A Golem on the Playground:
A Survey of the Golem Figure in American Jewish Children's Literature

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By
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For my family and friends (both two- and four-legged), who have let my mind wander to playgrounds everywhere.
Abstract

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Jewish children's literature has become an important method for developing Jewish American identity in recent decades. A Jewish children's book, when carefully selected for the right child at the right moment, has the potential to equip the child to claim his or her own Jewishness and position within a larger community, rich with history and meaning. When the golem figure is at the helm of a children's book, I have found this potential can sway perilously on his broad shoulders.

American Jewish children's literature has offered a plethora of diverse golem adaptations. Based on research into the world of children's literature and Jewish identity development, interviews with children's book authors and illustrators, and a survey of nearly forty American children's books and comic books, I have sorted representations of the golem figure into four distinct categories. These categories include: the religious champion golem (upheld within some highly observant American Jewish circles); the
terrifying golem (an historic European-Jewish ghost story); the universal superhero
golem (presented in some American comic books); and the happy helpmate golem
(shown in some children's picture books). These categories are characterized not simply
by the textual and aesthetic representation of the golem character in a particular book, but
also by the overall book's potential impact on a young American Jewish readership.
Within some religious denominations or communities, one category of golem may be
popularized for strategic reasons while in another community that same golem figure is
eschewed for one more suited to its constituency. The golem is a powerful figure, and a
golem story can have complex ramifications depending on the age, identity, and
parentage of the reader in today's diverse and nuanced American Jewish community. I
argue that though all golem children's books may have their place in a household's
library, some titles do more harm than good in cultivating a young American reader's
Jewish identity.
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Sample Illustration of "Terrifying Golem."

Sample Illustration of "Terrifying Golem."

Sample Illustration of "Happy Helpmate Golem."

Sample Illustration of "Happy Helpmate Golem."
I. Introduction

Any cursory reading of the golem story will show that there are two sides to the golem. On the one hand he is a fearless champion of the Jewish people, prepared to protect them from non-Jewish foes and defend them against blood libel or impending pogroms. On the other hand, the golem is a dutiful, loyal household helper who does chores tirelessly until his Jewish master insists he stop.¹ Yet within these two basic plot lines, there is a wealth of versions of the golem figure.

Children's literature has, in recent decades, offered many adaptations of the golem tale. Upon analyzing these adaptations, this paper shows four distinct categories of the golem figure in North American Jewish children's literature. These categories include: the religious champion golem (upheld within some highly observant American Jewish circles); the terrifying golem (an historic European-Jewish ghost story); the universal superhero golem (as presented in American comic books); and the golem as the happy helpmate (shown in some children's picture books). Perhaps surprisingly, these categories do not cleanly fit into a chronological sequence. Exemplary titles from each category can be found in different decades. These categories are characterized not simply by the textual and aesthetic representation of the golem character in a particular book, but also

¹ Perhaps most famously, this latter image of the golem served as inspiration for many tales and adaptations, including "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" animated vignette in Walt Disney's "Fantasia" (1940).
by the overall book's potential impact on a young American Jewish readership. Within some religious denominations or communities, one category of golem may be popularized for strategic reasons, while in another community that same golem figure is eschewed for one more suited to its constituency. The golem is a powerful figure, and a golem story can have complex ramifications depending on the age, identity, and parentage of the reader. Given these ramifications, it is interesting to explore how each of these golem archetypes addresses the evolving needs of a rapidly changing community. I argue in this paper that though all golem children's books may have their place in a household's library, some titles do more harm than good in cultivating a young American reader's Jewish identity.

Jewish children's literature has become an important method for developing a Jewish American identity in recent decades, possibly first gaining prominence with the enthusiastic reception of Sadie Rose Weilerstein's K'tonton stories in 1930. Along with the rapidly changing Jewish community in America came the notion that literature could be a powerful tool to help maintain a Jewish identity. Linda Silver, author of *Best Jewish Books for Children and Teens*, has written: “As first generation Jewish Americans continued the process of acculturation that their immigrant parents had begun, a market for Jewish children's books should be appealing enough to keep readers coming back for more.” This paper will explore how the golem operates within this mission, but first it is useful to discuss some of the particular challenges and opportunities in developing a

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3 Silver, xi.
Jewish identity within the contemporary American Jewish landscape.

According to Alan Dershowitz, perceived antisemitic attitudes and acts of Jewish persecution have decreased relatively steadily in America over the last few decades, so much so that “our children... have no actual memory of embattled Judaism fighting for the life, liberty, and equality of endangered Jews....”\(^4\) Not only do these children perhaps not have a firm memory of Jewish persecution, but their image of antisemitism may be complicated by interfaith families and dual-faith identities. According to the 2000-1 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), roughly 47% of Jews marrying between the years of 1996 and 2001 married a partner who did not identify as Jewish.\(^5\) This percentage is up dramatically from the 28% of intermarriages recorded between 1970-9, also by the NJPS. Historian Jonathan Sarna writes in his book *American Judaism* that children of interfaith parents largely fail to identify as Jewish: “According to various studies, between 70 and 82 percent of intermarried families in the United States raise their children in dual faith, no faith, or non-Jewish homes. The 'Jewish and something else' children, even if nominally raised as Jews, are ambiguous and ambivalent about their Jewish identification.”\(^6\) This speaks to a lost opportunity to develop children with healthy Jewish identities in interfaith homes. This paper will consider how some categories of golem representation (as described in Sections VII and IX) may foster ambivalence towards and rejection of Jewish identity among these children, while another category (described in Section X) may help these children fulfill the potential of...


their own Jewish identities.

Additionally, Jewish identity is becoming more and more of a choice for contemporary American children and young adults. They are increasingly able to simply opt out of affiliating Jewishly, and concerns about Jewish continuity have risen accordingly. In 1937, Jews accounted for nearly 4% of the American population. Reports from recent years place that number at closer to 2%. The NJPS 2000-1 found that between 1990 and 2000, the Jewish population in the United States declined by approximately 300,000. This decrease is certainly due to a plethora of reasons, and therefore requires a diverse arsenal of tools and approaches if one seeks to remedy it. Innovative methods of outreach now seek to make Judaism an appealing identity for those who may choose whether or not to identify with the Jewish community at some location on the Jewish spectrum.

The fact that many individuals of Jewish parentage or upbringing are able to choose whether or not they identify as Jewish speaks to the increasing force of assimilation or acculturation faced by the American Jewish community. This force can be seen as threatening, especially to those denominations that value the stark separation between secular non-Jewish life and an observant, “undiluted” Jewish community. Children’s literature can help inoculate children against the forces of acculturation while upholding the perceived boundaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Therefore, the Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jewish community may tell golem stories to its children in a vastly different way than the Reform Movement.

7 Dershowitz, 23.
This paper will explore how these four facets of latter 20th and early 21st century Jewish life in America help shape and interact with the golem figure. The golem's incarnation as religious champion, universal superhero, terrifying figure, or happy helpmate each addresses these contemporary developments in Jewish life in its own way. Similarly, these developments in Jewish society have helped shape the more recent golem figures, and each golem book can be used to varying effects within a particular young Jewish American constituency. After all, if the golem narrative can shift to reflect the values and priorities of a specific community at a specific moment, it has the potential to both reflect and shape the cultural or religious identity of a child growing up in that community. This paper analyzes what happens when the golem figure shows up on the imaginary and literary playground of America's Jewish children.
II. Methodology and Limits

In examining the dynamic relationship between the golem figure and the American Jewish community, this paper analyzes materials such as picture books (both text and illustrations), critical reviews, individual reader/public reviews, interviews with authors and illustrators responsible for the golem titles discussed, secondary literature regarding the golem figure, the study of children's literature, and sources pertaining to the changing demographics of the American Jewish community. Based on a survey of eight American children's books and twenty-eight comic books, all original to America, this paper sorts representations of the golem figure into four distinct categories. For each category, a few exemplary titles are explored in depth. This includes first an analysis of the book's text, scope, framing, and illustrations. Secondly, when possible, the analysis explores the critical and popular reception of the book and original interviews with the author and illustrator of the book. Finally, this paper situates this analysis into the larger context of the Jewish American children's community.

This is strictly a survey of children's literature originally written for a North American audience. There are several children's books about the golem in Israel, a few of which have been translated for an American audience. A separate paper could surely be
written about these texts alone. To explore the unique dynamic between the golem figure and American culture and Jewish community, these sources have necessarily been omitted. Additionally, there are several recent Czech children's books about the golem that have been translated into English and sold in America, a few of which have been purchased and distributed by British and American publishing houses. These sources will not be covered, in order to focus on the golem's literary life in America.

There are of course, limits to this survey. Ideally, it would be helpful to include original interviews with teachers from a variety of educational settings (both formal and informal, Jewish and non-Jewish) who have used golem stories with their students. Future research questions would include: which story/ies were selected and why?; what were the learning goals of the unit; how did children interact with the story and the golem character?; and what, if any, lasting learning effects did the teacher observe?

It would also be helpful to ask children what they personally thought or felt about specific golem titles. The sample of children should include both those who experienced the story orally in a group setting (with illustrations), and those who read and looked through the book on their own or with a parent. This information would help supplement adults' reviews and help us better understand a child's identification and identity-building process when confronted with a variety of golem stories.

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8 For an excellent article on the topic of the golem in Israeli literature, see Danusha Goska's “Golem as Gentile, Golem as Sabra: An analysis of the manipulation of stereotypes of self and other in literary treatments of a legendary Jewish figure.” New York Folklore XXIII: 1-4. 39-64
9 For examples, see What a Golem... (Eize Golem...) by Gold. Also, The Golem of Chelm: A Story About a Golem that Really Lived, Created by Rav Eliahu Baal Shem. (Hagolem Michelm Haya Vnivra) by Gold. (both translated and adapted by Yael Knochen) (Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers, 2009; 2010).
Another methodological challenge faced during research for this paper is how to best make use of individual readers' online reviews. People may post their reviews anonymously, and there is no accounting for whether or not the reviewer actually read or reflected on the book he or she reviewed. Similarly, these reviews are necessarily culled from a self-selecting group. People who feel ambivalent towards a title or thought it was neither very good nor extremely poor do not tend to post. One also cannot often learn much about the identity of the reviewer, including his or her profession, gender, age range, religion, or family status (parent or non-parent). Additionally, many segments of the population (such as the elderly or the very young) are not likely to leave online reviews. To help maximize the potential of this medium, reviews have been excerpted from a variety of sites and message boards. This research decision was intended to poll a wider swathe of readers and reviewers, in a variety of contexts. Further study should also consider face to face contact with individual readers and focus groups open to the public, containing diverse age groups, different genders, an array of professionals and non-professionals, and both parents and non-parents.
III. Folklore and Children's Literature

Children's literature in America has always, to some extent, adapted folktales. From Paul Bunyan and other early American tales, to the slew of multicultural folktales recently adapted into children's books, folklore has been a mainstay of American children's literature. This may be due to folklore's fantastic qualities, which can fuel the imagination yet often require a childlike suspension of disbelief. In more recent years, there has been a calculated shift in children's publishing towards adapted folktales, as publishers have catered to an increasing demand for multicultural offerings.\footnote{Taxel, Joel. “Children's literature at the turn of the century: Toward a political economy of the publishing industry.” 
Research in the Teaching of English, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Nov., 2002), 145-197. 178.} The rise of folklore adaptations within children's literature has not been without its detractors. Some claim global folktales provide a foggy, distorted window into another culture, and can be used as a distracting substitute for stories about real people living realistic lives in other cultures.\footnote{Taxel, 174.}

Additionally, some scholars of folklore have bristled at the enthusiasm with which children's literature has adopted and adapted folklore in recent years, citing that what gets published is instead a bastardized version of folk traditions and lore called “fakelore,” a
term first coined by Richard Dorson in 1950. This, however, is not an issue to be discussed in this paper. In fact, this survey of golem titles in children's literature assumes that the representation of a folktale is just that- a representation. As such, it can (and arguably should) be altered by the circumstances, culture, and community in which it is produced and for which it is intended. This paper will not therefore decide whether or not the golem folktale has been altered for children's literature, but will instead explain how the golem tale has been altered and to what effect.

IV. The Power and Potential of Children's Literature

Children's literature is a vast topic on which much has been written in the past. Therefore this section will only explore specific aspects of the secondary literature that pertain to the purpose of this paper. These aspects include first and foremost defining the term “children's literature” as it used here. Once this has been established, this section will examine various ideas about what is appropriate in children's literature, given the wide scope of purpose described above. Finally, I will consider diverse (and at times contradictory) ideas about the uses of children's literature, from education to entertainment, and discuss how children's literature can be used to help shape identity and construct well-socialized participants in a specific community (in this case, the broader Jewish community of America).

Children's literature can be interpreted to refer to a wide swath of literature including literature written by children, for children, or about children. Furthermore, opinions differ as to whether this literature includes picture books, board books, and chapter books. This paper uses only children's literature written by adults for the enjoyment of children, whether that literature is read to the children or the children are able to read through the book themselves. Picture books were consulted primarily throughout this paper as opposed to young adult literature, as the illustrations are ripe for
analysis alongside the text of the story, and the intended audience is typically under
eleven years of age. However, there is an assumption among many that picture books
are always meant for only the very young (under age five). This problematic assumption
will be examined in Section IX. The picture books discussed throughout this paper are
gereed towards children in a variety of age groups, from the very young (two to three
years old and up), to eight or nine year olds. This paper will also be looking at comics
pitched towards mid-elementary school aged children, and one chapter book that is likely
best read by nine to ten year olds at the youngest.

Commonly, librarians and teachers refer to children's literature as intended for
children up to the age of fourteen. Since this paper examines how children's literature
about the golem can help or retard children's formative Jewish identities, this age limit
has been reduced to eleven. This is not to say that literature cannot or should not continue
to help children explore their Jewish identities well into adolescence, but merely that the
type of literature used to help children explore their identities at the early adolescent level
is drastically different from that used to help shape formative identities at the primary
school level. The paper focuses on the latter type.

Standards of appropriateness in children's literature have changed radically over
time. The late Bruno Bettelheim wrote eloquently about these changes in *The Uses of
Enchantment*, which focuses first and foremost on the vast potential of stories (in his
case, fairy tales) to help nurture or support children in finding meaning in their lives.

