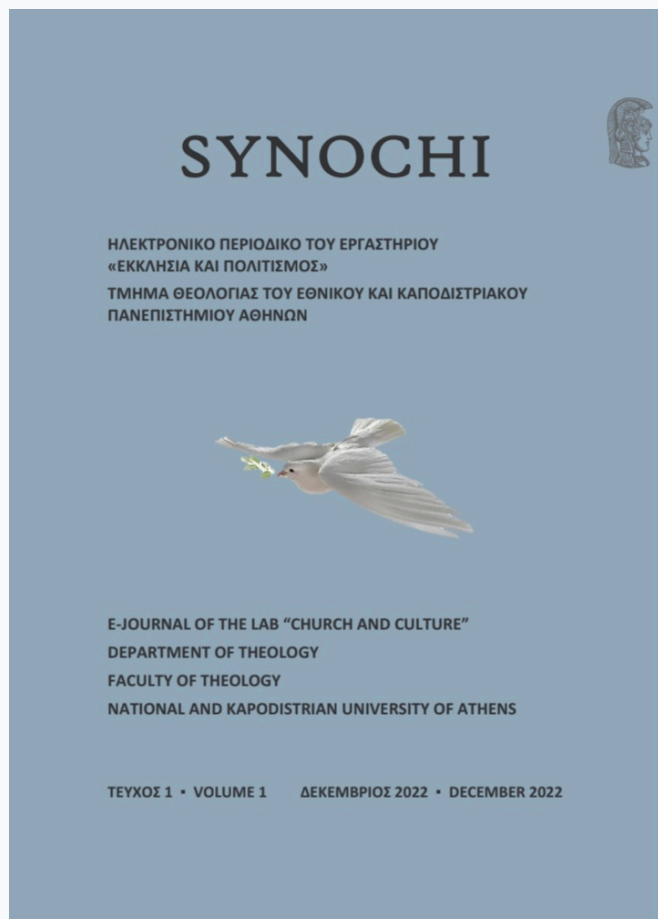


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### The Legend of Golem in the Age of an Anticipated New, Digital Adam.

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## The Legend of Golem in the Age of an Anticipated New, Digital Adam: Humankind at the crossroads

Zarra Konstantinou<sup>1</sup>

It is the first time in the known history that humans witness such an unprecedented progress almost on all aspects of modern technology. Especially on the fields of informatics, robotics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence (AI) and everything digital, achievements reach almost the level of the miraculous. No doubt, people have been helped greatly by this advancement almost on all aspects of their life and especially on grounds medical, educational and communicational. Quantum mechanics and astrophysics<sup>2</sup> are also revealing worlds and dimensions beyond imagination, thus altering our perception of 'reality' at a substantial level. As a result, our *cosmotheasis* is changing rapidly, too. At this point and at least to some of its foremost supporters, technological growth seems to take a grey turn, slowly revealing a possibly dark side. According to some, a kind of fusion between the human agent and the digital or the AI is expected. To the 'prophets' of this new era, the imminent changes will be so deep and transforming that after another hundred years our species shall be like gods when compared to us today.<sup>3</sup> Of course, as predicted, this 'cup of wonder' is not meant for the masses, but only for the elites that rule the many. In such a way, the society they have come to preach seems gloomy and ominous. Yet, from time to time, other visionaries in the past presented stories and legends teaching that

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<sup>2</sup> Evolutions on methods of observation and telescopes have multiplied the number of stars and galaxies. With the addition of *dark matter* and *dark energy* to its main components, universe turns out to be an immensely vaster reality than we thought just a few years ago. To many of the leading scientists, consciousness remains the greatest mystery of all. Reasonably enough, one ponders: Who knows what other discoveries and realizations lie ahead?

<sup>3</sup> So Yuval Noah Harari in some of his interviews (see below in notes). A much-needed pioneering study on the subject of AI in Greece, seen from an Orthodox Christian standpoint, came from Archimandrite Professor Aristarchos Grekas (*Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση, Αποστολική Διακονία της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, Αθήνα 2022], in Greek).

*hubris* is always paired with a disastrous aftermath. The traditions concerning the notorious golem of Prague belong to such a genre. But the beginnings of that impressive story are a lot older. Its basic elements were only a few and consisted of a very special individual (the gifted and trained magician), a concealed and dangerous magical method, earth and water, and the innate desire to imitate the Creator.

Long before the Judah Loew from Prague, there were earlier Jewish traditions<sup>4</sup> that spoke of certain highly devout and trained individuals, who knew the hidden qualities of the ‘sacred speech’ (Hebrew) and through that secret *gnosis* they were able to form and animate creatures almost like the Creator did in the beginning of time.<sup>5</sup> This subject appears also in two well-known Talmudic treatises, Berakhot (55a) and Sanhedrin (38a). The story is repeated in the midrash to Psalms (3), too. There, two hakhamim (wise ones) create a small calf in order to be eaten at the Sabbath meal. This is a highly important reference not only to the practice, but also to its product, since it had to be perfect and therefore kosher, appropriate for a Sabbath meal. Elsewhere in the Bavli (Sanhedrin 65b) the two sages are named, Rav Oshiah and Rav Hanina. As maintained, after studying the *Book of Creation*,<sup>6</sup> every Friday they could form and animate a calf; they could even eat it. Even closer to our theme is the story of another Talmudic sage, Rava, who by using similar occult methods created a man. He even sent this homunculus to another highly esteemed rabbi, Zeira, who tried to speak with it.<sup>7</sup> But after

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<sup>4</sup> For the “ancient parallels”, see Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1990, 3 ff.

