

Golem Stories

Scene One

It is 1590, in the city of Prague. The set is a room in the home of RABBI JUDAH LOEW (the MAHARAL). It serves both as a living room and as a dining room. The furnishings are poor, despite the reputation of the Rabbi. RIVKA is sitting with JOSEPH when the curtain rises. They are playing a game, seeing how close they can come to touching without doing so. RIVKA giggles. The REBBETSIN enters. As she talks, JOSEPH and RIVKA continue to surreptitiously play their game, until the REBBETSIN's story distracts JOSEPH.

REBBETSIN: So. Where was I?

RIVKA: The idols.

REBBETSIN: Right. So Abraham took his staff and smashed all the idols in his father's store, except for the largest one. In that idol's hands, Abraham placed the staff. When Abraham's father came home, he was horrified. "Why have you done this to my business?" his father cried. And Abraham said to him, "I didn't do it, the big idol did. While you were gone, all the idols had an argument, and the big one smashed all the smaller ones." "Don't be ridiculous," said Abraham's father, "he couldn't have done that, he's nothing but a statue." "Exactly," said Abraham.

(Slight pause)

JOSEPH: Leaving his father with a store full of smashed statues.

REBBETSIN: That's not the point.

JOSEPH: But it's true. It was his father's business. How was he to know that his son had suddenly decided that there's one God, and that it was unholy to worship idols?

REBBETSIN: He hadn't just decided it. God had spoken to him.

JOSEPH: Yes, I know, but Abraham's father didn't know that. Why destroy someone's business, just because of religious differences?

REBBETSIN: I see. You think this is like your bakery.

JOSEPH: Maybe. Yes.

REBBETSIN: That was different. That was done out of hatred, pure and simple.

JOSEPH: Was it? They truly believed they had God on their side.

REBBETSIN: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have started telling you my stories. It calms me sometimes, when I'm worried. I'm afraid I'm incapable of being quiet, when I'm nervous. But I'm being selfish. Why don't I check on Devorah, see if she's ready. She's been getting ready for hour, now. It's not often we meet a king, in any circumstances. Are you ready Rivka?

RIVKA: I want to stay here, with Joseph.

REBBETSIN: Well—yes, for a moment. Your father should be back in a moment, anyway. We're all so glad you weren't hurt, Joseph. You know that. Don't worry, King Rudolf's a good man. He doesn't know much about Judaism, but he likes Judah. I think he'll do what he can.

JOSEPH: I'm sure he will.

(The REBBETSIN exits.)

RIVKA: Don't mind Mamma and her stories. She loves you, that's why she tells you those stories.

JOSEPH: I know. It's sweet. I'm sorry I was so irritable with her.

RIVKA: I think it's amazing that you haven't been more upset, considering what you've been through.

JOSEPH: We've all had hard times. I'm just lucky, because I'm engaged to the Rabbi's daughter, and he's a friend of the King. The King's actually coming here. I can't believe it,

still. He must not want anyone to know he's coming, or he would have invited us to the palace.

RIVKA: (*Playfully*) Kiss me, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Kiss you?

RIVKA: Yes.

JOSEPH: We can't. I mean...it's bad enough that we've touched. By mistake. Mostly.

RIVKA: We'll be married soon. What does it matter?

JOSEPH: Then we don't have long to wait.

RIVKA: I liked it when we touched.

JOSEPH: So did I. You know that. But it's against Jewish law. What would your father think?

RIVKA: If I don't care what he thinks, why should you?

JOSEPH: He's the Maharal.

RIVKA: Joseph, I love you. And I'm scared.

JOSEPH: Scared of what?

RIVKA: Kiss me. Please.

(*JOSEPH hesitates, looking at her. The MAHARAL enters.*)

MAHARAL: What are you two doing? Where's your mother?

RIVKA: She's helping Devorah get ready.

MAHARAL: Still? He'll be here any minute. Why don't you go and check on them Rivka.

(*RIVKA looks at JOSEPH.*)

JOSEPH: Go on, Rivka. Don't worry.

(*RIVKA exits.*)

MAHARAL: Now, Joseph, I just want you to tell the King the truth, tonight. Don't be too afraid of him. He's come to hear our story, after all.

JOSEPH: Yes, Rabbi.

MAHARAL: Have there been any other incidents, in the last couple of days?

JOSEPH: Just a stone or two, that's all.

MAHARAL: Even that's too much.

JOSEPH: It's no more than usual. Even in good times, you can expect a stone or two.

MAHARAL: Well, that's going to change.

(The REBBETSIN enters with RIVKA and DEVORAH. They are dressed for company. Everybody but DEVORAH has a yellow circle sewn on the left arm or chest area of their clothes. The yellow circle is a required item for all Jews in Prague.)

Wonderful. You all look beautiful.

DEVORAH: Thank you. I just finished sewing this, Pappa. Do you think the King will like it?

MAHARAL: Where's your badge?

DEVORAH: I haven't sewn it on yet.

MAHARAL: Then throw on your cloak. You don't want the King to see you without a badge.