Without this meaning, children can lose direction or the will to progress along a chosen path, become deeply disturbed and eventually, even lose their will to live.\textsuperscript{16} Even among adults, a perceived lack of meaning in one's life can lead to deep depression and despair. Therefore, to mentor, guide, and foster the younger generation, the task at hand is to help children discover or create meaning in their lives. Bettelheim writes: “Regarding this task, nothing is more important than the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage, when transmitted to the child in the right manner. When children are young, it is literature that carries such information best.”\textsuperscript{17} This view is echoed elsewhere, including in M. Daphne Kutzer's excellent article “Children's Literature in the College Classroom.”\textsuperscript{18}

Since children's literature is so powerful, examining children's literature in the context of cultural heritage and tradition-transmission is of great importance. Educator Diane Frankenstein writes that all good children's books should act as both “windows and mirrors. Windows, because they are one of the ways children extend their knowledge of the world, and mirrors, because they are one of the ways children come to understand themselves.”\textsuperscript{19} Jewish children's literature can help children find the meaning and sense of self they need by empowering them to consider their own position in the Jewish community, as part of a larger social group with a dynamic belief system and a long, rich history. This can be done simply through using “Jewish words” a child may be familiar

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] Bettelheim, 5.
\item[18] Kutzer, 720.
\end{footnotes}
with or can easily become familiar with. These could range from Hebrew words and terms, to objects found in a synagogue (“bima,” “ark,” “rabbi”), to Jewish foods or common Yiddish phrases.

In her book *Best Jewish Books for Children and Teens*, librarian and Jewish children's literature expert Linda R. Silver notes that adults often recall specific children's books that changed their lives and shed light on the person they would eventually become. Speaking about this phenomenon in a Jewish context, she writes:

Blessed is the child who has been exposed to Jewish books since infancy... If literature speaks to the human condition, then Jewish literature speaks to the Jewish condition and is unparalleled in its ability to instill in young Jews a sense of pride, identity, knowledge, and love of their people.²⁰

Silver speaks directly to the unique potential of Jewish children's literature. It can transmit cultural literacy while building a deep sense of pride in one's Jewish identity. A Jewish children's book, when properly selected for the right child at the right moment, has the potential to give children the tools to claim their own Jewishness and place themselves in a larger context—one heavy with history and meaning.

When discussing the mission to create meaning, we can look at the role of “subjunctive stories,” as described by Jerome Bruner in his work *Acts of Meaning*:

...'subjunctive' stories are easier to enter into, easier to identify with. Such stories, as it were, can be tried on for psychological size, accepted if they fit, rejected if they pinch identity or compete with established commitments. Story, in a word, is a vicarious experience, and the treasury of narratives into which we can enter includes, ambiguously, either 'reports of real experience' or offerings of culturally shaped imagination.²¹

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²⁰ Silver, xii.
“Culturally shaped imagination” can refer here to the Jewishly sparked or fueled imagination one may wish to inspire in child readers of Jewish literature. In subjunctive stories, we can find the perfect recipe for ambiguity of narrator and repeatability of scenes, content, tropes, and refrains, that help a child slip into the book and try it on for size, as it were. For example, if someone wanted to use Jewish literature to help promote a Jewish identity among a diverse Jewish readership, the process may be to provide subjunctive stories that do not chafe or confine a child, regardless of their background, dual affiliations, level of religious observance or education.  

Critics debate what is aesthetically appealing and appropriate for children's illustrations, and what textual content is both appropriate and compelling for children. They also discuss how adults impose their own criteria when assessing these aspects of children's literature, and whether these criteria ever contradict those that children might articulate if they had the skills and agency to do so. In terms of aesthetic taste regarding illustrations, or ideas of what appropriate story content is, it is interesting to note the inherent gap between the expectations and perceptions of a child and those of an adult. Inevitably, tastes change over time and it is often the adult who imposes his or her aesthetics on to a work intended for children. This may be due to an adult's decision to should expose the child to more sophisticated art (according to the adult's taste) in order to help the child mature and progress them along towards eventually sharing the same tastes. Yet this overlooks the inherent, complex beauty and particular appreciations a child may have for aesthetics, and risks alienating a child from a picture book with

22 Not all Jewish children's literature sets out to do this, or accomplishes this effectively, as shown in the golem categories described below, with the exception of the category outlined in Section X.
illustrations that do not resonate. Indeed, according to Kutzer, “there are large numbers of adults who wish to shape children's literature after their own perceptions of what children should be, not on observations of what they are.”23 Often illustrators create magnificent, sophisticated artwork for children's books and receive critical acclaim. Their books sell well among parents, who as adults, inevitably enjoy the illustrations, and hold the purse strings. However, this cycle fails to take into account the child's tastes and desires, which likely dramatically differ from those of the adult's.

This differential comes into play when portraying frightening scenes or characters such as the golem. Thomas Leddy has written: “Whereas an adult may be able clearly to distinguish between real fear and make-believe fear, a child may not... 'The emotions with which we respond to art are as real and powerful as those with which we respond to life.' This may not always be true for adults, but it is especially true in early childhood.”24 Many award-winning books about the golem have extraordinarily well drawn, dramatic illustrations that are exceedingly scary. While this may create a safe and even pleasant kind of fear in an adult, it can be traumatizing to a child, or can distract a child to the point where he or she is not able to experience the story.

While it may seem easy to omit sophisticated, terrifying illustrations, it can be difficult for adults to gauge what positively constitutes “good art” for children. Thomas Leddy suggests that adults often instinctively forget or are incapable of articulating two primary aesthetic qualities that appeal to children: coziness and warmth:

-Coziness' and 'warmth' do not typically appear in our canonical

23 Kutzer, 721.
lists of aesthetic qualities. These values are frowned upon, or
downplayed, in the adult world. Although we adults still like to be
cozy and warm... we worry that such things are not serious, or that
our enjoyment of them will seem child-like. We art
cognoscenti...say that this is 'mere sentimentality.'

Yet children appreciate and even crave warmth and coziness in the art they consume.

While it can certainly backfire if not presented in moderation, and with the
accompaniment of a good story, it seems sensible for adults to attempt to integrate these
qualities where appropriate into children's picture books.

Finally, we arrive at the most important, most obvious, and unfortunately most
often overlooked facet of children's literature: the story. Simply stated, the story must be
good. There must be drama; there must be tension or conflict, scenery and framing, and
characters the child can relate to or “step into.” And there must be some resolution that
lets children know the end of the story has arrived. Regardless of the quest for meaning
or the scope of cultural heritage one attempts to transmit, nothing will be accomplished
without it hanging on a good story.

In terms of envisioning the ideal Jewish children's book, it may be useful to
consider a question posed by educator Dorothy Howard in 1968: “Where does a child's
mind go when it wanders?” This question poses a significant challenge to an adult
who seeks to write or illustrate children's literature, yet it is also a source of immense
inspiration. An adult should want a child's mind to wander into imagination, and should
foster that creative exploration. No adult should seek to dictate where a child's mind
should go, or even worse, refuse it permission to travel at all.

25 Leddy, 47.
Yet, a Jewish children's book can establish a particular type of mental playground to which the child's mind can travel and explore. This playground may be built on a historical moment, or feature Jewish objects, or be populated by Jewish characters. Ultimately, the child should want to travel there and feel empowered to play on this playground. The result is to create not simply a happy, well adjusted child, but to create a child who has explored his or her Jewish identity and feels some positive ownership of it. The golem strikes a unique pose on this playground. In some books, we find he is a wonderful playmate, while in others he may traumatize. In some books, we find that he is a dominant bully who orders the playground and dictates who and what belongs there for the child, while in other books, he can lead the child on to a playground that is not Jewish in the least. All golems may have a place in Jewish literature; but which to read depends on the desired outcome for the young reader.
V. The Landscape of Jewish Children's Literature

The field of Jewish children's literature has thrived in America over the past several decades. As we enter it in search of the golem, it is helpful to give a brief overview of some of the publishing houses, organizations, and awards that address this field in some way, and which come up in the discussion of specific titles in this paper.

Firstly, it is useful to describe some of the main categories of publishing houses that take on Jewish children's literature. To begin with, there are publishing houses that are entirely devoted to publishing Jewish literature and allocate either a set amount of resources annually or reserve a quota of titles annually for children's books. Examples of this include Kar Ben Publishing, Jewish Lights Publishing, and the Jewish Publication Society. There are also mainstream publishers such as Marshall Cavendish, Macmillan (Farar, Straus and Giroux), HarperCollins Publishers, and Clarion Books, which maintain an imprint for children's books and incidentally may occasionally publish a book with Jewish content. Finally, there are specialized Jewish publication houses that seek to print and distribute Jewish children's literature that exemplifies a specific, often highly observant, Jewish religious denomination (for example Feldheim Publishing, Mesorah Publishing Ltd. (ArtScroll), The Judaica Press, Inc., and Hachai Publishing).

Taking in to account the publisher of a specific title can, at times, help us better
understand the intended audience and/or mission of the book. For example, a mainstream publishing house will rarely publish a book intended or designed for Jewish outreach, while a Jewish publishing house may do so. Similarly, a Jewish publishing house with a specific denominational agenda will choose titles that conform to that agenda and help inspire their young readership to do the same. Where relevant, the publishers of the children's titles discussed will be provided in the body of this paper.

Additionally, there are a few organizations and awards related to children's literature that will be discussed throughout this paper, so it is useful to give a brief overview of them here. Understanding a little about them will help us better unpack their relevance to some of the book titles to be discussed. These organizations and awards include: the Association for Library Service to Children and the Caldecott Medal Award, the National Jewish Book Council and the National Jewish Book Award, the Sydney Taylor Award, and the PJ Library.

The Caldecott Award is distributed by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association (ALA). The Medal is awarded to an exceptional children's picture book annually. There are no criteria as to content of the book, nor about the constituency the book is aimed at (beyond, of course, the broad category of “children”). It is interesting to learn that ALA defines children as “persons of ages up to and including fourteen,” and states that picture books for this entire age range are to be considered for the Caldecott Medal. Indeed, many might make the mistake of assuming a Caldecott Medal Award-winning children's picture book is suitable for the

youngest of “readers.” The Caldecott, however, is often presented to those whose art work is more mature, and more appealing to a sophisticated artistic sensibility (and often lacking that coveted “coziness” and “warmth”).

The Jewish Book Council (an organization started in its initial form in 1925 by Boston librarian Fanny Goldstein) presents the Annual Jewish Book Awards, an honor bestowed upon the finest books in a number of categories ranging from illustrated children's books to debut fiction and writings based on archival material. The Council takes into account a wide range of criteria when selecting a book to receive an award, including that the book must deal with Jewish content and must be a quality book “that will appeal to a broad reading audience.”

Yet their mission goes far beyond the distribution of their Annual Awards. Their core platform includes serving “as the national resource center for information about the American Jewish literary scene,” promoting “the reading, writing, publishing and distribution of quality Jewish content books in English,” and serving “as the coordinating body of Jewish literary activity in North America in both general and Jewish venues.”

With this broad scope, it of course follows that their insight into books with Jewish content may be more nuanced, or at least from a more informed perspective, than that of other award-distributing bodies, such as the Caldecott Committee. The Jewish Book Council has its metaphorical finger on the pulse of America's Jewish literary scene; thus, their priorities may be more in keeping with the proliferation of books and the diverse and eclectic nature of Jewish life in America today. Their selections, specifically

29 Jewish Book Council "About JBC." http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/about/
for children, might conceivably take into account how each specific title may be enjoyed by this eclectic constituency.

All this is not to downplay the honor or prestige of the Caldecott Medal, but to point out potential reasons why one Jewish content book might win the Caldecott while another may win the National Jewish Book Award, and that the one might never be in the running for the other. Caldecott is an award for outstanding artwork in a “mainstream” children's book, while the National Jewish Book Council is more concerned with the interplay of literary/visual excellence and the unique literary potential, challenges, and needs of the diverse American Jewish community.

In discussing Jewish children's literary awards, one cannot fail to mention the Sydney Taylor Award. The Sydney Taylor Award is awarded annually by the American Jewish Library Association to a number of children's and young adult titles that “authentically portray the Jewish experience.”30 The Award has been given since 1968, and in recent years, there has been significant overlap between its selections and the selections of the PJ Library, an organization to be discussed below. However, it is not useful to go in to great detail concerning this award since none of the titles discussed in this paper, or any golem story for that matter, have received it in the past, though Eric A. Kimmel (author of The Golem's Latkes) has received a general Sydney Taylor Award for his overall body of work.

Few organizations have explored the Jewish children's literary scene as the PJ Library has in recent years. First founded as a program of the Harold Grinspoon

Foundation in 2005, the PJ Library currently sends books to over 95,000 children ranging in age from five months to eight years throughout the United States and Canada. In cooperation with local community organizations (such as Jewish federations and community centers), PJ Library mails age appropriate books to individual children each month at no charge to the family. Any family can register for the program; the only expectation is that the children or family identify in some way as Jewish. For example, grandparents can enroll their grandchildren even if only one of the parents identifies partially as a Jew.

The program is designed to engage families with Jewish books and to support them in raising Jewish children. The PJ Library seeks to help strengthen individual family dynamics by creating quiet rituals around Jewish stories, and to help engage and develop children's Jewish identities through these resources. It also seeks to help educate parents about their own Jewish identities, regardless of how they affiliate (or do not affiliate) with a particular denomination. In a June, 2011 story in the *New York Times*, journalist Mark Oppenheimer profiled the organization, stating “In my family's experience, the PJ Library does increase children's Jewish literacy, as well as parents'.”

PJ Library was named one of the "50 most inspiring and innovative programs in North America" by Slingshot in 2009, and was a Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA) 2010 selection for “Best in Jewish Education of the Decade." Today, there are spinoff branches of the PJ Library operating in Israel and Australia, and plans to expand

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33 Slingshot is a a group of “next-generation philanthropists” in their 20s and 30s, who publicize and fund an annual collection of exceptionally innovative Jewish nonprofits. ([www.slingshot.org](http://www.slingshot.org))
the PJ Library's membership twofold in North America are under way. PJ Library is not only growing in numbers; it is also growing in scope. In 2011, the PJ Library commissioned its first book (a volume about Jewish summer camps, by Todd Parr), and the organization has also managed to get out of print books reissued (including Michelle Edwards' 1991 *Chicken Man*). Looking into the future, the organization may help shape which Jewish children's books get published in the first place, and perhaps also how children's books are conceived and written.

