

The Golem

By Jeani Rector

It was the time of the Blood Libel.

Rabbi Loew felt uneasy. Tensions between the gentiles and the Jews were rapidly increasing. What made this particular night so much more significant than the other stressful evenings was the fact that Passover had begun, and part of observance included the baking of unleavened bread.

Judah Loew had heard the rumors. Despite the ridiculousness of the content, the rumors persisted and were believed by the gentiles on the other side of the gate. *Of course the Christians believe the rumors, Loew thought, because they are the ones who started them.*

On his side of the gate, Rabbi Loew was afraid for his people. The Jews in the ghetto of Prague were increasingly becoming the object of Christian persecution. Why, only that very afternoon, a gentile had stood at the ghetto gate and shouted, "You Jews murdered Christ! We ought to crucify all of you!"

And what could the Jews do? By law, they were not allowed to leave the gates of the ghetto. Nor would they want to. Because to leave the security of the ghetto community would be to risk one's life at the wrath of the gentiles.

And now there was this new rumor. The Christians were accusing the Jews of baking the unleavened Passover bread with an additional ingredient other than the water of matzoh and flour. The additional ingredient was supposed to be the blood of murdered Christian children.

Rabbi Loew shook his head sadly. No matter what went wrong in the Christian community, it was always the fault of the Jews. Christians blamed Jews for everything. If a child became missing, a Jew had snuck out of the ghetto in the middle of the night and committed murder. If that same child turned up floating face down in the Vltava River, well then, the Jews had committed murder by drowning the victim. If a disease spread through the Christian community, then the Jews were poisoning all the wells. If the weather turned bad, then the Jews were incurring the wrath of God.

Loew wondered, *How can anyone believe that Jews are murdering Christian children to use blood in bread? This is the year 1580, and in these modern times, people should be becoming more tolerant of others. It is not like a hundred years ago when superstitions abounded. In God's glory, Jewish people do not murder children to bake bread.*

Rabbi Judah Loew was an aging man; his beard was gray and his posture stooped. He had lived a long time and had been devoted to his people during his his entire life. He could not forsake the Jews living in the Prague ghetto now.

But what could he do to help his people? Instinctively Loew understood that very soon, all the tensions would come to a head and the gentiles would burst through the gates of Prague to destroy the Jews.

Somehow he would save his people.

He sat in a chair in his front room, watching the fire that warmed the cottage. Deep in thought, Loew almost didn't hear the faint knocking at his front door. When he did hear the knocking, Loew's first thought was that his wife would answer the door. But then he realized that his wife was fast asleep in the other room.

So he stood, stretched, and walked to the door. “Who’s there?” he softly asked without making any moves to open the door. These days, one couldn’t be too careful.

“It’s Itzak,” came the voice of Loew’s son-in-law. “Open up, Father, I have news.”

Loew let Itzak inside. “Warm yourself up by the fire,” Loew invited.

But Itzak only stood inside the door, closing it behind him. “There’s no time. A child has been found dead. Father, the child was found inside the ghetto gate. And the child is a gentile.”

“What!” Loew sputtered. “That’s impossible. It’s only another rumor, Itzak.”

“No,” the son-in-law said, “I saw the dead child myself.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Then it begins,” Loew finally said.

“Yes, the slaughtering of the Jewish people of Prague begins,” agreed Itzak. “I think the Christians put the dead child within our gates.”

“We don’t know that,” Loew said.

“It is a set-up!” cried Itzak.

“That is not the issue,” Loew said.

“What are you talking about?”

“The issue is what we can do to protect our people.”

The words sunk in. Itzak said, “What can we do? The gentiles will be storming the gates by morning to kill us all.”

“I will pray,” Loew said.

Itzak’s face grew scarlet. “You will pray! You will pray! And all of our people will be slaughtered like cattle.”

“God will protect us,” Loew reiterated.

“Father, you are a Cabalist.”

“Cabalism is a mystical interpretation of the Scriptures that is communicated only in an appropriate setting and in discreet ways,” Loew said.

