

The Golem Is a Myth for Our Time



The cast of "The Golem," a play by H. Leivick based on the 16th century legend of the Golem of Prague, counterclockwise from upper left: Joe Parisi, David Gregory, Carl Don and Christopher McCann, Joseph Wiseman and F. Murray Abraham. In background, Randy Quaid in the title role. The production, directed by Richard Foreman, opens Thursday at the Delacorte.

By ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

On the occasion of New York Shakespeare Festival's production of "The Golem" by H. Leivick, opening this Thursday at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, I have been asked to express an opinion about why the myth of the golem — an artificial man created, among other instances, to defend the Jews of Prague in the sixteenth century — has interested so many creative people in the past and continues to do so even today in our epoch of science and technology. In the Yiddish tradition I will answer the question with a question: why shouldn't this legend have influenced and intrigued creative minds? It possesses the tension and the suspense of the supernatural. It is based on a faith almost as old as the human species —

namely, that dead matter is not really dead but can be brought to life. I am not exaggerating when I say that the golem story appears less obsolete today than it seemed one hundred years ago. What are the computers and robots of our time if not golems?

The word "golem" is mentioned in the Bible only once, in the Book of Psalms; "Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance." It was understood as something potential, like an embryo, or perhaps like the stuff which the occultists call the astral body. Only in later times has the word golem come to mean an artificial man created by magic. The prophets have constantly warned the people of Israel against the belief that man could ever compete with God's creative powers. But there was always a concealed hope in man that somehow he could solve the riddle of Creation and break the code to its secrets.

But the basis of the Golem myth — Jewish mysti-

cism, or the Cabbalah as it was called later — is as old as the Bible and perhaps even older. According to Cabbalistic tradition the Book of Creation, Cabbalah's oldest text, was written by the Patriarch Abraham who transmitted it to his son Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, Jacob to Joseph and thus it was carried from generation to generation. The mystery of Creation as it is described in this esoteric book is contained in the 22 letters of the Alphabet and in the various names of God which can be combined from them. God Himself was supposed to have used them in creating the world. The Talmud tells us of an interpreter by the name of Rabba who formed a man by this mysterious power and also of some others who created a calf for themselves on the eve of the Sabbath and ate it for the Sabbath meal.

The golem myth includes female golems. In this continuation on Page 25

Why the Golem Legend Speaks To Our Time

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cellent monograph on the golem legend, Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin tells us of a female golem created by the great Jewish poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol who suffered from a severe skin sickness, perhaps leprosy, and had to live in isolation. He was said to have created the woman golem to keep house for him, to be his companion or perhaps his concubine. According to the legend, this golem was put together from wood and hinges — not a very convenient helpmate for a genius with a vulnerable skin. He was forced to get rid of her only when the religious leaders discovered her. Obviously, a female golem did not menstruate and did not need to take ablutions in the ritual bath to be cleansed for copulation. Also, since a golem is not born from men's semen and is not grown in a woman's womb, there was no sin in destroying her.

So strong was the belief in the golem among Jewish scholars that one of them, Rabbi Zvi Ashkenazi, debated whether a golem can be included in a minyan — a quorum of 10 men which the law demands for various religious ceremonies.

The most famous legend of a golem is the one created in Prague, Bohemia, in the 16th century, in the time of Emperor Rudolf II — a mystic, an alchemist, an astrologist, an ardent Christian, a friend and supporter of Tycho Brahe and Kepler. The Jews of Prague were in great danger because of accusations brought against them, one being that they used Christian blood in baking their matzo's. This golem was supposed to have been made of clay by Rabbi Loew or Leib, a Talmudic scholar, a renowned Cabbalist and also a worldly man for one in his time. In his writings he discusses astronomy, geography and other scientific matters. In his book, "Be'er Hagolah," he defended the Talmud against its severe critics who tried to find in it many follies and heretical statements. In one case, the Talmud was assailed for permitting a certain position in sexual intercourse which the anti-Talmudists considered a perversion. Rabbi Leib argued almost like a modern man, pointing out that since man gives to the woman form and spiritual exultation by his love, there is really no difference in how the act is performed. It is not an accident that Rabbi Leib's golem has gained more fame and inspired more novelists and playwrights than any other golem legend before him or after.

As far as H. Leivick's play is concerned, he made his golem not only a defender of the Jews, but also a philosopher and one who asked the eternal questions. I am sure that none of those worldly writers like Leivick, Gustav Meyrink, Arthur Holitscher, Johannes Hess and others believed that a golem did exist and worked all the miracles ascribed to him. But I am convinced that these writers felt in the legend of the golem a profound kinship to artistic creativity. Each work of art has the elements of a miracle. The golem maker was, essentially, an artist. Art is a profession that can not really be taught. Emile Zola's dream of rational and scientific art was never realized. Writers, painters, sculptors, composers of music have often been probed as to how they create; what comes first, the idea or the topic; where and how

lies precurred the truths of the future: men's attempt to endow mechanisms with qualities that God has given to the human brain.

