

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

JEWISH LITERATURE

Identity and Imagination

DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

Monsters of the Jewish Imagination

Essay by Jeremy Dauber

ATRAN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF YIDDISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,
AND CULTURE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Presented by Nextbook and
the American Library Association



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

Monsters of the Jewish Imagination

Jeremy Dauber

A young woman is in her bedchamber late at night, a thunderstorm raging outside. Suddenly, the windows burst open. As she moves to close them, her nightgown trailing behind her, she senses something in the room. She turns to find a vampire advancing toward her, his fangs glinting in the moonlight. The woman is terrified, but she knows just what to do: Reaching into her décolletage, she pulls out the crucifix hanging there and brandishes it at the creature. The vampire smiles even more widely. “Oy, lady, have you got the wrong idea.”

What makes a Jewish monster? Or, put another way, what makes a monster Jewish? One clue may be provided by the earliest monster in Jewish literature: the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Like all the great monsters of antiquity, the serpent features an uncanny combination of the animal and the human and bears ill will toward humankind. But the serpent is more than merely horrific. With its suggestion to Eve to disobey God’s command and eat from the Tree of Knowledge—and the disastrous consequences for humankind—the serpent is also a deeply heretical creature.

Idolatry and heresy are also important features of other biblical tales of the supernatural. The book of Deuteronomy is filled with examples of the supernatural in the everyday, with individuals who commune with spirits of the dead, despite the prohibition against this action. The consequences for breaking this prohibition are dramatized later in the Bible, when King Saul, who has consulted a necromancer (a witch skilled in raising the dead), seeks to summon the spirit of the prophet Samuel. The spirit tells the anxious king that he will die on the battlefield of Mount Gilboa with his son Jonathan—exactly what happens the following day.

As this story seems to imply, perhaps it’s best not to delve too deeply into supernatural matters. This was the view put forward by the great Talmudic rabbis in the first centuries of the common era. In the series of legends and interpretations known as the *midrash*, they wrote that one should not seek to discover “what lies above and what lies below, what comes before and what comes after.” This did not put an end to supernatural stories; it just gave them a particular Jewish shape.

In fact, Supernatural stories were common during the early centuries of the common era, and were often associated with illness, especially mental illness. But it took until the late Middle Ages and early modern period for these demons and spirits to fully flourish in the Jewish imagination. Jews were taught about Asmodeus, the King of the Demons, and



his beloved, Lilith, believed to have been Adam's first wife. (Because she was spurned, Lilith was reputed to harbor an especially deep hatred of children. Jews thought she might be the cause for the high infant mortality rate of the period.) Mystical formulas and amulets were created and disseminated to loosen or destroy demonic holds on the innocent. In 18th- and 19th-century Eastern Europe, it was believed that spectral presences haunted abandoned synagogues. The spirits, who were reputed to appear only at night, would lead prayer services. If a living man stumbled onto the services and participated by being called up to read from the Torah, he would die before morning.

With the rise of Jewish mystical thought in the 16th and 17th centuries—a strain of which focused on the human soul and its capacity to survive beyond the body and to be reincarnated in new beings—came the dybbuk. Though stories of dybbuk possession change slightly from one account to the next, some generalities apply: The dybbuk is the tortured spirit of a (usually male) sinner who is forced to wander the world in his in-between state, neither dead nor alive. The spirit takes refuge or “possesses” a body, usually a woman, who then begins to speak in the dead person's voice—to talk, mock, curse, or accuse observers. (At times, the dybbuk provides either great strength or a kind of second sight to the host; at other times, it merely causes the host great pain.) Since the dybbuk is generally unwilling to leave the body—perhaps because there are other demonic forces waiting to punish it for its previous sins—it must be exorcised, usually by a noted rabbi in a complicated ceremony.

Today, of course, these accounts of dybbuk possession might be read as case studies of mental illness, as allegories for some of the religious, political, or social issues affecting the Jews, or simply as terrifying stories. It appears, however, that 16th- and 17th-century readers readily believed in the existence of dybbuks. It's possible that stories in which evil spirits afflicted an innocent person for no apparent reason may have resonated strongly with a community frequently victimized by pogroms and other flashes of anti-Semitic violence.

