



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“The Golem of the Ghetto:  
An Original Story by Isaac Mann”**

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Beryl stares at the barbed wire fence that is at the back of his house and all around the ghetto. The one room that he shares with his parents grows darker and darker and there are no candles to burn or switches to turn to relieve the darkness. There isn't even a mattress for him to lie down upon. Beryl sits down on a stool, and waits for his parents to come home from their job of doing the laundry for the guards who work in the rec hall. That building was once Beryl's synagogue. That was before the soldiers came.

Beryl remembers fondly the Chanukah parties in the old synagogue- the potato latkes, the theatrical and musical pieces created by all the Jewish families. He remembers the seemingly endless Rosh Hashanah services when he and Noah, a friend and neighbor, would sneak off to play soldier. The first time they did that was when they were only five and that was how they met. When they were done with their war games, Beryl would ask Noah questions about weapons, battles, and military tactics. Noah knew so much about the Macabees.

But now the synagogue belongs to the guards and the boys don't play soldier anymore. Beryl opens up his door and smells the smoke of Bolívar cigars drifting from the open windows of the rec hall. He over-hears a conversation between two guards.

“Oh Kurt! You make ze most vonderful pig!”

“Shmurt you're eating like a pig!”

“I'm all done. Vat do you say ve leave ze rest of zis pig in ze market place and let ze jews fight for it?”

“Oh Shmurt you always make me laugh. Ze jews eat ze pig, hahaha!”

Before the soldiers came, Beryl and his parents had raised several sheep. His mother knit sweaters from the wool and his father milked the sheep and turned the milk into cheese. Beryl trained their dog, “Chutzpah”, to herd and protect the sheep. The family never killed the sheep for meat, but the guards seem to relish meat, and the smell of it makes Beryl sick.

Beryl closes the door and is seized, once again, by memories of the day his childhood ended. These memories always rush into his mind in the same way: the sound of Chutzpah barking. He jumped out of bed to see soldiers approaching the house. One of the soldiers broke open the door and Chutzpah jumped at him and bit his leg. Beryl and his father try to gain control over the dog but he will not listen. Another officer pulled out a gun and fired. Chutzpah was lying in pool of blood.

As the memories from that terrible day begin to fade, Beryl goes over and lies down on a pile of clothing. Suddenly, he hears muffled footsteps outside the house. He quickly drags the couch in front of

his door to ensure that no one will enter. Once in place, Beryl looks up to discover a figure on the couch smiling benevolently at him. Beryl tries to speak, but can't. He can't even figure out if the stranger is a man or a woman. "Who are you?! Why are you here?!" Beryl asks. "That's not important," the stranger said. "I understand you're unhappy, and you've suffered far too much for a boy your age. I understand your people are unhappy. I'm here to send a very important message." The stranger tells him a story about Jews in sixteenth century Prague. "Rabbi Leib", the stranger says, "was a Wise Man who lived in a time when Christians were accusing Jews of placing Christian children's blood in Matzah. Rabbi Leib knew these accusations were ridiculous and dangerous. The Rabbi had mystical powers and made a Golem, a monster of clay, that would follow his commands, and protect and avenge the Jews."

Beryl likes this story: it is about justice and protection and everything working out just right. There are many details in the story and Beryl isn't sure he'll remember them all. He wonders, "Why me? Why do I have to do this? I'm just a little kid." The stranger explains, "You're the only one here who hasn't given up hope."

Suddenly in the blink of an eye, it's day. Beryl wakes up and there is no stranger- just his empty house, and the story he has been told. He readies himself for school, wearing the same dirty clothes. He grabs a hard crust of bread. No sign of his parents. When he arrives at the school, he takes a stick and draws the outline of a huge body in the sandy soil. The figure is at least ten feet long. He writes on the forehead of the figure the Hebrew letters of the word "Emet" or truth. This is the word that you had to write on the Golem's forehead to make him come alive. He runs into his classroom and sees Noah. Beryl takes a deep breath and declares "Our avenger is here." His classmates turn their heads to look at Beryl. "We are the Jews! We are the chosen! What are we doing here, sealed off from the world in a cage like this? We need a solution and I just found one. I am going to summon the Golem!"

"What's a Golem?" a couple of the children ask.

"The Golem is a giant who can crush skulls in his bare hands and the Golem will listen to my every command," Beryl says triumphantly as he stares at Noah. Some of his classmates' eyes light up.

"Where is he?" they ask.

"He'll be outside at the end of class waiting for us!" Beryl declares.

Noah is unimpressed. "What has happened to you Beryl? After a year of being here, you need something like this to hope for? Can't you just face reality?"

