

“Frieda and her Golem” by Lynn Levin

Not long ago, a poor and solitary rabbinical student named Frieda Goldstein decided that she would create for herself a being to serve as her helpmeet and companion, an affectionate partner, a support in times of stress and self-doubt. The two of them would live as one, eating together, relaxing at home, and should physical intimacy feel right, then that too. From the start of her first-year studies at the rabbinical college, Frieda’s classmates, both the single ones and the married ones, aware that she was alone, invited her to coffee, Shabbat dinners, and movies. But Frieda, coveting her solitude and jealous of her time, always claimed other plans. Eventually, the invitations, which had first blown down like blossoms, withered away.

The rabbinical class had recently studied Jewish folklore and had thoroughly traced the legend of the Golem of Prague. It was said that a sixteenth-century mystic rabbi named Judah Loew, seeking to save the Jews of Prague from an antisemitic attack, fashioned a man-like creature from river clay. He animated it with an abracadabra of words and letters and sent it forth as a mighty protector. Once its mission was accomplished, however, the large and powerful golem developed free will and began to cause trouble. Rabbi Loew was forced to return the golem to an inert state. He did this by a clever move that again involved the mystical power of words and letters. When forming the magical savior, the rabbi had written *emet*, the Hebrew word for truth,

on the golem's forehead. To deactivate the being, the rabbi removed the e from *emet*, which changed the spelling to *met*, the Hebrew word for dead. Thus, ended the golem.

Considering Jewish history, said everyone in the class, no sane person could ever believe in the fantasy of an animated statue coming to the rescue of the Jews. Still, the potential of a creature brought to life or almost life whispered in the ear of the imagination. The class discussion branched out into Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the question of robots with minds of their own, computers that could write music, and the wonders of machine learning: algorithms capable of remembering your tastes and habits, codes that told you what you should buy and do. With fear and awe, the class agreed that artificial intelligence was taking over, seducing and controlling us in its hyper-logical way.

The class's conversation turned to ethics: To what extent should we let our inventions serve and direct us? How much should we toy with life? Nowadays, the disabled had robots to help them. What a superb and liberating force technology could be.

"Might it not," Frieda spoke up, "at least in the world of make-believe, be morally acceptable to create a being — you could call it a golem if you like — to be your partner in life?"

Everyone in the class turned to her with startled looks.

“It would be a good golem, one that didn’t cause mischief or commit violence,” she continued to the dumbstruck faces. “Not a mindless automaton, but a golem that could be happy, have a purpose, and know that its existence meant something.”

“Are you serious?” came a voice from across the room. No one else took up the argument, and the professor, adjusting his kippa, turned the discussion to the tale “The King’s Three Daughters.”

Disregarding her classmates’ reaction, and refusing all reason and the wisdom of legend, Frieda Goldstein resolved to make herself a personal golem.

She would make it out of meatloaf, not river clay, and she would make it the coming Sunday. On the appointed day, a cold bright day in early January, Frieda Goldstein sauntered home to her apartment, swinging two canvas shopping bags filled with ingredients for the meatloaf. Her curly brown hair bobbed in the chilly breeze. Advancing with her right foot, she felt herself striding toward a golden destiny. But with each footfall of the left, she sensed herself pitching headlong to a deep and dark unknown. As she came to the dog park across from her apartment building, she paused to watch the breeds and the mixes chase tennis balls and sniff each other. She saw their owners

bag the poo, break up dogfights, and dole out treats. Millions of people found love and companionship with dogs and cats. But it was so much trouble to take care of them. Better to fashion herself a neat and tidy one-and-only. With her helpmeet by her side, Frieda would have peaceful company, someone to handle the household chores, and loads of time to study. She would become a scholar rabbi, specializing in mystic texts.

