CZECH LEGACIES

THE LEGACY OF RABBI JUDAH LOEW OF PRAGUE

*Byron L. Sherwin**

In the Bible, God commands Noah to enter the ark. The Hebrew word for 'ark' is *teivah.* The Hebrew word for the letters of the alphabet is also *teivah.* The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, taught that in prayer and in study, a person must enter the letters. The letters of holy words are each like a door.

For many years, I studied the holy books written by Rabbi Judah Loew. The letters that comprise the more than 1,700 pages of his published writings are like doors. Where did these doors lead me? To Rabbi Loew, and to Prague.

Many years ago, I learned of a legend that tells that when a scholar dies he goes to a great academy in heaven, and there he can meet any one scholar of the past, and ask that scholar any question he wishes to ask. Years ago, I thought that if I were given that choice, I would ask to meet Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, der Höhe Rabbi Löw, the rabbi of Prague. For while many have been rabbis *in* Prague, only he was rabbi *of* Prague. Though dead for centuries, he continues to be Rabbi *of* Prague.

I thought of the questions I might ask him, but the more I thought, the more I felt like the fourth son in the Passover *Seder* – the one who does not even know enough to ask the question. I began to study Rabbi Loew's many books. It took many years, and I found there many questions and many answers, but certain questions still remained unanswered.

---

* Rabbi Dr. Byron L. Sherwin is Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Distinguished Service Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism at Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, Illinois, USA. He is the author of 21 books, including *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1982), *The Golem Legend: Origins and Implications* (University Press of America, 1985), and *Sparks Amidst the Ashes: The Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry* (Oxford, 1997). This essay is based upon his May 1995 lecture at the Old Jewish Town Hall in Prague.

Why was I fascinated by Rabbi Loew? Was it the story of his life? Was it the profundities of his work? Was it the mystery of the legends about him? Was he as great as he is portrayed by legend, or, do the legends only reflect an image of his greatness? What would Jewish Prague have been without him? What would Prague have been without him? What would Ashkenazi Jewry have been without him? What would the rabbi of the Altneuschul, the Staronova Synagoga, the Old-New Synagogue, have to say to the Old-New World, to Old-New Jews, to Jews of the Old world and the New World? His chair remains, as if it is somehow waiting for him to return. And, if he did return, what would he say, what would he do? What manner of man was Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel? What is the key to unlocking this mysterious man enveloped by layers of legend? Where is the door permitting us entrée to the letters that comprise the hundreds of pages of his writings?

Perhaps the place to begin is with paradox. As the great American philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once said, 'paradox is not a defeat, but an opportunity'. In the case of Judah Loew, paradox and irony provide a key to unlocking a mystery. Rabbi Loew's life, his legend, his writings, his teachings, his influence upon future generations, are characterised by paradox; punctuated with irony. Of the many paradoxes and ironies that might be offered, I would like to offer four examples:

1. Judah Loew is known to history as the Rabbi of Prague. However, he was not born in Prague, but in Poland – in Poznán. He is known as the Rabbi of *Prague,* even though he served as the Chief Rabbi of Moravia and also as the Chief Rabbi of Poland, even though he served as Chief Rabbi of Moravia twice as long as he served as Chief Rabbi of Prague. In fact, the Jewish community of Prague had many opportunities to elect him Chief Rabbi of Prague, but they did not do so until the last decade of his very long life. His life is an example of the proverb, 'No one is a prophet in his own land'. The first irony is that his presence in Prague gave the Jewish community of Prague a high status, never attained by that community before Rabbi Loew. Since Rabbi Loew served as Chief Rabbi of Prague, Prague always has had a high status in Jewish history that it would not have had without him. And yet, that very community – the Jewish community of Prague – failed to elect him their rabbi until the end of his life when he suffered from disappointment and sorrow.

Why did his election as chief Rabbi of Prague take so long? Didn't the Jews of Prague recognise the jewel in their midst? The Emperor Rudolph II recognised his greatness, but not the Jews of his own generation in Prague. Were they afraid of his power, of his greatness, of his genius?

2. Rabbi Loew was a great defender of tradition. He understood Jewish tradition to be like a chain, where a teacher conveys his knowledge of the past through his student to the future. For this reason he advocated radical reforms and improvements in Jewish education. Yet, despite his emphasis on identifying the links in the chain of tradition, Rabbi Loew never reveals how and by whom the tradition was conveyed to him. We know nothing about who his teachers were, who influenced him, how he was initiated to Jewish learning, particularly into the mysteries of the Jewish mystical tradition. Yet, despite the obscurity of the influences upon him, we can identify the many subsequent strands of Jewish life and thought that he directly and profoundly influenced.

Though he left his native Poland, he had a decisive influence upon the unique variety of Hasidism to develop in Poland. Indeed, he had a crucial influence upon the development of Hasidism itself. No less a figure than Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk considered him to be 'the father of Hasidism'. Recent scholarship demonstrates the extraordinary impact he had upon Hasidism.