Dena Glasgow serves on the Book Selection Committee for the PJ Library, a diverse group of professionals with formal and informal educational experience, children's authors, and others. She is also the Education Director at the Boston-area Jewish Education Program, an unaffiliated Jewish supplementary school for students kindergarten through seventh grade. Her professional and personal experience give her unique insight into the world of Jewish children's literature, and its unique potential:

Books open up new worlds and invite conversation, reflection and action. This is particularly true in the world of Jewish children’s literature. Children (and by extension families) encounter Judaism through compelling stories that, over time, become their own stories and part of who they are. Jewish stories have the power to draw people in. The right books are inviting, non-judgmental, and enriching. They bring alive the fundamental teachings of Judaism. They become part of family life and have the potential to encourage Jewish discussion and Jewish action (from baking hamentaschen to joining a synagogue).  

Glasgow has observed first hand the tremendous power of Jewish stories to help shape and inform a budding Jewish identity. When a powerful Jewish story is introduced at the right time, it can help draw a child and even an entire family into Judaism. Yet Glasgow

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34 Interview with Dena Glasgow, March 30th, 2012.
also understands the necessary precautions in finding an appropriate story that is up to this challenge; the book cannot judge or alienate young readers.

This latter precaution must be considered in depth among the PJ Library Book Selection Committee. Their task is to select the titles that the PJ Library will distribute around the country each month to thousands of families. Due in part to the diversity of the families participating in PJ Library, the Committee must weigh numerous factors when making their selections. They cannot risk alienating an entire constituency and must find titles that invite and welcome readers into exploring a Jewish identity, while simultaneously educating about what that identity might consist of. When asked what Glasgow takes into account when reviewing books as a member of the Committee, she responds:

We try to select stories that will be welcoming to Jewish families that do not know a lot about Judaism. Thus, while the recipients of PJ Library books come from all walks of life (from Orthodox to the unengaged), it is particularly important to us that our books be appropriate and appealing to those families that are unsure about where Judaism fits in their lives (or if Judaism fits in at all). We carefully evaluate each book to make sure it doesn’t assume knowledge that our readers may not have (as this would be very unwelcoming to families). In other words, we try to send out non-intimidating books that will help families grow Jewishly.\(^\text{35}\)

Glasgow articulates the importance of selecting the right story that will hopefully appeal to all PJ Library participants. Yet she also notes the unique potential power of putting said story in the hands of a family struggling to make sense of their own Jewish identity. With this archetypal family in mind, it perhaps makes logical sense that only one of the below golem categories (the happy helpmate golem, found in Section X), has been

\(^{35}\) Interview with Dena Glasgow, 3/30/2012.
selected as a PJ Library Book.
VI. History of the Golem Tale

The golem as a symbol of life molded and created by man dates back to the Babylonian Talmud, though the first use of the word golem (giml-lamed-mem) in a recognizable sense can be found in Psalms 139:15-16 “...I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth. Your eyes saw my 'unformed limbs' (giml-lamed-mem).”

This line is also translated as “Thine eyes did see my golem....” The short cosmological treatise Sefer Yezirah (one of the oldest extant works on kabbalah) deals extensively with the creation of a golem-like creature. During the medieval period, much of the literature on golems pertains to how the golem might be created, and the theological implications of such an action. Later centuries focus specifically on the creation of a specific golem by a certain rabbi or tsaddik, with various outcomes. Between the 18th and 20th centuries literary works detailing these narratives abound, with a plethora appearing in the final decades of the 19th century.

There are many disparate ideas about the origins of the golem story, and about the

39 Bilski, 13.
origins of the golem figure itself. Some folkloric sources attest that the golem was created by Rabbi Isaac Luria or Reb. Eliahu of Chelm, or by the Vilna Gaon, but the vast majority suggest the golem was created by Maharal, R. Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague (also spelled Low, Lowe, or less commonly Lew, Lev, Liva, or Levi). Yet even this majority is not apparently in agreement with the historical archives of Rabbi Loew himself, which never once mention a golem, let alone that he created one.

This most famous tale, regarding the Golem of Prague, will be focused on throughout this paper. Though there are multiple versions of the tale, it is helpful to begin with a general overview of the basic plot points and general arc shared by the vast majority of golem tales. Note that many of these similarities can be traced to the most prevalent version (the one popularized in part by the work of Yudl Rosenberg), about the golem of Prague. His role in promoting this narrative will be discussed shortly. The traditional narrative of the golem of Prague begins in 1580: Rabbi Loew, a past confidant of Emperor Rudolf, is concerned for the Jewish people's safety in light of recent cases of blood libel and threats of a pogrom against the ghetto. The rabbi uses kabbalistic magic to create a golem from clay (in some versions, with the help of two young students). To bring life to the clay-man form the rabbi, in most versions, carves the Hebrew word for truth, “emet” or “aleph-mem-tof” into the golem's forehead. The golem is unable to speak in most accounts, yet is able to fulfill orders and understands that his primary goal, granted as a condition of his life, is to protect the Jewish people.

41 For a thorough discussion of the history of the literary golem figure from the nineteenth century forward, see Cathy Gelbin's *The Golem Returns.*
43 Idel, 251.
The golem is able to help the rabbi with simple tasks, though he must be supervised, as he lacks common sense. One famous tale, later adapted multiple times including famously with Mickey Mouse in Fantasia's “The Sorcerer's Apprentice,” has the golem drawing pails of water to mop the floor. No one is there to tell him when to stop bringing water, so he floods the entire house. In another common scene from the golem tale, Rabbi Loew puts the golem to work fishing for dinner in the river. The golem stands in the water all day and into the night. Rabbi Loew assumes that he has been standing there unsuccessfully these many hours, so calls out to him “That's enough golem! Come home!” Upon hearing this, the golem lifts up his two enormous nets full of caught fish and upends them back into the river. He obediently turns around and returns to the rabbi. Both of these vignettes are found in the golem titles discussed below.

The major plot arc of most golem tales, however, arrives at a gruesome climax around Passover-time, in which non-Jews, blinded by antisemitism and convinced Jews have kidnapped a local child, killed him and used his blood for matzoh, attempt to storm the ghetto. The golem is called upon to use his awesome strength to protect the Jews, and he does so handily, uprooting trees and ripping non-Jews apart at the ghetto gate. Though the golem has fulfilled his mission and protected the Jewish people, the rabbi feels that the golem's power and potential to harm is too great, and that he must be destroyed. In other versions, Emperor Rudolf is so terrified by the golem's strength that he asks Rabbi Loew to destroy the golem in exchange for officially putting to an end all cases of blood libel. Regardless of the impetus, most versions of the story end with Rabbi Loew
destroying the golem by either erasing the “aleph” from his forehead, leaving “mem-tof”
44 or by dragging the name for God out of the golem's lips, thus killing him. In most
versions, the golem's remaining fragments are stored in the attic of Prague's Altneu Shul.
Some tellings end with the threat (or reassurance) that if needed, the golem can always
rise again to protect the Jewish people.

The modern popularity of Rabbi Loew's Golem of Prague legend can be traced
primarily to Yudl Rosenberg, a Yiddish author who produced a pamphlet in Warsaw in
1909 titled “Nifla'ot Maharal im ha-Golem,” later translated into English by Joachim
Neugroschel as “The Golem or the Miraculous Deeds of Rabbi Liva.”45 Rosenberg was
born in 1860 in Skaraschev, Poland and grew up to be a respected rabbi and halakhic
authority. Directly after World War I, Rosenberg immigrated to Canada, where he
became a respected member of the Montreal Rabbinate.46

Rosenberg's pamphlet was subtitled “An historical description of the great
wonders that the world-renowned gaon, Rabbi Liva of Prague, performed with the
golem, which he created to wage war against the Blood Libel.”47 In the tradition of
authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter, Rosenberg addressed a
foreword to his readers claiming that the contents of the pamphlet were in fact found in
manuscript form in the Library of Mainz, Germany. There, Rosenberg claimed, it had
lain amongst the personal papers of Rabbi Loew for many years. Rosenberg reported he

44 “Mem-tof” or מת translates from Hebrew as “death” or “he died.”
   University, 1981), 38.
47 Goldsmith, 38.
purchased the rights to the manuscript from a Chaim Scharfstein for 800 kronen.48

Many skeptics scoffed at Rosenberg's insistence that the manuscripts were authentic. Rosenberg responded with anecdotes about the great Rabbi Ezekiel Landau, who broke Rabbi Loew's ban on entering the attic of the Altnue Shul and, to his shock and horror, supposedly found the clay remains of the golem gathering dust. To add even more weight to this tale, Rosenberg claimed that Rabbi Landau had visited the ritual bath that very morning and was in a most pure state, wearing his prayer shawl and phylacteries, when he visited the attic.49 Rosenberg closed his Foreword with a plea that all Jews believe the veracity of his claims:

I had to devote a great deal of labor and expense to having the manuscript printed. And thus I hope that every intelligent person will be grateful to me for my work, and I am certain that every Jew will soon give this valuable treasure a place on his bookshelf.50

Though Rosenberg may appear to shame readers into believing his claims, there is significant evidence that either his pamphlet or (less likely) a manuscript Rosenberg purchased was a forgery. There are chronological errors within it that Rabbi Loew would have been unlikely to make regarding his own lifetime. For example, Emperor Rudolf's reign did not begin until several years after the story occurs. The pamphlet contains errors about the geography of Prague and the name of its river (Rosenberg refers to it as the Moldavka, whereas it would have been called either Vltava in Czech or Moldau in German). It also contains errors about the circumstances of the Jewish population in Prague during 1580 (there were no recorded incidents of blood libel in Bohemia during

48 Goldsmith, 38.
49 Goldsmith, 39.
50 Goldsmith, 39.
Given these factors and the history of the golem as a folk figure found in Prague, Vilna, Chelm, and elsewhere, it is highly likely that Rosenberg's pamphlet presents a hoax—whether on him or on the public, it cannot be determined. If Rosenberg was the mastermind, his intentions may have been to entertain and to profit from his pamphlet, but there were also perhaps more noble intentions involved. While accusations of blood libel may have been unheard of in late 16th century Bohemia, Rosenberg would have been all too familiar with them. The Jews of late 19th and early 20th century Europe suffered through many cases of blood libel, including the infamous 1899 Hilsner case in Polna, Czechoslovakia. Shortly after the release of the pamphlet, the Jews of Europe also found themselves dealing with the Mendel Beilis libel case in Russia (1911-1913). Both these cases and numerous others like them forced the European Jewish community into a position of deeper defensiveness, fear, and powerlessness. Rosenberg's “long-lost manuscript” may have given them the symbol of hope, security, and justice they so craved.

Indeed, Rosenberg's pamphlet goes into great and gruesome detail about the treachery of Christians in constructing a lie about Jewish murder and blood-letting for matzoh. Only one title treated in this paper fully embraces Rosenberg's treatment of this graphic scene, in which a priest kidnaps and kills a child to drain his blood and frame the Jews. Largely, children's books simply allude to the accusations, if they mention the persecution at all. Yet this haunting scene has been paramount in other golem literature,

51 Goldsmith, 40.
52 Goldmsith, 39.
such as H. Leivick's 1921 Yiddish play, “Der Goylem.” Combined with its timely relevance, it likely contributed enormously to the popularity of Rosenberg's pamphlet, and to the rapidity with which its Golem of Prague legend became in/famous among Jews, and eventually non-Jews, throughout Europe and America.

Yet it is interesting to consider what happens to the golem of Prague when he enters the American literary scene, and to compound this interaction by adding the golem to American children's literature. It is not as though cases of blood libel have never occurred on American soil (see Massena, New York, 1928 and Cincinnati, Ohio in the 1980s), but these cases, along with other overt acts of hostile antisemitism are much less prevalent in America than Europe. In tandem with or in reaction to these facets of the changing Jewish American community, this paper examines how the golem has been adapted to fit a new world of children's literature, and the ramifications of these adaptations for young readers.

53 For an English translation of Leivick's play, see Joachim Neugroschel's The Golem: A New Translation of the Classic Play and Selected Short Stories.
Given the golem's traditional narrative, it is little wonder that the character can be found in much contemporary children's literature intended for an orthodox audience. This particular golem category serves a definite function for a young orthodox readership; it defines boundaries around religion and community, while demanding a high level of Jewish literacy from its readers. Yet, there are drawbacks to putting a golem figure from this category into the hands of a nonorthodox reader. He or she may struggle with the material and feel alienated, ultimately disengaging from what could have been an edifying Jewish experience.

There are numerous ways in which the golem tale may resonate with orthodox communities in America today. The golem's origins are based in deep theological teachings, and his existence hinged on protecting the Jewish people from the non-Jewish enemy, while upholding the Jewish community as special and distinct from the non-Jewish society at large. Literally, the golem is defending the Jewish people against a hostile enemy, yet in America today, symbolically, the enemy may represent acculturation and assimilation. It is also possible that due to the enhanced Jewish profile of orthodox children, the experience of antisemitism and persecution may resonate more for them personally than it would with a non-orthodox Jewish child.
An example of the golem as a great Jewish champion can be found in Mesorah Publications Ltd./Artscroll's *The Golem of Prague*, by T. Kuperman (illustrated by “E.P.”). Kuperman's story begins with the admission that some aspects of the Prague Golem story are disputed, yet Kuperman staunchly maintains that though individual stories may be partially elaborated, a *tsaddik*'s (righteous person's) power to create a golem is a fact of Jewish faith. 

This belief in the real-ness or potential realness of the golem as an article of religious faith will also be discussed below in Rabbi Gershon Winkler's *The Sacred Stones*. Overall, of all the titles this paper considers, Kuperman's golem story most closely resembles Rosenberg's pamphlet/acquired manuscript.

In portraying the golem as a uniquely Jewish champion, Kuperman states early on that the golem is a primary example of “‘Lo yanum v’lo yishan Shomer Yisrael’ (‘The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps, nor slumbers!’).”

This phrase is found in Psalms 21, Verse 4, though its origins are not alluded to in the story. By invoking this phrase, we not only see the golem reified as a guardian of the Jewish community specifically, but we also find his position situated within a long Jewish historical and theological tradition.