Indeed, while this essay focuses on Jewish monsters, it's worth pointing out that in the Middle Ages, Jews themselves became quite monstrous in the eyes of Christians. For example, the blood libel, which claimed that Jews killed innocent Christians (typically children) to use their blood in the baking of matzo, appears as early as Chaucer. (The parallel between the blood libel and the Christian Mass are intentional: Just as the demonic force was the anti-Jew in Jewish thought, so the Jew could be seen as anti-Christian, i.e., demonic.) Demonic representations of Jews are apparent in other anti-Semitic charges, such as those which held that Jews poisoned wells, or were directly in league with the devil. Indeed, the myth that Jews had horns, or the lesser known rumor that Jewish men menstruated, suggests that during the Middle Ages, the Jewish body was considered by some to be inherently monstrous.

It was these sorts of anti-Semitic sentiments that helped the golem gain popularity. Though stories of the golem—the word means “artificial being” or “homunculus”—originated in the Talmudic times of the third or fourth century of the common era, the most famous golem tale comes from the 18th-century figure. In a conscious recalling of the divine creation of man in Genesis, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague was said to have taken mud from the Moltava river and molded it into a human shape; using mystical names of God, he brought the homunculus into a kind of life.



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

In this and other retellings of the golem legend, the creature—whose powers include miraculous strength and a supernatural awareness of evil against the Jews—was created to help protect the community against Christian threats, particularly those of the blood libel. In some versions, the golem is given a task—such as drawing water from a well—that is unrelated to its divine mission of protecting the Jewish people. The golem repeats the task again and again until the consequences threaten to become disastrous. A less common version focuses on the golem's existential dilemma. Spurred by love or some other powerful emotion, the creature realizes the gulf between itself and humans; depressed, angry, or insane, it turns on its creator. In just about every version of the story, however, humans triumph: The golem is put back to sleep, usually by erasing the divine name or mystical word on its forehead, to await its call once more when the Jewish people are in need. (According to legend, the golem resides to this day in an abandoned attic of Prague's *Alteneu Shul*, or Great Synagogue.)

The modern era has been tough on monsters: An age of reason and disbelief has driven them underground, forcing them to reemerge largely as metaphor. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment from Germany to Russia used dybbuks, dead souls, and wandering spirits as “truth tellers” in their work, creatures who dramatized their creators' positions, or else satirized those who still held onto outdated traditions and folk beliefs. In the reincarnation stories of the 19th-century writers Isaac Erter and Isaac Mayer Dik, for example, the spirits sow doubt and suspicion about their own motives and existences. In this way, they are no less heretical than their biblical or medieval counterparts.

On the cusp of the 20th century, Jewish writers reclaimed monsters, this time as a metaphor for human monstrosity. In his very first Yiddish work, I.L. Peretz, one of the greatest Yiddish writers, composed a poem, “Monish,” about a young man seduced from the path of tradition by Lilith herself. Similarly, Peretz's last story, “Yom Kippur in Hell,” ends with a cantor, whose rendition of the closing Yom Kippur service in hell allows the suffering souls who listen to achieve redemption while ensuring that he remains trapped there. Visionary writers like S. Ansky reinterpreted monsters as characters in the Jewish drama of ethnic nationalism, using supernatural folktales to establish a kind of proof that Jewish identity was deeply intertwined with the European soil in which the dead lie uneasily.

Tragically, Ansky's efforts were unsuccessful, and one might be tempted to give the last word on the matter to the great master of the supernatural Jewish story, Isaac Bashevis Singer. In his tale “The Last Demon,” Singer writes of a world where the supernatural pales before the monstrous actions of human beings during the Holocaust. “How can I be a demon,” writes the infernal narrator, “when mankind himself has become a demon?” Indeed, the horrors of the 20th and 21st centuries may have caught up with, if not outrun, the monsters of fiction, but this has not stopped new generations of Jewish writers, inspired as much by Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez as by Peretz and Singer, from creating their own fantastic creatures. Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar invented a Jewish centaur in his novel *The Centaur in the Garden*; and short story author Nathan Englander brings reincarnation to New York City's Upper East Side in “The Gilgul of Park Avenue.” Demons and ghosts may be terrifying, but they still insist on the power of imagination over reality, and can serve not so much as horror stories as responses to the horrors of the real world.



Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray*

Satan in Goray is set in the year 1666, almost two decades after Cossack pogroms devastated Jewish Eastern Europe physically and psychologically. Jews of the time believed such suffering and death could not be meaningless. It must have been part of God's greater plan, the beginning of the process leading inevitably and inexorably to the coming of the Messiah. And so, later that year, when a man named Sabbatai Zevi declared himself the Messiah, a good part of the Jewish world simply lost its head in an ecstatic frenzy.

Singer was clearly fascinated by what Edward Mackay called "the extraordinary madness of crowds," and the ways in which religious belief, hope, and the human propensity for self-deception combined to create a set of behaviors that were irrational in the extreme. But while Singer grounds his tale in historical fact, he sets the story in the semi-mythic town of Goray, "at the foot of the hills beyond the end of the world." Over the course of the novel, the generally righteous citizens of Goray, fallen under the spell of Sabbatai Zevi, are transformed into creatures both economically and morally bankrupt. This fantasy—or delirium—is so powerful that it maintains its hold on some townspeople even after Sabbatai Zevi converts to Islam.

Rechele, a young woman, becomes the focal point for the forces in the town supporting Sabbatai Zevi. Raised by relatives who filled her childhood with literal and metaphorical images of blood and gore, Rechele is always tightly wound, and it takes little to push her over the edge. Near the end of the novel, Rechele is possessed by a dybbuk and believes herself to be impregnated by Satan. It is part of Singer's achievement that we are able to read the story both as a psychologically masterful display of a hysteric's descent into mental illness and as a fantastic evocation of the figure of the possessed.

The novel not only suggests how fantastic novels may be read psychologically, but how supernatural literature may be read allegorically. Writing in the early thirties, Singer saw the increasing power of the Soviet regime to the east and the growing shadow of Nazism to the west. In each case, Singer saw how weak men of goodwill are easily pushed aside by brutes if they refuse to fight, and how the mob embraces those promising bread and circuses. When we consider the figure of the righteous but withdrawn Benish Ashkenazi (whose last name is taken from the word for Eastern European Jew), or that of the slaughterer Gedaliya, whose hairy body and love of meat make him the apotheosis of physical lust, we see how characters in Singer's novel become representative of communal political problems.

S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk*

Born in the shtetl of Vitebsk, Ansky (né Solomon Rappoport) grew dissatisfied with traditional Jewish life, turning to Russian literature and social movements, working in the mines with peasants. But in his mid-30s, Ansky, already a successful writer, suddenly returned to his roots: in 1911, he helped initiate the St. Petersburg Ethnographic Expedition, an ambitious trek through the Russian empire to collect spoken, sung, written, and crafted treasures of Jewish culture. The mission was highly influenced by the nationalist currents of the time; if Jews in the region could prove that their traditions stretched back centuries, they could make a stronger case for being considered Russian.

The Dybbuk, a play inspired by much of Ansky's research, reflects both its source material and the expedition's nationalist aims. Khonon is a poor rabbinic student immersed in the



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

study of kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. But when his true love, Leah, is betrothed to someone else, Khonon dies, only for his spirit to return and possess her. Although the story is set in the late 19th century—many of the characters in the play admiringly tell tales of and by Hasidic leaders who flourished in that century—it draws on much earlier traditions: the handshake agreement of the fathers binding the lovers, the call of a spirit to a Din Torah (court of rabbinic law), not to mention the detailed, realistic customs surrounding the exorcism of the dybbuk.

None of which means that Ansky sacrificed literary or dramatic effects in the name of folkloric authenticity. Case in point: the dynamic between dybbuk and victim. Though it was common in Jewish folklore for a male spirit to enter the body of a woman, it was rare for the two to know each other, and unheard of for the pair to be lovers. In crossing the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* with the tale of the dybbuk, Ansky creates a story in which even death does not spell an end to romantic obsession.

But Ansky had other oppositions in mind when he subtitled his play “Between Two Worlds.” There is the world of Jewish mysticism versus the world of halacha (Jewish law)—as when Khonon ignores the warning against the sudden embrace of kabbalah at the expense of halacha. There is the world of haves and the world of have-nots: Khonen enters the world of mystical experimentation in the first place because Leah’s father is unwilling to marry her to a poor student. There is the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity: The play frowns on the traditional idea of arranged marriages, suggesting that sacred unions are instead a product of romantic love. Finally, there is the world of men versus the world of women: Leah becomes Khonon-Leah, vacillating uneasily, occupying neither world fully.

