



University of Tennessee, Knoxville

TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006

College Scholars

2005

Finding Golem

Elizabeth Abbot

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp3

Recommended Citation

Abbot, Elizabeth, "Finding Golem" (2005). *Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006*.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp3/3

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College Scholars at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006 by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.



Finding Golem

FORM C
COLLEGE SCHOLARS PROJECT APPROVAL

Elizabeth Abbott
Scholar

Dr. Jinx Watson
Mentor

Finding Golem

Project Title

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
(Minimum 3 Required)

Name

Signature

Jinx Watson

Jinx Watson

Marilyn Kallet

Marilyn Kallet

Mark Luprecht

Mark Luprecht

PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF THE SENIOR PROJECT TO THIS SHEET AND
RETURN BOTH TO THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR. THIS PAGE SHOULD BE
DATED AND COMPLETED ON THE DATE THAT YOUR DEFENSE IS HELD.

DATE COMPLETED

8/2/05

Finding Golem

Elizabeth Abbott

University of Tennessee

Letter to the Reader

In our society, we often focus entirely on producing a desired result without taking the process of creation into account. This project, however, is more about the journey taken than the product achieved. Behind all of my research on Golem, personal questions about the roles of language and creativity have motivated my work. The four separate parts of the following project are intended to highlight the distinct paths I have taken over the last two years to get to this point.

Part 1 covers the high points of my academic research into the Golem legend and mystic Judaism. It also serves as a reply to those whom I interviewed and personally corresponded.

Part 2 pays homage to the picture book which, though not taken as a serious art or literary object by the majority of academia, absolutely deserves respect beyond what it is normally apportioned. This section has resulted from the hours I have spent both with children in local elementary schools and by myself reading, studying, and trying to understand this new art form, which few have begun to truly appreciate.

Part 3 discusses the Golem legend in the round and, like much of the work of Rabbi Loew himself, is based upon intuitive acceptance instead of strictly rational thought.

Part 4 is both a final understanding and a return to the beginning. Two years ago, the project began as an attempt to write and illustrate a picture book. Now, it has become much more; it is a personal reflection on language. From picture book, to formal paper, to personal paintings, this section reflects the overall journey I have taken and the processes of understanding I have utilized on my way.

Happy reading! and please understand the following pages not as my work, which was chiefly experiential, but as a representation of the greater process.

Foreward

I titled this project “Finding Golem” because this paper is best understood as a journey toward discovering why the story of Golem has resonance on a personal and cultural level. Propelled by a feeling, I was in search of something deeper than strictly rational scholarship— something to explain what this mystic tale of creation, ethical dilemma, struggle of power, and power of language truly meant.

As my work began, I read numerous renditions of folktale, legend, narrative, fiction, and rhetoric all collected over years of common cultural memory. The more I read, the more I understood every Golem tale is different from the next; the story of Golem lives within the experiences, ideas, beliefs, and emotions of he who tells it. Thus, the Golem became alive not only as a story, but as a living, evolving creature found inside the dynamic people who each personally re-birthed the legend through the centuries.

My concept of a living Golem deepened as I had the privilege to discuss this legend with several insightful academics, teachers, spiritual advisors, artists, and friends. After every conversation about the Golem, I walked away seeing how each individual’s life experiences bore a new self-specific Golem, each with a different purpose and a different meaning. In this way, my project became more about the people with whom I connected than the original subject of my research. For instance, Holocaust survivor Mira Kimmelman viewed the Golem as a hero’s story in which those being persecuted could find protection (Kimmelman, 2005, Personal Interview). Rabbi Beth Schwartz saw the

tale of Golem as a cautionary tale against the sometimes fallacious power of human rationality and an anti-war story about the uses and misuses of power (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview). My friend and teacher, Danny Budik, understood the Golem as both a tale reinforcing some of the basic elements of Judaism, such as keeping Sabbath, and as a warning to those who have historically aimed to harm the Jewish community (Budik, 2005, Personal Interview).

All these people, and all of those with whom I corresponded otherwise, believed the Golem of legend was a fictional creation of mouth and pen. Yet, they confirmed to me that the Golem is real, and the magic of their words and their memories brought Golem to life. He was and still is fulfilling his ancient responsibilities— to warn and protect, to live in continuous action without a voice of his own, and to liberate his people from fear and powerlessness.

In the search for Golem, I found many things which I had not expected. However, my most significant discovery was the intelligent, perceptive, and caring people who not only graciously offered me their time, thoughts, and support, but gave me the gift of seeing and hearing their Golem, which I now understand to be something more personal and meaningful than I had imagined. In turn, I now offer to you my Golem. Though he is not perfect, I hope he clarifies, informs, and perhaps even summons you to ask new questions before he is laid to rest.

Part I

What is the Golem?

Theological Roots

In order to understand the phenomena of the Golem story, we must first address

two key, yet basic, questions – what is the story of the Golem, and why is this story important.

The record of humans' ability to create life is traced back to a text found within the oldest and holiest of Jewish books, the *Talmud*. Sherwin (1985) translates this passage as:

Rabba said: If the righteous desires it, they could create worlds, for it is written: "But your inquires have distinguished between you and your God."

Rabbah created a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera. Rabbi Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon, he said to him: You are from the companions. Return to your dust.

Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Oshaia spent every Sabbath eve studying the *Sefer Yetzirah*, by means of which they created a third-grown calf which they ate. (p.2,3).

Here, in the *Talmud's* first and only instance of man's ability to create another humanoid, several basic ideas about human creativity and the Golem are established.

Creativity

First of all, the holiness of man as a creator and this creator's potential to become like God is of the highest significance. In Sherwin's book, *The Golem Legend* (1985), he points out that both man and God possess creativity, and by using this creativity we are not "playing God," as the popular idiom suggests, but we are becoming closer to our Creator by being like our Creator:

Raba seems to be saying that the feature that we share with God is our creative ability. God is a creator. We are created in the divine image. We strive for *imitatio dei*. Therefore, when we are creators, we are most like God; we are most clearly in His image...It is noteworthy that Raba never questions the propriety of human beings striving to be Godlike, to be creators. Raba does not question the propriety of creating worlds or of creating artificial life. For Raba, and apparently for Rabbah, the creation of worlds and the creation of artificial life is not a usurpation of God's role of creator, but is rather a fulfillment of the human potential to become a creator. (p.3).

Furthermore, the emphasis is not placed on the Golem as a being but is placed upon the act of creation by the Rabbis. Therefore, the most basic and earliest references to a "man made by means of the *Sefer Yetzirah*" were spectacular not because of the Golem, but because of the awesome ability which particular Rabbis possessed in order to produce another living thing; it is the process, not the product, which should illicit awe, respect, and attention.

Language

A second key identifying characteristic of the Golem is an inability to produce spoken language. Interestingly, there is no information that paints this Golem as being unable to understand, yet he cannot use language to communicate with Rabbi Zera. Without any other context, the fact this humanoid form could not verbally communicate was enough information for Rabbi Zera to conclude he was indeed a Golem "from the companions," and could easily "return" to "dust." Interestingly, "the term ha-medaber," or "the one who

speaks”, became a common designation for human beings in medieval philosophical Hebrew” (p. 7). The ability to utilize language seems to become one of the prominent features that separates humans from non-human beings. Language, then, plays an increasingly powerful role in the Golem legend; the careful study of language in the *Sefer Yetzirah* gives Rabbis the godlike power of creativity, and it is precisely the humanoid creation’s inability to use language which classifies him as a sub-human Golem, therefore less than his creator.

Also, the idea that God creates through language is biblical in origin, however the idea that humans can create through the use of language is originally rabbinic. Sherwin (1985) translates this passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* as:

Twenty-two letter elements: He outlined them, hewed them out, weighed them, combined them, and exchanged them, and through them created the whole of all creation and everything else that would ever be created...it comes about that all creation and all language issue from one name. (p. 5).

Here, the twenty-two Hebrew letters are derived “from one name,” “from the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of God,” and “since the letters of the alphabet were the building blocks of creation,” it is assumed by adherents of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that “knowing how to manipulate those letters gives one access to the same forces that brought the world into being” (p. 5,6). The *Talmud* also says that there are twelve, forty-two, and seventy-two letter names of God which may have been used for creative purposes, and various Kabbalistic schools maintain that by combining letters into “gates,” of which there are 231 to as many as 271, mystic creation may be attained (p. 2). By creating a Golem through the knowledge of this language, one may become like his

Creator and closer to his Creator. However, it is little understood that by creating a Golem man is also coming in contact with his own most primitive and soulless form:

Rabbi Johanan ben Hanina said: The (sixth day of creation) consisted of twelve hours. In the first hour his dust was gathered; in the second it was made into a shapeless mass (Hebrew: *golem*); in the third his limbs were extended; in the fourth a soul was infused into him; in the fifth he arose and stood on his feet; in the sixth he gave their names...(p. 8).