Kuperman's story is laden with Hebrew words and terms that go largely untranslated. The young reader is expected to know about *gedolai Yisrael*, *tzaddikim*, and *Amora* from the text on the first page alone. Nearly each page has multiple examples of Hebrew terms that the reader is expected to be familiar with. These relate largely to:

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57 Kuperman, 6.
58 Roughly translated: “great ones of the Jewish people;” “righteous persons;” “Jewish scholars who speak on matters of biblical oral law” (see connection to Hebrew verb רומא, “to speak”). Historically, “Amora” refers to a group of scholars within Babylonia and the Land of Israel, who passed down Judaism's oral law from 200-500 C.E.
theological concepts and practices. This fits if the book (as the publisher in part
presumes) is intended both for readers who already have strong Jewish religious
backgrounds, and for those who parents hope will remain observant and highly Jewishly
literate.

In terms of plot and content, Kuperman's golem is more active in the Jews' clever
reconnaissance plans than overtly and bluntly violent. He performs many of the same
helping activities of Rosenberg's book, including the floor mopping scene and the fishing
scene, in addition to the overall plot of defending the Jews against the Christians' charges
of kidnap and murder. Yet when it comes to protecting Jews, the golem sneaks by night,
scales buildings, plants evidence, and uses supernatural instincts to help Jews outwit the
villainous Father Taddeus and his Christian minions. In the end, the issue of blood libel is
set to rest when a plot uncovers that the missing boy was in fact murdered and his corpse
hidden by Father Taddeus. The golem, having offered his assistance to the Jewish
community, is laid to rest in the attic of the synagogue, where he can once again be called
upon to help his people in a time of need.

Though Kuperman's golem is not as violent as other portrayals, he is a constant
tool (and companion) for the Jewish people in their quest to redeem themselves against
the accusations of the most vividly realized villain of any of the golem titles discussed in
this paper. Father Taddeus sets out to convert young Jewish maidens, and to incite
violence against the Jews at all costs. He grows more and more furious as each of his
plots is foiled by Rabbi Loew and his golem, crying "I, Father Taddeus, swear in the
name on my debased honor that, come what may, I will find a way to bring destruction to
the enemies of Christianity who make me stumble at every turn!’”59 And indeed he nearly does, through the gruesome kidnapping and murder of a toddler in his wine cellar, where he leaves the boy's body to rot after covering it with a tallis by which he intends to incriminate the Jews.

Whatever violence the golem fails to perform the priest more than makes up for. Yet again, the victorious Jews outwit those who would defeat them, and the result is a story tailored through plot and vocabulary for a highly knowledgable and observant Jewish audience. No child uninitiated into an extremely Jewishly literate world be able to read and comprehend this story. Similarly, no child who has not already aligned him or herself somehow with the Jewish people would be able to identify with the protagonists or “participate” in the story. Finally, though the story's violence may have the potential to traumatize any child, a child of an interfaith family might be traumatized further by feeling that his or her Christian identity, as portrayed in the book, is a villainous taint or a horrifying liability.

Ultra orthodox Rabbi Gershon Winkler's *The Sacred Stones: The Return of the Golem* (The Judaica Press, Inc.) is an illustrated children's chapter book relating an historical adventure story for an orthodox readership. In the past, Rabbi Winkler has expressed his opinion that the golem is in fact a true historical figure created in Prague by Rabbi Loew, treating the existence of the golem as a fact of faith.60 He has such terrific respect for Yudl Rosenberg (and Rosenberg's pamphlet) that according to Goldsmith, “it

59 Kuperman, 74.
60 Goska, Danusha. “Golem as Gentile, Golem as Sabra: An Analysis of the manipulation of stereotypes of self and other in literary treatments of a legendary Jewish figure.” *New York Folklore* XXIII: 1-4. 39-64. [pages unnumbered within article]
was inconceivable to Winkler that such a venerable scholar could have been the author of a literary forgery." Winkler's tale involves the golem and the sacred breastplate of the Israelite High Priest, or Khosen Mishpat. Winkler gives significant biblical background for this artifact. The plot hinges on the discovery and subsequent theft and abuse of the breastplate at the hands of non-Jews. The golem is resurrected to help regain the breastplate, and alongside the Maharal of Prague Rabbi Loew, sets things right again in the Jewish world. Along the way, there is other trickery and tragedy dealt by non-Jews, including the discovery of a Jewish child who had to be relinquished to the Inquisition years before. It is clear who the "underdog good guys" are and who the villainous enemies are on each page of the story. Additionally, the book trades heavily on Hebrew vocabulary and terminology, and Jewish religious values and practices. For example, God's name is spelled "G-d" throughout.

The experience of reading *The Sacred Stones* certainly entertains, but also may help affirm and solidify a child's Jewish world while helping the child learn more religious text and practices. Plot turns are few, and many are the moralizing sermons from various characters about why their minute actions or impending actions are sanctified by Jewish tradition and texts. During one such sermon about the beauty and goodness of the Talmud, a non-Jewish character (one of the few who is not portrayed as an outright treacherous villain), is so moved by the rabbi's speech that he cries out his shame at having ever disapproved of Jews in the past. In fact, he pleads with the rabbi to stop speaking about the wisdom of the Talmud, for it is simply too much beauty and

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61 Goldsmith, 38.
62 *Khosen Mishpat* is another story adapted by Yudl Rosenberg in 1913.
sense for him to bear: “‘Please, Rabbi, no more! Else I would soon wish to convert!’

The publisher of *The Sacred Stones* suggests that reading the book can result in the deepening of an orthodox Jewish identity. The Judaica Press released the book in 1991, and a quick scan of the Press's website shows that they pride themselves on their religiously edifying repertory:

In today's burgeoning Jewish book world, it can be difficult to discern which books represent authentic, Torah-true Judaism. Judaica Press has been publishing books for almost 50 years, and during that time we have developed an impressive line of titles that hold true to the ideals of authentic Judaism and our traditions.

*The Sacred Stones* might be said to have dueling priorities at its core: on one hand, it must provide a strongly and devoutly Jewish story with role models and conflicts that can resonate with and ultimately edify a young orthodox readership. On the other hand, it of course seeks to tell an entertaining adventure tale- a goal that might be said to merely be in service of the first. After all, how will a book make an impression on a child if the child is too bored to turn the page?

Nineteen issues of the original “Mendy and the Golem” comic book series, written and drawn by Leibel Estin and Dovid Sears respectively, were published between 1981 and 1985 by Mendy Enterprises. As recently as February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012 the communal website “COL LIVE: Chabad Lubavitch Community News Service“ (www.colive.com) began running a retrospective series of the original “Mendy and the Golem” series. The series involves unfortunately little journalistic commentary, mainly reposting pages from the original run for the sake of nostalgia among its readership. Many readers of the site

have in fact commented on their deep love for and fond memories of the strip. Many plead for reprints, and several even ask for a new set of adventures to be produced featuring Mendy and the Golem. It is interesting that no one seems to recall the 2003 “Mendy and the Golem” series, which ran for six issues and “updated” the plot and characters. This latter series will be discussed in Section XIII. But suffice it to say, the second incarnation lacks much of the religiosity and overt Jewish character of the original. This may well be why it was either rejected or simply ignored by the Chabad journalists and readership.

There are also some who speculate that the original “Mendy and the Golem” strip was in fact written in collaboration with Chabad Lubavitch:

While not overtly stated in the credits, Mendy appears to have been created under the auspices of or somehow in cooperation with Chabad. This is evidenced not only by occasional story content (such as biographical tales of certain Chassidic rebbeim), but by house ads and the Tzivos Hashem sweatshirts favored by Mendy and Rivky.

Indeed, little Mendy sports a kippa, tziszis, and a brightly colored shirt with the superman logo and the Hebrew word “Tzivos 'Hey'.” As Abramovitz writes, the image on the shirt is likely reference to or logo at the time for Tzivos Hashem, or “God's Army,” the religious Jewish children's club founded in Brooklyn by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, in 1980. Rumors of overt cooperation between

Chabad and the original “Mendy and the Golem” authors cannot be confirmed or definitively laid to rest. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that the primary audience for the original strip was a highly observant, deeply religious group that identified as starkly different from non-Jewish audiences.

Indeed, the original “Mendy and the Golem” comic strip billed itself as “The World's Only Kosher Comic Book,” and each page is filled with the hallmarks, symbols, and dialogue of an American orthodox Jewish world. Mendy finds our golem on the first page, and there is never any doubt throughout the series that one is reading the tale of a distinctly Jewish superhero operating on behalf of a highly observant Jewish community. When Mendy first stumbles upon the golem in the basement of his shul, he exclaims “Wow! He must be as big as Og, the giant who rode on the roof of Noah's Ark!”\(^{68}\)

The comic is full of such tidbits, designed to help educate and solidify a religiously literate inner circle. Each issue focuses on a Jewish value such as *hachnasat orhim*, or hospitality for guests (Issue One), *ahavat Israel*, or love of the Jewish people (Issue Two), and other values such as *tsedakah* or charity, or the mitzvah of mezuzah (Issues Four and Five).

The original “Mendy and the Golem” series operates in much the same way that T. Kuperman's *The Golem of Prague* or Gershon Winkler's *The Sacred Stones* does; it helps strengthen the highly religious and cohesive group identity of orthodox Jewish youth. There appears to be no room in these stories for children of interfaith parents, or children who themselves identify as multi-faith. There is also a perceived level of Jewish religious and cultural literacy that comes with these stories. Though specific Hebrew and

Yiddish phrases may be occasionally translated, the child who is not familiar with orthodox Jewish life and customs may be at a loss when confronted with these books. Additionally, the child who is not firmly within the Jewish tribe, as defined by orthodox standards, is largely left to the world of villainy in these stories. Jews who are not orthodox are entirely missing from the stories, and nearly all non-Jewish characters are plotting treacherously against the Jewish protagonists. For those who fall beyond the category of “orthodox Jew,” the golem is decidedly not their hero and these stories are decidedly not for them.

Yet for the child who identifies strongly with the orthodox Jewish tradition, these stories can provide adventurous entertainment, enriching further Jewish education or providing affirmation (both religious and cultural), and offer a hulking hero who essentially exists to protect them and their families. In this way the golem helps fight against acculturation and assimilation within the orthodox Jewish community and helps make Judaism an attractive or appealing lifestyle for those who already fit within the community’s boundaries. For those who do not fit within said boundaries, it may alienate and prove distressing, even to the point of crippling or arresting a child's developing Jewish identity. To imagine this category's golem on the American Jewish child's imaginary playground, one might picture a hulking bully who decides what toys are suitable and dictates how they should be used. Nonetheless, as with any bully, if you have the the appropriate access and a suitable profile, he can be an attractive, and in the long-term, rewarding playmate.
VIII. A Superhero for All: Golem as the Protector of Universal Good

There is much to say about the golem's turn as a uniquely American superhero- a universalized crusader for good. From the original champion of the Jewish people in the face of antisemitism, the golem has emerged in some American literature as a heroic figure righteously crusading for universal good. We can notice this phenomenon in three areas of golem literature. Firstly, there is the connection between the golem and America's beloved Superman. Secondly there are individual children's books that portray the golem as a heroic superhero who can be called upon to vanquish evil figures like bullies (Jewish or non-Jewish). Finally, there is the curious journey of the “Mendy and the Golem” comic strip- from the 1980s original discussed earlier, to a 2003-2005 series which recast the golem as a universal hero. This section will consider all three of these golem portrayals and show how each upholds a specific characterization of the golem as a universally good superhero. Ultimately, this superhero figure may be entertaining and appealing to a wide range of readers, yet the figure's lack of Jewish content does not help a child have an engaging Jewish reading experience.

The involvement of American Jews in the early comics industry is a vast topic, as are the nuances of the golem's role in American comic books around the end of World War Two. It is useful to comment briefly that many have theorized that Superman
himself was modeled after the golem legend. Marvel Comics writer and artist Frank Miller stated “All of the major superheroes throughout the 1940s were created by the Jews [during a] time of persecution.... Superman was a golem.”69 Here we have perhaps the most explicit vision of a universalized golem. Superman is easily the most recognizable superhero in American popular culture, and he fights for the good of all, without ever knowing or seeming to care about an individual's religious identity. To the untrained eye, there is very little “Jewish” about him.

Yet Marvel Comics, that purveyor of American superheros, has capitalized on the golem legend more than once. In 1974, Marvel produced a series called “Strange Tales.” The series ran a story centering on a version of Rabbi Loew's golem of Prague. The “Strange Tales” golem series opens with a Professor Abraham Adamson and his nephew, niece, and niece's boyfriend wandering in search of the mythical golem, the golem having left Prague to travel the world and fight injustice wherever he finds it. Yet by the time our tale begins the golem has grown tired and has banished himself to the desert to die. Beyond the golem being a crusader for universal justice, the dialogue has been stripped of any explicitly Jewish references. For example, instead of ever using the term “Jews” or “the Jewish people,” the reader is left to simply infer what the characters mean when they invoke “our people.”70

Additionally, Rabbi Loew is discussed at length but never referred to as a rabbi. Instead he is called simply a “wise man.”71 It should be noted that Marvel Comics did not

71 Weiner, 57.
set out to hide the Jewish origins of the golem, and even brags about them on an inside cover column. They claim that Marvel Comics had in the past been the first to recognize Black heros and villains and female characters, and is now “proud to introduce the comics’ first Jewish monster-hero.” Yet the comics themselves are relatively devoid of explicit Jewish references (only a few Jewish terms such as “kabbalah” are re-appropriated as names of characters and places), and the golem himself is a righteous hero for the masses. The golem series overall failed to gain a following, and was discontinued after only a few issues.

Before turning to another comic book, it should be mentioned that the golem as a universal superhero can also be found in bound children's picture books such as Davey's Hanukkah Golem, by David Gantz (Jewish Publication Society). In this story from 1991, young Davey wears a beanie and wool coat. He is entertained in the evenings by stories from his Grandpa, including a tale about the golem who was created “to protect Jews from their enemies.” This choice of words omits the question of what enemies Jews were facing and refrains from discussing issues of blood libel and antisemitic Jewish persecution.

