

### ***The Chosen* Group Discussion Questions**

1. In “The Phenomenon of the Really Jewish Best-Seller: Potok’s *The Chosen*,” Sheldon Grebstein writes, “what would seem an unlikelier best-seller than a first novel by an unknown writer with an unpronounceable name, a novel about orthodox Jews, especially Hasidic Jews, set in the Brooklyn of the early 40s, and a novel whose most stirring action is a schoolboy softball game? ...It is a book totally devoid of such sure-fire elements as violence, sexuality, or romantic love” (23).

Potok’s novel clearly beat the odds. How can you explain this book’s unlikely success?

2. Scholars break up literary developments into various periods, noting the specific style and choice of topic that seem to occupy most of the literature from the period. Chaim Potok wrote during periods that scholars refer to as modern and postmodern. In modern literature, there is an emphasis on humanity’s rationality and scientific experimentation; in postmodern literature, there is an emphasis on a lack of truth and absolutes. Do you think that Potok’s writing belongs in either of these categories? Does he write in a category all his own? How does Potok deviate from these labels? Why might he have chosen to avoid them?
3. Potok detested the label “Jewish-American” author. He often said that he was only an author writing about his own little world. Why do you think these labels exist? What are the benefits and drawbacks of such labels? Would you describe this novel as “Jewish-American”? Why is this book so popular among people who are not Jewish? Do Potok’s themes resonate with other readers?
4. A quest motif is a theme in literature in which the main character must go on a journey in order to fulfill his or her destiny. Quests can be physical journeys, like Beowulf’s going off to slay Grendel, or spiritual journeys, like Holden Caulfield coming to terms with his place in the world. Potok has been praised and criticized for his use of the identity quest in his novels. How has he developed this motif in *The Chosen*? Is this motif particularly relevant in Jewish culture, or does it have a place in broader American culture?
5. In an interview-turned-book version of *The Power of Myth*, the noted mythology scholar Joseph Campbell and journalist Bill Moyers discussed the role of myth in contemporary society. Campbell argues that society needs a mythology because without it, people would not have a secure sense of identity in the world. In the opening chapter, he focuses on the need for an ethos for young people to understand themselves and their place in society. He says: “This is why we have graffiti all over the city. These kids have their own gangs and their own initiations and their own morality, and they’re doing the best they can. But they’re dangerous because their own laws are not those of the city. They have not been initiated into our society” (9). Given what you know about *The Chosen*, how would Potok react to that statement? Would he agree or disagree? Does the novel argue that beliefs/mythologies serve to give people a sense of identity and purpose? How so? How might his characters be different if they didn’t hold their beliefs? Would their obstacles have been the same? Defend your group’s position.