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## Yossele in Love by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Everyone says it's a myth until one day something  
happens in the streets that brings it back to life.*

Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem*

“My counselors tell me you are the most knowledgeable man in all of Europe on matters relating to the Kabbalah, isn't that so?” questioned Emperor Rudolf II, speaking cheerfully to the bearded old man that stood before him in the Prague Castle's reception room.

“I am only a humble student” replied the man, bowing his head. “My ignorance in all matters, human as well as divine, is vast.” He shrugged his shoulders in self-deprecation.

“You are Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the most famous rabbi in Prague. I desire to master the practical arts that can be gleaned from the Kabbalah, and want you to lend me your firm hand, guide me away from any perilous undertakings. Will you lend me your assistance in this?”

“I must point out the dangerous nature of the knowledge you seek. However, I am willing to teach Your Majesty some of the practical aspects of the Kabbalah but I would ask in exchange for an important boon for my people.”

“What would that be?”

“Jews all over the Empire, and particularly in this city of Prague, are being unjustly persecuted on account of a slanderous tale that is being bandied about.”

“What tale is this?”

“They say that we Jews murder innocent children and drain their blood to be used as an ingredient in the preparation of matzah and wine for our Passover services. This is a horrific lie, but one that has cost the lives of many of my people.”

“I expect this is only another old wives’ tale spread by the ignorant.”

“I wish it were so. Actually, a prominent priest named Thaddeus is spreading this libelous tale among his parishioners and egging them on against us.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Punish Thaddeus for spreading false rumors and prohibit dissemination of the libel.”

“I can’t do that. The Holy Roman Empire is a Christian nation. I can’t take your side against the vast majority of my subjects. It is regrettable that people are acting in such a manner, but the Jews need to find a way to protect themselves without my help.”

“Do you authorize us to take defensive measures against those who attack us?”

“Yeah. Form a militia or something. As long as you don’t engage the authorities or damage public property, I will not interfere with your acts in self-defense.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I think we have an understanding. When would you want to receive instruction on the Kabbalah?”

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Rabbi Loew spent several days rereading the sacred texts and meditating. He was unwilling to create an armed militia for fear of causing widespread bloodshed. His heart rebelled against another course of action that kept suggesting itself, for it required him to assume powers that only God possessed; but Rudolf’s equivocal support for limited actions to protect the Jewish population of Prague left

Loew without an alternative. One night in March he went to the shore of the Moldau in the company of two younger men (his son Bezalel and Yaakov, a disciple), and dug out a large amount of mud from the banks of the river and carried it in buckets back to the Old-New Synagogue in the heart of Prague's Jewish Town. They brought the buckets to the attic and there the three men labored all night to mold the wet mud into an enormous human-like figure, with massive arms and legs and a misshapen head with two holes for eyes, no nose or ears, and a mouth that was only a wide slit. Contemplating their handiwork, Loew declared: "This lump of mud is like Adam before being instilled with the spark of life. It's a *golem*, an unfinished creation. Let's attempt to animate it."

Loew inserted in the mouth slit of the giant a piece of parchment in which were inscribed the letters "chet" and "yud" (spelling the symbol for "life"); he and his disciples danced three times clockwise around the prone figure of the golem, each time repeating aloud those letters, at the end of which Loew whispered the secret name of God.

The creature on the ground shuddered, rose to its feet, and stood immobile before its astonished audience. There was long silence.

Loew then stood next to the golem and uttered a summoning in the firm voice he used when addressing his congregation: "Golem, I am your creator and master. Henceforth you will obey my every command. Your name shall be Josef, although I and others may address you as Yossele. Bend your head to signify your understanding!"

The golem slowly lowered its head and issued a low grunt.

"I shall teach you how to speak if I can" continued Loew. "You'll also learn your household duties and other actions that you will need to take on my behalf. Right now, remain standing and do not move until I command you to do so."

Yossele became a statue whose head almost touched the low ceiling of the attic. "Let's go down" Loew directed Bezalel and Yaakov. "We have a lot of planning to do. Passover is only weeks away."

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As the holiday approached, Rabbi Loew and his assistants set in motion a plan to protect the inhabitants of Prague's Jewish Town from attacks by Christian extremists and hoodlums. The rabbi's wife Perle fashioned a large hooded wrap that covered Yossele's body except its arms and served to mask its figure from the casual attention of most passersby. Bezalel would lead the golem in a nightly pilgrimage through the streets of Prague and, if they became aware of an actual or threatened attack by outsiders against inhabitants of Jewish Town, Bezalel would order "Yossele, go get them!" and motion the golem to lunge at the attackers and drive them off.

