

Will Your Golem Help You or Haunt You?

Source Sheet compiled by Rabbi Shari Shamah

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Does Judaism believe in the supernatural?

As early as the Book of Genesis, Jacob wrestled with some sort of spirit / angel / devil / being which left Jacob's hip wrenched.

Genesis 32:25-26	בראשית ל"ב:כ"ו-כ"ה
Jacob was left alone. And a figure wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.	וַיִּנָּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיַּגַּע בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמּוֹ:

In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of the Hebrew word דִּמְיוֹן [shae-dim] is generally translated as Demon.

Deuteronomy 32:16-17	דברים ל"ב:ט"ז-י"ז
They incensed [God] with alien things, Vexed [God] with abominations. They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, Gods they had never known, New ones, who came but lately, Who stirred not your forebears' fears.	יִקְנְאוּהוּ בְּזָרִים בְּתוֹעֵבֹת יִכְעִיֶּסוּהוּ: יִזְבְּחוּ לִשְׂדִּים לֹא אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים לֹא יָדְעוּם תְּדָשִׁים מִקְרָב בָּאוּ לֹא שְׁעָרוֹם אֲבֹתֵיכֶם:

- In Biblical terms, what do you think this reference to demon meant?

The Rabbis of the Talmud must have been concerned with the idea of demons or ghosts as there are many references in Berachot 6a. In this one, the Rabbis seek to address how to know if demons exist?

Brachot 6a:6
One who seeks to know that the demons exist should place fine ashes around his bed, and in the morning the demons' footprints appear like chickens' footprints, in the ash. One who seeks to see them should take the afterbirth of a firstborn female black cat, born to a firstborn female black cat, burn it in the fire, grind it and place it in his eyes, and he will see them. He must then place the ashes in an iron tube sealed with an iron seal [gushpanka] lest the demons steal it from him, and then seal the opening so he will not be harmed. Rav Beivai bar Abaye performed this procedure, saw the demons, and was harmed. The Sages prayed for mercy on his behalf, and he was healed.

- Do you think this was some sort of magic or supernatural ritual?
- From where do you think they got this idea?

Was the idea of forming something and giving it life mentioned in Tanakh?

Psalm 139:16	תהילים קל"ט: ט"ז
Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them.	גִּלְמִי רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וְעַל-סֵפֶרְךָ כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂי יָמֵי יִצְרוּ (ולא) [ולו] אֶתְּךָ בְּקֶהֱם:

The Hebrew word highlighted is Galmi. Which has come to be known as the process by which God created humans. Until God comes and breaths the breath of life into us, we are just golemim – not quite human, but something formed.

A golem has come to be known as a human created being, generally made from clay or earth. In many cases, this formed being is considered to be a helper.

One of the most well-known golem stories from Jewish history was written in 1890 by I.L. Peretz about this being brought to life.

<u>Golem from Mystics to Minecraft</u>
"Great men were once able to perform great miracles," begins the short story "The Golem," written by the author I. L. Peretz in 1890. In his narrative, Peretz retells the best-known version of the golem legend, which takes place in Prague and revolves around the studious Rabbi Loew. The rabbi performs the great miracle of bringing a clay golem to life – by placing a magic word, the shem, in its mouth. Once brought to life, the golem is strong and protects the Jewish ghetto. It also performs all sorts of physical labor for its creator. But one day the golem flies in a rage, smashing buildings, flinging boulders, and uprooting trees. Rabbi Loew pulls the shem out of the golem's mouth and the creature falls to the ground, dissolving into dust. Frightened by this turn of events, the rabbi resolves never again to create such a dangerous servant. To this day, the dusty remains of the golem are said to be located in the closed-off attic of the Old New Synagogue in Prague.

- So there are still golem shards in the Altneushul in Prague? According to legend, yes!
- Is the Golem in the Altneushul there to haunt people or to be re-formed in case it's needed?