Frieda preheated the oven to 350 degrees and mixed together ground beef, dried onion soup mix, oatmeal, egg, and water. A kosher recipe, to be sure. In the baking pan, she formed the feet, then the sturdy legs and hips. She gave the creature a yoni and breasts. She shaped the meat into arms that could both work and embrace. Then she lovingly molded the face, adding two pearl onions for eyes. Being white and luminescent, the pearl onion eyes, as yet sightless, seemed to stare at Frieda.

As Rabbi Loew had inscribed *emet* upon his golem's brow, so Frieda, using tiny strips of red bell pepper, pressed the word *friend* in English on her creature's forehead. She inserted a piece of paper with the name "Gittel" into the mouth and baked the figure for an hour. When she removed it from the oven, she circled it seven times in the way that a bride would circle her groom. Then she waved her hands over the human-like shape—it smelled so meaty and good— and said, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has

made me a friend.” With this, the creature blinked. Frieda, startled, jumped back. Gittel’s eyes, while still white and translucent as the pearl onions, began to focus. Her skin changed from cooked meatloaf to an opaque sandy tone, as if she were wearing a beige bodysuit. She sat up, began to stretch and grow, slid out of the baking pan, off the table, and stood in Frieda’s kitchen, beautiful, nude, no hair on her head or anywhere else. Trembling, unsure of how to act in this sacred moment, Frieda covered her face with her hands.

Gittel grew until she stood six feet tall. The red bell pepper strips that spelled “friend” clung weirdly to where her hairline would have started, if she had had hair. Frieda found her lovely and shapely, her features more refined than her own. She glowed in admiration of her work. This friend, or simulacrum of a friend, was now all hers. Gittel swallowed the piece of paper with her name.

With much fear and trembling Frieda reached out and held the creature’s hands and said the shehecheyanu, a prayer thanking God for bringing her to this occasion. Gittel repeated the blessing back in perfect Hebrew.

“You are Gittel. I have made you,” said Frieda, barely able to believe her good fortune and magical power. “Gittel,” said Frieda pressing a finger gently to her new friend’s lips. “Frieda,” she said pointing to her own mouth. Gittel mirrored her maker’s gestures and uttered the

names in clear English. And so, the journey toward language and understanding quickly began.

Yet their life together remained secret. Gittel's appearance was strange, and Frieda decided that she must not let others see the naked wonder who lived with her. She would get around to buying her tall women's clothes, but for now Gittel must be kept away from the world, and the world must be kept away from Gittel. Frieda drew the shades in her apartment and kept them down.

Gittel absorbed new vocabulary and grammar with ease, forgetting nothing. Evenings when Frieda could steal a little time from her studies, she would sit with Gittel on her brown corduroy couch, first reading her pre-school books with lots of pictures, then teaching her how to read. Together they moved on to children's classics, then Twain, Hawthorne, and George Eliot. Frieda guided her friend's understanding of the needs and predicaments of the people in the books. For the first time in her life, or at least the first time that she would admit, Frieda knew closeness and saw with growing regret and sadness what she had been missing all along. She wanted nothing more than Gittel in her life. Well, that and becoming a famous mystic scholar.

The pair celebrated Shabbat each Friday night, Gittel blessing the candles, wine, and challah. When the winter holidays came up, the

two of them relished dates, figs, and olives for the New Year of the Trees and ate hamentaschen for Purim. In the bedroom, they discovered each other's pleasures. Frieda stroked her friend's smooth body. There was so much of her to caress. And Gittel, instructed by Frieda, ministered to her mistress's desires. After lovemaking, each clung to the other.

Over the weeks, Gittel's awareness sprouted into many questions: Where did all the people in the books come from when there are only two of us? Why do those people in the books have so many problems?

Frieda began to wish that she had not educated Gittel through literary works. Better to have instructed her in basic arithmetic, abstract art, or geometric design, supplying paper, pencil, and crayons instead of educating her in the ravelings of human lives.

