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Golems Among Us

Writer Beth Kander, in her 2024 novel *I Made It Out of Clay*, imagines what might happen if the Golem, the mythical champion and protector of the Jewish people, appeared in present day Chicago to accompany a young woman, struggling with the local dating scene, to her sister's wedding. At first, the Golem's presence in Eve's life seems like a good thing! He's handsome and strong, protective on the crowded subway, and wards off an antisemitic stalker threatening to ruin the family wedding. But with the Golem's laser-focus on safety and security of Eve and her loved ones above all else, things quickly get out of hand when he barricades the entire wedding inside the venue in order to protect them from all of the threats that exist in the world. "He might be a protector," Kander writes, "but he looks like something else. His care has become something deformed by extremism. In his unrelenting mission to shield us from all pain, he's shoving us toward new dangers - and hurting people while he does it."[1] The golem doesn't understand nuance, and contains no nuance. The golem is neither good nor bad, just a source of pure power - in some ways, like religion itself.

This may seem like a counterintuitive way to open the High Holy Day season. Presumably, we're all here because we see **value** in Judaism, in Jewish life. Certainly that should be a core principle of my work as a rabbi, that religion in general, and Judaism in particular, have a positive benefit in our lives. And yet, Rosh Hashanah and our spiritual work of this season call us to turn a critical eye to that which we hold most precious, to ensure that we have not transformed our core values into idols, inadvertently creating space for extremism and harm. This work is what Dr. Rachel Mikva calls a "self-critical faith": "Aware of religion's tremendous power both to harm and to heal, with no way to permanently separate these potentialities, the traditions transmit their sacred stories alongside tools for penetrating self-examination and ongoing self-improvement."[2] Our core work at this season calls us to examine the ways that Judaism calls us to be better people, and to reject the ways it does not.

In Mikva's work *Dangerous Religious Ideas*, she identifies the potential within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to use religion and religious ideas, scripture, and rituals for harm, rather than for good. This danger is not a new phenomenon of the politicization of religion in the public arena or relegated to extremist expressions, or even reserved for other religions, but has been present in Judaism, in all of its forms, since its inception. It is on us as serious Jews to grapple with that potential danger. As Mikva writes, self-critical faith calls on "…adherents, wherever they identify on the progressive-traditional spectrum, to recognize the dangers of spiritual complacency…It cannot be that 'the dark side of religion is all in the mind, heart and company of 'the other,' those people who have the wrong God, the wrong books, the wrong nation in which to live' - or the wrong interpretation."[3]

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[1] Beth Kander, *I Made It Out of Clay*, p. 380.
[2] Dr. Rachel Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 6.
[3] Ibid, 7.

Our own self-critical faith calls us to pay attention to three particularly tricky elements: the idea of chosenness, texts within our holy and expansive canon with which we disagree, and perhaps most importantly, others who do Judaism differently than we do.

Perhaps one of the most interwoven "dangerous" ideas within Judaism is the idea of chosenness, the concept that God chose the Jewish people for a particular role of Divine service. The idea of chosenness might not be a part of your Judaism at all! This concept sometimes appears hidden inside the ways we celebrate the specialness, talents, and achievements among our people, such as when we enumerate lists of Jewish Nobel Prize winners, pointing out the high proportion of Jewish recipients relative to our population size. More insidiously, chosenness can manifest in explicitly racist expressions that enable violence. Chosenness is embedded in our prayerbook. In a few minutes, we'll say the prayer *Aleinu* to close out our service as we always do. Aleinu at its core is a prayer about our chosenness.

Shelo asanu k'goyei ha'aratzot - that God has not made us like the nations of the lands

V'lo samanu k'mishp'chot ha'adamah - nor placed us like the families of the earth

Shelo sam chelkeinu ka'hem v'goraleinu k'chol hamonam - who has not made our portion like theirs, nor our destiny like all their multitudes.[4]

We say these words every time we gather in prayer. Our prayerbooks, both the one we're using tonight and the one we use every Shabbat, temper the chosenness with a less literal translation, but they do not excise it entirely. Our tradition offers different ways to translate chosenness into our Jewish actions. We can understand it as "the language of aspiration, nurturing a special relationship with God by creating a national religious life devoted to divine service."[5] This idea is at the bedrock of Reform Judaism, leading to the imperative to engage in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Others translate chosenness differently, reading entitlement into this concept, an entitlement that can lead to acts of violence and hate. This past July, the Reform movement decried "the mounting crisis of settler violence on the West Bank against Palestinian civilians."[6] This racist violence - and that is what it is - is enabled by a legal system that allows it to continue unchecked, rooted in Jewish textual understandings of conquest and suppression towards those outside the community. Is one translation of chosenness more authentically Jewish than the other? Chosenness as responsibility and divine service, chosenness as entitlement and a motive for xenophobia. *Both* are rooted in Jewish text. Both are authentic expressions of Judaism, even if one feels closer to our Judaism.

