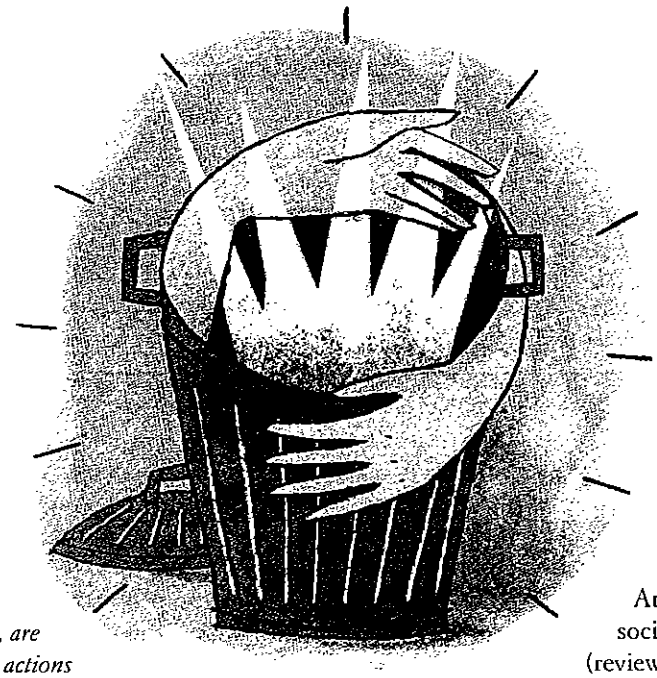
From Waste to Wonder

Steps to a Spiritual Ecology of Living

Natan Margalit



There are no words which, in themselves, are useless. There are no actions which, in themselves, are useless. But one can make useless both actions and words by saying or doing them uselessly.
–Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz

The Waste Culture

Not long ago, as I was composting the rinds and peels collecting in my kitchen, my mind wandered to the words of a mystic rabbi who claimed that whenever any event happened in the world, it surely has a reason for existing—that it is up to us to find the spark of holiness even in our greatest mistakes. Those things that we'd like to hide from, tuck away, and forget, he said, must be held up to the light, because there is something in them, some energy which could hold the key to our happiness and fulfillment, that is calling to be redeemed.

We live in a waste culture. Gangsters "waste" their rivals; partiers who drink too much alcohol get "wasted." A recent book by Kevin Bales identifies the shocking reality of the contemporary slave trade as the story of "disposable people."

Natan Margalit divides his time between teaching at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and writing. He is working on a book on the theme of waste to wonder. He may be reached at natmargal@aol.com.

Another book, *Wasted Lives,* by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (reviewed in this issue), explains how our present economic system makes classes of people—the poor, the unemployed, the elderly, the cultural "other"—into "human waste."

We take for granted the idea that there always has been and always will be waste. Yet waste is in the eye of the waster. Waste is whatever we define as needing to be thrown "away." There is what we need, and then there is the other, the unnecessary, the waste. We define who we are by what we are not. We use waste to deny the reality of what we don't want to see and feel.

Modern culture has multiplied the quantities and categories of waste. As we vainly attempt to shield ourselves from all contingencies, troubles, and inconveniences, we separate ourselves off from our world and one another. It is time to look at waste and ourselves in a new way.

There Is No "Away"

The environment, our bodies, emotions, our history, health, time, and space—all are tied together as part of the garment of light and energy which is creation. According to the radical spiritual monotheism found in Jewish sources, all created phenomena are united by keeping a spark of God; all are manifestations of holiness, even though that holiness may be difficult to perceive in the moment.

This emphasis on the unity of all is the beginning of an

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eco-theology that says that if everything is part of God, nothing is "waste." The idea of "waste management" is that there is a place "away" where foul, useless things can be tossed. The concept of waste implies that something could be absolutely useless, as if it were outside the realm of the holiness called creation. To be outside of the holiness of creation is to be outside of God. In that sense, the very idea of waste as something that could exist outside or "away" from God is a kind of idol worship. Thus, the concept of waste is antithetical to a monotheism that posits an omnipresent God. With this understanding, Jewish environmentalism and Jewish spirituality come together to form an organic and holistic eco-theology moving from waste to wonder.

