The Golem of Prague: Man or Monster?

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The Golem of Prague is a well-known tale within Hasidic folklore. It represents the harsh anti-Semitism that Jewish ghettos were subjected to in Europe, and how Bohemian Jews would unite as a group to preserve their own culture. While the tale is considered as fictitious, it does play off historic elements; such as the Pogroms of the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century, or Rabbi Loew, a well-respected Bohemian scholar of Talmud as well as the origin of the legend. The story revolves around the golem, a man created out of clay who protects the ghettos of Prague from these pogroms and others who threatened the Jewish community. However, contemporary portrayals of the Golem envision the clay creation more so as a monster rather than a man, and a terror rather than a protector. Looking at modern history, the image of the Golem starts to shift with the decline of Kabbalah and Hasidism, and the rise of western cinema and media.

Origins of the Golem

While the Golem of Prague is popular amongst Hasidic Jews, golems have been a part of Jewish lore prior to the tale, originally a believer of Kabbalah. Kabbalah is the ancient Hebrew practice of Judaism, often seen as a Jewish Mysticism. In Hebrew, Kabbalah’s literal definition is “tradition,” as it plays off the ideology of the Talmudic Aggadah, the ancient text for Rabbi thought. Kabbalah attempts to understand the making of the world and the connection of God and Man. This could be done by their occult-like practices, using phrases of powers and rituals, as the universe “is built essentially on the prime elements of numbers and letters, because the letters of God’s language reflected in human language are nothing but concentrations of his (God) creative energy.” These words of power from the Hebrew alphabet the Kabbalist use are called Shems, known as hidden names of God, elemental powers granted from God or other spirits. It is believed by the Kabbalist that Shems are keys to unlocking secrets of God, or rather they are secrets granted by God after a great deal of fasting and prayers to unlocking powers that could almost mimic divine creation, such as a golem.

While a subject amongst Kabbalist only, golems do appear once in the traditional Orthodox Jewish Bible. After the creation of earth, as referenced in Psalm, God created Adam out of mud and clay. After God blew the breath of life into the mouth of Adam, the clay creation became man. Adam, now with a soul, spoke on to God “Thine eyes did see my golem, yet being unformed; and in Thy Sefer all the yamim ordained for me were written down, when as yet there were none of them.”

In other translations of Psalms 139:16, such as the King James Version or the Common English Bible the word golem is replaced with “embryo” or “unperfect.” In this statement of Adam’s, he claimed that prior to his soul being inserted by God himself, he was simply a golem; a golem is the a man who is not complete. This also originates from the concept of a golem being a creature of clay and other earthly elements, as man originally came from.

The Golem of Prague

The Golem of Prague was a tale believed to be created by Rabbi Loew himself, or rather was documented by the Rabbi as some Hasidic and Kabbalist believed. While the story circulated in Prague sometime after Rabbi Loew’s death in 1609, and the story taking place in the late 16th century, the story was not published in writing till 1837 as part of an anthology by German poet, Berthold Auerbach. However, it is believed the story was documented by Rabbi Loew’s son in law, R. Yitzchak ben Shimshon HaKohen Katz who was with Rabbi Loew during the making of the Golem, discovered in 1909. The authenticity of R. Katz’s edition of The Golem of Prague, titled Niflaos Maharal: HaGolem M’Prague is considered false as the edition was likely fabricated by Jewish Scholar, R. Yudl Rosenberg due to the historical inaccuracies of Rudolph II’s reign. However, while it may be a hoax, this edition of The Golem of Prague is considered the most descriptive of the Golem and has the most accurate description of the Talmudic practices performed.

