

SHULEM DEEN

## *The Chosen*

**O**ur father died during the summer of 1988, and half a year later, absent his steady guiding hand, it seemed that our family—from my mother on down to my little brother—was in a state of rebellion.

Only a few weeks earlier, my mother had switched from the floral kerchief she'd worn for a decade and a half—the mark of the exceedingly pious—to the more common headgear for Brooklyn's Hasidic women: an elegantly styled wig. My little brother, Mendy, at nine, began to insist on wearing high-top sneakers, even though his school considered them “goyish,” a vulgar American fashion. My elder sister, Chani, and I, though our relational status ordinarily swung between heated animus and chilly indifference, colluded on the most rebellious act of all: watching movies.

It was she who came up with the idea. “We can rent a VCR,” she said. “My friend Miri can get us movies.”

I knew nothing about VCRs, or movies, except that they were sources of profanity and corrosive to the spiritual health of a Hasidic boy. My sister, however, at sixteen, was worldlier than I, and she had even worldlier friends. She knew a place that rented movie-watching equipment by the hour. Her friend Miri, known on our block as a *prusteh meidel* for her short skirts and for chatting with boys, had a membership at the video store at the edge of our neighborhood—the same video store that, for years, my father and I would pass on our way to shul on the Sabbath, and he would

place his hand over my eyes when they wandered to the posters in the window.

But our father was dead, and our mother didn't care, and there wasn't much else to do besides.

It was during the intermediate days of Passover. I was fourteen, studying at a Montreal yeshiva, but now home for the holidays in our Hasidic community of Borough Park, Brooklyn. Ordinarily, I spent my days from six in the morning until ten at night immersed in sacred texts, with the occasional break for a dunk in the ritual bath, a prayer service or two, and the odd meal. All of that was now suspended, though, and without the structure and routine of the yeshiva curriculum, I felt fidgety and restless.

Passover is an eight-day holiday, but only the first and last two days are wholly sacred, on which there are extra prayers and festive meals and special foods and endless rituals to keep the days flowing. The four intermediate days are only semisacred: special enough to take off from weekday routines, to keep kids home from school and adults off from work, but otherwise involve lots of sitting around with little to do.

Part of me wished for the lesser tedium of the study hall. I had already read every book in our home, scoured every drawer for something to hold my attention—an old Rubik's Cube; a set of *kugelech*, the Israeli jacks my friends and I used to play with for hours on end—but all those old childhood diversions no longer satisfied. The feeling of boredom was overwhelming, and it was hard not to consider the forbidden. And so my sister's movie-watching suggestion sounded like just the thing.

Several hours later, on the floor of my sister's bedroom, lay the television set and VCR box, and beside it, a pile of rented videocassettes.

There was an air of freedom in our apartment, and transgression. Movies and television were forbidden in our community, as were radio and newspapers. All secular influences were suspect, and I now felt an unusual mixture of excitement and apprehension.

My sister had other ideas, though. As it turned out, the dozen or so dramas and romantic comedies she rented were mostly for herself. She allowed me to watch selected parts of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (shooing me out when sparks of teenage romance struck—"You're too young for this") and only one other movie, which she rented especially for me and which she left me to watch on my own: *The Chosen*.

Despite having little to compare it to, I realized quickly that *The Chosen* was an unusual film. In one of the first scenes, a line of teenage Hasidic boys ambles into a Brooklyn schoolyard, and I had a startling realization about the world. Until then, I had known that the outside world did not know us, did not understand us, and we did not understand them; so it had always been, so it always would be. But now, here on this television set, on this *profane vessel*, I saw my world reflected back to me—a 1940s version, to be sure, but close enough. And within this reflected world, within that line of boys, was a boy after my own heart: Danny Saunders. Earnest, soft-spoken, with a beaver hat and coat that could've come from my own closet, with sidelocks curled as perfectly as my own. Danny loved his world, his people, his traditions, but he also had a rebellious side; he hungered for knowledge, for experiences, for encounters with the outside world.

The film, based on Chaim Potok's novel by the same name, is a story of friendship between two boys, Danny and Reuven, and it is also a story of fathers. Danny and his father, Reb Saunders, are Hasidic. Reuven and his father, Mr. Malter, are not. It is his father that Danny loves and respects, and to whom his heart belongs, but his mind belongs to the modern world of Reuven and Mr. Malter.

Hungry for intellectual stimulation, Danny visits the public library in secret—oh, how I envied him in those moments!