As I toss my rinds into a makeshift chicken-wire bin and cover the smelly mess with hay, I realize that the same principle which operates in my kitchen-to-compost-to-garden cycle also operates in the spiritual and psychological processes that operate in our minds and bodies and souls. We know that ecological systems work in energy and nutrient loops in such a way that nothing is ever lost. The death of one creature means the fertilization of another; the outbreath of a plant is the in-breath of an animal. In a spiritual understanding of the world, such as is found in the kabbalistic and hasidic masters, every event, every thought, contains a spark of God and has a purpose for coming into the world. Similarly, from contemporary psychology and holistic paradigms of health, we know that feelings and thoughts which are buried in the sub-conscious do not go away, but continue to affect us until they are uncovered, at which point they can actually add to our energy and self-understanding. This same ecological and spiritual understanding applies to the political realm: There is no country that is so irrelevant, so "powerless," that it can be simply ignored, dumped upon, considered waste. And it applies to the physical mass of the earth itself: There is no place "away" for all our garbage to be dumped. The oceans are not big enough for our chemical waste; the atmosphere is becoming saturated with carbon from our cars and industry, threatening us with disastrous climate change. The world is One, and there is no sense in this dumping on the "Other." There is no "away."

The Roots of An Illusion

If there is no reality in nature or in spirit to the concept of waste, how did it ever get started?

Without attempting to uncover an historical answer, Jewish tradition gives us some narratives which hint at the beginning of the waste culture we currently inhabit. Egypt, Sodom, and the Tower of Babel, all are cultures portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as being obsessed with controlling their environment. The peoples of these places thought they could conquer death through technology and social problems through totalitarian control. Their economic systems, based on the umbilical chord of the rivers and bolstered with the technology of irrigation and massive building, encouraged their propensity to act like gods. (For a detailed study of these ancient cultures in the context of ecology, I recommend Evan Eisenberg's excellent book, *The Ecology of Eden.*)

Egypt, for example, is pictured in the Bible as the perverse corruption of the image of the womb. In one verse, it is actually pictured as the womb from which the Israelite nation was born: "Has any God taken a nation out of the innards of another nation?" Yet, it is a womb which will not serve its natural function of letting the infant go out into life, but rather tries to hold on, becoming a tomb. Egypt is like the womb which Jeremiah speaks about in his despair, as he laments ever being born into this world, wishing "that my mother might be my grave, and her womb big [with me] for all time" (Jeremiah 20:17).

Pretending to be gods, we "waste" the rest of the world that doesn't fit our picture, even as we depend on it to provide us with raw materials, cheap labor, and markets for our products.

It is Egypt's need for perfection, its need to hold onto an illusion of complete control, especially through technology, that makes it into a place of death rather than life. The shocking example of this is found in the story in which the angel Gabriel appears before the heavenly court and gives evidence that the Israelites need to be freed from slavery: an Egyptian brick has been found encasing an Israelite baby. This image, in which the brick replaces the womb and becomes a tomb, encapsulates the biblical picture of Egypt. It is anti-life, even as its pharaohs, with their pyramids and mummification rites, grasp for eternal life.

What does this narrative have to do with waste? Waste is invented when humans, who inhabit a messy, unruly, physical, social, and psychological world, try to be gods and control this world absolutely. At this, we can only fail. We can only create an illusion of a perfect world, at best a temporary bubble of perfection. But in order to maintain this illusion of control, the unruly parts of life which don't fit the picture are tossed outside. The category of waste comes about through the narrowing of consciousness: putting that which we don't like, that which we can't control, out of sight, out of mind.

We have inherited this culture of hyper-control, and our particular culture in the contemporary United States has honed it to a fine art. Pretending to be gods, we "waste" the rest of the world that doesn't fit our picture, even as we depend on it to provide us with raw materials, cheap labor,

and markets for our products. Those in the upper and upper-middle classes can count on a medical system that tries to defy and deny death through more and more expensive technology and drugs, even as this advanced medicine is not available to millions without insurance. We eat food with little idea of where it comes from, clothe ourselves with materials made who-knows-where by who-knows-who, and get our energy with the unconscious flip of a switch from who-knows-what coal or nuclear power plant. Our media and "mainstream" culture do not encourage us to look into the sources of our wealth. The opposite is true. We are encouraged to be lulled into a consumer's haze of TV, media hype, and endless talking heads arguing within a narrowly defined limit of the "normal." The "normal" culture we inhabit doesn't allow much reflection on the sources of our wealth or the places where we dump our waste. This comfortable bubble of affluence is itself a waste culture, our modern Egypt.

