

THE JEWISH ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE GOLEM

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The concept of a Golem usually refers to a mythical or legendary creature that is human-like, formed out of clay of the earth, and created by a Rabbi through “magical” or non-scientific means. The Golem usually does not have the power to speak and has great strength. The most famous of these creatures is supposedly the Golem of Prague created by the Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew (1520-1609). Although this legend is completely baseless (no scholarly or scientific evidence), it is still very popular today (especially in the city of Prague, even among non-Jews), so it is important to understand if this concept is legitimate in normative, traditional Judaism. There are those who postulate that the Jews, who were constantly oppressed by neighbors and authorities in Europe, “needed” to invent such a legend, to act as a Jewish hero that would protect them from gentiles who sought to harm them. Others believe the Golem myth was the origin of Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein story. Is there indeed a legitimate Jewish concept of a Golem? If so, what are the details of such an idea, and what is the status of such a creature? Would it be legitimate for Jews to create such a creature, if it were possible through technology, and is it possible through other means? How is this creature different from and similar to other human beings and Jews? If there is no legitimacy to this concept in Judaism, then why has this legend persisted for so long? The sources tell us much about whether the Golem is indeed “real,” legitimate and how such a creature is perceived within Judaism.

HISTORY OF JEWS CREATING A GOLEM OR GOLEM-LIKE CREATURES

The specific term “Golem” is only used once in Scripture,¹ and it signifies an unformed substance. Rashi explains the term “Golem,” both in his commentary to this verse and in the Talmud,² to indicate human form, the body before the soul has entered it, or, in general, an unfinished and unformed product. In modern Hebrew, “*Chomrei Gelem*” is translated as raw materials. In fact, the Talmud describes the various stages of man’s original Creation, which took five hours on the Sixth Day of Creation, and in Hour 2, prior to his receiving a soul, his status was described as that of Golem.³ The Mishna, however, also used the term “Golem” in quite a different manner, calling any person who acts in ways that are opposite to a wise person’s *modus operandi* a “Golem,” signifying an ignoramus or imbecile. Sometimes, the term is translated to refer to an “undeveloped mind.”⁴

There is indeed a precedent in Jewish history of creating something inanimate that suddenly comes alive. When the evil Jeroboam broke away from the other tribes and formed his Kingdom of Israel in Shechem, he made an idol, a calf of gold, that the Talmud says recited the Ten Commandments.⁵ A Midrash states that the original Golden Calf in the desert came alive and began to speak as well.⁶ When the Torah says that Joseph spoke evil about his brothers, Rashi explains the details of this evil slander. The brothers were eating from live animals without slaughtering them first, a prohibition for all descendants of Noah. How could the sons of Jacob be guilty of such an obvious sin? Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz (1558-1630) explains that these sons have received the *Sefer Yetzira*-Book of Creation that was written by their grandfather Abraham, which contained the secrets of how to

¹ Psalms 139:16

² Rashi commentary on Psalms 139:16 and Sanhedrin 22b

³ Sanhedrin 38b

⁴ Mishna Avot 5:7

⁵ I Kings 12:25-28 and Sotah 47a

⁶ Midrash, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 44

create living beings. Joseph's brothers then created young girls and animals. It was these animals that Joseph saw the brothers eating, unaware of the Book of Creation, or how these animals came to be. Thus, eating these without slaughtering them first was not prohibited.⁷

The most famous story in the Talmud in this regard involves Rava, who created a "man" through the use of words and sent this creature to Rabbi Zaira. When Rabbi Zaira spoke to it and the "man" did not answer him, he declared this to be a creature of "magicians," and sent it to return to the dust and "die." Then the Talmud declares that Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Oshia used to spend every Shabbat studying the "Book of Creation." Through this book and combination of letters, they created an adult calf and ate it.⁸

There is a tradition in the *Sefer HaGematriot* that Ben Sira and Jeremiah also studied the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yetzira*) for three years, after which they created a man. On this man's forehead was a Hebrew word. This creature spoke and told them that people erred in the generation of Enosh concerning creatures like him, and it is better that he should not exist, whereupon Jeremiah erased one of the letters on his forehead and the creature turned to ashes.⁹ The book called "The Secret Name of Forty-Two Letters" has an alternate story. In it, the creature himself erases one of the letters. In this version, the creature explained why it is preferable that it should not exist. If creatures like him were to remain alive, people would ascribe all creation in the world to human beings and would forget about G-d. After the creature returned to ashes, Jeremiah states that it is proper to study and know how to do this, but not to actually put this knowledge into action and create anything.¹⁰

