

Clinging To Golem. A Historical and Contemporary Protector

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ABSTRACT: *The Golem of Prague was created by Rabbi Judah Löw as a protective response to anti-Semitism and blood libels that threatened the Jews of Prague. Golem is an enduring archetype that lives on after death and is relevant to contemporary society. In recent years, a global interest in Golem's mythical persona has evolved and is reflected in modern literature, art, and pop culture. In this paper, the reader is introduced to several historical and new-age archetypes derived from Golem-themed stories authored by diverse writers. Among Jewish authors, attempts to bring back the richness of Yiddish language through literature and deep longing for sanctuary from anti-Semitism are embedded in Golem tales. However, the choice to either mask or reveal one's Jewishness through story is experienced in multiple ways, such as safeguarding internal essence, ethnic suppression, or transformation of vulnerability into liberation. Whether cloaked or openly Jewish in literature, the sacred Golem archetype offers healing for people who encounter anti-Semitism, systemic racism, and/or marginalization.*

KEYWORDS: Golem of Prague, sacred stories, anti-Semitism, Jewish writers, masking theory, historical trauma, archetypes

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with my visit to Prague in the summer of 2022. Unlike other European journeys, I did not travel to the Czech Republic with a research agenda. I simply longed to experience a degree of *ancestral bonding* (Abrams, 2022) with my deceased Czech predecessors. I also anticipated discovering the Golem of Prague. As a child, I devoured the Jewish comic book series *Mendy and the Golem* (Estrin, 1981) and though my understanding of Golem was limited at the time, its mystery remained with me. From the moment I set foot upon the cobblestone streets of Prague, I visualized the *Josefov* Jewish Quarter and the Old New Synagogue where Golem's story and spirit linger.

I visited stunning synagogues and became acquainted with the works of Czech Jewish scholars such as Franz Kafka and the *Maharal* (chief Rabbi) of Prague. Despite Josefov's prestige, the shadow of historical trauma was present within each step I took. I learned about Golem's protective role in the face of endless anti-Semitism and resonated with the cumulative erasure of Jewish culture among European authors. Dismissal of my intersectional identities are all too familiar for me in academia. I am startled by the world's fear of Jewish *intelligentsia* (Chalmers, 2015) or cutting-edge intellect, and its ever-present shadow that threatens my robust scholarly expression. In an effort to find sanctuary from my annihilation, I studied the secularization of Jewish literature, the Yiddish language, and Yiddish theatre between the 16th and 20th centuries in Eastern and Western Europe.

Of special interest to me were the varying Golem tales authored by Jewish and non-Jewish writers. I detected a common factor among modernized Golems (Reingold, 2019), the historical Golem Savior, (Maidenbaum, 2021), and Kafka's (1949) Golem fragments. Jewish authors' collective attempts to bring back the richness and flavor of Yiddish and Chassidic literature were apparent in their writings, provoked by a yearning for belonging when Jewish identification was unwelcome. In fact, Franz Kafka was fascinated by Yiddish theatre and found solace in its warm familiarity (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017). He described Chajim Bloch's collection

of Chassidic tales as “the only Jewish literature in which, regardless of my condition, I immediately and always feel completely at home” (Kafka, 1917, as cited in Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017, pp. 534-535).

A sense of home is embedded in the aforementioned works, though the fluid expression of Jewish *intelligentsia* has been stolen from its authors on historical and contemporary levels. In addition to *homeliness* (Freud, 1953), a strong transgenerational clinging to the myth of Golem is a preservation of authentic Jewish folklore. I, too, hold onto Golem’s protection as I find my voice in higher education. To best understand the cultural myth of Golem, I first introduce the reader to a literature review of Prague’s Jewish history and creation of Golem for context and then to several Golem archetypes. I discuss how sacred stories provide anchorage in cases of marginalization within the following sections.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Golem is a powerful archetype for many people. The definition of *Golem* is a person or entity that is dumb or non-reactive (Maidenbaum, 2021). Jung (1970) noted that the myth of culture carries unconscious material of its collective unconscious. The myth’s collective unconscious then tells of its cultural history, people, and their stories. Myths are not time-bound and thus allow for transcendence far beyond concepts of past, present, or future. Like cultural stories, the myth of Golem was born in Prague and has since been passed down throughout generations (Maidenbaum, 2021).