There were four such encounters; in each instance, Yossele ignored the clubs, knives, and other weapons of the marauders and cracked heads, broke limbs and tossed bodies to the ground with mechanical thoroughness, only stopping when Bezalel blew a whistle whose harsh and grating

sound caused the golem to return to Bezalel's side, leaving the results of the carnage behind. All told, Yossele slew ten attackers and wounded an unknown number of others, and its exploits became legendary, both within the Jews and the other inhabitants of the city.

At the end of each night's promenade, Bezalel would lead the golem back to the Old-New Synagogue, and take it to the attic. Loew would then issue the command "sleep now!" and remove the parchment from Yossele's mouth, rendering it immobile until the next time the golem needed to be awakened, which was done by reinsertion of the parchment and issuance of the command "awake!"

Loew would spend such time as his other duties permitted teaching Yossele to understand common speech, as well as training the golem to follow silent commands by imitating the gestures of the rabbi, his wife and children, and his disciples. Yossele proved to have very low intelligence, but was docile and performed the ordered chores capably, although it had to be directed to stop repetitive tasks when the assigned activity was completed, else Yossele would have continued to carry out the work.

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Passover seders and other religious observances were peacefully conducted in Prague that year and many others to come, as the legend of the avenging monster spread throughout the Holy Roman Empire; Jewish mothers began telling their children tales about the friendly monster that protected them and their families from attacks by the *goyim*; a new type of gingery "golem biscuit" in the approximate shape of Yossele, was created and became a delicacy for the residents and visitors of Prague for centuries to come. It was all for the good.

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One night, Loew was busy writing one of his sermons and asked Perle to put Yossele to sleep after Bezalel and the golem returned from their night rounds. It was well past midnight when Bezalel returned, took the golem to the attic, and went to sleep himself. By that time, Perle had forgotten her assignment and retired, leaving the golem in the attic, unattended and awake.

A few hours later, some noise outside the premises rendered Yossele restless. The golem went down the steps to the main room of the temple, let itself out and, as it had seen Bezalel do many times, steered itself through the narrow streets of the Jewish Town. It was almost daybreak and the streets were deserted, so Yossele ambled aimlessly in the dark without meeting anyone, until the light in a building drew its attention. A small establishment, a bakery, was already open as the baker and his assistants busied themselves preparing babka, rugelach, challah and mandelbrot for the morning trade. Yossele lacked the sense of smell, but was attracted by the light of the candles and the firing ovens and tumbled into the establishment by shoving the door open and approaching the counter with heavy steps.



Bedlam followed. The baker and his assistants ran in panic to hide in a back room; only a young girl, who dispensed the merchandise to the buyers, stayed behind the counter, rigid with fear. Yossele approached her and, having received no instructions to attack, stood staring at the girl curiously.

For a moment, neither moved. Then the girl, who was accustomed to dealing with all sorts of customers, grinned and said: "Hello! I'm Havah! How can I help you?" She had a musical voice and a practiced, friendly manner that Yossele already associated with the members of Rabbi Loew's family, so the golem sensed kinship and grunted back in a nonthreatening tone.

Havah had heard the rumors about the existence of a protecting golem and this creature seemed to fit the description that was circulating around town. She turned towards the back room and shouted: "Master Arie! Send someone quickly to the Synagogue and fetch Rabbi Loew! I think we have gotten his golem here!"

Then, facing the unexpected guest, Havah said in her sweetest voice: "May I offer you a piece of challah? It is fresh out of the oven!" She tore a piece of bread and, with slow, deliberate gestures, tendered it to Yossele.

The golem reached for the bread, seized it, and dropped it to the floor. It issued another grunt and remained standing, eyes fixed on the girl.

Havah then launched into a low tone monologue in which she recited, in the calmest, friendliest voice, everything that came to her mind, from the history of her family to the names of her friends and her favorite games and activities, and the songs she sang and prayers she chanted when she attended Sabbath services. She was in the midst of reciting a psalm of praise when the door to the shop opened and a disheveled, sleepy-eyed Rabbi Loew entered and took command of the situation.

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Things appeared to go back to normal after the incident, but Loew sensed they were not so. Yossele still obeyed his orders, performed menial tasks like fetching logs for firewood and protective ones like cracking the heads of hostile goyim, but there was a new hesitation every time the rabbi or any of his family members addressed the golem with a new command. Finally, Loew decided to get at the roots of the problem and questioned Yossele: "Joseph, you have been created to serve the rightful needs of man, but you seem to bridle at receiving our commands. Express what is in your mind, so it can be put to rest! Speak now!"

