

# “I Had to Rummage through It, Rummage through It”: Literature, the Anthropocene, and the Aesthetics of Garbage

Tafat Hacoheh-Bick

Polonsky Academy, The Van-Leer Jerusalem Institute

**ABSTRACT:** This article argues that in an era that produces enormous quantities of waste, “reading” garbage can free us from the modern obsession with cleanliness and the fantasy of a pristine nature. It examines Hebrew literary texts with garbage at their center—the medieval *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir* (The king’s son and the ascetic), and the contemporary work of Israeli writers Raquel Chalfi and Haviva Pedaya—in the context of the “dirty Jew” trope, often depicted in opposition to nature. Particularly through Pedaya’s *Be-’ein he-’atul* (Eye of the cat), I point the way to a theory of writing garbage.

## AESTHETICS AND GARBAGE

**I**N *WASTED LIVES: MODERNITY AND ITS OUTCASTS*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that beauty, alongside happiness, was one of modernity’s most stirring promises. This promised beauty, however, was inseparable from the notion of perfection, and perfection is a temporary state that can only give way to decline. Some factor—aging, wear and tear, the passage of time, a tragic accident—inevitably mars that perfection and dooms the beautiful object to the inexorable: becoming trash.<sup>1</sup> This deterioration is neither a foreign element that has insinuated itself into modern times, nor a deviation from modernity’s potential; instead, deterioration is modernity’s inexorable outcome. From the very first moment of our existence, along with the existence of anything we own, an eventual relegation to the scrap heap is certain. A toss into the garbage, a layoff from work, a dispatchment to a nursing home: these situations lie at the core of modern existence.

A Hebrew version of the article was published in *Theory and Criticism* 57 (Winter 2023), by The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hebrew are made by Devra Lehmann.

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Life: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2004), 118.

Bauman opens his book with an invocation of Leonia, one of the cities in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*). The inhabitants of Leonia use new objects every morning. They “wash with just-unwrapped cakes of soap, wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio.” So much waste is produced that the city's very existence is threatened. Each morning, the previous day's items are discarded; in their virginal state, these objects arouse a lust for use, just like the virginal girls in *One Thousand and One Nights*, who are brought to the king each evening and subsequently killed, until Scheherazade captivates him with her stories. Yet it is not at all clear “if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity.”<sup>2</sup> This literary city is an obvious caricature. But is it really such an exaggeration? Isn't it, at the very least, an apt depiction of consumer desire, the urge to tear the plastic wrapping from a virginal product and be its first owner?

This article grows out of the premise that thinking about garbage is crucial for understanding our own era, one in which we discard increasing quantities of things, and that an important way to do that thinking is from the perspective of aesthetics. Terry Eagleton claims that aesthetics, which arose in the eighteenth century as a discourse of the body, connected universal law and abstract reason to the individual human being, making that law and reason seem entirely natural. Through aesthetics, reason has moved from the realm of the intellect to become embedded in the senses, and as a result, the law is experienced as voluntary. By this means, aesthetics has endowed the law with a mystical power that is invisible to the eye.<sup>3</sup> In other words, even though aesthetic taste seems to be inborn, it aligns with bourgeois ideology and the apparatus that serves it.

Our age of garbage casts bourgeois taste into serious doubt. We produce so much trash that it can no longer be hidden or repressed, and it even invades literature and art. My claim is that in our time, with the relentless production of material goods, we are experiencing the unraveling of an aesthetic sensibility that until recently seemed self-evident. This unraveling raises a number of questions. What is beautiful? What is damaged? What is dirty and repulsive? Essentially, what is garbage? Hard thinking about garbage needs to involve hard thinking about manufacture, consumption, and use, but to get to that point, we must first *see* garbage, take note of it, observe it. This is precisely where literature, art, and culture play a decisive role. Through their complex relationships with material reality, cultural forms not only reflect contemporary conditions but also have the potential to change them.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I focus on Hebrew literature and explore the possibility of “Jewish garbage.” The aesthetics of Western modernity arose as a project of beautification and sanitization—of streets, of body, of language—and Hebrew literature, which was a site of clashing aesthetic visions, became the birthplace of the “new Jew.” The exploration of Hebrew literature, with its presentation of the new Jew, reveals not only the rise of a sanitized modernity but also resistance to it, and perhaps suggests a different option altogether. I aim to pursue alternative aesthetic traditions, to return to the “dirty Jew,” and to discern the potential he bears for ecology.

<sup>2</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1974), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The Ideology of the Aesthetic,” *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 329–30.

<sup>4</sup> This dynamic has become apparent in the feminist movement, which has grasped the need to represent women's bodies in all their different colors and shapes in order to save women from anorexia and other ills. More broadly, there has been a recognition that the ideal of feminine beauty is an aesthetic construct, and that there is a need to cultivate pleasure in variety. For more on social aversion to older women and on the link between that sort of aversion and moral judgment, see Hanna Freund-Shertok, “Go'al” [Disgust], *Maft'e'ah* 3 (2011): 117–29.

## LITERATURE, THE CLIMATE CRISIS, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE: FROM NARRATOLOGICAL TO AESTHETIC CHANGE

To the extent that it has explored the relationship between the novel and the climate crisis, literary criticism has usually approached the question as one of narratology or representation. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh discusses literature's general neglect of the climate crisis. He claims that the small number of works that do address the issue are dismissed as examples of a second-rate genre, a type of fantasy writing. This attitude, he claims, relates to the novel's rootedness in nineteenth-century bourgeois life. That rootedness has constricted the narratological range of the novel, unlike that of ancient literature, to events that are highly plausible, everyday, and banal. The novel depicts human problems, with narrative possibilities that are bounded by time and space. Whereas a Chinese tale, for example, may span thousands of years and cross expanses on a galactic scale, the literature of bourgeois Europe and America confines time and space to limited, graspable dimensions. When nature appears in this literary tradition, it is portrayed as serene and boring, its threatening and unpredictable features shunted aside.<sup>5</sup> Ghosh warns that these narratological features do not suit a world that is increasingly shaped by extreme change and subjected to forces of staggering magnitude. This neglect is rapidly coming to an end in literary criticism, as well as in literary works published in just the last two years.<sup>6</sup> But in the Israeli context, as Lia Sharvit and Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky point out, despite the occasional appearance of the climate crisis in literature, that writing has remained marginal within the book market.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the constraints that Ghosh identifies, there exists the issue of representation—the difficulty of turning the climate crisis into a compelling, emotionally resonant story. Timothy Morton attributes the problem to the challenge of dealing with hyperobjects. To engage with the climate is to track immense objects and the complex interactions of colossal forces over enormous spans of time, and these elements are not easy to conceptualize or depict.<sup>8</sup> In *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*, Jonathan Safran Foer describes the relationship between literature and the climate crisis, between narratology and the nature of the disaster, as a losing proposition: “In addition to it not being an easy story to tell, the planetary crisis hasn't proved to be a *good* story. . . . The planetary crisis—abstract and eclectic as it is, slow as it is, and lacking in iconic figures and moments—seems impossible to describe in a way that is both truthful and enthralling.”<sup>9</sup> The issue extends beyond literature. In his essay “Four Theses