The school bell rings and twenty children run out in a pack, all stumbling over each other to see if they can find the Avenger. Beryl looks down and sees that the outline of the giant has been trampled by footsteps. Noah puts his hand on Beryl's shoulder and says, "You got to quit dreaming and face facts. We're all starving and we need to do something about it. Something real—no more fantasies. It's back to the old plan." Noah gathers his classmates around him and they start discussing how they are going to steal the guards' food.

Beryl stares at the dirt and scratches his head. He angrily kicks what remains of his drawn figure. "What did I do wrong? Did I not spell "Emet" correctly? Was there some step that I missed? "Rabbi Leib," the stranger had said, "gathered clay", not dirt. He had built a three-dimensional figure and paced around it seven times." Beryl realizes now that the details are very important. The crusty dry roads in the ghetto are nothing like clay. Beryl drags himself home in defeat.

His parents stumble through the door. Mom has a black eye and Dad has cuts all over his face. He can't remember what his mother's voice sounds like; she hasn't talked for what seems like years. He has tried to engage his dad in conversation but his father has only replied with simplistic, predictable answers. Beryl notices now that his dad is covered in dirt from his waist down. "Dad, what happened to you?" "They threw me into one of their god-damn mud baths", his father mutters, staring off in the distance. Beryl notices that the mud on his father's pants is very thick and figures that there must be clay in it! He knows that he has to get into the rec hall and find that mud, no matter the risk. After his parents have fallen asleep, Beryl sneaks off and makes his way to the rec hall. He finds at the back of the building, a place where a brick is loose. He carefully and quietly removes several bricks and crawls through the opening.

Before Beryl can get to his feet, he comes nose to snout with a dead pig. He slowly crawls through a pile of beheaded chickens. When a guard walks in with a wheelbarrow and begins to load food onto it, Beryl hides behind some burlap sacks. He holds his nose, feeling sickened by the smell and sight of meat. After the guard leaves, Beryl approaches a huge metal door and pushes against it. It begins to budge with a rusty creak. He stealthily creeps into the hall and sees paintings of German war heroes on the walls, recalling the portraits of the rabbis that used to be there. He begins looking for the clay. Where would they put clay in this huge building? Beryl passes the bathroom door and suddenly realizes, they would store their mud right next to the tubs. He walks through the bathroom door, and there the crates stand.

Beryl begins to stomp on the top of all of the crates. He needs as much clay as he can get. The first crate gives in with a loud cracking sound. He tears away all of the wooden segments and begins molding this clay into a gigantic muscular arm. He opens all of the crates as fast as he can and from each one he molds an additional body part. He puts the body parts together attaching them to a huge torso. He has never done anything this fast in his life. Beryl begins shaping the features of the face. He lifts his hand after indenting the pupil on the monster's eye. He looks down at the Golem whose strong features and brave face make him look like a warrior. But still there is no life in the clay giant. Beryl feels the sweat running down his face, and is overcome with frustration. With all of its muscles, it is still just a stupid lump of clay.

Beryl takes a deep breath and begins the ceremony: "And the Lord God formed a man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Beryl speaks as he walks around the giant seven times. After the seventh time, he scratches "Emet" on the forehead. He sees the clay arm slowly budging and imagines the skulls that it will crack in its bare hands. But after the initial motion, the clay is still. "Stand on your feet," Beryl commands. He repeats the command over and over again but the clay man stares at the ceiling, motionless. Beryl tries to push him onto his feet but to no use. Overwhelmed by tears, he finds his way out, through the broken wall in the food storage area.

He spies a crowd of children in the distance and recognizes Noah's voice. All of his friends except for Noah are crying. "We were caught by the guards," they explain, "while we were trying to steal food. The guards have decided to take it out on our parents." Beryl sees that the parents are being tied to poles and the guards are brandishing sticks and guns. Noah asks, "What are we going to do?"

Beryl responds, "I've built a Golem out of clay. I thought I saw his arm move."

"Where is the Golem?" Adam asks.

"He's in the bathroom in the rec hall. I snuck in. "

"Let's go back in." Jonah replies hopefully. "It's our last hope."

Beryl leads the way back through the narrow hole. He leads them to the bathroom and they all gasp when they see the figure lying motionless on the floor.

Adam and Jonah add clay to the muscles in the Golem's arms. "If only he could stand, he would destroy our enemies," Jonah says.

"And lead us out of the ghetto to a great meal, good clothes, and house five stories high," Adam joins in.

"You guys are getting ahead of yourselves. How are we supposed to go from rags to riches? It's just a stupid lump of clay. You're going on and on about this killing machine. The only killing machines are the soldiers who are about to kill our parents." Noah says.

"That's just it, Noah. We don't need a killing machine. If we had a killing machine, then everyone would want a killing machine and then we'd be no better than they are."

