

ONE TORAH FOR ALL

Zerubbabel ben Emunah

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Is There a Golem in the Shadows?

Even though many people have never heard of a golem, there is evidence they have existed in the past. They may even exist today. In fact, golem may be much more prevalent in society than one could imagine. They are here, and they are among us.

Before one can see that golem exist, he has to understand what they are. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* describes a golem as an “alchemical man” (Scholem and Idel 737). Now, this should not be anything new to the twenty-first century man, as scientists have been attempting to create life, any life, from raw material for a very long time. What many do not know, is that in Jewish writings, these “alchemical men” have existed for nearly two millennia. Apparently, western science is just now catching up with what some of the Jewish sages have known for a very long time: it is possible to create life out of non-living material.

Byron Sherwin points out in “Golems in the Biotech Century,” that the “dominant halakic” ruling of Jewish courts, is that a golem cannot attain the status of a human being as long as it remains a golem (138-139). Furthermore, he points out that “a golem is an artificial person, that is, a person without a soul” (Sherwin “Golems” 141). Mikel Koven points out in “‘Have I Got a Monster for you!’: Some Thoughts on the Golem, *The X-Files* and the Jewish Horror Movie,” a golem is a being who is not complete, and because of this incompleteness the golem is not accountable for its actions (217). Furthermore, Koven states that Adam was such a golem until the Creator breathed a soul into him (220). In quoting the Talmud, Curt Leviant, in the introduction of his translation of Yudl Rosenberg’s book, *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, clearly points out that “artificially created men do not have the ability to speak” (xiv).

In quoting William Blackstone’s, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Sherwin aptly points out that this is exactly how a corporation is defined (qtd. in Sherwin “Golems” 141). Interestingly, the Supreme Court of the United States of America has ruled similarly in the case of *Lee v. Weigert* (1933), in which the court described mega corporations as a “Frankenstein monster,” which is a type of golem (Sherwin “Golems”141). Rather ironically, one of the

Supreme Court justices who wrote that opinion was a direct descendant of the Maharal, the chief rabbi of Prague (circa 16th century), the creator of the most famous golem of all (Sherwin "Golems" 141).

Maharal is an acronym short for **Morenu Ha-Rav Loew**, who was a historical person (1525-1609). There is no historical record of his creating a golem. The story of the Maharal creating a golem was unknown until the early twentieth century when Yudi Rosenberg wrote a novel about the rabbi (Leviant xvi; Kievel 3). Leviant points out in the introduction of his translation of Rosenberg's book, that Rosenberg did not even claim authorship of the work, but rather attributed it to the son-in-law of the Maharal, Rabbi Isaac Katz, in an effort to gain more credibility, and thus more readers, for his work (xvii). Rosenberg even places a whole chapter in the beginning of his book, claiming how he supposedly came to be in possession of this work (Leviant "Bill of Sale" 8; ch. 2).

Regardless of whether the Maharal actually created a golem or not, there are other historical records that predate the golem of Prague. Byron Sherwin in his book, *The Golem Legend: Origins and Implications*, reveals that one of the earliest known references to a golem in Jewish literature was in the third century C.E. (Common Era), quoting *Sanhedrin* 65b, in which Rava (Abba ben Joseph bar Hama, born 270 C.E.), a Jewish Talmudist, "created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera" (3). When Rabbi Zera asked the golem a question and the golem refused to answer, because he was not able to answer, being a golem, the rabbi perceived that he was a golem and removed his life force and returned him to dust (Sherwin *Golem* 3).

Several variations of how a golem is created are recorded in Talmudic writings, but each variation has certain characteristics in common (Leviant xv). One of those elements of commonality is written of in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation (Sherwin, *Golem* 4; Leviant xiv). Jason Jordan in his article "Golem Truth," declares that not only is the study of the *Sefer Yetzirah* necessary, but one must be a master of the twenty-two characters of the Hebrew aleph-bet and know the "spiritual manifestation" of each letter, as well (16-17). One would also need to master the pronunciation of the 42 letter and 72 letter names of the Creator (Jordan 11). One also can use various combinations of the name of the Creator by rearranging the letters to bring the golem to life (Leviant xv). The close correlation between rearranging the four-letter name of the Creator with the idea of rearranging the four letters of DNA is noteworthy. Some scientists now believe the four letters of DNA (GATC) can be rearranged to create life (Sherwin "Golems" 139). This is very close to what the Jewish sages did in rearranging the Hebrew letters of "YHWH" in order to bring a golem to life.

