

Demanding Connection:  
The Golem Myth in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers* and Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham*

העוסק בקפר יצירה יש לו לטהר עצמו ללבוש  
בגדים לצינים ואין לו לאדם לעסוק  
יחידיו כ"א צי או גי דכתיב ואת הנפש אשר עשו  
בחרן וכתוב עוזים תשנים מן האחד וכתוב לא  
עוז היות האדם לבדו אעשה לו עזר כנגדו לכך  
התחיל צי בראשית ברא . ויש לו ליקת קרקע  
בתולת במקום הרים שלא חפר בת אדם קס.  
ויגבל העפר במים חיים ויעשה גולם אחד ויתחיל  
לגלגל באלפא ביתות של רכ"א שערים כל אבר  
לבד כל אבר סכת"צ באו"ת בקפר יצירה כנגדו  
ויתגלגלו בהתחלת א"צ ואח"כ יגלגל בתורת א  
אָ אָ אָ אָ ולעולם אות השם עמהם אָ וכל הא"צ  
ואח"כ אָי ואח"כ אָי ואח"כ אָי וכן א"ו  
וכן א"ה כולו ואח"כ יתליך צי וכן גי וכל אבר  
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Front page image: Instructions on how to make a golem

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## Introduction

*"And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;  
and man became a living soul."*

(Genesis 2:7, ASV)

"She demands connection - surely, a Jew must own a past" (Ozick, *Puttermessenger Papers* 17). Cynthia Ozick's protagonist Ruth Puttermessenger is determined to find herself an ancestor. She needs someone who represents a past that can define her present. Owning a past is one way of defining what constitutes Jewishness. Edward Shapiro makes it clear what exactly makes Jewish identity problematic: "the problem of Jewish identity lies in the question whether Jewishness is a matter of religion, history, culture or ethnicity" (*Introduction*, 286). Jews of all places and all times have struggled with the question of what defines the Jewish self. This question has different answers for different Jews at different times and in different places and it is true that, as Jonathan Rosen says, "every generation has its own story to tell" (257).

In general one could say that Jewish American writers began "demanding connection" to their Jewish roots in the last decades of the twentieth century. Andrew Furman holds that "[a]lthough assimilation will continue [...] I believe we are in the midst of a powerful counterveiling trend toward rediscovery. An unprecedented number of young Jewish Americans, raised largely ignorant of Judaism, have become part of the *baal t'shuvah* (returnee) phenomenon." (17). This is true for many third generation writers who confirm the "[...] almost universal phenomenon that what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (Hanson qtd by Meyer, "Putting the Jewish back" 105). Both Cynthia Ozick and Thane Rosenbaum seem to be an exception to this rule, as not only

every generation has a different story but also every writer has a different story to tell. Adam Meyer comments that Ozick is “[...] the precursor of the third generation of Jewish American fiction writers who would return to an exploration of their Jewish roots in their texts. (“Putting the Jewish back” 110). And Thane Rosenbaum, whose parents survived the Holocaust, as a son does not wish to forget. On the contrary, he wishes to remember the Holocaust past.

Of course, the question is, to which aspect of the past do you connect? Which roots do you explore? In other words, where do you return to? Well, in the two works of fiction this thesis is concerned with, the two writers return to a notion that marks the beginning of everything: creation. In the book of Genesis we read how God created the world through the utterance of words. Adam, the first human being is an exception. He is “formed” by God and he becomes a living soul through the breath of God. Another story of creation originating in Genesis speaks of a man, made of earth or clay, coming to life through the utterance of Hebrew words. Most versions of this story could easily start with the words “once upon a time”, words that show the mythic or legendary nature of this tale. It is the tale of the golem. As with any myth or legend it is difficult to point to its true origins. Myths and legends develop over time and space and this is also true for the tale of the golem. According to Gershom Scholem, a Jewish scholar who devoted his life’s work to Jewish mysticism, the idea of the golem is deeply rooted in the thinking of the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics of the Middle Ages (“Messianic” 336). In many Jewish and Kabbalist texts, dating back as far as the second century C.E., this myth of the golem is mentioned or retold in varying forms.

The best known version of the golem story is the tale of the Golem of Prague, involving rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known in the Jewish tradition as

the Maharal of Prague. (Scholem, "Messianic" 335) This version is most famous in the sense that it is most often referred to in modern Western European and American culture. In short, Rabbi Loew created a golem out of clay and brought it to life by inserting the name of God into its mouth. In other reports one reads that the golem comes to life when the Hebrew word *emeth* (truth) is inscribed on its forehead. Rabbi Loew's purpose in making a golem was to rescue the Jews of Prague from persecution and oppression. After a period of success and rescue, the golem runs out of control. It turns against its creator and has to be destroyed before it will destroy its creator.

The myth of the Golem of Prague contains two important notions: creation and redemption. Perhaps one could also say that these notions display where the story originates and hopes to end: it starts with creation and ends in redemption. The myth of the Golem of Prague shows that the creation of a golem affirms the creative power of human beings. The myth also spells redemption: a golem's 'life' purpose is to redeem.

The golem myth has found its way into Western European culture and literature as Lewis Glinert describes in his essay "Golem! Making of a Modern Myth". He has investigated how the golem "[...] has evolved in the past hundred years from the secret knowledge of the few to the cherished legend of the many [...]" (78). Scholem has an explanation for its broad usage. The golem is a figure "in which so many authors found a symbol of the struggles and conflicts that were nearest to their hearts." ("Kabbalah" 158) Two recent examples from Jewish American fiction are Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Klay* (2000) and James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (2001). Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermessaer Papers* and Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham* are two

other examples of Jewish American fiction to have used the story of the golem in a contemporary setting.

Although Ozick and Rosenbaum are worlds apart generation wise, their two works of fiction discussed in this thesis share important aspects. Both writers demand connection to the Jewish past to fight the forgetfulness that threatens their Jewish American present. Golems are their weapons of choice. Both novels are set in New York City. In both novels golems are created to clean up the city and to redeem the city of its moral decay. Of course they do this in their own distinctive way. Ozick offers a female voice and perspective by creating the first female golem in the Jewish American literary tradition. Rosenbaum, on the other hand, brings golems to life as ghosts from the Holocaust past, male and female.

I would like to state that Ozick and Rosenbaum are “attempting to recreate collective memories through fiction” (Kerry Powers 80). In highlighting the golem myth as a cultural memory, they also highlight the notions of creation and redemption found in this myth. Ozick and Rosenbaum employ the golem myth for different purposes, but in highlighting it, many similarities can be found as well. In *The Puttermesser Papers*, Ozick employs the golem myth to portray the act of creation as well as the warning against it, turning the golem into an image of Jewish creative writing. She also employs the golem myth to portray the redemptive nature of literature. In *The Golems of Gotham*, Rosenbaum employs the golem myth to portray that one can (re)create the Holocaust past through the imagination. He also employs the golem myth to portray a threefold notion of redemption: one, that the third generation after the Holocaust has a redemptive force; two, that redemption can be achieved through *tikkun atzmi* (repair of the self); and three, that redemption can be found in remembrance.

I will discuss the outlines of contemporary Jewish American fiction in section 1 in more detail to show how the usage of the golem myth is part of a general tendency in Jewish American fiction to reconnect with Jewish heritage. In section 2 I will examine the myth of the golem to extract the basic themes of this myth: creation and redemption. Section 3 will be devoted to Cynthia Ozick's way of portraying the themes of creation and redemption in *The Puttermessaer Papers*. Then, in section 4 I will demonstrate how these two notions are illuminated in *The Golems of Gotham*.

