



ARTIFACTS

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Oy Vey! The Jewish Golem and The X-Files

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Riley Simpson is a recent graduate from the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. He loves writing and editing, as well as myths and stories like the Jewish Golem legend complex. He lives in Arlington Heights, IL. He was curious about golems, so he asked his friend Peter, an X-Files superfan, to recommend a golem-themed episode of his favorite show. Peter recommended one, but as Riley looked at the episodes on Netflix, he found two that fit the bill of the golem legend. That's where he got the idea to explore and compare the two similar legend complexes.

Golems are everywhere. In modern popular culture, the Jewish Golem — sorry, Gollum from “The Lord of the Rings” books and movies isn’t a golem— has appeared in many TV shows, films and books. Most recently, stone golems called “Watchers” help Noah’s family build their life vessel in this year’s film *Noah*. 2013 saw Sam and Dean Winchester battle a golem in an episode of *Supernatural*; a golem protected a child in an episode of the new show *Sleepy Hollow*. Go back a few years to 2006, and you’ll find Bart Simpson taking advantage of two golems — a male and a female — in a “Treehouse of Horror” episode of *The Simpsons*.

Older films depicting golems came out in the 1920s, 1930s, 1950s and 1960s. One shouldn’t normally fear these abundant golems because these variants of the original legends tend to keep the primary purposes of a golem’s creation intact: service and protection. Dating back to at least the 1500s, the golem’s history shows these two reasons — along with golem creation to disprove pagans’ religions — as the main motives for fashioning a golem (Koven, 2000, p. 218).

The Jewish Golem legend used to comfort Jewish communities in from the before the 1500s until at least the 1930s. In the earliest days, Jews feared accusations of blood libel from anti-Semitic groups and used golems as protection. The later examples of golem belief come from Jewish ghettos before and during the Holocaust in the late 1930s and 1940s.

The two examples I will use throughout the paper are two episodes from *The X-Files*, “Kaddish” and “Arcadia.” The first one deals explicitly with a golem in a Jewish neighborhood in modern Brooklyn, New York. The second episode deals with a similar creature to the golem; they call it a Tulpa creature,

which is from Tibetan legend. However, I believe the creature depicted in “Arcadia” is a variant of the golem because of its shape, texture, material and, most importantly, purpose.

I’ve already named a few generic parts of the Jewish Golem’s story. Before I continue with my arguments, I’d like to fully flesh out the golem’s legend complex. Oreck points out the several ancient literary references to the golem in the Bible and the Talmud. In the Bible, the word “golem” appears once in the Book of Psalms. In Hebrew, “golem” means “shapeless mass,” and the Talmud uses “unformed” or “imperfect” to describe golems. Adam, the first man, is called “golem” according to Talmudic legend. In that context, it means “body without a soul” (Oreck, n.d., p. 1).

Jacobs refers to “The Ethics of the Fathers,” a section of the Talmud, and its comparison of a “dummy” golem to a wise man (Jacobs, n.d., p. 1). The process of creating a golem differs from story to story. In general, a rabbi forms the shape of a man from soil or clay that hasn’t been touched by man. There are many ways to bring life to this mass. One such way is to write “*Sem-Hamforesh*” (the secret name of God) on a piece of paper and place it in the golem’s mouth, ear or an amulet hanging from the golem’s neck—the location depends on the variant (Koven, 2000, p. 218).

Another way to bring the golem to life is inscribing either “*Shem*” (Hebrew for “truth”) or the word “*emet*” (Hebrew for “life”) on the golem’s forehead (Koven, 2000, p. 218). Performing a ritual that involves walking around the mass of clay in a circle while reciting Hebrew letters and the name of God (Jacobs, n.d., p. 1).

Regarding the golem’s role and purpose, the main theories involve servitude, protection and degrading pagans. Koven (2000) elaborates on the servitude angle:

Other traditions tell of golems created as ‘dependable’ and ‘trustworthy’ servants to provide cheap labor . . . Weinreich tells of a golem created in Vilna which, since it was not really human and not bound by God’s laws, could supply food and perform duties for the Jewish community on the Sabbath (p. 218).