DEVORAH: My cloak? But that will look—

(There is a crash.)

What's that?

JOSEPH: It sounded like a stone.

MAHARAL: At my house?

JOSEPH: I think so. It sounds like it. And I've heard that sound often enough, recently, believe me. Do you want me to clean things up?

REBBETSIN: I'll go with you.

MAHARAL: If it's a stone, bring it here. It will be something else to show the King.

(The REBBETSIN and JOSEPH exit.)

DEVORAH: What a time for this to happen.

MAHARAL: It's a good time for this to happen. A hidden blessing. So the King knows I'm serious when I tell him about Joseph's troubles.

DEVORAH: What's he like, the King?

MAHARAL: Different. He's obsessed by mystical knowledge. That's why he likes me, I think, because he wants to learn about the Kabala. But he's an independent thinker, and that makes him good for the Jews.

RIVKA: He still makes us wear these badges.

MAHARAL: Even so. And you should put yours on, Devorah.

(The REBBETSIN and JOSEPH enter, with a stone.)

REBBETSIN: It was a stone, just as Joseph guessed.

RIVKA: Are you all right?

REBBETSIN: I'm fine. They had already run off, as usual.

DEVORAH: They're such cowards.

MAHARAL: Leave the stone on the table.

(There is a knock.)

That must be him.

JOSEPH: Or someone with another stone.

REBBETSIN: He's early.

MAHARAL: A little. It's him. The cloak, Devorah.

DEVORAH: Yes, Pappa.

(DEVORAH puts on her cloak. Everyone stands and waits tensely. Pause. The MAHARAL opens the door. RUDOLF enters, holding a cross before him. He is hidden inside a large dark cloak, which covers up his royal vestments.)

MAHARAL: Hello, your majesty. It's good to see you.

RUDOLF: It's good to see you, too, Judah.

(The MAHARAL stares at the cross.)

It's just a precaution, Judah. I hope you don't mind.

MAHARAL: I didn't know you had become so religious. You told me you were more interested in alchemy than Christianity.

RUDOLF: I am, but a learned priest told me this particular cross has special powers. It was touched by St. Paul himself. It wards off evil spirits. He advised me to use it when—when I'm in someplace unfamiliar.

MAHARAL: I assure you, I am acquainted with the full Kabala. There are no evil spirits in my house. You can feel free to put the cross down.

RUDOLF: Yes, of course.

(RUDOLF lowers the cross. JOSEPH takes his cloak.)

MAHARAL: Let me introduce you to my family. This is my wife Pearla, and these are two of my daughters, Devorah and Rivka, my youngest. And this young man is Joseph. He

is Rivka's fiancé, and he's studied with me since he was very young.

RUDOLF: Is he the rabbinical student I met?

MAHARAL: No. That was Isaac, Devorah's fiancé. He's in Poland now, studying. Joseph's the baker.

RUDOLF: Where are your other daughters?

MAHARAL: Married, I'm afraid. Now that these last two are spoken for, I'm afraid you'll have to find your heir another princess.

(RUDOLF laughs, a little uncomfortably.)

RUDOLF: Well. We have some things to discuss.

MAHARAL: Perhaps you should take the girls into the kitchen while we talk.

REBBETSIN: Of course.

(The REBBETSIN, RIVKA and DEVORAH exit.)

MAHARAL: Please, sit down.

(RUDOLF sits. After he sits, so does everyone else.)

RUDOLF: Your house seems a little small.

MAHARAL: It's no smaller than it ever was. It is enough for us.

RUDOLF: I had heard that it had become bigger. As big as my palace, almost.

MAHARAL: As big as your palace? How would I ever manage that?

RUDOLF: They say some of your people stole from the treasures.

MAHARAL: Your majesty, I assure you. We did no such thing.

RUDOLF: Well. I thought so. It didn't sound that believable a story, to me. Someone trying to save his own skin, more likely. I'm sorry I even brought it up.

MAHARAL: You'll find that a lot of the stories you've heard about us are untrue.

RUDOLF: Yes. Of course. It's just that your people are so... Why is that stone on your table? Is it religious?

MAHARAL: On the contrary. It just arrived in our house, a few minutes before you did. It was thrown through our window.

RUDOLF: Because of me?

MAHARAL: I assume that it's because Passover is coming up, next month. This sort of thing happens every year, although it's particularly bad this year.

RUDOLF: Which is why you asked me here, tonight.

MAHARAL: That's right.

RUDOLF: I don't know what I can do for you, Judah. I can't control public opinion.

MAHARAL: Perhaps not, but you could make more of an effort to find the people who throw these rocks, or worse. I rarely see an officer in this quarter, and when I do, he is usually turning a blind eye to these attacks, or even participating.

RUDOLF: Most of the guards don't want to come to this section. They're afraid of you.

MAHARAL: We've done nothing to harm them.

RUDOLF: Well, perhaps not, but some of them have children.

MAHARAL: So?

RUDOLF: They know Passover's approaching. They know you'll need matzos. They just don't want you to use their children to make them.