Golem was sculpted by Rabbi Judah Löw, the chief Rabbi of Prague. The Maharal formed Golem as a protective response to the ongoing danger and blood libels endured by the Jews of Prague. Blood libels date back to the Middle Ages when Jews were accused of murdering Christian children and utilizing the blood for *matzot* (unleavened bread) traditionally eaten on Passover. This fabrication re-surfaced throughout Europe and was emphasized mainly by priests during the simultaneous holidays of Easter and Passover. In Prague, Priest Thaddeus invoked fear of blood libels and Jews became scapegoats for many European societal concerns. Jews were blamed for the Black Plague in the 14th century and blood libels were a recurring form of Jewish incrimination throughout Eastern Europe, Russia, the Iberian Peninsula, and England. Crimes against Jews were exacerbated by poverty, poor economics, religious beliefs, and the fact that the majority of gentiles paid debts to Jewish money lenders. Money lending was a degraded occupation mostly assigned to Jews, so when Jews were blamed for blood libels, debts were erased for gentiles. Volunteers enlisted in Crusades to the Holy Land, for example, benefited from the Pope’s cancellation of all money owed to Jewish debtors (Knapp, 1955). The chief Rabbi therefore sought refuge through the clay-based Golem.

2.1 Creation of Golem

Golem was solidified from a combination of alchemy, mystical, and Kabbalistic elements (Reingold, 2019). Construction of a living being is a known concept in Judaism and was first mentioned in the Talmud (Idel, 1990). Spanish Kabbalist Abulafia wrote a “recipe” in the 13th century for creation of an artificial entity (Scholem, 1961) and Rabbi Issac ben Samuel of Acre later sculpted a Golem that is referenced in his Kabbalistic writings. Cross culturally, Golem creators were advised to first undergo a mystical experience as part of this culmination. In Jewish tradition, the duality of mysticism and magic contributed to the making of Golem (Maidenbaum, 2021).

Though many Golem myths exist, the following tale is among the most prominent ones. The Maharal dreamt that chosen letters from the Book of Creation were consulted in order to form a Golem. Rabbi Löw’s birthday is significant in Golem’s foundation, as his mother experienced labor pains on Passover eve at the stroke of midnight. Guests at the *Seder* (Passover dinner) left in search of the town midwife and found a suspicious man in the Jewish Quarter. When searched by authorities, the man retrieved the dead body of a Christian child and admitted that he was paid to bury the child on Jewish property and to blame Jews for a blood libel when the body was found (Knapp, 1955). The Maharal fetched soil from the Vlatava River and formed Golem with words, prayers, and incantations. Golem may have participated in various encounters after its completion, such as wearing an amulet and finding corpses of Christian children. Golem was named Joseph, though affectionately known as “Yossele” to the chief Rabbi. It could conquer an army and had a sense of smell strong enough to uncover contaminated matzot. The Rabbi engraved the word *emet* (truth) on Golem’s forehead, or some believe he wrote

the word on parchment and placed it under its tongue. Golem lived in the Maharal's home and fulfilled its obligation of guarding the Jews. Each morning the Rabbi informed Golem of its daily duties, except for Fridays when it was laid to rest for the Sabbath. One Friday evening, Rabbi Löw forgot to put Golem to sleep. It ran amok and frightened the quarter residents. When the Maharal realized the danger, he led Golem to the synagogue attic and removed the letter Aleph from its forehead, which then read *met*, (dead) and Golem died (Knapp, 1955, as cited in Maidenbaum, 2021).