<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth R. Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*, 17 ff.

<sup>6</sup> On this book and its uses, see Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 9 ff. Also, see the relevant chapters in my *The Mystical Theology of the Mandeans: The Jewish Occasions*, in Greek [*Η Μυστική Θεολογία των Μανδαίων: Οι ιουδαϊκές αφορμές*, Έννοια, Αθήνα 2022 (νέα εμπλουτισμένη έκδοση)].

<sup>7</sup> See also Philippe Breton, *À l’ image de l’ Homme: Du Golem aux créatures virtuelles*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 1995, 38.

realizing that it was mute (another important element: the absence of logos),<sup>8</sup> he ordered the creature to return to its dust.<sup>9</sup>

Still, there are references in the *Midrash Rabbah* concerning the creation of the world by using combinations of letters. Thus, again in the *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzirah* § 6 in the Long Recension) the magician may act as the Creator with the proper use of divine names and the hidden properties of the Hebrew letters. Similar insinuations are to be found in the *Midrash Rabbah*, too,<sup>10</sup> while the same belief permeates the *Book of Radiance* (*Sefer Bahir* § 59). There, when the mystics discuss about the etymology of the term *shamayim* ('heaven' or 'heavens'), they conclude that

“God kneaded fire and water and combined them together. From this He made the “beginning of His word.” That’s why it is written, ‘The beginning of your word is truth’ (Psalm 119:160). Thus, it is called *Shamayim* – *Sham Mayim* (there [is] water) – *Esh Mayim* (fire water).”

The reference to the ‘truth’ in Psalm 119:160 is important, so we will return to that later.

The attempts for creating humanoids (or even other animaloids) did not cease after the Talmudic era. These practices, supported by the material in the Talmud, evoked an air of mystery and wonder and won many a mind in the circles of mystics of later periods, too. It is reported that even the highly esteemed Vilna Gaon<sup>11</sup> and the kabbalist Solomon ibn Gabirol<sup>12</sup> in the 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Prague golem was mute, too. See Yudel Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, Yale University Press 2007, 36. Also, Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> The occasion for Zeira’s order seems to be Genesis 1-2, but there is another verse that poses as more probable here: Daniel 12:2.

<sup>10</sup> Especially see *Genesis Rabbah* 4:1-2 and 12:9-10.

<sup>11</sup> That was the great Talmudist rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797). He was the spiritual leader of the Lithuanian communities, a proponent of the *pshat* method (the literal) of Talmud study and an opponent to the Hasidic movement. He is considered to be the founder of the non-hasidic Yeshiva. The term *gaon* (pl. *geonim*) means *genius*, first used for the spiritual leaders of the older Babylonian communities. See Immanuel Etkes, Yaacov Jeffrey Green, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1058) was a Spanish philosopher and a poet. But mostly, he was a kabbalist. It was believed that he created a female golem. See Yehuda Liebes, “Rabbi Solomon ibn

century delved into those practices.<sup>13</sup> Rabbis from Speyer in the 12<sup>th</sup> century were also believed to have created similar anthropoids. These accounts silently reached the medieval world and went on, especially in Germany. The first to write about the creation of a humanoid -in the terms the golem<sup>14</sup> came to be seen later on- was a kabbalist. That was Eleazar ben Judah<sup>15</sup> from Worms, living at the dusk of 12<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup>. And it was another kabbalist from southeastern Poland that wrote about the formation and animation of a golem by magical means. That was a *Baal Shem Tov*, a master of the Good Name (the Tetragrammaton) and a great Talmudist, Rabbi Elijah, who created a hominoid for doing various kinds of works for him. Rabbi Elijah from 16<sup>th</sup> century Helm was credited as the first to have completed such a task in the Renaissance world.<sup>16</sup> The creature was animated by the term *Emet* (*Truth*; see below) and then shattered to sand, when the band was removed from his neck.<sup>17</sup> According to another version of the story, the creature grew in size and stubbornness, so rabbi Elijah fooled it to its demise. Perhaps as a cure to an ancient *miasma* (μίασμα), the

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Gabirol's Use of Sefer Yetzirah", *Jerusalem Studies* 6 (1987) [in Hebrew], 104-105. Also, Philippe Breton, *A l' image de l' Homme: Du Golem aux creatures virtuelles*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 1995, 35.