<sup>5</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of recently published works that engage with nature include Edna Gorney, *Deyuqan zo'ologi: Leqsiqon* [Zoological portrait: Lexicon] (Haifa: Pardes, 2020); Dror Burstein, *'Olam qatan: Deyuqana'ot shel ḥaraqim* [Small world: Portraits of insects] (Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2021); Tamar Weiss Gabbay, *Ha-ḥaza'it: Novela bi-shlosha ḥalaqim* [The weather woman: A novella in three parts] (Tel Aviv: Locus, 2022); Alik Pelman, *Sefer derekh* [Way] (Ramat Hasharon: Asia, 2021); and the short-story collection *Antiqlimat* [Anticlimax], ed. Ron Dahan (E-vrit, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Lia Sharvit and Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, “Ha-roman ha-yisra'eli, mashber ha-aqlim u-viqoret ha-entropotsentri'ut” [The Israeli novel, the climate crisis, and the critique of anthropocentrism], *Qeri'ot yisra'eliot* 2 (2022): 303–34. Sharvit and Marienberg-Milikowsky propose the concept of “relative anthropocentrism” as a way to avoid the binary thinking that might result in too narrow an engagement with works that focus specifically on the climate crisis.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1–7.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 14.

on Climate History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty examines how the disciplines of human and natural history have developed independently of one another. In explanation, he notes that for most of time humans were not a significant factor in the history of the natural world. Only during the Industrial Revolution did that separation begin to collapse, and the process has intensified since the second half of the twentieth century, when humans transformed themselves into an unmistakable geological force.<sup>10</sup>

To describe the relationship between literature and crisis, John Parham draws on Lauren Berlant’s felicitous image of “genre flailing.” This is a “mode of crisis management” that emerges when “long-standing practices, like literature or literary criticism, seem useless and become ‘disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it.’” In this state, we “improvise like crazy.”<sup>11</sup> This has indeed been literature’s response to the Anthropocene shock—a flailing and a pushback, an attempt to demonstrate that literature is still essential, with its own, indispensable response to the problem, even if that response is not yet correct or complete. Parham invokes the argument of Timothy Clark, that geological forces can be represented only on an immense scale, through digital and statistical tools, and not through an intimate and individualistic mode like the novel. In consequence, Parham contends that the Anthropocene poses fundamental questions for literature:

How can personal narrative or the notion of the autonomous individual, central to conventions ranging from the novelistic or dramatic protagonist to the essayist, nature writer, gamer or poetic “I,” really help us reflect on the overlapping geological, environmental and interspecies dimensions of humanity’s impact on the Earth; or foster the collective ecological consciousness, and activism, required to address that impact?<sup>12</sup>

Is it too early to speak of Anthropocene modes of writing? Parham argues that current literature is indeed flailing, but that time will bring both an adaptation and a renewal of genres. He proposes several possibilities for that eventuality: experimental and fictional writing that plays with space and time and creates a futuristic poetic experience; an expansion of experience to other species;<sup>13</sup> and a broader contextualization of human life—into the distant future, deep history, and Earth itself. Of course none of these possibilities is new, but literary criticism now awaits them with greater urgency.

These are all important claims about literature’s treatment of the climate crisis, but here I propose a different approach. In my view, the shock of the Anthropocene is so severe that it unsettles the structure of desire and reopens questions about beauty and taste. In this article I point to a shift that is aesthetic rather than narratological, on a change in physical substance rather than in plot. Alongside the flailing genres and thematic questions, a more material turn, toward different stuff and different smells, may offer a new literary-poetic possibility.

The concept of the Anthropocene signals a shift to a new geological era, one in which human beings play a decisive role in the processes of nature. The concept involves a paradox regarding

<sup>10</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

<sup>11</sup> John Parham, “Introduction—With or Without Us: Literature and the Anthropocene,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*, ed. John Parham (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4. Parham quotes from Lauren Berlant, “Genre Flailing,” *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–62.

<sup>12</sup> Parham, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> In Hebrew literature, Edna Gorney’s *Deyuqan zo’ologi: Leqsiqon* is an example of this approach.

the human position. On the one hand, humanity, with its rational agency and highly consequential influence, occupies a central and privileged position; on the other hand, humanity, which has failed in its rational organization, is a species (just one part of nature) rather than “human” (an exception that is somehow beyond nature.)<sup>14</sup> What are the implications of this duality for modern Western literature, which emerged so clearly from the Enlightenment conception of humans as agents who exercise choice and reason, as beings who are uniquely set apart from their environment? Will the species write differently from the human, and will the poetics of the species differ from the poetics of bourgeois literature? I ask how this new literary-geological stage might be written, not only as a question of narrative but also as a question of poetics and aesthetics. In what sense can we break free of the individualistic bias, of viewing the human subject who acts in the world as literature’s fulcrum? And how might we return to ourselves as species and animals, to dwellers of dirt and refuse? What kind of literature can be written in a world in which humans have amassed too much power — power that has chiefly revealed their inadequacy?

Obviously, I cannot answer all these questions here, but I can at least nudge the discussion in this direction. Like humanity, which is both human and species, garbage has a dual character. At the outset, garbage testifies to human power, to the human capacity to create, produce, and subdue the earth, just as the biblical Adam was enjoined: “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth” (Gen. 1:28). Ultimately, however, garbage testifies to human ruin, to creation that bears a curse within itself. Along with nature writing, depictions of animal life, and treatments of the climate crisis, engagement with garbage offers rich potential for an Anthropocene poetics, and I therefore offer it here as an aesthetic-material alternative to the narratological approach.