## 1. "Demanding Connection" in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge"

(Hosea 4:6, ASV)

The Jewish people are often referred to as the "People of the Book". Jewish Americans have, over the years, demanded connection to this book, the Torah, and the rest of the Jewish literary tradition, in many different ways. While the first and second generation of Jewish Americans "[...] embraced America wholeheartedly and succumbed to the lure of American culture", the third generation "[...] has witnessed a re-emergence of theology [...]" (Kauvar "Reflections" 338). This, of course, has had its influence on Jewish American fiction. How does 'demanding connection' take shape in contemporary Jewish American fiction? If there is a "returnee phenomenon", what do Jewish American writers return to? In his essay *American Jewish Fiction*, published in 1990, Alan Berger mentions that in the eighties Jewish writers increasingly turned to traditional figures and texts in telling their own tales. However, "imagining with the materials of Jewish myth and mysticism is the hallmark of emerging writers as well" (221). And so Berger concludes that "collectively, Jewish novels are increasingly exploring the meaning of being Jewish from within rather than from the perspective of American culture" (222).

Three years later, the journal *Contemporary Literature* devoted a full issue to Jewish American Literature. Two scholars in this field, Elaine Kauvar and Lillian Kremer, offered opposing statements to the, then current, debate on the status of Jewish American culture and literature. Kauvar's position is that "[t]he contemporary American Jews' ties to Jewishness are weakened, if they exist at all [...] by a radical ignorance of the classical texts crucial to Jewish culture. Without a



basic knowledge of those, one can hardly possess the particulars necessary to maintain or to construct the future of an American Jewish culture; [...]” (Kauvar “Reflections” 347). Kauvar’s words echo the words of the prophet Hosea, when he says: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6 ASV). Kauvar might be labelled pessimistic, she does however mention a specific description of where to return to. “What will be decisive for the future of an American Jewish culture is knowledge, a return to what Cynthia Ozick [...] has called “distinction-making”, the principle of *havdalah*, the difference between the sacred and the profane.” (Kauvar “Reflections” 356).

Cynthia Ozick illuminates the difficulty of this principle in an interview with Kauvar on these matters. According to Ozick

Jewish mainstream culture was once confined to the content of the traditional religious texts, hundreds of classics that were oceanic enough even without novels and secular poetry [...]. The old definition didn't include imaginative literature as we know it now [...] But since the rise of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment [...], the idea of what Jewish culture is about has been radically altered. We seem not to know exactly what to do with this difference in perception of the nature of textual culture; it is simply too new in Jewish life (“Interview” 364,365)

Kremer is less gloomy when it comes to Jewish fiction’s current status in America. “A significant portion of contemporary Jewish-American fiction is pervasively Jewish in its moral insistence and its reference to Judaic texts.” (572). Andrew Furman, agrees with Kremer: “Although assimilation will continue [...] I believe we are in the midst of a powerful counterveiling trend toward rediscovery”(17). Furman not only defines this return as one in the direction of Jewish Orthodoxy

but also mentions a study by Bershtel and Graubard who point to the fact that this renaissance lies in the transformation of traditional Judaism. Many of these newly formed Jewish identities can also be found in contemporary Jewish American fiction (18).

Demanding connection, however, has its consequences. At the end of her essay Kremer concludes that

Jewish American literature is a vibrant, flourishing literature, more assertive than it was in the fifties and sixties, more essentially Jewish. Literary critics will need to broaden and extend their knowledge of Judaic thought if they are to explicate this new Jewish-American fiction with the discernment it merits. (589)

Kremer emphasizes the role of literary critics in explaining this “more essentially Jewish” literature. Ezra Cappell also points this out in the introduction to his book *American Talmud The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction*. He writes that “there have not been many critics capable of interpreting and decoding that which is most authentically Jewish about Jewish American culture, particularly its literary production”(13). In Cappell’s view Jewish American fiction’s obscurity and seeming irrelevance to the American public has come into existence because scholars lack the Jewish background knowledge to successfully mediate the content of Jewish American fiction to a wider audience (16).

Has ‘demanding connection’ then turned out to be an alienating process? Cappell shows it has not. He is attempting to present a way to deal with the struggle of Jewish Americans. He argues that Jewish Americans need a literature that builds bridges between tradition and modernity. They are in need of a literature that gives them the tools to stay within their tradition while living a post-modern life. In his opinion Jewish American fiction should be doing (and

actually is already doing) just that. This is the struggle Ozick mentions, that we “seem not to know exactly what to do with this difference in perception of the nature of textual culture” (Kauvar, Interview 365). Cappell purposefully calls his book *American Talmud*, by which he labels the cultural work that Jewish American fiction writers are doing as religious or inventing tradition. Taken together, Jewish American fiction forms a new American Talmud which can enhance the sense of Jewishness in America, because he believes that “today’s post-modern society is in desperate need of [...] a secular instrument of salvation”(16).

This brings us to Cynthia Ozick and Thane Rosenbaum who can be seen to be trying to “recreate collective memories through fiction” (Powers 80), thereby contributing, each in their own distinctive way, to this secular instrument of salvation, the American Talmud. This notion is certainly not new to Ozick, for in her 1983 essay “Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means” she already advocated a redemptive literature. This is a literature that “insists on the freedom to change one’s life” (245). This redemptive force of literature might make it possible for writers to return to their tradition: “Redemption means fluidity; the notion that people and things are subject to wild alteration; the sense of possibility; of turning away, or turning toward [...]” (246). In *The Puttermesser Papers*, Ozick turns toward many elements of Jewish tradition, such as midrash, the golem myth, Jewish mysticism, and the Talmud. Through these elements the notions of creation and redemption are constantly echoing in this work of fiction.

Although there are many elements of Jewish tradition worth returning to, there are others that are less tempting to turn towards. Turning away or turning toward has been a crucial dilemma for many second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust. Thane Rosenbaum is a child of Holocaust survivors, thus labeling him a second-generation witness. In *American Judaism* Jonathan Sarna states that “[...]”

a new generation is supposed to experience for itself the two dominant themes of late twentieth-century American Judaism: death in the Holocaust and rebirth in the Jewish national home" (338). Rosenbaum identifies himself as a post-Holocaust novelist, for the aftermath of the Holocaust in the lives of second-generation witnesses is the main focus of his fiction. In his fiction the Holocaust is one of the crucial 'threads of cultural memory'. Returning to this aspect of the Jewish past is controversial. According to Furman "scholars and critics continue to cast a wary eye on how Jewish American writers "imagine" the Holocaust" (60). For that is all that a second-generation witness can do: imagine. Ozick has a strong point of view on this issue:

I believe with all my soul that [the Holocaust] ought to remain exclusively attached to document and history... If the Holocaust becomes commensurate with the literary imagination, then what of those recrudescing Nazis, the so-called revisionists, who claim the events themselves are nothing but imaginings? (Ozick quoted in Furman 61)

However, she has to concede that "the facts alone [...] are finally *not* enough" (61). That is why Rosenbaum has ventured to imagine the Holocaust, the world of his parents. In doing so he is also 'demanding connection'. He contributes to the American Talmud by interpreting the aftermath of the Holocaust through the eyes of the second generation and drawing conclusions as to what this past holds for the present.

Demanding connection then takes many shapes and forms in contemporary Jewish American fiction. The fact that Jewish American writers are looking to connect to the past proves to be vital for the continuance of Jewish American fiction. However, it also poses the danger that Jewish American fiction could become obscure, unknown and unrecognizable to the greater American public.

Therefore, as Kremer and Cappell have argued, it is important that there are people building bridges. Jewish American fiction needs scholars with sufficient background knowledge to communicate the value of this fiction to every reader, Jewish and non-Jewish. Nevertheless, in the end, it is authenticity that has the greatest and most lasting impact. Which brings us back to Ozick's firm belief she teaches us through *The Lesson of the Shofar*: "It is only by writing out of one's Jewish specificity that one is likely to have universal resonance" (Berger "American" 226).

