



Alice's Academy

"Will I Remember This?": David Wisniewski's *Golem*

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How is David Wisniewski's Golem different from all other golems? Golem scholar Shandel Gamer concludes that Wisniewski's Caldecott Award-winning version is not just another golem story, but an innovative contribution to the literature. This thoughtful analysis seemed a particularly fitting article to post during Passover. Ms Gamer has a master's degree in English from San Diego State University and is a member of The National Coalition of Independent Scholars. Also an artist, she is a member of the La Jolla Art Association.

The word "golem" first appears as a Biblical reference in Psalms (139:16) meaning "unformed substance" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*). According to the Talmud, a collection of third and fourth century Rabbinic writings which constitute Jewish civil and religious law, the word refers to the unconscious Adam before God imbues him with a soul, neshamah. The Talmud also suggests that the ability to create a man is not the sole province of God and that a righteous man can magically create a golem or artificial man: "For Rava created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera" (Sanhedrin 65b).[1] The techniques for creating a golem are found in another Jewish text, the Sefer Yezirah [Book of Creation].

The idea of the golem and the belief in golem-making continued to be discussed and reinterpreted for several hundred years, and according to Emily D. Bilski and Moshe Idel, in their article, "The Golem: An Historical Overview," by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a "virtual explosion of discussions on the golem" (11). In the fifteenth century, the formulas for golem-making were translated into Latin. By the late sixteenth century, the act of golem-making was associated with two rabbis, Eliahu Ba'al Shem of Chelm (d. 1583) and Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague (d. 1609). The legends surrounding these two historical figures are the foundation for the modern golem tradition.

The first document connecting golem-making with a contemporary figure was discovered ca. 1630. The manuscript tells the tale of how R. Eliahu Ba'al Shem of Chelm created a golem by means of the Sefer Yezirah. In this earliest version of the legend, the rabbi has to destroy his golem after it grows to enormous proportions (13). Accounts of the Ba'al Shem's golem continued to be published by both Jewish and Christian authors throughout the seventeenth century. Yet, it wasn't until these legends were collected and recorded by Jakob Grimm in his *Journal for Hermits*, published in 1808, that the golem became "a literary motif as well as a legendary figure" (14).

Forty years after Grimm, the first published stories connecting the golem with Rabbi Judah Loew appeared in Leopold Weisel's *Sippurim* (stories). In 1909, Rabbi Loew became the sole proprietor of the golem legends with the publication of Yudi Rosenberg's *Nifla'ot Maharal im ha-Golem* (*The Golem or The Miraculous Deeds of the Rabbi Liva*).[2] Rosenberg was also responsible for the inclusion of the Blood Libel (Lie)[3] stories into the golem mythology. Through these stories the golem became both a defender and saviour of the Jewish community. The inclusion of the golem-as-saviour motif changed the golem legends forever. In 1919, Chayim Bloch published his work, *The Golem: Legends of the Ghetto of Prague*. Most of *The Golem* is a retelling of stories previously published by Rosenberg; however, Bloch made two significant contributions to the development of the legends. Unlike Rosenberg, Bloch's writing style made the stories more accessible to readers and his characterization of the golem changed the once docile servant into one who shows signs of a violent nature. The importance of both Rosenberg and Bloch to the oeuvre of golem mythology is immeasurable. Together, these two men created the foundation upon which later golem stories have been built. According to Moshe Idel in his book, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions of the Artificial Anthropoid*, "It is the creative literary genius of Rosenberg and Bloch, together with the propagative efforts of Bloch, that contributed to the spread of the Maharal legend in wider audiences" (253).



To appreciate the effect Rosenberg's and Bloch's golem stories have had on children's literature, it is only necessary to consider the large number of children's books in which the golem is either linked to the central theme or is the main character. In the past twenty-five years alone, the golem story has been retold by many notable storytellers. Included among the list of writers who have published golem stories are: Isaac Bashevis Singer, Elie Wiesel, Mark Podwal, Beverly Brodsky McDermott, Sulamith Ish-Kishor and, now, David Wisniewski. With so many golem storybooks, few could have predicted that this once relatively obscure character would gain international recognition as the subject of the 1997 Caldecott Medal Award.

David Wisniewski's exquisitely crafted children's book, simply titled *Golem* (Clarion Books, 1996), is powerfully rendered with earth-tone, bark-cut paper designs which give a dynamic edge and strength to the author's version of the golem legend. In appearance, *Golem* is similar in both length and size to another recent golem book, writer and illustrator Mark Podwal's *Golem: A Giant Made of Mud* (1995). However, *Golem* is written with a more sophisticated audience in mind and includes a back page which offers an insightful history of the golem from the inception of the word "golem" through its present-day meaning. The effectiveness of Wisniewski's story lies in the fact that the author balances the simple language of a picture book with the complex ideas more commonly associated with the longer, young adult golem stories of I. B. Singer and Elie Wiesel.