Galmi, or Golem, means “unformed mass,” which appears only once, (Psalms 139:16) in the Bible: “Your eyes saw my unformed mass (*galmi*), it was all recorded in Your book” (p. 9). Adam, the prototype for all humans, was *galmi*, or a Golem, before he was infused with a soul and became a purposeful being. Midrash interprets this as “Adam saying to God: Your eyes saw my Golem” (p. 9). In this way, humans are not only “descendants of Adam but the descendants of a Golem as well” (p. 10).

German Hasidism

The rabbinic texts introduce the idea of the Golem in its most basic form. We know that human existence is traced back to Adam, who was also a Golem before he was given a soul and purpose. We know that by creating a Golem, man becomes like God and therefore closer to God. We know the power of language not only creates humans, but allows humans to create in God’s image as well. We know that a Golem is made by man through knowledge of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. We know that a Golem is less than its creator—it is soulless, speechless, and made out of earth. What we do not know, however, is precisely how a Golem is made.

The literature of German Hasidism both affirms the knowledge of Golem presented in Rabbinic literature and provides insight into the creation aspect of the Golem tale. German Hasidism saw the *Sefer Yetzirah*, not as a book of speculation, but as a “manual of magic” (p.13). Followers of this form believed that “words and names carry a magical potency, and that things that exist do so by virtue of the secret names that dwell within them” (p.13). As was earlier stated in Sherwin’s analysis of the Talmudic Golem, German Hasidic Jews viewed the creation of a Golem not as an impropriety but as an act of *imitatio dei*. Furthermore, to Hasidism’s core principle of “*hasidut*,” or “piety,” the ability to create a humanoid form was a tangible affirmation of purity and “a ritual of initiation into the mysteries of creation...reserved for the pious” (p.14). So, at this point in the development of the Golem story, it is still the act of creation, not the product of creation, that is important.

The German Hasidic Jew also understood that perfect moral and ethical insight had to be reached before one could conceive a Golem (p.15). Unlike the current situation in which modern man finds himself, where humans have the technical skills and rational abilities to create without the ethical understanding of their actions, only those so close to the Creator that they were able to share certain characteristics— only those so pure, wise, and pious that they could be close to the likeness of God- could participate in the act of creation. In *Hiddushei Aggadot*, Rabbi Judah Loew writes:

It is possible for a person to cleave completely to God to such a degree that he, too, could create a world. The principle of this is that if a person cleaves totally to God, he takes upon himself the likeness of God in terms of being able to create a world also. (p.14).

For Rabbi Loew, not only is oneness and “mystical ecstasy” gained by entering into this mystical relationship with God, but being so close to the Divine also brings out one’s “creative potentialities and potencies” (p.14).

Unlike the Rabbinic texts, the detailed focus on the creator and the act of creating is not the only contribution of German Hasidism to the Golem phenomena. German Hasidism also delineates how a Golem is created:

Two or three adepts join together to create the Golem. A magical circle is drawn to circumscribe the space in which the Golem is to be created. Virgin soil, taken from a mountain, is kneaded in running water. From this, the form of the Golem is made. Over this form various combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are recited. The formulae for these combinations derive from the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The recitations of these letter combinations animate the Golem, limb by limb. In some rituals, the formulae are recited while walking around the circle. Reciting these permutations in reverse order can serve to deactivate the Golem and to transform him back into inert matter. (p.15)

The Golem, as a product of this mystic communion, is still less important than the process, than the ability to “cleave” so closely to God that one may partially assume his creative powers.

16th and 17th Century

The sixteenth century, however, brought change to this aspect of the Golem. The importance of the Golem after creation becomes as important as the process of his creation. With emphasis being placed upon the life of the Golem, stories begin to

circulate frequently. The earliest of these primarily describes Golems as servants. As the century progresses, the Golem grows in physical proportions and becomes a protector against oppression, manipulation, and servitude. In the late sixteenth century, the Golem often functions as a spy, with either supernatural powers which allow him to penetrate into Christian areas, or a “gruff” appearance that helps him gain access to plots against Jews (p.17).

In the seventeenth century, the story of Golem acquires two of its most notable features: the Golem forms a will of his own, which may ultimately endanger the creator and community; *emet*, or “truth,” has to be written on the forehead of the Golem in order to bring him to life. Both of these attributes become increasingly popular in the legend of sixteenth century Kabbalistic scholar, Rabbi Elijah of Chelm. Rabbi Elijah creates the Golem by writing either *emet* or variants of the Tetragrammaton directly on the Golem’s head or by writing these on parchment which is then attached to the Golem’s forehead. Retaining a feature from the sixteenth century version of the tale, the Golem grows to huge proportions, and Rabbi Elijah, nervous about the Golem’s self-motivated growth in addition to his ability to “wreak havoc,” deems it necessary to destroy the Golem. Rabbi Elijah then reaches up and removes the parchment from the forehead of the Golem, or he erases the first letter, *alef*, from the *emet* on the Golem’s forehead. *Emet* morphs into *met*, or “death,” with the deletion of *alef*. After Rabbi Elijah erases the *alef*, the Golem turns into dirt which then collapses on top of the Rabbi and injures him (p.17).

The placement of the scroll or inscription on the Golem’s forehead becomes significant in the context of one of Rabbi Eliezer’s Midrash, as well as in some literature of thirteenth century German Hasidism. In *Pirk de Rabbi Eliezer*, Rabbi Eliezer notes that

the Tetragrammaton is written on God's own forehead. In the German Hasidic tradition, a story describes God as inscribing *emet* on the forehead of Adam. By removing the *alef* from *emet*, God decides to take away Adam's life (p.18). It can then be deduced there is a hierarchy of creation that stems from God, who created Adam, Adam who fathered men, and then men, who create Golems. In each case, the creator may only make a being less perfect than he.

The placement of *emet* on the forehead of the Golem also becomes allegorical. In a text that Gershom Scholem dates back to thirteenth century, the prophet Jeremiah and his son, Sira, create a Golem who gains control of his being, gains a means of communication, and lectures on the dangers of creating like the Creator:

Through the use of letter permutations and combinations, they create a Golem. On its forehead they write the phrase "the Lord God is Truth (*emet*).” But, once the Golem becomes vital, he takes the knife with which Jeremiah carved these words on its forehead and he scratches out the letter *alef*. Now the phrase reads, "the Lord God is dead.” Jeremiah then asks the Golem why he did what he did. The Golem replies with a long parable. The message of the parable is that once human beings become creators they are in danger of forgetting the Creator. Once the creature becomes a creator overwhelmed by his own achievement he may act as if God is dead and he is now God. (p.18).

Not only does the Golem become a danger for the physical well-being of the creator in the legends of Rabbi Elijah, but the Golem brings very real spiritual and psychological dangers to the creator as well. Though man possesses the ability to

utilize creation in order to be closer to God, perhaps the story of Jeremiah vocalizes that no matter how pure the intention, man has to realize the dangers of becoming a creator (p.19).

Rabbi Loew of Prague

The turning point of the Golem legend occurs in the eighteenth century, when the tale coalesces around Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel of sixteenth century Prague. Rabbi Loew is frequently referred to as “*der Hohe*”, “the great Rabbi Low” (Goldsmith, 1981, p. 21), in the literature of the West, and he was a leading scholar of “golden age” Czech Jewry during the Habsburg empire (Kieval, 1997, p. 3). Today, nearly all retellings of the Golem story emphasize the Rabbi’s role as the creator of Golem and caretaker of Prague’s Jewish community. In fact, today’s renditions of the tale commonly portray Rabbi Loew, not the Golem, as the main character. The Maharal, an acronym in Hebrew meaning *Moreinu ha-Rav Rabbi Liva* or “Our teacher, the master Rabbi Loew,” published fifteen serious writings during his lifetime, and now his legendary status has further emblazoned his mark on history as a character of opera, ballet, fiction, poetry, and even film (Goldsmith, 1981, p. 21). The differences between the historical Rabbi Loew and the legendary Maharal of the Golem, however, are vast.

The Life of the Maharal

Rabbi Loew was born around 1512 in Posen, Poland, though his parents were originally from Worms. The Maharal married in Prague and served as the Chief Rabbi of Moravia for twenty years. In 1573, now independently wealthy and at the age of sixty, Rabbi Loew left his position and moved to Prague to teach at the newly opened Klaus Synagogue, where he immersed himself in scholarship primarily concerning the *Halakah*

and *Aggadah*. Though scholars do not fully understand why the Rabbi, at this advanced age and livelihood, chose to leave the comforts of Nicolsburg, most agree that the intellectual and cultural opportunities found in Prague, including access to the only Hebrew printing press, lured him to the somewhat esoteric and cosmopolitan capital. In 1583, Rabbi Loew's brother-in-law and rival, Isaac Hayot, was elected Chief Rabbi of Prague. The following year, Rabbi Loew moved back to Posen to become the Chief Rabbi for four years until Hayot resigned from the position in Prague. Though the Maharal relocated to Prague in hopes of attaining the coveted position of Chief Rabbi, he was once again disappointed and resumed his old position teaching at the Klaus Synagogue. After another move to Posen and then back to Prague, Rabbi Loew, at the late age of seventy-seven, finally assumed the role of the Chief Rabbinate of Prague in 1597. He held this position until 1604, when he resigned due to health and age. Rabbi Loew died in 1609 and is still buried in the old Jewish cemetery of Prague today (p. 23-5).

