How the Golem Came to Prague

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THE LEGEND OF THE GOLEM, the mute clay servant brought to life by Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague and who ran amok one Sabbath, is one of the most enduring and imaginative tales in modern Jewish folklore. Although its roots ultimately lie in late antique rabbinic literature, the story dilates somewhat dramatically in the nineteenth century.1 While

most studies of the Golem tradition acknowledge that the association of
the legend with R. Loew and Prague is an early nineteenth-century phe-
nomenon, there has been little exploration of the first stages of that pro-
cess of association, before the mid-1840s. There was, however, a surprising
amount of literary activity surrounding the Prague version of the legend
in the decade immediately preceding. In this essay, we would like to focus
on the period between 1834 and 1847, and particularly on two sources
near either end of that chronological range that have hitherto never been
discussed in any printed scholarship on the Golem. Together they shed
valuable light on the transformation of a shadowy oral legend into per-
haps the most famous of all modern Jewish literary fantasies.

The popularity and plasticity of the Golem gain momentum from a
short entry by Jakob Grimm in 1808 in the literary and folklore journal
Zeitung für Einsiedler (Journal for Hermits), the principal organ of the
Heidelberg Romantics edited by Grimm’s mentors Achim von Arnim and
Clemens Brentano:2

The Polish Jews, after speaking certain prayers and observing fast
days, made the figure of a man out of clay or loam, and when they
speak the miracle-working Schemhamphoras over it, the figure comes

100–104; Arnold Goldsmith, The Golem Remembered, 1909–1980: Variations of a Jew-

ish Legend (Detroit, 1981); Sigrid Mayer, Golem: Die literarische Rezeption eines Stoff-
zes (Bern, 1975); Beate Rosenfeld, Die Golemwaage und ihre Verwertung in der deutschen
Literatur (Breslau, 1954). On the Golem of Prague specifically, see also John
Neubauer, “How Did the Golem Get to Prague?” in History of the Literary Cultures
of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries, vol.
4, Types and Stereotypes, ed. M. Cornis-Pope and J. Neubauer (Amsterdam, 2010),
296–307; Norbert Nübler, “Der Prager Golem,” in Jüdische Welten in Osteuropa,
ed. A. Engel-Braunschmidt and E. Hübner (Frankfurt, 2005), 209–18; Vladimír
Sadek, “Stories of the Golem and their Relation to the Work of Rabbi Löw of
from Seven Ghettos (London, 1948), 153–65; Vilém Klein, “Pražský Golem,” Věta

2. On the Heidelberg Romantics, see Friedrich Strack, ed., 200 Jahre Heidel-
berger Romantik (Heidelberg, 2008); Jon Vanden Heuvel, A German Life in the Age
literature discussed there. There has been no study of the Zeitung für Einsiedler
see Jessen’s brief Nachwort to the facsimile reprint of 1962 (Hans Jessen, ed.,
Zeitung für Einsiedler mit Nachwort [Darmstadt]). For a brief discussion of Grimm’s
piece in relation to the surrounding articles in the same issue of the journal, see
alive. It is true that he cannot speak, but he understands reasonably well what anyone says to him and commands him to do. They call him Golem and use him as a servant to do all sorts of housework, but he may never leave the house alone. On his forehead is written Aemaeth (Truth; God). However, he increases in size daily and easily becomes larger and stronger than all his housemates, regardless of how small he was at first. Therefore, fearing him, they rub out the first letter, so that nothing remains but Maeth (he is dead), whereupon he collapses and is dissolved again into clay.