Those were made-up people, explained Frieda, while the two of them were real. They were not lonely, and they did not have problems like the people in the books. Gittel looked at her maker through the knowing translucence of her pearl onion eyes. "Yes, we have each other," she said, and then observed her maker spending long hours at her desk and computer, engrossed in her studies, her mind somewhere beyond the stars.

Each book begot interest in other books. Gittel, being home all day and a hungry reader, tore through volume after volume. She drew up reading lists based on writers Frieda had mentioned: Walt Whitman, Bernard Malamud, Albert Camus, Margaret Atwood. Frieda gladly carried home stacks of library books for her friend. And thank goodness for libraries, as Frieda, who was barely scraping by on her stipend, could afford to buy nothing but her textbooks and only the most basic foods and supplies.

Frieda taught Gittel how to tidy up the apartment. How fine it felt, after a long day of studying rabbinic skills and commentaries on ancient law, to return to an apartment that was all swept, dusted, and shiny clean. Lovely to walk in the door, to kiss and be kissed. Frieda always smiled to see the red bell pepper strips that spelled friend upon Gittel's brow. But the knowing focus of those pearl onion eyes made her uneasy, and she would look at the being's brow or cheek or chin rather than meet the pale gaze.

At first, Frieda, who was at best a very basic cook, had to learn what Gittel would eat and what she would not. Beef, she would not touch — no surprise, considering her raw material. For the same reason, she refused eggs, onions, and oatmeal. Eager to honor her companion's tastes, Frieda became a vegetarian, and soon began to teach Gittel how to measure, mix, and use a knife. A quick learner with plenty of time on her hands, Gittel mastered easy, then



elaborate, recipes which Frieda pulled off the Internet. She prepared pakoras with potato and cauliflower filling, vegetable biryanis, chopped salads, humus and tahini, roasted carrots, and pizzas galore. Gittel wanted to learn more recipes, so Frieda taught her how to use the computer.

One evening in March, Frieda, who purchased very little, came home to find a tower of boxes by her door shipped from booksellers and purveyors of fine foods. Perplexed and suspecting fraud, she signed on to her credit card account and gasped as she read through hundreds of dollars of charges. Gittel cocked her head in confusion as Frieda broke down in tears. The red bell pepper letters spelling friend on the golem's forehead began to look taunting, even sarcastic.

“How could you do this?” she cried to Gittel. She clutched her chest. “You can't buy things. Only I can buy things. How am I going to pay for this? I can't pay for this.” She pointed at the boxes. Was her companion going to take over her life?

“The computer said that based on the books I've read, I would like these books. And the recipes online said that because I made those recipes I would like other dishes like them, and the computer showed me how to get the things I wanted.”

“You don’t understand money,” retorted Frieda. “You did something you had no right to do.”

A new awareness lit Gittel’s face. “This is what happens in books.” She turned her terrible eyes to her maker. “This is people having a problem.”

Frieda reported the spurious credit card charges to the bank, blaming them on a house guest who went way too far with computer privileges. She cancelled that credit card, requested a new one, followed the instructions for returning the merchandise, and changed her passwords. All deliberately in earshot of Gittel. That night, each rolled away from the other in bed. In the darkness, Frieda considered the story of the Golem of Prague, how it broke free from the rabbi’s control and began to frighten the town. But her Gittel was a good learner, and now that she knew that buying things by herself was something she must not do — and because Frieda had put precautions in place — the conjurer was confident that Gittel would desist from future shopping sprees.

The next morning, they said little to each other.

Upon returning home, Frieda was horrified to find that Gittel had opened all the window shades and was sitting by the living room window, chin in hand, fixated upon the dog park across the street. Oy

gevalt! Had others seen the smooth and naked figure staring out the window? Now that Gittel was aware of the world outside their apartment, what was to become of their couplehood? What of the fiction, the lie really, that Frieda had fed her: that only the two of them were real?

“We never open the shades,” Frieda admonished her companion.

Gittel stared out the window, mesmerized by the sight of other humans and the four-legged furry things scurrying around them. “You said that there were only two of us. But there are so many others. So many others outside our home.”

“I meant,” said Frieda, “that for me there was only you, and for you there was only me. We are a couple. But I kept much from you, and I am sorry.” A veil of shame drifted over her face. She was unsure of how Gittel would see her now, unsure if their bond would hold.

Gittel’s awareness was growing on its own. Gittel, the marvelous invention, was transmogrifying into something as unpredictable as life itself. What was to become of Frieda’s perfectly constructed life of study, domesticity, and companionship?

“And what are those brown and black creatures on four legs?”

“Those are dogs. You pet them and feed them, and they live with you and love you in return.”

“Do they ever have problems?” asked Gittel.

“Sometimes. It’s a lot of work to take care of them.”

“I would like to visit the dogs and the people. Frieda, all day you go to school. All evening you stay at your desk. I feel alone when you are away, and alone when you are at your desk at home. I cook. I clean. I read. And now I see the outside, and I want the outside. I want to talk to those other people and pet their dogs.”

On her way home the next day, Frieda stopped at a Goodwill store and bought a tall woman’s outfit for Gittel. Shoes and socks, pants and a blouse, a winter jacket, and sunglasses. She also purchased gloves and a big headscarf printed with pink magnolias. She would need to keep her creature as covered up as possible.

The next Saturday, after she returned home from synagogue, Frieda dressed Gittel in the Goodwill outfit, explaining that this is what one had to wear when going outdoors. She stood on a chair and tied the headscarf as snugly and as fashionably as she could around Gittel’s head so that the red bell pepper strips that spelled friend were covered by the scarf. Now she could pass for an Orthodox Jewish

woman or maybe a cancer patient hiding hair loss. Frieda slid the sunglasses onto Gittel's face. That was better. Now Frieda could look at her friend head on, no need to shy away from the troubling eyes. She tied a scarf around her own head and donned a pair of sunglasses.

Gittel watched as Frieda turned the key in the lock. The two descended the stairs, walked across the street to the dog park and sat on a bench. They watched the owners throw balls and rings, saw the dogs slurp water from bowls, and heard the owners compliment one another's pets as they traded tips about dog food and vets. A smile broke over Gittel's face as she watched the romping. A woman in a red coat, who had a Boxer, sat down beside them on the bench and made small talk about the crisp day. Other dog people nodded their way. A dog park was a place for fellowship. Frieda did not sense that her golem smelled beefy, but soon a number of dogs trotted over to sniff her. Gittel watched people petting the dogs, and she imitated them. Soon she appeared popular with the dogs. Someone let her throw a stick for fetch. The pet people came and went, but the lady in the red coat stayed beside them. She complimented Gittel on her magnolia-printed scarf and showed her how to say "paw" so that she could shake hands with Sandy, her Boxer.

Gittel had so much fun that Frieda took her back to the dog park the following day, making sure that her friend was covered up as before.

“Every time you go out,” she said, “you must cover yourself up like this.”

The lady in the red coat, whose name was Nan, was back, and she seemed especially interested in Gittel. She admired her magnolia-printed scarf and made oblique references to healing. Pets, she said, improved one’s health. They lowered your blood pressure. You lived longer if you had a pet. “For a long time, I never wanted a dog,” Nan confessed. “Now I know what I was missing.”

“I would like to have a dog,” announced Gittel, caressing Sandy’s silky head and floppy ears.

“They are a lot of work,” countered Frieda.

“I would take care of the dog,” said Gittel.

Sandy rested his head on Gittel’s knee and looked up at her with his sad and loving eyes. He was a jowly beast and left a swipe of slobber on her pant leg. Frieda thought about the mess dogs made, shedding all over the place, flinging spittle on the floor and walls. And the chore of walking a dog, the cost of kibble and visits to the vet, and then the grief of putting the creature down when it was old and lame. Oh, and the barking, the scampering. She needed silence and peace in which to contemplate the divine, search for oneness, pour over mystic texts.

Ultimate questions called her: Where did the soul reside? What did the soul do before life and after death? Were new souls born, and was heaven crowded with them? Questions ad infinitum, queries as vast as space, fit only for the greatest minds.

These park visits were wolfing down her study time. To the extent that Frieda was an introvert, Gittel was turning out to be an extrovert. She was far more sociable than Frieda. The young scholar began to fear that she might not be enough to fill her companion's heart. If only she could return to the early days when they were as two Eves, with no one else in their world.

The following day, Monday, returning from school, her mind cluttered with her studies and worries about Gittel, Frieda approached her apartment door, then stopped short. The door was ajar. A break-in? Had Gittel escaped? Stoking her courage with a deep breath, she pushed open the door to find her beloved with Nan at the kitchen table, and Sandy beneath it. Gittel looked at Frieda through her sunglasses. Thank God she was in her outdoor costume, her headscarf covering, just barely, the red bell pepper strips that spelled friend. Frieda's heart raced. The golem and human were drinking tea and eating the raisin apple pie that Gittel had made the night before. Nan was sitting in Frieda's place.

“Nan, what a surprise!” said Frieda unsmilingly. “Hey.” She dropped her books on her desk.

Sandy woofed. The hair on his back rose up in a ridge. She felt unsafe in her own home. She was furious at Gittel. Who was she to invite a stranger into their home? Worse, their secret lay in wait under the edge of the scarf, a quarter inch from being revealed.

Nan petted the dog to calm him down and told him to be a good boy. She hurried to explain that Gittel had visited the park on her own and sought out Sandy at once.

“So nice to see her getting out, feeling strong, doing something on her own. Health returns little by little,” she said. “I know. I’ve been there. Have a piece of pie.”

So now this invader was offering her some of her own pie. It was a tiny apartment with limited seating, only two chairs at the kitchen table, one at the desk, and the small brown corduroy couch. Frieda walked to her desk and opened a book. She was facing a deadline, she explained.

“Frieda has to study, and I have to start dinner,” said Gittel in a shrunken voice.



Nan's face narrowed. "I should get along myself." She slid into her red coat and took up Sandy's leash. The dog shook himself as if to rid the air of tension. Brisk as a broom, Nan swept herself out the door.

The fine order that Frieda had imposed on their life together was giving way. Gittel was making friends on her own, and there was no telling where this would lead. Nan might come by to visit. There she would find Gittel in her naked state, her pearl onion eyes uncovered, red bell pepper strips blazing. The monster revealed.

Gittel cleared the table, clattering the dishes on purpose.

"You brought someone into the apartment without asking me," said Frieda. "That was not okay."

"I was lonely. I wanted more friends, and I wanted to play with the dogs."

Pity touched Frieda's heart, but Gittel's new freedom seized her with alarm. Frieda tried to reason with her. The world was a dangerous place. She should never go outside alone.

No, returned Gittel. Outside there were new friends, people who asked what she thought and what she did, and they had pets. "If I

want to go out, I will go out. But I will still cook and clean for you. You don't need to worry about that."

The pledge hit Frieda like a slap. She backed away from Gittel. Then she gasped as her companion put an acorn squash on the cutting board, took a butcher knife, and hacked it in two with one blow. Her golem, like all golems, was very strong. And now her golem was angry and did not love her anymore. She cursed the day she stirred this thing into existence. What a fool she had been to teach her creature language and instruct her in the ways of human need. Now she had agency and desires of her own. Maybe a soul had evolved within her. With foolish magic Frieda had made this monster, and it was only a matter of time before the monster broke free.

Frieda thought of the Golem of Prague and knew what she had to do. That night as Gittel slept, Frieda, hands shaking, peeled the letters f,r,i from Gittel's forehead, leaving the word "end."

