

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: Performance photo from the Habima production of *The Golem*, 1925; Below: Drawing of the golem and the Maharal from the 1925 Habima production of H Leivick's play

wipes away the holy name of God from the golem's forehead. In doing so, the golem falls on top of Elijah Ba'al Shem, leaving him cut and battered.

In the early 20th century, the golem of Prague took on an added dimension that was entirely absent from earlier tellings. Thanks mainly to a fabricated story produced by a chasidic rabbi from Warsaw which he passed off as being written by the Maharal's son-in-law, the golem now protected the Jewish community from a pogrom brought about by a blood libel accusation. This version coincided with an increase in anti-Jewish violence across Europe stemming from charges of blood libel and ritual murder.

In 1920 H Leivick, an anti-Czarist activist who had fled Belarus in 1913, wrote the modernist play *Der goylem*: a dramatishe poeme in akht bilder (*The Golem: a dramatic poem in eight acts*), which was popular in the Yiddish theatre repertoire worldwide. In the UK it was performed by Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, and Moscow's Habima theatre showed it in a Hebrew translation.

Unlike the golems of legend who are robotic beings acting without agency on behalf of their creators, the breath of life brings humanity to Leivick's golem. He learns to fear, love, feel pity, succumb to temptation and live a life of loneliness. A gentle figure whose task is to protect through force an innocent community seeking redemption from suffering, persecution, and violence, the golem must live in opposition to his nature. When he succeeds in descending into a dark and abandoned cave to find the vials of blood a priest has planted in order to frame the Jewish community for ritual murder, the golem is plagued by evil spirits, descends into madness, and ends up murdering two innocent Jews.

Now afraid of the weapon created to protect them, the Jewish community demands that the golem's life be taken from him. As the Maharal issues his life-ending order to the golem, the golem cries out in an ultimate display of humanity, "What will you do with me? What will you do?" ■

See: yivo.org. Read more about the Prague golem in our Prague special beginning on p22. **Stefanie Halpern** is the director of the YIVO Archives.

THE LEGEND OF THE GOLEM

The 19th-century story of the Prague golem is well known but tales about the mythical clay creature reach back almost a thousand years, says **Stefanie Halpern**

The legend of the golem, a creature formed from clay and formidable in its physicality but without agency of its own, has captivated the collective imagination for centuries. Perhaps the best-known iteration of this tale comes from a 19th-century German literary invention set in 16th-century Prague. The story involves the creation of a golem by Rabbi Judah Loew, known as the Maharal, in order to protect the Jewish community from antisemitic violence.

Writings about golem creation have their roots in early kabbalistic texts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation), one of the earliest books of Jewish mysticism (thought to have been written in the third or fourth century), is said to contain the secrets of the way God created the universe and provides the basic outline for creating a golem. Succeeding in giving life to a golem was believed to demonstrate that one had studied and gained mastery of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Commentaries on this text, such as that written by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms

in the late 12th century, provide detailed instructions for golem creation. His commentary explains that after combining and kneading virgin soil collected from a mountain with pure water, one must recite an intricate pattern of letters and sounds as each limb of the golem is shaped. Each letter of the Tetragrammaton, or the four-letter name of God, is then combined and spoken aloud with each letter of the alphabet, and this series of permutations serves as the activation word, bringing the golem to life.

Stories such as that of the golem of Chelm were also popular in 17th- and 18th-century Poland. In this tale, Elijah Ba'al Shem, a 16th-century talmudic scholar, kabbalist, rabbi of Chelm and the first person said to possess secret knowledge of the holy names of God, creates a golem to perform hard labour for him. When Elijah Ba'al Shem realises that the golem is growing larger by the day, he becomes fearful that it will consume the universe and therefore

