

Mud and Truth

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Tsofi knew the story since her mother began telling it to her and her brother almost every night. Other villagers would notice how her people did not eat the same meat or observe the same day of rest. In her mind those differences were as arbitrary as preferring to eat lamb or chicken. Yet such arbitrary reasons had sparked the most violent of reactions.

As Tsofi listened to her mother's voice, she could almost see the fires illuminating the night sky, blood splatter painting the cobblestone roads, and the rainstorms of shattered glass. Cries of distress mixed with cries of the people who relished the destruction, as if the small towns and neighborhoods were primal civilizations and they were their conquerors. Emperor Rudolf dismissed her people's appeals for action as less trivial than a dispute between farmers over cows and goats. It's not as if they could do anything for him, a small group of people sequestered away from the rest of Prague, restricted to their own world. Then one night, a man known simply as the Maharal decided: enough. With the help of two students he gathered mud clay from the river to meld into a human-like shape that stood over six feet. As the clay began to dry, he said a little prayer and inscribed אמת or "truth" on the clay figure's forehead, awakening the first golem. That golem guarded the Jews of Prague and frightened away anyone who tried to hurt them. Finally, Emperor Rudolf had no choice but to address their concerns. After that, her mother said, the Maharal lost control of the golem, and

upon finding him, removed a letter from his forehead, turning “truth” into **ממ** or “death.”

Since that fateful day, the summoning of a golem became a new ritual in the coming-of-age ceremony for boys of thirteen, in addition to recitation and presentation of the holy texts. Many girls in her town were kept busy with cleaning, cooking, shopping, and making sure the house still stood while men and boys studied from dusk till dawn. Tsofi had little complaints about it. She loved to go into town, see the quiet chaos of the market. She found it hard to envy her brother Avram, who spent his days in that small room in the synagogue, head slouched down, at their father’s siddur, the crisp smell of a well-used book permeating the air.

Tsofi had read that siddur herself. Her father spent some time teaching her to read when her brother began Hebrew school, and she was still too small to be of assistance to her mother. She knew she was luckier than most girls in the village. It filled her chest with pride, making her want to stand tall compared to the rest. Mother made a point to remind her to keep that pride to herself, it was not worth making the other girls feel bad.

“If it weren’t for us, your father and brother would be lost. We are the ones who keep them grounded, who remind them to come home.” Tsofi knew it was true. Imagining Avram trying to barter with the butcher put a small smile on her face and filled her with that same air of pride. When she did bring this up to her brother he smirked and said, “You still don’t get to awaken your first golem.” At that, the air left her body, causing her to sink and slouch.

Her brother’s coming of age ceremony would be in a few months,

to demonstrate his understanding of the traditions and values of their people and bring life to a force of divine protection he could awaken and put to sleep if he wished.

Tsofi would come of age with a visit from the matchmaker and a walk down an aisle to chuppah, dressed in white. Without a chance to show that she was not unlike her brother. Just another future caretaker and carrier of children. No different from her mother, her grandmother, or any other girl in this village. No different from the matriarchs, whose greatest honor was having their sons.

With a long-drawn sigh, eyes unable to move from the sight of her feet in the dirt, she turned from the market to make her way home. In her periphery, the yellow sunlight was turning orange, and the shade was getting darker. She had much to do before sunset when her family and the rest of the village would welcome the Sabbath bride.

As Sabbath ended, Tsofi took the basket of clothes and made her way to the river at the other side of the hedge by her house to take care of laundry while her mother was at home entertaining guests. When her mother wouldn't say who the guests were, Tsofi took that to mean her mother was speaking with the matchmaker about Tsofi's marriage prospects in a few years.

As she settled into her spot by the river, basket at her side, she took in the calm bright sun, and let her fingers linger in the cool murky waters as she traced the muddy bank. The mud was cool from the waters, yet warm from the contact with her own fingers. Tsofi liked to imagine letting the mud drag her into the river by the hands, pulling her in.

“What do you mean they’re coming to this village?”

The sound of her father’s voice disturbed her reverie, prompting her to continue washing the clothes, attempting to ignore any instinct to find out who “they” could be.

“Listen, Moishe, there was a pogrom two towns over earlier this month, and I just heard from my brother in law in the next town that a mob had come in during the Sabbath. That means we must be next!”

Although she couldn’t see it, she could tell from the heavy sigh of her father that he must have been rolling his eyes. It was a mystery to the whole village how her father could keep himself together with “Lazar the Paranoid.”

“Lazar, the gentiles here never have a problem with us. We don’t bother them, and they never bother us. I don’t see why they would—”

“You know I’m not talking about our neighbors Moishe.”

The long pause that followed created little knots in Tsofi’s stomach. She froze in the middle of soaking old sheets. A voice in her head was pleading with her father to say something, anything. Maybe her father would somehow receive that message from a distance. But he did not know his daughter was at the other side of the hedge dividing the house from the river bank. She held her breath, not letting any bit of air leave her mouth or nose until she heard something. Anything.

“I...I...” Her father stopped talking. The tightness in Tsofi’s stomach began to loosen a little, causing her to let go of the air she was holding in, stopping short of a sigh of relief, sensing the trepidation in her father’s voice.

“I...I don’t want to believe that it could happen here...to us...I don’t want to think outsiders would put so much trouble into going

so far just to start a pogrom. For all I know, our ancestors thought the same before the Romans took the second temple...and again in Chmelnitski... It's why I left Krakow in the first place. Maybe mobs wouldn't bother villages like ours."

