

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

assortment of Golemim, however, has less to do with authors' idiosyncrasies or efforts to win audiences than it does with the cultural function of Jewish literature. No literature on earth is more imbued with ethical import than that of the Jews. It is a literature constructed to generate and sustain faith; to introduce or validate laws, customs and beliefs; to promote proper action. Whether sacred or secular, Jewish literature works to shape and define the deepest values of society; its characters function as exemplary or cautionary models for human behavior.

An ethical emphasis prevails throughout the retellings of the Golem legend. But the moral instruction offered by the various tales differs radically because changes in culture and environment made necessary reinterpretations of the past for each new generation. Thus, each new version of these legends alters the boundaries established by those preceding it, all alterations dependent upon the shifting needs and values of the society to whom the legends are directed. It is on this protean quality of the Golem legends that I wish to focus.

Biblical Sources

Translated from Hebrew, the word *Golem* means "embryo" or "shapeless mass." It is in this latter sense that *Golem* makes its only appearance in the Bible in Psalm 139:16 where it refers to a man in an as yet unaccomplished state (presumably Adam before God breathed life into him). More commonly, the biblical passages that are linked with the Golem's creation and destruction are Genesis 2:7, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul"; and Genesis 3:19, "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return." Throughout the centuries these ancient passages have been embellished upon, compiling a variety of Golem legends in Talmudic aggadot, midrashim, cabbalistic texts, folk tales, and so on up to our most recent imaginative writings.

Cabbalistic Images

The actual process of creating a Golem derives from various interpretations of the *Sefer Yetsirah* ("Book of Creation"), one of the earliest cabbalistic works. In nearly all cases, the process depends upon a belief in the creative power of Holy Names: the Golem is animated by combining letters to form one of the Names of God. If the process sounds simple, consider the fact that a formula for creating a Golem was recorded by the German mystic Eleazar of Worms in no less than twenty-three folio

volumes! Sometimes a *Shem*, or Holy Name, was inscribed on a tablet or slip of paper that was inserted into the Golem's mouth to bring him to life. In other instances, a *Shem* was inscribed directly on the Golem's forehead. To deanimate the Golem one removed the tablet or erased the Name.

Physical Images

The actual physical characteristics of Golemim vary. Most Golemim were created out of clay (i.e., very fine dust), though an 1847 legend talks of some made of wood, and Puttermesser created her Golem out of soil taken from her potted plants.

Some—especially Beverly Brodsky (McDermott's) and those brought to the screen by German Expressionist filmmakers—are rather forbidding. Others, like the one rendered by Uri Shulevitz to accompany Singer's version of the legend, have a kind of cuddly charm. Nearly all Golemim are large and powerful. Many are not very bright. Singer describes his Golem as having the "mentality of a one-year-old child and the strength of a lion" (Singer, 1982, p. 61). Elie Wiesel's Golem, on the other hand, is "no fool or monster, but a figure of intuition, intelligence, and compassion" (Wiesel, 1983, flyleaf).

In some cases, Golemim are endowed with supernatural powers, the ability to see through walls, to foresee the future, to become invisible when they don a certain amulet. Some Golemim are mute (possibly to demonstrate that man's creations must necessarily be less than those of God); but others, notably those of Leivick and Rothberg, are quite articulate.

Some scholars such as Moses Cordovero maintained that because a Golem was not created by God, it possessed vitality but no soul. On this matter, Jacob Emden (the grandson of Elijah of Chelm who was reputed to have made a Golem in the sixteenth-century) often debated about whether a Golem was eligible to serve in a minyan. Gershom Scholem suggests that a Golem has neither a sex drive nor a capacity for love (Scholem, 1971, p. 340). This characteristic prevails in works by Rosenberg (1909) and Bloch (1925), but not in more recent works. Singer's Golem is in some sense redeemed by the power of love; Rothberg's Golem is destroyed because he is denied a mate (a theme which also occurs in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel which bears much in common with Golem legends; sexual craving leads to the comic downfall of Ozick's Xantippe and, consequently, Puttermesser's reign as mayor.