<sup>13</sup> See Ben Zion-Bokser, *From the World of Cabbalah*, Kessinger 2006, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the best study on the golem is this one by Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 1990. Also see Gershom Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem," in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Schocken, New York 1969, 158-204. Elizabeth R. Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2012. David Wisniewski, *Golem*, Clarion Books, New York 1996. Ben Zion Bokser, *From the World of the Cabbalah*, Kessinger, New York 2006. Chayim Bloch, *The Golem: Mystical Tales of the Ghetto of Prague* (initially published in German, 1917) Rudolf Steiner Publications, New York 1987. Michel Faucheux, *Norbert Wiener, le Golem et la Cybernétique: Elements de fantastique technologique*, Editions du Sandre, Paris 2008. I. L. Peretz, "The Golem," in Eliezer Greenberg, Irving Howe (eds.), *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Viking Press, New York 1954. Gershon Winkler, *The Golem of Prague: A New Adaptation of the Documented Stories of the Golem of Prague*, Judaica Press, New York 1980. Arnold Goldsmith, *The Golem Remembered 1909–1980: Variations of a Jewish Legend*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Eleazar ben Judah (c. 1165-1238), also known as Rokeach, was a member of the Kalonymus family that migrated earlier from Italy to Germany. A great scholar, kabbalist and alchemist among the Ashkenazi pietists, he saw the death of his family in the hands of Crusaders, as they travelled east.

<sup>16</sup> See Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 207 ff.

<sup>17</sup> See Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 64-66.

supernatural but ill-mannered servant collapsed onto its former master, causing his death. And then came the most well-known narrative of them all.

It is purported that traditions about the humanoid were in wide circulation in Prague since the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. As the legend goes, in the dark and misty Prague of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a deeply concerned about the defense of the Jewish community rabbi asked Heaven about the best way to deal with the oppressors of the Jewish community.<sup>18</sup> Answer did come and following supernal instructions he created a champion out of clay and pure magic. Since Heaven seemed slow to react on the many persecutions of the Jews by Rudolph II, it was His pious men that would fill the gap. Perhaps not unexpectedly, especially in the light of the never-ending persecutions and expulsions of the Jews, other meaningful traits were added. Since human contribution waxed and waned, whenever found, the golem humanoid was invested with the qualities of the champion and protector of the Jews.<sup>19</sup> It is maintained that this was the purpose for the creation of the (now) most famous golem of all: the golem of Prague,<sup>20</sup> formed and animated by the almost legendary Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel,<sup>21</sup> who lived there in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was through sheer magic (an ancient old occult ‘technology’ on the hidden forces in nature, see below) that it was brought to life, bestowed with special traits and powers. Like men -and especially like the magicians of the olden times-, it had two names: Joseph and Yossele.<sup>22</sup> Combining characteristics of the warrior and the priest, he himself could act as a magician and a necromancer, summoning the dead and going invisible at will.

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<sup>18</sup> Yudi Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, Yale University Press 2007, 34. See also Maya Barzilai, *The Golem, How he Came into the World*, Camden House, New York 2020.

<sup>19</sup> See Yudi Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 35, 36-7.

<sup>20</sup> See Harald Salfellner, *The Prague Golem: Jewish Stories of the Ghetto*, Vitalis, Prague 2016. Yet, it is not certain at all that the creation of the Prague golem was a work of the Maharal; so Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 251-52.

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609) or Maharal, was one of the most important rabbis and Talmudists in Europe at that time. He served as chief rabbi in Moravia and then in Prague. Following the Nahmanidean school, his philosophical treatises are vastly influenced by kabbalistic doctrines. It has been maintained that the golem was a creation of another great rabbi and mystic of that time, namely of Yitzhaq Luria, but the elements leading to this attribution are scant. See Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 251.

<sup>22</sup> Yudi Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 39.

As the legend has it, gradually the creature developed a mind and a will of its own, thus proceeding in acts undesirable and disastrous. In fear of violating commandments, and especially the one on the Sabbath rest, Rabbi Judah Loew was left with no other choice but to destroy his creation. Therefore, he ordered the golem to sleep at the attic of the synagogue and with his initial helpers he proceeded to the reverse ritual of the first one.<sup>23</sup> According to other strands of legend, all the golem's maker had to do was to remove the sacred name from its mouth (elsewhere, from his forehead) and the hominoid was finally de-animated (elsewhere, with his various body members disintegrated).

It should be noted that the term (גִּלְמִי – golmi = my golem) appears for the first time in Psalm 139:16<sup>24</sup> (LXX 138:16, τὸ ἀκατέργαστόν μου)<sup>25</sup> and it has the meaning of the unformed substance<sup>26</sup> or the embryo.<sup>27</sup> This particular Psalm is very important on the subject, since reference is made to the formation of his “limbs” “in secret” and in the hidden recesses of the earth and also of the “wondrous works” of God (vv. 14-15). So, initially, but long after, too, the term *golem* meant the material in a primitive, crude or unshaped condition. This is the meaning in the above-mentioned verse of Psalms. Both the clay and the act of forming and animating it are reminiscent from the Genesis narrative on the creation of the anthropomorphic, even theomorphic,<sup>28</sup> yet not theriomorphic<sup>29</sup> Adam. Thus, in this Psalm, Adam could be seen as a kind of a golem: “*Your eyes saw my golem*”.

