The relationship between a father and son can create a lifetime of memories and numerous valuable life lessons. No matter the color of your skin, having a father figure to instill in a young child a passion for success and a yearning for intelligence is immeasurable by any standards. For a young man like Danny Saunders, who had such an influential, historically relevant father, the knowledge that he gains by observing his practices within the Jewish faith creates a sense of pride for his identity as an orthodox Jew. However, throughout the film The Chosen, Danny finds himself continually battling his succession as a Rabbi, the creative endeavors concerning the field of psychology, and the perplexity of the human mind that enthralls him. The film details his constant personal difficulties in deciding whether he should follow his father’s wishes or pursue a life in academia. Another storyline is between Danny and his secular friend Reuven and their struggle to keep their friendship despite their religious differences. Therefore, it is my intention to show how Danny fights to discover his cultural identity and eventually comes to a comforting conclusion about his personal cultural identity, preparing him for life-long success.

During the entire film, Danny is in a continuous process of attempting to discover his own personal cultural identity. Raised in a very strict household, Daniel was always in mind to capture his father’s position as a Rabbi and a man of great knowledge. Over many years of memorization and study, he mastered the scriptures, successfully following his family’s guidelines for success. There were two major influences on his early life that seem to affect him the most: a household of silence with his father and the constant presence of his family’s history.
His father, a very important man who saved his people and removed them from Russia to America, is larger-than-life among the rest of his followers. This set a high standard for Danny to hold himself to, probably leading to his eventual deviation of thought on being a Rabbi. Also, values like tradition and conformity are highly preached among their religion, and values like stimulation and self-direction are shunned upon, especially in the instances when Danny tells Reuven that he has never seen a picture movie before and when Danny says his succession to his father’s throne is like a family dynasty.

Now that we have touched upon the background of Danny and his family, it is important to identify when and why Danny deviates from the original, religious plan and goes on his path to find cultural identity. It all starts in the scene when Danny tells Reuven (as he had not done prior) that he goes to the library on a regular basis to read different books written by writers like Freud. Reading in Danny’s family is only sanctioned if it is concerns the scriptures and texts involved with such; if Danny wants to read anything else, he needs approval from Reb Saunders, his father. Since Danny has never done anything like this before, he starts to feel exposed by his father’s repeated subordination. Plus, it does not help that he is getting guidance on readings and book choices from Reuven’s father, who is in fundamental opposition to Reb’s thought on the status of the creation of a Jewish State. This creates even more tension between Danny and his father, and to go along with that, Danny makes the decision that he does not want to go to Hebrew higher education (like most Jewish students did); rather, he wants to go to college to study psychology to learn about the beauty and complexity of the human mind, in which he finds particular interest. His mother seems to really encourage this idea, but his father seems to passively oppose the decision; during the kitchen scene where his mother gave him the briefcase for his books, viewers can tell his father is having trouble letting his son—his rightful heir—stray from the religion. For these Jewish people, self-realization is highly stressed, and Danny has discovered his.

Reuven’s father provides a large problem for Danny and his relationship to his father, along with adding to the complications of his friendship with Reuven and finding his cultural identity. Their families’ beliefs clash on many terms involving the Messiah, and Reuven’s father writes scholarly articles passionately opposing everything that Reb Saunders stands for as a religious man. Therefore, on the surface, when they meet at the prayer session, Reb is not fond of Reuven, mainly because of his father’s career and journalistic choices. In the U.N. meetings, when they approve a Jewish State without the presence of the Messiah to create it, Danny is no longer permitted to speak to Reuven. When Danny takes Reuven aside and tells him the news, this causes each of the two young men extreme turmoil during classes when they have to be in the same room, because Reuven cannot stand not speaking to Danny because of such trivial differences in religious thought. Even before that, Reuven provides even more complications to Danny’s cultural identity search because Reuven finds a particular interest in Danny’s sister, Shaindel. He seems to be flirting with her on the couch in the Saunders’ household and admiring her at the marriage
ceremony. In Danny’s family, marriages were arranged from an early age, a practice very old in fashion and not familiar to Reuven. Danny’s religious beliefs and his friendship with Reuven continued to clash, which is a very important point because his friendship with Reuven facilitated more of the thought that Reb Saunders would conceive as unneeded for his son’s upbringing.