Regardless, both editions of The Golem of Prague revolve around the same story. In both contexts, the Jews in the ghettos of Prague in the 16th century were suffering great allegations by other Bohemians of the Holy Roman Empire. Scandals of a Jews stealing Christian infants at night to sacrifice their blood for Talmudic rituals emerged anger amongst the inhabitants of Prague. This invoked Pogroms, violent parades against the Jewish ghettos by the Bohemians, either through burning down Jewish homes out of Prague or general massacres constructed with the help of Holy Roman Empire Soldiers. In 1572, Rabbi Loew Bezalel, represented as a high authority of the people and was given the title “The Maharal,” met with King Rudolph II to discuss possible negotiations on protecting the Jewish ghettos. This is one of the historical inaccuracies that R. Yudl Rosenberg encountered, while Rabbi Loew did speak to Rudolph II about the matter, he wasn’t king of Bohemia nor was he Holy Roman Emperor as “that year, Maximillian II (d. 1576) served in the Holy Roman Empire. Scandals of a Jews stealing Christian infants at night to sacrifice their blood for Talmudic rituals emerged anger amongst the inhabitants of Prague. This invoked Pogroms, violent parades against the Jewish ghettos by the Bohemians, either through burning down Jewish homes out of Prague or general massacres constructed with the help of Holy Roman Empire Soldiers. In 1572, Rabbi Loew Bezalel, represented as a high authority of the people and was given the title “The Maharal,” met with King Rudolph II to discuss possible negotiations on protecting the Jewish ghettos. This is one of the historical inaccuracies that R. Yudl Rosenberg encountered, while Rabbi Loew did speak to Rudolph II about the matter, he wasn’t king of Bohemia nor was he Holy Roman Emperor as “that year, Maximillian II (d. 1576) served in both capacities.” While the meeting went well in both

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3. Psalm 139:16 (Orthodox Jewish Bible).
4. Psalm 139:16 (Common English Bible).
5. Psalm 139:16 (King James Version).
editions of the story, Rabbi Loew had hesitations towards the safety of the ghetto's future.

The night afterwards, the Maharal engaged in a Kabbalistic prayer known as sh’elath shalom, meaning “dream quest” or to pray to God for an answer. After his rest in prayer, the Maharal received a message written on a note under his pillow:

“Atta B’ra Golem Dovek Ha-Chomer, V’sigzor Zeidim Chaval Tortei Yisroel!”\textsuperscript{10} This translates to “You create matter stuck together with mud and cut off the wicked; Ruin the destroyers of Israel.”\textsuperscript{11}

In the heart of the night, the Maharal took his son-in-law, R. Katz and his best student R. Yaakov Sasson, out into the woods to complete a task. This is the famous scene of the creation of the Golem, the most important aspect of the story. It was with his sh’elath shalom that the Maharal was also able to obtain his word of power, his shem, in which he would bring the Golem to life. With the help of R. Katz and R. Sasson, the Maharal commenced in the ritual to bring the Golem into existence near a river bank, using the Sefer Yetzirah. The creation of the Golem is somewhat similar towards Adam's creation in Genesis. The Golem was merely mud and clay formed into the figure of a man upon a ritual circle of torches surrounding the figure, flames engulfed the figure as the Maharal demonstrated the correct prayers from Genesis 2:7 “And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And the man became a living being.”\textsuperscript{12} And so, the Golem was born.

The creation of the Golem is where the description of the clay man is given, and it usually varies depending on the edition of the story. One continuous feature is the importance of elements used to create the Golem. During the ritual, the Golem is crafted from the clay near a river bank, which is fused with water and earth. The clay is then brought into the formation of a man by a swarm of fire, solidifying the great creature. Then, the Golem is finally brought to life with the reciting of Genesis, the story of Adam breathing air into his nostrils giving him the gift of life. The elements used to create the Golem reflects Adam’s creation, as God created Adam through the elements of the earth as well: earth, water, fire, and air. However, it also contrasts the Golem from Adam with the absence of one element, air. While the Golem is created through the recital of Genesis 2:7, he is not given a similar practice from the Maharal, as the Maharal did not blow into the Golem's nostril. This refers to the understanding of the Golem's place in the Talmud, that he is man who is incomplete. The Golem may be created by man, but man could not create man in the same manner as God. Only God has the power to breath the breath of life into a Golem; only God may create a divine soul.