Alchemy, Zohar, Torah

Rabbi Loew's life in Prague fell under the rule of Habsburg emperors Maximillian II, who reigned as sovereign from 1564 to 1576, and Rudolph II, from 1576 to 1612. This period is often referred to as the "golden age" of Czech Jewry (Kieval 3), a time when the population of Jews grew exponentially and policies supported by the Sovereigns were tolerant and sometimes even supportive. Emperor Rudolph's fascination with the occult, including alchemy, astronomy, and other sciences, gave Prague a modern, mystical air. Jews and Protestants were treated with more respect during this age, and the Jewish community within Prague flourished. Though mysticism, which was

“a major part of Renaissance humanism” (p.28), was embedded in the atmosphere of late sixteenth century Prague, Rabbi Loew rejected alchemy, magic, and all of what one would consider the pseudo-sciences, which were rampantly popular during the reign of Rudolph II. The Maharal was preoccupied with the *Zohar*, which some consider the primary book of Jewish mysticism, predating the *Sefer Yetzirah*. However, Rabbi Loew ultimately believed the Torah was the real “source of all man’s knowledge about the world” (p. 28); “man’s knowledge and love of the Torah, the revealed word of God, enable[d] him to combine the material and the spiritual world” (p. 28). Thieberger explains Rabbi Loew’s fascination as one of a practical guide to living:

The text of the Torah, through its unique combinations of letters and words, conveys to man everything he needs to know in order to find his way both in thought and action through the perplexities of life, without being obsessed by the fear of getting lost in the Universe. At the same time every particle of the text is of cosmic significance which man can only surmise with awe. (p. 28).

So, the belief in the holy and sacred serves to connect man with God, not magic or miracles:

According to the real Rabbi Loew, man must not call an event a miracle because it is beyond his comprehension. There can be no such thing as a sudden change of the natural course of events, because the order of such events is fixed. Rabbi Loew saw two distinct worlds, the one lacking corporeality and time as we know them, following its own divinely given laws, the other visible to our senses. (p. 29)

In many ways, Rabbi Loew's philosophy was based upon "intuitive acceptance" instead of rationality (28). His disbelief in miracles stems from his perception of the Torah as the tangible connection between the world of spirit and the physical world in which daily living takes place.

In *Tiphereth Yisrael* he wrote: If we are able to find the reason, then the Torah would be no more than a textbook of medicine or natural history. It is here, however, not a question of the order of nature, i.e., of material causes and effects, but of a divine, supernatural order. By fulfilling the commandments, we fulfill their supernatural purpose, cling to God and purify ourselves. (p. 29)

The real Rabbi Loew does not teach a philosophy of pure rationality, nor does he rely on a solely mystic conception of faith. This blend of realism and spiritual intuition may have created a platform for the Rabbi's eventual incorporation into the Golem legend centuries later, but it still stands that the real Rabbi Loew never showed any preoccupation with the creation of a Golem. Nevertheless, during the eighteenth century the Maharal, who did not believe in miracles, was credited with legendary status as creator of the Golem, protector of the Jews.

Literary History

How and why the legend of Golem was attributed to Rabbi Loew of Prague is a point of contention among scholars. Literary historians, such as Scholem and Idel, base their research upon the written records that link Rabbi Loew to the creation of Golem. Their respective research confirms there was no written form within the sixteenth or seventeenth century that places the Maharal as the creator of Golem. Both of these

scholars also conclude that the Golem making tales of these time periods were usually associated with Rabbi Elijah of Chelm. Scholem, Idel, and other literary historians also agree the first biography and genealogy of the Maharal, *Megilit Yuhasin*, written 1727 by a descendant Moses Perles, is likewise free of any Golem creating activity. Thus, Rabbi Loew was not known as creator of the Golem before the general time of 1730. However, scholars surmise that the legend was transferred from Rabbi Elijah of Chelm to Rabbi Loew of Prague before the nineteenth century (Kieval, 1997, p. 5).

A few scholars, such as Vladimir Sadek, believe Polish Hasidism provides the missing link between the Golem and Rabbi Loew. Beshtian Hasidism exulted the Maharal as its “spiritual precursor” (p.5), and in the latter half of the eighteenth century some Polish publishing houses, which printed Hasidic materials, reissued several of Rabbi Loew’s out of print books but with new commentaries. Sadek sees these coincidences of date and place as reason to surmise a needed connection between the Golem legend and the Maharal. This theory, however has yet to become commonly accepted in the academic world. (p.5).

Ethnography

Another way to approach the question of the Golem legend’s transference to the Maharal of Prague is through the study of ethnography and folklore. Here, ethnography serves as a way to understand “what a culture ‘remembers’ and recounts, especially through oral transmissions” (p.5). These accounts of communal memory are tracked through objects such as art, pottery, carvings, community records, and family Bibles. This information may allow an ethnographer to trace the history of a particular idea back to its original expression or belief. Much of the information gained, however, is used only

to strengthen the correlation between a community at a certain time and the presence of a general idea or motif. In the case of Rabbi Loew, ethnographers had a rare opportunity in Prague during the 1720s when the Maharal's tombstone was restored. The aforementioned biography of Rabbi Loew, *Megilat Yusasin*, by descendant Moses Perles, was also written and published around the time of Rabbi Loew's tomb's revitalization. Ethnographers discovered no trace of elements or allusions to the Golem theme on the Rabbi's tomb, and, as said before, the Golem is never mentioned in the biography. Together, these pieces of information strengthen the conclusion by literary historians that the vital connection between Rabbi Loew and the Golem legend had yet to come about by 1730. It is interesting that the occurrence of these two events, the writing of biography on the Maharal and the renovation of his tomb, occur nearly simultaneously.

In favor of his argument stating Polish Hasidism is the real origin of the Golem of Prague tale, Sadek comments, "Hasidism accords the gravesite of the Maharal the same treatment that they would give the final resting place of any *zaddik*, making pilgrimages to it and placing prayers and petitions" (p.6). What is remarkable is that not only Hasidic Jews but Christians and non-Hasidic Jews also make this pilgrimage and pay respect to the Rabbi in like behavior. Folklorists are looking to the early eighteenth century to corroborate the renewed frequency of Rabbi Loew related events, such as the renovation of his tomb, the *Megilat Yusasin*, and the pan-religious pilgrimages, with the possibility of the formation of a "Maharal Cult" or an act of 'invented tradition' (p.6). Kieval explains that perhaps the "rabbinic elites in Prague in the 1720s and 1730s— in particular the students and faculty of the city's *yeshivot*— fostered a magical-kabalistic reinterpretation of the life of the Maharal"(p.6). Kieval continues on this line of thinking

by deducing the connection between Polish Hasidism and Prague could have originated from the teachers, students, and elitists of the theological community who traveled frequently between the Poland and Prague. If this is true, it also implies that the elite of Prague were engaging “in a process of historical projection, in which the mystical pursuits and cultural fashion of the present were attributed to an earlier, heroic age and to an older historical figure” (p.5). Though there are many theories, none of them adequately answers the questions of when and how the transference of the Golem legends incorporated Rabbi Loew.

Folklore

We do know, however, Franz Klutschak, a journalist and folklorist, was the first person to transmit the Golem of Prague legend in written form in 1841. His folktale is elaborately written as a prose piece which contains ethnographic notes along with Jewish cultural terminologies, and it is considered to be an authentic collection of the Prague folk tradition. This tale warns of power which is uncontrollable, a theme which is contained in nearly every account of the Golem of Prague story thereafter. In this telling, the Golem does not know of his own magical powers and is thus controlled by Rabbi Loew, who places a talisman prepared for each day of the week in the Golem’s mouth. One Sabbath, the Rabbi is startled by screams coming from the Synagogue. Rabbi Loew remembers he did not place a new talisman in the Golem’s mouth and realizes the Golem, now aware of his own magical capabilities and enormous power, is becoming destructive. The Maharal then orders for the prayers to halt, upon which he puts the new talisman in the mouth of the Golem and saves his community from the wrath of the artificial monster (p.8).

Six years later, the Jewish doctor Leopold Weisel wrote a collection of tales known as “Sagen der Prager Juden,” in the popular and often referred to *Sippurim: Eine Sammlung Judischer Volkssagen*. One of these stories was Weisel’s own fictive telling of the Golem of Prague tale, which most scholars hail as “the benchmark for subsequent retellings until the eve of the First World War” (p.8). Though this tale is not authentic and has less detail than Klutschak’s rendition, it had more frequent circulation and remains the basis of the majority of Golem legends told in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The most fascinating aspect of this tale is Weisel’s introduction; he attempts to lower his audience’s expectations by characterizing the legend as so popular he should “present it briefly if only so that one not think that I did not know it” (p.9). Weisel must mean his Golem of Prague story enjoyed popularity among both the literary and the Jews of Prague, which leads one to conclude this legend did in fact circulate to the point of immense popularity earlier than some literary historians believe (p.9).