At this point, it would be logical to conclude that the idea of the creation of a Golem is legitimate Jewish ancient tradition, steeped in the legends of the distant past, but not actual for modern times. But Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Ashkenazi, known as the Chacham Tzvi (1658-1718), was one of the greatest and most respected Rabbis and leaders of his time, writes that his grandfather, the head of the Jewish court in Chelm, a city in Europe, had actually created a Golem. And Rabbi Ashkenazi posed the actual Jewish law question concerning whether this creation could be considered a Jewish adult and count for a Minyan-Quorum of ten adult Jewish males that is needed to pray in the synagogue.¹¹ Thus, the idea of this creation is not only an ancient legend, but very real in recent Jewish history as well, and creations such as this apparently did take place. But did this "miracle" (supernatural event) really occur, and if so, by what means? Why would G-d give man such power? And what was the secret to allow man to create beings that came alive? Could this be duplicated today? Should it be?

HOW GOLEM-LIKE CREATURES WERE CREATED AND DESTROYED AND WHY

It seems that the secrets locked into the Book of Creation had something to do with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. There is something special about the Hebrew language (see the chapter about "Hebrew and Secular Language", vol. 1), and each Hebrew letter is also special. In Hebrew, each letter is also a number, for example. G-d created the world by using the Hebrew letters in a combination that make up the words which G-d spoke and then created the physical universe.¹² When Adam gave names to each animal, it was not just a random description like the word "chair" for a four-legged object one sits on. The Rabbis tell us that the Hebrew names, made up of Hebrew letters, intrinsically described the essence of each creature.¹³ Therefore, it is evident that there is special power in Hebrew letters and names. Clearly, then, if letters are the "secret" building blocks

⁷ Rashi commentary, Genesis 37:2, Shelah, Parshat Vayeshev

⁸ Sanhedrin 65b with Rashi commentary

⁹ Tradition, Spring 1998, (Vol. 32, no. 3) "Survey of Recent Periodic Literature" J. David Bleich, p. 59 *Sefer ha-Gematri'ot*

¹⁰ Tradition, Spring 1998, (Vol. 32, no. 3) "Survey of Recent Periodic Literature" J. David Bleich, p. 60 *The Secret Name of 42 Letters*

¹¹ Responsa, Chacham Tzvi 93

¹² Genesis 1:3, 9, 11, Mishne Avot 5:1, "Baruch She-amar" prayer, morning service

¹³ Genesis 2:20 with Nachmanides commentary

of all creation, man, imitating G-d, has the potential to use the right combination of letters to also create something alive.

This concept is not only logical, not only conjecture, but can be found in traditional sources. We know that Bezalel was given the task of assembling the Tabernacle, which in many ways was a replication, in miniature, of the creation of the world.¹⁴ In order to create the Tabernacle, Bezalel was given the secrets of the letters by which the universe was created.¹⁵ In another Midrash, G-d speaks to an angel and shows that angel the letters through which He created the Heavens and the Earth, the letters through which He created the stars and planets, and the letters through which G-d created everything else in the universe.¹⁶ Thus, it is clear that it is through the special combination of letters that creation was effected.

The secrets of the use of these letters was first given to Abraham by G-d, which were then written in a book called *Sefer Yetzira*-The Book of Creation, according to Rabbi Chaim David Azulai (1724-1806)¹⁷. Abraham passed it on to Isaac, then on to Jacob and then on to Jacob's older sons, who created young women and animals with this knowledge, as mentioned above. This book and knowledge was passed down to future generations. Rashi explained that it was by using the secrets in this book that Rava was able to create the being mentioned in the Talmud, and the Talmud specifically says that Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Oshia used this book in creating the animal they consumed on Shabbat.¹⁸ It was also through the secrets of this special volume that Ben Sira and Jeremiah were able to create the being described above.¹⁹ Apparently, the letters were not only pronounced, but some letters were also written on the forehead of the created being. According to the stories mentioned, that word was *Emet*-Truth. Why this particular word? The Talmud explains that this word – Truth -- was the seal of G-d, and a seal is something that is usually written and stamped.²⁰ It is also true that by erasing the first letter of this word – i.e., *Emet*-Truth – one is left with the word *Met*-death, and this was the method of “killing” the beings that were created through the Book of Creation.

