THE GOLEM:
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

I. THE ANCIENT PERIOD

The first mention of the term “golem” is found in the Bible, where it appears only once, in Psalm 139:16: “Thine eyes did see my ‘golem’....” According to commentaries in the Talmud (collection of ancient Rabbinic writings that constitute the religious authority for traditional Judaism, compiled in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E.), these words were spoken by Adam to God. The word “golem” was understood as the form of man before he acquired a soul.

The idea of the creation of an artificial man and its eventual destruction is found in passages in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b):

Rava created a man and sent him to R. Zera. The latter spoke to him [the artificial man], but received no answer. Thereupon, he [R. Zera] said to him, ‘You are from the companions. Return to your dust.’

Found in a major authoritative Jewish text, this passage indicates that Judaism accepted the idea of the creation of an artificial man. What was the meaning of this for Jews, at a time when they were already in exile? At issue was the claim that Jews could attain a major achievement, that Jewish masters possessed the highest magical powers.

The Talmud gives no indication of how this creation was accomplished, but we can assume from R. Zera’s remark that the artificial man was made of dust. The techniques for creating artificial life are derived from another seminal Jewish text, the Sefer Yeẓirah (Book of Creation). This book contains lengthy discussions on God’s creation of the universe achieved by combinations of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Thus the Talmud and the Sefer Yeẓirah represent two complementary discussions: the fact of creating artificial life and the technique for doing so. It is assumed that both were based on a single tradition.

II. TEMPERING MAGIC: THE GAONIC AND MEDIEVAL MITIGATION OF THE GOLEM’S NATURE

At the turn of the ninth century, Jews in Baghdad came into contact with Arabic philosophy, itself influenced by Greek rationalism. As part of a larger reaction against the mythical anthropology of Judaism, Jewish scholars in the
tenth and early eleventh centuries reinterpreted the notion of the artificial man. They claimed that it was impossible for Rava to have created artificial life, as only God is capable of this feat. Some scholars maintained that Rava’s so-called creature was merely an illusion, a psychological type of magic, an hallucination. Others believed that God, Himself, created the man as a sign of Rava’s great piety. Thus the rabbis of the Gaonic Period mitigated the problem of magic presented by these Talmudic passages.

III. MEDIEVAL MAGIC AND MYSTICISM

The great Jewish figure Rashi, who lived in France in the second half of the eleventh century, discussed the creation techniques found in the Sefer Yezirah together with the creation of man as described in the Talmud. In the twelfth century, as part of a larger reaction against the rationalism of the previous era, Jewish masters began to elaborate on the golem creation.

At the end of the twelfth century, there is a virtual explosion of discussions on the golem. Also, beginning in this period, and perhaps even earlier, one encounters a plethora of ideas of the golem and a diversity of techniques, i.e., what it is and how it can be made. These ideas of the golem need to be understood each within its own historical background and intellectual framework.

A. Germany, ca. 1200. The Ashkenazi Hasidim

Two of the leading figures of Ashkenazi Hasidim, R. Yehuda he-Hasid and R. Eleazar of Worms, wrote commentaries on the Sefer Yezirah. The extant text of R. Eleazar presents an elaborate and systematic discussion of a technique to be used in creating a golem. Dust is molded into the shape of a man, followed by the recitation of permutations of letters (based on the Sefer Yezirah). To create a golem you recite combinations that begin with the first eleven letters of the Hebrew alphabet; to undo this act of creation (render a golem lifeless) you recite letter combinations beginning with the second half of the Hebrew alphabet.

Another technique involves the spreading of dust in which the three letters spelling adam (man) are written, followed by the recitation of letters. A golem is supposed to emerge from the uninformed dust on its own, such is the power contained in the Hebrew letters.

In a third technique that appears at this time, though its origins are probably much earlier, the golem appears with the three Hebrew letters that spell emet (truth) inscribed on his forehead. When the first letter is erased, leaving the word met (he is dead), the golem is destroyed.

Though these texts contain recipes for the creation of artificial life, they do not generally include accounts of any specific individuals who actually created golems.

