

The Golem, Goyim, and the Hasidic Imagination

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The stories from my childhood that made the deepest impression on me were the ones my father read out loud after Shabbos lunch. When I was in the second grade, he started reading the books from the Prophets section of the Bible in English translation: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. I remember the scene when the high priest Eli is informed that the Ark of the Covenant has been captured by their enemies and he falls backwards in shock and breaks his neck and dies. I remember David endlessly evading the wrath of King Saul who tries to kill him out of murderous jealousy. But mostly I remember the constant threat the ancient Israelites faced from the no-good Philistines who attacked them at every turn. I cheered every time Samson smote the Philistines, including in his last heroic act after Delilah cut his hair, the Philistines gouged out his eyes and imprisoned him, and Samson stood in the temple of Dagon and prayed to God for strength to pull apart the pillars supporting the entire structure. I celebrated when Samson managed to topple the temple, killing three thousand of the enemy.

Once we finished the book of Kings, we shifted to a somewhat more recent saga of Jewish danger and deliverance, to that of the sixteenth-century Golem of Prague. My father read to me the cartoon Golem stories written by Arnold Fine and illustrated by Howard S.

Speilman, serialized in the children's section of *The Jewish Press* each week.

Even before my father read these stories to me, I knew (and believed with complete faith) the story of the Golem's creation by the mystic Rabbi Judah Loew. I acquired my knowledge of the Golem during recess at school when my friends and I would gather around a bulky tape recorder and listen repeatedly (incessantly?) to a dramatized narrative called *The Mysterious Golem of Prague* directed by Simcha Gottlieb and Chaim Clorfene. The audiotape grippingly described how, in order to shield his community from blood libels and other heinous plots, Rabbi Loew fashioned an animated creature as a protector. Using his walking stick, Rabbi Loew drew a life-size human form in soft clay, around which he and his followers made seven circuits while chanting a ten-word kabbalistic formula. At the end of this ritual, a non-verbal being with superhuman strength emerged.

The Golem cartoons my father read to me in *The Jewish Press* only reinforced the reality of the Golem and his exploits. The main villain was a wicked Catholic priest named Father Thaddeus who was consumed by a burning hatred against the Jews. Thaddeus was always creeping along the cavernous labyrinth beneath his church, meeting with his henchmen and devising schemes to ensnare the innocent Jews. And each week, just as calamity was about to envelop the Jews, the grunting and snorting Golem would rush on the scene to prevent it and protect the Jews from the evil Catholic priest. Speilman's minimalist cartoons effectively conveyed the deviousness of Thaddeus and the brutal strength of the Golem. Thaddeus was depicted sporting shoulder-length hair and wild eyes. The Golem was depicted as a head taller than everyone else, possessed of a chiseled face and bulging muscles. With a cascade of "Whack!" "Boom!" and "Thud!" the young reader was mesmerized by the Golem's ability to always disrupt the evil plots and protect his Jewish charges (fig. 1).

In my pre-adolescent mind, the stories of the Philistines and those of Father Thaddeus merged with the messages I received in school about non-Jews. We were taught that Jews possess two souls, a divine and animal one, while non-Jews only possess an animal soul. The



Figure 1 A page from the long-running weekly Golem cartoon in *The Jewish Press*.

animal soul gave its possessor vitality to stay alive but not the ability to transcend base animalistic instincts.

This message of Jewish superiority contributed to a feeling of separation from our Afro-Caribbean neighbors, which matched the parallel universes we inhabited. The Golem stories with the villainous

Father Thaddeus made me terrified of the massive Tudor gothic style brown brick Episcopal Church of St. Mark, with its bright red windows and spire topped with a crucifix, located across the street from my yeshiva, Oholie Torah, the Tent of Torah. Every time I passed the church, I shuddered because I associated this church with the one Father Thaddeus used to plot against the Jews of Prague. In my immature mind, the wicked “goyim” from the Golem stories melded with the Afro-Caribbean youth in the neighborhood who threw eggs and rocks at our yeshiva buses on Halloween as they transported us to and from yeshiva. I had no idea that the church ran a food pantry for needy parishioners and that it was adorned with stained glass windows celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman and the struggle for African-American freedom.