Therefore, the “how” of creating a Golem is known, in general, but the specific details remain a well-protected secret. If this amazing knowledge still exists today, does man have the right to use it to create such beings? And, if not, why did G-d give the book to Abraham, and then allow man to use it to create beings in the past at all? Should man dabble in such things, which seem very dangerous and better left to the Almighty?

LEGITIMACY OF CREATING A GOLEM IN JUDAISM

Can and should man be able to create a Golem? On the one hand, G-d is the Creator of the universe and everything in it. On the other hand, when man was created in G-d's image²¹, that “image” of G-d cannot refer to a physical characteristic since G-d, by definition, has no physical image. Rather, man was given some component of G-dliness. That element of G-dliness could be man's ability to create in the world. (See chapter on “Shabbat” vol. 4 [to come] for an expansion of this theme.) The Talmud states that there are three (equal) partners in the creation of every human being: G-d, the father, and the mother.²² Thus, every parent is called a creator of a human being in Judaism. According to the Midrash, G-d tells man that just as He, G-d, created worlds, so does

¹⁴ Genesis 2:2-3, Exodus 31:3, 5, Proverbs 3:19, Exodus 31:2-3, Genesis 1:31, Exodus 39:43, Genesis 2:1-2, Exodus 39:32,, 40:33

¹⁵ Berachot 55a

¹⁶ Otzar HaMidrashim, Matatron 20

¹⁷ Chida, Midbar Kedaimot 8b, Chama 12

¹⁸ Rashi commentary on Sanhedrin 65b

¹⁹ Tradition, Spring 1998, (Vol. 32, no. 3) “Survey of Recent Periodic Literature” J. David Bleich, p. 59 *Sefer ha-Gematri'ot*

²⁰ Shabbat 55a

²¹ Genesis 1:1, 1:28

²² Kiddushin 30b

man also have the ability to create worlds.²³ In fact, another Midrash says that had G-d given the Torah in the “correct” order (instead of the order in which it was actually written), one who learned that Torah and understood it properly would have been able to figure out how to create worlds and to revive the dead.²⁴ Thus, man does have the ability to create in this world. In fact, all progress, creativity in the arts and scientific developments are a result of man’s creative processes.

Had this chapter been written a hundred years ago, then the entire notion of Golem would have remained a theoretical discussion in the sources. But in the twenty first century, due to man’s advances in technology, human beings are on the cusp of possibly creating in the laboratory something similar to a Golem, or possibly something alive from something not yet alive. Thus, this discussion changes from a theoretical one to a (possibly) very practical debate of the ethics of creating such a creature, with Jewish tradition weighing in on this moral question. It make take twenty or thirty years, but it is certainly now in the realm of possibility. Cloning already has come to a place scientifically far beyond what people imagined even a few years ago. Thus, it is important to discuss this concept from a Jewish perspective. (See chapter about “[Cloning](#)” for a discussion of the Jewish view of this issue.)

The sources discussed above demonstrate that man’s attempt at creativity, used improperly, is forbidden. Using non-G-dly powers for magic or to try to create something is clearly prohibited in the Torah.²⁵ But harnessed properly, such as through the Book of Creation, it seems that man could or should use all his creative powers to create even beings like the Golem. In the Talmudic passage where Rava created a creature/Golem that could not speak, Rava also states that the reason man cannot imitate G-d perfectly in creation is that each human being has some sin. But if there were a man who did not sin at all, then that man could create exactly like G-d did and does.²⁶ The verse quoted from Isaiah indeed indicates that it is only man’s sins that separate him from G-d,²⁷ and Rashi seems to connect these two passages, by saying that Rava created that man who could not speak through the Book of Creation. But had Rav been without sin, he would have created an actual human being in every sense of the word²⁸. Maharal disagrees with Rashi, and states that by definition, Rava (in that passage) and man, in general, could never create another being that could speak, since a person can only create something that is lower than itself, but never one that is equal to itself.²⁹