The golem’s masters usually sent it on domestic errands, to do field work, to fish or to clean the synagogue. Rabbis also used the golem to demonstrate God’s power and the errors of idolatry to pagans. Sometimes golems were created by bringing palace statues and assigning them degrading duties (Koven, 2000, p. 218). Although the rabbi does not fashion the statue, Koven relates the story to the golem legend because it involves bringing life to inert matter.

As for the final and most important reason for creating a golem, protection of a Jewish community, I’ll turn to the most famous golem tale: the Golem of Prague. In 1580, anti-Semitic Christians accused the Jews of blood libel and ritual murder. To protect his people, Rabbi Loeb directed a dream question to heaven. The answer came to him in Hebrew. In English, it translated to “Make a Golem of clay and you will destroy the entire Jew-baiting company” (Arbel, 1).

According to Arbel, Loeb hired two assistants to perform a ritual to bring a golem to life. After purifying themselves, Loeb and his assistants read from a holy book, *Sefer Yezira* (The Book of Creation), went to the River Moldau and sculpted a giant body of from the riverbed’s clay. The two servants each walked

around the body seven times and recited Zirufim, Kabbalaistic formulas. The clay mass glowed red, and then water flowed through the body. It grew hair and fingernails. Finally, Rabbi Loeb walked around the body, wrote “*Shem Hameforash*” on a piece of parchment and placed it in the golem’s mouth. He bowed to the four directions, and then all three recited: “And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Arbel, 1).” It came to life. They dressed it and sent it on its way to protect the Jewish people (Arbel, 1).

Oreck identifies a few extra facts about the Golem of Prague: Rabbi Loeb created it to protect the Jews during Easter, and the golem also helped out with the community’s physical labor tasks (Oreck, 1). Regardless of the details, the golem ended up going rogue. Arbel says, “Eventually, when the Golem was no longer necessary (and some claim he went mad and became a danger to everyone) Rabbi Loeb decided to return him to the void from which he came. He did that by recalling the *Shem Hameforash*, and with it the life principle, and thus restored the Golem into lifeless clay” (Arbel, 1). The Golem of Prague is the quintessential golem legend because it’s the most recognizable and the most detailed. It also serves as a cautionary tale for Jews and rabbis seeking to create golems.

Finally, the Golem of Prague has a very exact way of “killing” the golems. Other versions include erasing some of the letters of the Hebrew word “*emet*” (“truth”) from the golem to make the word “*met*,” which means “death” (Oreck, 1). If a rabbi performed a ritual similar to Rabbi Loeb’s, another way to take the life from a golem would be to perform the ritual backwards: walk the circle in the opposite direction and say the words in reverse order (Oreck, 1).

Now that we’ve covered the ground rules (or mud/clay rules if you’re a golem) for the creation of this creature, it’s time to examine the legend’s depiction in *The X-Files* episodes, “Kaddish” and “Arcadia.” The former episode came first in 1997. A group of Neo-Nazis have murdered a Hasidic Jew named Isaac in Brooklyn, New York. However, police find Isaac’s fingerprints on the recent dead body of one of Isaac’s attackers. Mulder and Scully arrive on the scene. Scully, ever the optimist, believes the fingerprints were planted to make the crime look like one from beyond the grave. But when the other two attackers and the anti-Semitic shop owner are murdered, the agents see security footage of the killer who bears striking resemblance to Isaac. Mulder seeks a local rabbi to teach him about golems. The rabbi tells Mulder of the Kabbalistic rituals of animating the inanimate via the inscription of “*emet*” (“truth”) on the golem’s hand. The rabbi calls the golem a monster that’s unable to speak or emote. He also warns of the golem’s tendency to run amok and the fact that the creator usually ends up destroying it. It turns out that Isaac and his widow Ariel never married, so she brought a golem in his likeness to life to stand in for their final wedding vows in the synagogue; the murderous rampage was just a side mission (Carter and Howard, 1997). Just as the golem is an imperfect recreation of human life, so is “Kaddish” an imperfect variant of the Jewish Golem legend. According to Koven (2000):

“First of all, nowhere in any of the Jewish traditions does the golem take on the characteristics of someone who is alive, or was alive, like Isaac-Golem ...I think the writer, Howard Gordon, was attempting to make Isaac-Golem into more of a doppelganger figure, and *that* aspect of the legend is much more recent and literary in its origins” (Koven, 2000, p. 223).

