Prague to Peace

The Golem, the clay anthropoid of Jewish mythology, has taken on many shapes and perceptions in character throughout its hundreds of years of existence. Although golem in Modern Hebrew is the adjective for “dumb” or “helpless” (possibly a reference to the Golem’s obedience and inability to speak), golems came to exist through Jewish mysticism and legend, dating as far back as the Middle Ages in the 5th Century. Throughout the Golem’s presence in Jewish culture, this figure demonstrates an image of obedience, destruction, hubris, and heroism depending on the storyteller; Elizabeth Baer writes in her book *The Golem Redux,* quoting Arnold Goldsmith, that “it is a legend combining all the ingredients of a popular film or television series: violence, the occult, religion, historical roots, supernaturalism, and even sex” (Baer 6). Despite the myriad of interpretations, a message surfaces while examining each retelling of this mysterious clay-servant: the Jewish people keep the Golem alive out of the necessity for a savior. Jewish history—filled with prejudice and persecution—has caused the Golem to emerge not as a scapegoat, but rather as a hero; the analysis of this mythological figure uncovers the Jewish hope to repair the world to its original Paradise.

The most common or known story pertaining to the Golem takes place in Prague, Czechoslovakia during the 16th century in Josefov, the Jewish Quarter or “ghetto” of the city (Baer 18). During this point in history, the shtetls of Jewish living were twisted and dark, with cramped apartments housing multiple families at once (providing the perfect environment for the infestation of disease). The Jews were looked down upon for this undesirable way of living—even though this contamination was a result of the Jews’ forced confinement within Josefov—and were persecuted for their differences. Similar to the years leading up to the Holocaust and the night of Kristallnacht, the Jews in Central Europe were forced to wear yellow badges and were victims of pogroms in which thousands of Jews were killed and synagogues decimated. The legend of the Golem during this time period was said to be a result of the rumors of Blood Libel, in which the Jews were accused of murdering Christian children and using their blood to bake matzah for the sacred holiday Passover (Baer 3). Amid this persecution, Rabbi Judah Bezalel Loew—the High Rabbi of Prague in Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah—became a well-known face of the movement against this oppression.

Historically and most realistically, Rabbi Loew is said to have met with Emperor Rudolf II in February of 1592 in order to request an end to the violent and persecuting Blood Libel aimed specifically at the Jews (Baer 26). However, the legend tells of Rabbi Loew in 1580 asking God for help in a dream and being answered in the form of a golem (Goldsmith 15). In order to give him life, Rabbi Loew (nicknamed the Maharal) writes the Hebrew word for truth, “emet”, onto Golem’s forehead and inscribes the name of God onto paper and places it into Golem’s mouth. In David Wisniewski’s interpretation of this myth, he writes that Maharal created Golem for only one reason: “To protect the Jews” (Wisniewski 14). Golem uncovers the unjust accusations of the goys, whether through violence or through the revelation of the truth to authorities, depending on the interpretation.Within the legend, Golem is successful in suppressing the victimizing slander, and either because “Golem becomes destructive or his heroic qualities are deemed no longer necessary,” Rabbi Loew returns the faithful clay-servant to his natural-self by erasing the first letter of “emet”, the letter aleph, to create the world “met”, the Hebrew word for death (Baer 3). With the word “met” now on his forehead, the Golem crumbles back into clay. Legend rumors that the remains of the Golem lie in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue in Prague, specifically the Genizah—the place where Jews bury their holy scriptures. These remains, while appearing to demonstrate the Golem’s mortality, are not permanent; there is always the possibility that if needed, Rabbi Loew could rewrite the aleph on his forehead to recreate the Golem to bring back deliverance to the community again.