On the other hand, if it was so “easy” and prevalent for the Rabbis of the Talmud (or today) to create such a being, the later Rabbis ask a question of Rabbi Eliezer, based on something he did. When Rabbi Eliezer saw that he had only nine adult Jewish males, one short of the ten required for public prayer, he freed his non-Jewish servant so that the servant (according to Jewish law) would now be considered a Jew, obligated in almost all of the commandments, and could be counted as the tenth man in the Minyan. Since freeing a non-Jewish servant for no reason is forbidden, later Rabbis ask: why didn’t Rabbi Eliezer simply create a Golem instead of freeing his servant, and thereby solve the problem in this manner?³⁰ Some answer that this serves as a proof that a Golem could never be considered a Jew and eligible for a Minyan (to be amplified below). But others say that it was not just anyone who could create such a creature at will. So, the idea of a Rabbi having the ability to create a Golem may have been more prevalent in earlier times, but maybe its secret was revealed only to a select few. In any event, the idea that a Golem or a man-like creature could actually be created is taken for granted in

²³ Midrash Tehillim 116:8

²⁴ Midrash Tehillim 3:2

²⁵ Deuteronomy 18:10-12

²⁶ Sanhedrin 65b

²⁷ Isaiah 59:2

²⁸ Rashi commentary on Sanhedrin 65b

²⁹ Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Section 3, 166

³⁰ Berachot 47b, Chida, Birkai Yosef, Orach Chaim 55:4

Rabbinic literature throughout the ages as fact, even by the most respected Rabbis. As late as the twentieth century, Rabbis ruled about a Golem that had been created, regarding whether or not he was eligible to become part of a Minyan and pray.³¹ The fact that a Golem could exist or ever existed never seemed to be questioned.

THE LEGAL STATUS OF A GOLEM IN JUDAISM

Because so many great Rabbis and respected Jewish leaders discussed the question of the legal status of the Golem in Jewish law, the recorded arguments themselves give credence to the idea that such a creature existed in the past and could even exist today. The seminal discussion, as noted above, was a responsum of the Chacham Tzvi, who wrote that his grandfather did indeed create a Golem in the 1600's.³² In the responsum, he put forth several arguments in favor of actually counting a Golem as a Jew for a Minyan in a synagogue. He said that since the Talmud considers the status of an adopted son who is raised in a Jewish home to be "as if" the adoptive parents created the child,³³ a Golem created by a righteous Jew might be considered no less. He also writes that since Rashi (based on the Midrash) says that the actions of righteous people are considered like their children (and that is why the words "These are the children of Noah" is followed by "He was a righteous person"),³⁴ this points to the possibility that if a righteous person creates a Golem, it might be considered like a child. However, he then says that since Rabbi Zaira (in the Talmud) ordered the "man" created by Rava to die and it did, it is clear that this "death" was not an immoral or illegal act. Therefore, since no one considered killing a Golem to be murder, this creature cannot be counted as human, and would not be eligible for a Minyan. Similarly, in the Torah's words prohibiting murder to Noah and his descendants, the verse says, "Who kills a man within a man" (from which the prohibition of killing a fetus is derived),³⁵ Chacham Tzvi says that since the Golem was never inside a human womb, it cannot be considered human. Therefore, he rejects the notion that a Golem may be counted for a Minyan.

Although he does not disagree with the Chacham Tzvi's conclusion, Rabbi Gershon Liner (1839-1891) takes issue with the last point. He says that if the definition of a human being is someone who was born from a woman's womb, then killing the very first human being, Adam (and Eve) would not be considered murder since Adam was not born from a woman's womb.³⁶

In analyzing the status of a Golem, there is considerable difference of opinion about exactly how we are to consider this creature from a legal Jewish standpoint. Rabbi Yosef Rosen (known as the "Rogechover," 1858-1936) held the "lowest" opinion of the status of the Golem and did not even consider this creature to be a living being at all, but, rather, a being with no legal status.³⁷ Most of the other Rabbis who weighed in on this discussion considered the Golem alive but not human. Rabbi Ashkenazi's own son, Rabbi Jacob Emden, the leader of his generation, also wrote about this issue (and the Golem that his great-grandfather created) and concluded that the legal status of such a creature is similar to that of a dog who is sometimes sent on a mission. He also comments the widely held notion that if the Golem is allowed to remain alive for too long, he continues to grow and get stronger and might pose a danger to society. It is for that reason that the creature was "killed" by removing the letters on its forehead.³⁸ Chessed L'Avraham (1570-1643) essentially agrees, and says that