It was not until the twentieth century that the most popular and most widely remembered story of the Golem of Prague came into being. Ironically, the stories we know today most closely resemble what Byron Sherwin believes to be a literary hoax, Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg’s pamphlet *Nifla’ot Maharal im ha-Golem*, or *The Miraculous Deeds of Rabbi Liva*, published in 1909. In Rosenberg’s telling, Golem is created to defend the Jewish community of Prague against the blood libel and antagonistic, anti-Semitic Christians of Bohemia. It is not the danger the Golem poses to the Jewish community nor the danger inherent in the creation of the Golem which come to the thematic forefront; Rosenberg’s Golem tale emphasizes the outside, physical dangers of Jewish existence. The motivation behind Rosenberg’s publication and distribution of this

pamphlet is not known, however his intentions may have been altruistic. Perhaps *The Miraculous Deeds of Rabbi Liva* was an attempt to “boost the morale of European Jewry” who were faced with an increasingly anti-Semitic atmosphere where the blood libel was gaining popular strength (Goldsmith, 1981, p. 39). In his own way, by circulating stories of a Jewish hero and “miraculous redeemer” (p. 39), perhaps Rosenberg was creating a figurative Golem out of his text to provide the Jewish population a sense of security and community.

Final Question

As the classic Golem scholarship of Gerschom Scholem, Moshe Idel, Byron Sherwin, Arnold Goldsmith, and Hillel Kieval explain, the metamorphosis of Golem literature and legends from Rabbinic literature to the early twentieth century is substantial. Now, from the early twentieth century to the current date, numerous works of visual art, film, poetry, fiction, drama, and picture book have been created, each focusing on different aspects of this ancient and multi-layered legend. Each of these accounts leave us harboring ethical reservations about the Golem, his creator, and his precarious position as a being within our world that differ little from the questions our ancestors also faced—should we create as God has created before us?

Part II

David Wisniewski's *Golem*

David Wisniewski

Arguably, no author or illustrator's attention to detail, dedication to deliberate process, or precision technique is as elaborate as that of David Wisniewski. As a primarily self-taught artist, Wisniewski's broad performing arts background shaped his

artistic expression and offered him valuable insight into the intricacies of entertainment. David Wisniewski began his training at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Clown College. After graduating in 1973, he toured with the Ringling Brothers for two seasons and with Circus Vargus for another year (Baltimore, 2004, p.1).

In 1975, Wisniewski began work as a puppeteer in Washington D.C, where he met his future wife Donna. He attributes much of his artistic style to this experience in puppetry: "shadow puppetry honed all my art skills because it's a combination of theater and graphic art and design" (Peck, 1998, p.2). After six months, Donna and Wisniewski married, and in 1980 they formed their own shadow puppetry group – the Clarion Shadow Theater. The Clarion enjoyed success and significantly updated the art of shadow puppetry by creating moving scenery through the use of acetate rolls, the light of an overhead projector, and three directional rolling mechanisms: "this meant cutting transparent colored plastic films and applying them to clear acetate sheets to create scenic rear-projected transparencies" (p.1). The Wisniewski's produced elaborate adaptations of such works as "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite," an International award winning rendition of Musorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," and "Peter and the Wolf," which was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institute (Baltimore, 2004, p 1).

In 1981 his daughter, Ariana, was born. In 1985, after the birth of a son, Alexander, the Wisniewski's ended their days as shadow puppeteers. David Wisniewski transferred his cutting experience from plastic to colored paper, and he began his life as an author and illustrator in 1989, with the publication of *The Warrior and the Wise Man*, by Clarion books. Wisniewski describes his paper cut style as "obsessive compulsive" (Wisniewski, 1999, p.2) as he uses around 800 number eleven exacto knife blades per

book. Also, because his illustrations are made of delicate silk screened color aid paper, Wisniewski developed a precise three step sketching process that is both exact and labor intensive:

After my black-and-white and color sketches are accepted I get them copied on translucent architect's vellum. This allows me to transfer the art to the back of the Color-Aid by tracing them with carbon paper. So I'm always drawing and cutting from the back. You have to be careful not to rotate the page while you're cutting, and you can't handle it with your fingers. (Peck, 1998, p. 2).

After the illustrations are finished, each spread is held under light, which is then oriented from left light, right light, or center light to maximize dramatic effect, and photographed. Wisniewski continued his career as an author and illustrator, producing ten picture books and winning the prestigious Caldecott Award for his *Golem*, among other honors. On September 11, 2002, Wisniewski died after a brief illness at the age of 49 (Baltimore, 2004, p.2).

Multiple Levels of Meaning

Like many folktales, legends, and myths, the Jewish tale of Golem has been incorporated into the realm of children's literature. Because of talented authors and illustrators such as Beverly Brodsky McDermott, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and David Wisniewski, *Golem* is firmly embedded in the canon of modern children's literature. Of all the Golem literature written for children, David Wisniewski's Caldecott award winning picture book, *Golem*, is the most sensitive and complex. As *Golem* is based upon the Jewish story of the Golem of Prague, the story told by Wisniewski retains elements of legend, fairy tale, traditional folk piece, historical non-fiction, and fiction.

Though the theological roots of the story are based on a passage from the *Talmud*, hundreds of years of oral additions, revisions, textual records, and fictional retellings have shaped this story into a conglomeration of forms. Unlike the fairy tales usually found in children's literature today, the main character of *Golem*, Rabbi Judah Loew, is a non-fictional historical figure, and the setting, Prague of 1580, is specific in both time and place. Some of Rabbi Loew's actions within *Golem*, like visiting Emperor Rudolf II, are documented occurrences, and the illustrations accurately depict the scenery within sixteenth century Prague. Certain fictional additions, however, have been made to the Golem tale depicted by Wisniewski. The idea that Rabbi Loew created Golem to protect the Jewish community from the blood libel most likely originated from a fictional pamphlet, *Nifla'ot Maharal im ha-Golem*, which circulated around the year of 1909 by Yudl Rosenberg. At this time, most who read the pamphlet doubted the authenticity of the text, but collective cultural memory has incorporated many of the fictional additions.

The tale Wisniewski chronicles, then, seems to most closely resemble a legend, as the story takes place in the historical past, has mostly human characters, and was believed by those who perpetuated the story during the height of the tale's oral circulation. What is different about *Golem*, however, is that a considerable number of people today believe the creation of Golem was and is true. Though most modern, rational, twenty-first century humans view this and other tales of Golem as fictional, some people still believe in this form of creationism. These believers may acknowledge the details of the Golem of Prague tale as most likely fictional, but they believe that one can create another humanoid through knowledge of the Jewish mystic books such as the *Zohar* and *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Some critics of *Golem* may say the complex form of the story blurs the lines between right and wrong, good and evil, and reality and fantasy. The complexity of *Golem*, however, precedes Wisniewski, whose only decision was to work with a tale already given to him. The story of Golem is full of uncertainties and mysticism not only in plot, but also in the story's evolution of form through centuries of cultural memory. In this way, the story has a magical existence of its own which is so powerful Wisniewski cannot simplify the conflicts or euphemize the contexts.

Inherently, Golem is a story that flourishes on unresolved questions of right and wrong, good and evil, reality and fantasy. These questions provide readers with a productive uncertainty which simultaneously allows multiple levels of meaning to coexist flawlessly. To some readers, *Golem* may be interpreted as a monster story. To others, *Golem* may function as an introduction into another culture and real world issues that are not black and white— anti-Semitism, racism, oppression, and persecution. Still, layers exist with ethical, theological, and psychological implications. These simultaneous levels of meaning cause Wisniewski's book to be remarkable— readers of all ages and maturity levels have the ability to connect with *Golem* in a manner which is particularly meaningful.

Multi-Cultural Teaching Tool

In conversations with members of my local Jewish community and other scholars, all have commented on the usefulness of *Golem* as a teaching tool for the issues of anti-Semitism, including persecution, oppression, and segregation. As these issues are often difficult to sensitively discuss in the classroom, *Golem* can provide a less threatening option for teachers. By virtue of being a children's book, art and text join together to

present an alternative mode of exchange which Wisniewski respects, as he does not overly simplify the story for his child audience but makes the themes and meanings more tangible, thus easier to grasp.

Wisniewski opens his story with a double spread illustration of Prague accompanied by a six sentence introduction to the historical situation of the time he chronicles, 1580. The text characterizes the Jewish community as being oppressed, segregated, and persecuted: "Pinned in their walled ghetto, forbidden the use of weapons or the protection of law, the Jews could do nothing the vicious falsehood...[they] were bearing the ignorant fury of others" (Wisniewski, 1996, p.2). The illustration presents the Prague of Christians and the Emperor as illuminated by light, towering over the dark Jewish ghetto. In fact, the Jewish ghetto has to be physically separated from Christian Prague by both the Vltava river and by elevation; the ghetto is on the lowest elevation depicted on the page, while Christian Prague is on the highest elevation. The separation of geography provides a visual aid to accompany the words of the text, making the idea of segregation more comprehensible to the reader. The audience also views an angry mob issuing out of Christian Prague and heading for the ghetto with torches. This image foreshadows the violent conflict to come later in the story and also establishes a mood of aggression and "fury" felt between feuding peoples (2). Because the Christians are taking action, streaming down to the Ghetto with weapons and the power of the Emperor at their back, the Jews are thus characterized as being the defenseless, powerless, and the persecuted "other" (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview).