2.2 Sacred Stories

The myth of Golem is a cultural story constructed from anecdotes of individual and collective encounters positioned by the storyteller within overarching cultural discourses (Bridgewater & Buzzanell, 2010, as cited in Abrams, 2019) and offers the gift of resonance. Prior to elaborating upon Golem's archetypes, it is important to recognize its significance as a sacred story. Sacred stories contain precious components of personal and cultural narratives derived from the Self and universe (Abrams, 2019). The exchange of myth ignites archetypal bonding with ancestry (Abrams, 2022), as well as deep compassion for the storyteller and legend itself (Stephens & Kanov, 2017). According to Bruner (1987), "a life as lived is inseparable from a life as told" (p. 31). The qualitative researcher's narrative evokes the reader's associations and awakens desire for externalization of their own stories (Ellis et al., 2011). Bits and pieces of the author's sacred stories are embedded into a liminal space and internalized within the souls of receivers. This profound reciprocation has been named "a covenant made with the other" (Cottle, 2013, p. 145). It reduces existential loneliness among both entities (Cottle, 2013), especially in circumstances of oppression such as anti-Semitism. Readers may resonate with any or several of Golem's archetypes and cling to their presence in an uncertain world.

III. GOLEM ARCHETYPES

Golem is an *enduring* archetype (Maidenbaum, 2021, p. 207) that lives on after death. Despite its Greek and Jewish origins, it is relevant to contemporary society and mirrors the invention of artificial intelligence. Golem is featured in film, science, and pop culture such as in *Tobor the Great* (Scholem, 1954), *The Incredible Hulk* series (Johnson, 1977), *A Space Odyssey* (Kubrik, 1968), *I Robot* (Proyas, 2004), *Ex Machina*, (Garland, 2014), and *Her* (Jonze, 2013). A global interest in Golem's mythical persona has evolved in literature over several decades and is reflected in works like *Frankenstein*, Grimm's narratives, Bashevis Singer's novel *Golem* (1969) and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Chabon, 2000). Artistic commemorations of Golem are showcased in *The Jewish School (Drawing a Golem)* painting by Kitaj (1989) and a bronze Golem statue in Poznan, the Maharal's birthplace. Recent museum exhibits in Paris and Berlin accentuated Golem's persona with imagery that varied from rebel to escapist, to expressionist, and to instigator of *demiurgic* actions. The demiurgic perspective weaves an independent personal narrative into larger environmental ideas and thus makes space for change. Like the demiurgic view, Golem's myth is rooted in post memory, yet its clay foundation ushers in a promise of rebirth (Stepnik, 2021).

For generations, Jews have identified with the salvation from harm by saviors. Though Golem is internationally acknowledged, its popularity as Savior increased when journalist Yudl Rosenberg published *Niflaot HaMaharal* (the Maharal's Miracles) in 1909. Rosenberg's writings expanded upon Golem's myth and amplified its symbolic evolution in 16th century Prague. *Niflaot HaMaharal* attracted Jewish imagination as it followed a series of pogroms that claimed thousands of Jewish lives (Maidenbaum, 2021). The Savior archetype has evolved over time and given way to redesigned, more inclusive prototypes, such as superheroes/heroines that are not bound by gender or other identities (Stoops, 2020). The combined spiritual and material Savior archetype paved the way for Golem's presence in Yiddish theatre during the 18th and 19th centuries.

3.1 Influence of Yiddish Language and Theatre in Prague

Golem's mystique was integrated into the Yiddish language and theatre in Prague. The Yiddish language originated during the era of the Holy Roman Empire and was spoken by Jews who resided among non-Jews. Yiddish is a "fusion language" (Weinreich, 2008, p. 29) that merges all Jewish-occupied cities through Semitic,

Romance, Middle High German, and Slavic languages. Middle Yiddish was the dialogue spoken in Prague during the Maharal's era, a combination of Western and Eastern dialects. While Rabbi Löw spoke Hebrew, Golem spoke Yiddish and inspired an eclectic group of European artists that were attracted to the language (Starck-Adler, 2018).