Initially, Wisniewski's story is primarily a restating of previous golem tales, as the author retains the most common and fundamental elements found in the majority of these legends. Thus, Wisniewski's storybook includes parts of three traditional stories from the golem legends: Rabbi Loew's dream-question, the threat of the Blood Libel and the location and means for the creation of the golem. With deft precision, the author conveys how the "Blood Lie" threatened the Jewish community and how in a dream Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, chief rabbi of Prague, dreamt that "only the most righteous man, a tzaddik, could create and control" a golem (n. pag).[4] Wisniewski succinctly relates how Loew and his two assistants go to the river Vltava (Czech for Moldau) and shape a figure of clay -- animating it by engraving the word "emet" (truth) upon its forehead.

The golem appears in the story as a clay figure of gigantic proportions. Chayim Bloch, in describing the golem, states that "the three elements, Fire [Aysch], Water [Mayim], and Air [Ruach] brought it about that the fourth element, Earth [Aphar], became living" (68). Wisniewski's depiction aptly captures the power of a creature literally ripped from the earth through this mystical combination. Although Wisniewski's golem appears less "Jewish" looking than other authors or illustrators have portrayed it, this golem is, actually, more consistent with the original nature of the golem -- a clay man. The irony is that Wisniewski's golem appears as a primitive, almost Hulk-like creature, yet is endowed with shades of emotional subtlety not often seen in previous characterizations.

Like several authors before him, Wisniewski grants his golem the power of speech. Yet, while many golem legends include the creature's ability to speak, few golems have been capable of voicing more than monosyllabic answers to Rabbi Loew's orders. In most legends the golem is incapable of complex reasoning, lacking what Gershom Scholem refers to as "neshamah," or divine intellect.[5] Wisniewski's golem is different, possessing both the power of speech and an intelligence capable of questioning its creator's decision to bring it into being: "'Father,' his great voice rumbled, 'was this wise to do?'" That this particular golem is able to voice this simple but profound question indicates that Wisniewski's work has something more to offer than a mere retelling of known golem legends.

In truth, the golem's words contain both a questioning of its creation and a warning of the dangers inherent in the rabbi's god-like actions. In this way, Wisniewski's golem functions much like the "figure" that appears in the opening scene in H. Leivick's play, *The Golem*. There, the voice of the "figure," the unformed golem, also warns Rabbi Loew about the dangers of bringing it into existence: "I have come to warn you: create me not. Do not dislodge me from my rest" (226).

Wisniewski returns to established lore by naming his golem "Joseph," a name associated with Biblical power, and by having him perform as the shamash (servant) of the synagogue. Rabbi Loew also orders the golem to "guard the ghetto at night and catch those planting false evidence of the Blood Lie." However, Wisniewski's story again takes a turn away from the standard storyline when he has the rabbi find his creation standing in the street at sunrise. When the rabbi questions the golem concerning this unusual action, the creature responds by expressing its wonder at the beauty of the scene: "'The sun is rising,' said Golem. 'The sky changes from black to blue. It is very beautiful.'"



This ability to experience wonder at something as intangible as beauty is the most meaningful expression of Wisniewski's own contribution to the evolution of the golem legend. Although previous golems have had limited intelligence and the power of speech, Wisniewski's golem steps beyond these parameters in its ability to question the rabbi's actions and to appreciate the beauty of nature. Even the golems in stories by I. B. Singer and Elie Wiesel, written for an older audience, never develop beyond verbalizing their own personal desires. To be sure, Singer's and Wiesel's golems articulate their loneliness; however, they never achieve the level of sophistication necessary to express wonder.

In this way, Wisniewski's golem eclipses previous incarnations. This golem is not an unquestioning or unfeeling machine, as it is so often portrayed in legend. Rather, Wisniewski's Joseph Golem appears even more human than its creator, who responds to its creation's wonder with cynicism. "Rabbi Loew sighed. How simple Golem was! The smallest thing--the scent of a rose, the flight of a pigeon--filled him [the golem] with wonder. 'Joseph!' he replied. 'Finish your work. Then you can watch the sun rise.'" This reversal of roles forces the reader to question which of the two is the automaton and which the human.