## 2. A Jewish Cultural Memory: The Myth of the Golem

*"Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance; And in thy book they were all written,  
[Even] the days that were ordained [for me], When as yet there was none of them."*

(Psalms 139:16, ASV)

For a good understanding of the notions of creation and redemption as portrayed by Ozick and Rosenbaum, it is important to look at how these notions are represented within several golem legends. Therefore, I will identify seven different notions from these legends which have influenced Ozick and Rosenbaum in using the myth of the golem. As mentioned earlier, it is in the nature of a myth to evolve over time. This is certainly true for the golem myth. According to Lewis Glinert, rabbi Yudel Rosenberg has been very influential in the making of the modern golem myth. Rosenberg, who published a cycle of Hebrew tales in Warsaw in 1909, was responsible for the fact that "[...] all the old traditions or folktales about any and every golem got sucked into a single channel and reincarnated into one of the great modern myths, the myth of the Golem of Prague [...]" (Glinert 82). Hillel Kieval also attests to this phenomenon when he writes that "every literary evocation of the Golem legend since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has incorporated two new elements: Judah Low is understood to be the Golem's Creator and Prague's Jewish town is portrayed as the locus of events" (5). According to Kieval, the legend of the Golem of Prague is a "historical projection, in which the mystical pursuits and cultural fashions of the present were attributed to an earlier, heroic age and to an older historical figure" (10). He even concludes that the new legend is

a cautionary tale of a type quite different from the original legend. At least as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century Polish rendition, the source of danger has

always been understood to reside within – within the confines of community; in the very process of the creation of artificial life. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tale has been remembered as a distortion, as if it had always been concerned with the danger posed by the outside world. (16)

One of the new elements in Rosenberg's version of the legend of the Golem of Prague is that for the first time, the power of the golem was used to fight and defeat the enemy. As Ozick mentions in her account of the golem tale: "it rose to become the saviour of the Jews of Prague" (Ozick, PP 46).

Presently we may know the golem myth only as originating in Prague, but according to Gerschom Scholem, the myth of the golem has its origins in the writings of Jewish mysticism, or rather in the Kabbalah which is the "sum of Jewish mysticism" (1). Scholem, an expert on Jewish mysticism, dedicates a chapter of his book *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* to "The Idea of the Golem". Scholem explains the goal of the Kabbalists: they "had attempted to penetrate and even describe the mystery of the world as a reflection of the mysteries of divine life" (2). Commenting on mysticism in general, Scholem says that "the sacred text loses its shape and takes on a new one for the mystic. [...] The word which claims the highest authority is opened up, as it were, to receive the mystic's experience. [...] the absolute word is as such meaningless, but it is *pregnant* with meaning" (12).

This is also true for the golem myth. It is pregnant with several different notions. One of them is that a golem affirms the creative power of human beings. For in bringing lifeless matter such as clay to life one needs the power to create. Scholem shows how close this endeavor comes to the biblical story of creation: "[...] obviously a man who creates a golem is in some sense competing with God's creation of Adam" (*Kabbalah* 159). However, the idea that a human being is

capable of such an act of creation does not originate in the biblical story but in the legends written down in the Talmud about certain famous rabbis of the third and fourth centuries (*Kabbalah* 165). A text that played a major part in the development of the golem concept is the Book of Creation, *Sefer Yetsirah*, a Jewish mystical text, dating back to somewhere between the third and sixth century C.E. This book describes how the cosmos was built: from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Book of Creation has been interpreted differently by different groups of Jewish mystics. Though it is presented as a theoretical guide to the structure of creation, it may also have been intended as a manual of magical practices. (*Kabbalah* 165-173)

Since we cannot speak of 'the golem myth' as one unambiguous whole, Scholem speaks of the 'Idea' of the golem. He points out several notions that have shaped and influenced this myth over the centuries and I will discuss these briefly. Ozick and Rosenbaum both draw on these notions in their fiction. They are aware of the fact that not only Prague had a golem but that this myth is indeed an idea shaped and reshaped over time. In order to fully grasp their usage of the golem myth it is necessary to point out several of these notions. This will show that Ozick and Rosenbaum are very selective in reinventing tradition, using whatever notions from the golem myth they prefer and which they seem fit.

The first notion present in the golem myths is that the creation of a golem is an end in itself and without practical purpose. It is "a ritual of initiation into the secret of creation" (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 177). However, in the myth of the golem of Prague, the golem is created with a specific purpose other than proving his creator's initiation into secrets of the cosmos. Ozick and Rosenbaum have both opted for the inclusion of this feature. For, if anything, their golems are practical minded creatures, created for a very practical purpose which requires them to get



their hands dirty: cleaning up New York City. However, Ozick's and Rosenbaum's creation of a golem can also be seen as an end in itself. In creating a golem they are directly connecting to Jewish tradition, which enforces them as Jewish American fiction writers.

The second notion deriving from the golem myth is that the creation of a golem holds within itself a warning against idolatry. According to Scholem, "the Golem [...] is nothing but a replica of Adam, the first Man himself" (*Messianic* 336). Scholem continues by stating that "there is in the Golem a representation of Man's creative power" (*Messianic* 337). As I pointed out earlier, a golem affirms the creative power of human beings. However, being able to create a replica of Adam means that you raise yourself to the level of the Almighty. Scholem recounts a tale from the *Sefer Yetsirah* in which the prophet Jeremiah creates a golem. However this golem meddles with the letters inscribed on his forehead and the words then read: God is dead. Scholem comments:

It is indeed significant that Nietzsche's famous cry, "God is dead," should have gone up first in a Kabbalistic text warning against the making of a Golem and linking the death of God to the realization of the idea of the Golem. (*Messianic* 338)

In the next section we will see how Ozick uses this warning inherent in the golem myth to employ the golem as an image of Jewish fiction writing. Rosenbaum also compares the process of golem making to fiction writing, explaining why to him the image of the golem is so powerful:

The golem story, in essence, is a story of creation, which is not much unlike what artists do. The novelist begins with a blank page and, by adding words, gives life to a story. [...]. Such an endeavor is a godlike act – the act

of giving life – and in Judaism, such powers are rarely displayed by human beings. (Interview 20)

Third, in making a golem, order is important. According to some kabbalist texts, the order in which the alphabet is repeated spells the specific characteristics of the golem (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 186). Rosenbaum and Ozick both draw on this feature of golem making and golem undoing. They reinvent this notion of order to fit their specific purpose with their golems. Ruth Puttermesser, Ozick's protagonist, is studying Hebrew. Moreover, she knows the *Sefer Yetshirah*, the Book of Creation, by heart. And she uses this knowledge in her creation of the golem. Ariel, Rosenbaum's female golem maker, is also aware that "the mud from the river wasn't going to do it all by itself" (*The Golems of Gotham* 39). Instead of using the Hebrew alphabet, Ariel uses the Auschwitz numbers of her grandparents. This illustrates how Rosenbaum reinvents the notion of order to fit his purpose of golem making: dealing with his Holocaust past.

Fourth, there is symbolism of rebirth in the undoing of a golem. The golem returns to the earth that it was made of (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 187). Ozick uses this feature of the myth to stress the notion of (failed) redemption through rebirth. When the remains of Puttermesser's golem Xanthippe, the earth that she was made of, is "shoveled under the red geraniums of City Hall Park" this earth brings forth a sickly new life: "whoever touches or picks those stems of blood-colored blossoms soon sickens with flu virus, or sore throat, or stuffed nose accompanied by nausea [...]" (Ozick, *Puttermesser Papers* 101). Rosenbaum turns rebirth into a second chance. Oliver, his protagonist, needs to undo the golems, so he can start over and live his life.