How can you create a Golem:

According to Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (c. 1176-1238), creating a Golem involves the following steps:

- Studying the *Sefer Yetzirah* with a partner for three years
- Gather fresh mountain soil
- Kneading the soil in running water
- Forming the soil into the shape of a Golem
- Reciting the 231 pairs of Hebrew letters with the five possible consonants (a, e, i, o, u) and names of God
 - Reciting the aleph bet in different orders produced different results (eg one direction creates a male Golem, another a female Golem)
 - Each pair of letters corresponds to a part of the human body
 - These recitations should be done rapidly while circling the Golem

A Golem to fight antisemitism? Could we use that today?

A Golem for Protection? [Practical Kabbalah: Techniques for Creating a Golem](#)

It is taught that some golems are created to help protect the Jewish community. “Rabbi Loew’s procedure is as follows: After asking for a dream question as to how he might protect the Jews of Prague from persecution, Loew is answered in his dream with the alphabetical Hebrew phrase, “**Ato Bra Golem Devuk Hachomer V’tigsar Khavel Torfe Yisroel,**” which means, “**Create a golem out of clay who will destroy all the enemies of Israel.**” He told this to his son-in-law, Isaac Ha’Cohen, and his best pupil, Jacob Ha-Levi. He said he needed their help because they were born under the signs of fire and water, respectively, and Rabbi Loew himself under the sign of air; together with the soil, they would have representatives of all the elements needed to create a golem.”

Wait, this Golem reminds me of Frankenstein?

Scholars have studied the connections between the Golem and Frankenstein, and while many want to claim that the mechanical monster known as Frankenstein was modeled after a golem, it most likely wasn’t that way. That being said, the golem creation could have informed or played a part in formulation of the Frankenstein Story.

[Tablet Magazine: Is Frankenstein’s Monster the Golem’s Son?](#)

[Jewish Press: Frankenstein And The Golem](#)

What happens when the Golem goes awry?

Der Golem (The Golem), Leopold Weisel, 1947

In the reign of Rudolph II among the Prague Jews lived a man named Bezalel Loew, known, because of his tall stature and great learning as high Rabbi Loew. This rabbi was highly skilled in all the arts and sciences, especially in the Kabbalah. By means of this art, he was able to bring to life figures, formed of clay or carved from wood, that, like real men, did what was assigned to them. Such self-made servants are worth much: they do not eat, they do not drink, and do not need wages; they work tirelessly, you can scold them and they give no answer. The Rabbi Loew had formed such a servant out of clay, laid the Shem in its mouth, and brought him to life with it. This constructed servant performed all the menial duties in the house throughout the week: chopping wood, carrying water, sweeping the streets, etc. But on the Sabbath he had to rest, therefore, the master took the Shem from his mouth and made him dead before the rest day arrived. But once it happened that the rabbi forgot to do this and misfortune followed. The magic servant became enraged, tore down the houses, threw rocks around, uprooted trees, and thrashed about horribly in the streets. People rushed to let the rabbi know about this, but the difficulty was great; it was already the Sabbath, and any work, whether creating or destroying, is strictly prohibited, so how to undo the magic? To the rabbi, his Golem was like the broom to the sorcerer's apprentice in Goethe's poem. Fortunately, no one had yet inaugurated the Sabbath in the Altneu-Synagogue, and since this is the oldest synagogue in Prague, everything depends on it, and there was still time to take the Shem from the wild fellow. The master ran, and tore the magic formula from the mouth of the Golem — the clay lump fell and crumbled to pieces. Terrified by this scene, the rabbi no longer wanted to make such a dangerous servant. Even today, pieces of the Golem can be seen in the attic of the Altneu-Synagogue.

- Do you believe in ghosts, goblins and golems?
- Do you believe the golem was created to be a helper, or for a nefarious reason?
- Could you create a golem today?
- Does the golem seem scary, comforting, believable, or something else?

To read more about golems:

- [My Jewish Learning: Golem](#)
- [Jean Meltzer: Magical Meet Cute](#) (a cute fiction read!)
- [Jewish Virtual Library: The Golem](#)