Martin Buber wrote about the influence of his thinking upon Zionism. Indeed, the title of Theodore Herzl's novel *Old-New Land* is probably borrowed from the name of Loew's synagogue – the Old-New Synagogue (Staronova). Similarly, the influence of the legend of Rabbi Loew and his Golem has been immense. Perhaps no Jewish legend since the Bible has had such a vast influence on literature or science. Many examples could be given, but a few may suffice.

The legend of the Golem appears in the writings of at least three Nobel Laureates: Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jorge Luis Borges, and Elie Wiesel. Its influence is seen in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* in Goethe's *Sorcerer's Apprentice,* in the novels of Gustav Meyrink, in the poetry of Hugo Salus, in the drama of Halper Leivick, in the opera of Eugene d'Albert. It is found in the earliest films of the 1920s, and on the stage today. It is found in popular culture, even in comic books like *Superman.*

It is also found in recent reflections on the very relevant problem of the relationship of human beings to machines, particularly to the computer. For instance, Professor Norbert Weiner of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wrote in 1961 that 'the machine is the modern counterpart of the Golem of the Rabbi of Prague'. The first computer installed in Israel was named 'Golem'. The first test-tube baby was compared by *Time* Magazine to the artificial creation of human life as it appears in the legend of the Golem. In 1982, the American President Jimmy Carter appointed a commission to study the ethical problems in medicine. In their report, this presidential commission wrote,

The myth of the Golem created from lifeless dust by the sixteenth-century Rabbi Loew of Prague serves as a reminder of the difficulty of restoring order if a creation intended to be helpful proves harmful instead.

The second paradox and irony is that we know how and whom Rabbi Loew influenced but we do not know who influenced him. We know how Rabbi Loew influenced the links in the chain of tradition that came after him, but we cannot precisely identify the links of the chain of tradition that preceded him, and that influenced his thinking.

3. Rabbi Loew was the first significant Jewish author who sought to make the Jewish mystical tradition accessible and understandable. His goal, according to one hasidic master, was to 'reveal the concealed'. Yet, the nature and meaning of his own teachings largely remains unknown, obscure, mysterious. For example, once Rabbi Yehiel Mayer of Gastinin approached his master, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk, to discuss Rabbi Loew's writings. The rabbi of Kotzk turned toward his disciple and said, 'How can you expect to understand the profundities of Rabbi Loew's writings when you could not even understand his gossip?' The son-in-law of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk – Rabbi Abraham of Sochaczew – was so impressed with the deep wisdom of Rabbi Loew that he once said, 'The Maharal of Prague had brains even in his feet'.

The third paradox is that – though Rabbi Loew revealed the concealed hidden in the tradition that came before him, his own writings are difficult, mysterious and concealed.

4. In the entire long history of Jewish religious thought, few thinkers have had a more parochial, a more exclusivistic view of the nature of the Jewish people than did Rabbi Loew. His view was that the Jewish people occupies an exalted metaphysical status above all other peoples of the world, that Jews are not only essentially different than others, but better than others. No other Jewish thinker erects such high and firm walls between Jews and non-Jews, between the Jews and the non-Jews among whom Jews lived, than did Rabbi Loew.

Yet, despite his narrow views, other aspects of his teachings and the legends about him have had a broad and universalistic impact. As already mentioned, the impact of the legend of the Golem is immense in science and literature, extending far beyond the limited Jewish sphere. In February 1592, Rabbi Loew was summoned to the castle to speak with the Emperor, Rudolph II. Reports of this meeting record that the subject discussed was not the situation of the Jews in Bohemia, but science, alchemy, magic and mysticism. Recent studies of Rabbi Loew's thought have found in his writings anticipations of Immanuel Kant's epistemology, Hegel's dialectic, Pascal's

theology, Commenius's educational theories, Rousseau's politics, Vico's historiography, Henri Bergson's metaphysics and Einstein's physics.

Of all of the examples of the impact of Rabbi Loew upon the community outside the walls of the Jewish ghetto, of all of the examples of how this most parochial of Jewish thinkers became a hero to future generations of non-Jews – particularly in Bohemia – the following example is the most revealing.

In the long history of the Jewish Diaspora, Judah Loew of Prague is the *only* rabbi who is considered a national hero of the people among whom he dwelt. No rabbi in ancient Babylonia, not Rashi in France, not Maimonides in Egypt, not Isserles in Poland, no rabbi in modern England or America, is considered a national hero – only Rabbi Loew in the Czech Republic.

The famous statue of Rabbi Loew by Saloun stands in Prague. No statue of any other rabbi stands in a national capital anywhere else in the world. Not in Warsaw, not in London, not in Washington. Only in Prague.