The fifth notion worth mentioning is that creating a golem is an ecstatic experience, it is not corporeal but a 'creation of thought'. (Scholem, *Kabbalah*

187). Ozick and Rosenbaum stress the fact that the golem is a made of out the mind: it is a product of the psyche. The imagination enables them to employ the golem myth in their fiction, therefore this aspect is stressed. Perhaps they also want to make clear to a modern audience, that a golem really is, after all, a myth.

Another notion we encounter in the myth is that golem-making is dangerous for the creator (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 188). The tale of the golem of Prague illustrates very well how the golem runs out of control. The creator does not have the ability to control the created anymore. Scholem recounts that in one of the versions of the tale of the golem of Prague, "the rabbi is successful in stopping the Golem, but the heap of clay falls upon him and kills him" (*Messianic* 336). Both novelists emphasize this aspect of the myth to enforce their plots and messages.

The last notion present in golem myth is that a golem is mute. Scholem supposes that this is because the souls of the righteous are no longer pure (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 189). He points out that "there is one thing he [the golem maker] cannot give his product: speech, which to the biblical mind is identical with reason and intuition" (*Messianic* 337). Ozick's and Rosenbaum's golems are anything but mute. This shows how ... Perhaps they have done away with this golem feature because they employ the golem in such a way that it has to speak, otherwise it is useless. Their golems have important messages to bring across which cannot be delivered without words.

I have identified seven notions from several golem legends. The purpose here was to point to the fact that there is not one golem legend, but that the myth of the golem consists of many notions that have been built up in the course of time. In *The Puttermesser Papers* and *The Golems of Gotham* all of these notions are present in one way or another. Ozick and Rosenbaum have reinvented these

notions from the golem myth in order to demand connection to the Jewish tradition.

### 3. Creation and Redemption in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers*

*"And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."*

(Genesis 6:5, ASV)

*The Puttermesser Papers* are a collection of five stories that describe the life of Ruth Puttermesser. Ruth is a woman of great learning; knowledge is what she favors above everything else. She is a lawyer and works in the civil service of New York where she dreams of making reforms. Her dreams and fantasies have the tendency to become reality. In the course of the novel she manages to become mayor of New York which gives her the opportunity to work out her reforms. She dreams of having a daughter and over night she creates a golem who poses as her daughter and who becomes Puttermesser's instrument to redeem New York City. This female golem in New York makes *The Puttermesser Papers* a perfect example of Ozick's "fascination with incorporating Jewish heritage in American fiction" (Kremer "Post-alienation" 587). Kremer holds that "the Puttermesser stories [...] exemplify Ozick's organic integration of Jewish myth to enhance a contemporary moral quest." ("Post-alienation" 573) This seems to fit Ozick for she holds that "[...] with certain rapturous exceptions, literature *is* the moral life." She explains: "[...] of the stories and novels that mean to be literature, one expects a certain corona of moral purpose: not outright in the grain of fiction itself, but in the form of a faintly incandescent envelope around it." ("Innovation" 245). To Ozick, literature and morality are two sides of the same coin. In *The Puttermesser Papers*, Jewish myth raises the value of the protagonists moral quest. In *The Puttermesser Papers*, Ozick employs the golem myth to portray the act of creation

as well as the warning against it, turning the golem into an image of Jewish creative writing. She also employs the golem myth to portray the redemptive nature of literature.

### **A Struggler Between Terach and Abraham**

The nature of human thought and imagination mentioned in Genesis 6:5, also known as *yetzer ha-ra* (the evil instinct), puts the Jewish fiction writer at a standstill. For, if all that the human imagination brings forth is evil in the eyes of the Creator, fiction writing becomes a dangerous endeavor. The endeavor becomes even more dangerous when, as a Jewish fiction writer, by actually creating worlds and the people in it, one is also at risk of idolatry. Both Cynthia Ozick and one of her critics, Harold Bloom, admit that story-making is always about creation and therefore, Timothy Parrish argues, "creation cannot occur without gods or God being present as either animating forces or rival creators" (444). Parrish shows that many of Ozick's literary characters are torn between their desire to create and the commandment not to be idolaters (440). This is also true for Ozick herself. Or, to use the words that Ozick once used to pinpoint Harold Bloom's position, she is "a struggler between Terach and Abraham" ("Literature" 195). Terach was an idol-maker while Abraham saw through the "human uselessness of idols" ("Literature" 191).

The act of golem-making in itself is an image of what a Jewish fiction writer does. As mentioned above, fiction writing can be morally dangerous for a Jewish writer. So is golem-making according to Scholem:

The danger is not that the golem, become autonomous, will develop overwhelming powers; it lies in the tension which the creative process

arouses in the creator himself. Mistakes in carrying out the directions do not impair the golem; they destroy its creator." (*Kabbalah* 191).

In her essay *Literature as Idol: Harold Bloom*, Ozick states that "The chief characteristic of any idol is that it is a system sufficient in itself. It leads back only to itself"(189). By viewing art as an end in itself, by making art a religion, art is turned into an idol and the result will be that art will be worshipped instead of God. This in its turn will result in the death of God.

Scholem mentions a case where the golem tale was reinterpreted as a moralistic legend. In this version, an early thirteenth-century Kabbalist text, the golem's forehead was inscribed with not only *emeth*, but with *YHWH Elohim Emeth* (God is truth). In the story, the creature grabs a knife and erases the first letter of *emeth*, leaving the message: God is dead. Scholem comments that this legend becomes a warning against one of the consequences of golem-making: the death of God. (*Kabbalah* 181) Most interesting about this specific golem legend is the lesson learned by the creator of this golem. He admits: "Truly, one should study these things only in order to know the power and omnipotence of the Creator of this world, but not in order really to practice them." (*Kabbalah* 180) This passage is very much reminiscent of the ending of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, where in the epilogue it says:

Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall  
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise  
Only to wonder at unlawful things:  
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits  
To practice more than heavenly power permits.

(Epilogue II.4-9)

This brings us to Ruth Puttermesser. Puttermesser can in many ways be seen as Ozick's literary alter-ego. They are the same age throughout the novel, which was written over the course of two decades. Both adore George Eliot and Plato, although, in a conversation with Lewis Frumkes, Ozick admits she probably would not choose reading Plato over lovemaking (1). Both are Jewish Americans with a Russian background, and both have a thirst for knowledge. (Ozick is well-known for calling herself an autodidact). Puttermesser is more extreme than her creator for she possesses a Faustian thirst for knowledge. In the second chapter of the book, *Puttermesser and Xanthippe*, her biographer already hints at her Faustian destiny: "she was intimate with every folly and every fall. (Ah, but she did not expect her own fall)" (29).

Ozick portrays Puttermesser in a Faustian way to enforce the notion that having aspirations as high as creating life out of lifeless matter, is nothing more than being an idol-maker. "The god thou servest is thine own appetite" (Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*, sc.5, l.11) This accusation against Faustus is certainly true for Puttermesser. It is comically exemplified in her dream of *gan eydn* (Garden of Eden), her vision of Paradise:

There, at any rate, Puttermesser would sit, in Eden, under a middle-sized tree [...] There Puttermesser would, as she imagined it, *take in*. Ready to her left hand, the box of fudge [...] ready to her right hand, a borrowed steeple of library books" (13).

But, alas for Puttermesser, this paradise is not yet a reality. For now, "her days given over to the shadow reign of a playboy Commissioner, Puttermesser was learning only Hebrew" (13). This is a significant point. While she is dreaming of paradise, in real life she busies herself with the Hebrew language. This language holds the key to creation, according to the Kabbalah. Moreover, it is "a code for



the world's design" (5). And we are reminded by Puttermesser's biographer that she really *knows* all this: "what had polymathic Puttermesser *not* read about the genus golem?" (43). Puttermesser knows the essay of Gershom Scholem, in which he alludes to the *Book of Creation*, by heart. In fact, Puttermesser even gives a summary of this essay as to remind the reader: I know!

