The Magic of the Golem: The Early Development of the Golem Legend

Peter Schäfer
Freie Universität Berlin

We all know one or other version of the golem legend—whether from Rabbi Loew of Prague (who successfully created an artificial man out of dust and put him to death again), or from Jakob Grimm or from Gustav Meyrink’s famous novel, Der Golem, or only from Goethe’s Zauberlehrling. The legend has a long and complicated history which goes well back into medieval and even Rabbinic Judaism. The first to deal with it extensively and in a scholarly way was Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism. Actually his lecture, delivered at one of the celebrated Eranos conferences in Switzerland in the early fifties, is a fine example of Scholem’s art of writing (the subtlety of which is much more apparent in German than in English). It was first published in German under the title ‘Die Vorstellung vom Golem in ihren tellurischen und magischen Beziehungen’, 1 and later in English simply as ‘The Idea of the Golem’, thus omitting the ‘tellurian’ as well as the ‘magical’ references. 2 More recently, Moshe Idel has devoted an entire book to the golem, aiming at both completing the evidence and testing Scholem’s results. 3

In this article I shall not try to depict again the growth of the golem legend from its beginning to its end; this cannot be done seriously in so short a space. What I am attempting is the more modest task of inquiring once more into the origin of the idea of the golem and its early development, especially with regard to the question of its connection with magical practices, and when exactly it grew into the notion of an artificial creature in the full sense of the word. In doing so it is inevitable that I will be dealing also with Scholem’s and Idel’s results and their methodological presuppositions. 4

3 Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid (Albany, NY, 1990). See also the review by Yehuda Liebes, ‘Golem Reconsidered’ (in Hebrew), Kiryat Sefer 63 (1990–91), pp. 1305–1322. The general tendency of Liebes’ review is that Idel does not go far enough in tracing the idea of the artificial ‘anthropoid’ (is this awkward term, which seems to be inspired by star wars, introduced in order to avoid ‘man’?) in all layers of tradition, especially in the Talmud. In addition he complains that the book was published in English: the better a book in Jewish Studies is the more it deserves to be published first in Hebrew, only ‘poor books can . . . be published in a foreign language’ (p. 1307).
4 The article is a slightly revised version of a lecture delivered at Yale University, Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, and the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. I thank my friends and colleagues at these institutions for their invitation and critical comments, in particular Glen Bowersock for kindly reading the manuscript of the final version and making some very helpful suggestions concerning my English. A somewhat different German version was presented, upon the invitation of the President of the Freie Universität Berlin, as a public lecture at the Freie Universität, celebrating the award of the Leibniz prize 1994.
1. Hebrew Bible

The enigma of the golem starts its career as early as the Hebrew Bible. There, in the book of Psalms, we find the word golem for the first (and only) time:

It was you who created (qanita) my conscience; you fashioned me (tesukkeni) in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am awesomely, wonderously made (nifleti).
Your work is wonderful; I know it very well.
My frame ('osmi) was not concealed from you when I was shaped ('usseti) in a hidden place, knit together (ruqqamti) in the recesses of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed limbs (golmi); they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed (yussaru), when as yet there was none of them.

This text poses several serious philological problems of which the meaning of the hapax legomenon golmi in its immediate context is by no means the least. There is no doubt that the suffix 'i' in golmi refers to the one who is speaking and is praising God for his wondrous deeds; the direct equivalent to golmi is 'osmi ('my bone, my skeleton'): God's eyes saw the speaker's golem, just as his 'bone' was not concealed from God. How does the singular golmi relate, however, to the immediately following plural 'they were all recorded (yikkatevu) in Your book'? The JPS translation simplifies the difficulty (as it does very often) by translating golmi as 'unformed limbs' and thus smoothing the transition to yikkatevu. The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia chooses the opposite possibility and corrects golmi into gemulai—a suggestion which not only 'solves' the problem of the golem in the Bible once and for all but also imposes on the text a rather pietistic meaning which certainly is not the subject of this passage: 'Your eyes saw my rewards, they were recorded in your book every day (correcting also kullam into kol yom)'.