Yiddish printing in Prague included all genres of Old Yiddish literature. Prague was famous for its Jewish printing shops that produced prayerbooks and the only female published book in the 16th century. The book reflected Prague's progressiveness at the time and the flourishing of spoken and written Yiddish. Western Yiddish declined during the *Haskalah* movement in the 18th century, when alternative use of Hebrew and German was encouraged. Western Yiddish was simultaneously rejected in the west, though Eastern Yiddish prevailed somewhat. It wasn't until after Jews arrived in Bohemia and Moravia that Eastern and Western Yiddish united. Yiddish still existed in Prague, though Jews of higher socio-economic status spoke German. With the pilgrimage of Eastern Jews to Prague, Yiddish theatre was re-ignited (Starck-Adler, 2018).

In the 19th century, Rabbi Löw's Golem became an important legend in Jewish folklore. Ethnographer Leopold Weisel infused Kabbalistic properties into Golem's existence and other authors wrote differing opinions about its development and death. Golem itself served as an intermediary between Western German and Eastern Yiddish dialects and also differentiated between the two. Though cultural gaps existed between German and Yiddish speaking Jewish artists, they collaborated through a Berlin-based magazine called *East and West*. In the magazine, writers described blood libels, the dilemma of demonstrating non-violence in the face of threat, and the disappearance of Yiddish. Franz Kafka attended the Yiddish theatre in 1910 and became interested in Eastern Yiddish influence, so different from his own forced assimilation into secular Western European culture. He was captivated by mysticism and found belonging among Jews performing for Jews and speaking in their own contained language (Starck-Adler, 2018). Inspired by his exposure to Yiddish language and theatre, Kafka wrote about Golem.

3.2 Kafka and Golem

Despite Kafka's reputation as the most famous Jewish storyteller of Prague, his stories were seldom identified as such. In fact, the only two Jewish identified tales he wrote involved Golem. Both were fragmented stories and later integrated into *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914-1923* in 1949, though the first fragment was omitted from the *Kritische Ausgabe* (critical version) of the diary, likely by Kafka himself. The second fragment was at first not included in Glatzer's (1961) bilingual *Parables and Paradoxes*, though later named *In our Synagogue* and featured untitled in the *Gesammelte Werke* (Collected Works) under the section *Fragments From Notebooks and Loose Leaves*. Though his second story emerged into public discourse, no researcher to date has studied this manuscript alongside Kafka's first fragment. Kafka's editor Brod contributed to the literary gap by minimizing all Jewish associations, Hebrew words, or context from his texts. This ethnic suppression that was characteristic of the 20th century deprived Kafka's Golem of Jewish identity (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017).

The meaning behind carrying a secret identity and subsequent act of masking or unmasking this persona in scholarship is referred to as *masking theory* (Caplan, 2021, p. 53). Though masking theory is correlated with the lived experiences of Jewish comic book authors, it is relevant to Kafka's choice of cloaking his Jewishness as a form of self protection and safeguard for his story characters (Caplan, 2021). Recent scholars, however, have identified Kafka's deeper knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish embedded in his descriptions of Golem. It is clear that Kafka read all publications about Golem and owned a personal copy of *Der Golem* written by Weisel (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017).

Kafka's imagination of Golem's design was vastly different from other versions. It began with a wad of red clay found in the Maharal's washtub and a description of the clay's bitterness. Onlookers in the story gathered to taste the bitter clay. The Maharal then kneaded the clay-based Golem with seeming gusto, and with distinct movements of his lower jaw, lips, and hands. The Rabbi's hands moved so wildly when wetting his fingertips that the water sprayed up to the ceiling of his home. Kafka's Golem fragment ends there. After that, there are only brief mentions of Kafka's engagement with his Jewish heritage within the works of Grozinger, Haring, *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, and Felstiner (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017).