Still *The Dybbuk* transcends both its anthropological origins and its structure of opposites. The acts are structured to build to local crescendos; there are tableaux which function as *coups de théâtre* and meaty roles for a wide range of actors. Not surprisingly, the play soon became one of the warhorses of the Yiddish theater. As the dybbuk haunts its characters, so too the play seems to have an unworldly hold on us: Recent years have seen adaptations and revisions by American playwrights as diverse as Tony Kushner and Paddy Chayevsky.

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

Gregor Samsa awakes from a night of uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a monstrous, beetlelike “vermin,” but his biggest worry is getting to work on time. His family members are forced to find jobs and take in lodgers. Eventually, even his beloved sister, Grete, whom he hoped to send to conservatory, admits if the giant insect really were Gregor, he would have had the decency to leave of his own free will and save them the torture.

When Franz Kafka composed *The Metamorphosis* late in 1912, he was just a few months past his 29th birthday, and in the midst of a brief, astonishing five year spurt of creativity that included early drafts of *The Trial* and *Amerika*. He’d just met his future fiancée, Felice Bauer, and had grown fascinated with Jewish culture, and in particular Yiddish language and theater. How do these two encounters play themselves out in the story of poor Gregor Samsa?

It’s nearly impossible to mistake the Freudian implications that arise from the very first lines, which describe Gregor Samsa waking from uneasy dreams. Of course, the difference between Freud’s interpretation of dreams and Gregor Samsa’s waking nightmare is substantial. Still, the self-loathing, the hatred of his changing body,



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

the squeamishness about having family members—especially his mother and sister—enter his bedroom, could easily represent an acute anxiety about expressing mature sexuality in a juvenile, familial context. (Kafka lived in his parents' house until he was 31—two years after the completion of this novella.) It's worth recalling that Gregor is enamored of a beautiful woman's picture on the walls of his bedroom; insectlike, he clings to it, covering it with his body. Though hardly a major theme within Jewish theology, moralistic works and supernatural tales often evoked the connection between lust and monstrous forms. One famous Yiddish treatise, the 18th-century *Kav Hayosher*, suggested that each act of masturbation created a demon or an imp.

The monstrous transformation at the heart of *The Metamorphosis* may also reflect the ambivalence Kafka felt about his city's Jewish identity. Though Prague might be characterized as a central European city, its inhabitants viewed themselves as highly westernized, in contrast to their co-religionists from the Eastern European hinterlands, whom they considered to be uneducated, lacking in personal hygiene—in a word, disgusting. Originally, these perceptions arose during earlier struggles over emancipation. In an effort to prove their social and political worth, Western European Jews wished to distinguish themselves from other Jews deemed unworthy of such privileges through external appearance and actions. Yet the clear link between Eastern and Western European Jews must have caused thinkers such as Kafka some anxiety: Were the poor masses of Eastern Europe actually a dark reflection of Western European Jews themselves?

Ultimately, this Jewish monster may be a creature of the modern Jewish imagination in a more fundamental way: Like the characters in so many of Kafka's stories, Gregor Samsa eludes any firm interpretation. This is not to say that some answer to the question haunting any reader of serious literature—what is this about?—is absent. Kafka, instead, combines the skeptic and the believer, giving us the sense of that answer's possibility, but not how to reach it. In this sense, we live perhaps more in the Age of Kafka than the Age of Freud: Freud insisted on the absolute explicability of uneasy dreams, whereas Kafka reminds us that interpretation leads to a world of even greater mystery.

Cynthia Ozick, *The Puttermessaer Papers*

Smart, determined, "something of a feminist," Ruth Puttermessaer is a New York City civil servant, living alone on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. With rich prose and love of detail, Ozick lifts Puttermessaer's ordinary life, even the details of bureaucracy, into the realm of the extraordinary. The most mystical event in Puttermessaer's life is the creation of a female golem, who transforms the minor functionary into Mayor (while serving as a kind of replacement for the child Puttermessaer never has). The golem soon writes the "PLAN for the Resuscitation, Reformation, Reinvigoration & Redemption of the City of New York," allowing Puttermessaer to transform that most Jewish of all diasporic cities, for a brief time, into heaven on earth.