Interestingly, with the exception of two illustrations, Christians are only depicted as silhouettes of the human form. From the Emperor to the mob on their way to incite a

riot within in ghetto, the audience is not presented with any visual detail which could bring about empathy or a sense identification within the reader. The Christians, or as Wisniewski states, “enemies of the Jews” (Wisniewski, 1996, p.16), retain no individual identity; they are only presented as a group with a malicious purpose. Wisniewski’s choice to represent the Christians in this manner further helps the reader to understand the issues of anti-Semitism; the racial conflict is between two peoples, not individuals, who each have a unifying element that is subversive to the other group.

Upon her first reading of Wisniewski’s *Golem*, Rabbi Schwartz noticed the Jews and the Golem are depicted with skin tones of dark beige and light browns. Their hair is likewise very dark, and their dress is earth toned, fully covering, and marked with the gold emblem of “O” (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview). The dark colors of skin suggest that anti-Semitism is also a racial issue. The Jews are the “other” not only because of religion but also because of ethnicity. The browns used for skin tones also help the child audience identify a difference of culture, while the golden “O” is another way of visually reinforcing the idea that negative labeling and segregation have existed for much of the history of Judaism (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview).

Though the setting and impetus for action within the book lies in the conflict between Jewish and Christian Prague, this reading of *Golem* as a multi-cultural teaching tool serves as only one level of meaning within *Golem*. The issues of persecution, segregation, and oppression presented by Wisniewski in a tangible manner through the marriage of graphics and words do not personally threaten the reader, but provide a starting point for understanding anti-Semitism. As linguist, scholar, and Rabbi, Beth Schwarz says, “the historical truth is that for much of Jewish history Jews have been

oppressed, persecuted, segregated, and discriminated against. This book shows that, but in a way that leads to larger questions” (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview). Within the picture book framework, Wisniewski thoughtfully provides an account of persecution amid a tangle of mystic phenomena, ethical dilemmas, and adverse circumstances found in late sixteenth century Prague.

Hands, Mist, and the Dual Nature of Creation

On another level, *Golem* is a story about the ability to create and the roles we can play as creators. Golem is a monster made of mud, created by Rabbi Loew in order to protect the Jews of Prague during a time of unusually harsh discrimination. As the tradition goes, God made man, and man may share in this creative capacity with God to create other beings. Those created, however, must be lesser than the creator, which means Golem is a being without a soul. Wisniewski highlights the creative process in *Golem* by using the recurring images of exaggerated hands and sharply writhing currents of smoke, steam, and electricity.

On the title page of Wisniewski’s book, the word “Golem” is surrounded by mist which is creeping off the page in a right to left upward diagonal motion. This mist has two earth-toned layers with shadows present between each, giving the mist an illusion of movement over the stationary background which looks to be clay or stone. The mist has a creative and mystic potency that is ominous, galvanizing, and creeping. It resembles lightning, which is a great source of power that seems to come from the heavens to connect with earth, which may allude to the creative connection between God and man. When looking at the full page, the design resembles the headstone of a grave: the text of “Golem” is placed up two-thirds of the page, is centered, seems to be carved, has a

background which is similar to the texture of stone or clay, and utilizes a font which resembles those commonly used on headstones. In this context, the writhing two-layered paper cuttings conjure images of late night foggy graveyards which are full of malice and mischief, adding a fearful, cautionary element to the book's already supernatural tone. When one looks closely at the inscription of the word Golem, it is noticeably carved out of instead of into the clay textured background. With this also in consideration, these images together retell the basis of the Golem legend - out of clay the Golem was created with mystic powers which spanned all the way from Heaven to human, then the Golem was again returned to dirt. The implication, however, is the Golem was something greater than just a monster made of clay; he deserved to be respected in life and in figurative death, hence the image of the title page tombstone.

On the next two pages, the visually thematic symbol of the hand is introduced. In the top center of the two page spread, the reader sees a shovel, which is the visual cue that connects the illustrations of these pages to the overall story. With this shovel, which appears again in the hands of Itzak Kohen during the molding of Golem scene, the dirt used for the body of Golem is removed from the earth leaving a massive void. This imprint resembles a forearm and hand that reaches out to the reader from the upper right page down to the lower left page. According to Karen Simonnetti, this form represents the right hand of God, which, in Jewish tradition, "is a strong hand of protection and the hand that brought the Jews out of slavery" (Simonnetti, 1997, p. 6). Golem was a creation of Rabbi Loew, inspired by God, to deliver the Jews from the unjust persecution caused by the blood libel. If this symbol stands for the hand of God, it also becomes a symbol of

creativity passed from maker to lesser maker; God made man, and man, through purity and adhesion to his maker, made Golem.

Hands and smoke both appear again during the scene of Rabbi Loew's vision. The reader will notice the hands of Rabbi Loew are unnaturally large for his figure and poised in a manner roughly equal in height to his head. Two other hands are visible. One is the yad, a pointer with which to touch the words on the sacred scrolls that rests on the Rabbi's table. The other is what the text describes as "a hand of light" (Wisniewski, 1996, p.4), seen in Rabbi Loew's vision. This hand, depicted as clear and sparkling, comes from beyond the top of the left page and writes "Golem" in Hebrew "upon the smoke and ashes" (p.4). Because the origin of this hand is above the written page, because it is translucent and occurs within Rabbi Loew's dream, it can be inferred that this is once again the hand of God reaching down and planting the seed of creation in Rabbi Loew's mind. The ash grey smoke upon which "Golem" is written by the hand of God again assumes a writhing (p.4), electric aura of creative energy. In alchemy, ash is one of the great creative elements, as it is the byproduct of fire and stands simultaneously for the end and return to the beginning; out of ash new life grows. The visual cues of hands and smoke symbolize the beginning of the Rabbi's Godlike creative powers.

On the next two pages, Rabbi Loew "plunged his hands into the vast lump [of dirt], shaping it" (p.6), creating the Golem in the image of man just as God created man in his divine image. When the Rabbi calls on the name of God to bring life into the Golem on the proceeding two pages, his hands are again emphasized and the steam-like visual becomes the creative power coursing from God, through the Rabbi, into Golem: "The words soared aloft and unleashed the power of life itself. As lightening strikes iron

and flashes to earth, so the infinite energy of creation blazed through the rabbi into the course clay” (p.8). Rabbi Loew’s hands are raised above his head and become two of the three earth toned elements amid blazing white, gold, and metallic grey. The height and coloration of the Rabbi’s hands, which are reaching upward to Heaven, emphasize the creative ability of man. The power of creation becomes tangible through the sharply cut, electric forms – one can see the shared creative power between God, Rabbi, and Golem.

On the fifteenth page of *Golem*, which is a little over half of the way through the picture book, the symbolic meaning of both hands and smoke transform into signs of destruction, the opposite of creativity. On a backdrop of violent red and orange, the silhouette of an angry Christian mob is seen crossing the Vltava to terrorize the Jewish ghetto. Here, the smoke form, which up until this point has represented the awesome power of creativity, follows the Christians and denotes violence. The hands illustrated here are holding axes, scythes, swords, and torches, raised in anger and malevolence against the Jewish people. These Christian hands are paralleled three pages later with the colossal hands of the Golem, who, single-handedly destroys the mob of Christians. The steam form turns into a fire of fury in red, orange, and silver while becoming the backdrop for a scene of destruction. Rabbi Loew, understanding for the first time what he has created, thinks “this was too much destruction, too much.” The Hebrew symbol of *shin* is illuminated on the bottom of the left-hand battering ram. According to Karen Simonnetti, from *The Book of Letters* by Lawrence Kushner, “something *shin* is shattering...the breaking of the primeval vessel...*Shin* is the letter just before the end. This is the *Shin* of Shaddai, God’s most mysterious name” (Simonnetti, 1997, p.6). As the opposite of alchemy’s ash, which sixteen pages earlier symbolizes the initial creative

seed implanted into the Rabbi from God, the *shin* comments on Golem's obliteration of the Christian antagonists and foreshadows the destruction of the Golem.

The emphasis on hands, the physical tools humanity was given for creative purposes, ends with the demise of the Golem. Gazing into the old cemetery of Prague, Golem's hands grip housetops amid the red sunset. He knows his end is near, however he refuses to let Rabbi Loew return him to clay. The Rabbi, for the first time in the story, becomes violent, as he "lashed out with his staff erasing the first letter" of "emet," thus taking the Golem's life (Wisniewski, 1996, p.24): "even as he [Golem] lifted his mighty hands, they were dissolving"(p.26). The Rabbi, who shared in creative power with God, now uncompromisingly destroys his own creation. As humans, we share certain qualities with our Creator: we are made in his image and have creative capacities just as He does. However, we can only create like He did, not as He did, and with our creation comes immense responsibility. As Rabbi Loew joined with the awesome powers of God to create the Golem, he was left with the heavy ethical burden of controlling and eventually destroying his creation. On this level, *Golem* serves as a warning on the limits of human creativity and the tenuous roles we play as creators.