Young Davey rides his scooter around his New York City neighborhood the day after his grandfather tells him about the golem. He does not notice when two other young children ask him if he wants to race them on their homemade skate scooters, and he panics when he thinks they are chasing after him. He assumes they are coming for him to

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72 Weiner, 57.
73 Weiner, 50.
steal his scooter, so he races onward to the local park where he manages to slip inside a small cave that only he knows about. While there, he feels frightened until he remembers the story his grandfather taught him. He decides to use the clay from the cave walls to build himself a tiny golem for protection.

Needless to say, Davey eventually emerges from the cave with his miniature golem to find the supposed street toughs have gone home, and Davey and his scooter are again safe. He believes he owes his safety to his tiny golem, and he calls the golem “his own secret Hanukkah miracle.” On the final night of Hanukkah he wraps up the figurine and gives it to his grandfather as a gift. Davey never realizes that the boys were not his enemies and only wanted to play.

This golem story raises interesting questions regarding the golem as a universal hero in America. Firstly, the youths who attempt to race with Davey are never identified as Jewish or not Jewish. Therefore, Davey does not explicitly call upon the golem to protect him from non-Jewish villains. He merely hopes it will protect him from bullying. Secondly, there is in fact no real danger posed to Davey while he hides in the cave. He invents a frightening situation and then responds accordingly. While this may be a subtle commentary on the perceived decrease in antisemitism in America, it is more likely meant to simply capture the whimsical imagination of a child. The golem is his hero, whether the enemy is Jewish, not Jewish, or in fact, completely imaginary.

The comic strip “Mendy and the Golem” was first produced in the early 1980s as described in the Section VII, yet its characters reemerged for a brief run from 2003-2005.

75 Gantz, 25.
This series was produced by the then relatively newly established publishing company The Golem Factory. In this latter series, it takes nearly four (out of a mere six) issues for Mendy to meet the golem. In the meantime, our fearless characters live a coincidentally Jewish life. Mendy and his sister are shown eating at a kosher pizzeria and going to a Hebrew Day School, yet gone is the didacticism and overt religiosity of the original “Mendy and the Golem.” Perhaps more tellingly, the image of the golem as a hero for the Jewish people is no longer present.

In the first issue of the six-part series, Mendy Klein and his sister Rivka (Rivky in the original series) grow suspicious when their mother begins behaving strangely while their father is in Prague on business. They come to learn that their father is in fact missing, despite their mother's protective claims to the contrary. The mother travels to Prague to try and learn more about the fate of their father, and against her wishes, the children travel in secret on the same flight. Once in Prague, the truth of Mr. Klein's kidnapping by a couple of greedy villains comes to light. Mendy falls into a web implicating the bellhop and other seemingly innocent figures, all of whom are acting in cahoots with the villainous couple.

By the end of the series, Mendy has himself created and brought to life a golem who helps save the day and rescue their father (and the entire family) from the villains' clutches. What is most interesting for the sake of this paper are the changes this series exhibits in comparison to the original. First, Mendy's father is no longer a rabbi. He is now identified as a professor and scholar. His heavy beard is gone, and he wears a stylish

76 During research, little could be found about the Golem Factory as a business or publishing house, other than that it is now defunct.
The entire Klein family is Jewish, yet the signs are less overt than in the original comic. Their mother does not wear a snood and sports a smart modern suit. Mr. Klein does not wear a kippa but instead a bowler hat. Gone are Mendy's obvious tzisztis. He has replaced his kippa with a baseball hat, and he now wears a plain striped tee shirt instead of his Tzivos Hashem shirt. Additionally, the scenes in which Mendy accompanies his father to their local shul have been dropped, though this may perhaps simply be a function of a different plot line.

There are very few visual differences that separate the Klein family from the villains, which is in keeping with the most radical change between the two “Mendy and the Golem” series. The villains are not explicitly identified as non-Jews, and there are many kind characters throughout the story who reveal themselves to be non-Jews while helping the Klein family. The heavy handed didacticism and moralizing around specific Jewish values has also been dropped. There are no longer many Hebrew phases, and there is hardly any Yiddish to speak of. It appears that the Golem Factory severed any potential ties to Chabad Lubavitch (a rumor mentioned earlier), and worked independently in this new series.

The newer “Mendy and the Golem” series breaks down the stark divisions between non-Jews (as villains), and Jews (as heroes) expressed in the original. This is a clear example of the golem in the midst of a transformation to universal American hero from a mystical distinctly Jewish protector. He is no longer called to action by an obviously orthodox family, and he is no longer called upon to protect the Jewish
community against the persecution and antisemitism of the larger society. It is perhaps no
accident that the message boards on Chabad's Online Community are full of commenters
nostalgic for the original series without a single mention of the newer one.

The universal hero golem certainly has its place in American children's literature. Artists and writers have long been inspired by this figure, and it is perhaps only natural
that over the course of time, the character would grow to take on new characteristics,
shed old ones, and enter new contexts. Though many might find these universal hero
golem stories to be entertaining, harmless flights of fancy, few would suggest that in
sharing them with a Jewish child, one is actively developing that child's Jewish identity.
A child could read an entire issue of “Strange Tales,” or Davey's Hanukkah Golem, or the
reprised “Mendy and the Golem” series without finding a distinctly Jewish characteristic
with which to identify. The universal hero golem may strike a friendly and appealing
pose on the playground, but he is more likely to be found in the “secular” imaginations of
all children than on the Jewish playground that much Jewish children's literature is trying
to cultivate.
IX. “You'd Have to be Mentally Ill”: The Terrifying Golem

Some children's books portray the golem tale as an exotic ghost story- a tale in which the golem is threatening and terrifying, and in which the Judaism presented is a dated relic of spooky, atmospheric Old Europe. Many of these stories feature dramatic, breathtaking illustrations that appeal especially to adults with sophisticated artistic tastes. Some have also garnered critical acclaim from the non-Jewish world; two of the titles discussed below, David Wisniewski's *Golem* and Barbara Brodsky McDermott's *The Golem: A Jewish Legend*, have either won or been an honorable mention for the Caldecott Picture Book Medal. Yet copies of both books have been removed from school libraries and petitions for their removal have circulated at public libraries. This section argues that though these stories may be excellent, entertaining reads in some readers' hands, they are primarily written to excite and entertain an older readership without any concern for developing their Jewish identity.

77 This is discussed on a listserv frequented by many librarians in the mid to late 1990s called “Fairrosa Cyber Library” A thread dedicated to both Wisniewski's and McDermott's Golem books discusses some of these complaints, and can be found at http://www.fairrosa.info/disc/golem.html. For example, a Judy Teaford posted on February 22nd, 1997: “There is another book, *The Golem: A Jewish Legend* written and illustrated by Beverly Brodsky McDermott that was removed from the shelf of a Newburgh, NY school when a first grade teacher, Phyllis Hoyt, complained that the book contained strong language and threatening artwork that children might not understand. Even though the book was on the shelf for 16 years with no complaint, the Superintendent, Phillip Leahy, said that it was his right to remove the book and that he was not burning or censoring it. (Is this a contradiction!) Hoyt's main complaint about the book was a section that repeats the blood libel and a passage where the mob screams, 'Kill the Jews!'”
An example of the terrifying golem is found in David Wisniewski's 1996 picture book *Golem* (Clarion Books). Wisniewski created both the text and illustrations for the story. His text begins with an explicit, graphic historical discussion of the prejudice and violence faced by the Jewish community in Prague in 1580, including cases of blood libel. Wisniewski writes: “Penned in their walled ghetto, forbidden the use of weapons or the protection of law, the Jews could do nothing to stop the vicious falsehood.” In anticipation of a brewing massacre, Rabbi Loew turns to kabbalah for aid, and the secret to creating a golem is revealed to him. The golem's creation scene is no less dramatic than the opening description of Prague, with “torrential rain lash[ing],” “howling wind,” and “columns of steam shriek[ing] from the formed clay figure.”

Wisniewski's flair for the dramatic and for severe, searing imagery is carried throughout his adaptation. His golem is a hulking, chiseled man with the Hebrew word “emet” carved into his forehead. In keeping with the melancholic tone of the story, the golem does not desire life at first and is reluctant to be created. Rabbi Loew explains to the golem that by day, he is to take care of the synagogue, but that he must always be prepared to leap to the defense of the Jewish people. In fact, he cannot die until the Jewish people are ultimately out of danger. If only the golem's life were so simple, however. He learns the joys and beauty of being human, admiring sunsets, smelling roses, and wondering at birds in flight. Yet when the Jews' enemies inevitably rise up and storm the ghetto walls, the golem rises to the occasion literally, by swelling in size and brutally murdering the invaders. The scene is described in vivid detail, and the terror of

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79 Wisniewski, 8.
80 Wisniewski, 12.
the violence is too much for even Rabbi Loew to witness: “[he] covered his eyes. This was too much destruction, too much.”\(^8^1\)

After the bloody confrontation, Emperor Rudolf asks Rabbi Loew how long the rabbi plans on terrorizing the people of Prague with his golem, enslaving them with a giant. Rabbi Loew responds with “Would a people who celebrate the end of their own slavery wish to inflict slavery on others?”\(^8^2\) In Wisniewski's *Golem*, as deep as the danger faced by the Jewish people is, equally deep is their compassion and desire to live in peace. With the Emperor's promise to let the Jews live in peace, Rabbi Loew promises to destroy his golem.

But the golem, as large, menacing, and violent as he can be, is despondent over the realization he will be turned back to inanimate clay. The reader's heart breaks with the golem's when he learns he will not even be able to remember sunsets once he is destroyed. He cries out to his “father” Rabbi Loew as Loew erases the aleph from his head and thereby reduces him to crumbled clay. Rabbi Loew stores the crumbled clay in the attic of the Altneu Shul, noting that the golem can be reanimated if ever there is the need: “Perhaps, when the desperate need for justice is united with holy purpose, Golem will come to life once more.”\(^8^3\)

Wisniewski's plot line greatly mitigates the helper role of the golem. This figure is not a dull robot who performs chores automatically. Instead, Wisniewski's golem emphasizes the heroic yet terrifying violence the golem is able to mete out in defense of the Jewish people. Though the scenes of non-Jewish bloodshed and massacre are indeed

\(^8^1\) Wisniewski, 19.  
\(^8^2\) Wisniewski, 21.  
\(^8^3\) Wisniewski, 28.
haunting, what is perhaps most unsettling about this portrait is the golem's depth of feeling and resignation to his fate. He is not a soldier trained to attack on command; he is a living man with appreciation for love and beauty- a man who feels torn about the purpose of his creation and pleads with his creator to change his destiny.

On the surface, Wisniewski's Golem may seem like a particularly anti non-Jewish (it is not specified as anti-Christian) screed. After all, for a children's book it goes into tremendous detail about blood libel and about the oppressive prejudice against the Jews in Prague. Yet this story is far more complicated than a simple tale of good (golem and Jews) versus bad (non-Jews). The reader is left deeply ambivalent about the golem's service on behalf of the Jewish people, and indeed even depressed and guilty that he was created and destroyed in the name of Jewish heroism, when all he really wanted to do was watch sunsets and birds silhouetted against the sky.

The story's text alone provides for a complex reading experience, but Wisniewski's illustrations exponentially compound this. Wisniewski uses a technique of paper cutting he mastered while working in a shadow puppet theater troupe, and his use of layered paper cut-outs creates a rich, detailed, jagged, and unsettling visual aid. His illustrations flow off the margins of the page and lead visually into several stages of depth perception and dimension. Additionally, his strong color palette of brown, rust, orange, red, and white make the story seem exceptionally grim and other-worldly. Wisniewski's golem is a massive, chiseled man with a muscular frame, a brownish complexion (resembling human flesh), a blunt haircut, and a tattered belted tunic. In other words, he is easily recognizable as a man, which makes the story so much more
disquieting and which also distinguishes Wisniewski's golem from others we have examined.

Many critics and adult readers were enchanted with Golem. Though critics admitted it was “stark and terrifying,” most also felt that the exquisiteness of Wisniewski's approach merited the book's awards and praise. Reading through the published reviews of established book critics, one cannot help but notice that the book these reviews describe is characterized primarily by the grim and gruesome. These features, though perhaps appealing to older children and adults, may in fact frighten younger children- the audience typically assumed for most picture books. Indeed, to a wider degree than is typical, critics in fact seem to disagree on the recommended age range for the story. Some recommend it for children as young as five, while others declare it should be offered to students no younger than nine.

Both where they agree and disagree with the critics, it is interesting to examine public readers' reviews of the book. These reviews are typically posted by individuals online, and can be written with a wide range of care, thought, and reflection. Yet these reviews are still crucial to an analysis of the story, since they often show how parents perceive the story as they shared (or intend/ed to share) the story with their own children. These reviews can provide a window into the domestic scene the story incited, and to the positive or negative lasting effects the book had on the family.

Online reviews for Golem are greatly mixed. Many individuals unequivocally sing the book's praises. Yet most of these reviews do not mention whether the story was

shared with a child and/or what that child's perspective on the story was. Instead, many of the glowing reviews are from adults with a basic grasp of Jewish history and the golem folktale, who greatly appreciated Wisniewski's artwork and dramatic flair. The negative reviews complain that the story is far too gruesome, historically complex, and frightening for children. One reviewer writes: “While I realize that many classic children's stories are a bit gruesome, they were also written a LOOONG time ago.... I almost put [this] book down. It was actually scary.... Yikes. We quickly picked up a different book to erase the memory of the last one from her head.”\(^{85}\) This reviewer clearly seems to have expected the book to be mildly scary, as the story of the golem is an older folktale. Yet the level of fright Golem achieved was not what s/he expected to share with a child. Another reviewer makes a similar complaint, commenting that “you would have to be mentally ill to write this sort of story for children.”\(^{86}\) Some comment that Wisniewski's illustrations and stylistic choices are the most disturbing, yet others feel the subject matter itself is simply not fit for children. “It's fine for adults, but this should in no way be considered a children's story.”\(^{87}\)

More than one reviewer writes that the story's theme of Jewish persecution is not suitable for children:

[The book] is too dark as it describes the persecution of the Jews in such vivid detail that it will scare small children.... Parents


might want to steer young children away from this book until they are old enough to learn more about the persecution of the Jews.... *Golem* portrays an extremely powerful story of Jewish persecution that would certainly send a message to a much older adolescent crowd, but would not be appropriate for young children. 88

Reviewers' negative responses could be due to a variety of factors, including a dramatic change over time in what is considered suitable material for children's literature, as Bettelheim discusses in *The Uses of Enchantment*. In addition to or instead of this, it may signify a unique shift in how a parent presents a “Jewish book” to his or her Jewishly identified child, and the intended effects of that book on a child's identity. Many parents in America today might easily choose not to embrace a story which brings up the specter of antisemitism.