The rabbi did not expect that Yossele would utter any words, for the golem did not have the gift of speech. However, he was taken aback by the creature's response. Yossele walked unsteadily to the back wall, where hung a painting of Abraham and his family, and stabbed with a stubby finger at one of the figures in the background: Sarah, the patriarch's wife. While it did this, Yossele emitted a different sort of grunt than its usual utterances: a moaning sound that suggested desire and longing.

It took Loew a few moments to comprehend the golem's lament, but when understanding struck him the rabbi gasped in astonishment. "You want a woman!?" Yossele nodded gravely.

"But that cannot be..." started the rabbi, and caught himself. "Yossele, I can perhaps make another creature to be your companion, but golems are neither male nor female, and my next creation would be just a replica of yourself. Another Yossele. Is that what you want?"

Golems are unable to voice their emotions, but Yossele rejected the rabbi's offer by striking the wall forcefully, leaving a large crack in the plaster, and grunting loudly.

"I'm sorry, Yossele, but there is no way I can make you a female companion! Even the Lord could not create a woman directly, but had to fashion one from Adam's rib. And you have no ribs that I could modify to make a female golem!"

Yossele did not understand the joke, but by now it could read a person's expression and negation and regret were written clearly on the old rabbi's face. The golem issued another loud grunt and stood still, awaiting its orders.

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Three mornings later, Perle had just slid the magical parchment in Yossele's mouth and was starting to direct the golem to fetch water from the community well when the golem pushed her aside and bounded down the attic stairs, across the temple's main room, and out into the street. Perle was flabbergasted, and then frightened. A rebellious golem was outside her expectation. Finally, she shook herself and ran over to the bedroom, where Loew still rested in bed. "Husband, something terrible has happened! Yossele has run away!!"

The rabbi was immediately awake at the sound of the news. "Wake Bezalel up!" he commanded, threw some clothes on, and ran down the stairs and out the front door. Outside, there was a clamor, as people were talking loudly and gesticulating. "Which way did he go?" shouted the rabbi. Three people pointed in the direction of the market at the center of Jewish Town, and Loew bolted in that direction without giving thanks.

Four blocks later, Loew found himself in front of the Jewish bakery where he had retrieved Yossele a fortnight before. The wooden door had been torn off its hinges and three men were cowering, their backs to the walls. Yossele was holding Havah by the arm, and the girl - white with fear - was uttering some nonsense, calming words.

Loew issued a stern command at the top of his voice: "Joseph, let go of that woman!" The golem turned to face him and for a moment it seemed as if it was about to attack the rabbi. Then, very slowly, it let go of Havah's hand and stood before its master.

What followed was perhaps the most courageous act in the rabbi's life. He came forward and yanked the magic parchment out of the golem's mouth, an act that might have cost him his life had Yossele resisted. But the golem allowed its master to assert his authority, and stood frozen in the middle of the shop, which by now was filled with Bezalel and others.

It took four men to carry the golem's motionless body back to the Old-New Synagogue and up the stairs to the attic, where they lay Yossele on the floor.

"What shall we do with him?" asked Bezalel. "Should we destroy him, or undo the enchantment that created him?"

Loew was overcome with emotion. He shook his head: "It is not Yossele's fault, but mine. I let my pride convince me I could replicate the Lord's handiwork without having to face the consequences. I succeeded, but gave Yossele feelings that cannot be satisfied. I must now try to find a way to remedy the ill that I have caused to a guiltless creature. For now, wrap Yossele's body in prayer shawls and keep it hidden in the attic, asleep. I will hopefully think of what to do.

But Rabbi Loew could never find the answer, and Yossele still remains asleep in that attic.

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## Bio

Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, *The Satchel and Other Terrors* is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.

## Author's note

In the Jewish folk tradition dating back to the seventeenth century (and perhaps earlier) the golem is a humanoid, created by those living in fear, as their protector against oppression and injustice. The golem, as portrayed in folklore, is an irrational automaton devoid of feelings. In my story I have expanded the concept to demonstrate that all forms of life, even the humblest, are capable of love and manifest it in whatever ways they are capable of expressing it. This is consistent with the goal of *Carmina Magazine* of showcasing "how the stories of the past are still creatively relevant in the modern day."