³¹ Mishne Berurah no. 4, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55

³² Responsa Chacham Tzvi 93

³³ Sanhedrin 19b

³⁴ Rashi commentary on Genesis 6:9

³⁵ Genesis 9:6

³⁶ Sidrei Taharot, Oholot 5a

³⁷ Responsa Tzfnat Paane-ach, 2:7

³⁸ Responsa Yaavetz 2:82

although the Golem has a life force, it is a life force equivalent to that of an animal, and since it is not a crime or a sin to kill an animal, killing a Golem is not forbidden either.³⁹

As noted above, Rabbi Chaim David Azulai comments about this issue in a number of his books. In *Birkei Yosef*, he cites a number of the sources and arguments noted above and concludes that a Golem is no different from a Jew who cannot speak, and who has the status in Judaism of someone not obligated in the commandments (and thus not eligible for a Minyan). But we see from this analysis that he might consider the Golem to actually be human.⁴⁰ Rabbi Yehuda Asad (1794-1866) disagrees, and says that a Golem has no “soul” at all, and at most has a life force equating it to the status of an animal.⁴¹ In an addendum to his original responsum, Rabbi Ashkenazi cites Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, who also says the life force of the Golem assigns it the status of animal, not a human, as a further proof that the Golem would be ineligible as one of the ten men needed for a Minyan.⁴²

There is a group of Rabbis who key in on the issue of speech. If that is the human component which is missing from the Golem, this in itself disqualifies it from having the status of a human being. Thus, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (1555-1631) writes that the Golem’s inability to speak ranks him not higher than an animal.⁴³ In fact, in the Aramaic translation of Onkelos on the verse of the creation of man, when the Torah says “He became a living soul,” Onkelos translates it as “a speaking spirit,” indicating that the essential life-force and uniqueness of the human being is his ability to speak.⁴⁴ Maharal says that together with the soul, it is man’s speaking ability that makes him uniquely human.⁴⁵ Rabbi Dovid Sperber (1877-1962) discusses the entire issue at length, and points out that in the Torah, man was called human (Genesis 1:26) even before G-d actually created him and put within him the divine spirit. Nevertheless, he too, concludes that it is man’s ability to speak which makes him uniquely human, so that the Golem would therefore not be considered human.⁴⁶

Rabbi Chaim Palagi takes a different approach. He questions the status of the Golem from several different perspectives, and then states that it is possible that the Golem would not be eligible for a Minyan because it was only created a few days prior. And like any human who is a few days old, the Golem might possibly be considered a minor, not eligible for a Minyan for another thirteen years. Thus, according to this view, it is possible that the Golem might be considered human and even Jewish, but simply not “old enough” to be counted for a Minyan.⁴⁷ Rabbi Tzadok HaCohen Rabinowitz (1833-1900) discusses the issue of the Golem, and takes what might be considered the most radical position.⁴⁸ He states that the Golem created with the intelligence of an adult may be equivalent to adult Jews who have intelligence but cannot speak or hear. If such Jews show full thought processes, then these human beings are considered full Jews in Jewish law and are eligible to be counted for a Minyan. Since the Golem was not created through the Book of Creation to be an animal, but, rather, was intended to be human, then it should indeed be considered human. But since the Golem cannot speak, Rabbi Tzadok concludes, he could indeed be considered human, but just not Jewish. And it is for this reason only that the Golem cannot be considered for a Minyan in a synagogue. But Rabbi Tzadok concludes that the Golem might

³⁹ Chessed L’Avraham, Maayan 4, Nahar 30

⁴⁰ Chida, Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 55:4

⁴¹ Teshuvot Mahari 26

⁴² Responsa Chacham Tzvi 93, addendum

⁴³ Maharsha commentary on Sanhedrin 65b

⁴⁴ Genesis 2:7 with Onkelos translation

⁴⁵ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, chapter 27, 112

⁴⁶ Responsa Aparkasta D’Aina, Section 4 “*Inyanim Shonim*” 388

⁴⁷ Ruach Chaim, Yoreh Deah 1:18

⁴⁸ Rabbi Tzadok, HaCohen, Kuntres Divrei Chalomot 6 (end of Resisai Layla)

indeed be counted for the three or ten males needed to comprise a group of Jews in the Grace After Meals blessing, just as a minor is sometimes counted in this group!