The concept of the Golem being made of clay contributes to the ambiguity of the figure itself. His birth is also a mystery, although many argue that the idea of a humanoid created out of clay in the image of their creator was introduced in Genesis: the creation of mankind. Like Golem, Adam was formed out of the earth (“adamah” meaning “earth” in Hebrew) in the image of God. Thus, the act of creating a golem by the rabbis is, in a way, an emulation of God. Moshe Idel, in *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions On the Artificial Anthropoid*, quotes the Rabbinical text *Leviticus Rabbah*, stating that God “collected [man’s] dust…kneaded him...formed [his limbs]… [and] He made him a Golem…blew in him the soul…put him in Paradise” (Idel 34). Likewise, in David Wisniewski’s retelling of the Golem of Prague, Rabbi Loew “plunged his hands into the vast lump [of clay], shaping it…a crude clay giant lay lifeless on the riverbank” (Wisniewski 9). The descriptions of the creation of man and of Golem are practically identical, not only exposing a human desire to emulate those superior to them, but also the human-like aspects of the clay figure.

In all legends of the Golem, he appears in the form of a man and in some stories more organic than others, yet no matter the manipulation and artistic direction, his figure is consistent in that he always remains a humanoid with the word “emet”—truth—inscribed on his forehead and is always mute. In some versions of the myth, the Golem is named Joseph and is dressed to blend in with the rest of society. Some paint him as a giant with rock-like, earthy characteristics. In others, however, such as Trina Schart Hyman’s painting of the Golem, he appears to encompass qualities of Frankenstein’s monster, with yellow skin, a bulky body, menacing hands, sunken eyes and a barbaric expression of disdain. These contrasting appearances of the Golem brings many questions to the nature of the beast; whether he was destroyed for being violent or for just being superfluous.

Two versions of this Jewish folklore—as told by Barbara Rogasky and David Wisniewski—portray the Golem as peaceful in the beginning of his life, but with the looming probability of turning savage. Wisniewski imagines Rabbi Loew telling Golem to justly resolve the Blood Libel thought up by the non-Jews: “They are godless men, carrying bottles of blood or the body of a missing child. You must bring them unharmed to the authorities” (Wisniewski 14). This depiction of the Golem interprets his actions as nonviolent and just, without an excess of disturbance to the relationship between the Jews of Josefov and the other citizens of Prague. However, Susan Bolotin comments that in Wisniewski’s *The Golem*, the readers “feel the golem’s power, the raging hatred of the anti-Semites, the terror of the battle” (Bolotin 1). The description of Golem’s actions as a terrifying “battle” suggests that inevitably, the Golem is inclined towards brutality, even if he is ordered to peacefully end the accusations. Bolotin expounds on this idea, writing that “creating life—that is, performing the Lord’s job—can be a dangerous game” because of the uncertainty of the creature’s behavior: which she describes as “undoubtedly a predecessor of Frankenstein’s monster” (Bolotin 1). This parallelism between the Golem and Frankenstein’s monster hints at the idea of corruption, as the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* turns from the thirst for knowledge to the thirst for revenge on his creator. For these reasons, many hypothesize that the imminent destructive behavior of the Golem is the reason for Rabbi Loew’s decision to return the clay figure back to the earth.

On the other hand, some regard the Golem as a savior whose behavior is entirely sacred, not violent or destructive. The inscription of “truth” onto Golem’s forehead, plus the placement of God’s name into his mouth, affirms the presence of holiness among his being, for Hashem—meaning “The Name” in reference to God—is present in all of the Golem’s actions. Thus, one may argue that although his actions may be violent, Golem behaves in accordance to God. Bolotin, quoting Roseanne Carr, writes that “[t]here are 22 letters to the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 elements in DNA. The Hebrew letters actually represent DNA” (Bolotin 1). This concept of Hebrew representing what humans are made of is a belief of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism that is aimed “at the understanding [of] the hidden nature of God and putting [it]…to practical use” (Wisniewski 32). By connecting the combinations of Hebrew letters to the combinations of genes within our DNA, the fact that “emet” is written upon Golem’s forehead emphasizes the idea that the Golem is made of truth, not evil, as some interpretations suggest. Thus, some argue that the Golem, striving to reveal the truth of the Blood Libel accusations, acts sacredly, whose ethical behavior attempts to imitate the goodness of Hashem.