“No Father, you know what I mean.”

“I seek religious and mystical experiences through Cabala. I seek truth through the divine interpretation of Cabalism.”

“Cabalism has two sides. Two interpretations.”

“Itzak, what are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying.” Itzak was grim. “The Sephir Yetzirah is the Book of Creation. Only a righteous man, a pure and just man, can use Cabala to achieve the power of Genesis.”

“It would be an abomination!” Loew cried. “It would be a monster!”

“Father, you must create a monster to save your people.”

Loew rubbed his eyes with shaking hands. He and his son-in-law remained standing in front of the door, neither speaking. Loew gazed into the fire, deep in thought. He felt apprehension and dread. But most of all, he felt resignation.

His son-in-law was right.

The Jewish people of Prague could only be saved by a monster.

“It may be just legend,” Loew whispered.

“No, it is not legend,” Itzak said. “It is Cabala. It is the other side of Cabala, the dark side. It is dark magic. It is no legend.”

“We will need three people,” Loew said.

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” asked Itzak.

“Do I have a choice?” Loew felt a hot tear trickle down his withered cheek. “Can I in good conscience allow my people to be slaughtered? But on the other hand, can I in good conscience be so arrogant as to pretend I am God?”

“No,” said Itzak as he opened the front door, “you don’t have a choice. I’ll fetch Yakov, and then we’ll be three.”

Loew shut the door as his son-in-law walked into the night. He knew that in order to prepare to use the power of the Cabala, he must be ready. He must be pure. He must be cleansed.

He began to heat water on the cookfire, then got his nail clippers. The primordial protection that Adam had in the Garden was the shields of the finger and toenails. The cleansing and paring of the nails was vital in order to be open to Cabala’s power. Carefully Loew clipped his fingernails and his toenails, and then threw them into the fire to be burned.

When the water on the cookfire was warm, Loew poured it into a glass. With his right hand symbolizing Hesed, he poured the water on his left, and then reversed the process. The left hand symbolized Din. Now his hands were clean.

He undressed and then carefully chose his ritual garments. He put on clean clothes that had been purified from washing. Finally Loew was ready, and he sat in a chair, patiently waiting for his son-in-law’s return.

He didn’t have to wait long. He heard a knocking on the front door. Again Loew questioned who it was before he opened the door. He let Itzak inside, and then softly greeted his favorite student, Yakov. Young Yakov desired to become a Rabbi, and Loew felt that the youth had the qualities to achieve his dream.

“I know why I’m here,” Yakov said before Loew had a chance to explain.

“Good, then we are all of the same mind,” Loew said. “We must go to the river immediately.”

All were aware of the risks involved to travel to the river. All understood that it was against the law to go beyond the walls of the Jewish ghetto. But Itzak knew of a secret crevice in the wall where rocks could be removed. It was a way out; an escape into the world beyond.

It was late, very late. By the position of the moon, Loew judged the time to be about one in the morning. He took a deep breath when he walked out his front door, sniffing the air. The air smelled fresh and there was no scent of rain.

Loew and his followers stepped quickly through a deserted, narrow lane of the ghetto. The sky was incredibly clear, and the moon was a tiny crescent. Millions of stars sparkled and shimmered, and the night sounds were beautiful as crickets sang in their search for mates. Loew took another deep breath of the fragrant night air, and felt how wonderful it was to be alive in such a world. God had created beauty, but mankind created hate and prejudice. It was up to Loew to join God and mankind together to achieve peace.

Silently the three traveled through the dark streets of the ghetto. They had no candles and the moon’s light was dim. Loew knew when they had reached the right place at the wall because Itzak signaled with his hand to come forward.

All three quickly removed rocks from the wall. The opening was small and it was fortunate that none in the trio were overly large. When all three men squeezed through the space, they reached inside to

pull the rocks back into place. It would not do to leave the hole exposed in the wall for any guards to see. If the hole was discovered, then none of the three could ever return home.

