to him about complicated tax matters, but he is distracted by the fact that his paintings will hurt people he loves. Asher goes home and sees his mother looking down at him through the **window**. She embraces him, weeping. She tells him about the work she and Aryeh are doing on campuses across the country. Campuses are filled with “chaos” and “nihilism,” she tells him, and many poorly taught Jews are involved, “their heads [...] filled with the ideas of the sitra achra.”

As they drink coffee together, Rivkeh asks Asher about his exhibition. He tells her that there are no nudes in the paintings, so yes, his father can come. Rivkeh gives him a strange look. She keeps talking, but Asher has a hard time listening. Then Aryeh comes home and embraces Asher. They continue to talk about his parents’ work on college campuses and about Asher’s growing fame. Aryeh remarks that perhaps Asher’s gift “is not from the sitra achra.” He asks Asher why he looks so pale.

*Asher’s arrival in a snowstorm, to an empty apartment, gives a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity to his old home, as though he’s seeing it again for the first time. It’s a melancholy homecoming, far from the innocence of early childhood.*



*Asher’s warm reception contrasts with the far colder one he’ll receive after the exhibition. The most striking thing about his interactions is how much everyone has aged. Otherwise, much is the same—his community harbors the same misgivings about his work that they always have and are quite unprepared for how Asher has developed artistically since he left.*



*After all these melancholy encounters with people he’s loved, even Asher’s ancestor looks different. He’s no longer threatening, but invites Asher to join his journey. Not long before, Asher wondered if he was an exception in the long family heritage of journeying. Now it appears that this isn’t true—although it’s yet unclear what Asher will contribute to the journey.*



*Asher continues to feel anguish about the consequences of his upcoming show. His mother’s appearance at the window recalls the controversial painting, unbeknownst to her. The culture has shifted in significant ways since Asher was a child, and his parents are now working among Jews who are exiled and disconnected ideologically rather than primarily politically.*



*Rivkeh apparently senses that there’s more Asher isn’t telling her about the upcoming exhibition. Even Aryeh now entertains the possibility that Asher’s art might be on the side of holiness—an ironic concession in light of what he’s about to unveil. It’s agonizing for Asher to find this degree of warmth and acceptance on the eve of such a controversial show.*



The next morning, Rivkeh tells Asher that they know the Paris girl's family and that Aryeh will give Asher his blessing. Asher does not say much; Rivkeh's eyes are troubled. They walk together to the subway, and Asher goes to the Kahns' apartment. Jacob Kahn's face looks sunken, and he is "sickly pale." Asher struggles to approach him. Jacob thinks at first that Asher's visit is a dream. He compliments Asher's **crucifixion** paintings. He says they are great works and "culminations"; after this, Asher will have to do something new. Asher agrees. Jacob says that he is proud to have sculpted a new "breathing David." Before they part, he tells Asher to become a great painter, as it's "the only justification for all the pain your art will cause."

At Shabbos dinner, Asher's father sings hymns exultantly. He feels satisfied with his life and happily anticipates new challenges in his university work. Asher doesn't know what to do. At the synagogue service, he prays for a miracle. He wonders how he could possibly explain the **crucifixion** paintings to his father. He knows his father will not understand the problem of needing an "aesthetic mold." He will only see the crucifixion and, with it, "rivers of Jewish blood." But as they walk home together from the synagogue, Asher doesn't broach the subject. When Aryeh hears that museums have bought some of Asher's work, his eyes "glittered with pride." But when Rivkeh hears this, she just gives Asher the same "strange troubled look."

Asher spends an anguished night unable to sleep. He has a quiet, ordinary breakfast with his parents and is still unable to warn them about what they will see at the gallery. He watches sunlight shining on them from the **window** and then dresses for the exhibition.

When Asher arrives at the gallery, he feels overpowered by the sight of about 60 paintings of his family and neighborhood, tastefully hung in the huge gallery. It feels as if someone else has painted them. Anna has placed the *Brooklyn Crucifixion* paintings just before the elevator, the climax of the show. Asher is stunned by their raw power. He prays to the Master of the Universe for forgiveness for "[emulating]...Your ability to create out of nothing."

*Like his reunion with his parents, Asher's visit to Jacob is also troubling—Jacob has aged dramatically and no longer the vigorous, creative man who taught Asher so much. Still, Jacob seems to regard Asher as his magnum opus and to be satisfied with this "sculpture." He also rightly prophesies that Asher's art will continue to bring pain.*



*Asher continues to feel troubled by his parents' evident happiness and fulfillment, which he knows he's about to upset. But words fail him, as he realizes that his parents don't have an ability to understand.*



*Asher enjoys a last, outwardly peaceful domestic scene in his childhood home, knowing that things are about to change. He watches them in front of the same window that has been the scene of much family anguish. This time, it's a happy scene that he'll probably never see again.*



*Rather than feeling prideful, Asher is humbled by the sight of his work and moved to prayer, fearing he's been presumptuous. Even though his work is more controversial than ever from a religious perspective, Asher's self-conception as an artist becomes ever more pious—the allegedly divergent aspects of his identity are converging in his own mind.*



Anna tells Asher that there's a bidding war over some of his paintings. Asher can barely listen as Anna introduces him to prospective buyers and quotes the huge numbers his work is likely to bring in. There are such crowds that they have to open the gallery doors early. As Asher circulates among the crowd, he can only think of his parents. They finally arrive, looking bewildered. Asher moves through the exhibit with them. Gradually, he notices that people are staring at his parents and whispering.