But once, out of carelessness, someone allowed his Golem to become so tall that he could no longer reach his forehead. Then, out of fear, the master ordered the servant to take off his boots, thinking that he would bend down and that then the master could reach his forehead. This is what happened, and the first letter was successfully erased, but the whole load of clay fell on the Jew and crushed him.3

Grimm’s version is quite minimal compared to some of the fully developed narratives of the later nineteenth century, but it was enough to spark the imagination of several leading Romantics such as Arnim and E. T. A. Hoffmann. One of the earliest, and certainly most exaggerated, examples of the ludic nature of the legend’s reception is Arnim’s novel Isabella von Aegypten (1812), which features the Golem as an estranged bride filled with “Hochmut, Wollust, und Geiz” (pride, lewdness, and parsimony).4 In fact, many critics have read Arnim’s sexually charged Golem Bella as a critique of Romantic desire, a testimony to the legend’s departure from rabbinic quarters.5 Heinrich Heine’s analysis of Arnim’s novel in his influential Die romantische Schule (The Romantic School) undoubtedly also contributed to the Golem’s increasing popularity.6

3. Jakob Grimm, “Entstehung der Verlagspoesie,” Zeitung für Einsiedler 1 (1808): 56 (= Jakob Grimm, Kleinere Schriften [Berlin, 1869], 4:22). All translations are our own unless otherwise specified. We have preserved Grimm’s original spelling in his transcriptions of Hebrew words. The piece was only the fifth article published by the young Grimm in his varied and illustrious career as a philologist, folklorist, and jurist.


the middle of the century, the Golem had become folded into a larger set of Romantic motifs that included the doppelgänger, galvanization, Faustian sorcery, and various automata including, most famously, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster. Succumbing to the Romantic appetite for all things legendary, the ancient rabbinic story of man’s mystical simulation of the divine creation becomes a trope of mutability. Like the piece of clay from which he is created, the literary Golem can be shaped and molded to resemble any form, from the spectral figures in Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s poetry to Leopold Kompert’s nostalgic project and finally to Yudl Rosenberg’s great protector of the Jewish people at the turn of the twentieth century.

Since at least the middle of the seventeenth century the legend had been centered on the Polish city of Chelm and the famous R. Elijah Ba’al Shem. As Jewish writers responded to Grimm, Arnim, and Brentano with their own literary versions, the legend began to migrate and crystallize around R. Judah Loew, known as the Maharal of Prague. The decisive move in establishing this new locus for the legend was the publication of Leopold Weisel’s “Der Golem” in 1847 in an influential collection of Jewish tales of Prague issued by the Bohemian editor and publisher Wolf Pascheles. This collection was an instant success and went through many editions over the next six decades, thus ensuring that Weisel’s version became the standard for the rest of the century. Weisel fixes the legend to the Maharal, despite the fact that R. Loew was never in his


lifetime associated with kabbalistic practices of the sort described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation), one of the earliest Jewish mystical texts, and a volume that actually enjoyed a revival in Loew’s sixteenth-century Prague.\textsuperscript{11} Because of the importance of Weisel’s text as a baseline for the Prague version, we present a translation here:

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* (magic formula) 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, 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.

As the legend became increasingly associated with Prague and R. Loew, it became moored and unable to retain what folklorists describe as its

\textsuperscript{11} On the *Sefer Yetzirah* and Golem-making, see Scholem, “Idea of the Golem,” 180–95.
ecotypified nature. An ecotypified legend is one that is free to take on the locality of the place it arrives in because it is essentially and narratologically located in no one place. Place and name are not fundamental to the narration of the story; they are blanks to be filled in by the local storyteller. On this model, the Golem legend told in the streets of Prague differs from the one told in the streets of Vienna, Copenhagen, or Chelm only by the particular rabbis and towns it invokes. The point of adopting the tale is to lay claim that this all happened not very far from here. Once local variation is removed as a variable from the narration, then the material ceases to be legendary and undergoes a transformation into a full-fledged literary phenomenon, which somewhat counterintuitively allows for all sorts of expansions and revisions. In other words, once the rabbi and city are frozen in the European consciousness, the Golem is figuratively able to come alive and run amok. This helps explain the dramatic literary recastings by Jewish writers after the Weisel version appears, such as those by Ludwig Kalisch, Leopold Kompert, Moritz Bermann, and Ludwig Frankl.