In an attempt to adjust her position, Tsofi slipped against the rock, catching herself with her hands as she fell into the shallow bank. The splash yielded a sudden silence from the other side of the hedge. After a few moments of uneasy silence, she carried on washing clothes. From what she could tell her father and Lazar had left to continue their conversation elsewhere. She wondered if maybe her slip had given her away, if her father somehow knew she was close by, or if he had assumed she was any one of the village girls doing laundry. Whoever he thought was on the other side of the hedge, he probably left thinking it would turn into gossip, then from gossip to panic.

Tsofi continued washing the clothes and sheets, hoping that doing so would wash away the fearful seed planted in her brain. As she was finishing the last sheet, Tsofi put the cloth aside, sat on the smooth rock by the bank, and carefully removed her shoes, letting her feet slide into the water. Feeling the cool mud seep into the spaces between her toes, she allowed herself take in the space around her, letting her hands flatly touch the drying mud by the stream.

Drying mud.

Scrunching the mud together, not caring if it got under her nails, Tsofi waded her legs in and out of the water. Pointing her toe toward the mud above the water, she lightly traced the letters alef, mem, and taf.

אמת

Seeing those three letters.

In the mud.

Tsofi stopped herself for a moment, surveying the area when she saw a bundle of branches and leaves within walking distance.

A perfect cover.

“I hope mama doesn’t find it strange if I ask to take on laundry more often...” she considered. She rinsed her hands and feet in the river before putting back on her shoes. As she took the laundry to dry, she saw Avram with his knapsack of books, heading down the path from the synagogue back to their home. The sight of her brother with his book bag made Tsofi’s heart drop from her chest to her stomach.

“He’d probably laugh if I asked him to help...” she thought with her head hunched downward, looking onto the ground. Then, as a small breeze enveloped her exposed ears, Tsofi laughed softly to herself as she began to put the clothes on the line.

She never needed her brother to go to into town.

He never needed her to read for Hebrew school.

This would be no different than any other task she had been faced with in her life.

After helping her mother clean the dishes and the kitchen, Tsofi told her she needed some air. “Don’t go too far!” her mother said as she retired to the downstairs bedroom. Tsofi was not going far at all. Just a short walk away, barely even a stroll away from her home. Yet a small voice in her head said she was going far from something.

Once she was at the other side of the hedge, the river and its muddy bank welcomed her back. Removing her shoes, she let the dirt fill the spaces between her toes. The mud felt cool, but a soft kind of

coolness like the surface of a frozen lake, not harsh like snow flying through aggressive winds.

She was tempted to just sit by the river, study each part surrounding it as always, but had not come here to idle. Though there was no danger present, she could still see the windows of shops being shattered into a million pieces, fire consuming a synagogue that did not look unlike the one in her village. She knew the stories. She didn't have to actually be there to know what happened. No one did. She shook her head. As she began to gather in the mud and dirt to make out a sphere for the head, she thought back to the tale of Prague.

*Is this what the Maharal thought of when bringing the first one to life?
This urgency...an urgency over maybe...nothing?*

At the same time, Tsofi could not find it in herself to call the apprehension nothing, as she put the "head" to the side and gathered enough mud from the bank to mold into a large body, or at least an outline of a body. While unsure of the size, she knew it had to be much bigger than herself. She made the arms and legs twice as long as her own, and the body twice as large. She lifted the head onto the shoulders with her hands.

"Are you sure this is the right place?"

"I am certain."

Tsofi froze, her skeleton might as well have jumped from her skin and run off, leaving her behind.

They're speaking Polish... Unsure of where the voices were in relation to the river, she immediately crouched down in the water. Her heartbeat reached her ears, so loud she swore it couldn't possibly be in her ribcage. It was not loud enough to overpower what the men's

voices said next “Shall we bother with the houses here or meet the others in town?”

Tsofi did not listen for the other man’s response.

She slowly waded herself out of the water, hoping not to make any sudden movement. She didn’t have to look behind or turn around to know that clouds of smoke would emerge from all around. Blazes would lighten the sky, enough to overwhelm the eternal flame itself. Blood splatter against the cobblestone road would dry into the stone by dawn. Gravestones no different than crushed boulders. Because even when dead, the fact that her people lived at all was deemed insulting. Screams at the sight of bloodshed and ruin; screams for more of it.

With her finger Tsofi traced those three letters onto the sleeping golem’s forehead with precision and care, not letting herself linger on the feeling of the cooling mud. She tried to ignore the tremor in her finger as she lifted it from the mud to draw the next line. Her success depended on אמת. Such a simple three letter word. Once the full word was done, she slowly moved her finger out of the mud, wiped it against the leaves of the hedge, stepped back and waited.

Nothing happened.

She was torn between wanting to destroy the useless pile of mud and running home. However, she was stuck in place to feel her stomach sink and arms shake. She was finally ready to run, when she felt the ground shake, she latched onto the rock beside her. It was as though the ground yawned, causing a small rumble in her immediate area.

“Hmmm...” The ground shook a little again, but this time Tsofi found herself letting go of the rock all too aware of how her legs were shaking, standing straight as the upper body of the mud golem

slowly propped itself upright with his arms, then held himself steady by the ground as he pushed himself upward and stood upright before her. There were two faint beams of light, signifying his eyes, not staring down upon her, but to her. Waiting patiently for Tsofi's instruction.

The air re-entered her body as Tsofi let out a small laugh, wiping a tear from her cheek she didn't realize she shed.

The golem woke her from her brief reverie. He was gazing at her the way the village looks to the rabbi during high holidays or gentiles to their king. She was not used to having someone, let alone a giant of earth, regard her in such a manner. She gave a small smile, collecting herself, knowing exactly what had to happen next.

"Go." She told him. "Help." □