One possible reason for this is that, as discussed earlier, children in America today tend to observe and experience fewer antisemitic acts than in earlier periods. Furthermore, many children are being raised by interfaith parents and/or in interfaith households. A story based on a bloody feud between Jews and non-Jews may be deeply uncomfortable for children to read, or for parents to share with their children. In addition, Wisniewski's *Golem* also does not present a positive or empowering Jewish connection. Even the powerful golem who protects the Jewish people is ambivalent about his show of strength, and begs for his life before being destroyed. Wisniewski's *Golem* seems at times to be populated entirely by boogeymen; from the non-Jewish antagonists to the looming, violent and chiseled golem, to the determined rabbi with the power to grant and take away life, each is imbued with dangerous power and the potential to terrorize.

The Baltimore Sun interviewed Wisniewski on February 19th, 1997, shortly after his Caldecott win was announced. The journalist wrote of Golem: “There's nothing black-and-white about the tale- lots of grays about good and evil, power and persecution, fighting with physical force. Tradeoffs. Is it even appropriate for kids? 'I think children are not given credit for deep thinking,' Wisniewski says.”89 Undoubtedly, many would agree with the charge that material is often oversimplified for children and that their intellect is underestimated. In another interview with the journal The Reading Teacher, Wisniewski discusses the moral ambiguity and unsettling nature of his book: “Golem has an enormous amount of grey tones- a lot of “yes, but...” when its moral points are discussed. Is [the golem's violence on behalf of the Jewish people] good, bad, or somewhere in between?”90 Despite this moral ambiguity, Wisniewski feels that there is a strong overall moral message to his book. He recommends it be used in classrooms for eight and nine year olds (not four to six years olds, for whom it is often recommended). Wisniewski suggests that this is the age when children “usually have got it together. That's usually when labels start: you're fat, you're ugly, you're this religion. Prejudice in thinking and interaction appears.”91

This offers a fascinating insight into how Wisniewski imagines his book will be used in the classroom. He thinks the intense persecution, antisemitism, and rumors of blood libel in Golem will help open a discussion about all varieties of prejudice among

91 Peck, et al., 460.
young readers. This may of course be true, though it seems like a difficult jump for young readers to make—from cases of blood libel and storming the walls of a ghetto to bullying peers over physical appearance. This is not to say it is impossible, but merely that it is an interesting perception of the book's teaching capacity. Regardless, Wisniewski certainly does not indicate that he has intended the book to be used by children to help form a Jewish identity.

Professor Kay E. Vandergrift of Rutgers University (a leader in creating informational web pages to help teachers and librarians use literature\(^{92}\)), has noted that “previous Caldecott Award-winning books have been challenged as to their appropriateness for children.”\(^{93}\) As discussed earlier, there is often an assumption that a picture book is marketed towards younger readers, whether that is the audience the author intended or not. The effects of such an assumption can range from the book failing to make an impression at all, to making an all too vivid and terrifying impact. Bettelheim's theories apply directly to the younger child (with whom many automatically associate picture books), while Wisniewski indicates his sense that the book can be used most effectively with older children—older children for whom, perhaps, the ordering of turmoil and the parsing of trauma are not such urgent necessities, or to whom metaphors are more apparent. It is worth re-visiting Bettelheim's work here, as it relates to the potential pitfalls of Golem's aforementioned “grey tones:”

Just because his life is often bewildering to him, the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this

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\(^{92}\) Glick, Andrea. “When Kay Vandergrift launched one of the first sties for librarians, she never imagined it would become an overnight success.” School Library Journal, July 1, 2004.

\(^{93}\) Vandergrift, Dr. Kay E.. “Children's responses to the golem.”

http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/professional-development/childlit/golem/golemchildresponse.html
complex world with which he must learn to cope. To be able to do so, the child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of the turmoil of his feelings.\textsuperscript{94}

Wisniewski's grey tones, set amidst the grim drama of his illustrations and the intensity of his vocabulary, does little to help order an experience of turmoil. Instead, it might provoke the child to enter deeper into that state. Yet again, it seems plausible we are brushing against disparate intended age groups. On the one hand, \textit{Golem} in fact may pose a liability for younger readers, creating a dangerous experience which does not support a well adjusted (Jewish) identity. On the other, it has potential to entertain, inspire, and possibly educate. This seems to be one of the fundamental risks of the terrifying golem.

One would be remiss in discussing the terrifying golem without also speaking about Barbara Brodsky McDermott's 1976 book and 1977 Caldecott Honor Book \textit{The Golem: A Jewish Legend} (published by the now defunct trade press J.P. Lippincott Company). McDermott's book, like Wisniewski's, has faced complaints and controversy over the explicitness of its text and illustrations. McDermott was not raised with the golem legend (and possibly not raised Jewish), and first learned of the figure only through watching the 1915 German film “Der Golem.” After this viewing, McDermott began serious research into the history of the golem figure, and was drawn to the kabbalistic aspect of the golem's origins. She decided to create a children's book emphasizing this aspect of the tale, and drawing out the magical qualities of the Hebrew alphabet and the rituals used to create the golem. The illustrations have a mystical, Chagall-esque quality. She even opens her story with a quote from Martin Buber's \textit{Ten

\textsuperscript{94} Bettelheim, 5.}
Rungs: Hasidic Sayings: “The origin of the world is dust, and man has been placed in it that he may raise the dust to spirit. But his end is dust and time and again it is the end where he fails, and everything crumbles into dust.” This opening quote sets the tone for the rest of McDermott's story, and she focuses greatly on the poetic religious language of the tale, and the theology driving Rabbi Loew's actions.

Hebrew letters trickle across the pages in the background of each illustration, and Hebrew letters are carved into the golem's forehead to give him life, but still no speech. Rabbi Loew has created him because of a dream in which the rabbi foresaw the destruction of the Prague ghetto at the hands of non-Jews. Similar to Wisniewski's and other golems, McDermott's story also features a golem who is created to defend the Jewish people. His role as a helper is greatly downplayed; instead he spends his days attending synagogue, listening to prayers, attending seders, and participating in other religious activities. He also visits the marketplace freely, where he first hears that the non-Jews are turning on the ghetto. He follows these non-Jews to the ghetto walls, and as they begin storming the ghetto, he swells and begins violently destroying every non-Jew and tree in sight. The violence of this scene, both in text and illustration, closely resembles the massacre in Wisniewski's book. The rabbi is shocked and horrified at the bloodshed and chaos the golem has wrought, and calls out for his destruction. The golem opens his mouth and his first word, the name of God, tumbles forth. Upon saying the name, the golem instantly crumbles. Rabbi Loew thoughtfully gathers up the clay fragments and hides them in his synagogue, beneath his sacred books.

In both of these stories, the golem is a looming and terrifying creature unleashed upon the ignorant and cruel non-Jewish population. However, these books are not aimed at a Jewish readership specifically. Instead, they portray an exotic ghost story from a land far away and a time long ago. For example, McDermott awkwardly devotes a page of her text to describing a seder as if it were an ancient rite that had long since ceased to be practiced. Similarly, the golem's visits to shul are described in anthropological terms. On the surface, this kind of attention to unpacking rituals and vocabulary may seem like an important way to educate readers of all backgrounds; surely, many books aimed at Jewish readers specifically can alienate members of the diverse American Jewish community by assuming the readers know more than they do, and unintentionally embarrassing them.

Many books that cater to the orthodox community fall into this practice, perhaps intentionally and strategically, as was discussed in Section VII. There is a difference between explaining Jewish traditions and practices as if they are exotic ancient practices of the Prague ghetto, versus providing children with a Jewish practice or term that they can personally relate to and interact with by themselves.

Readers of both these terrifying golem stories may not necessarily identify with any of the characters in the story, and may be upset by the violence and antisemitism outlined in the tale. There are no parts of the story with which American Jewish readers (of all affiliations and identities) can easily identify or recognize from their own lives. Instead, the Judaism presented is a fantastical beast with macabre undertones, rooted in a distant fairy tale Europe. There are no protagonists the reader can root for, and no true Jewish characters the child can admire. Though these stories may excite and terrify, they
cannot do much to foster a developing Jewish identity of a specifically Jewish young readership.

Wallace Markfield reviewed McDermott's book in May 2nd, 1976's The New York Times Book Review. Markfield was impressed with McDermott's portrayal of the golem, and spoke glowingly of its refusal to shy away from blood libel and violence:

… in retelling this elusive, enigmatic legend… [many] would set about converting it into a sweet-tempered, squeaky clean plea for interfaith harmony or a pious parable directed against the abuse of power in general and the C.I.A. in particular.  

The latter jab may be in direct relation to the relatively recent Watergate scandal, yet it, along with the former, certainly speaks to the anxieties around the golem legend and a fear of overcompensating by over-sanitizing it. Markfield enjoys McDermott's book because it refuses to portray the golem as unproblematic, while showing intense antisemitism and violence. Wisniewski may well have agreed with him that to omit these aspects would be bleaching the story of its lush character in hopes of portraying a rosier world for sheltered children.

However, this viewpoint fails to take into account the full potential of literature to help form a child's Jewish identity. Of course, a child cannot build a three-dimensional identity on superficial portrayals of contrived peace and harmony. The terrifying golem ghost stories of Wisniewski and McDermott certainly have a place in children's literature. As author and artist Dr. Mark Podwal stated in an April 1st, 2012 interview about his 1995 Golem: A Giant Made of Mud (HarperCollins Publishers' Green Willow Books imprint), which features another terrifying golem figure “children like to be scared.”

96 Goldsmith, 158.
97 Interview with Dr. Mark Podwal, 4/1/2012.
However, Podwal also admits that there is a limit to both the level and nature of terror present in a golem book:

> When my two sons were young, I read them Barbara's book [Brodsky McDermott's], which I quite liked. My older son enjoyed it, but my younger son was really frightened. All the talk about blood libel and blood stuff was too much for him. I knew I didn't want to put all that in my book. Some critics were upset that I left out blood libel, but they didn't understand what the 'original' folktale is about. They thought it had always been about blood libel. They didn't know that their version was really created by that Canadian man from Warsaw [Yudl Rosenberg] about 100 years ago.\(^\text{98}\)

This quote brings up two interesting points. Firstly, though Podwal is aware children enjoy being scared through books, he decided that the issue of blood libel was frightening either to the point of distraction, or touched on a topic that was inherently too scary for a young reader. Secondly, Podwal is well versed in the complex origins of the Golem of Prague story, and realizes what common aspects of the story are actually first tied to Rosenberg's pamphlet. He understands that some members of the public and some critics have expectations as to what a golem story should cover, including blood libel. Yet Podwal did not set out to tell the expected golem story. *Golem: A Giant Made of Mud* features numerous symbols and scenes not found in other golem tales: Emperor Rudolf gifts Rabbi Loew with a silver spoon engraved with Hebrew letters, which the rabbi later uses to build his golem. The Emperor's house is festooned with mystical creatures and objects that he invites the rabbi over to appreciate, from a two headed crocodile to a unicorn's horn and a stone that grows. These elements were introduced to the golem story by Podwal, based on other Jewish mystical sources he read about in the work of scholar

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\(^98\) Interview with Dr. Mark Podwal, 4/1/2012.
Gershon Sholem. Podwal felt justified in picking and choosing what elements to include in his book. Instead of blood libel, the rabbi is disturbed both by the seemingly sudden unpleasant change in his strategic friend, Emperor Rudolf, and by a dream he has in which the ghetto is stormed and set ablaze by an angry mob. These concerns lead the rabbi to use his silver spoon to create the golem.

Though Podwal's golem is not created in response to blood libel, he is far from devoid of terror or the capacity to frighten. He is a looming bulky figure consisting entirely of shadowy water colors, and colored smoke trails from his eye sockets. There are no clean lines or detail on the golem's figure, which along with his size, makes him a mysterious and terrifying character. Podwal wrote: “With the exception of the rabbi, all who looked at the golem trembled inside.” When the inevitable attack on the ghetto arrives, the golem fulfills his mission by swelling in size even further, until he can uproot trees, flatten buildings, and tear non-Jews limb from limb with ease. The golem's growth is so rapid and dramatic that in illustrations he emerges towering over the Prague skyline, with the emperor's tiny palace sitting atop his head like a miniature crown. He wreaks havoc on Prague until the rabbi cannot stand to witness the destruction any longer, and prays that the violence will end. Within moments the horror stops, yet the golem's fate remains unknown. His lumpy blurred figure is shown receding into the hills of Prague.

99 Interview with Dr. Mark Podwal, 4/1/2012. Podwal further commented on people's common misunderstanding of what is or is not in a mythical “original” golem story. Podwal claims that Pete Hamil in fact plagiarized Podwal's Golem: A Giant Made of Mud in Hamil's 1998 book Snow in August (New York City, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1997). In his book, Hamil uses the silver spoon and the two headed alligator as part of his retelling of the golem story. However, Podwal takes full credit for first imagining these elements in the golem story. He believes that Hamil likely plagiarized him unknowingly, however, and that Hamil simply assumed Podwal's book featured a commonly agreed upon golem narrative. This shows how easily creative liberties can become part of an assumed “original” narrative.
100 Podwal, 14.
until his head becomes a muddy peak on the outskirts of the city, with small holes peaking out for eyes, and the emperor's palace resting on top. Though the book goes into tragic and heartbreaking detail about the death of the emperor, his beloved pet lion, and Rabbi Loew, the golem is merely left in suspended animation. He will lurk in the mud for eternity so that “today a golem might be anywhere, or everywhere, waiting to be brought to life.”

Podwal's book provides a gripping story with lush illustrations. Though Podwal has omitted any mention of blood libel to avoid gratuitously frightening children, his book is still rife with terrifying images and scenes; the golem commits great violence and lingers beyond his creator's death to haunt the world. Due to such potential to terrify, Podwal's book is not best suited for younger children struggling to deepen an understanding of themselves through a “Jewish book.” Podwal somewhat corroborates this when he admits “I don't write for children. My books are really my vehicle for the color paintings I want to do. The story, and specific words for a certain age group- all that stuff I basically run by my editors. That's what they're there for.”