It was exhilarating to be experiencing such an adventure, and Loew chastised himself for allowing himself this emotion. He saw it as pride, and to be prideful was to sin. Rabbi Loew understood that in order for Cabala to work, he needed to be righteous and pure in thought.

So he focused on the purpose of this dangerous trip. He was doing this for the salvation of his people.

Once outside the wall, the three men were careful as they walked the streets of the gentile city. They crouched and stayed within the dark shadows of the buildings. They walked quickly and with purpose. Loew's eyes darted back and forth as he traveled, searching for anything amiss. His senses were heightened and adrenalin coursed through his veins.

The buildings became sparse as Loew and his followers reached the edge of the city. He smelled water, and knew he was close to the river. Soon he heard the water, and felt the slippery mud beneath his shoes. Moving underneath the trees and through the underbrush, Loew found a location that seemed to fit his needs.

The dusky, earthy scent of damp mud filled his nostrils. Mud was what Loew had been seeking. And there was a lot of it here.

"Let's begin our work," Loew instructed.

In the dark of the night, the three men got to their knees. They used their hands as shovels, their fingers as molds. They scooped the rich, fertile mud and began to push it into a mound. They worked together as a unit, shaping the wet earth until it began to resemble something. It resembled a silhouette lying in a prone position, flat on its back.

It resembled a man.

The mud had been shaped to simulate a very large man, lying flat on his back, limbs outstretched.

Loew stood erect. His arms and his knees were slick with wet mud. His hands were caked with wet earth and he held them outstretched in front of him.

"I can create a man, but I cannot create a soul," he said. "That is for God alone."

"What do you mean, Rabbi?" asked Yakov.

"This earthen man shall be mute and without will," Loew explained.

"But you are his will," Itzak said. "This man shall do your bidding, am I right?"

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," Loew said softly. "I hope you are right and that this abomination will awaken to do my bidding. If he awakens at all. That has yet to be seen."

"What is this thing we are creating?" asked Yakov.

"This is a golem," Loew answered. "I will name the golem Josef, in the hopes that he will protect our people. I will name this golem after Josef Sheda of the Talmud. Josef Sheda was half human and half spirit, and saved the Jews from conflict. It is a fitting name for this golem, who is to save the Jews of Prague."

Then Loew said, "We have three people here. Each of us represents the elements of the Cabala. I am air. You, Itzak, are fire. And you, Yakov, are water."

"The earth is the fourth element. Who represents the earth?" asked Yakov.

"Why, the golem, of course," Loew said. "In Genesis it says, *And the Lord God formed a man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.*"

Rabbi Loew began to chant, "Shanti, shanti, dahat, dahat."

The surrounding countryside darkened even more as clouds quickly covered the moon. Gusts of sudden wind yanked the leaves from the bushes, and the limbs became horizontal as they yielded to the heavy flow of the strong breezes. Night creatures scurried to the safety of their burrows. The sound of the rushing Vltava River rose to that of a roar.

Loew shouted to be heard, “Ato bra Golem devuk hakhomer v'tigzar zedim chevel torfe yisroel. Life to the clay man.”

The wind began to howl through the trees at an accelerated rate. Small whirlpools of leaves and debris swirled around the man of mud, who was still prostrate on the ground.

Once again, Loew got to his knees. He leaned forward, bending over the golem's head. He had a thin stick in his right hand. On the forehead of the clay monster, Loew used the stick to draw the word EMET.

“EMET means truth,” Loew shouted above the wind as he rose to his feet. “The truth is to be told.”

A large tree branch, close by, came crashing down. The wind was becoming relentless in its fury. Nothing was spared. The clothes of the three men were flattened against their bodies as the wind pressed against them. They leaned forward as to retain their balance, unconsciously pushing back at the wind that pushed them forward.

And then the thing made of mud moved.

The golem's huge hand closed into a fist. His knee rose as he tucked his massive foot closer to his body. The monster's elbow bent to prop himself into a sitting position.

The wind suddenly ceased. There was no sound, except the river, and even that became almost quiet. The stillness of the forest was eerie. No owl shrieked and no mouse squeaked. No crickets chirped. There was total and absolute stillness.