### WHY GARBAGE?

Garbage is repugnant, abominable, repulsive, and polluting, yet it also carries the potential of returning to the soil, to fertilize and enrich it. Like the Derridean *pharmakon*, which is both remedy and poison,<sup>15</sup> the Hebrew word *zevul* points to a duality: the term means filth, but also fertilizer for the fields. The word even evokes the Holy Temple, which is unavoidably bound to the same duality of stench and fragrance:

I have now built for You  
A stately House [*beit zevul*]  
A place where You  
May dwell forever  
(1 Kings 8:13)

Garbage is raw material, the remnants of use, but always metaphorical as well. The item that is cast away is the repudiation of something or of someone.<sup>16</sup> Garbage is also the symbol par excellence of the ultimate end of things, the repressed outcome of our lives. Karl Marx uses the term “metabolic rift” to refer, among other things, to the problem of waste that does not find its

<sup>14</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene” (Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, February 18–19, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Tamar Berger, *Ha-tsidah: Nofei she'erit bi-Yisra'el* [Aside: Residual scapes in Israel] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2022), 45.

way back to the soil, waste that is excluded from the ecological cycle that could have returned it to use. According to John Foster, Marx makes a distinction here between the village, which can ensure the beneficial return of waste to the earth, and the city, which produces waste that pollutes its surroundings. Foster refers to Marx's remark in *Das Kapital*: "In London . . . they can do nothing better with the excrement produced by 4½ million people than pollute the Thames with it, at monstrous expense"<sup>17</sup>

Garbage reveals the gap between life in an industrial world and the limits of what the environment can support. As Yaron Balslev has found in his study of household size and waste production in Tel Aviv, the proliferation of garbage results not from demographic growth alone, but also from changes in economy and consumption levels. Comparing the quantity of waste produced during years of economic crisis and years of economic growth, Balslev remarks, "waste can be seen as the other side of the consumption coin."<sup>18</sup> Throughout history, he adds, garbage was primarily an urban problem, because in rural areas people "successfully avoided the negative impact of waste by using organic remains as fertilizer."<sup>19</sup>

And yet, even though waste has become such a central and prominent issue, its appearance in literary writing is relatively rare.<sup>20</sup> It is unusual to find garbage dumps in Hebrew literature, and one must do quite a bit of sifting and rummaging to find instances of waste. This absence is especially notable because Hebrew literature has not, by and large, been a site of gardens and love, but has instead excelled at melancholy, death, and decay. Even literary environmental research tends to shy away from garbage dumps and their contents, focusing instead on pristine landscapes and the dichotomy between organic and inorganic—a dichotomy that no longer holds in the Anthropocene world, where microplastics pollute even the deepest and most remote parts of the ocean.<sup>21</sup> Since, as I have already pointed out, I believe that ideology and aesthetics are intertwined, I cannot help but wonder what we might gain if literature finally lowered itself into the garbage dump, sniffing it out and examining its contents.

My attention to "dirty nature" is a critique of the hygienic subject who cleanses the surrounding space while ignoring the cost of waste disposal. As Heather Sullivan argues, "The challenge of shaping dirt and negotiating with its mobile grit functions as a metaphor for the project of modernity. Modernity's many anti-dirt campaigns include efforts made to remove or conceal bodily filth, waste, and the sweaty labor of agricultural processes."<sup>22</sup> To understand modernity, one must understand how it has shaped a negative view of filth and prompted numerous

<sup>17</sup> John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (1999): 383. On the growing metabolic rift between the demands of the Israeli economy and the carrying capacity of local ecological systems, see Matan Kaminer, "Li-qrat eqologia politit shel ha-tsiyonut be-merhav ha-kafri" [Toward a political ecology of Zionism in the rural sphere], *Teoria uvikoret* 57 (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Yaron Balslev, "'Ir 'ivrit 'im ashpah 'ivrit: Ha-tipul ba-psolet shel Tel Aviv bi-tkufat ha-Mandat" [A Hebrew city with Hebrew garbage: Waste management in Tel Aviv during the Mandate period], *Yisra'el* 24 (2017): 277, 298.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent survey of waste and literature (primarily American), see Netta Bar Yosef-Paz, "White Trash, Literary Trash: Contemporary American Filth-Fiction" (PhD dissertation, Ben-Gurion University, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Gai Farchi, "'Al ha-plasti" (On plastic), *Teoria uvikoret* 55 (2021): 143–50; Richard Kerridge, "Forward," in *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*, ed. Serpil Opperman and Serenella Iovino (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Heather I. Sullivan, "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (2012): S26.



itself is torn between stench and its representation, which is always the more pleasant of the two; as Haim Nagid puts it in a poem, “Poetry is garbage without the filth.”<sup>25</sup> Or, as Dominique Laporte writes, “and certainly the sign, as such, exercises a function of negation in relation to the real it designates. We thus readily agree with Adéodat when he writes that ‘filth in name is far nobler than the thing it signifies; we much prefer to hear it than to smell it.’”<sup>26</sup> Waste is indeed more pleasant and tolerable when it is represented in a text—although even Laporte notes that modernity’s obsession with a clean physical environment came along with the desire for a pure, polished language cleansed of grammatical and syntactical errors: “Cleansed, language corresponds to the three requirements of civilization declared by Freud: cleanliness, order, and beauty.”<sup>27</sup>

Is the effort to write about garbage, then, doomed from the start? At its very outset, is it an attempt to turn what cannot be endured into something aesthetic? Or, conversely, might dirty language, the language of shit, succeed in summoning unbearable sights and smells and rupture the alliance between the culture of cleanliness and sanitized language? It is difficult to break away from the written page to the world of matter and action that lies beyond it; every literary appeal to do something of the sort awakens a sense of helplessness. Nonetheless, to make waste present in literature is to invite much-needed reflection on actual waste, to point to connections that may be blurred in our world—to think about what garbage is, where it goes, and what its end might be.