From Waste to Wonder: Living in the Paradox

How do we get back to a world without waste? The trick is to live in the middle of a paradox: to realize that we live in a world which is imperfect as well as perfect. That is, we must learn again that everything is a part of God, that everything has a spark of the divine, but also that on this particular level of divine manifestation these sparks are often an impossible, unpredictable mystery. We must learn to let go of our obsession with control, and open our eyes to wonder. Living in this paradoxical, perfect/imperfect world takes skill, practice, patience, and knowledge. Spiritual traditions can provide us with some of the tools to move from waste to wonder. For example, one way that the Jewish tradition guards against the illusion of perfect control is what I call the wisdom of "rough edges." You almost never find a true four-cornered square in the Jewish tradition. The square is the symbol of complete human control. Culture. The cultivated field. The perfectly woven cloth. In a talmudic joke, the Rabbis imagine a "square snake," and immediately reject the idea as absurd: there are no square snakes. The wild, untamed, and dangerous (but also wise, clever, and mysterious) serpent is the opposite of the square, male-dominated control culture.

In the biblical institution of *peah*, fields of grain are always left with the corners unharvested, open and wild for whoever wants to come and take. The same is true for our bodies—the corners of the beard (called *peot*) are left wild, connecting our bodies and the fields as two fertile surfaces, two areas of expression, areas of nature where we leave our mark of culture. As with fields and bodies, so also, according to the law of *tzitzit*, our four-cornered garments must be modified with fringes. The four corners again cannot be simply square but must have flowing tassels, breaking up the illusion of power in the square weave of the textile. The fringes themselves are, according to tradition, made up of a portion tied in specific knots, but then the rest left to fly in unbounded freedom.

Someone who knows Jewish tradition may well ask, what about *tefillin*?—the leather phylacteries that Jews wear on their arms and head while praying. These are perfect squares. True enough, but they are balanced by the straps which hang down, like the side curls or the fringes, flowingly connecting the head with the body, winding around the arm in gentle patterns, and forming Hebrew letters on the hand. The square is always softened and modified with something open, untamed, and free.

We are taught over and again in subtle, suggestive reiterations that we don't have complete control. We are taught that life is better lived by controlling what we can and leaving the rest up to God. This is a basic principle of "waste to wonder" because it is the obsession with control which drives us to create the category of waste in the first place. When we train ourselves to live with the balance of control and spontaneity, empowerment and freedom, autonomy and relationship, we learn to accept the world as it comes to us, changing what we can and dealing with the difficult parts as they come. It is only when we adopt an illusion of total control that we try to hide the unpredictable and uncontrollable from our eyes, creating waste.

Rough Edges of the World

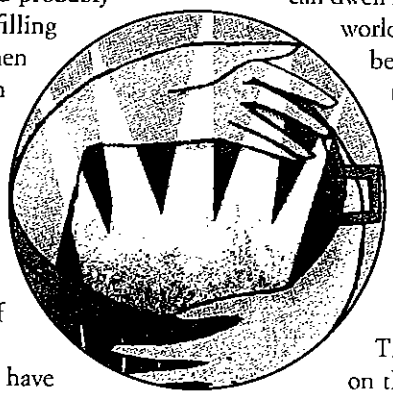
Jewish tradition takes the same theology of "rough edges" out to the garments of the world. In kabbalistic thought, the world and all that fills it are understood to be the many garments of the divine. The world only exists because it is clothed in these garments, not fully seen, not fully understandable. We may yearn for the pure light of God, but we don't scorn the garments—they are our world, they are us.

That necessary covering can at times become too thick, hiding the light too much—this is the *kelipah*, the shell of the world. The *kelipah* is the Kabbalah's way of understanding evil—the sparks of divinity are trapped within the shells. It allows us to deal with the difficult, ugly, or dangerous parts of the world, knowing that they need to be put away, covered—for a time—but still not thrown away, or given up completely for lost. The holy sparks in the *kelipah* are actually from a holier place than the uncovered sparks, and it is ultimately in unlocking their power that the world will be redeemed.

The principle of covering is the flip side of the "rough edges" principle. When we've decided that we invite the wild, the rough, and the unpredictable back into our world, what do we do when it is too rough to handle? Once we know that the very existence of this world involves a covering of the divine light, we realize that covering is not in itself a sin. It is the cost of living in a material world. Covering, or putting on garments, is another aspect of living in this world, not an ideal dream world. It says some things cannot

be seen or absorbed or tolerated in their raw, exposed state. But that doesn't mean that they should be rejected as utterly evil and destroyed as waste. It simply means that they need something to wear before joining the party.