The concept of truth emphasizes a deeper significance in the myth of the Golem, for truth sheds light on the idea of bettering society through discovery and knowledge. Truth, pertaining to the legend of the Golem, is the revelation of the false accusations on the Jews. Truth in a more universal connection, though, represents the human goal to strive to reach for something greater than themselves: unveiling truths in human nature and in the natural order of the world. This definition is greatly significant in other ancient cultures, especially in Greek mythology. For the Greeks, truth was the desire for knowledge in the arts and sciences and the desire to be like the gods. This gift of the pursuit for truth originated with the titan Prometheus, the creator of mankind and granter of fire to man. Fire quite literally sheds light onto those around it, as the arts and sciences shed light onto human nature. Thus Prometheus gave mankind the benefit of being able to find truth for themselves by being exposed to the life around them. The connection of Prometheus to the Jews, as Moshe Idel hypothesizes, is that “Prometheus’ creation of the Truth[, humans,] out of clay and breathing into it might have reminded some Jews of the creation of man out of dust and the induction of life by God” (Idel 5). This personification of truth reveals the idea that humans are in fact truth, just as Golem’s DNA is made of truth. This idea that truth is present within our beings reveals a tendency within human nature: the tendency to be drawn toward discovery. Moshe Idel continues to note that “[i]t is pertinent to recall that Prometheus is, according to Greek mythology, the titan who created the first man, and the creation of “Truth” is presumably part of his endeavor to establish a better society guided by truth” (Idel 4). The fact that truth is present within Golem reminds readers of the improvement of society. Since truth is present within his figure, Golem’s actions are deemed more holy than monstrous, for his behavior is guided by truth, not by his sentiment.

Despite these contrasting illustrations of this mythological humanoid, the idea of a mud figure with unpredictable behavior is more thrilling than a peaceful savior, which is why society’s views of the Golem as a monster has overshadowed the original sacredness found in Judaism. Notwithstanding the fact that the Golem was created as a redeemer from the oppressions for the Jews in Central Europe, today he is only pictured as a colossal villain wreaking havoc through destruction and slaughter, because this is more entertaining and popular in today’s culture. In present day, the Golem can be seen in “Dungeons and Dragons, an opera, comic books (including a figure in Superman), featured in episodes of The Simpsons, X-Files,” *Sherlock* and *Supernatural*, all as the villain or demonic monster of the plot (Baer 4). For instance, Golem’s character in the episode “The Great Game” in the series of *Sherlock* is a giant-like, mute assassin that Holmes must stop before he murders another victim. This manipulation places a whole new emphasis on the Jewish figure; instead of sending messages of defending truth and improving society, this image of a heinous giant illustrates an evil perception on the Jewish people as a whole.

The vast acceptance of the Golem as violent introduces the theme of hubris present within the creators, for the creators are the ones who placed this grotesque being on earth. In the Talmud, only truly pious and righteous men—tzaddikim—could create a golem, formed through spells using the twenty-two Hebrew letters from Kabbalah, accentuating the interpretation that it is within human nature to crave power greater than its own (Wisniewski 32). The concept of hubris within Rabbi Loew as he created Golem is present as his construction of a living creature demonstrates a desire to be like God, if not aspire to be God. It is within this subject that the Golem appears within other culture’s warnings of over-confidence within human beings: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Goethe’s *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. Within Shelley and Goethe’s stories, the creator is unable to control their creations and they turn against their masters. This brings to question whether Rabbi Loew’s act of controlling the Golem is an act of hubris in his supernatural capabilities. Baer quotes Gershom Scholem in order to emphasize that the Golem’s misdeeds are not in fact his fault, but lie in the responsibility of Rabbi Loew: “the danger comes not from the golem ‘but lies in the tension which the creative process arouses in the creator himself’” (Baer 5). Laying blame onto the creator introduces a new theme: a blame on the Jews.

Many outsiders who are ignorant of the original meaning of the Golem choose to use the Golem as a bad reflection on the Jewish culture, when in fact the Golem reflects the Jewish hope for peace. In addition to entertainment’s distortion of Golem’s character, some interpretations prompt the absurd argument that the Jewish people desire absolute control. One telling asks the Jews their true purpose in creating the Golem, revealing a fear and prejudice of the religion: “’What will you do now?...Will you conquer this city with your giant and enslave us all?’” (Wisniewski 24). This analysis that the Jews wanted to use the Golem for personal gain—rather than for acceptance and equality—uncovers not an uncommon topic that has appeared throughout Jewish history. The persecution of the Jews, from the Inquisition, Prague ghetto accusation, Holocaust and anti-Israel propaganda, stems from the belief that the Jews are a pretentious people with the desire for power and money. If a figure such as the Golem—a childish legend that inspires hope and peace—can be blown out of proportion, than catastrophes stemming from prejudice are destined to occur.

