

The Thirteenth World

The Tale of Rabbi Loew ben Bezalel, Judah the Lion, the Maharal, and the Golem which he created is well-known. Less known are the variations of the tale. Still less known the variation you are about to hear. For if God is the Master of this world of worlds, he is also Master of the other worlds of which this world is one, but I am getting ahead of my tale.

What is known is that on the 20th of the Hebrew month of Adar (the year is in dispute), Rabbi Loew succeeded in creating a Golem by the power of the esoteric knowledge contained in the Sefer Yezirah, the mystical Book of Creation: the words and letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the primordial numbers and the names of God. But what is not known is that Rabbi Loew made more than one attempt before succeeding. (How else explain the rumors of mounds of unknown clay found in the attic of the altneushul (oldnew synagogue), so diverse in form that a Golem made from all of them would presumably be too patch-worked to function at all, and would collapse like the Tower of Babel.) Is it surprising that Rabbi Loew had to try a number of times before succeeding? For does not a midrash say that the Creator Himself created the world 26 times and only on the 26th time did it stand?

The place of the Golem's creation is not in dispute: the attic of the altneushul in the city of Prague, in the ghetto of that city. Nor the reason for the Golem's creation: the threat of pogrom to the Jews of the ghetto from the good citizens of Prague, jealous of the other in their midst, citizens superstitious and easily-incited.

The Sefer Yezirah contains the 22 letters which are the elements which lie at the basis of everything created; the letters that the Maharal will use to create his Golem out of clay.

Where were we? The attic of the altneushul. Where the old and decrepit prayer books are stored, it being disrespectful to discard them. Miraculously, the doves that roost in its eaves and the mice who live there have not tasted of them. On the ancient floor, each step of the Maharal generates an echo that reverberates like thunder. The window panes are crooked and they distort the shadows, forming strange forms on the floor. A dove's leg is transformed into a giant hand, like that of . . . a Golem.

And it falls upon Rabbi Loew to make this creature. If what we call "normal" is an awesome equilibrium, how much more awesome is the equilibrium required to

create the non-normal. No one realizes this more than the Maharal, gifted in mathematics and astronomy as well as kabbalah. At first he seeks the easy way out. From a dove, yes, it is handy, and it already breathes; a few changes here and there, who knows? he reasons (in Judaism everything is built on what has gone before). And there is none unto the Marahal when it comes to reasoning. He searches the Sefer Yizerah for a hint of how to go about it. He begins to repeat all kinds of holy words concerning invoking doves. He feels akin to the virgin earth after the Flood, hopeful of receiving Noah's dove sent out from the ark. Ultimately he fails. His dove-man is a lump with rudimentary limbs neither arms nor wings, but somethings in between. Tears come to Rabbi Loew's eyes. But there are still the mice, perhaps even more man-like than doves. Again prayers and chanting. The result is a kind of large Sphinx-like mound of mouse-colored clay. He feels one with the mouse who extolled God: Howbeit Thou art just in all that is come upon me; for Thou has dealt truly, but I have done wickedly. Rabbi Loew chides himself that he is no better than King Rudolf's alchemist.

Rabbi Loew can neither slumber nor sleep. Time is of the essence. Rumors of the mobs planning to attack the ghetto increase. Easter is coming and the time of the empty tomb does not apply to the Jews.

The Maharal steepes himself in the Sefer Yezirah and extracts from it what he believes is necessary to create a Golem. Yet he waits for a sign. Does not a heavenly voice in the Sefer Yezirah say: Thou canst not do it alone? In a dream he dreams that he visits the first world created which does not resemble our world at all. It is a kind of rough ball of clay and water, far from solid. He wakes from his dream, troubled. He rushes to the attic of the altneushul and at once he begins his prayers and recites the chant based on what he has extracted from the Sefer Yezirah, standing above but to the side of a circle he has drawn on the wooden floor of the attic. His forebodings according to the dream are correct. A small shapeless lump of clay, the size of a homunculus, with perhaps the hint of a head results. He does not dare follow the next step, the writing of the required word "truth" on the forehead, for there is no forehead, and there is no man shape. He knows he has failed. Sorrowfully, with a trembling hand, he writes the word "death" (met) on the upper part of the form. It crumbles into small pieces of clay. He does not know if he is permitted to dispose of it, so he sweeps the pieces into a corner: let them be a reminder to him that he is not The Creator, but only a minor creator, himself made in the image of The Creator, should he succeed.