The last and important aspect of questioning cultural identity that Danny went through was the night he left his room and saw his father singing a Hebrew song to his young son. Not only did Reb do this to Danny when he was a young child, the love and tender care given in such an exchange is a product of their religious faith and practice, something Danny was starting to drift from. Reb was a very passionate, family man that spent extra time and effort to teach his sons the fundamental beliefs of the Jewish faith and how they should live their life. Immediately after viewing this, Danny seemed to feel a heavy draft of guilt splash upon him like a tidal wave; he knew that his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps but his heart was not in it to become a strictly, religious man at that stage. Danny wanted to pursue the high level of interest he had in the power of dreams, not spend his life trying to uphold himself to a man like his father, so important to his people and his community. Reb was so influential in historical standards for his followers, as he successfully saved many of them from persecution, gaining an immeasurable level of respect from the rest of people. This was an extremely high standard for Danny to follow and his aspirations for intelligence just simply overshadowed any motivation he had to fulfill his father’s vision. This was the fundamental reason why he was constantly searching for his cultural identity; his personal intentions did not meet his father’s expectations and he needed to find a way to qualify his objectives or gain acceptance.

In the scene between Danny, Reuven, and Reb in the study, Reb finally spoke to Danny and voiced his concerns, which was a sign of change. For many years, Reb had raised Danny through silence in the same way as his father did: in hopes that his young son would learn the values and importance of Hebrew life through self-reflection and an absence of guidance. The silence between Danny and his father represented the loneliness, pain, and suffering that many people have had to go through and it was Reb’s belief that for Danny to really grasp how to live a true Jewish lifestyle, he needed to figure things out on his own, without his father’s recommendations. This method was intended to make Danny a powerful, knowledgeable leader in the Jewish community, making Danny the wonderful Jew that he became after all those years. Satisfied with his son’s education, Reb finally cut loose his grip and allowed Danny to pursue his dreams of going to Columbia University, giving his son his wishes of good luck and praise, bringing on tears of joy from Danny. Danny knew how tough this was for his father to do, considering how alien it was to his nature. This acceptance, which he so longed for, gave Danny a complete sense of family and cultural identity, making him feel like he truly belonged to the faith, the family, and the community, even though he was going outside of his father’s original expectations. It was a very emotional scene that seemed to finally give resolvs to Danny’s continuous search for his placement among his religion and as a
member of society. A very important line from Mr. Saunders was when he stated that “He’s a righteous man, and the world needs a righteous man!” Daniel’s cultural identity was sealed by a hug and a long awaited conversation with his father.

The last scene of the film, although it may seem miniscule in importance compared to the previous scene in the study, tied in most of the themes of the movie. First, Danny says how he and his father talk all the time now and then shares a handshake with Reuven, unconsciously saying thanks for everything that he was for Daniel; a friend, a role model, and a helpful hand along the way on his path to finding his cultural identity. In the last moments, Reuven speaks about a story in the Bible of how the son of a king strayed away from his father; the son was told to return to his father and the son said he couldn’t. The father sent a messenger to tell him “to return as far as you can and I will come to you the rest of the way.” This is analogous to Daniel’s journey to finding cultural identity because he strayed from the expectations of his father and could not return to his father’s ways. His father talked to Reuven (who was his messenger) and made sure that Danny was aware of his concerns and the two met in a middle ground to resolve their personal afflictions. Also, the myth also tied in with Danny’s discussion earlier in the film on the human mind and the heart, representing his unrelenting ambition for knowledge, a symbol of his transition. This just seemed very ironic to me and seemed to be a perfect way to end the movie.

Achieving identification of cultural identity requires people to successfully devote themselves to identifying just exactly what they stand for as a person and where they stand in their culture (the “I” and “Me” concept of the self that George Herbert Mead developed). It is truly honorable to be conscious of and have pride in your cultural identity, as most are oblivious, complacent, and downright lazy in trying to find theirs. For Danny Saunders, his personal journey to cultural identity went on for years, as he found avenues that seemed to be more appealing to him outside of his religion. He struggled to find a common ground between his faith, his father, and his ambitions, constantly battling himself on what was the right thing to do. It wasn’t until his father began to understand how intelligent his son really was and that his aspiration to be a psychologist was something that he would never be able to control. Granted, he knew that he had successfully instilled in Daniel the beliefs, values, and practices of their religion. No matter where his son went (although it wasn’t where he particularly wanted him to be) Reb knew that Danny was prepared to take on the world in a righteous fashion. Danny’s recognition of his cultural identity would undoubtedly allow him to succeed in psychology, making his father proud every step of the way.

*Title art by Jordan Hollander*