Jewish authors, most notable Post-Holocaust, write to redeem the holy qualities amidst the Jewish hero in order to not only replace the concentration of the Golem’s monstrous qualities with his sacredness, but also to deviate any negative interpretation of the Jewish people towards an emphasis on repairing the world and creating a paradise for all peoples.

Elie Wiesel, one of the most distinguished Post-Holocaust authors and author of the Holocaust-memoir *Night,* writes his interpretation of the Golem to notify the world of the egregious acts of the Nazis and the world’s blindness during and leading up to the Holocaust, and to reinstate the savior qualities of the Golem into society. In Wiesel’s 1983 version of *The Golem*, he depicts the Golem less as a figure that has the potential of corruption and focuses solely on his noble efforts to save the Jews from their sufferings. This response exposes the influence the Holocaust had on the perception of the Golem, for rather than making Jewish culture appear evil, survivors made the Golem a savior. Not only does writing about the Golem give the Jewish culture a hope for peace and acceptance—after he rids the allegations of Blood Libel—but it provides inspiration for Jewish cultural pride after an attempt of genocide on the Jewish people. Elizabeth Baer argues that the Golem resurfaces time and time again to remember old Jewish history and the culture that came with Josefov in Prague (Baer 24). Even though Josefov was not the ideal environment for living, it was still strong through faith and community; Wiesel and other Jewish post-Holocaust authors write to remember that strong community and faith that was almost exterminated. Baer continues to assert the necessity of Golem in his tribute to rich Jewish history and a promise for the future, as “[t]he golem serves to affirm the long history of Jewish legend and Jewish imagination in the face of lethal antisemitism” (Baer 25). Through this examination, the Golem begins to morph into a guardian of the Jewish people. Wiesel continues with this idea, specifying the Golem as “charitable and generous with us”, “us” referring to the Jews of Josefov (Wiesel 32). Arnold Goldsmith argues that Wiesel was aware of his deviation from the typical portrait of this creature, noting that “[h]is audience probably expects ‘a monster’” that greatly resembled Frankenstein’s monster. This motif of beastly characteristics is not what Wiesel chose to emphasize. After surviving the many horrors of Auschwitz, he recognizes the Jewish need for a reinstallation of optimism.

This optimism is a hope for Jewish future, but also for Jewish acceptance. Wiesel emphasizes the importance of acceptance by making subtle references to the millions that were murdered in cold blood by the Nazis—“I have not forgotten the dead…victims forever need defending against forces that would crush them”—establishing the constant need for defense against prejudice (Baer 82). Even more hauntingly, Wiesel writes *The Golem* in the point of view of a gravedigger, maintaining that memorial to the millions killed and emphasis on the world to be aware of their damning discrimination. This gravedigger, as depicted by Wiesel, states that “I truly liked [the golem], and I was not the only one. We loved him. To us he was a savior. [He had] a single, sacred purpose: to protect the life, the security and the future of the community…He was a saint” (Wiesel 12). Just the utilization of the words “savior”, “sacred” and “saint” emphasizes Wiesel’s novel approach to the figure of the Golem. Despite his typical monstrous appearance, the Golem is the figure of hope and serves to help the Jews in times of struggle.

Furthermore, Wiesel underscores the importance of the Jews owing the Golem their lives and their faith. Wiesel seems to epitomize the sanctity of this humanoid for its actions and deliverance, arguing that “[i]n spite of what you think, he was not less human than we, but more human” (Wiesel 34). This statement disregards any previous interpretation that the Golem was not human—without a soul and the ability to speak. Any previous impression that the clay anthropoid was inferior and monstrous is completely undermined through Wiesel’s praise.