However golmi relates to kullam yikkatevu, there can be no doubt that it stems from the well attested root galam, 'to wrap up, to fold'. It is something which is wrapped—probably around the 'esem, if we take the parallelism to 'osmi into consideration. Thus, it seems to relate to the not yet fully unfolded stage of the human body, and the translation 'embryo' probably comes closest to the meaning of golem here. The context sustains and enforces this interpretation because all the verbs being used speak of the creation of a human being

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5 Ps. 139:13–16. The translation follows, if not specified differently, the Jewish Publication Society edition.
6 Literally: 'kidneys'.
7 Literally: 'intervwove'.
8 Literally: 'bone, skeleton'.
9 Literally: 'embroidered'.
10 This last half-sentence is the translation of the Revised Standard Version; the JPS has: 'to the very last one of them'.
in the mother's womb: qanita ('you created me'), tesukkeni ('you interwove me'), nifleti ('I was made wonderously'), 'uśṣeti ('I was shaped'), ruqqamti ('I was embroidered'), and probably also yuṣṣaru ('they were formed'), if it refers to golmi. Since the place where the weaving, shaping and embroidering of the golem happens is not only the mother's womb but also the seter ('secret, hidden place') and the tahtiyot ares ('recesses, depths of the earth'), the creation of the golem has, as Scholem has put it, a 'tellurian' connection: man, obviously not as individual but as humankind, is created out of the depths and darkness of the mother's womb, which is the earth, and which is known by God alone. Needless to say it is also God alone who does this wonderful work of forming and unfolding the golem, the wrapped embryo.

2. Rabbinic Literature

The Midrash largely supports the interpretation of the golem as the yet unfolded embryo. Moreover, by relating it exclusively to Adam, it underlines the notion of mankind as being referred to collectively rather than individually. Thus for example a Midrash in Wayyikra Rabba and in Bavli Sanhedrin\(^ {11}\) describes the stages of Adam's creation as the collection of his dust (husbar 'afaro), his being made golem (na'asah golem),\(^ {12}\) the stretching of his limbs (nimtehu evraw), the casting of the soul into him (nizreqah bo neshamah), his being put on his feet ('amad 'al raglaw), and finally his ability to give names to the different species of God's creation (qara shemot). The peculiar stage of the golem is precisely that before the unfolding of the limbs, thus of the still 'wrapped' embryo, more than just dust but less than a human being with unfolded limbs, let alone with a soul and the ability to speak.

Another Midrash in Bereshit Rabba provides a unique interpretation of the verse Psalms 139:16.\(^ {13}\) It first explains golmi ra' u 'enekha by arguing that the first Adam was created by God as literally filling the whole world, from east to west, from north to south, and even up to the vault of heaven; thus, as a golem, he was stretched out from one end of the world to the other. This explanation obviously answers the question of how did God actually see Adam's golem, thus referring to ra' u 'enekha in the biblical verse: he filled the whole world and even reached the vault of heaven, so that God saw him, so to speak, eye to eye. The second interpretation goes on to elucidate the golmi in golmi ra' u 'enekha and explains it quite in opposition to the biblical text: God shows Adam, while he is still in the stage of golem, the future history of Israel. Golmi ra' u 'enekha thus means: 'the golem\(^ {14}\) which your (i.e. Adam's) eyes saw, they are all written in the book of Adam: This is the book of the generations of

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\(^ {12}\) Wayyikra Rabba has between the collection of dust and the golem: 'he kneaded him (gibbelo) ... and he formed/embroidered him (ruqqemo). The kneading obviously refers to the addition of water to the dust, and the forming may refer to the forming of the limbs, as Idel translates (Golem, p. 34). But this forming of the limbs applies to a still embryonic stage (encoding rather than actually forming) because the limbs are stretched out, according to the version in the Bavli, after the golem stage.

\(^ {13}\) Bereshit Rabba 24,2.

\(^ {14}\) Golmain or (in most manuscripts) golem.
Adam (Gen. 5:1)'. This interpretation no doubt refers to Psalms 139:16 and understands golmi in the double sense of first, Adam’s golem whom God’s eyes saw, and second, the golem of the yet unfolded history of Israel (actually God’s history with Israel, therefore golmi) which Adam’s eyes saw and which he recorded, therefore, in the book of Adam.15

Scholem takes this Midrash as an important witness to his theory of the golem’s tellurian power which he developed in his famous article: ‘It would seem as though, while Adam was in this state (sc. of the golem), some tellurian power had flowed into him out of the earth from which he was taken, and that it was this power which enabled him to receive such a vision.’16 M. Idel takes issue with Scholem and cannot find a conception of a golem here having any tellurian powers. According to him, golem ‘stands for an advanced stage of the formation of the embryo’.17 This certainly being the case, Idel nonetheless discovers in the Midrash a pattern which is ‘similar to the later discussion of creating an artificial man’,18 thus interpreting it as a precursor of the later golem legend (or, to formulate it more carefully, as the material from which the later golem legend easily could be derived). In my opinion neither interpretation does justice to the Midrash which has nothing to do with the notion of the golem in the later sense but is, as we have seen, an interpretation of the difficult biblical verse golmi ra’u ‘enekha. Whether medieval authors used the Midrash for their conception of the golem or not, is a different question (there is actually no evidence for this); but even if they did, this certainly does not allow us to view the Midrash itself as part of the historical development of the golem legend.