Returning to the original Jewish law question about whether the Golem would be eligible as an adult Jewish male for a Minyan and community prayer in a synagogue, no Rabbi answers in the affirmative. Rabbi Dovid Rabinowitz Tumim (1843-1905) echoes the feelings of many other Rabbis when he says that if a woman or minor cannot be counted for a Minyan, how could a Golem have a higher status than these two categories of human beings and be counted?⁴⁹ But then, based on a ruling of the Shulchan Aruch, Turei Zahav adds an interesting comment. Rabbi Yosef Caro rules that if an adult Jew is one of the ten in a Minyan and then he falls asleep and cannot answer the Cantor's blessing, nevertheless, he is still counted as part of the Minyan. Rabbi David HaLevi Segel (1586-1667) in his commentary Turei Zahav asks: since we know from the Zohar that a person, while asleep, loses his soul until he wakes up, how can this person be considered part of the Minyan⁵⁰? If this soulless person is eligible for a Minyan, perhaps a Golem, who is without a soul, might also be eligible? However, no Jewish law authority ever permits a Golem to be part of a Minyan. The premier Jewish law expert of the twentieth century, Chofetz Chaim, also rules that a Golem cannot be counted for a Minyan or anything else required by Jewish law to achieve group *Kedusha*-holiness.⁵¹

DEFINING THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HUMAN BEING

Although it is ruled out of a Minyan-Quorum, the Golem's status raises an interesting question. In defining what a Golem is or is not vis a vis a human being, it is important to define what makes a person a person, or a human a human. Especially in the age of cloning and gene-splicing, this question may have practical ramifications. What, then, makes a homo sapiens human – not from a scientific perspective, but from a Jewish law and Jewish philosophy perspective?

Already in Talmudic times, this basic question had to be addressed regarding specific questions, as unique beings composed of part animal and part human appeared in nature. And some animals even then were already capable of some human activity. What then is considered a person?

The Talmud discusses the status of an animal born with a human face, but with an animal body and vice versa – a human being born with an animal face. What is the status of each creature? The Talmud rules that the dominant component is not the body, which contains the heart, but, rather, the head, which contains the brain. Thus, the creature born with the animal body and human head would be considered human. This concept might have practical implications in the future regarding transplants, when, one day, it may be possible to transplant a human brain. Would the person with the new brain retain his or her own identity or then assume the identity of the brain? What if the transplanted brain was of a different gender than the body, or if a Kohen's brain were transplanted in an Israelite's body? The legal and philosophical questions are intriguing and complicated. The Talmudic passage, however, adds that if the animal/person performs human activity such as learning Torah or plowing the field, then that creature would be considered human, even if it had an animal face.⁵²

The Mishna compares different species that appear similar to the eye but are nonetheless considered different in Jewish law. But it then says that according to the opinion of Rabbi Yossi, the ritual status of an orangutan is the same ritual status as that of humans regarding what makes it ritually impure.⁵³ Then there is a

⁴⁹ Responsa Maane Eliyahu 49

⁵⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55:6 with Turei Zahav commentary

⁵¹ Mishne Berurah no. 4, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55

⁵² Jerusalem Talmud, Nidah 10a

⁵³ Mishna Kelim 8:5

discussion about ritual slaughter which must be performed in a precise manner in order to render an animal Kosher for consumption by observant Jews. There is an analysis regarding the question of whether a monkey can be trained to do *Shechita*-Ritual slaughter: would an animal slaughtered by a monkey be Kosher? Shulchan Aruch says it would not be considered valid. But the fact that there is even a discussion and that the reason it is invalid is based on a verse and not on logic, shows that there is contemplation that other species may have human elements within them.⁵⁴ Amazingly, some authorities rule that the ritual washing of the hands of a person by a monkey is valid; some only after the fact.⁵⁵ Thus, it is important to define what exactly makes human beings uniquely human. What physical or other characteristics separate man from all other species?

In the Torah's description of man's creation, we indeed see that man was unique in the way he was created and received "the image of G-d." We also see that in G-d's creation of each animal, followed by Adam's naming each beast, a differentiation and uniqueness emerges between each species, as well as between animals and human beings.⁵⁶ The Talmud tells us that each time the word "*Lemina*-its species" is written in the Torah, it is to inform us that every group in creation is unique, and, therefore, completely different from all other groups.⁵⁷ For example, a Tosefta describes many species that seem to look exactly alike. And yet there are distinct species of rooster, for example, where mating them with their female counterparts would be forbidden as mixing different species.⁵⁸ This Jewish law was stated two thousand years before geneticists arrived at the same conclusion, based on scientific experiments. In addition, the Mishna makes it clear that while each human being is unique (with his or her own fingerprints, voice pattern, DNA, etc.), there is something that links every person and distinguishes that individual to make him or her distinctly human.⁵⁹ In trying to find that characteristic which makes man uniquely human, there emerge several different views.