Elaine Kauvar describes the process of the creation of the golem in these terms:

[...] for in reaching "out a correcting hand" and "forming and re-forming the savage upper lip" Puttermesser has completed, with her "own handiwork", a kind of Baal, a figure not unlike the idolatrous molten calf. Puttermesser names her creation Leah, which in Hebrew means "wild cow" and which intimates the conjunction of golem and idol, implicating the lawyer in idolatry. Not until the thing is completed and writes, "I am made out of earth, but I am also made out of your mind" is it apparent that

Puttermesser has fashioned a golem. (*Cynthia* 135)

Ozick here ingeniously constructs a permissible way in which Puttermesser can have it both ways. Puttermesser can fulfil her creative desire, coming very close to idolatry, but then, the created turns out to be a golem: a creature which only confirms Puttermesser's place within the Jewish textual tradition and therefore invalidates beforehand the possible accusation of idolatry. Within this creative construction, Ozick can freestyle away without risking to be put on the spot.

Kremer and others have labelled *Puttermesser and Xanthippe* as a midrashic tale because it is a "later text adding an interpretive gloss to earlier ones" ("Post-alienation" 585). Janet Burstein calls it the "midrashic impulse: the interpretive effort to re-connect with textual sources" (175). Originally, a midrashist interprets passages from the Hebrew Bible to "clarify and to reinforce

the moral resonance of their foundational text within contemporary experience" (175). However, in contemporary Jewish American literature, a midrashic tale does not only reinterpret scripture, it also reinterprets the legacy of scripture, a vast amount of text produced through many ages of Judaic civilization. Ozick re-connects with this myth and continues the midrashic impulse in her Puttermesser stories. Therefore she justifies her action of golem-making by referring to the Jewish past:

Puttermesser understands and sees she has created a golem for the same reasons Rabbi Loew had – as an agent of redemption to preside over civil reforms. The Great Rabbi's accomplishments inspire her: "Old delicate Prague, swept and swept of sin, giving birth to the purified daylight, the lucent genius of New York (64).

In using the golem myth, Ozick is exploring the boundaries of human creation. The golem itself is employed by Ozick as an image of Jewish creative writing. It takes place within the Jewish tradition, as a midrashic impulse or as embroidering on a cultural memory. However, this kind of writing is limited within the confines of Jewish tradition, a tradition that does not permit idolatry through fiction, but instead uses fiction as a secular instrument of salvation. Which brings us to the second notion present in Ozick's use of the golem myth: redemption.

## **The Golem As Puttermesser's Instrument of Redemption**

Creating a golem, in Puttermesser's case, was triggered by her desire for civic reform. When Morris Rappoport, her lover, leaves her, he leaves behind his *New York Times*. The newspaper to Puttermesser represents a "record of multiple chaos and urban misfortune" (66). Then, all of a sudden, she remembers how she made her golem, out of the earth in her plant pots in her apartment. She realizes that she made the golem

[...] because of agitation and fever: because of the wilderness inside Rappoport's *Times*. [...] Her craving was to cleanse the wilderness; her craving was to excise every black instance of injustice; her craving was to erase outrage. In the middle of her craving – out of the blue – she formulated the PLAN. She was thumbing it now, it was in her hands: PLAN. For the Resuscitation, Reformation, Reinvigoration & Redemption of the City of New York (66,67).

It is remarkable that Puttermesser's 'craving' (a word befitting a person with so great a thirst for knowledge) is the underlying reason for her golem to appear. Puttermesser craves for knowledge, for justice and peace, but also for daughters, for offspring. Puttermesser not only has a creative desire but also a procreative desire. These two 'cravings' come together in the golem, who represents these desires and therefore also has two names: Xanthippe and Leah. These two names are significant and meaningful. In the last chapter, *Puttermesser in Paradise*, we read what goes through Puttermesser's mind in the last "nanosecond of life still allotted to her" (214). She was thinking of Paradise, but "she was also thinking how names have their destiny, how they drive whoever holds or beholds them" (214). Names are a driving force and in Xanthippe and Leah Ozick shows the twofold meaning of the golem. Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, the only one who

could "gainsay Socrates" (49) represents the creative desire: the thirst for knowledge and insight into the secrets of creation. And Leah, which means 'wild cow', is an allusion to idolatry, but also an allusion to the Rite of Leah.

In her essay *Cynthia Ozick's Golem: a Messianic Double*, Miriam Sivan explains that Leah "echoes the Lurianic 'rite of Leah' which, as Scholem recounts, is concerned with the promise of redemption". Sivan continues to argue that "Leah is messianic in that she represents the return from exile, an exile which is 'a cosmic, not an historical, event in Jewish tradition'. The golem as Leah is Puttermesser's intention." (53). The golem knows this: "[...] the creature wrote: Leah is my name, but I want to be Xanthippe." (42) This golem cannot be fooled. She knows exactly who and what she is. She knows that she is Leah, Puttermesser's 'daughter'. However as Xanthippe she also represents the Faustian element in Puttermesser: her thirst for knowledge. For the golem continues: "I want to be Xanthippe [...] I know everything you know. I am made of earth but also I am made out of your mind." (42)

Xanthippe and Leah both confirm the golem as the daughter of Puttermesser and the offspring of her mind. Ozick stresses this in the language she uses. For instance, when Puttermesser asks the golem where the plan for the redemption of New York came from, the golem tells her: "Two urges seeded you. I am one, this (the plan) is the other. A thought must claim an instrument. When you conceived your urge, simultaneously you conceived me" (67). Ozick uses the word conceive; Puttermesser becomes "pregnant" with this PLAN for the redemption of New York. And in order to bring this about a golem is created. Xanthippe / Leah becomes Puttermesser's instrument to bring about civic reforms and to transform the City.

We have already seen that Ozick uses the golem as an image of Jewish creative writing. Through her name (Xanthippe/Leah) and her actions (writing the PLAN / bringing redemption) the golem is used by Ozick to represent the redemptive nature inherent in literature. Ozick seems to point to the idea that within Jewish fiction this redemptive nature is even more worth stressing because it is a way of 'demanding connection', or 'returning from exile'. Jewish fiction is a way of combining the two desires, the Xanthippe and Leah, of the Jewish fiction writer. On the one hand, this writer has the desire to create, a desire that poses some problems from a Jewish perspective. And on the other hand, the writer has the desire to procreate, the writer 'demands connection' and wants to return from exile.

This PLAN for the redemption of New York, has a precedent, namely Puttermessenger's dream of *gan eydn* – Paradise, which is described in the first chapter of the novel. After the undoing of the golem Xanthippe, redemption seems to have failed. For the city of New York is returning to its previous state: "the City is choking" (100). However, Puttermessenger's life does find a redemptive closure. In the last chapter called *Puttermessenger in Paradise*, we learn more about the nature of Paradise and the redemptive closure it brings Puttermessenger. In section 2 I outlined Ezra Cappell's notion that contemporary Jewish Americans are in need of a secular instrument of salvation and that Jewish fiction fulfils this role. Jewish American fiction is the new American Talmud, the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Cappell suggests a method to interpret Jewish American literature: through the use of a Talmudic analytical tool, a tool also used in rabbinical Judaism: PARDES. The consonants represent four different levels of interpretation of a text. Ozick uses this analytical tool, or as she calls it "an acronym for a way of

understanding" (220) to let Puttermesser uncover the meaning of Paradise and bring her life to a redemptive closure.