“Josef,” Loew spoke, surprised at the steadiness of his own voice as it broke the stillness of the forest. “You must awaken now. You must arise and follow me.”

It was frightening to witness when the golem rose to his feet. The man made of clay seemed to extend nearly into the sky as he stood erect. He was almost seven feet tall and his arms and shoulders were massive. His head was almost square and his eyebrows protruded like that of a Neanderthal. The features on his face were vague because he was smooth and appeared almost unfinished.

The golem looked like what he was: a creature made of mud.

“Rabbi,” said Yakov and his voice shook with nerves, “how can we sneak such a being back into the ghetto?”

“He is dark like the night,” Loew answered.

“But he is so large,” Yakov said.

“He is dark like the night,” Loew repeated. “He will not be easily seen. And God will protect us during our journey back.”

“Have faith,” Itzak told Yakov.

“Josef,” Loew commanded, “you will follow me.”

The lumbering hulk started to walk, his huge feet shuffling. Yet the golem made no noise as he lurched forward. Appearing clumsy and offish, he nonetheless walked silently and steadily.

This creation will be very efficient with what I will set him to do, Loew thought to himself. And I am afraid. Deathly afraid.

Loew was not afraid of the trip back to the ghetto. He was afraid of what he would be forced to do once he got there.

Silently and carefully, they made their way back through the city of gentiles.

Three men had come out of the ghetto.

Four men were returning.

When they reached the secret hole in the ghetto wall, the men had a problem. There was no way that a huge creature like the golem could possibly squeeze through the tiny opening.

“He will climb,” said Loew. And the golem mounted the stone wall and then scaled it.

Rays of dawn light were beginning to streak the sky with colors in the east. The men could see themselves more clearly now as they pushed the rocks back into the wall to disguise the escape route. They knew that time was running out for them, and also running out for the Jews of Prague.

The morning sun was rising quickly now, and its light was reflecting off of the slick mud surface that was Josef. The monster could be viewed in all his massive proportions, a hideous caricature of a man. To view the creature was to experience awe mixed with fear. It was very obvious that Josef could be strong and threatening.

Just as they began to head back to the Rabbi’s cottage, the three men stopped in their tracks to listen. Josef mimicked the men, making no sound of his own. But then there *were* sounds. Loew could hear a large crowd of people, somewhere outside of the wall, and they were approaching the gate of the ghetto.

“They’ve come!” cried Itzak in a panic. “The gentiles have come to kill the Jews of Prague!”

“Rabbi,” pleaded Yakov, “send the golem.”

Loew hesitated. To send Josef would be fury unleashed. At the last minute when it really mattered, Loew found himself uncertain.

“I can’t,” he said meekly.

“Send the golem or we die!” cried Itzak. “We will all be slaughtered, every one of us! Think of your family!”

“I don’t know what to do,” said Loew.

“It is no sin to defend oneself!” shouted Itzak.

“Please Rabbi, send the golem,” begged Yakov.

Grimly Loew stood there, his feet planted on the ground as though he were a tree. He could hear the gentiles getting closer, and he could tell that there were many in number, probably hundreds of angry people, all coming to kill.

He needed to decide. Perhaps the golem was an evil being. But nothing was more effective to fight evil than another evil. The gentiles were coming for a spree of mass murder. That was the worst evil of all.

He, Rabbi Judah Loew, would send the golem. He would burn in Hell for this act so that his people could live.

“Josef.” Loew spoke to his monster as though the golem were a child. “You must protect the Jews from the gentiles. The Christians are storming the gates of the ghetto. You must stop them.” Loew hesitated, and then added, “Josef. Stop them any way you can. Do whatever is necessary so that the gentiles do not enter the ghetto.”

“Thank you, Rabbi,” breathed Itzak.

Yakov said nothing. He just watched and waited.

The golem turned his square head towards the gate. He straightened his massive shoulders and then began to lurch forward. The monster walked with huge strides, and the earth shook beneath his feet. The immense hands were clenched in anger. The protruding forehead and brow were knitted with rage.