The other big knocks on the episode's faithfulness to the traditional legend stem from the actual ceremony. The audience sees part of the ritual that brings life to the golem in the beginning of the episode. The dark figure sculpting the golem (or doppelganger) uses the freshly dug soil on top of Isaac's grave. This is a no-no according to the original legends; the soil used for a golem must be "pure" (Koven, 2000, p. 224). Also, the creator inscribes the word "emet" on the golem's hand rather than the traditional location, the forehead. Koven retains that these deviations from the traditional versions are new variants to the legend cycle, even though online X-Files viewers rejected that idea (Koven, 2000, p. 224).

The second episode, "Arcadia," does not specifically deal with the Jewish Golem. Mulder and Scully go undercover as a married couple in a Arcadia, a planned community in southern California. They're investigating the recent disappearances of several married couples. Soon, they discover the neighborhood's homeowner association president, Gene Gogolak, keeps very strict code that requires every family and house stay like one another. In their investigation, Mulder and Scully discover the Gogolak is using a Tulpa, a Tibetan thought form creature, to keep the homeowners in accordance with the neighborhood's code. If you're different, you're dead. Eventually, Mulder and Scully discover the community is built on a landfill and that the creature uses the garbage piles under the lawns to move from yard to yard and house to house. After another man disappears, Mulder arrests Gogolak and handcuffs him to a mailbox. The Tulpa creature attacks Scully but then turns his attention to Gogolak. After it kills him, the creature crumbles at Mulder's feet. This variant might not smell like a golem legend, but it sure looks like one. The episode depicts the Tulpa in shadows during the first few encounters to build dramatic tension. But once I saw it as a big, hulking and lumbering creature, golems came to mind. Also, the creature is made out of dirt, soil and materials from the landfill under the community.

Although these materials aren't "pure," golems are also composed of soil and dirt (and, as "Kaddish" showed, *The X-Files* doesn't care if its golems are made from "pure" soil). Another golem similarity is the formation of the Tulpa. Mulder describes the Tibetan legend as a thought form conjured by Gogolak's mind. This is not the exact way to create a golem; it does not involve inscribing letters, placing parchment or even rituals (to my knowledge). However, Gogolak still animates the inanimate garbage and soil. He breathes life into the lifeless heap to make it do his bidding. Speaking of Gogolak's bidding, the Tulpa's role in the community is similar — but not exactly the same — as that of a golem's. The creature in "Arcadia" attacks homeowners who are different from the rest of the neighborhood. I believe it defends Gogolak's ideals of unity and perfection against the unpopular concepts of anarchy and divergence. In this convoluted way, the Tulpa acts as a golem would. Finally, the Tulpa's final act clinches its status as a golem variant. After failing to kill Scully, it wanders outside and attacks Gogolak. It sure seems like an act of random violence to me. Arbel says golems can become a "danger to everyone," which includes its creator. The Tulpa's disregard for Gogolak as its creator means the creature from "Arcadia" is a variant of the golem legend.

The Jewish Golem legend is a very culturally centered story that gives hope and ties communities together. However, they were and are cautionary tales that warn against creating life, which is reserved only for God (Oreck, 1). The two representations of the legend in *The X-Files* accomplish this latter part because the golems end up rampaging and causing disasters. This was especially true in "Arcadia"

when the Tulpa Golem killed its creator. Also, at the end of “Kaddish,” the creator, Ariel, decommissions her golem of her husband, Isaac, and returns him to lifeless dust. The golem legend can be applied to many more examples of lumbering creatures in popular culture. I elaborated on the Tulpa from “Arcadia,” but other famous monsters such as Frankenstein’s monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Karel Capek’s *R.U.R.* The latter is where the word “robot” comes from — it also means “slave” (Oreck, 1). One might say the golem is a slave; its creator can definitely command it to do slave labor without punishment — unless the golem goes nuts. Well, it just might do that either way.

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