According to this analytical tool there are four levels of meaning in the word and concept of Paradise. Throughout the last chapter, Puttermesser uncovers all four. The first level of meaning is *Peshat*, "the literal explanation" (Cappell 14). Puttermesser uncovers that this is "Paradise in its obvious sense: it is where you find yourself when you die." (221). The second level, *Remez*, is paradise in "the allusive sense: there are hints in Paradise of how your life deserves to be judged. Also hints to indifference to all that" (221). The third level, *Drosh*, the interpretation of Paradise, takes Puttermesser a bit longer to uncover. However, after an imagining of her life in which she marries and has a child and is perfectly happy in every regard, Puttermesser concludes that "Paradise was the place where she could walk freely inside her imagination, and call up anything she desired" (222). The last level of the meaning of Paradise is *Sod*, the secret meaning. "Paradise is a dream bearing the inscription on Solomon's seal: this too will pass. [...] A dream that flowers only to be undone will bring more misery than a dream that has never come true at all. The secret meaning of Paradise is that it too is hell" (234).

Puttermesser's life ends with seeing into the sod of paradise: paradise and hell are two sides of the same coin. In a way she learned this lesson earlier on in the book as she is undoing her golem and shouts: "Too much Paradise is greed. Eden disintegrates from too much Eden. Eden sinks from a surfeit of itself!"(99). In the end, Puttermesser learns that there is a limit to the usage of imagination. Imagination is freedom, but freedom has its price. The redemption Puttermesser finds is that she receives answers: the Jewish tradition, the past that she finally owns, helps her to analyse Paradise and to uncover its full meaning. Puttermesser

can now interpret Paradise, although she may not be happy to have uncovered its secret meaning.

#### 4. Creation and Redemption in Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham*

"On the way, Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a block of salt."

(Genesis 19:26, ASV)

Thane Rosenbaum's parents were Holocaust survivors. Alan Berger calls Rosenbaum "one of the most eloquent and anguished of American second-generation voices" ("Mourning" 6). Berger has written extensively on Jewish American writers who are second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust. He calls them the "children of Job", the offspring of survivors who "bear second-generation witness to the psycho-social dynamics of inheriting traumatic memory. This memory is doubly paradoxical; it is not the memory of one's own experience, yet it provides images and metaphors that shape second-generation identity. It is as if the legacy were almost *genetically encoded*" ("Mourning" 6).

In his protagonist Oliver Levin, Rosenbaum exemplifies how the legacy of the Holocaust influences the identities and lives of children of survivors. Oliver's identity, or rather his sense of identity, is central to this novel. Oliver is a man "haunted by loss". Or, as he puts it: "the loved ones are long gone, but the loss never leaves my side" (*The Golems* 32). He is the only child of Lothar and Rose Levin who, in the first chapter of the novel, end their own lives in their synagogue in Miami when Oliver is far off in college. Oliver continues with his life, marries Samantha and has a daughter, Ariel. When Ariel is two years old his wife abandons Oliver, leaving him and Ariel behind in New York.

Rosenbaum adapts the original golem story and turns it into a ghost story. He explains this choice in an interview conducted by Derek Parker Royal:



[...] what needed to be re-created here was more than the mere making of a Jewish monster; it also had to include a spiritual resurrection. The original golem was all body and no soul; my golems were all spirit with no body. A complete inversion of the paradigm, which makes sense to me, given that in a post-Holocaust world, nothing can be as it once was—even the operating manual for making a golem (19).

Rosenbaum chooses to create the golems as ghosts because to recreate the past you need, not just any creatures created out of clay, but the actual inhabitants of the past. This ghostly version of the golem myth is much better suited to bring across one of the messages of this novel: deal with the past or it will haunt you for the rest of your life.

In *The Golems of Gotham*, Rosenbaum employs the golem myth to (re)create the past through the imagination in order to shape the protagonist's identity. He also employs the golem myth to portray a threefold notion of redemption: one, that redemption can be achieved through *tikkun atzmi* (repair of the self); two, that the third generation has a redemptive force; and three, that redemption can be found in remembrance.

### **Playing God With Auschwitz Numbers**

"It all started with writer's block" (33). Oliver Levin finds himself in a situation where he is "left without words" (29), which for a writer poses a "to be or not to be dilemma" (29). Oliver, originally a Wall Street lawyer, turns his back on his career because "the numbingness of it all began to wear on me" (33) and he becomes a writer of gothic legal thrillers instead. Oliver here resembles his creator, for Rosenbaum also gave up being a lawyer in order to write fiction. Oliver also resembles Ruth Puttermesser in the sense that they are both legal

minds and wannabe artists. For Oliver does not see himself as a real artist. "[...] I am a writer, but I'm no artist" (30). Artists only care about truth. And he, as a writer of detective stories, has avoided that problem for his "aesthetic never qualifies as emotionally complex or intellectually challenging. I provide no insight into life, no glimpse of the human condition, no window into the inner workings of a troubled soul." (30). What he did instead was "pure avoidance. Flawless hiding. Grief masking. [...] That was my secret: the refusal to emotionally confront all that had gone wrong, and all that had walked away." [...] My parents were Holocaust survivors. Need I say more ...? (31). So, instead of acknowledging the truth about his identity, Oliver is alienated from his past. He finds himself in an identity crisis and he again resembles Puttermesser. Oliver decides to start looking to the past to shape his identity. Without knowing it he agrees with Puttermesser: "surely, a Jew must own a past" (Ozick, *Puttermesser Papers* 17).

In Oliver's case the past that he owns is rather problematic. Oliver is a second-generation witness to the Holocaust, born with "terror in his blood" (279). And he has lived a long time repressing all his unworked trauma. Freud insisted that you cannot master your traumatic past until you work through it (Berger, "Mourning" 7). Working through trauma, Berger writes, is how "Rosenbaum's second-generation protagonists represent their Holocaust legacy" ("Mourning" 7). Oliver's way of working through his trauma is to confront his past by recreating it in his novel 'Salt and Stone'. This is where his search for identity coincides with his daughter's plans to rescue her father. In order to recreate the past Rosenbaum hands his protagonists the golem myth as the instrument to do so.

When it comes to the notion of creation in *The Golems of Gotham* we see that there is, just as in *The Puttermesser Papers* and contrary to the myth of the Golem of Prague, a female creator. Ariel Levin, Oliver's teenage daughter makes

her objectives of golem-making very clear: "All I wanted was to fix my father, and that's why I did it" (19). The creation of a golem always has a specific purpose and we also see that here: Ariel wants to repair the brokenness within her father. In an imagined conversation with her father, Ariel displays her background knowledge on golems:

Ariel, I'm your father and I don't want you messing around with golems. They're not for children – very dangerous stuff, worse than smoking. Besides, they only show up every five hundred years or so, and even if you can figure out the recipe, they always go too far and then you can't stop them (25).

However, Ariel, stubborn and focussed, continues her crusade anyway. She figures out that "it was all in the numbers" (39). She creates the golems of Gotham by using the Auschwitz numbers of her grandparents as the basic ingredients of Kabbalah gematria. During a school trip to the Hudson river and the Lighthouse she collects clay from the river and brings it to her attic. And, "to complete the potion" she uses eight *Yortzeit* candles because they "remember the dead. If they can do that, maybe they can also work to resurrect them"(46). "My magic wand and broomsticks, the potions and the spells, came from the kabbalah. I was playing God, even though I was only in ninth grade" (39). After she had brought all the ingredients to the attic, she starts playing 'Invitation to the dead' on her violin, then she calls out the numbers and repeats them and she improvises, chanting: "Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen..." (48).

The creation of the golem did not go exactly according to protocol. As Rose later explains: "She used these numbers – the ones on our arms – but she played too many combinations, that's why we didn't come alone" (78). The Golems of

Gotham are not only Ariel's grandparents, Rose and Lothar, but also six Jewish writers, all Holocaust survivors who each took his own life: Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jean Amery and Piotr Rawicz. When Oliver finds out what his daughter has done, and his parents are introducing themselves as ghosts, he does not know who all these other ghosts are. It is strange for a child of Holocaust survivors and a writer moreover, not to know these names. Rosenbaum mentions this explicitly to emphasize the fact that Oliver is alienated from his past and unconnected to the legacy of his parents. Oliver's editor confirms this when she says: "A few months ago I swear you didn't even realize you were a child of Holocaust survivors. I think you forgot you were even Jewish. None of it was a big deal" (266).