In *The Ethics of Waste*, Gay Hawkins writes, “waste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture,”<sup>28</sup> and she identifies garbage as the dark side of consumer culture. This claim invites a “reading” of waste. But how does one convert waste into readable text? Although this article limits itself to waste that has already, and fairly recently, been converted into text, the goal is to read *waste*. Waste is not only a “social text,” as Hawkins suggests, but also, always, an “excess” beyond its specific materiality, in the sense proposed by Hanna Soker-Schwager: it always contains a semantic load of ruin and socioeconomic issues.<sup>29</sup> Netta Bar Yosef-Paz takes up this duality, remarking that waste “is simultaneously the result of human beings’ criminal negligence toward one another and toward their environment, as well as a metaphor for that negligence.”<sup>30</sup> In her discussion of the subgenre of filth fiction, she points to the intersection of ecological questions with issues of race, class, and menial labor.

To some degree, waste can also be conceived as an Anthropocene monster, as the site or the actual manifestation of destruction, and in this regard, we simply have no right to avoid dealing with it. In an article with almost theological overtones, Bruno Latour calls for a “post-environmentalist” approach, one that does not retreat from civilization into a virginal (and unrealistic) nature, but that assumes responsibility for the monsters it has created. Latour points out that Frankenstein’s sin was not creating the monster, but abandoning it and failing to take responsibility for it. An environmentalism that fails to deal with the output of technology and industry, says

<sup>25</sup> Haim Nagid, *Yamina le-simtat Gan-Eden: Mivhar shirim, 1971–2011* [Right to paradise lane: Selected poems, 1971–2011] (Tel Aviv: Safra, 2012), 96.

<sup>26</sup> Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Rodolphe el-Khoury and Nadia Benabid (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Hanna Soker-Schwager, *Maḥshavot meytarot: Odefut ba-sifrut ha-ivrit 1907–2017* [Excess thoughts: Superfluity in Hebrew literature 1907–2017] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Netta Bar Yosef-Paz, “Distopiyut ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-aḥshavit: Mi-qatastrofof le-umiyot le-asonot svivatiyim” [Dystopias in contemporary Hebrew literature: From national catastrophes to environmental disasters], *Ha-ḥinukh ve-svivo* 41 (2019): 203.

Latour, commits that same sin of avoiding responsibility for a human creation. Like the divine Creator, human beings must remain in the world and watch over the works of their hands: “we should, without any blasphemy, reverse the Scripture and exclaim: ‘What good is it for a man to gain his soul yet forfeit the whole world?’”<sup>31</sup> Turning our gaze toward the monsters, toward the hybrid creatures that are the products of modernity, is part of the duty of (post) environmental research: “Once again, the sin is not to wish to have dominion over Nature, but to believe that this dominion means emancipation and not attachment.”<sup>32</sup>

I argue that there are ecological costs to the process of creating the clean human, a process that I believe has reached its peak in our time. We produce and buy too many new clothes, shower too often, use air conditioning and avoid sweat and body odor, and readily discard anything that is slightly broken, worn down, or dirty. In *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays*, Paul Kingsnorth remarks, “The flush toilet, to me, is a worthy metaphor for the civilization I live in. . . . You can do your business and never have to think about what happens next: never have to think about what happens to the faeces and urine you have just produced. . . . What happens to a society that won’t deal with its own shit? It ends up deep in it.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, it is the act of returning to garbage, the act of reading garbage, and the act of thinking about garbage that this article sets as its goal. I follow in the footsteps of the author and environmental activist Edward Abbey. As Kevin Trumpeter has noted, Abbey’s writing treats the deliberate dirtying of space and the disposal of waste in public areas as an intentional ecological provocation; the goal is to make filth present rather than keeping it “neatly” pushed to the side. Abbey often observed that environmental cleanup movements were supported precisely by the companies that sold the polluting products, and that what emerged was only an apparent cleanliness, intended mainly to mask the real problem. Abbey, who crusaded against the construction of roads in nature reserves, dismissed many of those cleanup efforts with the observation, “the can is beautiful, the road is ugly.”<sup>34</sup> Although the objection may seem somewhat simplistic or problematic, it is also eye-opening, and I want to bring that same spirit to my consideration of garbage in literature.

## THE DIRTY JEW

To find alternatives to the modern aesthetic order, I will now turn to the concept of the “dirty Jew.” I want to extract the notion from the filth that clings to it—or perhaps more accurately, to return to that filth and immerse myself in it. Invoking the Jew as an ecological alternative is not a simple matter, first because the dirty Jew, as I will soon show, has historically been identified as anti-nature, especially by the discourse of the Haskalah,<sup>35</sup> and second because Judaism has been identified as a source of the anthropocentric attitude toward the environment. In a famous 1967 article, Lynn White pinned the blame for ecological damage on the Judeo-Christian tradition

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters: Why We Must Care for Our Technologies As We Do Our Children,” *Breakthrough* 2 (2011): 6. Latour is playing on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:26: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?”

<sup>32</sup> Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” 6.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2017), 92.

<sup>34</sup> Kevin Trumpeter, “‘The Can Is Beautiful, the Road Is Ugly’: Edward Abbey, KAB, and the Environmental Aesthetics of Litter,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28, no. 1 (2021): 20.

<sup>35</sup> Avidov Lipsker considers the Jew-nature divide to be an entirely artificial construct, and he dismisses the entire business as a “Haskalah cliché.” See his *Mahshavot ‘al Agnon* [Reflections on S.Y. Agnon] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2015), 236.

and its anthropocentric worldview, setting off a flurry of writing that sought other approaches in alternative theological sources.<sup>36</sup> Although the article was informed by an ecological awareness, it engaged in the earlier issue of the Jew's relationship to nature that had preoccupied even Hebrew writers during the Revival period. Indeed, the Hebrew literature of the Revival treats the question of nature and the eros associated with it as central themes, deeply bound to the processes of secularization, liberation from the Jewish body, and escape from the Jewish milieu of the Diaspora. In his seminal novella *Le'an* (*Whither?*), Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg sets the yeshiva in opposition to nature and youthfulness and shows the protagonist caught in the struggle. Berdyczewski does something similar; as Dan Almagor shows, he frequently portrays rebelliousness against rabbinical culture as an attempt to escape a well-known teaching of Rabbi Jacob, which becomes a central reference in Berdyczewski's early work: "Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, 'how fine is this tree!' [or] 'how fine is this newly ploughed field!' scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty" (*Avot* 3:7).<sup>37</sup> Bialik, too, in his poem "Lifnei aron ha-sefarim" (*Before the bookcase*), portrays a youth spent in the yeshiva, cut off from nature. As an adult, the speaker returns to the bookcase after a long period of separation:

Take up my greeting of peace, ancient parchments,  
and accept the kiss of my mouth,  
you who slumber in dust.  
From venturing to foreign isles, my soul has returned. . . .  
Do you still know me? It is I—so-and-so!  
The child you once held to your bosom, and a hermit set apart from life.  
Of all God's delights in all the earth,  
Was it not you alone that my youth once knew?  
You were a garden to me in the heat of a summer's day<sup>38</sup>

And finally, as Baruch Kurzweil notes, the heroes of Brenner and Berdyczewski repeatedly exhibit "Jewish powerlessness" in the face of eros, life, and nature. In light of "the exaggerated spirituality cultivated over generations at the expense of spontaneous life forces . . . eros remains for them an endless task, exalted, compelling, seductive, and repellent—one that they will never be able to manage."<sup>39</sup>

And so White's accusation of Judaism's hostility toward nature dovetails with Jewish self-criticism, which sought a return to nature as part of the process of Jewish "healing." Enjoying nature, knowing nature, developing bodily strength, keeping clean—these were meant, finally,

---

<sup>36</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7. For the impact of the article as well as the responses it provoked, see Tanhum S. Yoreh, *Waste Not: A Jewish Environmental Ethic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 2–3.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Almagor, "Mah na'eh ilan zeh: 'Al ha-yahas la-teva bi-itsirato ha-muqdemet shel Berdits'evski" [How beautiful is this tree: On the treatment of nature in the early work of Berdyczewski], *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 9, 1979, in *Musaf tarbut, sifrut, omanut* [Culture, literature, and arts supplement].

<sup>38</sup> Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Li-fnei aron ha-sfarim," [Before the bookcase], in *Ketavim Genuzim shel Hayim Nahman Bi'aliq: Mi-tokeh ha-'izavon* [Unpublished writings of Hayim Nahman Bialik: From the literary estate], ed. Moshe Ungerfeld (Tel Aviv: Beit Bialik/Dvir, 1971). The Hebrew text is also available at <https://benyehuda.org/read/4712>.

<sup>39</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, *Sifuteinu he-hadashah: Hemsheikh o mahapeikhah?* [Our new literature: Continuation or revolution?] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1965), 243.

to become the rightful inheritance of Jews once exile ended and secularization was complete. Going out to nature finalizes the break from the book, which stands in opposition to nature—an opposition that figured prominently during the Revival, especially in the work of Berdyczewski. It therefore seems only natural for eco-poetics to return to the same nature that the Revival poets so fervently desired. But aside from the profound problems inherent in a return to a conceptual framework linked to secularization—a framework that has been widely criticized in recent decades and that reproduces the dichotomy between secularity and youth on the one hand and religion and old age on the other—I argue that this return is problematic from eco-critical and environmental perspectives. It upholds a utopian, unrealistic conception of nature, portraying it as a fantasy of desire and perpetuating romanticized divides between country and city, between cleanliness and filth.<sup>40</sup>

In this article's reading of garbage, thinking about nature does not require an engagement with cultures whose writing highlights a love of trees, stones, and birds. Here the aim is to bring to the fore the "monsters" to which Latour refers—in this case, garbage—and to liberate eco-theological criticism from White's ideas, which until now have largely defined environmental discourse. I want to return to nature without falling into the romanticized and secularizing vision of the early twentieth century. Within the context of encouraging eco-theological reflection, the reading of garbage may also make it possible to recover the dirty Jew, the one who feels ill at ease in nature, unlike the secular Zionist sabra who has allegedly mastered the natural world and its secrets.

I now propose a reading of waste narratives in Jewish and Israeli literature, works that have not received enough attention, and I will consider the possibilities that they may contain. Engagement with waste, and the reading of waste, may enable thinking about other types of existence, and indeed about other ways of being human: as one who has not yet joined the modern project of cleansing space and body, or as one who has fallen away from it. For although modernity is marked by cleanliness, it took the Jew a comparatively long time to enter that framework and internalize its demands. Moreover, as Europe's internal Other, the Jew was consistently regarded as filthier, as one who failed to live up to the aesthetic standard. Filth and garbage are not quite identical, but I believe that reflecting on filth can point the way to thinking about garbage.

Mendele Mocher Sforim can be seen as a point of transition. According to Amir Banbaji, a distasteful quality in Mendele's literary art has prevented a national-humanist reading of his work: "There is no doubt that the narrator Mendele would like to be the ultimate embodiment of normality, modernity, and universality. But Mendele fails."<sup>41</sup> Banbaji claims that despite himself, Mendele summons up the diaspora Jew, with his odors and his failure to keep his surroundings clean. Yahil Zaban writes that Mendele "amplifies the Haskalah-era image of 'the dirty Jew' until it ceases to elicit disgust and revulsion and reveals itself instead as an image, a style, a creative act, a game."<sup>42</sup> He adds that what is truly disturbing about Abramovich's Jews "is not the filth itself, but the delight that is taken in it."<sup>43</sup> In other words, not only are they dirty, but they also derive pleasure and amusement from their dirtiness.

<sup>40</sup> For a critical examination of the concept of nature, see Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Amir Banbaji, *Mendele ve-ha-sipur ha-le'umi* [Mendele and the national narrative] (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2009), 269.

<sup>42</sup> Yahil Zaban, "Afruriyut ha-ḥelmon: Likhluh u-melankoliah ba-siporet shel Shai Abramovits" [The sulfurousness of the yolk: Filth and melancholy in the fiction of S. Y. Abramovitch], *Ot 3* (2013): 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Efforts to fashion the “new Jew” were bound up with attempts to cleanse him, or at least to imagine his entry into modernity as a moment of aesthetic change. How would the dirty Jew join the modern world? Would he finally become a nation like all other nations—that is, physically clean? Would he manage the removal of garbage from his cities, his streets, his own body? In “*We Are Here to Bring the West*”: *Hygiene Education and Culture Building in the Jewish Society of Mandate Palestine*, Dafna Hirsch cites remarks made by Rachel Pesach, a public health nurse, in 1931:

The whole world is carefully watching us and our work. Can this people, who suffered lives of exile for so many years, again become a healthy and free nation? We must prove to the world that our strength has indeed remained with us, that we know how to build cities like Tel Aviv, to establish agricultural settlements and villages, to set up modern schools; and we must show the world that we know how to live clean, hygienic lives, that we have succeeded in removing from ourselves the disgrace of exile, contamination, and negligence.