In addition, common in Talmudic literature, the word אמת (truth) would be inscribed upon the forehead of the golem, or sometimes upon the back of its right hand (Scholem and Idel 736). Importantly, one of the most common ways to remove the life-force of a golem is to remove the first letter of אמת, which would be the א (aleph); this then leaves the word מת (met or moot), which means "death" or "dead" (Scholem and Idel 736; Koven 219). One also finds recorded the method by which one can write the four letter name of the Creator, that is, the tetragrammaton, on a piece of paper, and insert it into the golem's mouth or attach it to his

body as part of the ritual to bring the golem to life. Then, to remove its life, one would simply remove the piece of paper (Leviat xv).

Hillel Kieval, in his article “Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish Culture and the Invention of a Tradition,” reveals that one of the barriers for a man to accomplish the making of a golem is sin, but the absence of it enables one to create life (2). Consequently, we see that in order for the sages to create a golem, an extended period of meditation was required to attain a high degree of purity before attempting to bring the golem to life (Jordan 17).

The point of Jordan’s article is to direct the reader’s attention to a particular passage in the Bible which, with careful consideration, may be speaking of the creation of a golem (8). Jordan is referring to Revelation 13:15, in which we see the beast that came up out of the earth, making an image of the beast that came up out of the sea, and causing the image to come to life. Unlike most stories concerning golem, in which the golem cannot speak, in this passage, this image brought to life can, and does, speak. Whether this is a golem or not remains to be seen, but it does give rise to new possible insights into this passage. One can well imagine, if something like this were to occur, the clamor of the general populace wanting the word אמת also inscribed upon their foreheads or hands as well, could be overwhelming. Could this be the “mark of the beast?” After all, what would be the harm in having the Hebrew word “truth” inscribed upon oneself?

Arnold Goldsmith, in referring to the golem, states, “we are dealing with legend, not fact” (qtd. in Koven 219). He goes on to point out, that many people today in this scientific age still believe in the “supernatural and mystical,” even though there may be no science to support such a belief (Koven 219).

The golem and its western legendary counterpart, Frankenstein, serve as examples of what many oppose in the fields of bioengineering, as well as reproductive biotechnology (Sherwin, “Golems” 136). As a result of the first test-tube baby being born, there was a strong knee-jerk reaction in the state of Illinois, in which the state legislature passed a law in 1978 making it illegal for in vitro fertilization (Sherwin “Golems” 138). Ironically, during this same time, many popular magazines such as *TIME*, as well as Jewish halakhic journals, declared in vitro babies to be golem (Sherwin “Golems” 138).

As was cited above, there are those who see golem with a much broader understanding than of just being a man-like figure made out of mud or clay, but as being any artificially or manmade life form (Sherwin “Golems” 136). The whole question of the golem when seen in this context, can, and does, include such things as robots, computers, machines in general, and all forms of artificial intelligence, regardless of how sophisticated and complex, or how simple these might be (Sherwin “Golems” 134). As Sherwin states, “I believe that we are now living in what could be called the age of the golem” (“Golems” 133).

Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, in *The Golem: What You Should Know about Science*, make the declaration that “[s]cience is golem” (1). They go on to explain that science, like a golem, can

serve the needs of humanity, or it can run amok (Collins and Pinch 1). However, neither science nor a golem is either good or bad in itself, but it depends upon the person wielding it (Collins and Pinch 1-2). Furthermore, it is not the golem, nor science, that is the monster, but rather it is its creator (Collins and Pinch 2).

The real question does not seem to be whether golem exist or not, for various fields of science are working feverously to create life. The real question points to the ethical and moral questions involved in the creation of that life. As Sherwin points out, the creation of a golem or Frankenstein-like man points out the reality that scientists are “intoxicated” with the possibility of creating life (“Golems” 136). He goes on to reveal that this is often without any regard for the possibility of danger to people or property; furthermore, there is a gross lack of taking responsibility for their actions in this regard (Sherwin “Golems” 136).

The grounds upon which those who oppose the creation of golem are many. As the field of bioengineering continues to develop, those who oppose much of the work in this field will continue to do so on “theological, philosophical, and ethical” bases (Sherwin “Golems” 136). Gershom Scholem declares in *The Prague Post*, “Golem-making is dangerous” (qtd. in Novak). Scholem goes on to explain that the major point of danger is not the golem itself, but the creator of the golem (qtd. in Novak). In fact, the actual reaction from the public at large is one of “fear, opposition, and moral revulsion” to any new advancements in the field of bioengineering in particular (Sherwin, “Golems” 138).

When one looks back over history, one can see that there are many scientific discoveries which are notable. These discoveries stand as mountain peaks above all the many failures of science (Collins and Pinch 139). The one thing in science that is certain is human error. For every success in science, there are thousands of untold errors in mistakes and human judgment (Collins and Pinch 140). If these human errors do not give rise to an attitude of deliberate caution, then surely science will continue to rush from one disaster to the next trying to find that next mountain top discovery (Sherwin “Golems” 136; Collins and Pinch 139). Scientists rush headlong, often without any regard to the morality or ethics of what they are doing, seeking to find that next “big” discovery, never asking themselves the question: Just because we can do this, should we do it (Sherwin “Golems” 137)?