We are living in an epoch of golem-making right now. The gap between science and magic, science and art is becoming narrower. The scientist of our time cannot be precise anymore. He often deals with objects of whose existence he is not sure and whose functions he cannot define. He can no longer decide whether the light we see consists of particles, waves or both. The atom which used to be the cornerstone of materialism is becoming a phantom. The Universe that exploded like a cosmic bomb some twenty billion years ago and ran away from itself, can no longer be elucidated by any plausible theory. Albert Einstein was supposed to have said that God or nature does not play dice. But this is what nature seems to be doing. Some of our scientists ascribe to blind evolution more improbable coincidents than all the wonders the teleologists could ever devise. Matter turns into energy, energy into matter and matter can be totally nullified by anti-matter (if it exists). The particles of the atom seem to multiply and what they will do can only be estimated by statistics. Galaxies explode, devour one another, tear off

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pieces from each other and run away into nowhere. We are told that the Universe is constantly on the brink of falling apart and is held together by a cosmic "glue."

How imaginative and hopeful the Cabbalah appears in comparison with this gloomy cosmology! The Universe of the Cabbalists was not created by some contrived explosion but by God's wisdom, splendor, and mercy. Man was bestowed with the greatest gift the Godhead could offer — free will. Because man is the weakest link in the chain of emanation, he is also the strongest. All worlds and spheres depend on his moral strength, his choices. Man's love for woman reflects God's love for His female counterpart, the Shechinah. Man's sins bring sadness to angels, seraphim, cherubim on High, delay the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of humanity. Man's virtuous actions enhance Creation, give meaning to God's divine experiments. Even the netherworld of Satan and Asmodeus, demons and hobgoblins has its purpose. According to the great Cabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, God had to dim His light and create a vacuum within His infinity to make place for the world. This vacuum became the shadow of evil, the dark background of the luminous world picture. Without evil, free choice would be meaningless.

In the golem legends, the golem often became independent, rebellious and a danger to his maker. The golem of Prague, for example, turned out to be an extreme literalist. When he was ordered to bring water from the well into Rabbi Leib's house, he kept on carrying pails of water in until the house was flooded. It grew more and more difficult to "program" him. He became so unruly that Rabbi Leib had to erase the sacred name engraved on his clay forehead and thus put an end to his existence. According to legend, his body was hidden in the attic of the old synagogue in Prague.

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do they get their inspiration. But no matter how willing the artists were and how hard they tried to explain their motivations and methods, they never succeeded. It always seemed that they were unwilling to divulge their secrets, the combination of style and theme, mood and purpose which made them do what appeared to the disciplined mind the impossible — playing a game without rules.

Even in our time, when science and technology grow in an astounding way, people are usually more impressed by a great painting, a highly inspired novel or play than they are by scientific discoveries. They admire the scientist but they are not puzzled by him. They still assume that his achievements can be analyzed, explained, repeated at will, improved by others. The very opposite is true about art. The artist must love the matter which he forms. He must believe in it, grant it life, bewitch it and be bewitched by it. There hasn't yet lived anyone who could improve upon the "Song of Songs," Homer's Iliad, Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," or Michelangelo's "Moses." The golem-makers were actually the fiction masters of their time. In a way they were lying to themselves and to others, but their

Isaac Bashevis Singer, who writes in Yiddish, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978.

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The resemblance of this golem to the golems of our nuclear age staggers the imagination. While we attempt to surpass our enemies and to create new and more destructive golems, the awful possibility is lurking that they may develop a volition of their own, become spiteful, treacherous, mad golems. Like the Jews of Prague in the sixteenth century we are frightened by our golems. We would like to be in a position to erase the uncanny power we have given them, hide them in some monstrous attic and wait for the time when they too will become fiction and folklore.

Can we actually do it? Do we possess enough free will to make a decision of this immensity? Will Satan and his host of devils and demons let it happen? This is the golem drama of our epoch. It may come back again and again into literature, the theater, film and other media in various forms and versions. There are many among us who deny that free will was ever given to us. To them all men are nothing but golems. Our history is a preordained history of golems. Freedom is and will remain an illusion. In a number of lands this way of thinking is obligatory, decreed by super golems, forced to be the basis of all science, all arts, the very essence of life. According to the Cabbalistic thinkers, bloody wars are always fought by golems. The real and most important war is the one between the lure of the flesh and the aspirations of the soul; between the sublime sense of freedom and the deadly slavery of being and behaving like a golem. ■

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