

# Paul Wegener, *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920)

## Abstract

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The 1920 silent film *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* [The Golem, how he came into the world] represented actor-screenwriter-director Paul Wegener's third retelling of an old rabbinical legend of the Golem, a clay monster who saves the Jews of medieval Prague from persecution. He had already made a very well-received version in 1915 and a parody in 1917, but the tale kept luring him back. In this clip of an early scene, the Holy Roman Emperor has ordered the exile of the Jews, and now Rabbi Loew (Albert Steinrück), who had earlier prophesied disaster for his people, secretly fashions the Golem (played by Wegener) from clay. Later, in the presence of the emperor, Loew simultaneously shows off his creation and recounts for the royal audience the history of the Jews. When the audience begins to laugh at Loew's story, the imperial palace starts to quiver and crack. The mighty Golem holds the ceiling up, however, and the emperor, in gratitude, pardons the Jews. In an echo of the Frankenstein story, however, Loew quickly discovers that he cannot control the Golem, and the latter rampages through the ghetto, attacking indiscriminately until a little girl innocently removes the magic amulet and renders him inanimate once again. Thanks to that action-packed plot and the film's visual artistry, it played to sold-out theaters for months. Like the Frankenstein tale, as well, this story of the Golem suggested the unpredictable nature of any innovation and offered a cautionary tale in an era of accelerating technological and social transformations. The film's theme of Jewish persecution would also have found a contemporary parallel in the post-1918 wave of Jewish refugees fleeing to Germany from pogroms in central and eastern Europe. Audience members might even have associated the film's setting—the Jewish ghetto of medieval Prague—with some of the urban neighborhoods where these refugees concentrated, such as Berlin's *Scheunenviertel*, which became the site of violent antisemitic attacks just three years after this film's release.

## Source

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Intertitles:

Decree against the Jews

"We no longer close our eyes to the many serious accusations against the Jews who crucified our Lord, who flagrantly disregard the sacred Christian feast days, who seek their fellow human beings' wealth and blood and who are said to be skilled in the black arts. We order that the entire Jewish community is to vacate their quarter, called the ghetto, before the moon changes."

[The emperor signs the decree and picks one of his courtiers to deliver it.]

Emperor: "Junker Florian, you will take our letter to the Jewish quarter."

[Meanwhile Rabbi Löw studies the instruction for bringing the Golem to life.]

Rabbi Löw: "Venus enters the constellation of Libra. The time has come when the incantation must succeed. I must wrest the life-giving word from Astaroth, the terrible spirit, that will bring the Golem to life to save my people."

[Florian arrives in the Jewish quarter.]

Servant: "An emissary of the emperor is outside."

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Rabbi Jehuda: “If there is compassion in your young heart, then go with me to Rabbi Löw. He is the heart and mouth of our Jewish people.”

[Florian agrees. They make their way through the ghetto to Löw’s house, where Florian sees Löw’s daughter, Miriam.]

Rabbi Löw: “It was I who cast the emperor’s horoscope. I have warned him twice of misfortune. Tell him I have a secret message for him.”

[Florian agrees.]

Source: *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*, dir. Paul Wegener, PAGU, 1920. wikimedia commons:  
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