One final characteristic needs to be addressed before proceeding further. Once created, many Golemim develop dangerously, growing larger and more powerful each day. And with that growth, they become increasingly truculent. Ultimately, they reveal a potential for wreaking havoc upon the world and must be destroyed. In some cases, however, as they grow, they become more human. This is true in the legends as they are interpreted by Wiesel and Singer. It is also true of the central figure in Rothberg's underrated *The Sword of the Golem* (1970). As this Golem grows he begins to identify with men and painfully recognizes his difference from them. It is this feeling of alienation that drives Rothberg's Golem to lash out at those he was created to defend.

Positive Images

Initially, the creation of Golemim was viewed by most in a positive light. Making a Golem was taken as an affirmation of the productive, creative power of the man—as a positive reflection of God's own creative power. The Talmud records that Rabbis Hanina and Oshaya, after studying the *Sefer Yetsirah*, were able to create a three-year-old calf which they ate on the Sabbath (B. Sanh. 65b). This was taken as a sign that if the righteous so desired, they could create a world. Rashi, the famous 11th century exegete, defended the activity of these rabbis, sanctioning it as a legitimate imitation of God: "This is not to be considered forbidden magic, for the words of God were brought into being through His Holy Name" (Ausubel, 1980, p. 429). German Hasidim of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries regarded the creation of a Golem as an ecstatic experience symbolizing their mastery of secret knowledge.

As Gershom Scholem points out in "The Idea of the Golem," early golemim were not conceived as servants of man, but were originally intended as mediums for spiritual experience. In fact, in some accounts of the creation of golemim, the creatures were never physically realized except in ecstatic devotion. When a Golem was put to *practical* use, trouble often ensued. One legend has it that because Rabbis Hanina and Oshaya ate the calf they created, they instantly forgot all the mystical knowledge they had acquired. When a Golem created by Rabbi Jaffe in Poland was put to work as a *Shabbos goy*, lighting ovens, etc., it nearly destroyed an entire town ("Golem," Funk and Wagnall's, p. 459). This destructive tendency of golemim was probably the inspiration for Goethe's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," which was reportedly written after a visit to the Prague Altneushul, a site connected with the most famous Golem legend.

The notion of Golemim as a reflection of God's creative power in man does not figure prominently in many recent versions of the legend, Lisa Goldstein's (1982) *The Red Magician* being one possible exception. Most modern versions of the Golem story conceive of the creature as having an extremely important function, namely the rescue of the Jewish people in times of great need. The most famous of these legends—the version that has influenced nearly all twentieth-century Golem tales—is *Nifloes Maharal im ha-Golem* (Rosenberg, 1909). In this work, which may be considered a cross between pulp fiction and Hasidic hagiography, Rosenberg relates the deeds of the famous sixteenth-century Rabbi Judah Bezalel Liva (the name is transliterated in subsequent versions as Low, Loew, Loewe, Loeb, Leib, Loevy, Levi), the Prague Maharal (Maharal is an acronym for *Morenu ha-Rav Rabi Liva*, "Our Teacher, the Master, Rabbi Loew").

According to Rosenberg's work, the Maharal lived at a time when Jews were subject to great persecution. With God's blessing, he created a Golem who, in a series of exciting episodes, acted to protect Jews against anti-Semitic attacks, especially a series of infamous blood libels (charges that the Jews murdered Christian children and used their blood for such ritual purposes as the baking of *matzoh*). The Golem was used to show that none of the charges has merit: he discovered a child who was reported murdered to be alive and well; he foiled the plots of those trying to plant disinterred corpses in Jewish homes. In addition, this Golem also served to frustrate all attempts of the Christian clergy to seduce young Jewish women to join the Gentile religion. And he worked to thwart any potential danger to the Jewish people from within their faith. He was instrumental in discovering a Jewish adulterer; he stopped an inadvertently incestuous marriage from taking place. At no point did Rosenberg's Golem appear destructive. He was de-animated when the anti-Semitic clergy and royalty finally promised to desist from making any further charges against Jews.

