

Who is the Golem?
 A Meditation on Human Responsibility
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It was strange to step down from street level to enter the main vestibule of the ancient building. The stone steps were smooth with age, perhaps even more ancient still. It took a moment to adjust to the shimmering of light and shadow in the late day's sun, בין השמשות / *beyn hash'ma'shot / between the suns*, a time of yearning that is neither day nor night. I stood there in the stillness to take in the aura held in the nether reaches of time and space. From Psalm 130, infusing the architecture of the sacred, שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה' / *Shir ha'ma'alos mi'ma'amakim k'rasicha Ha'shem / A Song of Ascents, From out of the depths have I called you, O, God*. So a stepping down, that our prayers might ascend from the depths, down these time-worn steps, my prayers to rise with theirs.

In Prague for a summer conference, I had come to Europe's oldest synagogue on the evening of my father's *Sh'loshim*, the thirtieth day since his death, a stepping stone, smooth and time-worn, in the mourner's journey. The Altneuschul, the "Old-New Shul," was built in 1270. It had been the new shul in relation to earlier ones when it was built, but with the destruction of the earlier ones, it soon became the old New Shul," thus Altneuschul, in relation to subsequent new ones. Legend offers another explanation for its name, one that makes of the venerable shul a bridge between past and future. From the Jerusalem ruins of Solomon's Temple, angels brought stones for the Prague synagogue *al t'nai/on condition* that they be returned with the coming of the *Mashiach*, when human history rises from the depths in a great Song of Ascents.

I had been at Terezin/Tereisenstadt that day, the concentration camp some thirty kilometers from Prague, nexus of Czech Jewry's destruction, place from which tracks led to the death camps to the east, Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek. Presented to the world with evil artifice as a "model" camp, a place of Jewish self-government, a place where the arts flourished, it was a place of death. The art produced by the Jews held there, most powerfully by children, continues to scream out in silent witness, affirming their own humanity as spiritual resistance to evil. Ubiquitous symbol of the Nazi hell, there are ovens there too, if not gas chambers, the number of dead quickly becoming too many for the burial of bodies.

Standing before the ovens, alone, I turned in my fingers a small piece of flint carried in my pocket from the Belgian North Sea coast. With the same deep intention as when I had carried a similar piece of flint to Dachau two years before, it had become my way of remembrance. A metaphor for the imperishable spirit of the Jew, flint is a source of fire, sparks cascading when steel is struck upon the stone. Flint can be immersed in water and immediately upon being withdrawn produce sparks. So have Jews been compared to flint, regardless of how far one is from their people, how cruelly wrenched from life, still the essential Jewish spark, *dos pintele yid*, ready to be called forth. Holding the stone tightly, investing it with my tears and prayers, I reached in to the iron mouth with trembling hand and placed the piece of flint on one of the rails meant to expedite the smooth entrance of bodies. In the place of demonic fire, holy fire, sparks of life, soul sparks.

Returning to Prague in a daze, I went first to the old Jewish cemetery where the dead of ages past, lovingly buried in sacred rite, not cast as ash upon the wind, sleep in the shadow of the Altneueschul. I sought my way along the maze of twisting pathways, hand-chiseled Hebrew upon worn stones that butt up one to another in more than neighborly closeness. Coming to the most famous grave, I waited for tourists to pass and then found a place to be alone. Scattered tins of *yahrzeit* candles and telltale streaks of melted wax upon the stone itself told of *amcha/the common folk* who had come to honor his memory. Tightly folded scraps of paper were tucked into every crevice and cranny, each *k'vittel* holding in its folds the outpourings of a heart, pleading for the holy rabbi's intercession above. Asking his permission, I then took out from my pack, a small *sefer kodesh/a holy book* carried through the long day, there to learn in his presence from the wisdom of the MaHaRaL of Prague.