The mystical Jewish group of Ashkenazi Hasidim was highly influential up until the mid-thirteenth century, at which time these masters disappeared. Their writings on creating golems must be understood as part of the larger context of magical recipes for the creation of many entities, ranging from calves to Heaven itself. These magical recipes formed a part of an elite ideology that probably sought to demonstrate that the Jewish masters possessed the highest form of knowledge. By providing proof for the superiority of these Jewish masters, they were laying claim to the authenticity of Judaism.
B. Northern France, ca. 1200–1250

Here the so-called circle of the Special Cherubin engaged in lengthy discussions on creating golems. The significant differences between these French techniques and those of the Ashkenazi Hasidim are as follows:

1. they use all the combinations of Hebrew letters in order to create.
2. the recitation of letters is performed in conjunction with moving in a circle around the molded dust.
3. the golem is destroyed by reciting the original combination of letters backwards and circumambulating in the opposite direction.

Here is one of the first instances where a specific person is credited with the creation of a golem: R. Abraham ibn Ezra, who was the author of a commentary on the Sefer Yetzi’ah, now lost. In the Sefer Ha-Hayyim (Book of Life), spurious attributed to the same R. Abraham ibn Ezra, is the first instance in which the golem is connected to astral magic, to the influence of the planets. This text presents a synthesis between pagan magic and Jewish magic (the combination of letters).

C. Golem and Kabbalah

The Provençal and Northern Spanish Kabbalists were not interested in the magical golem; rather they interpreted the artificially created man of the Talmudic text as a symbol for the anthropomorphic structure of the ten Sephirot.

In Italy, ca. 1280, a Spanish Kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia, discussed at length the creation of a golem. Founder of the ecstatic Kabbalah tradition, Abulafia was interested in techniques that could be employed to achieve ecstatic experiences, not in the creation of a golem per se. He borrowed the techniques of combining letters from the Ashkenazi Hasidim, but he radically redefined the purpose of these techniques, conflating them with the notion of prophecy found in Maimonides and Spain’s Aristotelian tradition. Abulafia transformed the magical achievement of the Ashkenazi masters into a psychological and mystical experience.

D. R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, late thirteenth century

In one manuscript (Sassoon 290) written by this rabbi, there is a unique recipe for creating a golem that included the visualization of colors as part of the technique.

IV. THE RENAISSANCE THROUGH MODERN TIMES

Recipes for creating golems were collected in Northern Italy, in the late fifteenth century, and were translated into Latin, thereby entering the Christian Kabbalah. By the end of this century, Lodovico Lazzarelli, a Christian Kabbalist, describes the creation of a golem.

Of critical importance for the wider dissemination of ideas on the golem, was Johannes Reuchlin’s De Arte Cabalistica, published in 1517. As a printed book, it was far more available than previous discussions of the golem in manuscripts had been. An important Jewish source during this period, is a discussion by the little-known physician and Kabbalist Abraham Yagel, who lived in Northern Italy in the late sixteenth century. Yagel was interested in the meaning of the creation of a golem and whether it was a form of witchcraft.
magic? Yagel concluded that it was a "natural magic," i.e., a form of technology, and did not involve demonic powers. Thus he claimed that the Kabbalah is the highest possible science. Yagel's writings may have been prompted by a growing awareness that during the Renaissance, Christian culture was progressing more rapidly than Jewish culture. If the creation of a golem could be presented as the pinnacle of scientific achievement, it would prove the superiority of Judaism.

Two historical figures who lived during the late sixteenth century became most closely associated with the ability to create a golem, with legends concerning their accomplishments persisting into the modern period: R. Eliahu Ba'al Shem of Chelm (d. 1583) and R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague (d. 1609). With the patronage of Emperor Rudolph II, Prague became a center for art and science, as well as alchemy and the occult. In 1592 R. Loew had an audience with Emperor Rudolph. The details of this meeting remain shrouded in mystery. Perhaps they discussed Kabbalah, a subject of great interest to both men. The first legend of the creation of a golem by a contemporary figure is found ca. 1630. Interestingly enough, this legend does not mention R. Loew, but rather the other important rabbi, Eliahu of Chelm.