Throughout my childhood in Borough Park, I had so often passed the public library on Seventeenth Avenue and Sixtieth Street, right at the periphery of our Hasidic enclave, but I never thought to enter it. It was like a rule of nature: rain is wet, the moon glows round in the night, and public libraries are not for Hasidim. But I did look for books in musty corners of variety shops along the edges of our neighborhood, in the homes of more worldly neighbors, and, on occasion, in my sister's bedroom. I knew Danny's desire to step across the boundaries.

Danny, however, had a special interest, one I knew little about. "Deep inside of us," Danny tells Reuven excitedly, "there's something called the unconscious! It makes us do and feel things without us ever being aware of it!"

"How do you know all this?" Reuven asks, and Danny, shyly, confesses about his secret library visits.

"It's okay with *me*," Reuven says with a shrug.

"But not with my father," Danny says. "He's very specific about the things I read."

Danny, however, doesn't let this affect his enthusiasm. He has been reading about psychology, and he can barely get the words out fast enough: "Adler! Jung! Freud! It's incredible, Reuven! It's exciting!"

Still, he knows, he will not be able to fully immerse himself in the subject that animates him so. His future has already been written—his destiny is to remain a Hasid, to follow in his father's footsteps and to spend his life dedicated primarily to religious studies. Reuven will go off to college, but for Danny, rabbinical yeshiva is the only option.

Unless. Unless something comes along, as happens in movies though rarely in real life, and Danny's father comes around, allows his son to continue studying his modern ideas, to learn more about the unconscious, and the symbols in our dreams, and our unknown desires. A boy, even a Hasidic boy, can dream the impossible, and it might come true, as it does indeed, in the end, for Danny.

I watched *The Chosen* once, then rewound the tape and watched it again, and then again. It was only with difficulty that I tore myself away, as the last two days of the holiday approached, and the rented equipment and the videocassettes had to be returned. But the movie itself left me dreamy, unsettled, with a painful yearning to be not only watching that movie but to be *in* it.

This, I would realize later, was my primary relationship to Danny: I envied him. I envied his experiences: his first visit to a movie theater, his non-Hasidic friends, the dream-come-true ending to his story. But even more, I envied him for his story being told.

In the days following, I walked through the streets of Borough Park and saw myself as if in a film, a film like *The Chosen*, with me as the central character. My character, too, had secret dreams. My character, too, wondered what mysteries the world held and whether I might access them one day. My character, too, had a story! Didn't I deserve a movie, too?

I imagined eyes. Eyes everywhere, observing my every step, every twist of my shoulder, every sideward glance. Walking to shul each morning, I acted the part of a boy who went to shul each morning. Coming home, I acted the part of coming home. My world, which had once been real, was now pretend. Instead of a Hasidic boy in Brooklyn, I was an actor playing a Hasidic boy in Brooklyn—and what a boy he was! Handsome and thoughtful and intelligent with a darkly mysterious side because he was so much older and wiser than his years, because he had *lived* so much—all the self-indulgent narcissism of adolescence finding expression in my *acting*, playing a character within a world I saw as fully artificial even as it was fully real.

"Robby Benson is *soooo* good-looking," my sister said, with a dreamy, faraway look.

It was a day after the holiday ended, and my sister and I were at our kitchen table. I was preparing to go back to Montreal, back to

my routine of morning-to-night Talmud study, back to my friends and to the yeshiva dormitory in which we slept six to a room, with an angry and severe rabbi as dormitory monitor. Danny was still very much on my mind, and I told my sister she'd missed out by not watching *The Chosen* with me.

*Robby Benson is soooo good-looking.*

"Who?" I asked.

"Robby Benson. He plays Danny."

*He plays Danny. Robby Benson. Plays. Danny. Robby. Benson.*

The words spun in my head, as only the startling truth can.

"He's not Jewish," she said. "He's from Texas."

Robby Benson. Not a Hasid. Not the son of Reb Saunders, who lived in a brownstone in Williamsburg. Not a Hasidic boy with a beaver hat and side curls, with the fringes of his *gartel* flapping by his sides. Not the boy who secretly went to the library to read books about Adler and Jung and Freud.

There was no Danny; it was just a character, and the person behind it had a name, an identity; a goy in Texas—were there even Jews in Texas?—an actor who ate *trayf* and didn't keep Shabbos. And yet, he told Danny's story, which was really the story of every Hasidic boy in Brooklyn who both loved his world and wanted more.