Gittel stirred, then rose from the bed and tried to speak, but only glugging sounds came from her throat. Before Frieda's eyes, the beautiful figure began to wrinkle and contract. Gittel looked at her maker with a final flash of consciousness, then collapsed on the bedroom floor in a formless mass.

Frieda fell to her knees before the ruined creature. She clutched her chest. Her heart curdled with guilt. What was it worth, her desire to ponder the great mysteries, or her longing for the starry realms? Was not Gittel her greatest work and her gravest loss? There were people who built relationships and lost them, but she had animated a being and instilled a soul into it. And then she'd destroyed what she had made. Was she a murderer? Had she killed a person? No, Gittel was not a person. Frieda tried to tell herself that. But that was not how she felt.

She cried all night. When morning seeped in through the edges of the shades, she gathered up the meat that had been Gittel, put it in a bag, sat on the floor and recited the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. Even through awash in sorrow, she was aware of her foolishness. How could she say Kaddish over this bag of meat, when one said Kaddish over a parent, sister, brother, or spouse, or, God forbid, a child?

Then, what to do with Gittel's remains? That morning she took the bag of what used to be Gittel to a creek and fed it to the fish. It was like tashlich, the way one sprinkled bread crumbs into a stream at Rosh Hashana, a symbolic casting off of sin. She performed her ritual with the same mixture of grief and foolishness she felt as she'd said Kaddish. She mourned for seven days, covering the one mirror in her apartment, the bathroom mirror, and rending the sleeve of her shirt.

Looking pale, her attention fixed on faraway things, she made it to all her classes, and when her fellow students asked what was wrong, she told them that a dear friend had passed away. They offered condolences, which she accepted with gratitude and even a faint smile, warmed by normalness of their caring. She donated Gittel's clothes back to the Goodwill store.

How awful that the dog park was across the street from her apartment. Frieda had to look at the sky, her phone, or the sidewalk as she passed the congregation of dog people. Had she really instilled a soul in Gittel? Certainly, one had evolved. And if the soul had a beginning, did it also have an end, or did it go on existing in some kind of afterlife? Here were those questions again, but they did not lift her mind as they had before. She wondered if the idea of an eternal soul was a universal fantasy in response to the universal fact of death. She wanted to curl up like a snail with a primitive brain and live in a shell.

Shortly before her week of mourning was over, she heard unfamiliar footsteps on her landing and the scratch of nails. Then came a knock at the door. It was Nan with Sandy.

Frieda let them in. "Sorry to bother you, but I haven't seen Gittel around. Maybe she'd like to take a walk with Sandy and me." Nan looked around the room, perceiving the vacancy.

“We broke up,” announced Frieda. “She moved away. Things weren’t working out.”

Nan’s expression widened in surprise. Then she swallowed a little as if to contain her feelings.

“I’m so sorry. This must be rough. So rough,” said Nan. Her words tumbled quickly. “Rough for me, too. I mean not as rough as for you. She was a new friend.” Sandy sniffed the air. He stood by Nan and did not lie down or sit. “She didn’t even stop by the park to say good-bye.”

“It was all very sudden,” said Frieda.

“I hope she’s okay. It looked like she’d been through a lot, what with the hair loss, the skin situation, the vision issue.”

“She wanted her freedom.”

“But to vanish like that.”

The two spoke a few more minutes about friends and break-ups, and how people got over them. Frieda looked at Nan. She was the forward type, but how else do you make new friends? And friends are

so hard to find. It seemed that all the connections were already knitted.

Nan, as if anticipating that Frieda would soon hint that she should leave, announced that she would be getting on her way. The dog needed his walk.

“Gittel would be happy to know that you came by.”

“But to vanish like that,” repeated Nan.

Was she wondering if Frieda had murdered her friend? Locked her up in a basement somewhere?

“She did what she had to do,” replied Frieda. “She wanted her freedom.”

And except for the fact that Gittel lay trapped in her maker’s heart, the great creation was now free from pain, and loneliness, and thought.