"Gomorra. Medusa. Orpheus and Eurydice. Salt and stone. Looking back has always been deadly" (255). With these words Oliver makes himself and his readers aware of the fact that he is on a very risky trip down memory lane. While the ghosts of Gotham fill the city and the holes inside his heart, the blockage gets lifted. The golems made him think of the past as "something worth revisiting" (256). Oliver even thinks: "But perhaps the biblical Jews and the ancient Greeks got it all wrong, maybe life is all about backtracking [...]" (256)

Rosenbaum employs the golem myth as an instrument to recreate the past. The golems are created through the imagination to confront issues of the past. For on the one hand it is Ariel who creates the golems, but on the other hand it is Oliver who is recreating and reimagining his past in his novel *Salt and Stone*: "I'm finally willing and able to touch, feel and sit with all this pain and sadness. I'm reimagining Samantha and why she left. I'm reimagining and re-creating you, and the reasons why you left. You're not really here; I invented you. [...] I even

invented Ariel's violin. This pain is a gold mine. What are you here for if not so that I can experience this gift?" (278).

Rosenbaum also uses the golem myth as a beautiful example of a creative process that provides insight into things larger than oneself. As we have seen in several golem myths and in Ozick's use of it, the warning against the creation of a golem is not directed at the creature of clay, but at its creator. By creating a golem the creator is endangering himself. And that is why the golem myth is so fit to be used here: reimagining a past that is not your own, and especially the Holocaust, is simply something larger than yourself and therefore dangerous. As the narrator phrases it: "Zyklon B was now the ultimate forbidden fruit" (3). Or, in Oliver's words, the Holocaust is the "ultimate tree of knowledge [...] You want to know about life, you want to know about death, you want to know humanity - you want to know inhumanity - you study the Holocaust" (265). Once his blockage is gone, he starts writing his novel: 'Salt and Stone': "Life was lived exclusively on the keyboard, gelling with a suddenly unblank screen. That's where the tears were spilled, the loss felt, the pain managed" (223). His editor doesn't like "this depressing book, filled with all of this Holocaust, suicide and abandonment imagery..." Oliver also comes to the conclusion that looking back has its consequences. "I'm cured, only the cure is even worse than the disease. If you know a way for me to get writer's block back, please tell me" (228).

Oliver has finally learned the lesson of Lot's wife, in which he is, according to Berger, an example of the second-generation witness: "If one looks back too soon- or engages in confronting the enormity of the Holocaust before the appropriate time- the result may be fatal." (*Children* 15). Throughout the novel, we see the dangers of reimagining the past. For eventually, the knowledge of things larger than himself will become too much for Oliver to bear and then it will

destroy him. In other words, these golems will run out of control and they will become a danger to Oliver and his surroundings.

The golems of Gotham are indeed out of control. The strange thing is that in this story the golems do not turn against their creator(s), but against the world. The golems are preparing "an assault that would rival the plagues of Egypt, the wooden horse of Troy, the raid on Entebbe, the Golem of Prague. A rampage of massive scale and epic upheaval" (312).

### **A Threefold Notion of Redemption**

Ariel is very specific when it comes to the purpose she has in mind for creating the Golems of Gotham. She wants to repair the brokenness inside of Oliver. His brokenness actually hurts her. Not only emotionally, but also physically. When Ariel is gathering the mud from the Hudson river that she needs to make the golem, she cuts herself on a piece of glass. She doesn't bother to look at it then, but when she revisits the site with her ghostly grandparents, she finds out this was the glass that was ritually broken on her parents' wedding day. In the manner of a true messiah, Ariel says: "I still have a scar from it. See? I showed them, taking off a mitten and proving to my grandparents that I had shed blood trying to rescue their son" (208).

Repairing Oliver turns out to be a redemptive cause. For the damage Ariel is trying to fix has everything to do with ghosts and scars from the past from which Oliver has to be redeemed. This redemptive element is present in many versions of the golem myth. We have seen it in the tale of the Golem of Prague, where Rabbi Loew creates a golem to rescue and redeem the Jews of Prague from their oppressors. And also in Ozick's version, where the golem is an instrument to restore and redeem New York. Rosenbaum employs the golem myth to offer a

threefold notion of redemption: one, that the third generation has a redemptive force; two, that redemption can be achieved through *tikkun atzmi* (repair of the self); and three, that redemption can be found in remembrance.

Rosenbaum uses the image of the lighthouse and the story of the Little Red Lighthouse to portray the rescuing and redemptive power of the third generation. Ariel, a member of the third generation is, as we have seen above, portrayed as a redeemer figure when it comes to her father. Ariel also mentions this: "The other day I started to realize that I'm a lot like the lighthouse. All kids are, really – tiny lighthouses trying to rescue their parents" (21). Later on in the novel, Ariel broadens the meaning of the lighthouse:

Were the banks of the Hudson River and the site of the Little Red Lighthouse a place to leave flowers and say Kaddish? Or was it more like an Easter tale, one of rebirth and resurrection? What kind of story was this? All along I thought that the Little Red Lighthouse was a story about rescue – for the boats on the Hudson, and for my father. Now I was starting to see it a little differently, taking the story more personally (205).

Ariel finally starts to understand the story more personally towards the end of the novel. When Oliver is ready to take his own life, standing on the Washington Bridge, surrounded by the golems trying to talk him out of it, Ariel is in the lighthouse. She is up there, has turned on its light and is trying to follow the movements of her father with the beam of the lighthouse (344). When the gun falls into the water, the rescuing image of the lighthouse is confirmed: "The gun and the broken glass dropped into the Hudson River, [...] sinking beyond any hope of future rescue, out of range of any lighthouse beam" (346). Apart from rescuing beams, the least Ariel has to offer her father is a tangible reason to keep on living.

The second, but most important, aspect of the notion of redemption that Rosenbaum portrays by employing the golem myth is redemption through *tikkun atzmi*. *Tikkun atzmi* means as much as “the repair of the self”. According to Berger, Rosenbaum offers the possibility of redemption from the legacy of the Holocaust. (“Mourning” 8) Rosenbaum also admits that this redemptive closure is present in *The Golems of Gotham*, the third book of his post-Holocaust trilogy.

I have a curious strain of redemptiveness running through my novels. [...]

The aesthetics of the trilogy called for a redemptive closure, given that it began with paralysis and mourning, turned to rage, and then ended up with resurrection and rescue” (Parker 4).

One of the ways in which Rosenbaum shapes this “redemptive closure” is through the *tikkun atzmi* of his protagonist Oliver. He employs the golem myth as the instrument of the imagination to look back to a traumatic past and then finds redemption by receiving insight knowledge of something larger than himself which ultimately “heals” the protagonist’s self. Berger uses *tikkun atzmi* as a “therapeutic term” that is used to describe “the attempt to achieve a healing of the self.” (“Mourning” 8) This becomes very clear in the mission the golems have in Gotham. Rosenbaum always portrays this mission against the background of the myth of the Golem of Prague: “The original Golem was created to protect and defend against an external enemy. But we came not because of the outside world, but because of the broken world inside of Oliver – the enemy within. That was our target” (312). A few pages further into the novel we read these words again: “Their task was never intended to be the same as that of the Prague Golem: Their manner and method of rescue was all about inner transformation, not outward violence” (340).