Is the female golem, the first of its gender, a shot across the bow of a male-oriented tradition of Jewish mystics and creators? When the golem names itself Xanthippe—the name of Socrates' wife—it claims that it does so not to emulate the proverbial shrewishness of that woman, but because "Xanthippe alone had the courage to gainsay Socrates." But Puttermessaer (whom we see early in the novel reading Plato's Socratic dialogues) soon takes Xanthippe's



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

constant needs—a reflection, distorted as it may be, of her own desires—not as legitimate criticism but as shrewishness. Eventually, the golem, like its predecessors, becomes too much for Puttermesser to control and must be destroyed. Perhaps this end was inevitable; or is the lack of control located in Puttermesser's own propensities and character? It is no coincidence that Xanthippe's undoing is its lust for, and abandonment by, Puttermesser's old lover Morris Rapoport, who had done the same thing to Puttermesser herself.

This sense is strengthened by reading some of Puttermesser's later adventures. Unlike Ozick, Puttermesser blurs the line between literature and life. Rupert Rabeeno, the great love of Puttermesser's life, is a master draftsman and copyist of great works of art: He claims that his process of copying is itself art. Finding Puttermesser, Rabeeno sees the opportunity to take his art to an entirely new level. Puttermesser is so enamored of George Eliot, author of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, and her great love affair with editor and writer George Henry Lewes, that Puttermesser's deepest desire is to reenact that story in a contemporary setting. Puttermesser, blinded by literature as much as by love, believes that Rabeeno truly has fallen in love with her; her realization, after the re-enactment has run its course, is crushing.

A similar encounter takes place in "Puttermesser and the Muscovite Cousin," where Puttermesser's ideal construction of the beleaguered Soviet Jew is shattered when she comes face to face with Lidia, who constantly takes advantage of her and other well-meaning examples of the New York City Jewish liberal. A vicious skewering of Jewish intellectual society, the story shows how Puttermesser lacks even the consolation of being a comfortable member of the satirized groups; she ends up entirely alone, abandoned by her cousin and those her cousin mocks alike.

True to her name (Yiddish for "butter knife"), Puttermesser proves incapable of forceful, permanent action, ending up with less than nothing, despite—or maybe because of—her thoughtful, intellectual approach to the world. Her death is sadly apropos of her life; but her paradise is hardly recompense. For Puttermesser, the constantly searching intellectual, paradise can never be anything but ephemeral; this is the lesson literature has taught her. Golems must be unmade, and heaven must turn into hell.

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

Angels in America opens with a funeral, a scene common in many so-called AIDS plays of the late eighties and early nineties: Here, though, the buried individual is not a gay man who has died of AIDS, but a Jewish immigrant, grandmother of Louis Ironson. Louis "isn't so good with death," and when his boyfriend, Prior Walter, becomes ill, he abandons him, only to become involved with a closeted Mormon named Joe Pitt, who, in turn, leaves his Valium-addicted, agoraphobic wife, Harper.

Kushner is not merely suggesting that America is a nation of the marginalized, however. The infection of Prior Walter with the AIDS virus is not, it turns out, a death sentence; it transforms him into a prophet, seeing into "the threshold of revelation." Whether he has a message more significant than the fact of his own survival—or, indeed, whether there can be any such message—is one of the more important questions that the play raises. When Prior visits heaven near the end of the play, it is a remarkably disillusioning experience, even



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

a frightful one; yet heaven's very insignificance allows humans to display a kind of metaphysical triumph that would be meaningless otherwise.

In this sense, Kushner creates ghosts and angels, almost precisely to reduce them to insignificance. The true angel in America is not the winged creature who smashes through Prior's ceiling, but Belize, the drag queen nurse who tends to Prior, his ex-boyfriend, as he becomes ravaged with disease. (One might also suggest the stern and forbidding Hannah Pitt, with her unyielding fortitude and her unemotional but powerful sense of love and responsibility.) The ghosts that do appear—the prior Priors, Ethel Rosenberg—are faint and ephemeral, at best foils to show off the emotional complexities of the play's main characters.