Summary

David Wisniewski's thoughtful retelling of the Jewish legend *Golem* leaves us not with resolution or finite understanding, but with questions which have no objective answers. Unlike the dualistic world of fairy tales, *Golem* contains no firm right or wrong, good or evil, but reflects the inner and outer conflicts that occur in real life. The historical basis of the book's setting and plot afford the reader with a rare glimpse into the life of Jews in late sixteenth century Prague. Through Wisniewski's portrayal of conflicting

religious communities, the issues of anti-Semitism can be approached in a relatively unthreatening manner. The religious and ethical considerations of man's Godlike ability to create are brought into the forefront of conversation through the symbols of hands and mist. With these visual elements, Wisniewski deepens the text by showing the reader that along with the power of creation comes the power of destruction; the responsibility of the creator outweighs the ability to create. The ability of Wisniewski to create a book, which so flawlessly brings together conflicting dilemmas, lies in his keen ability to utilize the picture-book medium. Wisniewski's unique method of multi-layered paper cuttings, which allow the interplay of light and shadow between visual planes, is the perfect complement to this ancient legend's multiple layers of meaning. This precise marriage between visual representation and symbolic meaning enhances the overall resonance and mystic depth of the story, and enables *Golem* to function as a picture book for all ages.

Part III

New Understandings

The thoughts and images of one mind are transformed into a solid object, which, when opened, conveys them to thousands of other minds. What a privilege! What an opportunity! What a responsibility.

David Wisniewski on the picture book

Metaphysical Golem

The story of Golem, from folklore to picture-book, metaphorically serves as a Golem. Metaphysical in nature, it seems as if the actual story, written or oral, serves its author and target audience like Golem served his creator and his Jewish community. On the most basic level a Golem 1) was created by language 2) has a creator who shapes and molds him, then brings Golem to life and gives him a purpose 3) goes into the world

separate from his creator 4) develops his own intentions, modifying those given to him by his creator and 5) serves his community in a time of peril. Beginning in ancient times, the story of Golem meets most of these criteria.

Golem, in the initial oral circulation periods, was a story more about the creator and his ability to create than the Golem himself. As Rabbi Schwartz commented, during this time the world was full of uncertainties and phenomena humans were not able to comprehend (2005, Personal Interview). Death came earlier and the quality of life was poorer. Ordinary man was looking for some way to control his environment and dispel his feelings of helplessness. The story of Golem served man in this capacity; the belief that humans could create other humanoids and could assume powers of God provides a sense of control and security not likely to be found elsewhere in the ancient world. This line of thought also applies to medieval times, when the idea of Golem being created as a servant and protector begins to receive currency. That one could make a Golem who could serve and defend against threatening people and circumstances belays fear of uncontrollable elements in daily life as well as the fears of persecution and oppression for many Medieval Jews.

In the eighteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century, the popular Golem of Prague variant likewise provides assurance and strength to a people who had experienced great injustices. As Mira Kimmelman notes, the implication of this variant is that the Jewish community has a hero whose divine purpose is to protect the Jews at the expense of those who antagonize their community. Inherent in this variant is also the idea that the Golem, though destroyed at the end of his mission, is always ready to come back if the Jews are ever threatened (Kimmelman, 2005, Personal Interview). Certainly, this

legend plays an important role in increasing the morale of a tired and oppressed people. In the story, Golem defeated the ignorance of Christians who persecuted Jews on the basis of the blood lie. In reality, the story of Golem served as a piece of rhetoric whose purpose was to unite the Jews, relieve their feeling of moral and physical defeat, and warn the enemy against showing any undue aggression towards their community. In this way, the story of Golem protects the Jews, just as its main character saves his Jewish community from violence and injustice.

A New Proposition

Expanding upon this idea, picture books that retell the Golem of Prague story may be perceived as Golems within themselves. Just as in the legendary creation, where the careful combinations of letters with the craftsmanship of the Rabbi shaped the form of Golem and brought him to life, the creation of a successful picture book relies on its author's ability to join visual, symbolic, and physical elements; a picture book is a physical object built upon unique power of languages to communicate through a variety of images which create a seamless interplay between visual representation and symbolic meaning. With David Wisniewski's *Golem* in the forefront of thought, it seems as if this story about creation, paired with the author's act of creating, connects on a level so deep it produces something magical. Wisniewski's *Golem* takes an ancient story that has already served the Jewish community on multiple levels through generations of oppression and brings it to life for people of all religions with renewed purpose and sense of being.

In a time of conflict and heightened awareness between the religious cultures of the West and Middle East, *Golem* serves to remind us that persecution of cultures is often

based on ignorance and insecurity. There is real persecution, segregation, oppression, and prejudice in the world and, though people will violently protect themselves on both sides, no one wins in the end (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview). This theme of the Golem of Prague story serves to protect its child readers by raising cultural awareness and introducing “grey” ethical dilemmas. As a creator, Wisniewski chooses to depict this story in a way which purposefully brings these ideas of prejudice to the forefront – he gives his book a purpose then sends it out into the world where it begins to develop new meanings and purposes of its own. Who knew, for instance, that *Golem* would win the Caldecott or become a favorite monster story of a certain Philadelphia first grade class (Peck, 1998, p.4). In this way, Wisniewski is not only creating the perfect marriage of art and text, meaning and purpose, but is establishing himself as one in a long line of those great enough to create a Golem, ensuring the tale’s future for years to come.

The story of Golem has served as a tale of assurance and relief to its audience for centuries. Whether by the virtue of giving man a sense of power over his unpredictable surroundings, providing a sense of security and community to those being persecuted, or initiating cultural awareness, the story of Golem is much more than a story – it is a phenomenon that has real psychological implications upon its audience. The figurative Golem of this ancient legend’s being reaches out into the world and provokes change in its readers and hence, person by person, our greater society.

Parallel Acts of Creation

After a conversation with Rabbi Schwartz, I realized the heart of the Golem story deals with the role of language and creativity. In Jewish tradition, God talked the world into being. In the New Testament, the book of John begins “In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It cannot be denied language plays a major role in humanity (Schwartz, 2005, Personal Interview). Our power to create and think creatively is what sets man apart from other animals, and the ability to create is rooted in language.

Native cultures across the world have relied on songs, chants, spells, amulets, jewelry and other forms which utilize language to control their everyday lives. They create a poem of sounds or images which has a functional purpose – to exact change upon some part of their personal or communal existence. Many cultures, which have progressed throughout time, deny that they utilize language in this same “primitive” way. All arts of contemporary man, from fine art to rhetoric, utilize language in a way much similar to that of our ancestors. We, like Rabbi Loew and our native ancestors, use language as a way to alter aspects of our lives. In the story of Golem, Rabbi Loew’s uses his advanced knowledge of words from the *Sefer Yetzirah* to create the giant, who ultimately saved the Jews of Prague from death. In this same way, we create visual art, music, poetry, scholarly articles, buildings, technology and more; we create as a defensive mechanism in order to protect and fortify ourselves against dangers we cannot control. By creating with the use of language, we are metaphorically producing Golems.

The creative act results in a figurative Golem because creation is brought on by a need, be it the psychological need of the creator or the functional, communal need of a group of people; the object created goes out into the world separate of the creator and evolves, eventually having a life of its own; the object always retains inherent qualities of its creator; the creative object serves to protect his creator in some way. As most art

meets these suppositions, the story of Golem becomes an orally transmitted outward expression of language's power and man's extraordinary ability to create.

Creating the picture book is also like creating the Golem; the creator's hands shape its image and his language brings the story to life. The act of creating a book, paired with an ancient story which chronicles this same act of creation, brings about magical quality of *Golem*. The reader, who brings his personal history into the interpretation of the picture book, connects with Rabbi Loew's supreme act of creation on a subconscious level as he too has played the role of Rabbi Loew – he is a creator in his own unique way.

In *Golem*, there is a quintuple occurrence of metaphorical and literary Golems. First there is the function of the Golem story itself as a Golem, which provided strength, boosted morale, and gave man a feeling of control over the uncontrollable. Next there is the story alone. There is also the understanding that Rabbi's Loew's creation of the Golem theologically parallels the story of human's own creation – God's creation of Adam. Then there is the creation of the picture book, which parallels the creation of the Golem chronicled within its pages. Finally the unique perspective of the reader is transferred into the picture book; the reader feels connected to the characters and story line on a deeper level as he too has experienced creation like that of the Golem. Within the multiple levels of Wisniewski's *Golem*, there is great depth of feeling and reflection. Outside of the pages of the story there are likewise multiple layers of understanding. When all of these layers coalesce around the same thirty-two pages, the effect cannot be anything but miraculous. The Golem story is truly a tale about language and the power of creativity which all humans, from our most ancient ancestor to modern man, understand.

