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Dear Chaim Potok,

From elementary and middle school, I distinctly remember awkward questions, sideways looks, and reluctantly granted acceptance, always in that order. Growing up Jewish in a city with an overwhelming majority of non-Jews posed a challenge I was not always up to, experiencing crushing guilt every time I admired the simplicity of the position of my Christian friends: they did not worry about kosher food, Friday night services, or how to properly respond to "Merry Christmas!"

The Chosen changed this. I first read the book about two months before my own bat mitzvah. My concern about the event grew daily as I came to fret over how my mostly Christian friends would respond to the oddities of a traditional Jewish ceremony from my haftorah trope and the cantor's quiet, subdued reverence to the frantic group dancing I knew to expect at the party afterward.

The pride Reuven and Danny took in their Judaism was truly a dynamic change from what I was used to. The few kids from synagogue that went to my school were no different from me; their shame at their oddity proved a constant and unfaltering source of displeasure. In *The Chosen*, being Jewish is a fundamental fact of their lives. They love the religion of their forbearers and it shows.

When Reuven and Danny discussed their differing stances on religion in an early chapter, I was initially horrified. How could Jews fight so severely amongst themselves? Were they not all Jewish, and therefore, fundamentally of the same religious mind? As I moved slowly, entranced, through the rest of the book, I was inspired to think more about the nature of conflict.

Even within groups such as Judaism, there will always be people who dissent from the popular opinion. In this case, those dissenters were Danny's family, and as a dissenter in my own world, I felt a particular kinship with them. When Danny first begins visiting Reuven at the hospital, he is quiet and introspective, lingering over things he hopes the two of them have in common. I too felt this same discomfort when making friends, as if we had a select few things potentially in common and it was up to me to identify each and every one of them. Everything from basketball teams to sleeping habits was an acceptable introductory conversation topic. Danny's successful friendship with Reuven taught me to feel hope toward future friends and to understand that even blatant and seemingly crushing dissimilarities cannot stand under the crushing weight of what matters: the type of person we are and the values we consider essential.

The character of Reb Saunders also evoked complicated emotions within me. As a child, I felt a peculiar sort of hero-worship for my older sister. She has always been quiet and withdrawn, often refusing to enter the childish games of sibling rivalry and roughhousing affection I craved as a form of acknowledgement. The silence Reb directs toward Danny was exceptionally difficult for me to read, because I felt like my sister too was a remote figure that somehow still resided at the center of my life. My love for her was balanced only by my undying distaste for how she treated me. Reading *The Chosen* meant having to confront the hard idea that my sister's distance was not an indicator that she did not love me, but instead, one more way in which she showed her affection.

Plenty of times, I have read a great book and felt it stick with me for the weeks afterward, but the past four years have not dimmed the effect of this novel. Even at age seventeen, my religion occasionally causes distress, as I concern myself with how to

reconcile my religious values and social situations. Additionally, sometimes still I face doubt about the relationship I have with my older sister or an offhanded comment by a friend about Judaism. At these times, I return to my carefully kept copy of *The Chosen*, left permanently in my room, and take the opportunity to embrace the words that always clear things up.

Sincerely,

Sarah Claypoole