The golems' mission is focused on the inside: the legacy of scars within Oliver. Everything happening on the outside, in the streets of New York, is an "additional weight" in the process of redemption. A weight, as Berger calls it, of "striving for at least a partial repair of the world (*tikkun olam*)" ("Mourning" 8). The fruits of *tikkun olam* are becoming visible in New York. The mayor mentions how New York has changed in his speech on New Year's Eve: "crime and murder are way down in New York. [...] There is no more smoking or smoke in New York. [...] We now take baths instead of showers. And all barbed-wire fences have been removed. Tattoos are all gone. Con Edison has eliminated gas" (215). However, these results prove to be temporary and in the end not enough. Because, as one of the golems reminds the other ones: "We are arrogant if we believe we can achieve something through our deaths that we couldn't with our pens while we were alive" (125). And therefore,

the Golems conceded there was a limit to what they could accomplish on the Upper West Side and beyond. It was all much too much. There were only eight of them, and billions of problems, unjust judgments, lost causes, dashed hopes, permanent insults, wounded feelings, open sores, deep indignities, and slapped faces for which there were no amends. Perhaps it was all a lost cause from the very beginning. Even those with a messiah complex are also waiting for the Messiah (290).

As we have seen, Ariel is referred to in terms of a messiah figure, but so is Oliver. Lothar and Rose glanced at their son standing there against the wall, underneath a crucifix bundled up in a sackcloth. This wasn't the baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, but the fully grown, bloodied martyr thrown now into the figurative broom closet to make room for Jews at prayer. And

positioned directly underneath where there was once a Messiah, was Oliver, the mystery writer (252).

Besides *tikkun atzmi*, Oliver gradually starts striving for *tikkun olam*. That is why he so desperately wants to convince his editor of publishing his novel *Salt and Stone*. But that is also why he goes too far into his past and comes to feeling the sin of the whole world on his shoulders. That is why his parents advise him: "The world has not been kind to saviors, Oliver. Maybe because in the end, we know that messiahs and magicians offer us nothing but wishful thinking. So don't sacrifice yourself for that book" (278). So, in the end, Oliver does not sacrifice himself for his book or for the "sins of the world" but he precedes his family to the Passover seder.

The "last supper" described in the novel points us to the third aspect of redemption: redemption from the "sin of forgetfulness" through remembrance. The Passover seder is the last moment that Ariel, Oliver and the ghosts are together in New York. It is not coincidental that Rosenbaum places this pre-final family moment around a Passover seder. Passover is the feast of redemption, "a time to celebrate and commemorate" (348). Rosenbaum constructs this particular seder in a true twentieth-century Jewish American way. According to Sarna "From Holocaust to Rebirth' became central to what has been called the 'civil religion' of American Jews" (337). So Oliver decides that "tonight was to be an early observance of Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day" (348). According to Oliver "the Haggadah only tells one Jewish tragedy, and by all reckonings, not the worst one by a long shot", for "the camps were worse than the pyramids [...] and Zyklon B was far more poisonous than any plague" (348). What we see here is that Jewish tradition is reinvented to include the memories of the youngest generation. In other words, Jewish tradition is appropriated by Oliver. He has

demanded connection to his Jewish past. He is not emphasizing the fact that this past is responsible for the "terror in his blood". Instead he comes to view remembrance as a redemptive force.

Rosenbaum employs the golem myth because there is always a lesson or a warning in the creation of a golem. And one of the lessons the Gotham golems wanted to teach the world, was that the world, humanity, has the moral duty to remember. "When did indifference and amnesia begin to rule the world, or was it always this way?" (294) the narrator wonders. "Forgetting is the easiest and most tempting of human enterprises" (293). And therefore the golems had to do something. "That's the whole point of our existence: to exact revenge, to teach the vile and ignorant important lessons about compassion, fairness and respect, so they will be decent the next time" (310). Therefore Oliver had to write his novel. The Holocaust "has to be told and retold in many different ways. There have to be more tellers and many more listeners, because there aren't that many more survivors..." (266). Therefore, the making of the golems is accompanied by the lighting of Yortzeit candles. For, as Ariel explains, they "remember the dead" (46).

A few days after the Passover dinner (and take notice: it is spring) the Levins make a trip to Miami. "Oliver and I took the plane. The Golems arranged for their own transportation" (359). Ariel and Oliver visit the graves of Rose and Lothar, where they say a proper farewell. The fact that it is spring, enforces the idea of a new beginning, a rebirth, new life. At the cemetery Ariel plays *Invitation to the Dead*. And she reminds the reader: "But maybe Oliver was being born all over again. This piece of music might also substitute as an invitation to a *pidyon haben* – the redemption of the firstborn. [Oliver] was getting a second chance "(366). "The golems inside you now need to die Oliver, Primo said. We gave them

life by pushing you to search for truth, to know yourself and where you come from, and how to live, really live, for tomorrow" (366).

The task of the golems is done and Oliver has been reborn, this time with the knowledge of who he is in the light of his family's past. He has demanded connection and, through the imagination, the past has become real. The Golems of Gotham have finally retired. Quite opposite to their Prague counterpart, they helped to rebuilt the city after their attack on it. And now "it would be far more likely for them to be found on the golf courses and tennis courts of Miami" (361). The final descriptions of New York offer little sparks of hope. The flowers in Central Park are in bloom and Manhattan has the "gloss of an island paradise" (351).

## Conclusion

"Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not."

(Proverbs 8:33, ASV)

"Surely, a Jew must own a past" (Ozick, *Puttermessenger Papers* 17). Ruth Puttermessenger has demanded connection to her Jewish past. So has Oliver Levin. Both protagonists discussed in this thesis have, in the end, established a firm connection to their Jewish heritage. Cynthia Ozick wrote that "fiction will not be interesting or lasting unless it is again conceived in the art of the didactic. (Emphasis, however, on *art.*)". She holds that the innovative (literature) looks for ways to educate readers as to what it means to be a human being ("Innovation" 241). These novels teach us the importance of identity and how identity is shaped by owning a past.

In this thesis I have given an overview of how Jewish American fiction demands connection to a Jewish tradition and a Jewish past. I have concentrated on Ozick's and Rosenbaum's usage of the golem myth to highlight the notions of creation and redemption. The myth of the golem is a cultural memory that has the ability to teach contemporary readers. It is through the notions inherent in this myth that it derives its contemporary power. The central question was how Ozick and Rosenbaum employ the golem myth to bring across their notions of creation and redemption. Ozick portrays her protagonist Ruth Puttermessenger as an isolated Jewish American woman in search of a Jewish past. Through her creation of a golem, Puttermessenger is taught the limitations of her own creative desire. In a Faustian way she experiences first the triumph of her creation and then an unavoidable fall that will mark her, and the New York she so desperately wanted to redeem, for times to come. *The Puttermessenger Papers* point to the redemptive

nature of literature, which has a way of illuminating tradition, or putting tradition in a new light.

Thane Rosenbaum uses the golem myth to portray the notion that the past can be recreated through the imagination in order to shape Oliver's problematic identity. Imagination has the power to illuminate the past and to enable a connection with that past, even if this past is the Holocaust. The golem symbolizes the unreal becoming real. It turns up from the past in order to help Oliver deal with the present. Also, the golems of Gotham came "to teach the world a lesson" (Rosenbaum, 310). One aspect of the notion of redemption is that redemption can be found in remembrance. We, Jews and gentiles alike, have a moral obligation to remember. We have to demand connection to the past in order to redeem ourselves from its possible burden on our shoulders.

By using the myth of the golem Ozick and Rosenbaum have re-invented tradition. Through their protagonists, Ruth Puttermesser and Oliver Levin, Ozick and Rosenbaum have demanded connection. These two works of Jewish American fiction show that there is an "American Talmud", mediating the contents of Jewish tradition to a twenty-first century public of Jewish Americans, and that Cynthia Ozick and Thane Rosenbaum are two of its contemporary authors. "So I resign myself and say to the Golem and its creator: develop peacefully and don't destroy the world. Shalom" (Scholem, *Messianic* 340).

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