We have enemies who photograph our filth, who spread rumors that we are polluting the Holy Land, spreading diseases, and the like. We, of course, know the opposite: we are spreading culture here. Even so, we still have a great deal to fix; we must strive to make every corner of the land a symbol of cleanliness, for every store to sparkle and delight the eye, for our homes and all our spaces to testify that the people of Israel have indeed arisen to live a new and healthy life.<sup>44</sup>

During this transitional period, Jews appear as both colonizers who cleanse the external space and people who must themselves be colonized and cleansed. They are dual figures: they are themselves suspected of filth, yet upon arriving in the land, they seek to purify it and are judged on their ability to do so.

Filth wandered along with Jews to other places as well. Anzia Yeziarska, a Jewish writer who moved from Poland to New York in 1880, depicts Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe as dirty. Ronit Berger notes that for the immigrant women in Yeziarska’s stories, domestic cleanliness became the stronghold from which they resisted the image of the dirty Jew. According to Berger, although poor sanitary conditions did in fact imperil immigrants’ health and at times proved fatal, medical reports from the period attributed the negative outcomes not to those conditions but to an inherent Jewish uncleanliness, especially among Eastern European Jews. To a significant degree, the attempt to escape the ghetto manifested itself in efforts to cleanse both the body and the external space.<sup>45</sup> Of course, dirtiness is always relative—everyone has a personal definition of “dirty”—and other bodies, besides Jewish ones, were expected to undergo cleansing upon entering modernity.

I want to consider whether stories of garbage can be read in the same way that Zaban presents the Jewish sin of filth—not just as a way to sully ourselves, but also as a source of delight and amusement. I ask whether it is possible to crave garbage itself, and what potential such a reading might unleash.

---

<sup>44</sup> Dafna Hirsch, *Banu heinah lehavi et ha-ma’arav: Hanḥalat higyena u-vniyat tarbut ba-ḥevrah ha-yehudit bi-tkufat ha-Mandat* [*We are here to bring the West: Hygiene education and culture building in the Jewish society of Mandate Palestine*] (Sde Boker: Makhon Ben-Gurion le-ḥeker Yisra’el ve-ha-tsiyonut / Ben-Gurion University Press, 2014), 185.

<sup>45</sup> Ronit Berger, “Living in Dirt: Reclaiming the Discourse of Hygiene in the Works of Anzia Yeziarska,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 22 (2003): 19–35.

### THE CONTENTED POOR AND THE DWELLERS OF THE DUMP

In recent years, ecological practices such as trash picking and dumpster foraging have become subjects of scrutiny. These contemporary forms of gleaning are driven by economic need or by an ecological motivation to correct distortion within the food market and the industrial sector. In a 2012 article, Vered Lee presents her observations of people who collect metal, aluminum, copper, plastic, paper, clothing, and other objects from the trash. Boaz, one of the people she features, describes garbage as almost erotic:

“Ever since I was born I’ve loved rummaging through trash,” he says. “I don’t look at young women, only at piles of garbage. You have no idea how much it draws me. When I lived in a regular house, I would go to throw out a bag of trash and come back with four new ones,” he laughs. “I’m a collector at heart. So there are collectors of Judaica? Well, I’m a collector of items from the trash. . . . My house is crammed with junk. You can’t see the floor tiles because everything is piled with gifts from the street. . . . I really love it. It’s not a compromise or a choice I was forced into. I love to walk around the street, to go, to poke around, to search. I’m a professional collector. I get excited by what I discover. I get excited about giving people gifts I found in the street.”<sup>46</sup>

Boaz’s words reveal a passion for the substance of garbage, for the potential it contains; garbage is thrilling, and it teems with finds and treasures. One can, of course, question the freedom behind Boaz’s statement, “It’s not a compromise or a choice forced on me.” At the heart of any inquiry into the potential of garbage lies a tension between desire and necessity.<sup>47</sup>

But what about literature and garbage dumps? In most cases, the dump enters literature through the back door, in an unwanted cameo.<sup>48</sup> One early story, however, positions the dump at the very core of the narrative, as a site of learning. The literary motif of the “contented poor” and of a dwelling amid garbage appears in the important work *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir* (The king’s son and the ascetic), part of the *adab* tradition, courtly literature intended to impart wisdom and

<sup>46</sup> Vered Lee, “Ha-anashim she-nimtsa’im be-tahtit sharsheret ha-mazon” [The people who are at the bottom of the food chain], *Haaretz*, November 14, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> The documentary *Waste Land* (2010), directed by Lucy Walker, follows the artist Vik Muniz as he travels to the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro to what is heralded as the largest garbage collection site in the world; Muniz plans to create portraits of waste pickers by using materials that they collect at the site. The film focuses on several pickers, tracing their involvement in the creation of the artwork, and then their difficulties as they return to the garbage dump after their short-lived glory and relative prosperity in the artist’s studio. The film brings to light what might be called “picking pride,” which the garbage collector Tião probably expresses most clearly: “We are not waste pickers. We are collectors of recyclable materials.” By contrast, Ísis, who does not want to return to the dump, complains, “I feel disgusting.”

Another example comes from the towns of garbage collectors in Egypt. These towns are built within garbage dumps, and their inhabitants, most of whom are Coptic Christians, earn their living through recycling. In an article about these individuals, Stephan de Beer offers a theological interpretation of their labor. He claims that they manage to recycle 80 percent of the waste that reaches them. See Stephan de Beer, “Jesus in the Dumping Sites: Doing Theology in the Overlaps of Human and Material Waste,” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2014): 1–8.