Having offered a few examples of the many paradoxes and ironies that surround the mysterious life, thought and legends of Rabbi Loew, I now move toward a conclusion, and as my conclusion, I want to explain what it has taken me many years to discover – the reasons for my own fascination with the High Rabbi Loew (der Höhe Rabbi Löw).

In Krakow, at the old Jewish cemetery, I tried to find an answer to a question that had been troubling me for many years. In his classic and comprehensive book on the biographies of the great rabbis of the past called *Shem ha-Gedolim,* Rabbi Hayyim David Azulai writes that the grave of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague is in the old Jewish cemetery in Krakow, and not in Prague. For years I wondered how such a great scholar as Azulai could make so obvious a mistake. In the cemetery in Krakow, I looked for such a grave – the grave of the 'Höhe Rabbi Löw,' but I did not find it there. Then, I found a book, published in Polish in the 1920s by the great Jewish historian of Krakow, Professor Mayer Balaban, that discusses the old Jewish cemetery in Krakow. In this book, there is a map of the cemetery as it was before the Second World War, and on this map, one finds the exact location of the grave of 'der Höhe Rabbi Löw'. So, this was the basis of Azulai's claim, but what Azulai failed to realise is that this is not the grave of Yehudah Löw ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague – it is the grave of Yehudah Löw ben Zechariah, Rabbi Loew, the Maharal of Krakow. Who was *this* 'Höhe Rabbi Löw,' *this* Maharal, *this* Rabbi Judah Loew?

My further research revealed that the Maharal of Prague and the Maharal of Krakow were relatives, that each of them was named after a

common ancestor, Rabbi Judah Loew the Elder, who died in Prague in 1440 and who was a prominent talmudist and mystic.

It is well established that Rabbi Judah Loew the Elder was a descendant of the Babylonian scholar, Rabbi Hai Gaon, who could trace his ancestry directly back to King David.

Rabbi Judah Loew the Elder of Prague was the great-great-grandfather of both Rabbi Judah Loews: of Prague and of Krakow. This Judah Loew the Elder was also the uncle of Rabbi Avigdor Kara, whose grave is the oldest one in the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague. In a text written by Rabbi Jacob Mollin, Rabbi Avigdor Kara is described as a close friend of the King – apparently, Wenceslas IV.

In the course of my genealogical investigations, I found that my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather – thirteen generations before me – was Rabbi Judah Loew of Krakow. His mother was the aunt of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague. She was the sister of Judah Loew of Prague's father, Bezalel ben Hayyim. Her husband was the father of Rabbi Loew of Krakow. He was Rabbi Zechariah Mendel, who was given the unusual title *ha-navee* – 'the prophet'.

Rabbi Zechariah Mendel of Krakow was the son of Benjamin Benish of Poznán. This further connection to Poznán would seem to indicate that the common grandfather of both Rabbi Loews, Hayyim of Worms, settled in Poznán where his daughter married Rabbi Zechariah and where his son Bezalel married the mother of Rabbi Loew of Prague. For this and many other reasons, one may assume that Rabbi Loew of Prague, like his older brother, Rabbi Hayyim, was born in Poznán – and not, as is often claimed, in Worms.

The Jewish mystics teach that nothing happens by chance – that there is a reason for everything. Indeed, they teach that there are two kinds of reasons for everything: a 'revealed' reason and a 'concealed' reason. The revealed reason for my fascination with Rabbi Loew seems to be because we are of the same family. What, then, might be the 'concealed' reason? At the present time, I do not know, but this possibility, which I found in the teachings of the Polish hasidic master, Rabbi Bunam of Przysucha, may be offered.

Rabbi Bunam of Przysucha was the teacher of Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk. It was Rabbi Bunam who made the study of Judah Loew's work a basis for his students' understanding of the teachings of Hasidism. It is told that before Rabbi Bunam would pray, he would recite a passage from Rabbi Loew's writings. In his later life, when he had become blind, Rabbi Bunam would have his students read to him from two works: the Talmud and the writings of Rabbi Loew. It is further told that earlier in his life, Rabbi Bunam came

to Prague, and when he stood at the grave of Rabbi Loew, he said, 'Know that I have spread your ideas. Until I did so, many failed to appreciate your thoughts'. After Rabbi Bunam's death, Rabbi Isaac Meir of Ger said, 'Only with Rabbi Bunam did the world begin to appreciate the sweetness of Rabbi Loew's words'. Once Rabbi Bunam said that each person should have both a teacher on earth and a teacher from heaven, and that Rabbi Loew of Prague was his heavenly teacher. So, perhaps like Rabbi Bunam, it has been part of my mission in life to spread the teachings of Rabbi Loew, to allow others to appreciate their profundity and their sweetness. Perhaps, like Rabbi Bunam, I too have a heavenly teacher named Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague.