



Golems in the New World

Matt Reingold

Abstract: This essay considers the ways that the legend of the Jewish Golem has been used in two recent graphic novels. The original legends of the Golem presented him as a creature that would protect the Jews of Prague against anti-Semitism and persecution in the 16th century, while leaving open the possibility that he could return again in the future. Both James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* and Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero's *The Silence of Malka* make use of many of the original tropes of the Golem narrative, but by making significant changes to the story including location, time period, and even what a Golem is, the texts offer new ways of understanding the Golem legend. These narratives suggest that despite immense progress for global Jewry since the 16th century, a Golem – albeit a new one – is still needed to protect Jews, sometimes even from themselves.

Keywords: Golems, James Sturm, *Golem's Mighty Swing*, *The Silence of Malka*, Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero, graphic novels

In a May 2009 article in the *New York Times*, reporter Dan Bilefsky identified a revival in Golem culture in Prague. In his visit to the city, he found Golem hotels, Golem figurines and action figures, a musical about the Golem, and even Golem-themed restaurants serving non-kosher foods like the “crisis special”, a roast pork and potato dish. In her analysis of the renewed interest in Prague's legendary creature, Eva Bergerova, director of the Golem play, sees in the Golem a “projection of society's ... fears and concerns. [The Golem] is the ultimate crisis monster” (qtd. in Bilefsky).

Bilefsky and Bergerova's observations about the Golem are reflected in Cathy S. Gelbin's statement that “the Golem has become a global signifier of the Jews” (9). The appeal of the Golem is, according to Gelbin, its nostalgic echoes to pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish culture and civilisation, and its strong cautioning against the dangers of abusing science and technology. The Golem's positioning in both the

medieval and modern worlds results in it symbolising “Jewish particularity in a globalised world” (Gelbin 9).

Over the last 25 years, Golem-mania has moved beyond the Golem’s geographical birthplace of Prague, and Golem-inspired texts have been written by both Jews – the historical creators of the Golem – and non-Jews, and published in countries around the world. These texts include Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer Prize-winning text *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and even an episode on Fox’s popular 1990s television series *The X-Files*. This paper will analyse two graphic novels published in English that prominently feature the legend of the Golem¹. Both James Sturm’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* and Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero’s *The Silence of Malka* echo the trends set by Chabon and *The X-Files* in transposing the Golem into modernity by relocating him to the early 20th-century Americas, and through significant alterations to the original Golem story, offer new ways of understanding the legend of the Golem.

Jewish Graphic Novels

The past 30 years have seen the publication of many Jewish graphic novels. Unlike other graphic novels, write Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, a Jewish graphic novel is an “illustrated narrative produced by a Jew that addresses a Jewish subject or some aspect of the Jewish experience” (xvi). Initially a small field that began with the publication of Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), Jewish graphic novels are now recognised by scholars and academics as their own distinct field of study, and journal articles, full-length works, and even university courses are dedicated solely to their study.²

Since the publication of Eisner’s and Spiegelman’s works, graphic novels have been written and illustrated that address all aspects of Jewish cultural, political, and religious life. These include graphic novels set in Israel, such as Rutu Modan’s Eisner Award-winning *Exit Wounds* (2008); the United States, including Liana Finck’s *A Bintel Brief* (2014); Morocco, including Joann Sfar’s *The Rabbi’s Cat* (2005); Poland, such as Sfar’s *Klezmer* (2006) and Modan’s *The Property* (2013); and Canada, such as Jamie Michaels and Doug Fedrou’s *Christie Pits* (2018). These Jewish graphic novels cover all eras in Jewish history, but, perhaps not surprisingly, many address either the Holocaust or the State of Israel, two of the defining events of the 20th-century Jewish experience.

Not many Jewish graphic novelists make use of fantasy in their works. In addition to the two Golem texts that are explored in this paper, Israeli cartoonist Asaf

¹ Eli Eshed and Uri Fink have published a Golem story in Hebrew that has not yet been translated into English and is not available for purchase outside of Israel. Entitled *HaGolem: Sipuro shel comics Israeli* (*The Golem: The Story of an Israeli Comic*), it introduces the Golem into seminal moments in Israeli history.

² For examples of book-length studies, see Stephen Tabatchnick’s *The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel* or Tahneer Oksman’s “How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs. For examples of collected volumes, see Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman’s *The Jewish Graphic Novel* or Derek Parker’s *Visualizing Jewish Narrative: Jewish Comics and Graphic Novels*. In 2011 the journal *Shofar* also published a full issue focusing on Jewish graphic novels. Courses on Jewish graphic novels have been taught at Washington University in St. Louis by Erin McGlothlin and at the University of California Santa Barbara by Ofra Amihay.

Hanuka's series "The Realist" regularly engages with the fantastical in his autobiographical exploration of daily life. Elsewhere, I have termed Hanuka's use of fantasy in this way as fantastical autography, as he often uses fantasy as lens for exploring his feelings about what he is experiencing. Hanuka's "presentation of the 'real' world is that it is bleak and dreary, but fantasy provides him with a way of interpreting and recasting this world in new and alternate ways" (Reingold).

The Golem as Jewish Fantasy Trope

Even though the legend of the Golem is "one of the most enduring and imaginative tales in modern Jewish folklore and ... perhaps the most famous of all modern Jewish literary fantasies" (Dekel and Gurley 241–42), a short review of the story's origins may be helpful for those less familiar with it. The earliest versions of the Golem myth were written in the 19th century, but they date the Golem's creation to 16th-century Prague, where Jews were victims of persecution by the neighbouring Christian communities. These versions include Franz Klutschak's version from 1841 and Leopold Weisel's from 1847, which are the earliest known written versions of the story. The Golem legend was then radically altered by Yudel Rosenberg who, in 1909, published a full-length work about the Golem's origins that added many previously unpublished details about the Golem's life; this version has become the template for all subsequent Golem works. According to legend, under the direction of God, the rabbi of Prague's Jewish community, Judah Loew, and his two assistants, build a human-like creature from mud found on the banks of the Vltava River. Employing mystical incantations, Loew brings the creature to life, clothes him, and names him Joseph. Traditionally, the Golem is both mute and impotent. Some versions of the story include that Loew inscribes the name of God on the Golem's forehead or mouth. Loew instructs Joseph that from now onward, he will be Loew's servant, bound to follow any of Loew's requests.

Joseph protects the Jewish community from harm and saves the lives of many Jews in Prague when they are attacked by non-Jews. He also takes care of daily tasks around the community, such as chopping wood and hewing water. These tasks reflect what David Honigsberg sees as part of the Golem's essence: "purity of purpose ... a Golem cannot be created for the purpose of evil" (139). On the Sabbath, the Golem rests after Loew puts him to sleep for the day. Despite the Golem's service to the community, Loew ultimately chooses to kill him. Golem Elizabeth R. Baer identifies two possible reasons for Loew's removal of Joseph's lifeforce. The first is that Joseph becomes violently destructive to the Jewish community on a Sabbath when Loew forgets to put him to rest, and the second is that the Jewish community no longer needs his services because non-Jews have stopped harming Jews. Regardless, the Golem's body is stored in the attic of Prague's Old-New Synagogue, where it can be reawakened in the future if necessary. In his analysis of Golem stories, Gershom Scholem suggests that Golems are, on their own, not dangerous, but that it is the "creative process" (191) itself that is dangerous, as the fashioner of the Golem has assumed the role of God and created life in an unnatural way. Therefore, regardless of the reason, the individual who makes a Golem must recognise the danger inherent in the act of creation.

As a trope, the Golem is central to the essence and origins of the science fiction genre, given his similarities to the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Despite many differences in the stories – especially Shelley's use of Christian beliefs as a

foundation of her text – there are numerous similarities that suggest that in some capacity Shelley was influenced by the Golem. These include the idea of bringing a creature to life, struggling to harness the creature and rein it in once it is created, and the eventual need to kill it.

Danusha V. Goska sees in the mythology of the Golem an attempt by Jewish communities to wrestle with their inferior status as outsiders in many of the societies that they have inhabited, coupled with a desire to also be part of these exclusionary societies. The Golem's own religious status is never clarified in any of the original texts; yet, as Goska argues, the Golem typifies how Jews perceived non-Jewish behaviour, and in this way is very "not Jewish". These behaviours include the Golem's lack of education and his willingness to use violence. Ironically, the Jewish community's perception of the Golem as "not Jewish" is refracted by the Golem's non-Jewish victims' perception of the Golem's very Jewishness. Ruth Gilbert sees the Golem's limitless strength and energy as a grotesque caricature of anti-Semitic tropes. These anti-Semitic beliefs see the Jew as "larger than life, uncontrollable and basely embodied ... the Jew has been depicted as a useful and sometimes necessary part of non-Jewish society but one that has repeatedly and profoundly troubled its sense of gentile self" (56).