"I want him to crush their skulls", Adam says. "What's wrong with that? They deserve to die."

"No", Beryl says, "We can't summon the Golem wishing for violence. We must summon him wishing for justice and safety. That's why I failed. I didn't make the Golem with the right intention."

Noah sees a flash of light cross the Golem's eyes and his heart fills with hope.

With a crash, the guards enter the bathroom and grab the children. They have decided to force all of them to watch the execution of their parents. They drag them outside by their collars as if they were wild dogs, and the boys dare not make a sound. Beryl, prostrate on the ground, sees a shadow looming from behind him. As the shadow gets larger and larger, he hears the sound of dragging footsteps coming closer and closer. The guards are silent now, he hears people from the crowd gasping. He turns his head to look behind him. There it was-ten feet tall, walking slowly. The soldiers fire their pistols at him, but the bullets pass through the clay without delaying the giant's stride. Some of the guards fall to the ground and seem to pray, and others run away screaming. "it was only a joke!" Shmurt screams. "I didn't mean it! Kurt, it was his idea to make ze jews eat pig! Don't hurt me. I love zem, I have always loved ze Jews!

"Shmurt stop it, you are making a fool of yourself!" Shmurt keeps the show going. He sings through his tears, "Chanukah oh Chanukah, come light all zese candles, let's have a party, ve all must dance in-- sandals— somezing somezing---I don't know the next vords--"

The Jews stare up at the Golem in wonder. With one swift motion, the Golem frees all of the parents who have been tied to the poles. The Golem silently beckons the children with a sweep of his arm to follow him. Even the Jews hiding in their homes open their doors and follow. Among the followers are Beryl's parents. They follow the Golem who leads them outside the ghetto, pushing over a barbed-wire fence. The Jews follow him out onto a field where an airplane is sitting on a makeshift landing-pad. The airplane is big enough to fit all of the members of the ghetto. The Golem squeezes through the six-foot door of the cockpit. Being made of clay, this is an easy thing for him to do.

Everyone enters the plane, finds a seat, and then immediately falls asleep, all except for Beryl. He is in the cockpit with the Golem and stares in amazement at the giant, who handles the plane as if he had been a pilot for years. Beryl too, grows sleepy, and drifts off.

"Beryl?" a deep, cool voice calls, waking him up. Beryl opens his eyes and groggily sees the Golem.

“Listen,” the Golem says, “Beryl, the plane has landed, and in a moment you will wake everyone up. The people of this land are waiting outside for your arrival. The place is safe and no one will threaten you. In this new land, you will be able to grow up and become highly educated. You will ultimately join forces with other progressive men and women who are determined and capable of setting the world on a straight and compassionate path.”

"Golem, won't you stay and help us in this new country?"

"No, Beryl, my mission is done. You know from the old stories, that if a Golem remains after the time in which he is needed, he makes a nuisance of himself. I might want to have friends and go to school, and to college too, even graduate school, and of course I'll want a Bar Mitzvah. And I'll want to get married and find a job I can settle into. You know, a job that's personal and me. I will have needs and become very upset if they are not immediately satisfied." With every new suggestion, the Golem's eyes widen more and more. Beryl understands. "What do I need to do?" he asks. The Golem leans his head down so Beryl can reach his forehead. "Wipe out the letters- the letters on my forehead. I wish you and humanity the best of luck." The boy carefully rubs off the word, "Emet" from the clay with his hand. The Golem begins to slump into the chair more and more, his head falling back. The intelligent well-meaning, human expression slowly reshapes into a neutral mask. The Golem begins to melt. Beryl watches as the golem loses all of its vitality, turning into a heap of clay again.

All of the adults took on jobs in their new country- as farmers, as tailors, and as merchants. It wasn't hard for them to make money. It was a small town that welcomed them with open arms. The children got a good education, but there was one thing that bothered Beryl. When everyone woke up on that fateful day, they seemed to forget all about the Golem. When asked about their escape from the ghetto, they replied that they had walked thirty miles from the ghetto to this small town. They were able to do this because the guards and officers all of sudden grew ill.

Noah admitted to Beryl in private that he had visions of a clay monster that saved them but he advised Beryl not to mention anything of the sort, or the towns-people would think him crazy. The dilemma was, holding on to the truth and not being able to tell anyone, made Beryl wonder if he had made the whole thing up. Until one day, he read the following article in the local newspaper:

“Authorities report the discovery of a plane found in a large field to the east of town. A plane of this size and design has never been seen before. If anybody has information about the plane or the two inch crust of clay that covers its entire floor, they should please report this to the authorities.” Beryl smiled to himself when he read this article but he decided to follow Noah's advice and never explained any of it to the authorities. He wanted to begin a new life and leave the old one behind.