Part IV

Personal Artistic Reflection

Statement

At this moment, humans are speaking, listening, writing, and reading in myriad languages across the world. Beyond this, engineers are living in the language of numbers, aerospace astronauts are talking to us from outside the Earth's atmosphere through configurations of waves and signals, artists are speaking with shape, form, and color, and musicians are singing in terms of timbre, pitch, and rhythm. Even past our own mind's conscious comprehension, our bodies speak to each other through a complex sensory game of hormones, smells, touches, and sounds. On these separate yet simultaneous levels, we are using language to find meaning, to bring about action, and to cause emotion. My work is aimed at answering the question, "what is language," through experimenting with the constraints, stereotypes, meanings, and modes of communication with visual mediums.

Slides

Blue in Green, Slides 1 to 4.

In the beginning there was a mark, and the mark could have color. The mark could be deliberate. The mark could be dimensional. The mark could be repetitive. The mark could be thick, thin, brushed, spat, drawn, imprinted, or left by nature. Even without a set meaning imposed on it by society, the mark could mean something to she who saw it. It could be beautiful. It could inspire fear. It could bring peace. It could warn of danger. Still, the mark could mean nothing. This is the mark as a mark – free to mean or not to mean, to feel or not to feel, to be or not to be as it would.

Snow, Slides 5 to 7.

Talking Fruit, Slides 8 to 10.

The mark begat the form, which begat the symbol. The mark started to occur more repetitively and those who saw it recognized it not as a mark but as a shape. As this shape was seen by numerous, different peoples, it began to develop a common meaning. The shape became a symbol and could be used to communicate a meaning, emotion, or action between peoples who evolved the shape into symbol.

Colonization, Slides 11 to 13.

The symbol began to gain complexity. Instead of being mostly representational, people began to alter and create their symbols in a strict and streamlined form. Peoples started to combine symbols to communicate meaning. The symbol thus began its institutionalization and begat the letter, which begat the word.

Systems, Slides 14 to 16.

The word begat the sentence, and the sentence was sent out to populate the world. The word was combined with other words to relate complex meanings between peoples. Language progressed and began to function on new levels according to humanity's need for its evolution.

Now, as society progresses, we not only expect language to progress with us, but discover new systems and ways of knowing which we quickly assimilate into a new language. Our twenty-first century existence requires the variety, complexity, and co-existing levels of language to be daunting. Whereas symbols, letters, words, and

sentences were created to more effectively and clearly communicate with our fellow beings, language is now becoming a barrier which we are personally and culturally struggling to conquer.

Bibliography

- Baltimore County Public Library. (2004). David Wisniewski, Author & Illustrator. Retrieved May 29, 2005, from <http://www.bcponline.org/kidspage/wisn.html>
- Bloch, H. (1972). The Golem; Legends of the Ghetto of Prague. H. Schneiderman (Trans). New York: Rudolf Steiner Publications.
- Brunvand, J. H. (1998). The Study of American Folklore, an Introduction. (4th ed.) New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Budik, D. (2005, April 12). Personal Interview.
- Goldsmith, A. (1981). The Golem Remembered, 1909-1980. Detroit: Wayne State U Press.
- Idel, M. (1990). Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Honigsberg, D. (1996). Rava's Golem. Retrieved November 26, 2004, from <http://www.sffinet/people/d.honigsberg/ravasman.htm>.
- Kieval, H. (1997). Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish Culture and the Invention of a Tradition. *Modern Judaism*, 17.1, 1-20. Retrieved November 26, 2004, from http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/journals/modern_judiasm/v017/17.1kieval.html
- Kimmelman, M. (2005, March 17). Personal Interview.
- McDermott, B. (1976). The Golem: A Jewish Legend. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Peck, J., & Hendershot, J. (1998). Golem comes to life; A conversation with David Wisniewski, winner of the 1997 Caldecott Award. Reading Teacher, 51(6). Retrieved May 16, 2005 from http://web23.epnet.com.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/citation.asp?tb=1&_ug=sid+4ECF8879%2D679A%2D423C%2DB564%2D38FE7F11EF1A%40sessionmgr6+db+aph+4441&_us=frn+1+hd+False+hs+True+cst+0%3B1%3B2%3B3+or+Date+fn+False+ss+SO+sm+ES+sl+0+dstb+ES+mh+1+ri+KAAACBTC00029633+8FE3&_uso=hd+False+tg%5B2+%2D+tg%5B1+%2D+tg%5B0+%2D+st%5B2+%2D+st%5B1+%2DDavid++Wisniewski+st%5B0+%2DGolem+db%5B0+%2Daph+op%5B2+%2DAnd+op%5B1+%2DAnd+op%5B0+%2D+mdb%5B0+%2D+mh+C50D&fn=1&rn=4
- Peretz, I.L. (1990). The Golem. In I. Howe, E. Greenberg (Eds.), A Treasury of Yiddish Stories. New York: Viking Penguin 90, p. 245-6.

- Podwall, M. (1995). Golem, Giant Made of Clay. Hong Kong: Greenwillow Books.
- Rosenberg, Y. (1976). The Golem. In J. Neurgoschel (Ed., Trans.) Yenne Velt, 1 (162-225). New York: Stonehill.
- Rothberg, A. (1970). The Sword of the Golem. Canada: Double Day.
- Scholem, G. (1965). On the Kabbalah and its symbolism. R. Manheim (Trans). New York: Schoken.
- Schwartz, B. (2005, March 17). Personal Interview.
- “Secret Name of God...” (1988). The Golem of Vilna. In B. S. Weinreich (Ed.), L. Wolf (Trans). Yiddish Folktales. (p. 340 – 341). United States: Pantheon.
- Sherwin, B. (1985). The Golem Legend: Origins and Implications. USA: U Press of America.
- Simmonetti, K. (1997). The search continues. Fairrosa Cyber Library of Children’s Literature. Retrieved via email from L. Henrickson, April 10, 2005. Available from: <http://www.fairrosa.info/disc/golem.html>.
- Singer, I. B. (1982). The Golem. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Sonheim, A. (2003). Picture Books about the Golem: Acts of Creation Without and Within. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 27.3, 377-393. Retrieved November 26, 2004, from http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v027/27.3sonheim.html
- Trachtenberg, J. (1961). Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion. Philadelphia: Meridian.
- Vandergriff, K. (1997). A study of the Golem, illustrated by David Wisniewski.
Retrieved November 11, 2004, from
<<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/golem/index.html>>
- Wiesel, E. (1983). The Golem. New York: Summit.
- Wisniewski, D. (1996). Golem. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Wisniewski, D. (1999). David Wisniewski, Acceptance Speech 1997 Caldecott. Houghton Mifflin Company. Retrieved April 17, 2005, from <<http://www.eduplace.com/author/wisniewski/speech.html>>

Yassif, E. (1986). Jewish Folklore, An Annotated Bibliography. New York: Garland.

Appendix I

Glossary of Terms

Glossary of Terms

The following definitions are quoted and paraphrased from:

Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem. (1971). Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House.

The Encyclopedia of Judaism. (1989). Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House.

The New Encyclopedia Britannica. (2002). Chicago: New Encyc. Britannica.

Aggadah- is usually defined as the portion of rabbinic teaching which is not *halakhah*, or that which is not concerned with laws and regulations. The *aggadah* is for the most part an amplification of those portions of the Bible which include narrative, history, ethical maxims, and the reproofs and consolations of the prophets. Only insofar as it seeks to adduce reasons for the *mitzvot* does the *aggadah* concern itself with the legal portions of the Torah. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Golem- a creative, particularly a human being, made in an artificial way by virtue of a magic act, through the use of holy names. The idea that it is possible to create living beings in the manner is widespread in the magic of many peoples. Especially well known are the idols and images to which the ancients claimed to have given the power of speech. Among the Greeks and the Arabs these activities are sometimes connected with astrological speculations related to the possibility of “drawing the spirituality of the stars” to lower beings. The development of the idea of the *golem* in Judaism, however, is remote from astrology: it is connected, rather, with the magical exegesis of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (“Book of Creation”) and with the ideas of the creative power of speech and of the letters. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Habsburg, House of- House of Austria, royal German family, one of the principal sovereign dynasties of Europe from the 15th to the 20th century. Its name is derived from the ancestral Castle Habsburg in Aargau, Switz. (New Encyclopedia Britannica)

Halakah- The word “*halakhah*,” which is from the root *halakh*, “to go”, denotes the legal side of Judaism as opposed to *aggadah*, the name given to the non-legal material, particularly of the rabbinic literature. It embraces person, social, national, and international relationships, and all the other practices and observances of Judaism. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Hasidism- a popular religious movement giving rise to a pattern of communal life and leadership as well as a particular social outlook which emerged in Judaism and Jewry of the second half of the 18th century. Ecstasy, mass enthusiasm, close-knit group cohesion,

and charismatic leadership of one kind or another are the distinguishing socio-religious marks of Hasidism. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Imitation of God (Lat. *imitatio dei*). A theological doctrine positing an obligation for man to emulate God's behavior. Central to Jewish thought, the doctrine receives its fullest development in rabbinic and subsequent literature, but its roots are clearly biblical, presuming man's creation in the image of God (Gen. 1:26,27). (The Encyclopedia of Judaism)