Rosenberg's Golem legend purports to be factual, the reprinting of an eyewitness account of events that transpired three centuries earlier, but there is no historical basis in either the life of Rabbi Loew—a rationalist who did not believe in miracles and who condemned magic—or in Rosenberg's depiction of the anti-Semitism of the era and the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II. History records that Rabbi Loew lived in Prague at a time when Rudolf was sympathetic toward Jewish causes. Nonetheless, Rosenberg's work is

far from a sensationalistic literary hoax. It demonstrates how the Golem legend serves an important spiritual and political function.

While the period in which Rosenberg set his legend may not have been a time of extreme persecution of Jews, the period during which he wrote it was. It is very likely that Rosenberg's work was a response to the blood libel charges that began to surface throughout eastern Europe during the 1890s. (It is worth noting that his pamphlet precedes by only two years the famous Mendel Beiliss blood libel case upon which Malamud based his *The Fixer*.) Rosenberg probably intended his retelling of the Golem legend to boost the morale of oppressed European Jewry; it gave promise of God's miraculous intervention in the affairs of men. Rosenberg's Golem can be viewed as a prefiguration of the Messiah; he is a character called upon to satisfy the Jewish people's incessant longing for deliverance from oppression. On this matter, Arnold Goldsmith comments, "To European Jewry, soon to be faced by a madman far more dangerous than any Father Tadeus [the Maharal's nemesis], Yudi Rosenberg gave hope for a redeemer, sent by God, to lead them out of the Holocaust" (Goldsmith, 1981, p. 50).

Such a positive conception of Golem as redeemer recurs frequently after Rosenberg. Chayim Bloch (whose work derives from Rosenberg without giving him credit) describes his Golem as a "symbol of God's help, which always comes in due season, although frequently . . . at the last, most anxious moment" (Bloch, 1925, p. 35). Singer offers a similar characterization: "What God did for us once, He can do again in times of great peril" (Singer, 1982, p. 54). And Wiesel's rendering of the Golem is surely messianic in intent: "Though mute and unhappy, a savior is what he was. Do you know anyone who lives only for others, who devotes . . . every inch of his being to a single, sacred purpose: to protect the life, the security, and the future of the community . . . He was a saint" (Wiesel, 1983, p. 12).

While such positive portrayals of the Golem legend may have acted psychologically to boost flagging Jewish morale, they may also have had more practical, political implications. Many of these works were undoubtedly intended for non-Jewish audiences, perhaps in an effort to discredit anti-Semitic propaganda and promote world brotherhood and peace. Bloch's book, for example, which was written while its author served during World War I, was commended by the Chief Rabbi of Vienna on the grounds that the "legends will be very fitted for the

enlightenment of those non-Jewish circles who still believe in the use of blood by the Jews" (Bloch, 1925, p. 12). Sulamith Ish-Kishor's (1971) account of the Golem, written and published during the Civil Rights movement, abounds more with detailed descriptions of Jew-baiting and elaborate defenses against blood libels than with accounts of the mystical creation of the Golem. Ish-Kishor's book is dedicated to "the great-hearted of every creed and race, who know that we are all one." And Singer's *The Golem*, (1982) is similarly dedicated to "the persecuted and oppressed everywhere, old and young, Jew and Gentile, in the hope against hope that the time of false accusations and malicious decrees will cease one day." Such revivals of the Golem legend by Rosenberg, Ish-Kishor, Singer, and others are hardly coincidental: they are linked to the social climate and moral attitudes of the times, and more particularly to a decline in world sympathy for, and a subsequent rise of threats against, the Jewish people.

Negative Images

The Golem is not cast in so positive a light in all of his recent incarnations. Whereas some interpreters saw the creation of a Golem as a spark of God-like creativity in man, others viewed it blasphemy. They argued that the role of creator was reserved solely for God, and that to usurp that role was a denial of His supreme power. In a passage from the Talmud, we learn of Rabbi Rava who proudly created a Golem and sent him to his contemporary Rabbi Zera who told him "You are a creation of magic; return to your dust" (B. Sanh. 65b). The clear message here is that true creation is strictly God's business.