I didn't know how my sister knew this, but she spoke about Robby Benson with puzzling familiarity. I didn't understand my sister's world, didn't know where she got her information from, but in our strictly sex-segregated world, boys and girls lived so completely apart that it felt pointless to inquire. Only later would I learn that my sister and her friends, who weren't obligated with dawn-to-dusk Torah study, occupied themselves with learning about the world. They went shopping, read books, watched movies, and knew the names of the people many Americans talked about. And so she knew about Robby Benson.

Now I wondered: Was it Danny Saunders I wanted to be, or Robby Benson? Did I want my story told, or did I want to act out

other people's stories? Or did I want both at once? What was the desire I was afraid to tell even myself?

As I rode the bus back to yeshiva in Montreal, I wondered: Could a Hasid be an actor? I knew of no rule against it, but if we weren't allowed to *watch* movies, would we be allowed to be *in* them?

Probably not.

In the end, I got to be both: Robby Benson and Danny Saunders. Not on a screen or a television set, but in a nightly performance from my top bunk in room number three of our third-floor dormitory. My audience: Moishy Rubin, Sender Gluck, Avrum Yida Schwartz, Chaim Berkowitz, and Mechy Farkash. My five dorm roommates; like me, Hasidic boys from Brooklyn, except they did not have worldly sisters and dead fathers and mothers too filled with grief to care, and they had never watched movies, not a single one.

At night, when Reb Zundel the night monitor left, and the dormitory fell quiet, we would wait, until we heard the large steel door close gently, the dead bolt clack into position. We'd hold our breaths. Faintly, we could hear the sound of Reb Zundel's footfalls going down the stairs, then the outside door creak as it opened, then shut behind him.

"He's gone." It was Moishy who always said it first.

"Wait another minute," Sender would whisper. And we'd wait a few seconds, until Moishy would say, "*Nu*, he's gone," and he'd look up to me from across the room. "Let's hear further."

Sender and Moishy would sit up on their beds, and Avrum Yida would come out from the bunk beneath mine to sit on a chair near the door, wrapping himself in a blanket like a cape. I, from my top bunk, would sit up straight and continue from where I'd left off the night before. I was the narrator of the story and also the actor of every part—Reb Saunders, and Mr. Malter, and Reuven, but most of all, I acted Danny. Confined to my top bunk, all I could do were

voices and gesticulations and dramatic head movements. But that was all I needed.

The images of Danny and his world swirled in my head as they came alive in my telling of it all: Danny studying over his Talmud; Danny at bat in the schoolyard, his gleaming blue eyes staring icily at his opponent; Danny at his father's *tisch*, the communal meal with Hasidim all around, singing the famous Satmar "Hakafah Niggun." Danny at the library, Danny at school, Danny in the streets as celebrants cheered the end of the long war and he was suddenly kissed on the mouth by a strange woman. Every scene had been etched in my mind, every word of dialogue fresh, as if I'd heard it only moments earlier.

*Deep inside us, there's something called the unconscious!*

I would mimic Danny's excited expressions.

*It's filled with things that we're afraid to tell even to ourselves!*

My audience would be silent, unblinking, barely breathing, it seemed, but every now and then Avrum Yida, on the chair, with his knees up against his chest beneath his blanket, wouldn't be able to contain himself.

"Was it the *real* Satmar 'Hakafah Niggun'?"

"How do they know all these things about us?"

"What does 'the unconscious' mean?"

I fumbled for responses, because I didn't know much more than he did. I, too, had never heard of the unconscious. "It's a psychology thing," I could say only, and Avrum Yida nodded faintly.

I would mimic Danny's father, the rebbe, grilling Reuven on his studies. A Hasid like so many we knew—both severe and good-natured; one moment cruelly mocking his son's friend for misremembering a passage of Talmud, the next moment smiling so warmly at a correct response.

"*Er macht es git, er,*" Moishy Rubin would say with a grin, approving my performance. "He's good."

The others would nod and smile in agreement, and I would



bask in the glow of the small night lamp in the outlet near Sender's bed, in the glow of my friends' approval, in my performance of a boy who was just like me, just like us, who wished for things we, too, might have wished for, if only we knew about them, if they weren't *so deep inside of us* that we were *afraid to tell them even to ourselves*. I imagined what it would be like to be Robby Benson, and we all imagined what it would be like to be Danny, for our dreams to come true, for our stories to be told, until Moishy Rubin's head would fall to his shoulder and his snores would ring through the room, and we knew it was time to save the rest for another night.