Podwal does not undertake creating a children's book with the express desire to create a meaningful Jewish reading experience for a child. He instead is inspired to create the (at times

101 Podwal, 20.
102 It is worth noting that the previously owned copy of Podwal's *Golem: A Giant Made of Mud* obtained for this paper had white tape placed carefully over the scarier, more explicit lines of text. The result being that the golem merely flattens buildings and uproots trees when provoked by an “angry mob,” but never “tears people apart as if they were dolls.” In fact, the golem never inflicts violence on anyone in the story. Additionally, the golem is never in fact destroyed, and his fate remains ambiguous. (In order to achieve this, an entire page of text was taped over.) This is especially of interest considering the bookplate suggests the book came from a rabbi's personal library. It seems plausible that the rabbi was trying to turn a terrifying golem ghost story into a story featuring a more friendly golem- and thereby also changing the story into a more positive book for constructing or developing a child's Jewish identity.
103 Interview with Dr. Mark Podwal, 4/1/2012.
terrifying and unsettling) art his adult sensibilities appreciate, and uses the genre of the children's book as a platform to collect, display, and distribute his artwork. Though his books may be artistically striking and may appeal to adults, they are not designed to resonate with a young child's Jewish reading experience.

All of the golem books in this category may provoke fear, intense emotions, intrigue, or fascination, but they do not necessarily provide an affirmational Jewish experience that embraces a wide variety of Jewish readership. They instead present a terrifying ghost story which can be enjoyed by all who do not find it too terrifying, though it can perhaps be identified with by none. The exotic golem ghost story certainly has its place. The terrifying golem may captivate children, even if it gives them nightmares. Adults may be drawn to the sophisticated and haunting award-winning illustrations. Yet the terrifying golem is not the only golem book that belongs on anyone's shelf. Indeed, it can easily be misused to alienate, traumatize, or even Jewishly “turn off” a young reader. This golem lurks in the shadows of a (Jewish or non-Jewish) child's imaginary playground. He is not there to be played with or to make friends. He is there to terrify— at the worst to traumatize and at the best to thrill.
The golem as the happy helpmate is an intriguing category, which this paper proposes is best suited to an inclusive American Jewish community diverse in terms of affiliations, identity, and religious and cultural literacy. This golem is not a violent crusader on behalf of the Jewish people who rips the non-Jews apart. He is not a superhero pursuing justice for all across the world. Nor is he a terrifying hulking figure from an ancient, exotic ghost story. Instead, the happy helpmate golem is a beloved friend to the Jewish people (though not only to them), whose foolish antics endear him to the reader while initiating the young reader into a non-judgmental and low pressure “Jewish” reading experience. Mentions of blood libel and gruesome depictions of villainous non-Jews are not to be found in this category of golem story. Instead, we see in these titles a gumby-golem who cannot stop making latkes and a golem brought to life by a grandfather and grandson, who dawdles after them like a puppy. The ultimate effect of these stories encourages diverse young Jewish readers to take ownership over and pride in their Jewish identity. Whereas other golem categories may do more harm than good in the formative period of a young American Jew's life, this section argues that the happy helpmate golem is a welcome figure who is up to the challenges and opportunities this period poses.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a happy helpmate golem can be found in
Eric A. Kimmel's *The Golem's Latkes* (Marshall Cavendish Children's Books). The book was published in 2011, and almost immediately began garnering critical acclaim. It was selected by the PJ Library to be sent out as a Chanukah story for children in their five to six age group, and was awarded the 2011 National Jewish Book Award. The book tells the story of a kind, grandfatherly Rabbi Lowe of Prague who decides to create a figure of clay to be his helper. He writes “EMET” on the golem's head, and the golem springs to action, ready to help the rabbi. The rabbi is the only one who is allowed to give the golem orders, but when he notices that his house servant Basha has her work cut out for her preparing for their annual Chanukah party, he grants her permission to use the golem while he steps out to visit his friend, Emperor Rudolph. The only rule is that Basha must monitor the golem at all times, as the well intentioned bumbling golem does not know when to stop a task and will do it indefinitely if left to his own devices.

Basha, however, sets the golem to making latkes and then sneaks out to visit a friend, apparently forgetting the rabbi's warning. Within a matter of pages, the poor golem has flooded the house and street and eventually, the neighborhood, with latkes. Emperor Rudolph notices the latke heaps taking over Prague's skyline, and casually mentions the scene to the rabbi. Grasping what has happened, the rabbi races home and must devise a way to enter his house through a top floor window, as the rest of the home is engulfed in latkes. Once inside, he is able to tell the golem to cease his tireless latke-frying, and soon after a slightly repentant but practical Basha returns. To get rid of such a surplus of latkes, she suggests they throw a Chanukah celebration for all the city's residents- Jews and non-Jews alike.
Kimmel's version is lighthearted and humorous. The golem is put to work making latkes for a Chanukah feast— a distinctly cultural Jewish activity. There are no dangerous consequences from his inability to stop. Instead, his silliness provides an opportunity for interfaith celebration. There is no mention of antisemitism or of Jewish persecution, and there is no negative or threatening portrayal of non-Jewish characters. Similarly there appear to be very few boundaries, either physical or symbolic, between the Jewish and non-Jewish residents in the region. They gather together from far and wide to partake in the Chanukah feast, and the golem knowingly smirks at the end when Basha jokes that, with Purim approaching, perhaps he might be good at making hamentaschen as well.

*The Golem's Latkes* is a clear departure from golem books of the past, and might be interpreted to represent a new chapter in the golem's American history. In this book, the golem is a happy-go-lucky figure, with smooth lines and a smiling face. He provides a friendly, warm presence in every scene. He even appears to have a sense of humor at the end of the story, while he contemplates flooding the town with hamentaschen come Purim. Children can relate to this golem as a stuffed animal or doll come to life, a joyous animation which poses an opportunity for delightful (Jewish) hijinks without negative consequences. There are no boogeymen in *The Golem's Latkes*, be they either the non-Jews or the golem himself.

For many Jewish children growing up in America today, *The Golem's Latkes* has the capacity to captivate the imagination without bringing up anxieties or challenging cognitive dissonances regarding their own life experiences. The child of an interfaith family who is either being raised Jewish or being raised with both faiths can internalize
this story in a positive way. There are no disorienting divisions between Jews and non-
Jews, let alone animosity such as that implied by blood libel. Similarly, the young Jewish
child who has not experienced antisemitism or learned about it yet (whether first hand or
from teachers or parents), can here interact with the golem outside of that arena.

Furthermore, *The Golem's Latkes* provides a joyous and relatively uncomplicated
“Jewish” reading experience; this is in many ways a necessary option for today's young
Jewish readership. They need positive, affirmational experiences of Jewish culture in the
form of stories, song, and ritual, and it should not make them uncomfortable with
potentially non-Jewish family members, or question the goodness or value of a non-
Jewish facet of their own identity. A story that provokes either of these reactions has the
potential to backfire, and cripple or retard the young child's developing Jewish identity.

The Jewishness of *The Golem's Latkes* is primarily cultural. The rabbi does not
engage in any religious rituals, the golem's creation is not shown, and there is little
explicit theology on the book's pages. Yet there is a rabbi, a Chanukah celebration, and of
course, latkes. There is, of course, a potential drawback to the lack of explicitly Jewish
material in the story. Children, for example, will not necessarily learn any history- Jewish
or otherwise- from reading *The Golem's Latkes*. They will also not learn about any of the
kabbalistic rituals or principles behind the golem's creation, or the historic antisemitism
that has plagued the diasporic Jewish community.

Perhaps most glaringly, a child will not even see Hebrew characters in *The
Golem's Latkes*. Instead, illustrator Aaron Jasinski opted to write the Hebrew word for
truth on the golem's forehead in English characters. Since the golem's creation is not
shown, nor is he destroyed in the book, any discussion of the significance of erasing the aleph from the Hebrew word “emet” becomes moot. Upon seeing the publisher’s proof, Kimmel states “My one surprise was that Aaron [Jasinski] used Roman letters for the word on the golem's forehead. That is not something I would've done and I'm still not sure why he did it that way. I thought the critics would skin us for that.”

As Kimmel anticipated, some may argue that *The Golem's Latkes* excessively dilutes the Jewish character of the golem folktale for the sake of appealing to an increasingly diverse audience, an audience who does not identify primarily or strongly as Jewish.

Indeed, one online reader reviewed the story stating “I don't know if the golem has any place in Jewish history or if this is only a figment of the authors [sic] imagination but either way it makes for a good story.” This reviewer apparently selected, read, and enjoyed the story without ever realizing that the golem figure has a long Jewish heritage behind him. Yet it might be argued that this potential drawback of the story can simply be remedied by context. The casual reader who has no knowledge of Judaism may not pick up on the Jewish themes of the story. But by reading it in a Jewish setting or with the intention of building Jewish identity, *The Golem's Latkes* can indeed be a “Jewish book.”

As such, *The Golem's Latkes* encourages the formation of Jewish identity by introducing positive Jewish cultural themes while omitting historically upheld themes of antisemitism, religion, and the hostile contrast between Jews and non-Jews. These omissions enable the former mission, perhaps at the expense of depth of historical learning and the formation of boundaries around Jewish community and peoplehood.

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104 Interview with Eric A. Kimmel, 3/12/2012.

Author Eric Kimmel did not independently decide to write a golem story. Though he holds Jewish folklore (and all folklore, for that matter) in high esteem, and has built much of his career on picture books adapting folktales, he had not considered writing about the golem before he was approached by his editor to write a book about the golem. Although he was encouraged to experiment with what exactly the story would be, he was reluctant to write the traditional golem creation and destruction tale, and after careful consideration, Kimmel decided to write *The Golem's Latkes*.

Kimmel was given great freedom in deciding who his golem character would be, and he was careful in making choices that would appeal to a diverse audience:

... when telling a story you have to keep in mind the limitations of your audience. The days when I could throw out a Yiddish phrase and assume most of the kids would understand it are gone. The old shtetl is ancient history. Jewish families are likely to be mixed. Even immigrant families are very different from what they were when I was growing up.... Their worship patterns may be Sephardic, Hasidic, or none. Children may be adopted.... What's typical? I don't think there is a such a thing...That's why I start from ground zero and assume my audience has little or no background. I give the audience as much information as they need to understand the story as it goes along.... I tell the story. What you choose to see in it says more about you than it does about me.106

Kimmel understands that there is no typical Jewish audience any longer, and that as an author of Jewish children's literature, he has an opportunity to embrace this eclectic young readership and an obligation to tell a story that is comprehensible, appealing, and Jewishly engaging. *The Golem's Latkes* does not require the reader to approach the story with a high level of Jewish knowledge, yet it does not necessarily alienate the reader who possesses this knowledge. Some may believe that stripping Jewish folktales of some of

106 Interview with Eric A. Kimmel, 3/12/2012.
their Jewishness or leaving in the bare amount needed to understand the story may be in part responsible for the resulting ignorance of Yiddish phrases Kimmel mentions, or for the perceived diluted Jewish literacy of many American Jews today. Yet it also could be considered a necessary and positive adaptation to the observation that nothing and no one can be typical or canonical in a diverse diasporic community. Additionally, Kimmel's final comment about the importance of the reader's intent and perspective speaks to the earlier mentioned significance of the context in which a (“Jewish”) book is read.

In addition to monitoring the level of Jewish knowledge presumed of the reader, Kimmel's golem figure was strategically conceived of as happy helpmate: “My goal was to come up with something that would be light, celebratory, and have a happy ending with a bit of humor.”

When asked about his ideas for his golem's visual representation, his comments indicate that it was important to him the artist's conception of the golem was congruent with his own: “All I saw at the beginning were the early sketches Aaron [Jasinski] had made of the golem. As soon as I saw them, I knew he'd be perfect. His golem looked like Gumby. That's just what the story needed: a huge clay giant who was not intimidating.”

Kimmel understood the importance of aesthetically representing a happy helper golem figure for his audience. Kimmel clearly felt that his golem was best portrayed as a benign being, and that such a characterization fit the relatively benign tale he had chosen to tell.

This benign golem is illustrated lightheartedly (and with great warmth and coziness, in the words of Leddy) by Jasinski. Indeed, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency

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107 Interview with Eric A. Kimmel, 3/12/2012.  
108 Interview with Eric A. Kimmel, 3/12/2012.  

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specifically cited the whimsy of his golem figure in their review of *The Golem's Latkes*:

“Jasinski's memorable illustrations show the fantastical golem painted more like a Gumby-style robot than a frightening ghoul.”¹⁰⁹ The golem has a small smile and large, button-like eyes. He has no organic looking lumps and wrinkles, and he appears sleek, gray, and metallic (hence the robot comparisons). Additionally, he is relatively svelte, though he looms over the human characters. The endearing Rabbi Loew is portrayed as bumbling and adorable; small of stature, he stands even shorter than his young housemaid Basha. This golem representation does not suggest that there was any clay or mysticism involved in the rabbi's creation, nor does anything suggest that he could be capable of great strength. With the kindly, adorable appearance of the golem and the English word on his forehead, Jasinski created a golem who would appeal to all children, regardless of cultural or religious identity.

Kimmel's book has resonated strongly within the Jewish community- among critics, the PJ Library, and the National Jewish Book Award Committee. It won the 2011 National Jewish Book Award for the Children's Illustrated Book category, much to the surprise and delight of Kimmel.¹¹⁰ It seems possible that the National Jewish Book Council's criteria for an excellent “Jewish book” closely reflects the changing face of the young Jewish readership. In that sense, the 2011 National Jewish Book Award given to *The Golem's Latkes* might be seen as an endorsement of this happy helpmate golem for the future in a way that the Caldecott Medal, with its lack of focus or familiarity with the distinct uses of Jewish children's literature, is not.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Eric A. Kimmel, 3/12/2012.
The Golem's Latkes was selected as a PJ Library Book, sent out to participating families towards the end of 2011. This means the book was mailed to thousands of children across the country, to be read in time for Chanukah. The PJ Library Book Selection Committee understandably has much to consider when making their book selections on behalf of PJ Library. Though Glasgow does not precisely recall the Committee's deliberations before they voted to distribute The Golem's Latkes, she can clearly articulate why the book was always, for her, a strong option for PJ Library:

… speaking for myself only, I like this story for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is a fun story that children and their parents will enjoy reading. Second, it is a book that leads to Jewish action (making latkes). Third, it is a book that teaches a bit about Jewish history (about the golem…which families could always choose to learn about more if they want to). Fourth, while a golem can be very scary, it is not scary as presented in this book (at least for the vast majority of children). Last, I love the illustrations and found them to be a real work of art… I liked the vivid illustrations and the endearing portrayal of the Golem.