<sup>48</sup> One example of this “back-door” entry of trash appears in Edna Mazia’s 1997 novel *Hitpartsut X* [Outburst X]. The garbage dump suddenly appears when the protagonist, Ilan, is searching for a place to bury his wife’s lover, whom he has murdered. In the dark of night, this new realm of life reveals itself, one that Ilan had never seen before he wandered into the other side of existence and went into hiding.

moral instruction, usually addressed to members of the upper class.<sup>49</sup> This work, which circulated widely in several versions, was adapted and translated into Hebrew during the thirteenth century by Rabbi Abraham ben Shmuel ha-Levi ibn Ḥasdai. In the story's frame, an ascetic seeks to impart wisdom to a king and his son, the crown prince, and the embedded narrative is constructed like a film that we are watching along with them. We look "through a hole," a sort of *camera obscura*, at a poor couple living in the garbage at the edge of the city:

They walked on and drew near until they reached the place of light  
 There they found a hole  
 And within it was a house formed like a cave, which a destitute man had hollowed out  
 Had taken as a place  
 of dwelling  
 For himself and his wife  
 And from there they heard the sound of music  
 And the clamor of singing  
 A voice of rejoicing and gladness  
 The voice of bridegroom and bride  
 And they looked through the hole and saw a man hideous in form  
 Strange in appearance and figure  
 His clothes tattered rags that he had found within that refuse  
 Reclining upon the seat  
 That his wife readied for him  
 From the choicest of the garbage.  
 (Oettinger, 115–116)

These destitute people are fortunate, not just because they have joy and good cheer, but also because they have a real fortune, one that is conveyed by the words "reclining upon the seat." Reclining is associated with royalty, which is why we recline at the Passover Seder; the translation of Abraham ibn Ḥasdai abounds in linguistic nuance that enriches the characterization of the couple. The poor man is described as a bridegroom as well, and a bridegroom "resembles a king" (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 16). The words "had taken as a place [*makhon*] / of dwelling [*le-shivto*]" echo the description of God's abode in the verse "from God's dwelling-place [*mi-mkhon shivto*] the divine gaze touches / on all the inhabitants of the earth" (Ps. 33:14; see also Exod. 15:17). And indeed, what is only implied at the beginning of the work is later made explicit: "And she called his name: 'Lord of Kings and Hero of Battles' / And he called her name: 'Lady of Kingdoms'" (Oettinger, 116). Through such cues, the couple turns out to be a narrative embodiment of the proverb "who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot" (Avot 4:1). In effect, the king of the story's frame observes a bizarre reflection of himself: a royal figure, yet one who lives amid the garbage.

The poor characters eat together, make music, and sing of their love and desire for one another. Despite the unappealing and non-idyllic setting of this romance, the woman celebrates the man as attractive, even sensually. Her song, in keeping with the *adab* tradition, is embedded within the narrative: "I liken the deer of my desire to the grace of a young stag / the perfume of

---

<sup>49</sup> Ayelet Oettinger, ed., *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir / Avraham ben Shmuel ha-Levi ibn Ḥasdai* [The king's son and the ascetic / by Abraham ben Shmuel ha-Levi ibn Ḥasdai] (Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv Press, 2011), 48. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

his lips is myrrh and fragrant clusters” (Oettinger, 117). For this couple, garbage is the potential ground of life not just for practical matters but also for the possibilities of desire. Observing this happy couple—an activity that occurs through reading—is itself the process of learning that the king undergoes.

And for a long while the king and crown prince stood  
Greatly frightened and astonished . . .  
In due course the king said: Never would I have thought to witness such great  
joy and sweetness of fellowship among all creatures as we have beheld in  
these two poor people!”  
(Oettinger, 117)

At the heart of the story is a metonymy that creates an analogy between the dwelling place and its inhabitants: they live amid the garbage, and they are consequently perceived as a kind of human garbage. They live in the binary opposite of the royal palace from which the king and the ascetic have come. But that palace did not provide the king and the ascetic with what they sought, and they therefore had to leave it. As a result, the metonymy is overturned: the couple are not human garbage but just the opposite, and the garbage in which they live is a potentially royal realm. The binary opposition between the palace and the garbage dump unravels as the metonymy begins to crack.

Structurally, the story is built upon three types of marginality: geographical, material, and social. Geographically, the story takes place at the edge of the city; materially, the story concerns the reviled substance of garbage; and socially, the story focuses on the abjectly poor. But these marginalities form the basis for the narrative’s fundamental reversal: the king and crown prince must wander all the way to the city’s outskirts to learn a lesson from precisely the people who dwell in the dump. This reversal mirrors Rashi’s commentary on the experience of Yosef, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s son, during an illness. Yosef reports, “I saw an inverted world. Those above were below, while those below were above.” Rashi explains, “‘Those above were below’: Those who are above here because of their wealth, there I saw below. ‘While those below were above’: The poor, who are lowly among us, there I saw as honored” (Bava Batra 10b). In this Talmudic story, as in *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir*, the reversal involves the social and aesthetic categories that pertain to the world we know: above and below, honored and lowly. But in the Talmud, the reversal occurs only in a different world, while in *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir*, the reversal takes place within our familiar reality. The time is the same time, the garbage is the same garbage—and nonetheless, the poor couple are (like) royalty. The king, moreover, comes to this understanding not through a numinous vision but through everyday curiosity—by paying attention to what he sees in the garbage to which his own feet have brought him. Alongside him, the reader gains the same understanding through the act of reading the story.

Although this distinctive story circulated widely, it was understood in a primarily metaphorical way. One example is the interpretation of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Pollonye:

One may further say that it is written as a parable in *Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir*, that a certain king decreed that no candle be lit at night . . . and he went out at night and found a man in the garbage, and so on, *who had lit a candle, so that he would see that all the pleasures of this world lie in refuse*. And this is the sum total of human affairs in this world—“and there was thick darkness

in all the land of Egypt,” etc., but “all the people of Israel had light where they dwelt,” for they saw that this whole world resembles refuse.<sup>50</sup>

According to R. Yaakov Yosef, the king is shown what lies behind the scenes of material existence. The world presents itself as majestic, full of sparkle and enticement, but in reality all of it is garbage. Cleaning it is utopian, hardly realistic at all, and as a result, the fundamental distinction is not between cleanliness and filth but between those who are willing to acknowledge that they are immersed in trash and those who refuse to do so, attempting instead to map out a world of illusory cleanliness. R. Yaakov Yosef emphasizes the importance of garbage in shattering the illusions of respectable society, but in doing so he makes the garbage entirely symbolic. By grouping this story with other trash narratives, I seek the opposite—to restore trash to its trash-ness and to reclaim the story’s materiality, the life of a destitute couple among heaps of garbage.<sup>51</sup>

