

# **H. Leivick, Anarchism & Yiddish Theatre**

**The Golem & other plays electrified New York audiences in the early 20th century**

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There is a staple of the Yiddish theater written in 1921 entitled, *The Golem* (sort of a Jewish Frankenstein).

It still remains quite popular in translation including a 2002 Off-Broadway run. I saw it performed in 1984 at a free outdoor staging starring Randy Quaid as the monster.

However, the play has two striking peculiarities. First, no one seems to remember the author's name. Second, it was written as a "dramatic poem in eight scenes," and originally thought to be unstageable because of technical demands. Although adapted into its current form, many theatergoers still find parts of the play dreadfully obscure.

The author, who wrote under the pen name of H. Leivick, was active in the anarchist movement during the 1910s-20s on New York City's Lower East Side and wrote the plays considered here. He later gained wide recognition as one of the world's most renowned Yiddish poets.

The Golem's story of a clay superman who goes on a killing rampage to save the Jewish community from a pogrom is Leivick's contemplation of the anarchist tactic of political assassinations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Boldly enough, Leivick decided to utilize an Eastern European Jewish folk legend to carefully assay this political topic.

Leivick's life before arriving in New York from Belarus, where he was born in 1888, was, to say the least, colorful. Historian Nahma Sandrow describes it:

"By the [Russian] Revolution of 1905, when he was seventeen, he [Leivick] was already committed to political action...In 1906, he was arrested twice, the second time spending a long period in chains, flogged, in solitary confinement...In 1912, he arrived in chains at a village in eastern Siberia on the banks of the Lena River. But soon afterwards he managed to escape, with the help of money raised for him by the people of America who had read poems he had smuggled out of prison...In 1913, he arrived in New York. There, he preferred on principle to earn his living as a physical laborer rather than as a writer, so he worked as a paperhanger for most of the rest of his life."

Once in New York City, Leivick joined Di Yunge (The Young Ones), a writer's group which saw their task as integrating elements of Judaism with progressive (chiefly anarchist and socialist) philosophies. His plays focused on the anarchist struggle, contrasting the European underground fight with above ground labor union struggles in the U.S.

## Hirsch Lekert

Leivick depicts the underground movement in his play, *Hirsh Lekert*. Set in Vilna, Poland, in 1902, it concerns the central character's attempted assassination of the city's repressive governor, Van Wahl.

The play chronicles actual events where a protest against the mistreatment of the Jews by the governor is met by military repression in which the marchers are mercilessly beaten. Thirty men, grabbed from the midst, are taken to jail and flogged till near death. Lekert feels the situation demands action. When community leaders are too dispirited to do anything, he decides to assassinate the governor. He shoots but only wounds the official, however, he is condemned to death and hung immediately. Lekert remained a hero to the Polish Jewish community.

The play is not a blanket affirmation of assassination. On the contrary, it argues that such deeds are only justified when people have shown themselves ready for armed struggle in a time of extreme danger. Many tried to smuggle guns into the march. A pogrom, in which the whole Jewish

community would be put to the sword, is on the horizon. Yet, the leaders temporize, frightened by the recent repression. Then, and only then, does Leivick suggest that a militant act is justified.

## The Golem

The di Yunge group's focus on "integrating elements of Judaism with anarchist and socialist philosophies" did not mean that Jewish lore had to be politicized. The fact that martyr Lekert was revered by all sectors of the Jewish community suggests this tradition was already thoroughly politicized.

However, to Leivick's mind, many of the sacrosanct tales from the Torah and folklore had yet to reveal their inescapable anarchist dimensions. He took up the tale of the 16th century Prague golem to affect just such a revelation.

The story of the golem has always been puzzling. Why is it that the golem runs wild at the end, killing the people he was meant to protect, like a Frankenstein? For the golem is no Frankenstein. The golem is summoned by the rabbi of Prague to protect the Jewish community from an anticipated pogrom.

An anti-Semitic Christian prelate secretly kills Christian babies and plans to blame the Jews for the crime to justify the impending attack on them. The killing of this treacherous prelate by the golem hardly seems blameworthy. However, compare the violence of Lekert and the golem.

Lekert shoots at the governor in the public square. The golem acts in secret to foil the concealed plots of his adversary. Where Lekert's violence was primed to revive the flagging spirits of the labor movement; the golem, a secret agent, saves lives but does not alter the perspective of the Jewish masses who remain ignorant of the danger, that, though temporarily staved off, still confronts them.

For Leivick, only violence which defends the working class against state violence, carried out publicly and after consultation (though not consensus) with the community, and only if the community has shown itself willing and capable of seconding the attendant with its own defensive activities is it justified. Leivick, then, explains the strange end of this legend, where the golem goes crazy and kills the Jews who it was created to protect—by giving it political grounding.

## Shop

At this point, Leivick's writings may seem of primarily historical value. After all, we don't live under a czarist police state, not yet at least. However, when Leivick arrived in the U.S. in 1913, he found a vibrant, above ground, union-oriented anarchist movement.

The last play we will consider addresses the problems of political consciousness in this configuration. In *Shop*, Leivick examines strikers making a decision during the height of the conflict. The workers must decide how to judge a woman who may or may not have scabbed by working during the strike.

Once the strike is underway, the boss circumvents the labor stoppage by hiring replacement scabs. The workers decide to invade and occupy the factory. As they fight their way in, all but one of the strikebreakers in the factory manage to sneak out the back door. The one person caught, Raya, actually is not a scab. She is labeled by the others as an "old maid," whose last hope for

happiness is marriage to Barkon. Learning Barkon is still working, she has come to the shop to convince her lover to join the strikers and doesn't want it revealed that he is a scab.

Leivick was well aware of how the sexual and the political mix. Indeed, in *Shop*, each person is a fount of conflicting sympathies. And it all comes down to one's attachment to different layers of solidarity. Some of the workers are so single-mindedly devoted to the nuclear family or upholding religious ritual that other (deeper) levels of loyalty don't impinge on them and they scab.

Those who have already formed deep ties with fellow anarchists in other struggles are the most committed. The most courageous activist in the play is Mina, who had been imprisoned in Siberia. Workplace community also plays an important role.

The play explores the dynamics of individuals' crosscutting loyalties and watches how people mesh and clash as they hash out decisions in a sequence of moments that combine to make up the collective interface of class struggle.

To see Leivick's plays as merely political tracts cast in drama would be a distortion of his abilities since he creates three-dimensional characters engaged in realistic, gripping conflicts.

But the issues he focuses on are not that familiar to the audiences of classic modern drama which tend to concentrate on how hard it is to survive in this mad, mad world (as in *Death of a Salesman* or *A Raisin in the Sun*) or on how absurd life is (*Waiting for Godot*).

Leivick later moved closer to communism and finally to Zionism towards the end of his life in 1962. However, during the time of his greatest literary productivity, from 1913 until the mid-1920s, he was an anarchist.

The only issue for Leivick, as an anarchist writer, is to depict how people work for the liberation of the underclass. This means he examines what turns the struggle takes, either victorious or disastrous, and what varied, lively, tragic, absurd and comic people one finds in the midst of these conflicts.

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A much longer and slightly different version of this essay appeared in *Jews: A People's History of the Lower East Side*. Jim Feast lives in NYC and is a member of the Unbearables literary group.

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