Kafka imported complex human attributes to Prague life and Jewish tradition in his fragments. He wrote three excerpts about Golem, yet crossed them out due to apparent fear of open Jewish expression in authorship (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017). Related to Kafka's agonizing quandaries, Goska (1997) correlated Golem's tale with Jewish inferiority when living among non-Jews and their hesitant desire to join the dominant culture. Golem protected Jews from anti-Semitic neighbors who viewed them as "larger than life, uncontrollable, and basely embodied...the Jew has been depicted as a useful and sometimes necessary part of non-Jewish society, but one that has repeatedly and profoundly troubled its sense of gentile self" (Goska, 1997, as cited in Reingold, 2019, p. 71). When I visited the Franz Kafka museum in Prague, my impression of his obscure art mirrored this stance. Kafka was tormented by resentment of his involuntary assimilation, love of Jewish culture, and denial of public immersion into Jewish identified topics. Much like his extraordinary visualization of Golem, Kafka's life-world encounters created space for modernized Golems that are relatable in modern society. Through his creativity, he externalized the ritual of donning and removing his mask of Jewish identity (Caplan, 2021) in mysterious ways that introduced multiple possibilities.

3.3 Present-day Golems

Every current artist broaches images of the *doppelgänger*, a biologically unrelated look-alike of a living person, within their work. The Golem archetype is awakened most through *creative experiment* and highlights the semiurgic power that Rabbi Löw held as a scholar-artist. Golem was cultivated as a societal metaphor from a bounty of unlimited intelligence (Stępnik, 2021). Scholem (1965) discussed related concepts of the Rabbi-mystic, *pure experimentation* (the act of "playing God"), rebellion, and mystification. Other artists such as Fromm, Warburg, Saxl, Panofsky, and Celan were recognized experimenters that brought life to *doppelgängers* and alter egos through their works (Stępnik, 2021). In an affiliated excerpt, Lüdicke stated of Golem:

The Golem figure is frequently associated with the many-faceted motif of the *doppelgänger*: the Golem as a simplified image of human being, as an alter ego that gives form to hidden longings...Artists and authors combined their presentations of the Golem with the notion of the *doppelgänger* in order to paint an enigmatic, ambiguous picture of *creator* and *creation*. (Lüdicke, 2016, as cited in Stępnik, 2021, p. 28)

Golem's symbolism is rooted in post memory and is characterized by muteness that is animated by the word. Its location in the Old-New Synagogue attic is characteristic of archetypal memory, though its stand-alone demiurgic stance in world-order concepts allows for entry of new ideas and concepts. The clay-based Golem embodies traits of fascination, fear, otherness, and the covenant of recreation (Stępnik, 2021). Golem's rebirth evolves in sensational and diverse ways. I discuss a few examples of modernized Golems below.

In 2009, New York Times reporter Bilefsky discovered a revival of Golem culture in Prague characterized by Golem-themed restaurants, hotels, figurines, and musical presentations. Golem is symbolic of medieval European Jewish civilization, though its position in progressive culture has become an archetype of "Jewish particularity in a globalized world" (Gelbin, 2011, as cited in Reingold, 2019). Though Golem-inspired novels and media now include non-Jewish authors, the study of Jewish graphic novels is recognized as a unique field of study that addresses all aspects of Jewish history. Few Jewish graphic novels feature fantasy (Reingold, 2019), however, so new-age Golem stories fill this gap in literature (Stoops, 2020).