But, as we have already suggested, Weisel was not the first writer to associate the Golem with Prague. In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to an earlier version of the Prague tale reported in 1841 by the non-Jewish journalist and folklorist Franz Klutschak. Likewise, several studies have acknowledged, without much discussion, earlier literary attestations going back as far as Berthold Auerbach’s popular historical novel Spinoza in 1837. Compared to the prismatic gleam of the

12. See, for example, Timothy Tangherlini, “’It Happened Not Too Far from Here . . .’: A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization,” Western Folklore 49 (1990): 385, “Legend, typically, is a short (mono-) episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs.”


post-Weisel versions, the attestations in the decade before Weisel, when, it should be stressed, the details of the legend’s rigidity are still being worked out, are quite sober. These earlier, perhaps even purer, literary renditions present a more granulated picture of Jewish storytelling in the early nineteenth century.

It is precisely the literary nature of these renditions, however, that has made scholars resist them. Whereas Weisel and Klutschak present their versions as folkloric records along the model that Grimm establishes, these other narrations are self-consciously artistic. Thus despite the fact that Auerbach’s version has been almost universally acknowledged as the first, and that he quite intentionally reports the Golem tale through a story told by an old maid who heard it in her home village, his version has not been given much serious attention.16

There is, however, an early source that takes the form of a folkloric report. In 1836, a full year before Auerbach’s novel was published, a brief item appeared in the November 16 issue of the Oesterreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichts- und Staatskunde. This leading Viennese literary magazine published a series of folk tales from around the German-speaking world under the title “Vaterländische Sagen und Legenden” (Tales and Legends of the Fatherland). Among these is the following brief untitled entry:17

Under the roof of the oldest synagogue in Prague (the Altneuschul), because of the belief that misfortune would meet the workers, there is

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17. Ludwig A. Frankl, “Vaterländische Sagen und Legenden IV,” Oesterreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichts- und Staatskunde 92 (1836): 368. Joseph Davis (“The Legend of Maharal before the Golem,” Judaica Bohemiae 45 [2009]: 41, n. 2) notes the existence of this source and attributes its discovery to an anonymous online writer (http://onthemainline.blogspot.com/2009/11/earlier-written-source-for-golem-of.html), but neither Davis nor the blog describes the contents of the 1836 entry or identifies its author. Otherwise, the source has never been mentioned in any scholarly context. We offer the first translation and analysis of this early version of the Prague legend, preserving Frankl’s original spelling of transliterated Hebrew words.
preserved, in its primeval form and color, a piece of trunk-like clay, which is known by the name “Golem.”

A wise rabbi (still called High-Reb Leb by the Jews), who diligently occupied himself with the Kabbalah on every secret, silent night, formed a human-like figure and put a secret name (“Schem”) of God under its tongue. Thus it was brought to life and performed the duties of a servant. But when the first three stars appeared in the sky on Friday evening, and the beadle (Schames, usually called Mulassim by the peoples of the Orient) announced the Sabbath, the rabbi, because even the damned spirits (only the Lord God creates a blessed one) are permitted to rest on the Sabbath, took the secret name of God from under his servant’s tongue, so that he became again a lifeless piece of clay. Once, it is told, the rabbi suffered the pain of the loss of his beloved son and forgot to de-animate his servant, when the beadle again proclaimed the peace of the Sabbath. Then this one was seized as if by madness; his eyes rolled and burned like flaming wheels, his breath was visible and sparkled with wonderful colors, and he began a terrible destruction in the house. Everyone was very terrified and cried with anxious horror for the rabbi. However, he was not in any condition to restrain the creature in order to take the secret name from under his tongue. So he spoke a deep-cutting curse, and the servant became again what it was before, a piece of clay. The rabbi never dared again to practice the secret science.