Known by his acronym, *Morenu Harav Rabbi Liva / Our Teacher The Rabbi Rabbi Liva*, Rabbi Yehudah ben B'tzalel Loew, the MaHaRaL remains across four centuries the most famous rabbi of the Altneueschul. A revered community rabbi, a talmudist and commentator, a moralist and mathematician, his knowledge spanned worlds, religious and secular. Through friendship with the Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, he received an audience with the emperor, opportunity then to intercede with human authority on behalf of his people. I found comfort in the time spent with the MaHaRaL, even more than I might have imagined. The title of the small volume I now opened carries layers of meaning, surely intentional, for us to wrestle with, *N'tivot Olam/Eternal Paths*, or did he mean *Paths of the World*, time and space become as one, the vision and the way? I was drawn to his teaching on peace, *N'tiv Ha'shalom/the Path of Peace*. From book and grave and the world beyond, he seemed to be speaking directly to me as a seeker of peace and as a mourner. I was not sure if it was my voice or his that spoke the words out loud: *ha'shalom hu sh'laymut ha'kol/peace is the wholeness of everything/v'hu noten ha'm'tzi'ut el ha'kol/and it gives (of its) reality to everything,/u'mip'ne kach ra'u'i/and therefore it is fitting/el rod'fei ha'shalom ha'simcha/that for the seekers of peace there be joy/ki ha'simcha hu/for there is joy/ka'asher nim'tza davar b'sh'laymut/when there is found in a matter (its) wholeness / k'mo she'ha'avel al hef'sed*

v'chisaron/as for a mourner concerning their loss and emptiness (Sifre Ha'MaHaRaL, N'tivot Olam, vol. 1, p. 213). How did he know?, I wondered, his words reminding me that it was time to go to shul, his shul, to mark my father's *Sh'loshim*.

A minyan gathered slowly, mostly of tourists who had mingled with each other outside in the narrow street between the shul and the old Jewish town hall. High above, on the famous clock tower of the communal building, two clocks turned in opposite directions. One turned in the usual clockwise way around Roman numerals, the other counter clockwise around Hebrew letters, cycles of time forward and back meeting in the present, harmonized in relation to twelve and six, as in the present moment of our gathering at 6:30, *beyn hash'ma'shot / between the suns*. A caretaker appeared, opening the heavy wooden door, questioning each of us intensely before allowing us to descend from street level to the depths from which our prayers might rise. Uniquely arranged, the straight-backed seats in the Altneueschul are all placed next to each other, backs against the wall, encircling the room, each seat with its own folding *shtender* upon which to place a holy book. The raised *bimah* in the center, across from the holy ark, is surrounded by a web of wrought iron filigree work, as though wistfully to protect with its delicate beauty all who ascend from below.

Only one member of the local community was present as we began to daven *Ma'ariv*, blessing the One whose word brings on the evening dusk, a young Yeshiva *bocher* from New York leading us. The community elder sat in his own seat in front of the *bimah*, against the wall from which rose the filigree work, directly across from the most ornate of all the seats. Set against the eastern wall, alongside the *aron ha'kodesh*, a cord draped between its arms that none might sit there, and so it has remained for some four hundred years. It is the seat of the MaHaRaL. I stood just a little behind the communal elder, and slightly to his right, facing the chair of the one with whom I had learned only a short while before. As it came time to say Kaddish, the elder rose and we began to say the holy words together. It became clear that he was saying Kaddish as a matter of course for all of those who have no one to say Kaddish on their behalf. When the man realized that I was an *avel/a mourner*, he lowered his voice and motioned to me in deference. Overcome with emotion, I understood what he meant, trying mightily to stem the flow of tears as they rose with the holy words carried on my voice, *Yisgadal V'yiskadash Sh'mei Rabboh....* As well as for my father, I was saying Kaddish for all those souls deported from Prague to Terezin and beyond. Standing there in the shul of the MaHaRaL, across from his seat, a *Song of Ascents* rising from the depths to the high vaulted ceilings and beyond, gathering holy sparks, holding all of those whom the *golem* had failed to protect....

Who is the *golem*? Even more difficult to ask, is it the *golem* who failed to protect all of those remembered on that night, whose souls and spirit along with that of the *golem* hover in the dense air of the Altneueschul? The *golem* is the stuff of ancient legend, shuttled forth and reshaped through the ages, emerging as a vicarious force for salvation when Jews were threatened in their lands of exile. The *golem*, though

perhaps better to speak of a golem, all contained in the one, is a figure of human appearance formed of earth by human hands. Given form through the four elements of air, fire, water, and earth, the golem is animated by spirit drawn from God's most holy name, incantations of its letters arranged and rearranged according to mystical formulae. Among the traditions of its animation the word **EMET**/TRUTH is written upon the golem's forehead. Small in stature at first, in the way of human development, the golem grows until attaining giant proportions. Meant to follow its creator's commands, when the golem oversteps its bounds it can become a danger through abuse of its great strength, the very strength that is meant to be for good, to protect. Then, the letter **א**/*aleph* is removed from the word **EMET** upon its brow, and only **MT**/Met/Death remains, the golem returning to dust, to the earth from which it came.

The most famous and enduring legend of the golem is that of the Golem of Prague. Of yearning that emerged out of the vicissitudes of Jewish history that swirled through the lands of exile, the people at times gave in to the charlatan song of a false messiah. At other times, they conjured up the powerful figure of a golem, given shape through the hands and stature of a revered teacher and leader. Along with their scattered kin in other lands, the Jews of Prague knew well the horrors to follow on medieval libels, the blood libel and desecration of the host. They knew the whetted sword of the Crusading hordes that swept down from the Rhine Valley. They knew expulsion even from the home they had created within their city of exile, and when allowed to remain they knew the persecution that was abetted by required Jewish dress. Long down the sorrowing stream of time, celebrating life and learning all along the way, they would know the demonic fire carried by the minions of hell from across the border with Germany that would devour their bodies and forever singe their souls.

As popular need sought hands and wisdom to give shape to hope, and the yearning of the people welled up for a leader of stature and power to intercede with both heaven and earth, the MaHaRaL of Prague became in legend the creator of the most famous golem, the Golem of Prague. As the prayer notes left in the crevices of his stone attest, the power of the MaHaRaL extends beyond the grave, unbound by time and space. Read back through centuries, it is a legend powerfully rooted in a presence still felt when standing before an empty chair. The legend is said to have no basis in fact, but I am not so sure. I think there is another way to understand it. (True, the MaHaRaL never wrote about a golem, nor sought renown for creating one.) Yes, there are the tantalizing elements of myth, the sealed attic door in the upper reaches of the Altneueschul where legend tells of the golem's formation and where its dust is said to remain. There is the ladder that begins half way up the outer wall to where entrance might have been gained to the attic, but now no more. (There is to this day the unusual repetition of the Shabbos Psalm (Ps. 92) in the Altneueschul, which, according to the telling, had been interrupted when on a Friday evening the golem ran

amok. Beyond myth, there is something deeper and more important that speaks to a greater truth than a word upon the golem's brow.

Who is the Golem? There is another way to understand the legend, one that has given rise to this Meditation on Human Responsibility. Encountering the MaHaRaL in a way I never had before, taking in his Torah in the city where he lived, learning at his grave, standing before his chair and weeping for those not saved, I have come to feel a truth to the legend that is not the truth commonly assumed to be. It is a truth that pulsates in the writings of the MaHaRaL, not always, but enough to make it real. It is a truth that is rooted in the most ancient of our sources, the same texts that he studied, whether in moments of ascent to his attic, or when calling out from the depths among his people, or when teaching Torah before the iron filigree work, woven as though to protect. It is a truth that teaches of human responsibility.

There is only one appearance in Tanach of any form of the word golem, and it refers to the human being, unformed as an embryo, in dialogue with God, imagining time unfolding: עיניך ראו גלמי ראו עיניך / *galmi ra'u eynecha/Your eyes have seen my unformed substance/ my golem*, (Ps. 139:16). In a midrash (P'sikta d'Rav Kahana, 23) that draws on an earlier Talmudic source (Sanhedrin 38b), the human begins as a golem, shaped of earth by God, much in the way that legend later describes the human creation of a golem: first God *gathered earth/כנס עפרו/ kines afar*, and then *גבלו/ giblo/kneaded it*, and then *רקמו/ rikmo/shaped it* and then *caused the golem to stand upon its legs/העמידו גלם על רגליו/ he'emido golem al raglav*. And then the final step that makes the human more than a lump of clay, that makes us worthy of protection and calls us to protect others, *זרק בו נשמה/ zarak bo n'shoma/God set within it a soul*.

The human and the golem are each of the earth, the uniqueness of our own (tellurian) bond and its hope expressed in our name, *Adam*, creature of the earth, *Adamah*. In God's creation of the human from the earth to which we shall return, the rabbis saw a bond between people and earth and people and each other, our common source the hoped for seedbed of harmony and reconciliation. To minimize strife and triumphalism, the rabbis imagined God taking from the dust of many different lands to create the one human being: *גופו מבבל/ gufo me'bovel/for their torso from Babylonia, וראשו מארץ ישראל/ v'rosho me'eretz yisra'el/and for their head from the Land of Israel, ואבריו ממשאר ארצות/ v'avarav mi'sh'ar artzot/and for their limbs from the other lands*, mention made even of their buttocks, dust to be taken from a low-lying place called *אקרא/ Akra d'Agma* (Sanhedrin 38b).

Endowed with a soul, we are further distinguished from the golem of human hands through our universal creation in the image of God. When we fail to recognize that unifying image in each other, then the desperate need for a golem formed of human

hands to protect and save from the consequence of our own fear and hatred of one another. The MaHaRaL writes of human unity as held in the image of God, drawing first on mystical imagery of the primordial human that eerily suggests the stature of the golem of Prague legend: *קומת האדם מן המזרח עד המערב ומן הארץ עד הרקיע/komat ha'adam min ha'mizrach ad ha'ma'arav u'min ha'aretz ad ha'raki'a/the stature of the human is from the east to the west and from the earth to the sky...; כי בצלם אלקים ברא את האדם/ki b'tzelem elokim bara et ha'adam/for in the image of God did God create the human/שהאדם שהוא נברא/שהאדם הוא כולל כל עולמו/she'ha'adam she'hu nivra b'tzalmo/thus created in God's image/הוא כולל כל עולמו/hu kolel kol olamo/the human contains all of God's world... (Sifre Ha'MaHaRaL, Gur Aryeh, vol. 5, Parashat Va'etchanan, p. 30-31).*

Who is the Golem? The human being when joined one to another, each one meant to be a protector of the other, is the golem toward which the writing of the Maharal of Prague points. Yearning for an end to the exile of his people, including even the ingathering of the Ten Lost Tribes, the MaHaRaL can also be read to offer hope for the end of human exile, our dispersion from each other. With apparent awareness of the European arrival in the Americas, he writes: *For they say that recently a certain place has been found, called by them in their tongue a new world that is not known from before/עולם חדש שלא נודע מקודם/olam chadash she'lo noda mi'kodem (Sifre Ha'MaHaRaL, Netzach Yisrael, ch. 34, p. 156).*

Of brutality brought then to these shores, not as a golem to save, the white man came. Another Jew from Prague, who became Bar Mitzvah centuries later in the Altneueschul, who would have chanted Torah surrounded by that delicate iron filagree work, across from the empty chair of the MaHaRaL, Franz Kafka offers warning in his imagining of the Statue of Liberty, not in the way of a protective golem, but, as he writes in his novel, *Amerika*, "as though in an intenser sunlight. The sword in her hand seemed only just to have been raised aloft, and the unchained winds blew about her form" (*Amerika*, p. 3).

Not on the coordinates of a nautical chart or an explorer's globe, a new world still waits to emerge from the old, an "altneue" world in which none shall need a golem to save, neither of God's creation nor of human. In the meantime, in the way of these musings as *A Meditation on Human Responsibility*, Who is the Golem? It is you and me, each one of us upon whom the world depends. And so it is, until that time when stones given on condition, *al t'nai*, shall be returned, Temple stones, rough-edged and un-hewn, like the scars upon a mourner's heart, seeking wholeness. Stepping down the time-worn stairs of the Altneueschul, my prayers to rise with theirs, so may our prayers rise together from the depths and become a great Song of Ascents.