<sup>23</sup> See Yudi Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 182 ff.

<sup>24</sup> גִּלְמִי רָאָה עֵינַי וְעַל-סִפְרִי בָלָם יִתְּבוּ יָמִים יָצְרוּ (וְלֹא) [וְלֹא] אֶתְּךָ בָּהֶם:

<sup>25</sup> Ps 138:16, τὸ ἀκατέργαστόν μου εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί σου καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ βιβλίον σου πάντες γραφήσονται ἡμέρας πλασθήσονται καὶ οὐθεὶς ἐν αὐτοῖς.

<sup>26</sup> Ps 139:16 (JPS), «Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance, and in Thy book they were all written - even the days that were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them”. The same goes for NAS and NRS. Also, QBE, “unformed body”. KJV, “substance”. TNK, “unformed limbs”. CJB, “embryo”. See also Gershom Scholem, “The Idea of the Golem,” in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 161.

<sup>27</sup> This latter meaning has been criticized. See Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 296-97.

<sup>28</sup> According to some Jewish mystical traditions, God had a body that was measured and contemplated by the mystic. See the Shiur Qomah traditions, the various works and the dissertation by Anastasios Akridas (in Greek), *Η παράδοση Σιούρ Κομά (Shiur Qomah): Αφορμές και στοιχεία αυτής σε κείμενα της αρχαίας Εγγύς Ανατολής, στο Άσμα Ασμάτων, σε ιουδαϊκά και χριστιανικά έργα*.

<sup>29</sup> As it happens with the description of angels in some texts. Ezekiel 1, where the four-faced cherubim, with its own Babylonian and Egyptian influences, is an example.



The term is also found in the Mishnah with an allegorical meaning, that of the uneducated and gross individual,

“Seven characteristics are found in an uneducated person ( *שבעה דברים* ) ( *בגולם* ), and seven in an educated one”.<sup>30</sup>

Later, in the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin (38b) and in his initial unformed state, Adam, too, is called a ‘golem’ due to his creation from the earth.

The methods used for the creation of this humanoid involved various stages and elements. The procedure resembled any other kind of magical operation, demanding a thorough preparation, purity, and the study of the *Book of Creation* (the *Sefer Yetzirah*).<sup>31</sup> This a book where some of the esoteric qualities of the Hebrew alphabet are revealed, as well as their connection to the spheres (sefiroth) on the Tree of Life (Etz Hayyim), the human limbs and organs, the elements, the planets and the zodiac. In such a way, the macrocosm (cosmos, universe) is related and connected to the microcosm (man). There, the ten sefiroth (“not nine and not eleven”) together with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet formed the thirty-two “paths of wisdom”. Obviously enough, there was (/is) an oral tradition that accompanies the material in the *Book of Creation* and it all has to do with the *how* of the creation of the world. Having drawn water from a living, running stream and obtained earth/sand from a place never plowed or come to contact with iron before, the mystic made clay and then gave it the desired form. Afterwards a kind of knitting followed by magically tying the various parts of its body to the alphabet, to certain words and theophoric names. The procedure was described in the book *Greater Secrets* (*Sodei Razaya*) thus,

“And he shall knead the dust with living water and he shall make a body [golem] and shall begin to permutate the alphabets of 221 gates, each limb separately, each limb with the corresponding letter mentioned in *Sefer*

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<sup>30</sup> See mAvot 5:7.

<sup>31</sup> On this important book, see the relevant chapter in Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken Books 1967. Also see the relevant material in my *The Mystical Theology of the Mandaean: The Jewish Occasions*, in Greek [*Η Μυστική Θεολογία των Μανδαίων: Οι ιουδαϊκές αφορμές*, as above].

*Yetzirah*. And the alphabets shall be permuted first, then afterward he shall permute with the vowel -alef, bet, gimel, dalet- and always the letter of the divine name with them, and [similarly] all of the alphabet. Afterward, [all the letters with each of the vowels, as with the alef; that is,] ah, ah, ai, ee, oh, and then e'. Afterward, the permutation of [alef with a letter from the divine name plus the vowels], alef-yud, and similarly in its entirety. Afterward he shall appoint beth and likewise gimel and each limb with the letter designated to it. He shall do this when he is pure. These are the 221 gates".<sup>32</sup>

Generally, they mixed earth with water, produced clay and then molded it into a *homunculus* or *ανθρωπάριον*. In the case of the Prague golem, loam and clay was collected from the bank of a river four hours after midnight.<sup>33</sup> The magician would invoke divine or angelic names or he would inscribe them on a consecrated piece of paper or a stripe of leather to be put on the creature's mouth or forehead. Thus, the anthropoid would be animated. It is very meaningful that in the story about Maharal making the Prague golem he had human helpers.<sup>34</sup> Each one of them represented the power of an element (earth, water, fire, air).<sup>35</sup>

In some strands of this tradition, imitating God involved a circular dance, like the one the Creator was believed to have danced around Adam before animating the very first human.<sup>36</sup> Maharal was instructed to circle the newly formed golem seven times.<sup>37</sup> Needless to say, this dance resembles the drawing of the magical circle by the magus and brings in mind the ḥasid Honi ha-meaggel (Onias the circle-drawer, first cent. BCE), when he prayed for rain and invoked the ineffable Name.<sup>38</sup> it also brings in mind the circling of

<sup>32</sup> Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 56; see all the relevant material in pp. 54-72.