Other than the elements used to create the Golem, another important feature that is present in all renditions is the Golem’s Shem ha-Mephorash or shem for short. Along with the recital of Genesis 2:7, the shem is what brings the Golem to life, as mentioned in the Sefer Yetzirah.\textsuperscript{13} The shem uses the sefirot formula to form the Hebrew alphabets (Emet), translating to “truth” or “real,” making the Golem real and alive. Depending on which rendition, the shem would appear on one of two places on the Golem. The most common area of the Golem that the shem appears on is his forehead:

The Rabbi knelt and engraved the word emet -truth- upon the creature's forehead. Instantly, the giant’s chest expanded like bellows.\textsuperscript{14} This made the Golem more recognizable, as the shem could be spotted by other inhabitants of Prague, making the Golem less pleasant and monstrous in appearance. In other versions, the Golem’s shem is written on a prayer and placed in his mouth by the Maharal:

After having gone through all the necessary procedures in building his Golem, the rabbit finally put a slip of paper into its mouth with the mystic and ineffable Name of God written on it. So long as this seal remained in his mouth, the Golem was alive- if you can call such a state alive.\textsuperscript{15}

This version of the placement of the shem plays more with the importance of the Golem having human features, as it requires a mouth for the shem to be placed within him. This also draws back to the idea that the Golem could fully become man through the breath of God, meaning that a nose must be present on the Golem's features as well. Another feature of the Golem that appears in many renditions is hair on top of the clay man’s head. In R. Katz’s account of the ritual, he commented on the Golem’s appearance, “R. Sasson joined us after the seventh round and the two of us suddenly began shuddering again as we witnessed the appearance of hair all over the clay figure.”\textsuperscript{16} Again, these additional features gives the Golem a more human distinction opposed to the other modern interpretations of the Golem’s image.

After the creation of the Golem, Rabbi Loew immediately informed the Golem of his task of keeping the Jews of Prague safe. The Golem is often described in this scene as very obedient but confused at the same time, much like a child. R. Katz saw the Golem in this manner in Rosenberg's rendition, “the Golem stared at us in puzzlement, like a man who had been awakened from a deep sleep.”\textsuperscript{17} This creates an outlook of consciousness on the Golem, as he is trying to be aware of his situation but does not fully understand his point of origins yet, again like a child or someone who has awoken in a new place. Quickly, the Maharal and his students, as well as the Golem return to the ghettos of Prague for the Golem to begin his mission. In all renditions of the Golem of

\textsuperscript{9} Warren I. Sr, Hachibur the Compilation: Study in Jewish Concepts and Beliefs, (Hachibur, The Compilation Institute LCC, 2009), P. 240.
\textsuperscript{10} Winkler, The Golem of Prague P. 31.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Genesis 2:7 (King James Bible).
\textsuperscript{13} Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, P. 168.
\textsuperscript{15} Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality, P. 335.
\textsuperscript{16} Winkler, The Golem of Prague P. 38.
\textsuperscript{17} Winkler, The Golem of Prague P. 40.
Prague, while he is referred to as a Golem through the narrative, he is rarely referred to as “Golem” by any of the characters. The Golem was given two names; the Maharal named the Golem Yosef drawn by Yossif Sheida, the demon that has helped sages retain prayers in the past and was also given the name Yossele the Mute by the other inhabitants of Prague, as the Golem’s identity was only known by R. Katz, R. Sasson, and the Maharal. The fact that the Golem isn’t referred to as “the Golem” expands on this idea that the Golem was considered less of a monster than a man or an individual, as the Golem is merely what he is but not who he is.

The tale of The Golem of Prague continues with the Maharal and the Golem protecting the Jews of the ghettos of Prague; this would differ on other renditions as the Golem would have been commanded to stake the nights. After the Ghettos are declared safe for another ten years or so, the Golem meets his end in several means. Most commonly in Auerbach’s rendition of the story, the Golem is destroyed by the Maharal after he goes on a rampage in the ghettos, destroying many of the very establishments it sought to defend. The Golem’s reason for his rage also is split into two different stories as well. One cause of the Golem’s rage being that the Maharal was tasked with setting the Golem to rest on the Sabbath by removing his shem. The Maharal forgot to remove the shem one day, causing the Golem to go mad and rampage. The Maharal used his cane to remove the D(Ale) from the Golem’s head, turning emet into met, translating from truth to death. The other version says that the Maharal abused the Golem’s utility, as the Golem was not meant to do chores and menial tasks other than his original purpose, protecting the Jews.