As a professional Jewish educator, a member of the PJ Library Book Selection Committee, and an individual strongly invested in the Jewish community, Glasgow finds much to recommend the happy helpmate golem figure. He can provide an introduction to Jewish culture and history, be an aesthetically appealing, endearing figure, and can provide a fun reading experience without terrifying young readers or alienating parents.

By omitting the violence, tragedy, and persecution of the golem story, Kimmel's book appeals to a diverse audience and attracts children to a joyous, uncomplicated Jewish experience. Instead of sanitizing the popular terrifying golem story and stripping it of all Jewish resonance, he chose instead to focus on a different chapter of the golem

111 Interview with Dena Glasgow, 3/30/2012.
tale- one which does not include the problematic identity questions that other versions of the golem may raise. It can be seen as an appropriate golem to engage young children across America's Jewish spectrum, and therefore plant the seeds for a vibrant, developed Jewish identity.

Another example of the happy helpmate golem can be found in Steve Stern's *Mickey and the Golem*, illustrated by Jeanne Seagle (1986). Mickey must endure his grandfather's stories about the Pinch (an old Jewish neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee) each night of Chanukah, every year, or else he incurs the ire of his parents. Mickey's grandfather always reserves the eighth night of Hanukkah for his golem story, in which schoolboys raise the golem to life again from his remnants in the Pinch's Market Street Synagogue, where the poor golem had been brought from across the Atlantic. Mickey's grandfather supposedly saw how the boys dressed the golem in a tee shirt and boxer shorts and made him perform innocent feats of strength for their entertainment. Each time Mickey hears this story, he rolls his eyes and tries desperately to bite his tongue at its ridiculousness.

Yet this particular year, Mickey's grandfather is too sick to tell his stories, and Mickey feels the loss acutely. He misses the sense of wonder and magic his grandfather spun each night, and he finds himself wishing that the tall tales were true after all, or at least that his grandfather was well enough to sit at the dinner table and make them real for Mickey.

Mickey decides to get his grandfather a special Chanukah gift- one that might heal his grandfather's body and lift his spirits. Mickey finds himself exploring the dusty
old attic of the Market Street Synagogue, hoping in spite of his more rational self that he might find some souvenir of his grandfather's wild story. He ends up finding a book in the attic and recites a Hebrew passage with the ominous “Read if you dare” scribbled in the margins. As he repeats the verse again and again, the golem takes shape out of the dust until he stands before Mickey, shorter than the boy and wearing a tee shirt and boxers. In shock, Mickey explains that they are on a mission to cheer up his sick grandfather, and plops a silly cap with a propellor on the golem's head. The golem looks at Mickey and says “‘All right, Mr. Chutzpah, show me the way,’” before hopping on the back of Mickey's bike and riding off into the sunset. 112

This golem is not created to terrify or intimidate, nor does he act as a champion of the Jewish people in the face of persecution. Instead, he is a playmate for young children, and a symbol of family, faith, and magic for young Mickey. He is illustrated in whimsical cartoonish drawings, and the illustrator did not omit the ridiculous ensemble described in the text. Yet the golem's real presence is anything but ridiculous. In The Golem in Jewish American Literature, Nicola Morris writes:

> The emotional trajectory of the story is of Mickey's movement from being a spoiled boy who does not want to listen to his grandfather's stories to someone who... recognizes his emotional and historical bond with his grandfather and his grandfather's traditions. Thus Mickey is able to claim his grandfather’s neighborhood stories for his own and in the process the stories become his stories, they live on into the next generation.”113

For Mickey, this tiny, goofy golem is a powerful figure connecting him to his Jewish

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family and tradition. The golem helps make real his Jewish identity, and allows Mickey to interact with it on his own terms. The golem neither pits him against non-Jews, terrifies and haunts, nor acts as a crusader for good, stripped of all Jewish connotations. Though this golem may not appear like the Jewish golems of legend, he is a strong, positive Jewish symbol for young Mickey. He offers the comfort, warmth, and connection to something larger which, as discussed earlier in this paper, children so deeply crave.

The golem's role in young Mickey's life is actually quite similar to the golem's significance to author Steve Stern.

My relation to the golem... was one of pure exhilaration at having found that the dryasdust [sic] heritage I’d been handed in my Memphis synagogue was anything but. So it was perfectly natural for me to conceive of the golem as an inspirational creature rather than a malign [sic]. In that respect I share Mickey’s experience.  

For Stern, the golem helped him connect to a larger Jewish community and tradition. This connection and sense of belonging had not occurred in the synagogue or the family home, but was instead forged through fascination and creative interaction with the golem figure. It was not until he started to explore Jewish folklore and specifically, the golem, that he felt his Jewish identity emerge. It was indeed not the stale identity he thought he had inherited, but was something more vibrant, vivid, and personal.

Furthermore, Stern's golem is placed in an historic Jewish neighborhood on Memphis, Tennessee. By drawing on this history, Stern explains his attempt to help combat some of the amnesia he sees in America regarding Jewish history and culture:

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114 Interview with Steve Stern, 3/31/2012.

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I had recently discovered, in my role as researcher for the Center for Southern Folklore, the blighted Memphis downtown neighborhood that had once been a Jewish ghetto called the Pinch. I liked thinking that the original population, immigrants from Eastern Europe, had brought with them from the old country something of the magical dimension that had informed that world. The magic had dissolved along with assimilation and the abandonment of the old neighborhood, but it was pleasant to believe that some of it had survived. A deactivated golem, for instance, might have been hidden away in the attic of a moldering orthodox synagogue, just waiting to be resurrected by an enterprising kid.\footnote{Interview with Steve Stern, 3/31/2012.}

“That world's” magical dimension might be interpreted as a distinctly Jewish dimension with facets of both culture and religion. Due to increased assimilation and intermarriage in America, this dimension has faded from view for many members of the younger generation. Mickey & the Golem pinpoints this loss of interest and eventual distancing in the tension between Mickey and his grandfather. Mickey's discovery of the golem allows him to access a Jewish identity he did not know he had, and to make the magic tales his grandfather told over the Chanukah candles become his own sense of wonder and pleasure in a Jewish identity. In writing a book featuring this scenario, Stern has paradoxically positioned himself as the “enterprising kid.” Stern has resurrected a golem from the attic of a moldering orthodox synagogue, and brought it forth to help spread the Jewish magic and beauty he sees disappearing amidst assimilation and the passage of time in American society.

When asked to consider the potential differences between the categories of the terrifying golem and the happy helpmate golem, Stern offers keen insight into why some
golem stories may be better suited to help spark children's imagination than others:

… kids (American and elsewhere) respond more to the theme that runs through children’s fiction from the Brothers Grimm to Maurice Sendak: that is, the idea that the fear, once confronted, is dispelled. And so you get tale after tale of children befriending monsters, dragons, and beasts of every stripe, domesticating what was previously threatening through courage and kindness.\(^\text{116}\)

Stern notes that children appreciate and are attracted to monsters who can be made allies and turned to whimsical friends. The happy helpmate golem allows children to feel they have special access to a monster who helps instead of terrifies. This monster is on their side regardless of whether one of their parents would have qualified to live inside or outside the ghetto of Prague, or whether they themselves have internalized a Jewish identity from synagogue or home yet. On the playground, this happy helpmate golem may be the best suited golem to help reach out to and inspire the diverse next Jewish American generation. He is friendly, whimsical, cozy and warm. He belongs on a distinctly Jewish playground and can connect a child to a larger sense of self and meaning, without bullying, intimidating, or alienating those who do not yet know how they fit into this larger context. Ultimately, this golem will play alongside the Jewish child and explore the playground with the child.\(^\text{117}\)

\(^{116}\) Interview with Steve Stern, 3/31/2012.

\(^{117}\) Though it is not explicitly published for children, this paper would be remiss if it did not mention another friendly golem, appearing in a recent serialized comic called “The Modern Golem,” running in Tablet Magazine.

Liana Finck's comic reinvents the golem figure and places him and Rabbi Loew on the streets of modern-day New York City. Finck uses actual photographs of New York City streets and settings including the Museum of Modern Art, New York City Fashion Week, and the New York Public Library. Directly atop these photographs she draws abstract, loose, childish figures of her protagonists.

The rabbi and his golem arrived in New York City after a time-travel experiment gone awry, but the worst consequence of their misadventure is that they have been separated from each other in the vast city. The comic strip focuses on their frantic quest to be reunited. Rabbi Loew refers to his golem as his son, and the golem refers to him as his father. Their anxiety without each other is poignant, as are the lengths they will go to find each other. The golem panics at his own unworldliness, and is lost without his father figure. The rabbi worries over his lost golem, and is frightened by the golem's innocence and naïveté while alone.
XI. Conclusion

This survey of American Jewish children's books featuring the golem finds many commonalities and themes shared amongst them. Additionally however, there is a great diversity in portrayals of the primary golem figure - a range which can be divided into four distinct categories. In order to understand and analyze these categories better, we must position them against the backdrop of the scope, purpose, and history of (Jewish) children's literature, and also against the background of an always changing American Jewish landscape.

The first category of golem figure, “Our Great Protector,” is exemplified by such works as Winkler's *The Sacred Stones*, Kuperman's *The Golem of Prague*, and the original Mendy the Golem comic book series. This golem figure helps enforce the strict

_\text{in New York. Though the strip is still running at the time of this writing, there has thus far not been a single mention of Judaism in its seven installments. The golem is a childlike figure of little to no threat; the librarians, museum curators, and fashion designers all fall in love with him. He is, however, able to get a job as a fact checker for *The New Yorker* when a librarian gives the golem sound advice, which the golem recounts thusly: “…although New Yorker editors are very smart, they are physical nincompoops and would be so afraid of my size and strength that they'd offer me any job I wanted.” The golem only wanted the job so he'd be able to “devour” information and grow smart enough to find his beloved rabbi. Upon first being shown to his office and being given an article about an arctic fox to fact check, he promptly eats all of the books on every shelf he can find and burps. This is the golem Franck has envisioned as the “modern golem,” a friendly figure without enemies, bumbling around American streets where he is out of place and without purpose. His precious father-rabbi needs the golem just as much as the golem needs his father-rabbi's love and care. He is the ultimate benign golem - an appealing puppy without bite or growl, who manages to befriend most of the New Yorkers he comes across. Though this comic strip is not particularly designed for children to enjoy, it shows a perfect example of what the golem may morph into on American soil - a continuation perhaps of the transformation we have already witnessed in *The Golem's Latkes.*}
separation of Jews and non-Jews, and the books demand a high level of Jewish literacy. While he might be a good tool for enforcing a highly observant Jewish identity among some children, he might not be an effective tool for reaching out to the widely diverse American Jewish population.

The second category of golem figure, “A Superhero for All,” is shown in comic books such as Marvel Comics' Superman books, “Strange Tales,” the remake of “Mendy and the Golem,” and David Gantz's *Davey's Hanukkah Golem*. He is an heroic protector of the universal good, and is decidedly stripped of his historical context, origins, and Jewish connotations. Though he may be an appealing figure, he is no longer a distinctly Jewish one, and is therefore not as useful in helping young children cultivate a Jewish identity, regardless of their religious affiliation or level of Jewish literacy.

The “terrifying golem” appears in haunting books such as David Wisniewski's *Golem* and Barbara Brodsky McDermott's *The Golem: A Jewish Legend*. He is frightening and exotic, with the capacity to wreak havoc on behalf of the Jews. Yet his loyalty to the Jewish people may not translate easily to a Jewish readership, as the Judaism portrayed in the stories appears to be from a land far away and long ago. The Jewish faith and culture shown is used to add to the dark mysteriousness of the book, and these golem stories thus become outlandish, haunting ghost stories. On the other end of the spectrum, the “happy helpmate golem” both demands little of and imposes little on its young readers. As exemplified in *The Golem's Latkes* and *Mickey & the Golem*, the golem is neither stripped of Jewish characteristics or entirely subsumed within them, nor is he terrifying or traumatizing in any way.
Each of these categories (religious champion; universal hero; terrifying golem; and happy helpmate) deserves its own place in children's literature. Yet they are not equally effective when it comes to developing the Jewish identity of the next generation. Creating that welcoming, empowering imaginary Jewish playground on to which a child's mind might wander is a tricky task. Introducing the golem figure into the mix is trickier still. The first category's religious champion golem figure may be a bullying dictator that strips the child of agency and compels him or her to behave a certain way on a certain playground, while declaring who is not invited to play. The second category's universal hero golem may be up for a good time, but does not provide the Jewish character and qualities the playground so desperately needs, especially when one of the goals of the story is to help develop the young reader's Jewish identity. The third category's terrifying golem may have the power of a strong impression; not only might he haunt the playground, but he might in fact hide in the child's bedroom closet long after the book has been shut. He may be too terrifying and have the effect of impeding the child from forming a Jewish connection. Furthermore, this golem ultimately relegates the Jewish religion and culture to the shadowy depths of a distant past. In terms of outreach and supporting a strong, nascent Jewish identity, the final golem is just right. He is warm, cozy, and inviting, while distinctly Jewish. On the playground, he is a playmate who will both make it Jewish and make it fun. A child will follow this golem on to the Jewish playground and find that the playground can, ultimately, be his or her very own.
Appendix
Select Golem Illustrations
Sample illustration of “terrifying golem” from David Wisniewski’s *Golem*
Sample illustration of “terrifying golem” from Barbara Brodsky Mcdermott's

_The Golem: A Jewish Legend_
Sample illustration of “terrifying golem” from Mark Podwal's *Golem: A Giant Made of Mud*
Sample illustration of “happy helpmate golem” from Eric A. Kimmel's *The Golem's Latkes*, illustrated by Aaron Jasinski
Sample illustration of “happy helpmate golem” from Steve Stern's *Mickey & the Golem*, illustrated by Jeanne Seagle
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