I routinely watched Black families in suits and dresses, holding Bibles, going off to church on Sundays. In the summertime, young Rastafari men with dreadlocks carried large boom boxes and played reggae music until late in the night. On hot days, little Black girls in tank tops and shorts, their hair made up in cornrows, played double Dutch jump rope and licked large blue-and-red ice popsicles, and little Black boys turned on the fire hydrants and cooled off in the jetting water. I observed all this but never interacted with any of it, as if I was living behind a clear glass wall. I didn't know the first or last name of a single one of my Black neighbors and doubtless they didn't know mine. We lived, attended school, worshipped, and played in two completely disconnected worlds that just happened to occupy the same crowded city blocks. Not only did most Lubavitchers not interact with their Black neighbors, but there was intense negativity aimed at them. It was common to refer to them as *shvartzes*, a derogatory Yiddish word for Black people. I often heard hateful “jokes” at school playing on racist stereotypes in line with the idea of non-Jews being akin to animals.

In the past few years, I have heard stories from Lubavitchers about how the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the spiritual leader of Lubavitch, met in 1968 with Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress, and encouraged her to use her position on the House Agricultural Committee to help the inner-city poor receive

food assistance from the federal government, and that Chisholm went on to champion the federal food assistance program known as WIC. This may all be true, but when I was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, we were never told about the Rebbe meeting any Black politicians or about his concern for our Black neighbors. All I heard about Black people was, “Hey! That’s the *shvartza* that stole my cousin’s bike.”

Although I can now look back on this from an anti-racist perspective, I was not immune from this prejudiced view of our Black neighbors as a child. When I was seven years old, my non-Orthodox Aunt Marta, a successful businesswoman, brought me an armful of drawing books, colored pencils, and toy soldiers for me to start a small business selling them on the street in front of my house. My first response was, “The *shvartzes* are gonna steal them!”

For me, and many other Jews in Crown Heights, the connection between our Black neighbors and violent anti-Semitism was only strengthened tenfold after the racial tensions that flared up in 1991. The immediate cause of the rise in tension occurred when Yosef Lifsh, a young Lubavitcher, accidentally drove his car into and killed Gavin Cato, the seven-year-old son of Guyanese immigrants, and the following day a group of Black teens stabbed and killed Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine-year-old Lubavitcher. But tensions simmered for decades, fed on a steady diet of mutual disregard and negative stereotypes. Years later, I would learn that this negative attitude that views non-Jews as an ever-present threat to Jewish survival was part of a broader perspective on the Jewish past that the noted twentieth-century Polish-born American historian Salo Baron criticized in the 1960s as “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history.” This conception views all of Jewish history as an unrelenting catalogue of tragedies.

On a personal level, after much reading of secular books on my own as well as meeting and befriending non-Jews in college, I came to realize how misguided and hurtful this view of non-Jews was, and how the stereotypical view of our Black neighbors as particularly violent was racist and unfounded. As a child, the message I took away from the Golem stories, which fit with many Hasidic tales I absorbed from my yeshiva days featuring evil Eastern European noblemen

who immiserated the lives of their Jewish subjects, was that it was necessary to fear the “goyim” among whom we lived. I accepted that there would always be wicked characters like Father Thaddeus who forever schemed to hurt the Jews, and that the Jews always need a protector, whether in the shape of Samson, the Golem, or the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

As the Talmud (Shabbos 21b) notes, “*girsā diyankusa*,” the knowledge we acquire at a young age, makes a deep impression on us. This is the power of ultra-Orthodox children’s literature, such as the Golem cartoons in *The Jewish Press*, absorbed at a tender age when we are so impressionable and before our critical thinking skills are fully developed, to influence so tremendously the trajectory of a community and its interactions with others.