The first and most obvious definition of a human being is that any being born of a human mother would define that offspring as human. Human beings are called "*Yelud Isha*-born of woman" numerous times in Scripture.⁶⁰ The Tosefta says a human being can never emerge as the offspring of any other species, and no other species can emerge from a human parent.⁶¹ The phrase in the Torah about "becoming one flesh" during sexual relations which then results in the birth of offspring is unique to human beings, according to the Talmud.⁶² Just as what come out of the body of an animal has the same spiritual status of that animal (whether it is offspring or anything else that comes from the body),⁶³ so too it is with human beings. One commentary goes so far to question whether a person born androgynous but incapable of giving birth is considered completely human.⁶⁴ When Eve was given her name by Adam as the "mother of all living beings," Onkelos translates that name as the "mother of all human beings,"⁶⁵ implying that in order to be a human being one must (originally, tracing back) come from Eve. And when the Torah describes "this book" – i.e., the Torah – as the book of the offspring of mankind, Nachmanides explains that it is a gift from G-d that man has the ability and blessing to give birth to other human beings.⁶⁶ Therefore, this is one simple and clear definition of how to define a human being. But there are others.

⁵⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 2:11 with Pri Chadash commentary

⁵⁵ Rabbi Akiva Eiger on Yoreh Deah 2:11

⁵⁶ Genesis 1:27, 2:19

⁵⁷ Chulin 63a

⁵⁸ Tosefta, Klayim 1:5

⁵⁹ Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5

⁶⁰ Job 14:1, 15:14, 25:4

⁶¹ Tosefta, Bechorot 1:5

⁶² Genesis 2:24, Sanhedrin 68a

⁶³ Bechorot 2b

⁶⁴ Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 1:4

⁶⁵ Genesis 3:20 with Onkelos commentary

⁶⁶ Genesis 5:1 with Nachmanides commentary

As was demonstrated above, some believe that what makes man unique is his ability to speak – not merely to make sounds and communicate as some animal species do, but to form ideas through words and writing that articulate true communication. This is the G-dly characteristic in man, as it was G-d who first spoke words that helped form the Creation of the universe. Thus, Onkelos defines man's unique creation as a being who can speak.⁶⁷ This unique characteristic of speech was also seen above in the definition of man by Rabbi Judah Loeb⁶⁸ and Maharsha.⁶⁹

Other commentaries assign a different characteristic of man that makes him distinctive from all other species and also makes man G-dly. While animals have no true moral choices and act mainly upon inborn instincts, angels can only do good and G-d's will. Only the human being has true free will and can decide to act morally or immorally. That is how Seforno distinguishes man.⁷⁰ Rashi and Seforno, in commenting on a different verse, also articulate this characteristic – the knowledge of good and evil and to act upon that knowledge – as what makes man G-dly and unique in the world.⁷¹

One commentary discusses this issue at length⁷² and says that each person is defined by a combination of thoughts, speech, and actions. Part of man's soul is the animal forces inside of him. He is also composed of some forces similar to those within plants (the desire for nourishment and to live, for example). But another force is his unique human intelligence. All these forces combine to form man. However, it is man's superior intelligence from which his soul emanates, and that is the G-dly characteristic of man – his intellect.

Thus, we see four different definitions of man's uniqueness: 1) progeny of another human being 2) ability to speak and articulate ideas 3) free will and knowledge of good and evil 4) superior intellect. Undoubtedly all are correct and contributing factors in what makes man unique and different from every other creature in the universe.

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⁶⁷ Genesis 2:7 with Onkelos commentary

⁶⁸ Maharal, Gevurot Hashem, chapter 27 112

⁶⁹ Maharsha commentary on Sanhedrin 65b

⁷⁰ Genesis 5:1 with Seforno commentary

⁷¹ Genesis 2:23 with Rashi and Seforno commentaries

⁷² Rabbeinu Bechaya, Kad Hakemach, "Reshut," Commentary on Genesis 2:7