In Yudl’s rendition, the Golem does not go into a rampage but simply put to rest by the Maharal. The Maharal does not wish to upset the purpose of the Golem, and after ten years of the ghettos not having any further pogrom attacks, it was time to return the Golem back to clay and mud. The Maharal said onto his son-in-law R. Katz “I have decided that it is time to return Yossele. He has served us well. We created him because of the blood accusations. Now thank G-d they have ceased.” The Maharal had his two students who knew of the Golem’s identity and laid him to rest in the old synagogue by performing the ritual once more, and then the Golem was put to rest one last time, as “the Golem lay limp on the floor atop his bedding which he had brought from the Court of Law. He breathed very slowly and seemed as tranquil as a child following a long day at play.” The Golem’s remains were left in the attic of the synagogue to be left alone till the city of Prague would need him again. The Golem, despite not being human, was still given a proper funeral by the Maharal and his students, “though Golem had not truly been a man, they recited Kaddish, the prayer of the dead.” The Maharal, while not declaring the Golem was not a man itself, still saw something of a human aspect in the Golem, to the point that he felt that the now lumped up clay should be given a proper funeral of God.

In Yudl’s rendition, there are some final words supposedly given to R. Katz in support of the Maharal, leaving him a diary before he died. One segment of R. Katz quoting the Maharal pertained to the Golem’s return:

The Maharal informed us that the spirit of the Golem will be resurrected during the resurrection of the dead following the Messianic era. It will, however, not reappear in the form of Yossif Sheida nor in his second form as Yossele Golem, but in a third form, that of an ordinary human born naturally of a man and woman. His coming back as a human will be through the drawing powers of a righteous person prior to the coming if the Messiah, to cause restitution for something very important which is no secret to be revealed. Yet, it is also possible that the power will be granted to cause both his earlier form to reappear.

The Golem’s portrayal in Media

The Tale of the Golem became very popular in Europe in the 19th century, after the rise of Hasidism in east-central Europe such as Germany and Poland. However, there are not many published artworks of the Golem around the 19th century, as the image of the Golem was always interpreted through literature rather than a visual. In 1899, a Bohemian painter by the name of Mikolá Ale illustrated an image of the Golem and Father Loew. Ale created a charcoal sketching of the Maharal looking upon the Golem, but what appeals to the image its accuracy with the actual original story of the Golem, portraying him as more human than Monster. The Golem has all the features mentioned before, with a human face, nose, mouth, and eyes. Like the description in Yudl’s rendition, the Golem does indeed appear to have hair, like R. Katz mentioned during the Golem’s creation into the world. The Golem also appears to have a very tired expression on his face, similar to how he was described to have ‘woken up’ like a man confused of his surroundings. The most important aspect of this image that defines the Golem from just being any other man is his shem. The Kabbalist formation emet can be seen clearly on his forehead, being one of two places located on the Golem. Ale’s Golem interpretation gives a first universal portrayal, which would lead to the Golem appearing into film.

A few years later, the famous German silent movie, Der Golem, Wie er in die Welt kam or simply The Golem in the English translation was released in 1920. Directed by German director Paul Wegener, the film was originally the third installment and prequel of a three-part

18 Ibid., P. 278.
19 The Golem was sent to expose the vandals whom have taking the Christian children in an effort to use the Jews as a scapegoat, saving young children that were taken in order to prove the innocence of the Jews, or simply and the most common aspect, smite the pogroms that dare attack the ghettos.
21 Ibid., P. 278.
trilogy. The original movie was released in 1915 but is unavailable today due to lost footage. The Golem’s storyline follows the same plot as the original renditions of The Golem of Prague. The Maharal creates the Golem to protect the ghettos of Prague, the Golem succeeds but enters a rampage. Then the Golem is destroyed by the Maharal and buried. The most important aspect of the Golem in Der Golem is his portrayal. The Golem was played by Paul Wegener, the same director of the movie. Looking at the costume of the Golem, it has most of the similar traits of as Mikolá Ale such as hair and normal human characteristics. The creature is of clay material, but still takes the form of a man and has very expressive features. The only difference with this rendition is the Golem’s shem is not present on his forehead but is instead an amulet. This contradicts the entire point of the Golem’s creation, that a shem summoned by a Kabbalist Mystic could have brought the Golem to life. The use of a parchment to slip the shem into the Golem’s mouth is still used in this context, but the film makes it seem like the source of the Golem’s life comes from the amulet, not the shem.