<sup>33</sup> Yudel Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Exactly as the Creator had the heavenly hosts, according to the Jewish interpretation of almost all plurals in Hebrew concerning the Godhead in the first chapters in Genesis.

<sup>35</sup> Yudel Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 34-5.

<sup>36</sup> On this 'dance', see bSanhedrin 38b and Genesis Rabbah 24:2.

<sup>37</sup> Yudel Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> mTa'anit 3:8. See the relevant chapter in my *Ancient Judaism I (Αρχαίος Ιουδαϊσμός: Μελέτες Α')*, Ennoia, Athens 2011.

Jericho by Joshua ben-Nun<sup>39</sup> in the book that bears his name. Other traditions speak of using the great ineffable Name of God, the Tetragrammaton. Actually, it was the intonation of the Hebrew names that brought it to life and therefore, the power of the letters and the commanding voice. Those magicians saw he prototype of this act to a hermeneia of Psalm 33:6, where it is stated,

בְּדִבְרֵי יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם נִעְשׂוּ וּבְרוּחַ יְיָ כָּל-צִבְאָה:

The Septuagint (Ps 32:6) has it thus,

τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ κυρίου οἱ οὐρανοὶ ἐστερεώθησαν καὶ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ πᾶσα ἡ δύναμις αὐτῶν.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, to those magicians the initial words of the verse were taken literally, as *if* it was “by reciting the name of Lord” that the heavens were created. Those interpreters read the prefix ב (it could be ἐν in the Greek translation, that is why it is in dative) as *if* it meant that God created everything *through* his great Name. In such a way, pious men, well-versed in the Torah and the old practical qabbaloth, could act like the Creator. And in their minds, this practice might even have meant the realization of the very first commandment ever given to man, when Adam was formed in the image [and] in the likeness of God.<sup>41</sup> Then, by reciting the Name, many similar wonders could be revealed and achieved.

Ergo, the Hebrew alphabet and the various methods of letter-knitting and name-forming, especially the Name of God (the great *Shem haMephoras*), played the major role.<sup>42</sup> The creature would be animated by uttering the Name and then de-animated by pronouncing it once more or even pronouncing it in reverse. Or, the name could be written on a piece of cloth

<sup>39</sup> See Joshua 5:13 – 6:27.

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the Jewish Publication Society, «By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth”.

<sup>41</sup> In the Zohar (*Zohar Hadash* 17c-d) it is stated that the dust and the clay that formed Adam’s body were collected from the place of the (future) Jerusalem temple, while his soul descended from the heavenly temple.

<sup>42</sup> Philippe Breton, *A l’ image de l’ Homme: Du Golem aux creatures virtuelles*, 36.

and then put on his forehead or inserted into his mouth.<sup>43</sup> Thus, combining letters meant bringing together and composing, while erasing or parting them meant decomposing. This procedure could be an evolution from the older principle of binding and loosening (the δένειν και λύειν of Empedocles<sup>44</sup> and others). In a way, here the magician acted as a lord of life and death; as a giver and as a taker. When the Name was used in its proper form, it was an agent of growth and life; when reversed, it became an agent of decay and death. As already mentioned, according to other traditions, mostly in the *Sefer haGematrioth*,<sup>45</sup> another word was used with similar effects: the word *Emet* (*truth*). Written on the creature's forehead or on a stripe of cloth and then applied on its forehead, it was brought to life. Yet, when the first letter, the Alef, was deleted, thus revealing another word and another meaning (*Mot/Met*, for 'death'), the creature lost all vitality and returned to its nothingness.

The theme of the golem is not unique in its entirety. This Jewish legend could be a retelling of a much older Greek myth, that of the mechanical guardian Talos (Τάλως). Quite similar to the golem, Τάλως was an animated bronze man created for guarding Europa and/or the island of Crete. His vigor emanated from a magic potion kept into his foot. It was the sorceress Medea that brought sleep on him and then she de-animated him. Still, perhaps as a distant echo to the primeval story of the giants, the offspring of the nefilim, that brought great sin and desolation on earth, leading to the necessity of the Flood, the Yiddish and Russian tales of the 'clay boy' have a tragic ending, too.<sup>46</sup> There, childless or old couples form a boy out of clay. Initially, it is loving and simple, but later on it surpasses their expectations in size and appetite. Like the giants in Genesis 6, the 'clay boy'

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<sup>43</sup> See Moshe Idel, *The Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, 296.

<sup>44</sup> As is evinced by the fragments of his cosmological poem, this was an endless process of cosmic proportions. Empedocles (died c. 434 BCE), was pre-Socratic philosopher, a *kathartes* and *iatromantis*, from Akragas. He taught mostly in southern Italy, Magna Grecia. He believed he was divine and that he remembered his past incarnations.