The example of composting again provides the connection between the ecological realm and the spiritual. Covering is the secret to successful composting. Trying to save and re-use the rotting scraps of our kitchen leftovers is unpleasant and dangerous if you leave the material exposed. You'll attract flies, smell up your yard, and probably give up the whole project and go back to filling garbage bags headed for the landfill. When we cover the composting material with some sawdust or grass clippings, it puts a separation between us and the smells and bacteria gathering in the composting process. It protects us from the danger, but the compost remains a useful part of our world; we haven't tossed it out of sight and out of mind. Compost is the opposite of waste, but only because we cover it.



It is the same with our inner lives. We have experiences which fill us with shame or rage or unbearable pain. These are driven from our consciousness, covered and hidden, because they need to be, for our sanity. But if they remain covered for too long they will begin to harm us, causing psychological or physical damage. Dreams, therapy, ritual, or simply living life and encountering experiences provide opportunities for these feelings to resurface, sometimes in disguised symbolic forms, when they can be re-told, re-lived, and reintegrated into one's life narrative. The covering process is as important as the uncovering.

On the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, we participate in this dance of covering and uncovering. The name *kippur* is derived from the word "to cover." As one friend might say to another, "I'll cover for you," God covers the Sin, relieves you of the guilt. Yom Kippur is therefore a two-way street: our main job on Yom Kippur is to uncover, reveal, admit, and acknowledge our mistakes, failures, and wrong turns. But we are only given the strength to uncover all these painful realities because of the promise that God will "cover" them. They become part of the greater unity, absorbed into the whole, and no longer need to be carried within one's individual personality. The composting analogy is also appropriate here: when we admit and bring to light our sins on Yom Kippur they do not magically disappear. Instead, they become loosed from their frozen, unconscious stuckness. They are uncovered, covered again within the forgiveness of God, and then they go through the process of "decomposing," loosening, freeing, transforming into new, useful forms.

The essence of not wasting is remembering the divine spark within us and within everything in the world. Covering then brings us to a puzzling paradox. Even though holiness is all around us, when that holiness is overexposed it is dulled, cheapened, and ultimately profaned. Much of our waste culture is the result of this reducing of the world to a materialistic, utilitarian dullness. When the divine spark is forgotten, things, even people, can be tossed away, discarded without a thought. Thus, coverings, garments, are there to guard the mystery and awe surrounding holiness, even as we acknowledge the holiness in everything. This is the paradox that the rabbis point to when they ask how God can dwell in the Holy of Holies, but also in the whole world. We need the Holy of Holies, hidden behind the walls and screens and curtains of the Temple, to remind us of the awesomeness, the special, ungraspable mystery of holiness. But we must then take that awareness and let it inspire us to see the holiness in the everyday world.

Each of us is a Holy of Holies. We sometimes need to guard our privacy and acknowledge the vulnerability of our soul. The rabbinic saying is that blessing only rests on that which is hidden from the eye. This is part of the paradox of living in this world: Within hiding is revealing. Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Isbica taught that those places where our creative potential is greatest, the places where we can create life, are always also the most vulnerable places. This is our sexuality, but also the soul, the individual genius, the sense of fertility, which needs to be wisely protected, revealed only at the right moments, and not abused or cheapened by commercialization or violence, so that it can bring forth life, the eternal life which dwells in creativity and truth. Like the Holy of Holies, which is the source of life for the whole people, the individual soul, while it sometimes needs to be exposed and seen, also needs its times of covering and privacy to remain holy.

From Waste to Wonder: Patterns of Wisdom

In these and other ways, Judaism may be a resource for the movement from a waste culture to a culture of wonder. This culture seeks a dynamic balance and invites plurality of voices. If by saying there is one God we mean that everything participates in God, there is nothing which is completely outside of God and we must see how the multiplicity and seeming confusion fit together. The Other can never be completely *other*; it becomes our task to find the proper balance between borders and openness, between covering and light, which may illuminate the whole.

If we have the wisdom and humility to live with rough edges and give up on total control, to deal with the difficulties and dangers as temporary coverings of the light, to learn to appreciate the garments of light which make up our world, and to seek the beauty of patterns formed by those many garments, we can move from waste to wonder. ❑