The article is signed “L.A. Frankl,” which, given the venue and the year, can only refer to Ludwig August Frankl, a young Jewish poet originally from Bohemia, who had made a name for himself on the Viennese literary scene with a series of popular poetic ballads on patriotic themes, and then later on various classical topics. In the 1840s he edited an influential literary journal, the Sonntagsblätter, that published the first so-called ghetto tales by Kompert and others. He subsequently became secretary of the

Jewish community of Vienna and wrote a memoir of his trip to Palestine which became a crucial text in the burgeoning Zionist movement.19

Frankl’s prominence makes the omission of this text from the bibliographies and literary histories quite surprising, but it is especially strange given the fact that, as we noted above, Frankl does figure in Golem studies as the author of one of the post-Weisel radical applications of the Prague tale, the Gedicht in Sieben Gesängen (Poem in Seven Cantos) written in 1862. Whatever the reason for its obscurity, this 1836 entry is one of the earliest known texts to associate the Golem with the Maharal and Prague.20 Moreover, while it is clearly presented as a folkloric report, it displays a surprising degree of literary artistry, thereby bridging the gap between the obviously literary renditions of Auerbach, Tendlau et al., and the Klutschak/Weisel versions. We will return to that artistry in a moment, but we must first examine how a Jewish literary legend of the Golem came into being.

As we have already seen, Grimm ushers in the new age of the literary Golem in the nineteenth century. Before 1808 there is no coherent liter-
ary narrative about the Golem, only fragmentary references by Christian Hebraists and various halakhic discussions (such as, for instance, whether a Golem can count in a *minyan*).\(^{21}\) Somewhat paradoxically, Grimm himself does not offer a strictly literary tale but rather a minimal folkloric report that hardly resembles the fairy tale style of the famous *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children’s and Household Tales), which he and his brother Wilhelm were already collecting and which would appear only four years later. Grimm’s intervention into the Golem tradition has two crucial features. First, by omitting any discussion of his sources, Grimm creates the strong, but false, impression that he is presenting a contemporary oral tale that he has collected and transcribed. In fact, his text is clearly based on a mid-seventeenth-century Latin account of the Chelm Golem by Christoph Arnold in a letter to the well-known Christian Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil.\(^{22}\)

Second, although he translates the main narrative from Arnold, he universalizes it by stripping the name of R. Elijah and the city of Chelm and attributing it to the “Polish Jews” and an ambiguous “they.” For his primarily Christian audience, this elision frees the legend from any historical specificity and subsequently makes it vulnerable to the esemplastic power of the Romantic worldview. When that audience hears the story for the first time, the legend is for a brief moment skeletal, unauthorized, and plastic. Whatever Arnim’s Golem Bella is, she is certainly not the original Jewish Golem. The same can be said for all of the non-Jewish versions of the Golem before Klutschak’s account in 1841. They are all extraordinary for the degree of playfulness with which they treat the motif of the Golem, but they are not particularly interested in the content of the original tale nor do they make an attempt to mimic any of the defining characteristics of a legend, such as being “short (mono-) episodic, traditional . . . [or] performed in a conversational mode.”\(^{23}\)

The Jewish response to Grimm’s removal of the rabbinic name is to contradict the sensational pitfalls of demonic desire and the charnel house monstrosities that haunt the Gothic imaginations of the German Romantics.\(^{24}\) For Jewish writers during this window before Weisel, the legend

\(^{21}\) On these earlier versions, see especially Idel, *Golem*; and Scholem, “Idea of the Golem.”

\(^{22}\) Johann C. Wagenseil, *Sota. hoc est Liber Mischnicus de uxore adulterii suspecta* (Altdorf, 1674), 1198–99. Rosenfeld (*Golemwege* 39), seems to be the first positively to identify Grimm’s source.

\(^{23}\) Tangherlini, “It Happened Not Too Far,” 85.