<sup>45</sup> The book had probably astronomical character. Allegedly, it was written by Yehudah ben Smuel haHasid (c. 1150-1217), a descendant of the famed Kalonymus House.

<sup>46</sup> See Mirra Ginsburg, *The Clay Boy*, Greenwillow, New York 1997.

eats all their supplies, their animals and finally its makers, terrorizing everyone only to be dashed by a hyper-sensitive goat.

These old legends were brought into new life through the work of rabbi Yudel Rosenberg (1860-1935), who wrote a book about the miracles of Maharal in 1909. Its title was *The Miracles of Rabbi Judah Loew (Niflo'es Maharal)*.<sup>47</sup> It is probable that the success of Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) *Frankenstein*<sup>48</sup> played a role in this rabbi's literal reviving of an old theme. Then, it could be the other way round: the golem stories might have inspired Shelley in the first place. But, if it wasn't for Chaim Bloch (1880-1973), who wrote *The Golem, Legends from the Ghetto of Prague*, perhaps this lore would have been forgotten. Yet, today, at the dawn of a new era (as some have it to be), when the fusion of man and technology is purported to be closer than ever, almost a century after the publication of his book, the theme of the gifted humanoid that presents powers and qualities that supersede those of the humans comes to the fore again in a new light. And the need for pondering on the new vistas open for the first time not to all humanity, but to a selected few, is deep and overwhelming.

In essence, the tale of the golem is similar to the Babel<sup>49</sup> narrative in the book of Genesis, where humans attempted to reach heaven by piling bricks. As ancient Greek tragedy teaches, *hubris* is always followed by *nemesis* and *tisis* (punishment). Quite similarly, the same issue is to be found in various novels and plays. Shelley's *Frankenstein* ends in agony and loss, while the ill-famed more modern play by Karel Capek (1890-1938), *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920),<sup>50</sup> also conceived in Prague, follows the same

<sup>47</sup> In its newer edition, Yudel Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, Yale University Press 2007 (first publication was in Hebrew, at Pietrkow, Poland, 1909).

<sup>48</sup> On Shelley's *Frankenstein*, see Philippe Breton, *A l' image de l' Homme: Du Golem aux creatures virtuelles*, Editions de Seuil, Paris 1995, 30 ff.

<sup>49</sup> Grekas, too, refers to the story on the tower of Babel as a paradigm to avoid. See Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση]*, 281.

<sup>50</sup> It is in this play that the widely used term *robot* makes its first appearance, though created by Karel's brother, the writer Joseph Capek. Etymologically, it is a Czech term (*robota*) of Slavic origin, from *rabota* ('work') and *robotnik* ('worker'). On the robots in works of science fiction, see Philippe Breton, *A l' image de l' Homme: Du Golem aux creatures virtuelles*, 19 ff. and 22 ff.

pattern.<sup>51</sup> A similar idea is also to be found in a movie, too, from that time. This is the epic *Metropolis* (1927, directed by Fritz Lang), where the hubris of a machine-conquered world has disastrous results. In this famous film, “a human machine”,<sup>52</sup> a robot called Maria, is the protagonist. Arrogant plans, behaviors and structures, finally meet their untimely end and the lesson learned is called humility. Even more modern creations, like the movies *Blade Runner*<sup>53</sup> and *Terminator*<sup>54</sup> touch upon this very same nucleus. The machine becomes more refined, sophisticated, powerful and autonomous and tries ‘to kill the father’, to conquer its creator, even to avenge him for his audacity to manufacture so highly advanced helpers or slaves. Therefore, it is not odd at all that in an interview one of the greatest minds of modern times, Stephen Hawking,<sup>55</sup> predicted that one of the most serious dangers for the humankind in the future would come from the Artificial Intelligence.

### Epimythion

It should be noted that modern academics see the whole legend of creating a golem as a 19<sup>th</sup> century fabrication. Even the great 20<sup>th</sup> century specialist on mystical Judaism, Gershom G. Scholem, didn’t think much of it.<sup>56</sup> Yet, in our mind, when seen in the light of its more ancient predecessors paired with the dire need and desire of a hero or a defender, as a concept,

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<sup>51</sup> Unexpectedly, Capek refused the allegation that Rabbi Loew’s golem served as an inspiration for his own creation.

<sup>52</sup> Maya Barzilai, *The Golem, How he Came into the World*, Camden House, New York 2020, 4, 17 ff.

<sup>53</sup> Directed by Ridley Scott in 1982 and based on one of Philip Dick’s novels (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), *Blade Runner* became a science-fiction cult movie. It takes place in the future (2019!), when a company produces androids (replicants) to send as workers in colonies on distant planets. A rather advanced model and his company rebels, escapes and returns to Earth, where they seek their creator and answers for their making and purpose in creation. Perhaps, the most important question in the film goes, “What is more important? Androids with feelings or humans without?”.