He continues to wait for a sign. The next night, he dreams once again (having following his second dream placed a pallet to sleep on in the attic; the doves and the mice are silent and unmoving as a tableau while he sleeps), this time a dream of the sixth world created, it is more formed than the world of his last dream, possessing rough land areas surrounded by an ocean, but uninhabited. He wakes, and half-hopefully repeats the process to create a Golem. This time the clay creature is larger, almost the size of a man, but as incompletely formed as the world in his dream. No utterance of the rabbi completes him. Once again he must write "death" on the form's uppermost portion, if this time his hand trembles less, and he sweeps the resulting crumbled parts into a corner next to the remains of the attempts of the first Golem and the dove and the mouse. The words come to him: I slay and revive. He takes it as a sign of hope.

The next night Rabbi Loew dreams yet again. We should not be surprised. Does not the Zohar say: the borders between heaven and earth, logic and dream, are constantly blurred? So is the border between past, present, and future for the kabalist. Like his other dreams, this dream deals with the previous creations of the world attempted by The Creator before the final one. An earth of clay metamorphosing, of clay being worked, and the number 13, luminescent, being prominent. And one thing additional: a creature, seemingly Adam, the first man, in rough form, lacking a soul, a Golem. On waking, Rabbi Loew realizes: his Golem must come from this 13th world, a world that perhaps continues to exist parallel to his own world, perhaps does not, but exists or existed (for, as was stated, in the mystical world the past, present, and future may co-exist); it is this world from which, he is convinced, according to his dream, his Golem must be brought.

But how? Again he reads and rereads the Sefer Yezirah in an effort to find the world or worlds needed to create his Golem. He is most aware of the dangers involved. Rabbi Issac Luria, the Holy Ari himself, said that the line of division between the holy and the satanic is as thin as a hair. And there suddenly comes upon him from the future the words of Rabbi Nachman: if the eye could look into the mysteries of the body, of flesh and blood, it would see that upon every vein and muscle there hang worlds. And, thought Rabbi Loew, perhaps the opposite is also true. But which world? Is it indeed the 13th?

After praying for guidance, the rabbi sways back and forth and begins to chant. What were the words he chanted to bring forth the Golem from the 13th world,

we do not know. It may be reasonably assumed that they were the combination of Hebrew letters from the Sefer Yezirah, certainly the letters of the Name of Names, together with variations on the number 13. His words are directed upward to the Source of all creation and then downward to the floor (while inwardly wondering, like Kohelet, whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth), focused on a circle which he has drawn on the floor with his forefinger dipped into a glass of ancient, dark red wine, so dark in color that it approaches the black of the stripes of the prayer shawl draped about his shoulders. Perhaps he is fearful of God's question to Job: Can you bind the chains of Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? – which constellations, unseen, shine unchanged in the heavens above the peaked roof of the altneushul. He remembers the words of the Sefer Hayim: "From the dust under the constellation of stars man is created, and from the dust under the constellation of the Lion the beast is created." And it is for him to create a being in between the two: a Golem. He is tense, with the tension with which the act of creation tempts the creator, and more so with respect to the results of the process, poised for the hint of something gone wrong, a ladder at the ready in case the Golem should be created not as he intended and he must reach the creature's forehead to erase the letter alef from emet (truth), leaving the word met (dead) in order to return the Golem to dust. A small lump of clay suddenly appears and grows into a lump larger than a man's size, three cubits in length, in the rough form of a man lying, perhaps similar to that of Adam, the first man, when he was created. Or perhaps, indeed, Adam, the unfinished first man, without a soul, a model for the Adam of the Garden of Eden who came fully formed to the 26th world, our world. Rabbi Loew stares, full of faith and yet fearful, almost unbelieving that such a thing can occur. Now the form has limbs, a head; eyes form, followed by lips and hair. Even teeth, crooked like the window panes of the altneushul and leaning one upon the other like the gravestones of the ghetto's cemetery, like the ghettoed Jews of Prague – Rabbi Loew cannot decide if this is a good sign or a troubling one. The figure is still inert, sleeping. Rabbi Loew looks at it with tenderness and with some horror. Rabbi Loew must wake him and instill in him the spirit of life. He hesitates, then with a look upwards, as if silently beseeching through the attic's roof, He who is above the Pleiades and Orion, and dips his finger into the glass of wine, over which he has recited a blessing, and writes with a steady hand the Hebrew word for "truth" on the form's brow. The Golem's eyes open, his

mouth utters one word: "Master". The Maharal has succeeded. The savior of the Jews of the ghetto is ready to arise.