

The Body Issue

FALL 2019



PERSPECTIVES

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES





From Margot Mink Colbert's ballet, *TRANSIT(ION): Emigration Transformation*.
Photos by Per Morten Abrahamsen.

The Golem: Old Monster, New Horrors

Olga Gershenson

Stories of the golem, a magically crafted human-shaped creature, originated in medieval Jewish sources. Since then, the legend, like the golem itself, has transformed. It has been told in different ways, with different agendas: with the golem's body made from clay, wood, earth—or in contemporary media-tions—metal and plastic (Gershom Scholem named the first Israeli computer Golem Aleph); in some stories it was human-size, in others, the golem grew enormously or was giant from the start. Some golems appeared mute and zombie-like, others were more sentient, endowed with a gift of speech and even self-reflection. Some golems were created as a metaphysical exercise with no practical purpose, others as servants or protectors. In its distinctly modern incarnations, the golem story was used as a symbol of antisemitic persecution or of Jewish self-defense; it was a metaphor for the relationship between artist and creation, and a cautionary tale of artificial intelligence. Whatever the version, the question arises, can this engineered body have a soul or agency? Every golem story forces us to confront the issues of body, autonomy, and violence.

An Israeli horror film *The Golem* (Yoav and Doron Paz, 2018) is the most recent adaptation of the legend. It keeps the trappings of the best-known version—a golem is created to protect the Jewish community, but later becomes too violent and needs to be destroyed. But in a departure from tradition, the 2018 film reimagines both the golem's creator and destroyer as women. The film opens with a scene set in the synagogue in Prague, where an enormous golem murders the old Maharal. A little girl steps out of the shadows and kills the monster, succeeding where the distinguished rabbi failed.

Fast-forward a few decades to a Lithuanian shtetl, where a tightly knit Jewish community is threatened by menacing outsiders in plague-doctor masks. They accuse the Jews of causing an epidemic and promise violence. In the face of existential danger and the lack



Courtesy of Yoav and Doron Paz.

of leadership from the rabbi, Hannah, who has been secretly studying sacred books, decides to create a golem. Hannah and her husband have been grieving the loss of their child, and so, when she molds the body out of soil and inserts into it a scroll with sacred letters, the result is not a hulk, but a young boy—the spitting image of her late son. In the logic of the film, the golem reflects the desires of its creator; the Maharal of Prague wanted a mighty protector, but Hannah wants her child back. Her golem, like her son, is a part of her, and a fierce connection develops between the two, as she looks into unblinking black eyes of a silent child, gives him a bath, and sews him clothes. Despite his appearance, the golem possesses superhuman strength, easily destroying anyone who threatens Hannah.

This new, artificial motherhood emboldens Hannah: whereas before she hid in the synagogue's cellar to eavesdrop on the rabbi's teaching, now she stands up to the patriarchy. Whereas before she applied potions to prevent pregnancy from lackluster coition, she now makes passionate love to her husband. She even prepares sumptuous meals, as if the creation of the golem has awakened her sensuality and strengthened her connection to her own flesh.

The golem is fine-tuned to her emotions, but beyond his fierce devotion to Hannah, he has no subjectivity, no mind or soul of his own. He is pure body. Without his own judgement or morality, the golem becomes her id, an externalized embodiment of her fears and desires, out of her control or even awareness.

When Hannah becomes jealous of her husband, the golem kills the rival woman. From there, things unravel, and the wise woman of the shtetl (whom we recognize as the grown-up girl from the opening scene) intervenes. She has seen it before—the golem needs to be destroyed. But Hannah can't let go of her surrogate son; their connection is too strong. As the men attempt to exorcise the golem, Hannah reels in pain. Ultimately, she realizes that at the

time of attack, the little golem is more destructive to the community than the pogromists. He must go. But even the scene of the golem's destruction is tender and loving. Hannah embraces the golem and kisses him, pulling out of his mouth the tiny scroll that animates him. The golem turns to dust in Hannah's embrace, but the story is not over. In the final scene, a girl, whose mother was killed by the golem, picks up the scroll from the dirt. This ending signals that the cycle of violence is ongoing. Significantly, it is the little girl, a victim, who holds in her hand the promise of future retribution.

What does *The Golem* tell us? Even though the narrative centers on women, this is not necessarily a feminist rereading of the legend. Neither is it just a meditation on a mother's loss. Rather, in the current moment, I read this adaptation as a commentary on the Israeli condition: like the golem, the country was created out of the sense of necessity in the shadow of the Holocaust. It came into existence out of trauma and loss, to serve as a protector, tasked to ensure that Jews will not be victimized again. And yet, this original vulnerability is not a guarantee of justice. As in the traditional legend, the protective powers of the golem in the 2018 adaptation lose proportion, and the violence spreads from the enemy to the very people it deemed to protect. *The Golem* is not alone in illustrating the theme of violence turned inwards. In other current Israeli horror films, monsters, be they zombies, serial killers, or demons, come from within the body of the Israeli nation and attack it from the inside. As long as the little traumatized girl picks up the scroll, the violence will continue.

OLGA GERSHENSON is professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies and professor of Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has published widely on the Holocaust representation, and on Israeli cinema and theater. She is currently writing a book about Israeli horror films.