<sup>54</sup> James Cameron directed *Terminator* in 1984. Again, in a futuristic Earth, machines have taken over, but bands of men still resist their tyrannical regime. Then, a cyborg is sent back in time in order to kill the mother of the hero that is expected to bring redemption to mankind before his birth and thus, to snuff any possibility for the resurgence of men.

<sup>55</sup> See <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/stephen-hawking-ai-could-be-worst-event-in-civilization.html> (viewed 18-11-2022).

<sup>56</sup> See the relevant chapter (“The Idea of the Golem”) in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, as above.

this tale sounds not so strange or unbelievable.<sup>57</sup> As already mentioned, the idea of having a supernatural defender is not exclusive to Judaism. It has been found in the mechanic defender of people in the ancient robot of Talos and it has kept on through the ages. Almost all of the Marvel comics' heroes (Superman, Captain America, Batman, even Zorro<sup>58</sup>) are following the theme of the much-awaited and needed defender that nearly fills the shoes of a long-delayed messiah. As if drawn out of the dreams and hopes of the poor, the weak and the oppressed, these characters punish the arrogant, thus bringing justice to a world steeped in the corruption and wickedness of the powerful.

Nowadays the so-called 'fourth industrial revolution' are slowly becoming the talk of the globe.<sup>59</sup> Stealthily, transhumanism grows into a dominant political ideology. As presented, the merge of the biological and the digital is imminent. They call it enhancement. Society and the human being<sup>60</sup> are expected to be redesigned in an ontological way, 'creating' not "in the image of God" (as in Genesis 1), but in the image of man.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in a synthetic way, man desires to come into the place of God, yet not in terms of love, purity, mercy, philanthropy and piety, but in those of absolute power, control and utter narcissism. With AI<sup>62</sup> and algorithms controlling everything,<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The issue if it really existed is an altogether different one. To this brief composition, the core point is that the golem existed in the minds and mouths of certain people, that the story spread and that it carries traits from much older similar material.

<sup>58</sup> The term *Zorro* means a 'fox', pointing to his cunning mind. A 1919 creation of writer Johnston McCulley, Zorro came as a defender of the poor and weak, thrusting cruel governors and oppressors.

<sup>59</sup> It is almost absurd that nobody asks the most logical and self-evident questions: Who is Klaus Schwab (1938-) and the World Economic Forum? Are they elected leaders? How can they dictate global policies that affect the lives of billions? Why the widespread silence, even the promoting of such ideas?

<sup>60</sup> Enthusiasm from the AI prospects has led some to talk about a "new anthropology", investing AI with apocalyptic and even messianic characteristics, mostly abroad. See Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 266.

<sup>61</sup> See Philippe Breton, *A l' image de l' Homme: Du Golem aux creatures virtuelles*, 45 ff. (on the issue of "les animaux synthétiques", pp. 16 ff.).

<sup>62</sup> On AI and its applications, see Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 19 ff., 25 ff.

<sup>63</sup> Grekas calls for "ethical algorithms", but is this possible? He is also aware of certain dangers from an all the more autonomous AI net. See Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 264-65

a vast and omnipresent internet of people and things,<sup>64</sup> where all are connected, monitored and interacted, where all privacy melts away and the free individual sadly sets, one foresees the dawn of a completely automatized world. In such a way, as a global ‘presence’, AI<sup>65</sup> comes in the role of God, where the updated and transhumanized elites will form its new flesh-and-digital priesthood heavily intoxicated with their visions of immortality.<sup>66</sup> Even worse, as is often stated, data<sup>67</sup> is the new wealth, yet who collects them and how they are used is never addressed. These expectations go so far as to form an artificial pseudo-theology for the masses (even so, only a selected few are the knowers, as they slowly rise into their newfound digital materialism).

What’s more, as it is claimed, there will be no private property or even privacy. Here one is almost forced to ask: If one will own nothing and thus he ‘will be free’ (from what, actually?), who will own everything? Will it be the same for the rich and the powerful, too? Will they abandon their millions and billions, their thousands of acres, their luxurious villas and all of their “always sunny” world? For what? To live cashless and credit-less in a small studio like a poor pensioner? *Really*, now? Most surely, invested with ‘godly’ qualities, in the role of an apprenticed magician and imitating God, the already privileged elites will retain all power and the chasm with the lower class will

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(see also pp. 268-69, where he concludes that the human psycho-pneumatic and somatic entity is impossible to be replaced by algorithms).

<sup>64</sup> The new 5G technology is expected to help manifest such unprecedented possibilities. Yet, it comes as a shock that independent scientific studies proving the safety of using 5G technology are non-existent.

<sup>65</sup> On theological approaches to the AI, see Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 85 ff.; on the expectations of a new digital kingdom or paradise, where consciousness will be uploaded and saved, thus making one immortal (?), pp. 266 ff.

<sup>66</sup> Similar concerns were stated some sixty years ago by Norbert Wiener in his *God and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1963. He even touches the problem of increasing unemployment due to automatization (p. vii).