There is, however, one passage in the Babylonian Talmud which does mention the creation of an artificial man and which has become an important link in the chain of argument of those who try to reconstruct the development of the golem legend:

It has been taught: ‘Or that consulteth the dead’ (Deut. 18:11)—this refers to one who starves himself and goes and spends the night in a cemetery, so that an unclean spirit may rest upon him. And when R. Aqiva reached this verse, he wept (saying): If one starves himself, so that an unclean spirit may rest upon him, he who fasts, so that a pure spirit may rest upon him, how much more so! But what am I to do—our iniquities have brought (this) upon us, as it is said: ‘But your iniquities have separated you from your God’ (Isa. 59:2).

Rava said: If the righteous wished, they could create a world (‘ahna), for it is said: ‘But your iniquities have separated you from your God’ (Isa. 59:2). Rava created (bera) a man (gavra) and sent him to R. Zera. (R. Zera) spoke to him but he did not answer. Thereupon he (the Rabbi) said to him (the artificial man): You are (coming) from the fellows (havrayya)19—return to your dust!

15 This latter interpretation does not solve the problem of the singular of golem and the plural of yikkatevulketuvim either, but this obviously is not the main concern of the Midrash. It only wants to explain how Adam was able to write down the history of Israel: when he himself was a golem he saw the golem of Israel’s history.
16 On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, p. 162.
17 Golem, p. 37.
18 Ibid., p. 38.
19 Means either ‘from one of the fellow scholars (haverim)’ or ‘from one of the magicians (habbarayya)’.
Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaya spent every Sabbath eve in studying the instructions concerning creation (hilkhət yeṣirah), and a calf (*'igla*) one third of the natural size was created by them, and they ate it. The message of this well composed literary unit is quite clear. There is a perfectly balanced parallelism between R. Aqiva's and Rava's dicta: if there were no iniquities, the pious could have a pure spirit rest upon them—but unfortunately our iniquities distance us from our God; if the righteous wished, they could create a world—but unfortunately our iniquities prevent this. The link between both cases is the biblical verse, the second case obviously being an enhancement of the first: if there were no iniquities, the pious/righteous could not only invoke a pure spirit but could even create a world and thus be like God. Rava's own and Rav Hanina's/Rav Oshaya's creation of a man and a calf respectively serve as illustrations of this situation: because of our iniquities Rava could not create a fully fledged man (his creature lacked speech, the most important characteristic of a human being), let alone a world, and Rav Hanina/Rav Oshaya could not even create a fully fledged calf. The latter example again is an enhancement of the first, this time an ironical one: despite their fervent study of the instructions concerning creation, they did not succeed in creating a man, let alone a world, they only succeeded in producing a calf one third of the natural size of a calf. What could they do with it? They just ate it—which certainly is the climax of the irony because how did they do this? Would they have cooked it on the eve of Sabbath?

If this interpretation holds true, the concern of our text is not the creation of an artificial man at all. It just illustrates that man could be like God and create a world (the stress being put on the creation of the world, not on the creation of a man) but that this is not the case because of man's inclination to sin: sin distinguishes man from God (by the way, the Rabbis regarded this not merely as a disadvantage; quite often they emphasize that sin defines mankind, that there would be no history without the possibility of sin and repentance).

Moshe Idel in his interpretation of this text starts from the presupposition that the story centres upon the creation of not only an artificial man but of a speaking man, 'in particular a creature upon whom a spirit will dwell in order to reveal something' (he gets this particular detail, of course, by transferring R. Aqiva's pure spirit to Rav's man). From this he goes on to ask what technique

20 According to the printed edition: 'the book of creation' (*Sefer Yeṣirah*). The readings differ in the textual tradition here as well as in the parallel text in San 67b. See, for example, MS Munich, cod. heb. 95, which reads here and in San 67b hilkhət yeṣirah; another manuscript (National Library Florence, III, pp. 205 and 208) reads hilkhət yeṣirah in San 65b and *Sefer Yeṣirah* in San 67b, in contrast to the printed edition.

21 bSan. 65b; cf. the parallel in bSan. 67b where only the case of Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaya is mentioned. The context there is the distinction between one who actually performs magic (*ha-ʾọseh maʾaseh*)—who has to be stoned; one who merely creates an illusion (*ha-ʾobez et ha-ʾenayyim*)—he is exempt (*patur*), although it is forbidden (*asur*); and a third category which is called 'permissible in any case (*mutar lekhathila*) and for which no reason is given. The calf of Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaya most surprisingly serves as an example for the latter.

