Abstract

This working paper has three modest aims: (1) To present, in a succinct and accessible but not distorted fashion, ancient religious Jewish sources about a human-like entity called the golem and some of their later interpretations; (2) To distinguish our sources from the popular modern representation of the golem in Ashkenazi Jewish fiction and folktales, which has played a greater role in recent Jewish contributions to bioethics; (3) To suggest why our ancient sources on the golem, if we try to locate them in their own interpretive contexts, have a new relevance to anyone who is curious about the ethical significance of humanity’s rapidly increasing ability to intervene in biological creation. The paper is organized in three parts. The introduction offers a critical synopsis of dominant ways that experts in Jewish bioethics have recently invoked the golem. As will be shown, these experts have a high degree of consensus about the golem’s significance, they refer to a narrow range of sources, and they use a similar interpretive procedure to determine the meaning of their sources. These facts are related. They result in an interpretation of the golem that equates one nineteenth-century Eastern European legend with an image spanning millennia, scores of texts, and much of the Western world. Key variables, with divergent implications, have been lost in this equation. Therefore, in the second section, a broader picture of the golem is provided. Beginning with the noun’s sole appearance in the Bible (Psalm 139) and looking at a few rabbinc and Jewish mystical writings, we will use the work of scholars and close readings of canonical sources to reveal several neglected ways that Jewish sources have used the golem image in order to reflect upon the ethics of creation. In our conclusion, we will summarize the empirical and methodological consequences of these readings. Rather than pronounce on what the golem tells scientists (not) to do with biology, we will synthesize new ways that this image might help them, or any open-minded reader, to think about this vital issue.