

Midday Book Club



Study Questions

MY NAME IS ASHER LEV

by Chaim Potok

1. In this novel, there are several allusions to, uses of cross imagery. One is shortly after Asher's mother is hospitalized for what will prove to be a long illness. Asher awakes to hear his father, Aryeh, singing a melody of pain and yearning. Another is when Asher has his first encounter with a painting of Christ on the cross. In the end, of course Asher is driven to paint his masterpieces, the two crucifixions. What does the cross's use in the novel represent?
2. What is Potok saying about tradition's relationship to faith in this novel? How does this apply to the way Christians' view tradition and faith in your experience? Can one be a faithful Christian and break with certain traditions?
3. Growing up in a Hasidic Jewish family, Asher's gift is not appreciated. Once, when he is very young, his father asks him, "You have nothing better to do with your time, Asher? Your grandfather would not have liked you to waste so much time with foolishness." Asher responds, "A drawing is not foolishness, Papa." What are the Jewish community's reasons for such negative attitudes? What are the attitudes you have heard, experienced or seen in the Christian community? What roles do you think art and literature and music play in the Christian life?
4. What is the significance of Asher's "mythic ancestor"?
5. Why does Asher remain an observant Jew?
6. In his novel Potok draws a parallel between Asher Lev and the great Jewish artist Marc Chagall. Some people say Chagall and his painting *The White Crucifixion* looms behind the novel for a number of reasons. Like Chagall, Lev spends time in Paris. While Chagall's painting may not directly relate to the novel, it is worth looking at and forming impressions of because it is so famous. Download the image and look at it carefully. If you are in Chicago, go to the Art Institute to see it. What do you think Chagall is saying in the painting?



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