Whereas Golem was limited by the Maharal's directives in the 16th century, Goska (1997) traced the emerging independence of Golems into the 20th century. Modern Golems became verbal, mobile, sexual, and daring. These Golems are man-made instead of created by godly figures and are therefore capable of human activities. Modern Golems crave freedom to move about in the world unencumbered. Comic books and graphic superhero comics feature examples of how futuristic Golems are "let loose into the world" (Reingold, 2019, p. 70) and viewed today. As mentioned in the introduction, I enjoyed the comic book series *Mendy and the Golem* (Estrin, 1981) and was intrigued by the adventures of a young boy and his daredevil Golem. I valued the partnership Mendy shared with Golem. It held a degree of edge that was absent in my own reality, but also personified the demiurgic stance of finding strength through mutual alliance (Stępnik, 2021). A more recent example of a present-day superheroine is Brienne of Tarth, the only female protector in the show *Game of Thrones*.

Historically, the role of hero has been male-dominated, but a few female heroines have found their place in literature and pop culture. Like the historical Golem, Brienne at first could not attain the levels of autonomy and beauty embodied by other super heroines. She questioned her positions in birthplace and gender restrictions and subsequently rebelled against marriage to seek broader opportunities. She then protected her people, was recognized as a warrior and knighted with the title of *Ser* (Stoops, 2020).

Like the spiritual-material innovation of Golem, Brienne's transformation demonstrates the separation from a former environment necessary for the transition of external properties to internal experiences (Campbell, 2008, as cited in Stoops, 2020). According to Bhaktin (1981) "the hero should not be portrayed as an already completed and unchanging person, but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life" (pg. 10). This sentiment is relevant to the ever emerging Golems. The forward-thinking Golem persona welcomes receptivity for change that is non-conforming and is a compelling archetype for embodiment in situations of adversity.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article reviewed Prague's Jewish history, Golem's wondrous creation, and the richness of Yiddish culture portrayed through Golem stories and archetypes. Within these tales, a collective longing amongst authors for sanctuary from anti-Semitism and isolation was detected. Despite this yearning, it is clear that Jewish scholars mask or share their Jewishness in diverse ways. The ritual of donning and shedding the mask of Judaism in scholarship is sacred to each writer beyond self protection from harm (Caplan, 2021). As a Jewish academic, I resonated with the intentionality behind this weighty dilemma in my daily lived experiences. Beyond simple resonance, I came to several deeper conclusions that pertain to Golem's symbolism and Jewish living within a secular world that I share below.

1. Kafka introduced human and complex life attributes through story. Though his fear of outward Jewish identification was evident through crossed-out Golem fragments (Dekel & Gantt Gurley, 2017), the honesty embedded in masking his story is its true beauty. As noted by Caplan (2021), concealing one's essence does not mean that it is altered. In fact, an external veil may safeguard internal treasures.
2. Golem's contemporary position of "Jewish particularity in a globalized world" (Gelbin, 2011, pp. 9-19) can be extended to Jewish and/or other marginalized experiences of being "othered" within dominant culture and holds tension for people of minority status. Clinging to sacred stories and archetypes such as Golem, however, can bring comfort and grounding.
3. Modernized Golems that are "let loose into the world" (Reingold, 2019, p. 70) strengthen people who face anti-Semitism or other systemic oppression to find their voices or rage when historical fear arises. Self or communal exploration of cultural autonomy and taking pride in one's heritage are healing processes.
4. The Yiddish language is not only a historical "fusion language" (Weinreich, 2008, p. 29), but also a love language. It was founded by Jews for Jews and promotes a sense of containment (Starck-Adler, 2018) for a nation that was expelled for years from non-Jewish spaces. Though young Jewish people may not speak or study Yiddish, the language nevertheless offers ancestral bonding (Abrams, 2022). Mere recognition of a mother tongue is a sanctuary for disenfranchised groups and conversing in love languages is therapeutic.
5. The alchemy of mysticism and magic in Golem's formation as well as masking theory (Caplan, 2021) extend deeper understanding of how external protection can transform inner vulnerability into liberation (Stoops, 2020). This is a validating message for marginalized communities that have remained stoic on the outside despite experiencing internal terror.

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