\(^{24}\) Although one can rarely speak of a unified “Jewish response,” we refer here to those sources written in the 1830s and early 1840s, which all reflect a deep engagement with German-language literature. No text written in any lan-
remains essentially a story about rabbinic mastery of the holy word, a practice highly regarded as the patrimony of the scholarly elite. Therefore, the natural response is to reattach the legend to a rabbi who is beyond all doubt, that is, a move toward the center of things. This may partially explain why it is attached to the Maharal; it is exactly because he was not a kabbalist that he makes such an attractive agent for the story. If the Christians saw the Kabbalah as some kind of radical Jewish thaumaturgy, then the way to lend it authority was to attach it to a rabbi whose spiritual profile was beyond reproach, a rabbi so serious that he even met with the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II in 1592.25

As we have seen, the move to the center (both religiously and geographically, since Prague is much closer to the heart of the Hapsburg Empire than the Polish city of Chelm) was a spectacular success. For nearly a quarter of a century after Grimm’s report there is no written record of any specific ecotype of the Golem legend, and one could imagine countless variants circulating orally. But once the tale is fixed in Prague, it quickly becomes the standard reflex and ultimately the authoritative version through Weisel, dominating the next six decades until it is swallowed up by Rosenberg’s more fully developed Prague narratives.26

That the attachment of Grimm’s uprooted Golem to the Maharal is in large part an attempt to emphasize the power of the holy word is evident in one of the main differences between Jewish and Christian accounts of the Golem in this period. All Christian accounts follow Grimm in identifying the utterance of holy words as the key to the animation process. The Jewish versions, on the other hand, emphasize the act of writing the secret name and inserting it into a cavity of the head (usually the mouth), an act which by definition defies pronunciation. It is not a magical spell

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25. On the life and work of R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel, see the various essays in Putik, Path of Life; Theiberger, Great Rabbi Loew.

26. For the argument that the Golem tale became fixed in Prague as part of a larger Bohemian Jewish “process of identity formation,” see Neubauer, “How Did the Golem Get to Prague?” 301. Neubauer, however, is not aware of any sources earlier than Auerbach, Spinoza.
that brings the Golem to life; it is an act of literacy, that is, an act of reading, studying, and writing, which are all meditations on the nature of God. This act strongly distances itself from the conjuring power of the words used by Grimm’s anonymous “they,” where “Schemhamphoras” is more like abracadabra. Moreover this act of literacy is about rewriting or reclaiming the creation in Eden by transferring the divine voice into the written form of the divine name. It would seem, then, that only a rabbi with a specific name can control the Holy Name. Man might not be able to speak for God, but he can quote him on parchment.

If we turn back to Frankl now, we can see how he refines these elements with consummate artistry. One of the most striking features of his version is the fact that it does not conclude with an etiological or anthropological anecdote as does Weisel’s and later Jewish versions, but rather it begins with such a notice:28

Under the roof of the oldest synagogue in Prague (the Altneuschul), because of the belief that misfortune would meet the workers, there is preserved, in its primeval form and color, a piece of trunk-like clay, which is known by the name “Golem.”

This creates a telescopic effect which moves us from the outside of the synagogue inside, as if exposing some hidden or forbidden space, where lying in the corner is an anatomical piece of trunk-like clay. No other version implies that after the Golem is deanimated for the final time he retains some resemblance or shape of his former self. Frankl also reports on the superstition that prevents the workers who have done repairs in the synagogue over the years from disturbing the Golem’s remains. Whether or not this opening notice is authentic oral material, it certainly adds to the mysteriousness of the legend to follow while simultaneously adding a layer of authenticity that the other versions are not able to match: if one doubts the truth of the tale, let him ask the workers who have seen it. They will not touch it but they can testify to its existence. That is why it is still there today.

Further contributing to the authenticity of the tale is the parenthetical remark about the beadle, “usually called Mulassim by the peoples of the Orient.” This aligns Jewish religious practice toward the east, thereby

27. Grimm, “Entstehung,” 56. *Schemhamphoras* is the medieval kabbalistic term for one of the secret names of God derived through manipulation of letters in the Torah. The term is a corruption of the Hebrew *shem ba-meforash*, “the explicit name,” which originally referred to the Tetragrammaton.

gesturing toward the ancient genealogy of the legend. Frankl also offers an unusual explanation of why the rabbi must deanimate the Golem before the Sabbath is announced: “because even the damned spirits (only the Lord God creates a blessed one) are permitted to rest on the Sabbath.” This further appeals to halakhic authority, but in a purposefully vague way.