Another sin that many of the less positive Golem legends warn against is idolatry. As soon as the Golem of Jeremiah and Sira was created, he warned his creators about the dangers of idol worship and demanded to be destroyed. (Similar warnings were issued by Golemim in works by Leivick [1980] and Rothberg [1970].) Not surprisingly, cautionary Golem tales of this sort became more popular after the scientific and industrial revolutions. This suggests that the idols we need to guard against are not necessarily golden calves, but rather the machines we create to serve us. In many legends, the Golem became the embodiment of modern man's love/hate relationship with machines. While man was proud of his creation and what it could do—whether chopping wood or thwarting anti-Semitic plots—he also feared that one day it would outgrow his control and turn against him.

A classic legend depicting the destructive potential of the Golem concerns Elijah of Chelm. In tamer versions of the tale, Elijah, upon animating his Golem, grows appalled at its giant size and strength. Recognizing the danger he might unleash upon the world, Elijah tears the life-giving name from his creature's forehead, thus returning him to dust (Trachtenberg, 1970, p. 85; Ausubel, 1980, p. 430). Jacob Grimm is said to have drawn upon this legend in his "Journal for Hermits" (1808). The fate of the Golem's creator in the Grimm tale is a dismal one: "Once he ordered the Golem to take off his boots, thinking to reach his forehead [and erase the life-giving Name] when he bent down. But when he erased the letter, the whole heap of clay fell on the Jew and crushed him" (Schwartz, 1983, p. 704).

Elijah's Golem probably served as a prototype not only for the one found in Grimm but also for Shelley's Frankenstein monster and the deadly computers found in such films as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Westworld*, and *War Games*. If the connection between a mystically conjured clay Golem and a steel, wire and glass computer seems tenuous, it is worth noting that when Israel's Weizmann Institute completed construction of its first computer, Gershom Scholem was on hand to dedicate the new machine which was called "Golem Alef." It is certainly likely that the recent rise in Golem legends parallels the proliferation of computers and other automatons and our subsequent worship and fears of these new creations.

A final most important use of the Golem legend for cautionary purposes has the clay creature symbolizing how easily force corrupts. This theme of the potential abuse of power gets its best expression in H. Leivick's 1921 play *The Golem*. While ostensibly relating the tale of the seventeenth-century Golem of Prague, Leivick's real subject was early twentieth-century politics in Russia, particularly the degradation of the socialist ideal by the Bolsheviks. For Leivick, the Golem represented the October Revolution, an event which began with good intentions and turned into a bloody disaster.

Abraham Rothberg's 1970 novel owes much to Leivick, to whom the book is dedicated. Like Leivick, Rothberg uses the Prague Golem legend to confront man with the moral implications of his creations. The book makes little effort to conceal a sadistic streak in the Golem (he hacks off fingers and limbs of those who taunt Jews and he ultimately splits Rabbi Loew's son-in-law in half with an ax). This image of the Golem communicates the message that force is bestializing. The human potential to abuse power also forms

the thematic center of works by Bari Wood (1981), whose Golem starts out by defending Jews in a concentration camp at Belzec but ends up ruthlessly murdering innocent people in a New York suburb, and by Beverly Brodsky (McDermott, 1976), whose Rabbi finds his creation growing more terrible than the evil it was summoned to dispel.

In light of the international and domestic turbulence of the late sixties and seventies, it is no wonder that so many writers turned to the less savory aspects of the Golem legend to issue cautionary messages. These messages come in the form of moral questions, "Is not he who cuts down by the sword an even greater victim?" (Rothberg, 1970, p. 4); homilies, "Sometimes we need force to fight evil, . . . but then force by itself runs wild and becomes evil" (Ruggill, cited in Goldsmith, 1981, p. 160); and humbling epigraphs, "The origin of the world is dust, and man has been placed in it that he may raise the dust to spirit. But his end is dust and time and again it is the end where he fails, and everything crumbles into dust" (McDermott, 1976; the motto is taken from Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*). All this gives clear evidence of the ethical import, the hoped-for socializing function of Jewish legend and literature.