Angels are, it turns out, far less important to the play than its monsters, both thoroughly Jewish, yet in entirely different ways. The first, Louis, is almost a parody: liberal, cosmopolitan, intellectual, perpetually guilt-ridden, narcissistic. Louis' abandonment of Prior when his illness becomes too grave is not only aberrant within the gay community (Prior bitterly remarks that every other AIDS victim in New York City has a loved one to take care of him or her), but an outgrowth of a weak and vacillating character.

The other monster in the play—Roy Cohn—is a political animal to the core. In the scene where Cohn, an anti-communist prosecutor, learns he has AIDS, he asserts he is not a homosexual; he is a heterosexual who has sex with men. Cohn redefines homosexuality in terms of power: Homosexuals, he argues, are people nobody knows and who know nobody. Raging against the collapse of his body, Cohn wants to be known (and feared) as he always has been. He is responsible for illegally jawboning a judge to ensure the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after they were convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union. Still, his most heinous crime, in Kushner's estimation, is his refusal to admit his true nature.

Kushner's exploration of the supernatural also draws explicitly on strains of Jewish mysticism, from the appearance of a flaming Hebrew letter to the kaddish, the traditional prayer for the dead, spoken by Louis over Roy Cohn. But ultimately these overt expressions of Jewish magic are less impressive than the deep strains of Jewish argument and Jewish history that pervade the play.

Background Literature

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

Ben-Amos and Mintz, ed. *The Tales of the Ba'al Shem Tov*

Fifty years after the death of Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of the Hasidic movement (better known by his title The Master of the Good Name, or the Ba'al Shem Tov), an enterprising printer decided to collect all of the tales that had been circulating in Hasidic circles about his life, death, and miraculous career. In these stories, the Ba'al Shem Tov encounters werewolves, spirits, and demons, as well as an ever-increasing number of faithful.

H. Leivick, *The Golem* (in Landis, ed., *Three Great Jewish Plays*)

Leivick's drama in verse was inspired by the series of legends which surrounded the noted Prague rabbi known as the *Maharal* and the golem he created to protect the Jewish people from the depredations of anti-Semitic activity, particularly stemming from the Catholic church. What results



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

is a sustained meditation on the excesses of religion—any religion—as well as an almost existential consideration of what it means to be a human being through the struggles of an intelligent creature who is not one.

Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi: The Mystical Messiah*

In the year 1666, the Jewish community was rocked by rumors that the Messiah had come to liberate the Jews from exile and to return them to their home in the holy land. Tales of the miracles done by Sabbatai Zevi were commonplace until his conversion to Islam. Scholem's biography of the false Messiah looks at the events of his life and the movement he inspired.

Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

Jewish mysticism is grounded in attempts to explain the supernatural, that is, ideas and concepts which are not easily explained in the visible and understandable world. Scholem's magisterial study is far and away the best overview of this highly complicated history and devotes one essay to exploring kabbalistic efforts to create a golem, or artificial man.

David Stern, ed. *Rabbinic Fantasies*

In this anthology of stories, legends, and folktales from the period of late antiquity and medieval Judaism, David Stern reveals how varied the imaginations of the rabbis were. As these stories show, far from being simply interested in matters of ritual law, the leading figures of Jewish life were creators fascinated by demons, angels, saints, and sinners.

Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*

One of the most long-standing and pernicious anti-Semitic myths in European history is the idea that Jews are in league with the devil. Trachtenberg's book traces the history of that idea and many of its tragic consequences for Jewish communities throughout the continent.

Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*

Though this book was written almost 75 years ago, it remains the standard work on the history of Jewish customs and beliefs concerning the supernatural. For readers interested in medieval customs for warding off demons or beliefs about the pantheons of Jewish angels, this book provides a treasure-house of information.

Beatrice Weinreich, ed. *Yiddish Folktales*

In this anthology of Eastern European folktales, recorded in the 20th century but possibly dating from before, an entire world comes alive for the reader. Not surprisingly, this traditional world has its share of supernatural creatures as well, ranging from ghosts and demons to imps and sprites.

Ruth Wisse, ed. *The I.L. Peretz Reader*

Isaac Leib Peretz may be the most influential writer in modern Yiddish literature, his work establishing a tradition of integrating traditional Jewish folk motifs with a modern, secular sensibility. The supernatural tales included by Ruth Wisse in this wide-ranging collection show a writer interested in golems and demons not as entities but as symbols.