<sup>67</sup> Grekas rightly calls the divinization of information from their part “a new form of Gnosticism, the technocratic or digital or algorithmic Gnosticism” (Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 267). Yet, it should be pointed, in ancient Gnostic texts Gnosis is never defined or presented; it remains an enigma. Surely, it had to do with the escape to another dimension, to the Pleroma above the eighth heaven, since earthly existence was too corrupted and unbearable to them.



become gigantic. In such a scheme of things, people would be regarded as mere units or as intelligent carbon structures at best. It is clear that ideas and strategies as the above-mentioned see the humans as a disease or as enemies. Impressively enough, the demise of human freedom and rights are subjects no one speaks about. They are almost totally ignored, while the vast majority of humankind has no future in prospects like this one. Worse, people are not asked at all about the world they are to live in; a world where the termination of every democratic value and right seems all the more a certainty.

As it was believed, the golem came as an answer to the need for a defender.<sup>68</sup> But what happens when the AI super creature/structure<sup>69</sup> (or the ‘enhanced’ selected individual) is now championing for the eager to flirt with immortality?

Needless to say, God is thrown out of every equation, while all sanctity of life is transformed into a bad Pythagorean joke in an algorithmic disguise. Truly, Biblical and Apocryphal material warns against hubris. Thus, the fusion of man with the machine in an unprecedented hybrid, genetic editing and manipulation might bring forth a living and walking Babel. Genesis 6, 1 *Enoch*, *Jubilees* and the Qumranian *Book of Giants* describe what happened when different species merged and when arrogance and greed take over. The fallen angels and the daughters of men gave birth to the giants. The turmoil, the corruption<sup>70</sup> and the atrocities were so vast, only the Flood could wash away. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, too, warn against the wicked desire to raise one’s throne higher than God. At this point, one may ponder (actually, one *has* to ponder): As is portrayed to be, a society of slaves and tyrannical pseudo-gods, whom does it serve? Is this the way God wants us to proceed? Then, is *theosis* some kind of realization of the Marvel comics super-heroes brought to life?

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<sup>68</sup> Yudi Rosenberg, *The Golem and the Wondrous deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, 36-7.

<sup>69</sup> The existence of an ‘apocalyptic’ AI is reported as much as various ‘churches’ of AI. See Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 101 ff. and 113 ff. respectively.

<sup>70</sup> It is interesting that Genesis (6:12) says that “all flesh was corrupted”.

For centuries it was believed that golem's body was stored at the genizah in the attic of the Prague's old synagogue, among old Torah scrolls, ketubot and other documents. Rabbi Judah Loew left an order that no one should go up there and disturb its sleep. Only his successors would have access there. But when one of them, rabbi Landau, attempted to ascend after long preparation, fasting and purification, with his phylacteries on, he stood still at the crown step of the stairs, hesitant and then frightened. As it goes, he never entered the attic. Then, the old prohibition was activated again. Much sought for, others held that it was stolen and entered at an old graveyard in Prague. There are tales involving Nazis searching for its body and even suffering death in their pursue. It is maintained that its body still lies at the old attic, but this is not confirmed in any way. In the renovation of the synagogue at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century no golem's body was found. Today, the attic is out of reach for the public. Yet, old legends cast long shadows; shadows that shape dreams or nightmares according to each one's disposition and preconception.

Of course, all by itself technology is neither good or bad.<sup>71</sup> Its use, intention and application determine the positive or the negative. That is why a call for an "ethical AI", having man in the center,<sup>72</sup> is in need today. Twentieth century with its two world wars and the innumerable smaller scale ones has proved beyond doubt that humans are very slow to learn. The beginning of the third millennium came as a legitimate child of the preceding one, with numerous collisions and contrasts, wide scale poverty -especially in the Third World- and the nuclear nightmare revived. At the same time, humans enjoy commodities never before witnessed in history. Old diseases have been cured or by-passed, but others, new ones have risen. Perhaps, our best chance now lies in the idea of the Holy and its return. Humankind has to rediscover the

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<sup>71</sup> Needless, to say, it is undeniable that AI and technological breakthroughs present many extremely positive aspects and applications, bettering health and everyday life. See Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 263.

<sup>72</sup> Aristarchos Grekas, *Artificial Intelligence and Man: Orthodox Theological Approach* [Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη και Άνθρωπος: Ορθόδοξη Θεολογική Προσέγγιση], 264.

sense of sanctity in the world<sup>73</sup> or else we will come to counter all creation on earth and beyond. Then, perhaps, the golem legend and other similar ones pose a test for modern humans, a test we have so miserably failed to pass so far:

The ultimate measure of wisdom and power may lie not in fulfilling every imaginable wish, desire or plan, but in *foreseeing* disastrous side-effects and thus abstaining or *denying* the prospect. The paths might be many, with some of them even more colorful and impressive, yet not all of them are to be walked.

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<sup>73</sup> See the last chapters in my book *Carrying Rocks on Clouds: Religions in dialogue* [Μεταφέροντας Βράχους Πάνω σε Σύννεφα: Θρησκείες σε διάλογο, Αρχέτυπο, Θεσσαλονίκη 2019], in Greek.