Dr. Jay Jacoby is Assistant Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. A fuller version of this paper was presented at the 1984 Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries in Atlanta.

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The Golem in Art: an Interview with Beverly Brodsky, Creator of her own Golem

Marcia W. Posner

Beverly Brodsky, whose most recent book is *Here Come the Purim Players* (Lothrop, 1984) is an artist who is constantly searching from within to find various art forms to express her view of the world.

Her work has evolved from bold geometricity to a more painterly, intuitive approach. She uses a wide variety of watercolor techniques and colors that range from the subtle transparent glazes to a bright, more opaque palette. Ms. Brodsky says she is a "color expressivist." She refers to color in her paintings as a primary tool with which she creates her images. Her pigments must be light saturated. She is aware that color has psychological impact on the viewer. By manipulating the colors, the viewer is emotionally stimulated in a variety of ways throughout the picture book as the story progresses from page to page. The colors are an essential part of her story-telling device.

Her art, while clearly recognizable as Brodsky, changes according to its subject. *Secret Places* (Lippincott 1979), an earlier book, clearly expresses her fluid, dreamy images of childhood with rich pastel tones. In *Gooseberries to Oranges* and *Here Come The Purim Players* the equally rich colors are now superimposed and defined with layers of cross-hatching which have literally been etched into the paper. Here, texture as well as line and color become an important element. Because of the nature of Barbara Cohen's text for *Here Come the Purim Players*, Ms. Brodsky had to invent a completely new format. She had to alternate between three distinct environments: The shtetl, the Persian palace and Reb Zalman's living room. Accordingly, the colors and style shift from the muted earth tones, to vivid decorative oriental patterns, to bright warm hues of candlelight. The complexity of the play within the story posed a challenge which she feels she resolved successfully. "I feel as though I choreographed my paintings," she says.

In *The Golem*, Brodsky has contrasted broad areas of deep, harmonious earthtones, with dramatic and explosive complementary colors. The stark white of the page is used almost as a color in itself. "It's a device to give form and shape to the content," she says. This important device was used in *Sedna* (Viking, 1975) and *Jonah* (Lippincott, 1977) as well. (See cover photo - Ed.)

This interview with the artist/author took place in her Manhattan studio on September 21, 1984.

On the Golem Theme

Q. What decided you to select *The Golem* as a theme for a picture book?

A. Once, in the South of France, I happened to watch a German expressionist film, "Der Golem," on television, and the images on the screen haunted me. I began to do research on the Golem. I read books about it; studied the period in detail—the life of the Jews in Prague at that time, their clothing, folkways, religious beliefs . . . I received slides of the Alt-Neu Synagogue, the Prague Ghetto, and the cemetery and its gravestones, including Rabbi Loewe's gravesite. I started researching fifteenth-century engravings of rabbis, ancient stone carvings, seder scenes, and Hebrew illuminated manuscripts.

Q. Did you visit Prague?

A. I never visited, but in my imagination and through my research, I was indeed transported there, dreaming of Czechoslovakia at night.

Q. Why do you think the Golem becomes destructive?

A. I read many Golem stories and interpretations. The one I chose to write about and illustrate is, for me, the most powerful, evocative, and dramatic story — full of expression and meaning. It is also universal. I was struck by the idea that we really don't have control over our creations. Once they are created, these things have a life of their own . . . The Golem was intended to protect and not to destroy, but even though our intentions are the best and even though the rabbi produced this force for peaceful purposes, it then has a life of its own and the rabbi no longer had control of it. As human beings, we cannot predict the future. There is no absolute blueprint.

Q. But why wasn't the Golem benign?

A. In other stories there are more benign Golemim who act differently and are created for different purposes. It was used as a servant, primarily on the High Holy holidays and on the Sabbath when Jews could not work. The Golem would do the chores. It