In February 1997, in an episode of *The X-Files* entitled “Kaddish,” a golem is created. This golem is created in the image of a Jewish man who had been murdered by three young men who were being conditioned into the mind-set of white-supremacists (“Kaddish”). The mud-man takes vengeance upon these three young men, as well as the man who was indoctrinating them, killing them one-by-one throughout the show. One of the underlying assertions in this episode seems to be the fact that there were more golem in this show than just the mud-man. The character responsible for inculcating racial hatred within those three young men, who were the first to go out of control, was also the creator of golem, as those three young men, who, because of their attitudes, became golem-like in their thinking and actions (Koven 222). By the end of the show, all the golem had been destroyed. This theme is echoed in many science-fiction movies, TV shows, and books, in which the creation of man attempts to take over and

take control of its creator, as well as mankind in general, and in the end must be destroyed by its creator. This phenomenon tends to open one's eyes to the seemingly innate fear of mankind that he will lose control of that which he creates to serve him.

As science presses on to continue to understand the human genome and all the secrets it possesses, the temptation to manipulate the information contained within grows stronger. What many scientists fail to realize, is that if one starts with human genetic code and changes it, the result is something other than human. It is a golem by definition! Regardless of whether one's point of view is that the change is for the better or for the worse, the fact that there is change screams that the result is something non-human. The kind of change to which the results would ultimately lead, becomes a moot point if it results in the extinction of the human race. One might even say this is "suicide by science."

Our world today is full of technological advances with more materializing every day. However, for all those advances, what science has promised for decades has not materialized. For example, we had the promise of robots serving our every need by the twenty-first century, which obviously has not happened ("Welcome" 46). Science continues to make grandiose claims and promises with little to no regard for the consequences of those promises. Furthermore, oftentimes the old adage of the "end justifies the means" seems to be the order of the day when it comes to science, technology, and bioengineering. Consideration of the path taken to get to the goal does not seem to be given its due concern. This is alarming.

Our world may not have artificially created men presently walking around in it, but there are other types of golem so numerous that man scarcely even notices them. What will happen when, while pursuing the creation of new life, one of those new life forms escapes and runs amok? Can mankind survive such a cataclysm? For example, is not the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction such a golem (Sherwin "Golems" 138)? Nevertheless, it seems only a matter of time before some despot will unleash such a newly created biological weapon upon his enemy, only to find that he has opened a Pandora's Box that can never be shut again.

However, it is not just the occasional despot with which mankind needs to be concerned in this matter. The scientist who takes no concern for the ethics or morality of what he is doing in any given field, is just as likely, perhaps even more likely, to open a Pandora's Box, unleashing upon an unsuspecting humanity things of which horror movies and nightmares are made.

Humanity, it seems, has placed its faith in the hands of the scientific community; but is science worthy of such a trust placed in them? Regardless of whether one views the traditional stories of golem as fact or legend, golem have a strong tendency to run amok at some point. Seemingly, science itself has run amok in our day. In many ways, science is intoxicated with itself and thus out of control. As was quoted above, "Science is golem." We can certainly see the validity of this declaration when bio-engineers splice together genetic code from different organisms to create a whole new life form, not fully understanding the ultimate outcome. Is this exercising ethically and morally sound judgment? Is it possible to gain the wisdom needed to know when to create and when not to create before it is too late (Sherwin "Golems" 137)? If

this continues, certainly at some point a golem shall be created which man will not be able to control. Remember, as we learned above, the golem is not accountable for his actions, but the actions of the golem are attributed to the one who created it. Paradoxically, it is not the golem who is the monster, but rather it is the creator of the golem who is the true monster (Koven 227).

Serious consideration should be given to the following passage from the Bible. "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah" (NASB Matt. 24.37). When one turns to the book of Genesis and looks up the "days of Noah," what one finds is rather astonishing. "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown" (NASB Gen. 6.4). Is there mixing of DNA happening in this passage? It seems rather obvious to this writer, that this is exactly what is happening in this passage between human women and the "sons of god" (fallen angels), thus resulting in "nephilim." What makes this pertinent for us today, is that "God" destroyed the earth with a flood as a result of the genetic manipulation in the past. Now, fast forward to the present time; and once again, man has learned the science of genetic manipulation. This begs the question, "Is mankind setting itself up for destruction once again?"

Has science run amok in its quest to create life, that is, to create a golem? We close with the following question from Tankhem, one of the characters in H. Leivick's play *The Golem*, after the golem had run amok: "Who'll save us? Who" (248)?

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