Besides appreciation, Wiesel asks for the Golem’s return. In his narration, the gravedigger stresses the vitality in the Golem’s actions in regards for the Jewish people: “if only the Golem were still among us…I would sleep more peacefully…Today, as yesterday, someone must stand between that hatred and us…none other [than the Golem] could disarm the murderers and conquer evil” (Wiesel 17-18). By exaggerating the essentiality in the Golem’s existence, Wiesel brings about a deeper message to the Jewish community: the need for a savior. Even though he is writing this post-Holocaust, Wiesel is arguing that the Jewish community is never safe from prejudice and oppression and that they lack the presence of a strong leader to advocate for the monotheistic culture. Most importantly, Wiesel argues that this liberator is human, an ode to the human shape of the Golem. Judaism, like many other religions, predicts a being that will grant world peace. While some Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah, Judaism is still waiting for the Messiah to come; Wiesel believes that this being will simply be human (Baer 88). By describing the Messiah as an everyday human, Wiesel sheds light on the idea that it is within anyone’s power to save the world.

Wiesel’s message is not a new idea; the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) has been around since the early rabbinic period and advocates acts of loving kindness and the performances of mitzvot—the commandments—to make the world a better place. It is a Jewish belief that the world is an imperfect place and that it is up to ourselves to fix it. The concept of the Golem is a reminder of this imperfection: “In Hebrew…an unmarried woman was considered to be…an imperfect being, and she was referred to in classical texts as a Golem. This designation implies her being imperfect” (Idel 232). This ancient belief that being imperfect is like being a Golem underscores the Jewish understanding that the world is flawed. Additionally, a Golem is sometimes used to describe a man who has no sons—a reference to passing down one’s name and heritage (Ideal 237). This message uncovers the idea that procreation makes one whole and lose imperfection, for procreation keeps a culture alive. Although the connection of an unmarried woman and the absence of sons to imperfection are sexist topics, Jews are always looking forward, searching for ways to improve themselves as individuals and as a community. Wiesel highlights this value in order to instill a reminder that it is not up to us to wait for God’s intervention to save us—as many believed should have been done during the Holocaust, blaming God for their horrific fate—but it is up for our human attributes to save ourselves. In an interview, Wiesel admitted that “Yes, it is man who must save man. That is the price of freedom God has given us. This freedom itself, of course, comes from God, but is up to man to lay claim to it” (Baer 89). By affirming the necessity in human action, Wiesel calls Jews to be the cause of change, not wait for it to happen. He emphasizes the fact that a community cannot rely entirely on one being; while he wishes for the Golem’s return, Wiesel recognizes the fact that a savior cannot always be present. Golem was impermanent; once the goal of ending the Blood Libel was accomplished, he was returned to clay. If he had stayed, the Jews would have relied on Golem to solve all of our problems. Wiesel uses the Golem to emphasize the impact that an act of change can have on the world and to provide inspiration for others to act for themselves, not wait for an outside source to provide the first steps towards positive action.

The Golem then becomes something that Jews aspire to be: not the monstrous figure that can lead to corruption, but the figure that inspires the saving of the Jewish people. Proof of man acting as the Messiah to save the Jews was the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. Some argue that Israel in a sense is a Golem, created “to protect the physical safety of Jews through the use of physical power” (Wisniewski 32). The State of Israel was man’s reaction to Jewish discrimination, giving hope to Wiesel’s call to action to act on the behalf of Jewish equality and world peace.

Both Israel and Golem represent the richness in Jewish culture, but also send the message of strength and the ability to save a people. This concept is the true beauty found within Golem’s clay: the hope for equality through human activism. Baer concludes that the Golem teaches about human nature, not only in where we are able to extend our powers, but where we lay our blame: “Understanding just what human nature…became a central focus of the humanities after World War II, when the question arose as to how human beings in a…civilized country could have systematically and quite publicly done what the Nazis did” (Baer 15). But as Wiesel sheds light on, it is not about looking back and finding someone to blame, but finding the hero within ourselves to move toward the future in hopes of achieving perfection. Maybe the Golem will not be awoken from the Ganizah from inside the Old-New Synagogue, but he may be awoken from inside ourselves.

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