Despite the amulet having more of a role as the Golem’s life source than the shem, Wegener’s Der Golem still follows a close resemblance to Yudl’s rendition or its original published work. Der Golem was considered as an Expressionist film, in many ways more than one. The Golem in Wegener’s film gives emotion to the Golem than stated in the original literature. Usually, the Golem is described as very level headed and unmoved by certain events until he is driven mad. Der Golem’s Golem brings more expression to the Golem, as Wegener portrayed the Golem to being curious and confused, like Yudl’s rendition stated during the Golem’s creation. This adds to the life to the creature; the Golem is like a human, just a very new human in the world.

The portrayal of the Golem changes very rampantly with the 1951 Czechoslovakian film, The Emperor and the Golem. Directed by Martin Fri, The Emperor and the Golem took an entirely different outlook on the Golem. The story is no longer based on the Maharal and his creation of the Golem, but instead takes place some time after the events. Rudolph II, after hearing about the power of the Golem, requests his top scholars and servants to find and study the remains of the Golem so they may use it for their own benefits. The Golem is found and is humorously wanted by everyone who knows of its existence, including Emperor Rudolph II, his General, his advisor, and a baker boy who gets arrested earlier in the film. Throughout the film, whoever has the shem controls the Golem, making the Golem the slave of the keeper of the shem, like how the Maharal summoned the Golem. However, while a Bohemian summoned the Golem, this probably suffers from being the least connected from the original Golem of Prague.

The overall difference is the portrayal of the Golem, looking more of a monster than a man. In Fri’s portrayal, the Golem is simply a humanoid clay creature; the Golem has no mouth, no nose, no hair, his eyes burn with smoke of fury, and his shem is replaced with a gem instead. Like Wegener’s film, the gem contradicts the use of the shem in Kabbalah, the word of God. The creature also is more lenient to serve whoever has control over the shem without hesitation, unlike how the Golem originally only serves the Jews of Prague, as it was his duty. The Golem is only referred to as “the Golem” as well, not given a name like Joseph or Yossele, dehumanizing him even more.

Despite this being the farthest rendition, this portrayal of the Golem is probably the most known today, as modern portraits of the Golem are based on the Czech film. But how is it that a film that was made in the country of the Golem’s origins could possibly drift from the origins of the tale?

It is likely due to the popularity of the Universal Pictures monster movies during the 1930s-1940s. Universal Pictures made the famous portrayal of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in 1931, starring Colin Clive as the Creation, which is often believed to have been inspired by The Golem of Prague. The Creation in the original 1823 release, however, was more intelligent in the film, as it expressed agony of his own birth, blaspheming his own creator. In the 1931 film however, the Creation was portrayed as a moaning monster that destroys what he does not know. Like the Golem, Frankenstein’s Creation is portrayed more as a monster than a man in modern interpretation, likely because of its entertainment value as it is easy to reason with a man, but not a monster. This creates a deeper horror in cinema that popularized the use of mindless monsters as villains.

Conclusion

The Emperor and The Golem, while considered as the most recognized portrayal of the Golem, drifts the most from the original story of The Golem of Prague and its Kabbalist traditions. It is likely that after the events of World War II, after Hasidism is less present in Europe, the Filmmakers of Bohemia are less inclined to follow authenticity. And likely due to the disapproval of Germans at the time, the use of German Expressionist cinematography was favored less as well. Instead, the filmmakers were influenced by American cinema, particularly their interpretations of villains; thus, turning the Golem from unfinished man to mindless Golem.

25 Der Golem, wie er in die welt kam, Dir. Paul Wegener, Der Golem., ed. Paul Davidson. (Germany: Universum Film. 1920).
26 Eisner, The Haunted Screen, P. 45.
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