

LITERARY THEMES

Man of the Year: the Golem

*This is definitely the year of the Golem. At the AJL conference last June in Atlanta, Assistant Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Dr. Jay Jacoby, read a paper on the Golem (and Lilith) to an audience of Judaica librarians. In July, a small off-Broadway theater group performed a version of "The Golem." In August, the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of Leivick's "The Golem" played to packed houses at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, and no less an authority than I.B. Singer interviewed himself in the *New York Times* (Section 2, August 12, 1984), on why the myth of the Golem has persisted. . . . In September, I interviewed Beverly Brodsky, whose picture book *The Golem* won a Caldecott Honor Award and an ALA Notable Book Award. I recently learned that the New York Police Department is using a robot—an electronic Golem!—to protect children from abuse by teaching them how to react to danger.*

If so much interest in the Golem is being evidenced, why not plan a library-sponsored program on "The Golem in Literature?" It is, unfortunately, an appropriate theme for the times. We live in a period of great uneasiness over rising anti-Semitism in this country and around the world; a time when Russian policemen arrest five Hebrew School teachers and wreck their homes while "searching for drugs used in religious rituals." It is reminiscent of the old blood-libel. The growth of the religious right is worrisome. If they're so right, then we're so wrong. Then, too, we have an example of a modern Golem, nuclear energy, whose power, at once benevolent, can also run amok and destroy us all. One response to stressful situations has always been an increased interest in mysticism, in false Messiahs and Golemim, which is most likely why there is such a resurgence of interest in the Golem.

There are enough children's and adult books, periodical articles, films, etc. available on the subject to explore it thoroughly. Professor Jacoby's fascinating paper and bibliography, which, because of their length can only be excerpted here, will have done much of the research for you. A transcript of the interview with author/illustrator Brodsky, which follows Dr. Jacoby's paper, will help with children's programming.

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The Golem in Jewish Literature

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Introduction

The Golem has been subject to a remarkable variety of characterizations. The legendary creature of clay has been variously interpreted as a dim-witted oaf (in Yiddish the word is used affectionately to mean "clumsy fool"); a compassionate and powerful champion of oppressed Jewry; a cautionary symbol of how power corrupts, of the sin of blasphemy, or of technology run amok; and, in the case of I.L. Peretz's wonderfully compressed short story, a vehicle for lamenting the loss of Yiddishkeit.

In the last decade, the Golem has inspired literary works by such major Jewish writers as I.B. Singer (1982), Elie Wiesel (1983), and Cynthia Ozick (1983). He has figured in works of science fiction, horror, and the Holocaust. In addition, the Golem legend was drawn upon in several works written expressly for children, was the subject of two scholarly studies (Goldsmith, 1981;

Winkler, 1980), and inspired the revival of an opera, a Lubavitcher comic book series entitled *Mendy and the Golem*, (Estrin *et al.*) and a recording (Jewish Radio Theatre, 1982) starring *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock, Leonard Nimoy (who, by the way, bears the Hebrew name Yehuda Leib, the same as that of the most famous of all creators of the Golem, seventeenth-century Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague). Finally, many of the concepts which underpin the Golem legend may be found in such recent popular films as *Blade Runner* (Dick, 1982) and *War Games* (Bischoff, 1983.)

Why does the story of the Golem bear so many retellings, with such a variety of changes in character portrayal? For centuries, people have been trying to establish *the* definitive, authoritative, true legend of the Golem. There is no denying that each writer has made an effort to imprint upon the legend his or her own personal and cultural experience.

Another reason for variant portrayals of this legendary figure may lie in authors' attempts to court different audiences. Peter Ruggill (1979), aiming his work at young readers bred on *Star Trek*, has his Golem defending Jews not from Polish anti-Semites but from alien invaders from outer space. And Ozick's Golem, a female incarnation called Xantippe (Ozick, 1983), fights against the mandarin bureaucracy of New York's City Hall. Xantippe's creator, by the way, is not a wonder-working rabbi but a middle-aged civil servant named Ruth Puttermesser whom the Golem helps to become the mayor of New York, which she then helps to convert into a paradise on earth. Xantippe is not the first female Golem, despite Ozick's claim to the contrary. Solomon ibn Gabirol, an eleventh-century poet-philosopher from Valencia, also created a woman Golem who, legend has it, served him in sexual as well as domestic respects.

The primary reason for such a varied