An anonymous manuscript in Oxford, dated ca. 1630, recounts a story of R. Eliahu of Chelm creating a golem by means of the Sefer Yeẓirah. R. Eliahu was called the Ba'al ha-Shem, the Master of the Divine Name, that is to say, the magician. His golem continued to grow in size, so that the rabbi had to destroy it by erasing the aleph, the first letter of emet (truth). This is the earliest known version of the legend; other versions date from as late as 1660. The unknown Kabbalist responsible for this text never mentions the Maharal of Prague.

Two of R. Eliahu's descendants were great halakhists (scholars specializing in Jewish law): He-Hakham Zvi, and his son, Jacob Emden. They discuss the legal status of the golem; for example, can a golem be counted in a minyan, the quorum of ten men required for prayer? They came to the conclusion that human form and a modicum of understanding or intelligence were not enough to make something human. The golem's inability to speak is one of the factors they cite in their reasoning. Their arguments can be considered an apologia for the activities attributed to their revered ancestor, R. Eliahu of Chelm, who had destroyed his golem.

Practical uses of the golem appear in late fifteenth-century written sources; such sources become more numerous in the seventeenth century. This new emphasis is concomitant with the development of the new science in Christian Europe. According to some versions of R. Eliahu of Chelm's golem, his growth was perceived as dangerous, necessitating his destruction. According to Jacob Emden, the destructive potential of the golem was great enough to wipe out the world.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, the issues raised in discussions of the golem change. Jewish authors begin to address questions of a golem's status and function, his possible exploitation, whereas in the medieval period, the interest was solely in the techniques for the creation of golems.

Some Christian authors published accounts of R. Eliahu of Chelm's creation of a golem as early as the middle of the seventeenth century. These discussions focus on the forming of the golem, the danger he poses, and his eventual destruction, and do not mention the Sefer Yeẓirah. Johann Christoph Wagenseil published an account in a letter from Christoph Arnold in 1674 (No. 3). This version was readapted by Johann Jacob Adel in a book published in
Frankfurt, in 1714 (No. 4). Schudt's publication of the story of a dangerous golem had tremendous ramifications. It became the source for Jakob Grimm, who published a version of the golem tale in the Zeitung für Einsiedler (Journal for Hermits) of April 23, 1808 (see No. 5). Grimm's golem influenced many Romantic writers who began to incorporate golem characters into their works, beginning with Ludwig Achim von Arnim in 1812 (No. 6); Heinrich Heine's discussion of Arnim gave the golem wider currency (see Nos. 9–10). In this way, the golem became a literary motif as well as a legendary figure.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, published accounts of R. Loew as the creator of a golem appear, many of them relaying an oral tradition that dates back to the eighteenth century. The earliest published account appears to be the version by Leopold Weisel, published by Wolf Pascheles in Sippurim (1847 through 1856; No. 12). Since 1856, there has been a proliferation of popular stories on R. Loew and his creation of a golem. R. Loew's association with the golem is probably derived from the culture of Rudolph's Prague; in addition, R. Loew enjoyed the esteem of both Jews and non-Jews in that city, and became a folk hero, something he remains to this day.

Even in the late nineteenth century, scholars of Jewish law continued to ponder the status of the golem, particularly whether or not a golem defiles when he is dead. This question is at issue with folk legends of the dead golem's remnants stored in Prague's Altnaschul, the city's oldest synagogue (see No. 90).

In 1909, Yudl Rosenberg published the most elaborate legend of the golem and R. Loew (Nos. 16–17). According to Rosenberg, he was publishing an original letter of the Maharal's and a manuscript written by R. Loew's son-in-law recounting the miraculous deeds of the great scholar. Such a claim cannot be substantiated. Here, for the first time, the golem rescues the Jews from the false accusation of a blood libel by exposing the plot to frame them. At the time of Rosenberg's publication of these tales, blood libel, the false accusation that Jews killed Christian children to use their blood as part of the Passover rituals, had once again become a serious threat—the infamous Hilsner case took place in Czechoslovakia in 1899.

Rosenberg published his tales in Hebrew and Yiddish. They formed the basis of Chajim Bloch's version of the legend, first published in Vienna in 1919 (No. 19). By Bloch's time, the golem had already become a subject rich in thematic material that appealed to writers, artists, composers, and filmmakers.

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