Eventually, they come to the **crucifixion** paintings. Asher sees his father staring in puzzlement at the part he can see over the crowd. Silence descends on the crowd as the three of them move in front of the paintings and stare at their own faces. Rivkeh shudders. Aryeh stiffens when he reads the titles of the works. He gives Asher a look of "awe and rage and bewilderment and sadness." Asher remembers seeing this same look when he was a small boy, using cigarette ash to create an image of his mother. The look says, "Who are you?" Aryeh slowly and silently leads Rivkeh out of the exhibit. Asher follows them. On the street, Aryeh hails a cab. Rivkeh tearfully tells Asher, "There are limits, Asher." She doesn't want to speak to him further. Aryeh never looks at Asher as they get into the cab and drive away.

Back upstairs, Anna congratulates Asher on the exhibit, telling him, "The apprentice has become a master." The next day, his parents go to Uncle Yitzchok's house and do not eat with him. Asher reads a friendly review of his work in the *Times*. Over the coming week, more stories appear, along with photos of Asher and his parents. There are comments, some of them harsh, from Catholic leaders about Asher's use of the **crucifix**. At Shabbos the following week, people turn their backs on Asher in the synagogue. Friends and relatives look at him with bewilderment and anger.

Asher's parents refuse to speak to him about the paintings. But when an unkind review is published in the *Times*, Rivkeh checks on him, and Asher finally gets her to listen to his explanation. She accepts his words, but she can never understand them or explain them to Aryeh, she tells him—the **crucifixion**, after all, was in a way responsible for Aryeh's father's murder.

*Asher continues to be oblivious to the fame-generating and money-making side of his work; he can only think about his parents and the pain they'll soon feel. Art is about truth-telling for him and not about personal gain—it even takes priority over the comfort of his loved ones.*



*As the book comes to a climax, Asher's parents finally see the work that, ironically, has been inspired by them and created out of love for them. That love is impossible for them to understand and receive in this form—Asher feels instantly rejected by his father's reaction, just as he did as a small child. Even Rivkeh can barely speak. In his greatest test as an artist, Asher has expressed the truth about his feelings without holding back—even though it effectively undoes his lifelong, painful attempts to reach common ground with his family.*



*Asher's success brings him little joy, as his parents and community refuse to speak to him, and even outsiders don't understand his use of Christian symbolism. Asher's triumph on communicating his feelings actually results in deeper alienation and loneliness than before; his community feels they no longer know him.*



*Asher's parents evidently still care about him, but they are unable to understand his choice of imagery—it can only be received as an affront to their religious and family identity. Where Asher was attempting to come to terms with his own heritage, they seem him rejecting it. This painful paradox suggests that, regardless of the intentions behind it, great art simply can't be understood and received by everyone.*



Rav Dorochoff calls, requesting that Asher come immediately for a meeting with the Rebbe. When Asher gets there, Rav Dorochoff is angry and brusque. In his office, the *Rebbe* gives Asher a “long burning gaze.” He has read everything in the papers, he tells Asher; he understands. And he does not agree with those who attribute art to the *sitra achra*. But these gifts must be used wisely, he goes on, and Asher’s actions have caused harm. The *Rebbe* cannot explain Asher’s work to his people in a way they will understand. Therefore, the *Rebbe* must ask Asher to go away. He encourages Asher to move to the Ladover community in Paris. Asher has crossed a boundary, and the *Rebbe* cannot help him here.

After the meeting, Asher walks for hours along the parkway, “along streets that had once been my world but were now cold and gone from me.” He considers the interplay of the demonic and divine in his work, concluding that “creativity was [both] demonic and divine,” and that he is both “the child of the Master of the Universe *and* the Other Side.” He knows that he cannot help hurting those he loves with his work; rather, he must simply strive to become an ever greater painter. He senses his mythic ancestor telling him, “Paint the anguish of all the world [...] but create your own molds.”

Asher calls Anna Schaeffer and tells her that he is returning to Paris. He also might go to Russia. When Asher tells his parents, his mother cries. He books a flight for the following night and prepares to leave. When it’s time to go, his parents say goodbye at the door, and even Aryeh’s eyes look moist. Rivkeh tells him, “Have a safe journey, my Asher.” Asher goes outside and gets into a cab. As the cab drives down the street, he turns around and sees his parents watching him through the living room **window**.

*To some extent, the Rebbe understands what Asher has tried to do with his crucifixion paintings. However, he is the rebbe for the entire community, and Asher’s actions have hurt that community. For the wellbeing of both, he asks Asher to seek a sense of belonging elsewhere. Asher does not, of course, lose his religious community altogether (in fact, his father’s efforts in Europe ensure that he has a new community in which to land), but he is exiled from the one he knows and loves best. Ironically, like his forebearers, Asher must travel, too—but for very different reasons.*



*Asher says farewell to the world that nurtured him as an artist, coming to the conclusion that, regardless of what he was taught, his art and his identity have aspects of both the demonic and divine—truth and beauty as well as pain and harm. Having reconsidered his ancestors’ journeys, he’s now in a position to consider that perhaps his role is to help balance anguish and beauty through his art.*



*The story has come full circle to Asher’s description of himself as “the notorious and legendary Lev of the Brooklyn Crucifixion” at the beginning of the book. Asher is both an observant Jew and a “blasphemer,” a tension he can’t maintain in the community of his birth. Now he departs on his own journey, and his parents watch him through the window—echoing the pain Asher captured in his painting, and perhaps hoping for his return.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

White, Sarah. "My Name is Asher Lev." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 19 Sep 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

White, Sarah. "My Name is Asher Lev." LitCharts LLC, September 19, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/my-name-is-asher-lev>.

To cite any of the quotes from *My Name is Asher Lev* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Potok, Chaim. *My Name is Asher Lev*. Anchor. 2003.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Potok, Chaim. *My Name is Asher Lev*. New York: Anchor. 2003.