Wisniewski again relies upon established themes when he describes the golem's going out of control and the violence which ensues. As in previous stories, Wisniewski's golem responds to the threat to the ghetto by growing larger in stature and killing indiscriminately. Although this is not a new element, the author does add dimension to the scene through his powerful cut-paper illustrations. For example, by using an aerial view of Rabbi Loew and his golem standing on one side of the gates to the ghetto and the mob of angry Christians standing on the other side, Wisniewski dynamically juxtaposes these small figures of the rabbi and the mob against the gigantic, dominating figure of the golem. Wisniewski's illustration, more than words, conveys the insignificance of the human element when compared to the supernatural power of the golem. More than his text, this scene provides readers with an image of the golem which is both memorable and frightening.

Wisniewski concludes his story in a traditional manner by mentioning Rabbi Loew's meeting with the "emperor" to discuss the golem's continued existence. Even though the author doesn't mention the emperor by name, we know that this is Rudolf II from the references to the "Prague Castle" and from Rudolf's historical promise to "guarantee the safety" of the Jewish community. Loew promises to destroy his golem, and warns the Emperor by stating: "It will be done. . . . But if we are threatened again, Golem will return, stronger than before."

Rabbi Loew returns to the ghetto intent on destroying Joseph Golem. As often occurs in stories describing the end of the golem, Wisniewski's Golem seems to know that the time for its destruction is near. Ironically, but not unintentionally, Wisniewski has Rabbi Loew find his creation in the cemetery watching the sunset. He informs it that its "purpose is at an end." After questioning its creator's decision, the golem looks out upon the beauty of the setting sun and asks, "Will I remember this?" [6] When Rabbi Loew responds, "No. . . . You will be clay," the golem refuses to obey its creator. Unexpectedly, Loew lashes out with his staff, erasing the first letter of the word engraved on the creature's forehead: "At this, emet -- truth -- became met: Death." As the golem begins to crumble into clay, it pleads, "Oh, Father! Do not do this to me! Please! Please let me live! I did all that you asked of me! Life is so . . . precious . . . to me!" However, its pleas are in vain. The golem's question and its plea for continued life are yet another example of the importance of Wisniewski's story to the continuing evolution of the literary golem. Wisniewski's golem desires more than mere existence; it wishes to experience the intangible beauty of life. That Rabbi Loew can so cavalierly disregard his creation's plea once more communicates to the reader that it is the golem, and not the rabbi, who is truly human in this tale.

Golem ends conventionally with Rabbi Loew and his two assistants removing the remains of the golem to the attic of the synagogue and covering it with old prayer books. Although the golem "had not truly been a man," the men do say Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, over it. The act of reciting the Kaddish is not new to the legends, as this component has appeared in previous stories. However, the saying of the Kaddish is often used to demonstrate the depth of the relationship existing between Rabbi Loew and his golem. In Wisniewski's story, no such expression of friendship or love is ever established. Thus, in *Golem*, the saying of the prayer is simply a formality, in alignment with other legends. The story concludes with the customary admonition that the golem will one day return should the need arise.

The golem legends attached to Judah Loew were once a part of the Jewish ghetto experience. Now, as the millennium approaches, the golem is experiencing a renaissance of expression. In addition to Wisniewski's book, the golem has appeared in another children's book also published in 1996, *The*



Golem: A Version, by Barbara Rogasky and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Moreover, the golem has recently been the central storyline of the syndicated television series, *The X-Files* and *Snow in August: A Novel* (1997), by Pete Hamill. Yet, what is unique to Wisniewski's work is the sense of wonder and nobility the author brings to this legend and to the golem itself. In *Golem*, David Wisniewski captures the essence of the golem legends and makes them live again for a new generation of readers.

Shandel Gamer

Notes

1. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1977) 161,166.
2. The authenticity of the Nifla'ot has been called into question by various scholars. Rosenberg stated that he found a 300 year old manuscript supposedly written by Judah Loew's son-in-law which describes the miraculous deeds of Rabbi Loew and his golem. Several inaccurate descriptions of Prague at the time Loew was Chief Rabbi suggest that the document was most likely penned by Rosenberg himself. Whether the Nifla'ot is a forgery may never be established; however, regardless of the authorship, the significance of this seminal work as a literary document is without question.
3. Blood Libel (Lie) stories related how Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian babies in the making of Passover matzoth. Historical incidents of blood accusations continued to occur into the twentieth century.
4. Because the book is not paginated, quotes from *Golem* lack page references.
5. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1973) 240-241. Scholem is referring to the distinction between the "three spiritual agencies: Nefesh or life; Ruach or spirit and Neshamah or soul proper." The soul (neshamah) is often viewed as divine intellect.
6. Interestingly, the golem's question echoes the HAL 9000 computer's "Will I dream?" in Peter Hymans' film version of Arthur C. Clarke's *2010: The Year We Made Contact*, 1984.

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