22 Cf. Bereshit Rabbah 8,4 ff.; bSanh. 38b; Bereshit Rabbah 9,5; bAZ. 5a.

23 *Golem*, p. 29, Liebes, op. cit., p. 1309, correctly points out that Idel's assertion of a polemical background of the talmudic story depends on the mistakenly assumed link between Rava's creation and R. Aqiva's pure spirit. However, in order to underline his understanding of what he
Rava used in order to create his *gavra*, and although he acknowledges that 'there is no indication as to the technique of this performance', he concludes from the well-known tradition that the world was created by the permutation of letters, as well as from the creation of the calf by means of *Hilkhot* or even *Sefer Yeširah*, that the technique of letter-combinations was indeed known and presupposed, and that the man therefore must also have been created by using various combinations of letters of the divine name.

This is an ingenious and breathtaking interpretation of the Rabbinic story. It starts, however, as I said, with the problematic assumption that the story deals with the creation of an artificial man, and builds upon this a whole theory of magical speech and Rabbinic polemic against pagan practices of animating statues. This theory binds together very diverse elements which belong to quite different contexts, and it misses in its erudition the core of the Rabbinic text and its irony. We do not have much of an artificial man here—because this man (*gavra*: a pun not only with *Rava* and *bera* but probably also with *havarayya*) is just an example of an unsuccessful creation; and we do not have much magic either because the means by which the man was created are not communicated and are not the main objective of the story. Even in the case of the creation of the calf, when the *Hilkhot of Sefer Yeširah* are mentioned (whatever this may be: there is no evidence that the *Sefer Yeširah* in the technical sense is alluded to, let alone the technique of the permutation of letters), it is not the technique which matters in this context but the Rabbis' very hard yet finally very ineffective struggle with it. I do not think, therefore, that the talmudic story in its 'original' setting can be claimed to be part of the tradition of the creation of a *golem* in the sense of an artificial man being brought to life by means of magic.

3. *Sefer Yeširah*

*Sefer Yeširah*, the enigmatic 'Book of Creation', forms the most decisive link within the chain of traditions analyzed by both Scholem and Idel in order...
to reconstruct the early development of the *golem* legend, mainly because it shaped almost all of later medieval versions of the creation of an artificial man. I do not want to enter here into the discussion of the book's origin and nature;\(^\text{27}\) however, by dealing with it after the Midrash (as Scholem does, but unlike Idel who discusses it, without giving any reason, before analyzing the midrashic sources), I obviously do not subscribe to its early, pretalmudic dating.\(^\text{28}\) In addition, I take it for granted that *Sefer Yesirah*, as Idel has put it, 'presented an elaborate cosmology which is grounded in the assumption that combinations of letters are both the technique to create the world and the material for this creation'.\(^\text{29}\)

The *loci classici* for our subject are sections 19 and 61 according to Ithamar Gruenwald's edition,\(^\text{30}\) the former dealing with God's creation, the latter with Abraham:

Twenty-two letters (sc. of the Hebrew alphabet): He engraved (*haqaq*) them, carved (*haqav*) them, weighed (*shaqal*) them, exchanged (*hemir*) them and combined (*siref*) them, and formed (*sur*) by them the soul (*nefesh*) of all the formation (or: creation [*kol ha-yesur]*) and everything else (or, according to one manuscript tradition: and the soul of everything else) which was ever to be formed (or: created).

How did he weigh and exchange them? *Aleph* (was combined) with all (the other letters), and all (the other letters) with *Aleph*; *Beth* with all (the other letters), and all (the other) with *Beth*; *Gimel* with all, and all with *Gimel*. And they all return in a circle again and again (*hozerot halilah*) ... Thus it results that all the formation (*kol ha-yesur*) and the whole speech (*kol ha-dibbur*) issues from one name (*yose be-shem ehad*).\(^\text{31}\)

This famous text no doubt deals with the creation of the universe out of all possible permutations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The second part describes the technique of this permutation and there are in fact in the textual tradition long lists of these possible combinations which constitute the world. 'The soul of all formation' (*nefesh kol ha-yesur*), for an unbiased reader, certainly means 'the essence of the creation of everything', i.e. of the cosmos. I also do not see any reasons to conclude from the fact that *nefesh* is missing in the second part (it has only *kol ha-yesur*), that we have to distinguish, as


\(^{28}\) Scholem, *EJ* 16, col. 786: 'it may be postulated that the main part of Sefer Yesirah, though it contains post-talmudic additions, was written between the third and sixth centuries . . . '; see also *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 167 (on p. 172 he is quite optimistic about the third century). Dan, op. cit., pp. 1 ff., presupposes the authorship of the book 'probably in the 3rd century' and discusses at length the 'enigma' that it is not mentioned at all from the 4th to the 10th century (except for a dubious reference in Kalir and the no less dubious quotation in Bavli Sanhedrin), and the sudden outburst of interest in it in the 10th century. The possibility, that it drew the attention of the authors of the 10th century because it originated closer to the 10th than to the 3rd century, does not seem to be an option for him.

\(^{29}\) *Golem*, p. 9.


\(^{31}\) Gruenwald, section 19.
Idel suggests (following a medieval commentary), 32 between the creation of the essence of all the beings and of the beings themselves. This is much too literal a reading of a text whose manuscript evidence is far from having been established.

Idel disagrees with this peshat of understanding yeṣur as designating creation or creatures in general (which is also the view of Scholem), and advocates the more specific meaning of a creature (in the singular), a human being. He concludes this from some Midrashim which use the word yeṣur in the sense of a distinct human creature, and from Sefer Yeṣirah itself: from the symbolism of the letters governing different parts of the human body throughout Sefer Yeṣirah, as well as from the parallelism of yeṣur and 'speech' (dibbur) in our text. 33 Thus he safely arrives at his obviously desired goal, namely the creation of an artificial man: ‘We may therefore conclude that from the philological point of view, it is reasonable to assume that a reading of the text of Sefer Yeṣirah as discussions of the creation of men (!) is a possibility which makes sense; 34 consequently, the understanding of the medieval commentators who extracted the creation of the Golem from the sentences which include the term yeṣur is not problematic, at least not from the philological point of view. 35 (I will come back to this final remark later).

As far as the interpretation of kol ha-yeṣur and kol ha-dibbur as referring to the creation of an artificial man, thus of a golem, is concerned, this again seems to me an overinterpretation. Of course, yeṣur may mean a distinct human being and not only the whole of creation, and of course, there is a strong emphasis on the human body and its limbs in Sefer Yeṣirah. But with regard to the former argument, the whole accumulated philological evidence cannot dismiss the simple fact that the text explicitly speaks of kol ha-yeṣur and kol ha-dibbur, thus pointing to each individual creature in the sense of the entirety of creation, and not in the sense of the singularity of the individual, let alone a golem. And with regard to the latter argument, the human body, Scholem has already pointed out that ‘man is a microcosmos attuned to the great world’. 36 The microcosmos of the human body and its limbs, each with its designated letter, in Sefer Yeṣirah represents the structure of the macrocosmos of the world. That ‘speech’ (dibbur) is mentioned in this context is only natural: speech characterizes man who resembles with this ability the world which consists of letters. This has nothing to do with the anthropoid and his ability to speak. There can be no doubt, however (both Scholem and Idel have emphasized this), that the ‘one name’ (shem ehad) at the end of our section refers to the divine name, thus imparting to the whole act of creation a distinctively magical tint. The world consists of all possible combinations of letters, the essence and climax of which is God’s unique

32 Golem, p. 11.
33 I do not find, however, the dibbur in the first part of the text in Gruenwald’s edition, as Idel translates: ‘the soul of all the formation and the soul of all the speech (dibbur), which will be formed in the future’; Golem, p. 10.
34 This modest ‘possibility’ very soon becomes almost a certainty.
name, the tetragrammaton. Everything issues from and is concentrated in one name; this is probably the precise meaning of yoše be-shem ehad.

The second text to be mentioned here is section 61 which links Abraham with the subject of creation:

When Abraham, our father, came, contemplated (hiba‘i) and looked, investigated (haqar) and understood, engraved (haqag) and combined (siref), carved (hasav), intended (hashav; or: calculated: hishev) and formed (yašar)37 and was successful, the Master of the Universe was revealed to him, made him sit in his bosom, kissed him upon his head and called him his beloved, made him his son and made an eternal covenant with him and his seed.

There can be no doubt that Abraham is introduced here as God’s imitator. The verbs being used are identical with those describing God’s creation (haqar, hasaf, siref, and above all yašar), and there can be no doubt either, as Scholem has pointed out,38 that the text speaks of a magical activity and not merely of some kind of speculative and contemplative efforts. The bold ‘he formed (yašar) and was successful (we-‘aletah be-yado)’ does not allow any other interpretation: Abraham repeated God’s creative act, and having been successful, was immediately rewarded not only by being called God’s beloved but also by becoming God’s partner in his covenant with Israel. To phrase it differently: God’s covenant with Abraham and Israel, one of the most important theologoumena of the Bible, was the result of, and reward for, Abraham having successfully imitated God’s creation. This is quite different from the basis of the covenant with Abraham in the Bible.

It also seems to be clear that it is the implied presupposition of this concluding paragraph of Sefer Yeširah that Abraham in imitating God followed the rules laid down in a book, which of course is Sefer Yeširah itself. The emphasis put on his contemplating, looking, investigating and understanding leaves no room for another interpretation: Abraham first studied Sefer Yeširah, understood it, and then started the process of creation in exactly the same way as God did. Hence, Abraham was the first human being who used Sefer Yeširah as a manual, and who was successful.

But what exactly is the creation in which Abraham was successful? The text does not tell us explicitly but since Abraham repeats God’s creation, the peshat obviously is that he repeated the creation of ‘all the formation’ (kol ha-yesur) in the sense of the creation of the world. This time both Scholem and Idel argue that the point is not so much the creation as such but more precisely the creation of human beings; therefore, both understand Abraham here as the first creator of a golem (or even golems). They arrive at this conclusion by referring to medieval commentaries, mainly from the circles of the German Hasidim (haside ashkenaz), which explain Genesis 12:5 (‘Abraham took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the souls they had made in Haran [we-‘et ha-nefesh asher-‘asu be-Haran], and they set out for the land of Canaan’)39 literally in the sense

37 Yašar with most manuscripts (see Gruenwald’s apparatus criticus).
39 Translation of the JPS, with the exception of ‘and the souls they had made in Haran’; the
that Abraham, using *Sefer Yesirah*, had created human beings.\(^{40}\) Idel adds to this the observation that Haran was considered to be a place of idolatry, 'understood as the worship of statues', thus giving the whole undertaking a polemical nuance: 'In opposition to the statues of the idolators, Abraham created men; according to the medieval understanding of *Sefer Yesirah*, “men” refer to anthropoids created by the means of *Sefer Yesirah*.\(^{41}\)

Again, no one would doubt that the medieval interpretation of Abraham's creation in *Sefer Yesirah* is a possible one, and that it was very easy to read *Sefer Yesirah* in this way—although, to be sure, not all medieval commentaries did: the earliest, by R. Yehudah b. Barzilai (beginning of the 12th century), definitely has the creation of the world (*ha-'olam*) as the outcome of Abraham's and his companion's (i.e. his teacher Shem, son of Noah) study of *Sefer Yesirah*, and not the creation of a *golem*.\(^{42}\) But the question is whether the fact that medieval authors preferred this reading of *Sefer Yesirah*, allows us to declare it the 'original' meaning of *Sefer Yesirah* in its 'original' historical context (whatever that was). This is a question of fundamental methodological importance because most of Idel's so-called 'phenomenological approach' is made up of the presupposition that we are permitted to collect information on a given subject from diverse places and times, even if we cannot establish any kind of historical connection and dependence, because we may safely assume that there were, so to speak, 'subterranean channels’ carrying traditions which surface only from time to time, and very often as incomplete and distorted pieces of information. As I have mentioned already, in our example there is not that much of a difference between Scholem and Idel but Idel has declared 'his' phenomenological approach a credo.

There is much to recommend this approach as long as it argues against those who sharply set apart all pieces of information available and rigorously refuse to arrive at any historical reconstruction because they cannot establish a linear development of a tradition from point X in history to point Y. But there also is an enormous danger in this 'phenomenological' approach because it runs the risk of confusing the reconstruction of history with the reconstruction of the unfolding and ongoing tradition. The medieval authors certainly had every right, from a traditional point of view, to interpret Abraham's creation in *Sefer Yesirah* as the creation of a *golem* or even *golems*, but it seems to me very doubtful whether they were right historically in the sense that *Sefer Yesirah* in its own historical context refers to the creation of a *golem* rather than to the creation of a world. The scholar who wants to advocate the former exposes himself to the danger of substituting a scholarly for a traditional approach (unless he wishes to state that exactly this is modern scholarship).

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\(^{41}\) *Golem*, p. 16.

\(^{42}\) I cannot find a reference to this text in Idel's book. It is also striking that Yehudah b. Barzilai, after Abraham's and Shem's creation of the world, mentions Rava's and R. Zera's (who are confused with Hanina and Oshaya in the talmudic story) creation of a calf: here the calf is taken very seriously, and the irony of the original talmudic story is completely missed.
4. Ashkenazi Hasidim

Let us now briefly turn to the manifestation of the golem legend within the circles of the haside ashkenaz, the German pietistic movement of the 12th and 13th century. It is in the writings of Eleazar of Worms (1165–ca. 1230), the last major scholar of this movement who committed its esoteric doctrine to writing, that we find the most precise instruction for the creation of a golem:

Whoever studies Sefer Yesirah has to purify himself (and) to dress in white clothes. He is not allowed to occupy himself with (Sefer Yesirah) alone but only in groups of two or three, as it is written (Gen. 12:5: ‘And the souls they made in Haran’; and it is written (Eccl. 4:9: ‘Two are better off than one’; and it is written (Gen. 2:18: ‘It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him’. Therefore, (Scripture) begins with Beth: bereshit bara.

He is advised to take virgin soil (qarga betulah) from a place in the mountains where no one has ploughed. And he shall knead the dust (wa-yiggabel ha-’afar) with living water (mayyim hayyim), and he shall make a golem, and he shall begin to permute (legalgel) the alphabets of 221 gates, each limb separately, each limb with the corresponding letter according to Sefer Yesirah. At the beginning the alphabets will be permuted, and afterwards he shall permute with the vowel N: נ, ר, ש, פ, פ, פ, פ and always the letter of the (divine) name (=the tetragrammaton) with them,43 and all the alphabet. And afterwards, then נ, then ר, and פ, then פ, and similarly נ in its entirety. Afterwards he shall appoint44 ה and likewise ט, and each limb with the letter designated to it.

All this he shall do when he is pure. These are the 221 gates . . . .46

This text is the first unquestionable evidence of the creation of a golem in the sense of an artificial creature by means of the procedure described in Sefer Yesirah, i.e. the creative process of the permutation of letters being applied to the creation of an artificial man.46 It consists of three clearly distinguishable

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43 The following נ indicates to permute the permutations of the letters of the alphabet with the tetragrammaton. Cf. also the unpublished treatise Sefer ha-Shem, in which Eleazar describes the combination of the letters of the alphabet with the tetragrammaton and the vowels in a similar way. See Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives (Binghamton, 1988), pp. 99 f.

44 Yamlikh: I follow Idel's translation (Golem, p. 56).

45 Commentary on Sefer Yesirah, ed. Przemysl 1882/83, fol. 15d ff.

46 The two texts which are often quoted as earlier stages of the creation of an artificial man by means of Sefer Yesirah (see the most recent survey by G. Necker, ‘Warnung vor der Schöpfermacht. Die Reflexion der Golem-Tradition in der Vorrede des Pseudo-Sa’adya-Kommentars zum Sefer Yesirah’, FJSB 21 (1994), pp. 31–67, especially p. 40) are not very persuasive. The first, Rashi's interpretation of hSan. 65b (see above, n. 26), only explains the talmudic text and does not refer to any contemporary practice. The second is a passage in the late midrash Pesiqta Hadatta, dated by Scholem (Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik, p. 231) to the 12th century; instead of Rava, who according to the Bavli creates a man, we are told here that 'a man was created' for Jeremiah and Ben Sira, after they had studied Sefer Yesirah three years (Pesiqta Hadatta, ed. Jellinek, Ber ha-Midrasch, vol. VI [Wien 1877, reprinted Jerusalem 1967], p. 37). This is very different from the active (note the passive 'a man was created to them' in Pesiqta Hadatta) ritual described in Eleazar's commentary on Sefer Yesirah. Moreover, in substituting the talmudic rabbi Rava by the biblical heroes Jeremiah and Ben Sira, the midrash defuses the talmudic Vorlage: according to Pesiqta Hadatta a world was created by Abraham, a man by Jeremiah and Ben Sira, and a calf by Rava and R. Zera, i.e. the biblical heroes are credited with the creation of the world and the man, for the rabbi only the rather dubious creation of the calf is left.
stages: (1) a preparatory ritual, (2) the forming of the body out of dust, and (3) the permutation of the letters of the alphabet.

The first stage mentions very briefly only purification and the donning of white clothes, a ritual act well known in mystical and magical contexts. The kind of purification is not specified but from what we know, e.g. from Merkavah mysticism, it most probably included fasting and abstinence from any impure food (most notably meat, garlic, onion and wine), sexual abstinence, and ritual baths. The white clothes are especially prominent in the magical ‘treatise’ Sefer ha-Malbush. The following warning that the creation of the golem cannot be undertaken by one person alone, of course is a kind of reversal of the rule in Mishnah Hagiga 2:1 that one does not expound the work of creation (ma’aše bereshit) before two, and the work of the chariot (ma’aše merkavah) before one—the explanation of God’s work of creation according to the Mishnah is permitted before one student only, but the imitation of his creative act according to Eleazar of Worms requires at least two persons (the imitator is not God!).