I often get questions along the lines of, "Rabbi Miriam, what does Judaism say about the afterlife? What do Jews believe about reward and punishment?" Of course, the aphorism "Two Jews, three opinions," exists for a reason. Judaism and Jews are rarely, if ever, unanimous. Our textual canon is multivocal. While it would be simple enough to merely pick and choose a

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[4] *The Koren Siddur with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, 364.
[5] Mikva, 105.
[6] Reform Movement Statement on West Bank Settler Violence | Union for Reform Judaism

biblical verse or a text from the Talmud as a "prooftext" for any opinion or question, a self-critical faith calls us to serious engagement with our texts, to acknowledging the diversity within, and the capacity of our textual tradition to hold multiple conflicting beliefs. Embracing the multivocality of Jewish text allows us to recognize that our text contains both a chosenness that calls us to make the world a better place for everyone, and a chosenness that is a vision of Jewish superiority. The tension of multiple voices is at the heart of Jewish text. The Talmud, our core legal text, is literally a recorded multigenerational oral argument! (And if that sounds fun to you, I hope you'll join me for this fall's adult education series where we'll take a look at some of my favourite Talmud texts!) Our Torah text has both voices that call emphatically for peace, and those that lead the ancient Israelites to conquest and domination of the other. Torah is not one or the other - it is multivocal and holds both. The Talmud intentionally preserves minority opinions, even when that voice is the sole dissenting voice. Famously, the 2nd century rabbis Hillel and Shammai were perpetually at odds with each other, and both of their opinions are recorded for each and every argument they had, regardless of who one (and it was usually Hillel). Later generations of rabbis looked back and noted, "Wow, those 2 were always ARGUING!" Even God weighed in on their arguments. The Talmud imagines a *bat kol*, a Divine Voice, emerging from the heavens to declare "*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim hayyim*.[7] These and those are the words of the living God." This phrase repeats throughout the Talmud, bringing divinity to dispute.

Jewish text enshrines a pluralism of ideas for perpetuity. Judaism has never been a monolith. Mikva writes that the rabbis of the Talmud were "afraid of division, not diversity."[8] Our Jewish way of encountering text encourages multivocality - we study Torah, chew on its words, argue over their meaning. It is a method of relating to sacred text that can feel foreign or even sacrilegious to those who are accustomed to other ways of relating to Scripture, to textual traditions in which there is one intended meaning, one accepted interpretation. This approach to text means that we have Jewish communities like ours - in which we read into our text a deep embrace of the idea that we are each created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, that God intended for humanity to be created in a wide variety of genders and sexualities, and that diversity is holy. And we have Jewish communities which adhere to a strict understanding of the gender binary and heteronormativity. *Both* are rooted in Jewish text. Both are authentic expressions of Judaism, even if one feels closer to our Judaism.

The challenge of a multivocal faith is its adherents, too, do not speak with one voice. We may feel the desire to distance ourselves from other Jews who don't think like us, don't believe like us, don't act like us. And they may feel the same way about our Judaism! We may look around and see ways that Jews and Judaism are causing harm in the world. One response would be to say that that's not really Judaism - that hatred, bigotry, and violence are not authentic expressions of Judaism and Torah, that they are extremist perversions of our tradition. But that would be dishonest. Hatred, bigotry, and violence are just as much a part of the Torah as justice, peace, and love for the stranger. Torah speaks with two voices, and as Jews, we speak with many voices. Mikva writes:

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[7] Eruvin 13b.
[8] Mikva, 51.

> Some people claim that destructive and hateful expressions are not real religion; the great religions of the world are, in essence, religions of peace, love, and goodness. Such essentialism identifies manifestations of religion that stray from these values as deviant or heretical. Ironically, this attitude is not all that different from that of fundamentalists who believe their interpretation of religious tradition to be the only authentic one. It also fails to recognize that even this idealized vision carries dangerous power.[9]

Judaism, and indeed all religion, is not inherently "good" or "bad." It is a blunt instrument, a powerful tool that can be wielded in ways that bring more peace, healing, and justice, bringing us closer to our best selves and into deeper relationship with each other and with those beyond the boundaries of our community…or it can be used to fragment us even further, to cause us to turn inwards, closing us off to those who are "other," to act with violence and hate. Judaism, on its own, is a golem - it is a lump of clay, that can be deformed by extremism or shaped into a powerful force for good. We give it power, we give it life.

Aleinu - it is on us to breathe life into Judaism.
Aleinu - it is on us to take our Judaism into the streets and into the public square.
Aleinu - it is on us to let the sacred words of Torah inform our daily actions.
Aleinu - it is on us to continue the never-ending and relentless search for *emet*, truth.
Aleinu - it is on us to pursue a self-critical faith.

Shana tova.

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[9] *Ibid*., 4-5.