In her study of Golems, Baer argues that like the Golem itself, which was put to sleep with the understanding that it might one day be reawakened, so too the legend of the Golem has gone through periods of obscurity, and other periods, such as after the Holocaust, where it has featured in many works of fiction. Much of this post-Holocaust literature, suggests Baer, relies on the reader's ability to construe meaning out of intertextual references. This intertextuality involves "references, quotations, or allusions to other texts. It allows for the re-vision and appropriation of older texts to suit new situations and meanings" (8). Baer refers to this literary process as "metafiction: a fiction about fiction" (8). Most importantly, the appropriation of the Golem away from Prague and into new cultural and ideological milieus across time and space creates "a network of texts that at once destabilizes meaning and enables the writer to render ideological commentary" (8).

According to Lewis Glinert, the new Golem stories have been infused with a "desire to create a creature for the greater good" (85). As explained by Edan Dekel and David Gannt Gurley, the "literary Golem can be shaped and molded to resemble any form" (244). These iterations move far beyond differences in genre. Goska traces the evolution of the Golem into the 20th century and argues that current Golems are now verbal, sexual, and dangerous. Whereas the original Golem was created by the spiritual leader of 16th-century Prague's Jewish community and limited by his inability to speak and act independently, contemporary Golems are created by average Jews who awaken Golems that possess powers and abilities that previous Golems did not. These abilities, while granting the Golem more independence and humanity, also make them much more difficult to control: the almost-human in these modern versions wants its freedom, and this tension often results in disaster.

One final important and salient feature of the modernisation of the Golem legend is how it has become increasingly ecotypified. As defined by Dekel and Gurley, an ecotypified legend is one that is "free to take on the locality of the place it arrives in because it is essentially and narratologically located in no one place" (246). Relative to the Golem, they argue, is the fact that most Golem mythology situates him in Prague and local flavours and variations do not exist; the Golem is therefore not ecotypified. When this fixedness occurs, the myth "ceases to be legendary and undergoes a

transformation into a full-fledged literary phenomenon, which somewhat counterintuitively allows for all sorts of expansions and revisions” (246). What this means is that once Loew and Prague become fixed in the story, the Golem comes alive and is set loose upon the city. While the city of Prague remains a prominent feature in many Golem narratives, one literary genre that has rebuffed this aspect while still offering original interpretations of the Golem’s legend is comics and graphic novels. To date, both of the largest mainstream comics publishers – Marvel Comics and DC Comics – and the publishers of the two graphic novels considered here have included Golems in some of their stories, but these stories are consistently disconnected from Prague, and as a result, the Golems in these texts are ecotypified and assume radically new identities from the more fixed ones based on the Golem of Prague. Changing the Golem’s birthplace and creator opens up the narrative in new ways that reflect the societies and worldviews of the fictional worlds that these authors and artists build, and through these changes, and many others, the Golem can be considered in an entirely new way.

Golems in Superhero Comic Books

Marvel Comics has created two different characters that have been called the Golem, both of which draw on Jewish mythology³. The first, a very short-lived, four-issue story published in 1974 and 1975 in the series *Strange Tales*, introduced a number of changes to the Golem legend, most notably shifting the location of the story away from Eastern Europe to the Middle East and changing the villains from Christians to Arabs. Written and illustrated by a number of different individuals, including Mike Friedrich (1974) and Len Wein (1974), the *Strange Tales*’ Golem narrative is a retelling of the story that positions it away from Jewish persecution in Eastern Europe and towards Israeli persecution at the hands of Arab armies. This sentiment is expressed through a story that revolves around a group of archaeologists in the Middle East who are searching for the Golem in the desert. Surprisingly, since the Golem did not live in the Middle East, they are able to locate him. Just as the group extracts him from the ground, a group of Arabs kidnap the archaeologists, save for their leader Professor Adamson who is shot and left to die. As his life ebbs, Adamson chants prayers over the Golem’s lifeless body and sheds a tear on the Golem’s foot, resulting in the Golem’s reanimation. Channeling the Golem of Prague’s commitment to saving lives, this Golem tracks down the kidnapped archaeologists and saves them. The comic ends with one of the archaeologists recognising Professor Adamson in the Golem’s eye. In the subsequent issues, the Golem continues to help the archaeologists and ensure that they are not harmed. In an explanation to the readers, the creators of the comic explain that their Golem should be understood as having human intelligence, and that this intelligence comes from Professor Adamson giving “up his life to instill a life-force in old Stone-face” (Friedrich, DeZuniga, et al. 32). Unlike the original versions of the Golem story, in which creator and created exist within a symbiotic relationship, the Marvel Comics version involves the Golem being unable to become human without the death of his creator: only through Adamson’s death can the Golem be brought back to life.

³ As Robert G. Weiner has correctly noted, Marvel Comics has had many other characters called Golem, but these do not make use of any tropes from the Jewish mythology of the creature.

The second Marvel Comics Golem was created in 1977 but has also been used by the company in more recent issues, including in 1993. This Golem is created as a result of a freak accident in which a Jew named Jacob Goldstein creates a clay man to protect Jews from Nazis during World War II, and in the process, Goldstein's body becomes unintentionally fused with the Golem's body. This new creature is "part a human and part a holy being, but one with total free will" (Weiner 67). Unlike Marvel Comics' first Golem, the Goldstein Golem can transition at will between being a Golem and being Goldstein. While other superheroes want Goldstein to help fight for the Allies in World War II, like the original Golem, Goldstein explains that he must remain with the Jews to ensure their safety before he is willing to fight in the war.

The publishing run of DC Comics' Golem series "The Monolith" spanned 12 issues between April 2004 and March 2005. Written and illustrated by Justin Gray, Jimmy Palmiotti, and Phil Winslade, the series features a Golem created in 1930s New York during the Great Depression by Alice, a Jewish immigrant from Prague, Rabbi Rava, a Chinese carpenter, and a bootlegger to help Lower East Side immigrants. The story is actually set in the 21st century in the home of Alice Cohen, the granddaughter of Alice the immigrant, and focuses on Alice Cohen's discovery that the Golem has been hidden in her grandmother's home for over 17 years. This Golem follows many of the modern iterations of the Golem story in that he can speak, dresses in contemporary clothing, and experiences feelings of love. Baer writes that "though there are Jewish characters and themes, the Golem's sense of responsibility is to the wider world of oppressed people in New York, a city often depicted as dark, menacing, snowy, and decrepit" (119). The larger issues with which the story engages include drug addiction, racism, sex-slavery rings, and child pornography. Tackling these problems transitions the Golem away from serving the uniquely particular Jewish experience and towards solving contemporary universal issues and the protection of all vulnerable and needy people.

Golems in Graphic Novels

Like Marvel's and DC Comics' Golems, both of the English-language graphic novels examined here situate their Golems away from 16th-century Prague, and instead take place in the Americas of the early 20th century. Despite their geographical and temporal distance from the birthplace of the Golem, the texts draw heavily on the mythology of the Golem while interpreting the text for the societies and places to which they are transposed. These two texts thus reflect Baer's assertion about other Golem adaptations in that they "call attention ... to the use of the imagination over the centuries as a tool for exploring human nature" (9). In this exploration of human nature, each author does what Leslie Jones identifies as taking "the skeleton of the plot from 'tradition' and reworks it to his or her own ends, in his or her own style" (89).

The first graphic novel that will be considered here is Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero's *The Silence of Malka*. Originally published in Spanish in 1996, it was translated into English in 2018. The story begins in Bessarabia, Russia, in the late 1800s, and the reader is immediately introduced to the main characters: Malka, a precocious and feisty pre-teen; her first cousin David; and her uncle Zelik. The family is preparing to move to Argentina following a pogrom, a violent attack on the Jewish community. The four-panel depiction of the pogrom is devoid of any words, and the reader must therefore fully rely on Pellejero's brutally graphic renderings. Throughout

the entire depiction, the panels fade increasingly to red; in the final panel the entire sky is blood-red. Pellejero's depictions of non-Jews who first cavort while destroying sacred objects, then destroy Jewish lives, and finally destroy the entire town itself powerfully convey the fear and devastation of the Jewish community (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Depiction of pogrom: Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero, *The Silence of Malka*, 2018, p. 17.

Despite Pellejero's depiction of the pogroms, the characters build their Golem not in Russia, but in Argentina. For while the anti-Semitism that existed in Russia seems non-existent in Argentina, extreme poverty and famine threaten Malka, David, Zelik, and their families as they struggle to survive as farmers during a drought. After his request for a loan to buy supplies to last the season is rejected by the wealthy Jews who help settle impoverished Eastern European Jews in Argentina, Zelik builds a Golem out of mud from a nearby riverbank, and inscribes Hebrew letters on the Golem's leg and chants prayers over him to bring him to life.

Over the rest of the work, the Golem helps Zelik farm and manage the property. He runs errands on behalf of the family and works to ensure that their wishes are fulfilled. While the Golem is mute, he does attract the attention of an Argentinian girl who tries to seduce him using local and indigenous herbal remedies. The blending of Jewish and Argentinian folklore results in the Golem becoming confused and violent, and he murders Zelik and his entire family, save Malka, who hides. In the final section of the work, the reader learns that Malka has dedicated her life to trying to destroy the Golem, who has willingly become a hired assassin due to his absence of conscience.

Upon seeing her in person, the Golem remembers her and becomes frightened; he is killed when he runs into the path of an oncoming train.

The similarities between *The Silence of Malka* and the original Golem story are numerous. In both tales the Golem is created by a pious Jew who feels that creating the Golem is the only way to ensure that his community can survive. Moreover, both Golems are created from mud from a riverbank and infused with life as a result of having words drawn on their bodies and prayers chanted over them. Similarly, like Loew's Golem, Zelik's Golem is devoted to him and follows all of his commands. Also, both are mute and asexual. Most importantly, both lose control, rise up, and harm the very communities that birthed them, before eventually being destroyed.

Despite these similarities, there are many differences, and it is their differences that offer the best understanding of the metafictional insights inherent in Zentner and Pellejero's reworking of the legend of the Golem. Zentner and Pellejero's Golem is a new-world Golem who was born in a country that openly welcomed Jews. Argentina's willingness to take in impoverished Eastern European Jews and provide them with land to farm directly clashes with the Golem's initial role as a defender of the Jews. Their appropriation of his secondary role as community helper seems to miss or obscure the very purpose of a Golem. However, his new role reflects the divergent natures of global attitudes towards Jewry, and the text's absence of any anti-Semitism once the family arrives in Argentina is a notable departure from other Golem texts and from the legend itself. The absence of anti-Semitism in the entirety of the rest of the text is tied to the idea that in comparison to life in Europe and the difficulties of adjusting to an entirely new lifestyle, anti-Semitism in Argentina was comparably a non-factor for these Jewish immigrants.

The Golem that Zelik creates in the new world protects the Jews not against threats of death from external foes, but against the economic and agricultural hardships that affect the family as they struggle to adjust to life in a new country. Farming becomes his most essential task in ensuring his master's survival, in the same way that fighting was the most essential task for Loew's Golem. Creating a Golem in Argentina, as opposed to Russia, also suggests the novelty of the challenges the family faces; this is compounded by the optimism that they feel for what life will now be. In one of the text's most charming images, Pellejero illustrates David and Malka imagining themselves playing amongst apples the size of boulders, being showered by candy, and running around rainbows (Figure 2). The enjambment created between the expectations and the realities of the harsh life of a farmer is sharper than that felt between their expectations regarding non-Jews in Russia. For while the pogrom was awful, they were habituated to it and did not expect anything different from their non-Jewish neighbors.



Figure 2. Depiction of Argentina: Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero, *The Silence of Malka*, 2018, p. 20.

The most surprising aspect of why the Golem in *The Silence of Malka* is created is that the Jews need the Golem after they are mistreated by other Jews. Zentner and Pellejero hold a mirror up to the Jewish community itself, depicting Jews who necessitate the creation of the Golem, in contrast to the Christians who physically tormented the Jews in Russia. Dressed as modern figures and depicted devoid of any discernably Jewish caricatures (Figure 3), the wealthy Jewish businessmen with their politely dismissive words thrust Zelik into the role of mystic who calls forth the Golem, as it is from Jews that the family needs protection.



Figure 3. Depiction of a wealthy Jew: Jorge Zentner and Rubén Pellejero, *The Silence of Malka*, 2018, p. 26.

Unlike traditional Golem stories, in which irrational anti-Semitism forces Jews to play the role of God, in *The Silence of Malka*, the persecutors are Zelik's modern coreligionists, who are devoid of any sympathy for the famine that is wreaking havoc on the family. Conversely, non-Jews are consistently depicted in positive ways. Whether it is the non-Jewish doctor who helps the family, or the non-Jewish

neighbours who are curious about the Jewish community, the non-Jews are polite, friendly, and likeable. Zentner and Pellejero's rereading of the Golem story and their decision to create him in the wake of negative behaviour committed by Jews cuts to the core of the identity of Loew's original Golem. There, the very reason why Loew turned to God and created a Golem was because non-Jews were persecuting Jews and Jews had no other recourse to protect themselves. By writing the story in this way, the text challenges Jewish communities to more carefully consider who are its enemies and who are its friends, and questions what really are the bonds that exist within Jewish communities and between Jews and non-Jews.

Significantly, what Zelik never does in the text, perhaps because of his own prejudices towards non-Jews as a result of his personal experiences in Russia, is turn to the non-Jews around him. Bypassing them and moving straight to harnessing the fantastical, Zelik fashions a Golem, thus bringing about his own undoing. And yet despite the Golem's role as a peaceful farmer, and being given no specific commands to employ violence, he still turns violent and kills his master. Brigitte Natanson sees in the Golem's inevitable turn to violence as a result not of the historical cause of anti-Semitism but the commingling of two disparate magical and fantastical elements. Seemingly, Zelik should have at least first turned to his neighbors – irrespective of their religious traditions – before resorting to the mystical, as the consequences associated with Golems are radically unpredictable. Equally, Zelik should also have turned to these same non-Jewish neighbors before turning to the wealthy Jews, because he has more in common with his rural farmer-neighbours, as they are all experiencing the same challenges of trying to remain alive during a drought.

Like *The Silence of Malka*, James Sturm's graphic narrative *The Golem's Mighty Swing* also focuses on a group of Jews who live in early 20th-century society in the Americas. Instead of the narrative revolving around the agrarian calendar and how a family adjusts to becoming farmers, in Sturm's text, the lives of a travelling group of Jewish baseball players revolve around the baseball calendar. The narrative follows a predominantly Jewish baseball team called the Stars of David as they tour the USA, playing against non-Jewish teams. The team experiences anti-Semitism in many of the cities they visit, including opposing players intentionally trying to hurt them, raucous fans yelling curses at them, and children throwing stones at them.

The central narrative of the text revolves around a game against the Putnam All-Americans that has been arranged by their publicist, Victor Paige. In an attempt to increase interest in the game and to turn the team into a more marketable entity, Paige crafts a narrative that one of the non-Jewish players on the Stars of David, Henry Bloom, is actually a Golem who plays first base and pitcher for the team while wearing a costume from a European Golem film. Unintentionally, the aggressive advertising and the promotion that the Jewish team is fielding a fantastical monster draws an aggressive and hostile crowd to the game that is eager to attack the Jews. When Bloom throws a pitch that hits a non-Jewish batter, a group of non-Jews storm the field and Bloom, in his Golem costume, protects the team as they escape to their bus and leave town, even though the local policeman says that if it were up to him, he would let the non-Jewish mob attack the Jews.

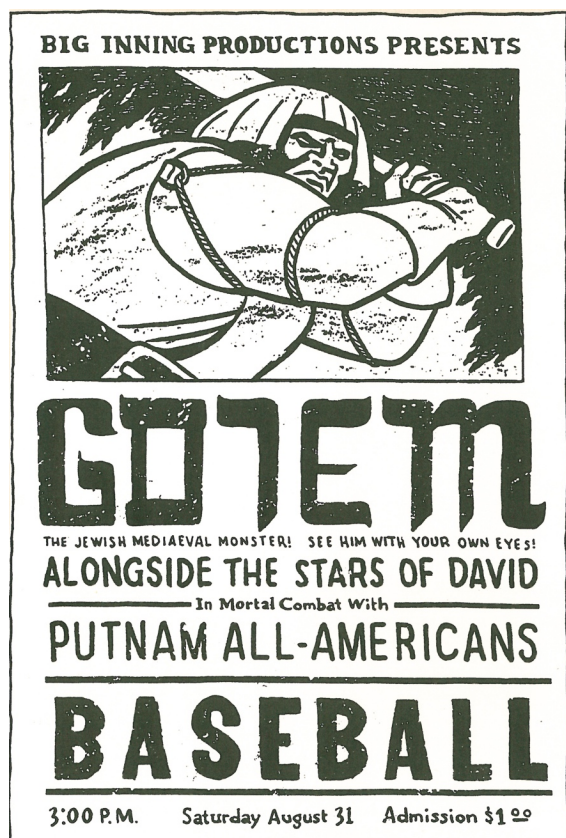


Figure 4. Baseball game poster: James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, 2007, p. 125.

The similarities between Loew's and Sturm's Golems are less readily apparent than those between Loew's and Zentner and Pellejero's Golems. Yet what clearly link Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* to Golem fiction are the numerous and diverse scenes of anti-Semitism throughout the text. While the establishment of Bloom as the Golem and the menacing posters that Paige creates exacerbate the anti-Semitism by depicting Jews as evil and violent (Figure 4), hatred towards the Jewish baseball players is readily apparent even before Bloom becomes a Golem. These include when the baseball umpires make intentionally incorrect calls against the Stars of David, when Lev Sheeny is beat up by a group of men, and when Mo is attacked by children who want to "see his horns" (Sturm 110) after they take his hat off. Mo chases the children, who then accuse Mo of trying to hurt them. The accusation that a Jew is trying to catch and harm a Christian youth is an example of the types of charges that were levied against Jews in Europe as part of blood-libel or ritual-murder charges

that were prevalent during Loew's lifetime. In Rosenberg's extended version of the Golem's origins, he introduces blood libels as one of the core reasons why the Golem was needed in the first place. While Mo is able to defuse the situation and impress the local Christians with his knowledge of baseball, his fear of being lynched as a result of being falsely accused of trying to harm a child is palpable, and the connection to European blood libels is evident.

Beyond the instances of physical violence, the text is also replete with examples of verbal and written anti-Semitism, all of which "startle the reader into recognition" (Baer 124) of how prevalent anti-Semitism was. At all of the games that Sturm depicts, there are fans who attend not because they like baseball, but because they want to sate their curiosity about the stories that have been told about Jews in their local newspapers. These stories include the headline: "Exclusive: When the Golem Comes to Town, Hide Your Women" (Sturm 136) (Figure 5). When analysing this headline, Baer sees more than just a fear that the Jews are going to harm women; she argues that the headlines "calls to mind the stereotypes of Jewish men as licentious rapists, [which are] prevalent in such Nazi films as *Jud Süß*" (125).



Figure 5. Newspaper story: James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, 2007, p. 136.

Like the original version of the Golem, which was created for the purpose of preventing violence but ultimately came to cause violence as well, Sturm's Golem also contributes to the violence that takes place on the baseball diamond. While anti-Semitism is readily apparent throughout the text, it is Bloom, dressed as the Golem, who throws the ball with the intention of causing injury that directly triggers the riot and fight. Through the use of dark shading around Bloom's body and by hiding his eyes, Sturm clearly depicts Bloom as the cold-hearted and remote figure that the



Figure 6. Bloom hitting opponent: James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, 2007, p. 167.

non-Jews perceive him to be (Figure 6). Furthermore, the posters designed to draw in crowds position the Stars of David as violent, aggressive, and – through the use of a Hebrew-style font – other, and not like fellow Americans, even if their game is being played on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath (Figure 4). By calling attention to the otherness of the Jews, Sturm effectively nullifies their attempt to be Americans by playing the most quintessentially American of sports: baseball. While Bloom is able to protect the Stars of David, the police officer's openness to sharing that he would have no moral compunctions allowing the non-Jews to murder the Jews shows that the Golem has not actually provided a long-term solution to the ills of anti-Semitism. If anything, creating the Golem has stoked the fires of anti-Semitism, as Noah Straus, the manager and third baseman of the team acknowledges when he says that "it is not surprise that things got out of hand. That is the nature of a golem" (Sturm 176).

Despite the inclusion of the anti-Semitic elements, Sturm's Golem text is very removed from the original narrative of the Golem of Prague. Sturm's Golem is a real-life black American male who is capable of speech and independent thought, including when dressed in the Golem costume from Paul Wegener's German-language film *Der Golem*. Therefore, he is no more created than any other actor who assumes the role of a character in a film or television episode. Furthermore, his actual creation is borne not of the need to respond to persecution, but of the need to make more money. While Bloom does protect his Jewish teammates (Figure 7), he does not actually cause any physical harm to any of them, nor does Bloom suffer or die as a result of assuming the role of the Golem; all he does is remove his costume. Sturm's text contains a nod to the

fantastical, but it is heavily grounded in the realities of daily life for Jews in early 20th-century America. Elements of the fantastical, while not explicit, are still present in Sturm's story, even with his removal of the fantastic component of creating a creature from mud. Sturm has transposed the fantastical to present-day America, where rabbis and spiritual leaders, as well as the magical acts they performed, are replaced by the religions of sport and showbiz, and where a baseball player can turn into a pseudo-fantastical creature. Yet even these do not ameliorate the anti-Semitism that affects the Jewish community, as the persecution persists even after the game is over and the Golem is retired, just as in Judah Loew's Prague after his Golem was retired.

Sturm's inclusion of an African-American Golem offers insight into the uniqueness of what a Golem actually is. By redefining the Golem as not something that is fantastical but something that is other, Sturm's text reifies the precarious positions held by Jews and African Americans throughout history and the need to find solutions to the scourge of hatred. The turn away from science fiction and fantasy and towards real people trying to solve problems moves the Golem myth away from a fairy tale about a helpless community with no other recourse; instead, it uses historically fantastical elements to offer a model for interethnic dialogue as a means for problem-solving.

Conclusion

In a 2006 article for the New York Times, Edward Rothstein explained that "the Golem involves more than just a legend. It also embodies a strategy: to meet irrational hatred head on, to undermine terror and mitigate its impact with resolve and persistence. Death is the threat; the Golem is the response". Rothstein's understanding of the Golem as a tool that fights against irrational hatred is as applicable for understanding 16th-century Prague as it is for 20th-century Argentina and America. Yet neither



Figure 7. Bloom protecting teammates from rioters: James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, 2007, p. 170.

Zentner and Pellejero's *The Silence of Malka* or James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* are mere transpositions of Prague's Golem into modern settings.

Each text questions central elements of the original story and, through adaptation, offers a new way of interpreting the legend of the Golem and the relationships between Jews and non-Jews. These new readings emerge as metafictional commentary that, while disrupting the original intentions of the text, offer equally compelling explanations for why a Golem is needed to protect Jews. Whether the issue is anti-Semitism in America or Jews mistreating other Jews in Argentina, the texts suggest that even in the New World, away from the persecution that plagued Jews in Europe, external help is still needed to ensure the survival of the Jewish community. Where the two texts most markedly differ is, of course, in relation to who the Golem is, and how he is created. While Sturm's Golem is more realistic, this realism reflects the circumstances that the Jews experienced. For even though there was anti-Semitism, there were also many non-Jews, including Bloom himself, who were willing to work alongside the Jews and to collaborate together to build a more tolerant America. Conversely, Zentner and Pellejero's Golem, while more similar to the original Golem, is needed for a situation that Loew could never have imagined when he made his original Golem: Jews turning their backs on fellow Jews. And yet this is leads in this text to the creation of a Golem. In this way, what links the two texts together is a recognition that while some things might not have changed – difficulties for Jews – the circumstances have, and that human Golems replete with feelings and emotions, like Bloom, are more effective than fantastical ones that cannot be controlled, especially when approachable non-Jews are nearby. In this way, Sturm's text articulates a clearer vision for contemporary Jewish responses to anti-Semitism by actually showing two communities working together, and by transcending the trauma of persecution, it offers a model for moving forward united against tyranny.

Biography: Dr. Matt Reingold is a researcher of Jewish graphic novels, arts-based education, and Jewish education. He currently serves as the co-department head of the Jewish History at TannenbaumCHAT, North America's largest community Jewish high school. He has published articles in the *Journal of Jewish Education*, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *The Social Studies*, *Religious Education*, and the *Journal of Holocaust Research*, and has articles forthcoming in *Shofar*, *ImageText*, the *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, and *Monatshefte*. He received his PhD from York University's Faculty of Education.

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