The creation of the golem itself consists of the two stages of the formation of its body out of dust taken from virgin soil—which becomes a commonplace in recipes to create a golem—and of the permutation of letters. The latter is a very complicated procedure which has probably also been corrupted partly in the transmission of the text. What is clear, however, is the explicit reference to Sefer Yesirah (which has 231 instead of Eleazar’s 221 gates, i.e. combinations), and the combination of each possible permutation with the letters of the tetragrammaton which in Sefer Yesirah is not part of the permutation process but is clearly hinted at when it states that ‘all the formation and the whole speech issues from one name’. The mention of every possible vocalization (most probably a, e, i, o, u) seems to be an addition characteristic of the haside ashkenaz.

The text itself does not say anything about the purpose of the creation of the golem; it simply describes the procedure (what follows are detailed tables of combinations). The procedure seems to be self-sufficient, a performative magical act the purpose of which is to imitate God, certainly not to make any use of the golem as is the case in the much later sources. It is only the

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48 An edition of this treatise is being prepared by my student I. Wandrey.

49 See the examples provided by Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, p. 185, n. 3, and Idel, Golem, pp. 60 and 65.

50 See above, p. 255.

51 Scholem, op. cit., p. 185 f.

52 From Pseudo-Sa’adyah’s commentary on Sefer Yesirah (fols. 40b-40c) we learn that pronouncing the permutation of the letters backwards will cause the golem to die.

53 Idel, Golem, pp. 56 f., wants to restrict the magical activity to the second stage only, the permutation of the letters, and does not find any magical performance in the first stage, the formation of the body. I cannot see any reason for this, except for Idel’s desire to contradict Scholem. The whole performance in all its stages, and beginning with the purification ritual, is certainly a magical act.
ritual that matters: by using Sefer Yesirah and following Abraham’s successful example, man can imitate God’s creative act. Pseudo-Sa’adya in his late 13th-century commentary on Sefer Yesirah emphasizes the ritual performance by adding the detail that the creature kneaded out of virgin soil should be buried in the ground, that a circle should be drawn around it (another well known magical act), and that the ‘magician’ goes around the creature when reciting the alphabets: ‘if he walks forward, the creature rises up alive . . . , and if he wishes to destroy what he has created, he goes around backwards pronouncing the letters, and the creature will sink into the ground of itself and die’. Unlike the story in the Talmud, there is no emphasis being put here on the golem’s ability or rather disability to speak, thus no hint that the ‘magician’ can create a defective creature only; and there is nothing left of the Talmud’s irony, thus turning the whole enterprise into a very serious performance.

It is certainly not by coincidence that we encounter this first serious attempt to create a golem simply for the purpose of demonstrating the creative and destructive power of God’s name and man’s ability to use it, in God’s image and likeness, in the circles of the Ashkenazi Hasidim. They are the Hasidim, the true pious, who are able to imitate God because no iniquities distance them any longer from their God (in contrast to R. Aqiva and Rava in the Talmud). We know a great deal about the elitist attitude of these haside ashkenaz and their claim to live a life without sin and thus to deserve paradise, about their hatred of and contempt for their fellow Jews whom they called wicked (resha’im) and evil ones (ra’im). And it is no coincidence either that the haside ashkenaz were deeply concerned with magic, and that this concern is rooted in their theological ideas.

To sum up, I would like to argue that the golem in the technical sense makes his first appearance in history in the haside ashkenaz movement. The Bible speaks of God’s creative act of forming the embryo of human mankind, without any hint of magic whatsoever. The Midrashim we have looked at have nothing to do with the magical creation of a golem; because of his iniquities man is not like God and cannot create a world, he cannot create even a man, the only thing he can produce is a calf one third of its natural size. Sefer Yesirah speaks of the magical act of God’s creation, but of the world and not of an individual, and of Abraham’s successful attempt in repeating God’s creative act. It is left to the elitist self-confidence of the Ashkenazi Hasidim to combine for the first time the magical act of creation by permutation of letters with the creation of a golem, an artificial man.

54 The dating of Pseudo-Sa’adya’s commentary is difficult because it is a compilation and consists of several redactional layers. Dan assigns the final redaction of the complete work to the end of the 13th century (J. Dan, ‘Iyyunim be-sifrut haside ashkenaz [Ramat Gan, 1975], pp. 104 f.; see also Idel, Golem, p. 83) and the golem ritual to a layer belonging to the first half of the 13th century. See also Necker, op. cit., pp. 32–34.
55 Commentary on Sefer Yesirah, II, 4 (Jerusalem, 1961), fols. 40b–40c. Scholem, op. cit., p. 186, ascribes this already to Eleazar’s Commentary to chapter II, fol. 5d.