Loew watched with dread. Yes, it was fury unleashed. Because the golem was simply a reflection of Loew's own inner hatred, the hatred that he always denied existed. But the hatred for the gentiles was there, and now the golem would mirror that hate.

A righteous man could possibly create a righteous golem. But a man who secretly hated would create an atrocity.

It was too late. Josef was going to have his way with the gentiles.

And Rabbi Loew was horrified at himself, because he found he had no desire to stop his monster. He had set his evil creation free to do the destruction that he himself secretly wished to do.

The golem ripped the gate off its hinges as though it were a toy. He stomped out of the ghetto, pounding the ground with his feet. His massive arms outstretched, the golem began grabbing the gentiles, one right after another. He ripped them apart, tearing off arms and legs and throwing pieces of people by the wayside. The gentiles tried to run, but Josef also ran in his lumbering but fast gait.

Loew shut his eyes, but the screams of the gentiles could not be ignored. It was horrible, horrible, but the Rabbi was rejoicing in his heart.

Yakov began to panic. "Rabbi, call him off."

Loew just stood where he was, his eyes closed.

"Rabbi, the golem is killing people," Yakov tried again.

"He's right," Itzak agreed. "Stop the golem. The golem has done enough."

Loew did not move. *Absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

"Rabbi!" Yakov began to shout to be heard above the screams of the gentiles, "Stop the golem!"

"No," Loew finally spoke.

Yakov stared at Loew in disbelief. The young Yakov hadn't wanted anyone killed. That was not supposed to be part of the deal. The golem was created to threaten, not to maim and murder. Why was the Rabbi allowing the golem to commit the same mortal sins that the monster was created to prevent?

"Stop the golem or I will," Yakov said.

Loew laughed. "And what could a pipsqueak like you do to stop a powerful monster like Josef?"

"I don't know, but I intend to do something."

With that, Yakov ran to follow the golem.

Passing the ruined gate, Yakov picked up speed. The sun had risen fully now, so he could see the huge monster in the distance. It sickened him to view all of the blood and body parts that were littered on the countryside. Yakov tried to run without seeing what lay everywhere on the ground. He shut his ears to the screams and the moans of the maimed and wounded gentiles.

And finally Yakov reached the golem.

Josef loomed directly in front of Yakov. Without thinking, Yakov leaped to land on the golem's back. His arms around the golem's neck, Yakov hung on to the monster's back.

Josef stopped moving. Then he reached behind himself and pulled Yakov over his head. The monster literally threw Yakov over his head and the young man landed hard on the ground.

Yakov couldn't breathe for a moment. He lay on the ground, gasping for air. The moment was too long.

Josef approached, and the massive clay man loomed above Yakov.

Yakov was doomed.

Suddenly he heard a voice. It was Rabbi Loew!

“Josef,” Loew said, “don’t hurt him. Don’t touch Yakov.”

Yakov turned his head to see Loew standing behind the monster. Loew was breathing very hard. The Rabbi had run after both he and the golem and now he had caught them.

“Rabbi,” Yakov said, as he still laid on the ground, “put an end to this.”

Loew stood without speaking, his breathing beginning to calm. The monster didn’t move. It was waiting.

“Do the right thing,” Yakov tried again.

Loew looked around as though seeing the gruesome scene before him for the first time.

“These people have families too,” said Yakov. “Let’s be the first ones to end the hate. Let’s lead by example.”

Still Loew did not move. The golem waited for his master’s decision.

“You have accomplished what you wanted to do,” Yakov added. “It’s over.”

“Yes, it’s over,” Loew agreed. “Josef, come to me. Bend down. Let me whisper into your ear.”

But instead of speaking into Josef’s ear, Loew quickly rubbed a letter of the word EMET off from the monster’s forehead.

The letter was E, and once removed, the word EMET was then changed to MET.

While EMET was the Hebrew word for truth, MET was the Hebrew word for death.

The golem crumbled, turning to earth once again, and it left a huge mound of mud upon the ground.

MET. Dust to dust.