Set against these markers of authentic transmission is perhaps the most spectacular literary feature of Frankl’s account—the description of the Golem’s frenzy as the Sabbath commences:

Then this one was seized as if by madness; his eyes rolled and burned like flaming wheels, his breath was visible and sparkled with wonderful colors, and he began a terrible destruction in the house.

The pinwheels of flame for eyes and the prismatic breath spraying forth from the Golem are as beautiful as they are horrifying. Moreover, the description artfully resonates with the opening anecdote about the clay “preserved in its primeval form and color.” Artistically then, this is a near-perfect literary legend. It contains all the hallmarks of an oral source yet shows literary finish and innovation. It stands out for its symmetric and well-formed reporting, but it also serves up a metaphor for the subsequent fortunes of the legend. The mute Golem spews out the kaleidoscopic history of his own literary reception, the colorful shower of stories that will follow him as he leaves the pages of folkloric collections and enters into a literary world that will constantly and inconsistently mold him into anything but his primeval form.

As we have already noted, once the legend is placed in Prague, it remains there quite consistently in the Jewish versions. The only Jewish author who does not abide by this topographic rule is the creator of the other important version that has escaped the notice of Golem scholars, the Danish Jewish writer Meir Aaron Goldschmidt (d. 1887), who somewhat bizarrely locates the tale in the city of Lemberg, which is modern-day Lvov in Ukraine. Goldschmidt was a radical journalist and writer who dominated the literary scene of mid- to late nineteenth-century Scandinavia. He is usually viewed as the quintessential Danish stylist and a seminal figure in the development of a language of realism.

30. On the life and work of Goldschmidt, see Hans P. Kyrre, M. Goldschmidt (Copenhagen, 1919); Mogens Brøndsted, Meir Goldschmidt (Copenhagen, 1965); Kenneth Ober, Meir Goldschmidt (New York, 1976).
end of his life, Goldschmidt became obsessed with the philosophical
notion of nemesis and devoted much of his energy to a visionary brand
of superfamily linguistics based on his study of Egyptian hieroglyphics,
Jewish mystical texts, and comparative Semitics. This particular phase of
Goldschmidt’s authorship has generally been ignored in the scholarship,
but it strongly informs our understanding of how he approaches the
Golem material.

Given his broad Jewish reading habits and proclivity for Jewish tales,
both literary and oral, it is not surprising that Goldschmidt gives us a
version of the Golem legend. He features the tale in his 1845 novel En
Jøde (A Jew), which is marked by its extensive use of Jewish legends
and folktales. The year 1845 was pivotal in the reshaping of the Golem
legend, coming almost ten years after Frankl but still two years away
from Weisel’s standardizing version. In addition to locating the tale in
Lemberg rather than Prague, Goldschmidt’s tale exhibits certain innova-
tions that are absent from all other Jewish versions in the nineteenth
century. His is also the only Jewish source that reverts to the anonymous
rabbi that Grimm offers. The combination of these two innovations gives
the appearance that Goldschmidt is supplying a local variant of the tale
before it becomes rigidly attached to the Maharal of Prague. This would
be consistent with Goldschmidt’s deep knowledge of Ashkenazi storytell-
ing traditions and could support the notion that the tale was not yet fixed
on the eve of Weisel’s rendition. Moreover, Goldschmidt’s Golem does
something on the fateful Sabbath eve that no other nineteenth-century
Golem does: he commits murder in the synagogue. This is in line with
Goldschmidt’s penchant for manipulating rabbinic legend and lore and
writing against the grain of tradition. At the same time, Goldschmidt’s
Golem functions as a metonym for the main character of the novel, Jacob
Bendixen, as he spins out of control from his creators’ (that is, his par-
ents’) vision and ultimately fails at the act of artistic self-formation. Gold-

schmidt is the first author, Christian or Jewish, to use the Golem material
as a metalegend for the narrative architecture of a larger work. In Arnim,
Horn, and even Auerbach, the legend is only included as a miscellaneous
anecdote or loosely constructed metaphor.