Recommended Reading

The following works of literature also explore the theme of monsters of the Jewish imagination and are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

Stage magic and the supernatural rub shoulders in this epic work, set against the backdrop of the Holocaust and World War II. A story of two cousins, the novel features both a spirited chronicle of the Jewish creation of an American art form—the comic book—and an updated version of the Golem of Prague story, one that owes as much to Harry Houdini as to Rabbi Judah Loew.



DEMONS, GOLEMS, AND DYBBUKS

Nathan Englander, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*

In this collection of short stories, Englander displays his skill at weaving traditional motifs—supernatural and otherwise—into the most modern of settings. “The Gilgul of Park Avenue,” about reincarnation, Jews and Gentiles, and the Upper East Side, is both a sly satire and a worthy addition to the field of Jewish supernatural literature.

Joachim Neugroschel, ed. *Great Tales of Jewish Fantasy and the Occult*

This massive anthology can serve as a remarkable and thorough introduction to the wide range of supernatural writing in Yiddish literature. Neugroschel shows how seeds planted in older, traditional Yiddish works bear stunning fruit in the secular works of the late 19th and 20th centuries, and the writers on display here, largely unknown to the general reader, are some of the finest in the Yiddish canon.

Dorit Rabinyan, *Persian Brides*

Set in 19th-century Persia, the story of the Ratoryan family and their village is suffused with magic. Spells to bring home wayward husbands and other romantic nostrums, though, are nothing compared to the magic cast by the storytellers within the novel, whose tales make this fantastical landscape seem extraordinarily compelling.

Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*

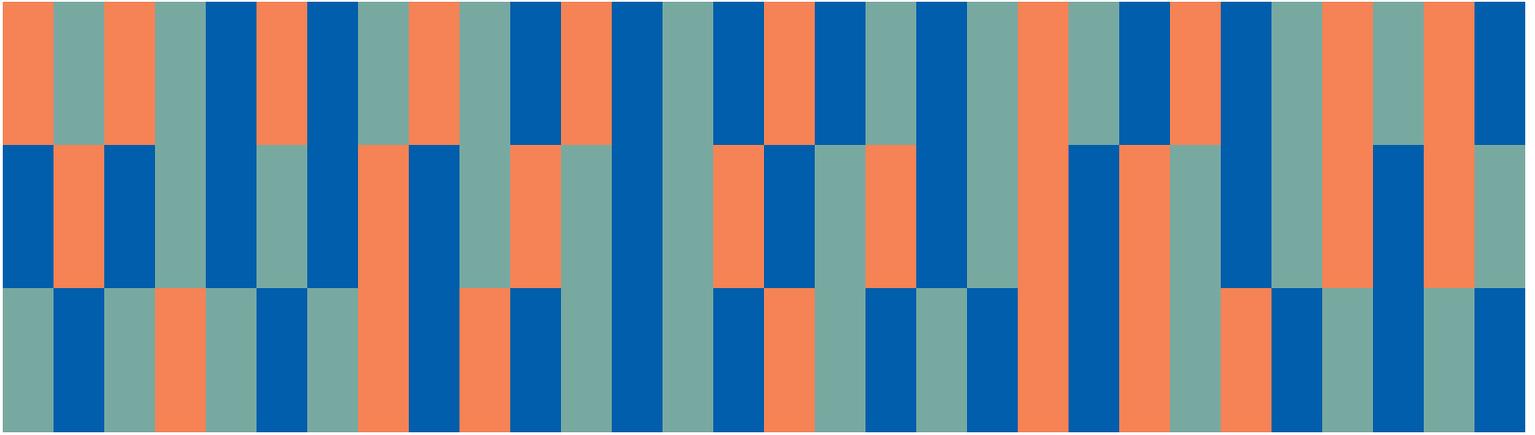
Often compared to Kafka, Schulz blends memoir and fiction to paint a dreamscape of his own childhood in the provincial Polish city of Drohobych. In one chapter, Schulz’s merchant father, intensely afraid of cockroaches, starts to look like one. In another, he experiments with electricity, mechanics, mesmerism, and psychoanalysis, the magic of a new age.

Jeremy Dauber

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio’s Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published this year by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center’s “Great Jewish Books” project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the Christian Science Monitor, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.



We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next. SAUL BELLOW



www.ala.org/publicprograms
www.nextbook.org