Kabbalah- "Kabbalah" is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward. In its wider sense it signifies all the successive esoteric movements in Judaism that evolved from the end of the period of the Second Temple and became active factors in the history of Israel. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Midrash- the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature constituting an anthology and complication of homilies, consisting of both biblical exegesis and sermons delivered in public as well as *aggadot* or *halakhot* and forming a running aggadic commentary on specific books of the Bible. The name Midrash derives from the root *drsh* [...] which in the Bible means mainly "to search," "to seek," "to examine," and "to investigate" (cf. Lev.10:16; Deut.13:15; Isa.55:6; et al.). (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Mishnah- The term Mishnah is derived from the Hebrew verb *shanah*, meaning "to repeat." Under the influence of the Aramaic word *tanna*, however, it received the meaning of "to learn," and was applied specifically to the Oral Law, essentially a matter of memorizing and recapitulation. Mishnah is contrasted with *Mikra* (from *kara*, "to read"), the Written Law, which is read (Neh. 8:8). Mishnah, as a general designation of the Oral Law, included all its aspects: Midrash, *halakhot*, and *aggadot* (Sif. Eut. 344). (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Rudolph II (of Habsburg, 1552-1612), Holy Roman emperor and king of Bohemia from 1576. His reign was a period of growth for the Jewry of his dominions, particularly the community of Prague. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Talmud- The word "Talmud" means primarily "study" or "learning" and is employed in various senses. One refers to the opinions and teachings which disciples acquire from their predecessors in order to expand and explain them. Another sense comprises the whole body of one's learning; e.g., "He from whom one has acquired the greater part of his Talmud is to be regarded as one's teacher" (BM 33a). A third meaning is in the technical phrase *Talmud lomar*, which is used to indicate a teaching derived from the exegesis of a biblical text. The work "Talmud" is most commonly used, however, to denote the body of teaching which comprises the commentary and discussions of the *amoraim* on the Mishnah of R. Judah ha-Nasi. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Tetragrammaton- the four Hebrew letters, YHWH, in the name of God or Yahweh. (New Encyclopedia Britannica)

Torah- The meaning of the word is therefore “teaching,” “doctrine,” or “instruction,” but is commonly accepted to mean “law.” Loosely, the term is used to designate the Bible as a whole. The word is used for the corpus of Jewish traditional law from the Bible to the latest development of the *halakhah*. In modern Hebrew the word is used to designate the system of a thinker or scholar, e.g., “the *torah* of Spinoza.” (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Yahweh- The God of the Israelites, his name being revealed in Moses as four Hebrew consonants YHWH called the tetragrammaton. After the Exile (6th century), and especially from the 3rd century BC on, Jews ceased to use the name Yahweh for two reasons. As Judaism became a universal religion through its proselytizing in the Greco-Roman world, the more common noun *elohim*, meaning “god,” tended to replace Yahweh to demonstrate the universal sovereignty of Israel’s God over all others. At the same time, the divine name was increasingly regarded as too sacred to be uttered, it was thus replaced vocally in the synagogue ritual by the Hebrew word Adonai (“My Lord”) which was translated as Kyrios (“Lord”) in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. (New Encyclopedia Britannica)

Yeshivot- The name *yeshivah* was applied to institutes of Talmudic learning of three distinct kinds: (1) the academics in Erez Israel and Babylonia in which the Mishnah was studied by the *amoraim* and which produced the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds respectively; (2) the academics of Sura and Pumbedita which in the geonic period were the central authoritative religious bodies for world Jewry, and (3) local institutions for the pursuit of Talmudic studies which developed in the post-geonic period. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Yetsirah, Sefer- or “Book of Creation”, refers to the Hebrew treatise on cosmogony and cosmology, originating from the third or fourth century. Several versions of the work are existent

, differing considerably from each other. Its purpose is to present the basic principles by which God created the world and by which the world continues to operate. Yet, some mystical elements can be found in it and the author’s terminology served as a source for symbols for the medieval Jewish mystics.

The world was created, according to this work, by the combination of two principles: The ten numbers from one to ten and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Ten Divine utterances brought about the existing cosmos and the combined force of the numbers and letters contains in it all existence. (The Encyclopedia of Judaism)

Zaddik- the title applied to an individual who is considered righteous in his relations with God and man. Noah is described as “righteous and wholehearted” (Gen. 6:9), and the Bible is replete with praises of the *zaddik*. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

Zohar- or “[The Book of] Splendor”, is the central work in the literature of the Kabbalah. In its literary form, the Zohar is a collection of several books or sections which include

short midrashic statements, longer homilies, and discussions on many topics. The greater part of them purport to be the utterances of the *tanna* Simeon b. Yohai and his close companions (*harrayya*), but there are also long anonymous sections. (Encyclopedia Judaica)



Blue in Green- Watercolor



Detail 1



Detail 2



Snow, Acrylic and Collage



Detail 1



Detail 2



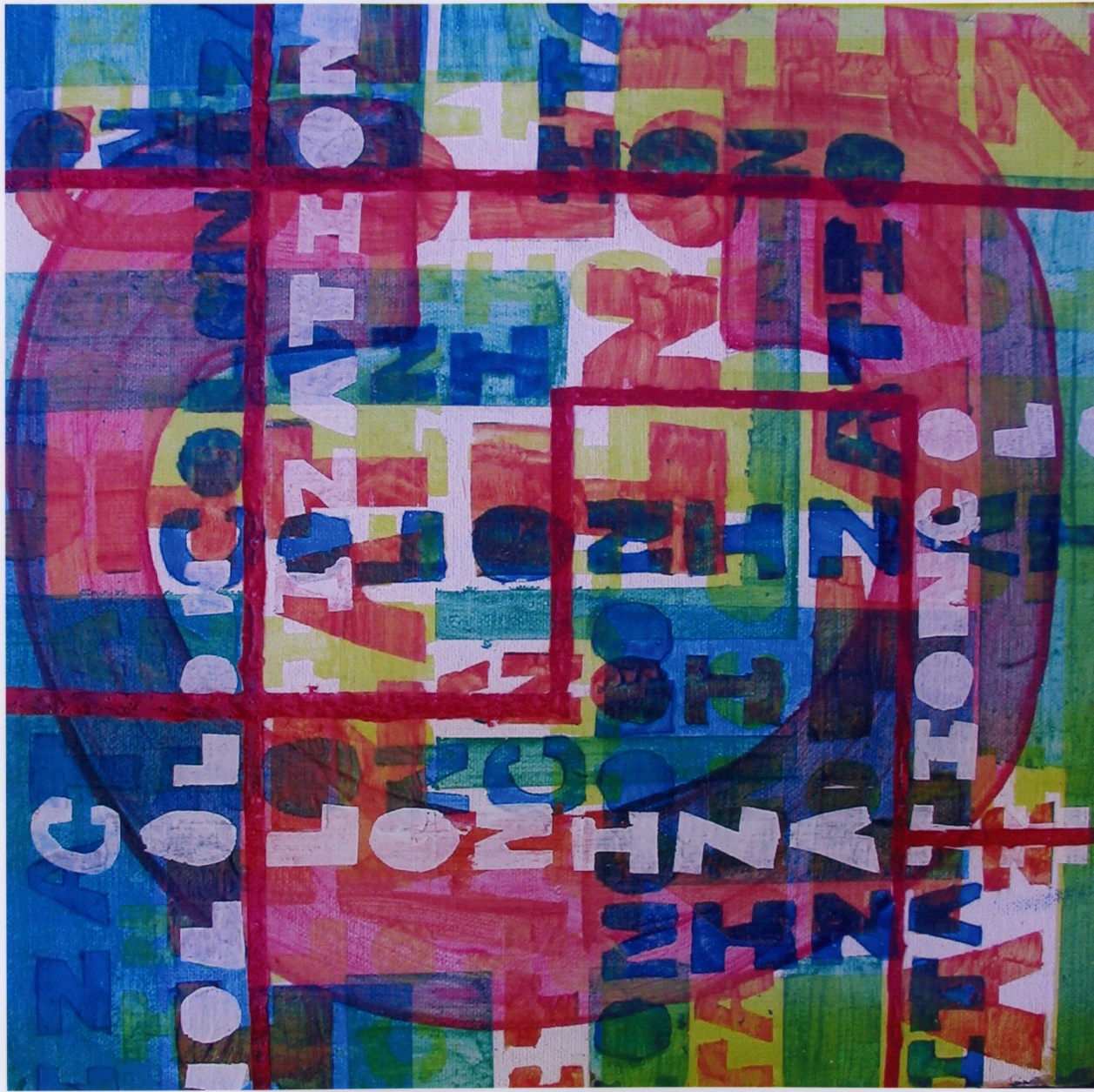
Talking Fruit - Oil



Detail 1



Detail 2



Colonization - Acrylic



Detail 1



Detail 2



Systems - Watercolor and Nail Polish



Detail 1



Detail 2