

The Story of the Golem

Parashat Shemini

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In the city of Prague in the year 15 CE, it was very difficult for the Jewish people. Soldiers attacked the Jewish community, night after night. Rabbi Loew, the chief rabbi of Prague, also known as the Maharal, knew he had to do something. The people couldn't fight back against the soldiers, so he needed to do something powerful, magical—something that had never been done before.

On a moonless night, he went to the bank of the Vltava River, and he formed a giant man made of mud, and he began to whisper secret prayers and incantations that no one had ever said before. He carved three Hebrew letters: *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav* into the forehead of the creature. *Aleph*, *mem*, and *tav* spelled the Hebrew word *emet*—truth—and that's a very special word in Hebrew, because *aleph* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *mem* is the middle most letter, and *tav* is the last letter, showing that truth spans the world. And as he carved the final letter, the creature opened its eyes.

"Rise," he said to the creature, and it stood up.

The rabbi looked at his creation. "You are called a Golem because you are made from the mud of the earth. Your only job is to protect the Jewish people."

The Golem opened its mouth to speak but nothing came out. It was mute. It couldn't talk. So, it nodded its head yes and followed the rabbi back to Prague.

The next night soldiers attacked the community. But in the dark, a sword was knocked away! Another axe was broken in two! One soldier went to attack and was thrown into a wall. All of the soldiers ran away.

The next night, twice as many soldiers showed up. Again, their weapons were shattered, and their bodies smashed. They came back in the daytime, but now they saw that this giant creature silently defeated every soldier defending everyone in the Jewish community and was seemingly unharmed by any weapon.

The soldiers complained to the emperor about the creature. And so, Rabbi Loew was called to appear at the palace. No Jew had ever appeared in the palace or before the emperor, and Rabbi Loew set foot in the throne room.

The emperor said, "I have heard that the Jews have some sort of secret weapon that they are going to use to attack the palace."

Rabbi Loew remained silent at first. Then he said quietly, "Whatever might or might not be helping the Jews is only to defend the people from attacks. If the soldiers stopped attacking, there would be no need for whatever the Jews might have."

The emperor immediately made a declaration ordering all soldiers to stop attacking the Jewish people. And the soldiers stopped.

Rabbi Loew waited a day, but still no attacks. Then a week. Then a month. Then a year, to be sure that there were no more attacks. And so, on a moonless night, the rabbi brought the Golem to the Vltava River.

There, he looked up at his creation and said, "Thank you. You have saved the Jewish people." The Golem shook its head no, as if it knew what was coming. But Rabbi Loew reached up with a stick and erased the *aleph* on his forehead, leaving only the *mem* and the *tav*, or the Hebrew word *met*—death. The Golem collapsed in a pile of mud, lifeless like before. Some say Rabbi Loew took the mud and hid it in the attic of the Altneuschul, the old new shul in Prague, to be brought back should anyone attack the Jews. Some say the Golem is a myth and never existed.[1]

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This week, in Parashat Shmini, we meet Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron. They are not outsiders. They are not rebels. They are priests, chosen and trained for this sacred moment. And on the day the Mishkan is dedicated, perhaps the holiest moment the people have yet experienced, they bring what the Torah calls *esh zarah*, a strange fire, a fire that had not been commanded.[2] And they die.

The Torah does not tell us exactly what they did wrong. The rabbis spend generations trying to understand it. But one thing is clear. Their fire was real. Their passion was real. Their desire to serve God was real.

But they acted on their own initiative, outside the moment that had been given to them. They brought something meaningful, but they brought it on their own terms.

The golem, when held within its proper limits, saved a community. Nadav and Avihu's fire was also powerful, but it came at the wrong time, in the wrong way. They were holding onto something that was not theirs to hold in that moment. Rabbi Loew knew when the moment had passed. He knew when to erase the *aleph*.

So, this week, I want to invite you to reflect: Is there something in your life that you are still holding onto past its moment? A role, a habit, a way of responding, something that once protected you or helped shape you, but may no longer be needed? Something that may now be asking to be gently released?

Knowing when to step forward is a gift. Knowing when to let go is wisdom.

Shabbat Shalom.

[1] <https://reformjudaism.org/podcasts/stories-we-tell/stories-we-tell-golem>

[2] *Leviticus* 10:1