MAHARAL: Certainly you don't actually believe that we use the blood of Christian children to make matzos?

RUDOLF: Well, I'm not saying you personally, Judah, I'm sure you've found a different way –

MAHARAL: Matzos are unleavened bread. Nothing more.

RUDOLF: Come now, I'm on your side, but you can't tell me that no Jew has ever –

MAHARAL: That's what I'm telling you.

RUDOLF: Then why is it so widely believed?

MAHARAL: Your majesty, I'm surprised at you. Just because something is widely believed, it doesn't make it true. As a student of the sciences, you should know that more than anyone.

RUDOLF: There were always a lot of things about your religion I never understood. But that you might want to use the

blood of Christian children, in revenge for what has been done to you, that made sense.

MAHARAL: Not to us. Not to any human, I hope. Eating children? Did you really believe we do that?

RUDOLF: I've heard that you spirit them away, in the deep of night. You then take the heart out of the child, so that the rest can be incinerated. This heart is placed upon a glowing coal, where it is magically transformed by your rabbis.

MAHARAL: I am one of those rabbis that they speak about, I'm sure. Do you think I transform the hearts of children?

RUDOLF: It is just a legend I have heard.

MAHARAL: Legends like that need to be questioned, because if they are not, they shape the mind of the listener into a hateful form. Even the Holy One, Blessed be He, should be questioned, if he says something that sounds immoral. That is why Abraham could plead with him to save Sodom.

RUDOLF: I don't know much about the Bible. All I know are the tales I have been told.

MAHARAL: And who told you that story?

RUDOLF: Many people. A highly respected young Jesuit priest, for one.

MAHARAL: Thaddeus?

RUDOLF: Well, yes.

MAHARAL: Thaddeus has been spreading that lie for years now. He hates us, your majesty. He would say anything to destroy us. He is the one who always incites the crowds against us.

RUDOLF: He is not the only one who's told me this story. Some of my alchemists have told me so as well, and they are experts on such transformations.

JOSEPH: I assure you, your majesty, I worked in a bakery, and never have we done anything so barbaric.

RUDOLF: I heard that they found the body of a child in your bakery.

JOSEPH: Yes, that's true.

RUDOLF: How did it get there?

JOSEPH: I don't know, your majesty. I just came in to open the shop, that morning. We take turns opening the shop, and it was just chance that it was my turn that day. When I arrived, there was a crowd already surrounding my shop, a Christian crowd, led by that priest, Thaddeus, although we almost never see Christians in this quarter. When I got to the door the child had already been placed on the doorstep. It was in a little bundle, turned dark brown with blood. I could barely look at it. Before I knew what was happening, the crowd was screaming at me, calling me a murderer and throwing stones. They burned the bakery to the ground. But the bakery was just the beginning. Since then, there have been crowds outside my door, throwing rocks and yelling curses. I live alone, thank God, so I put no one in danger but myself, but I am afraid that they will burn my home down, as well. I came to the Rabbi for help. I don't know how to prove it, your majesty, but I did not kill that child.

MAHARAL: I assure you, your majesty, that Joseph is one of the gentlest people I know. He is incapable of killing.

RUDOLF: It is hard to know what a man is truly capable of.

MAHARAL: I ask you, does it make sense that a crowd would have gathered, spontaneously, at dawn? Does it make sense that someone would commit such a terrible crime, and then leave the child on his doorstep, for all to see? Someone put that child there, horrible as it may seem to you. Then he gathered all those people, or told Thaddeus, and they marched to the bakery. Maybe it was the killer himself who spread the story.

JOSEPH: This sort of thing has happened before, your majesty. A few years ago, Thaddeus accused Jacob ben Avram of killing a young girl. Fortunately, she was found before they hanged Jacob.

MAHARAL: And in those days, he wouldn't have even gone to trial. It was before you had passed the law granting Jews the same trials Christians have.

RUDOLF: There are some people who tell me they want to hang you, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I know, your majesty.

RUDOLF: I've refused, out of friendship to Judah, and because I don't want to allow summary hangings of Jews anymore. But unless another killer is found, it will be difficult to stop the accusations against you.

JOSEPH: All I can tell you, your majesty, is that I am innocent.

RUDOLF: Well. I will do what I can.

MAHARAL: It would be helpful if you were to declare that matzos are made of flour and water, nothing more.

RUDOLF: And you swear to me this is true?

MAHARAL: I cannot swear. It is against my religious beliefs. But believe me, it's true.

RUDOLF: Hmm. Well, as I said, affairs of state. I must be going.

(RUDOLF stands, and JOSEPH hurries to get his cloak.)

MAHARAL: I appreciate your coming to see us, your majesty.

RUDOLF: Yes. Well then, goodbye.

(RUDOLF hurries out, covering himself with his cloak so as to be unnoticed outside.)

JOSEPH: Do you think this talk did any good, Rabbi?

MAHARAL: We'll see. He seems to be a little too influenced by Thaddeus and his like, right now, for me to feel comfortable. Well, we can only hope for his goodwill. He has been good to us, so far. Tell me if anything else happens, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I will. I promise.