While these features alone make Goldschmidt’s version an essential

31. On Goldschmidt’s engagement with Jewish tales, see David Gantt Gur-
part of the history of the legend, a closer reading of his text reveals an even more startling set of conclusions: 32

"There lived in Lemberg," began Philip, "a rabbi, who, as the Kemech ["the Christians"] say, knew more than his Our Father. Since he could not afford to hire a servant, he created a man out of clay, and by putting a piece of parchment with certain holy words under the man’s tongue he animated it, and it would work for him six days a week. Every Friday evening he removed the parchment with the holy words on it and the clay lay there dead until he had said his Avdolo and again laid the parchment under his tongue. But one Friday evening the rabbi was out late in the town longer than usual, and when the Sabbath candles were lit, the clay man became uncontrollable. He rushed into the synagogue and killed people with one blow of his hard arms, and he would have surely killed everybody if the rabbi had not returned at that moment and taken the holy words out of his mouth. And so once more he was dead, and afterwards the people’s urgent prayers convinced the rabbi never to animate him again. But even still to this day the Lemberger Jews say an extra prayer in thanks because they were saved from this calamity."

In many respects, this is the Prague tale as we know it from Frankl and Weisel, yet, as we have already noted, the detail that most stands out is the unusual choice of place. Although Lemberg is an important Jewish city historically, there is no other recorded version of the tale that situates the Golem there. Before the legend became attached to Prague and the Maharal, it did lie close to Lemberg, some one hundred miles to the north in the city of Chelm, but there it was quite specifically associated with R. Elijah Ba’al Shem.

It seems strange, then, that Goldschmidt knows the specific Prague version of the tale but chooses to situate the action in the vicinity of Chelm and assign it to an unnamed rabbi. 33 Should we read this as a local


33. In his later memoirs Goldschmidt also mentions “den fromme Rabbi” (the pious rabbi) who made a clay man, but once again he refuses to name the rabbi, and this time he mentions no place at all. Meïr A. Goldschmidt, Livs erindringer og resultater (Copenhagen, 1877), 2:260
variant of the legend that Goldschmidt has learned from his father? It is, after all, Jacob’s own father Philip who tells the tale in the novel. This is certainly a simple and elegant explanation for the unique attestation, but it does not fully take into account Goldschmidt’s near-obsession with manipulation of language and source throughout the novel. As one critic has noted, by positioning the tale in Lemberg, Poland, Goldschmidt is already anticipating the Polish storyteller’s arrival in chapter 7.34 But even more striking is the fact that the story told by the Pole is actually an account of another, lesser-known, legendary figure of Jewish Prague, Simon Abeles.35 How does Goldschmidt know a more obscure literary tale about Prague and not the Maharal legend, which by 1845 had been circulating widely in written form for almost a decade?36 Moreover, he actually met Leopold Kompert and Ludwig Frankl in Vienna less than a year after completing the novel, which suggests a close engagement with the main currents of Golem literature in the period.37

The elegant chiasmus of the two stories—an itinerant Pole telling a Prague tale and Jacob’s father relocating the Prague legend to Poland—suggests that Goldschmidt is quite consciously manipulating the Golem material. If we apply this sort of anagrammatic, or even kabbalistic, reading to the particular city in Poland he chooses, we can see the extent of Goldschmidt’s artistry. Historically, Lemberg was known as Leopolis, literally the “City of the Lion.” The proper German equivalent should be Löwenberg, but through various linguistic changes, the name was shortened to Lemberg. Thus, hidden beneath the name of the town Lemberg/Löwenberg is the family name of the Maharal himself, R. Judah Loew (”Lion”). Although Goldschmidt does not specify any particular rabbi, Rabbi “Lion” is still present in the etymological palimpsest of the toponym.38

At the same time, there is a genealogical tie between Lemberg and its

36. Auerbach, Spinoza, was a European bestseller and was translated into several languages, but Goldschmidt read so widely on Jewish topics that he certainly would have seen Tendlau, “Der Golem des Hoch-Rabbi-Lòb,” as well.
37. On the meeting between Goldschmidt and Frankl, see Ober, Meir Goldschmidt, 31.
38. The first element of the name Lemberg, Lem-, is also a homophone for the German word for clay, Lehm, which adds another layer of complexity to Goldschmidt’s wordplay.
neighboring city Chelm. The major early source for the Chelm version of the Golem legend is a report by R. Jacob Emden, given in slightly different form in three of his works, who knows his legend from his father, R. Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, known as Ha-Ḥakham Zvi. And the reason Ha-Ḥakham Zvi knew the story is that Elijah of Chelm was his grandfather, but it also turns out that the grandson’s last rabbinic post was in Lemberg, where he died and was buried. Thus Goldschmidt has also buried the Ba’al Shem into his cryptogram Lemberg by conflating the grandfather with the grandson and juxtaposing their respective cities.

Yet another odd feature of Goldschmidt’s Lemberg legend is that he never specifically uses the word “Golem,” but instead calls the creature Lermanden, or “Clay Man.” Certainly this could not have been due to ignorance of the term, since it is well established in talmudic sources and carries enormous weight in kabbalistic texts, which Goldschmidt read thoroughly. For some reason, then, GOLEM is a word, like the Holy Name itself, that he dares not write overtly. But once again, he uses the town of Lemberg to conceal another name. By rearranging the letters of the town, one can arrive at GLEM + REB, that is “Golem” + “Reb” (the standard short honorific for rabbi), or the creature and his creator. One might even take the anagram a step further and read the actual Danish word glem (forget), yielding the command to “forget the rabbi.” While such anagrammatic wordplay might seem to stretch the bounds of reason, in the context of Goldschmidt’s obsessive interest in comparative linguistics and the Kabbalah, and alongside the etymological and genealogical clues he embeds in the name, it becomes much more plausible.

The juxtaposition of these two orphans of Golem history, Goldschmidt and Frankl, is no mere partnership of convenience. As we have already noted, Goldschmidt knew Frankl personally, and he had much in common with his Viennese Jewish literary circle. The Jewish milieu of his novel En Jøde was a major influence on the ghetto tales published by Frankl in the late 1840s. Likewise, both Goldschmidt and Frankl began their literary careers with patriotic and nationalistic writings and later became increasingly associated with Jewish writing. Both were exiled from Jewish communities, Frankl from Palestine and Gold-
From London, and both writers became interested in Egypt later in life.

A brief but incredibly productive aesthetic window is opened when the Golem tale becomes attached to the Maharal of Prague in 1834 and then is closed with the publication of Weisel’s version in 1847. In the hands of Frankl and Goldschmidt, the literary legend in its infancy proves to be much more sophisticated than the mature version of Weisel, while at the same time providing a vibrant representation of the earlier oral traditions surrounding the Golem. In this regard, Weisel does not define the legend; he ends it and thus allows the influence of the Christian Romantics to flood into the Jewish tradition. Weisel himself as much as acknowledges this when he says, “To the rabbi, his Golem was like the broom to the sorcerer’s apprentice in Goethe’s poem.”

But the Jewish Golem of the early nineteenth century is not a monster or an erotic body; he is not a wind-up toy or an Anti-Christ. Everything that needs to be said about him can be said through his muted actions, not through any mutation of desire. Perhaps Goldschmidt is right, that in order to remember the Golem in his primeval form we must first forget the rabbi.

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42. Ludwig A. Frankl, Nach Jerusalem (Leipzig, 1858), 2:511; Ober, Meir Goldschmidt, 48–49.


44. Pascheles, Gallerie, 52.