### THE GARBAGE DUMP AS A SITE OF DESIRE

The story I have just discussed is for the most part unusual; to the extent that trash narratives exist, they are scarce. Here I am trying to collect and foreground some of those stories, examine the role that garbage plays in them, and consider the literary and ecological options that they offer. Despite their scarcity, I believe these stories are growing in number as the problem of garbage grows and demands increasing attention. Since the 1980s, an expanding corpus of texts has engaged with the issue, and that corpus includes the poem by Shez that I have already quoted, as well as the works that I am about to present. I am not making an empirical claim about an increasing amount of filth in literary works (even though I do believe that the amount is increasing), but rather asserting that garbage has grown as a problem, raising questions about bodies, sensations, odors, curiosity, and desire.

In her 2012 anthology *Kaḥol neged ‘ayin ha-ra* (Blue against the evil eye), Raquel Chalfi puts the spotlight on garbage in two short stories: “Zevul” (Trash), which I will discuss in the next section, and “Oto paḥ ha-ashpah ve-ha-shi’ur be-filosofyah” (The garbage truck and the philosophy lesson), which I take up now.<sup>52</sup> The plot of this second story revolves around the narrator’s chronic lateness to the philosophy lessons of Professor Zaftini, a visiting lecturer from England. Zaftini intimidates her, sending icy stares her way whenever she arrives late. On the morning that she is meant to give a presentation, she runs behind schedule. She hitches a ride on a garbage truck, falls asleep, and ends up at the dump instead of the university.

It is already clear from the beginning of the story that the protagonist is attracted to the professor and daunted by him in equal measure. These feelings are contradictory but intense—they compel her to continue arriving late and to avoid meeting up with him, but also to fixate on him. What results is a structurally conflicted desire, and it is linked to the structural qualities of the professor, whose appearance symbolizes the gap between intimacy and remoteness. From a distance he seems tall, but up close he turns out to be short. And although from afar he looks handsome and full of charm, “his facial skin, which from a distance seemed jasmine-white, was

<sup>50</sup> R. Yaacov Yosef Hacoheh of Polonne, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (Jerusalem, 1973), 137–139.

<sup>51</sup> It lies beyond this article’s scope to delve more deeply into the symbolism of filth and garbage dumps in Hasidic literature. Nonetheless, I touch on the issue below, in my discussion of Haviva Pedaya’s work.

<sup>52</sup> I am grateful to Neta Dan for having introduced me to this story.

revealed at close range to be shockingly pitted and scarred.”<sup>53</sup> At the same range, his eyes are as cold as ice. As the narrator puts it, “never had there walked on the university campus a creature who more perfectly exemplified the unity of opposites” (Chalfi, 240). We are dealing with dialectics, but of a very material sort, one that moves among pocked facial skin, a disappointingly flabby belly, and the otherwise spindly body of Professor Zaftini. Ultimately, these dialectics bring us back to the story’s title, to the garbage truck and the philosophy professor. The story’s structural qualities are almost parodies. They are archetypal in the extreme, exaggerated, and even humorous; there is even a mirror image, provided by the driver of the garbage truck—a man with large, hairy hands whose presence, which bears the steam of the warm garbage, soothes the narrator. As I have mentioned, she falls asleep and ends up at the dump.

Unlike her obstacle-ridden exertions to get to the philosophy class, her arrival at the dump occurs without her even intending to get there. It is almost as if she is compelled by an irresistible melody, one evoked by the text’s almost cheerful, repetitive refrain (which recalls the bluesy quality of Chalfi’s poetry): “I was brought in the truck, in the garbage truck, not to the philosophy class of Professor Zaftini was I brought, to the municipal dump I was brought, by the garbage truck I was brought” (Chalfi, 248). At the dump, she encounters sanitation workers who are sorting through the trash: “Like dark points merging into lines, into outlines of figures, into figures, into people dancing slowly among the mountains of garbage” (249). This dance beckons to her and mesmerizes her, and she is compelled to take part in the rummaging: “There was no way other than this dance” (250). Despite the urge to draw near, however, the reek keeps her at a distance; it is not easy to come close to the mountain of garbage, just as it is not easy to come close to Professor Zaftini: “It is likely that I would have remained standing there, watching the mountain from afar, never approaching it—if not for the rose” (250). The narrator likens herself to Moses, who observes from afar without approaching, and the mountain of garbage is likened to a sacred place—the Promised Land or Mount Sinai—and one may not come near the sacred. Suddenly the narrator sees a rose blooming amid the trash, “swollen as at the peak of love”: “The rose, one might say, was what created a rapport between me and the mountain. Afterwards, I was no longer afraid of it” (250).

The story is about the disappointment of attempts to draw close. It is impossible to be near Professor Zaftini, whose immediate presence always involves heartbreak; he is the fear of fulfillment, the love that exists only when it remains unrealized. The rose alone, swollen with love amid the garbage, can save the narrator. A familiar symbol from mysticism,<sup>54</sup> the rose emerges in a moment that is a kind of epiphany—but as the story mentions several times, the rose is also a tattoo on Professor Zaftini’s ear. After the narrator’s epiphany, the rummaging becomes unavoidable: “Now I knew, without expressing it to myself in words, that I had to rummage through it, rummage through it” (250). Because of the rose, the narrator can be redeemed with what the dump has to offer: the people dancing amid the garbage, the hot steam of the stench, and the

<sup>53</sup> Raquel Chalfi, *Kaḥol neged ‘ayin ha-ra* [Blue against the evil eye] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2012), 242. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>54</sup> The rose is a prominent kabbalistic symbol that has also received extensive treatment in Hebrew literature. See Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *‘Al shirat Zelda* [On Zelda’s poetry] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), 77; Avi Elqayam, “‘Ka-shoshanah bein ha-ḥoḥim’: Sod ha-shoshanah ke-tmunat kol ha-tmunot be-midrashai ha-Zohar,” [Like a rose among thorns: The secret of the rose as the quintessential image in the midrashim of the Zohar], in *Qabbalah, mistiqah u-po’etiqah: Ha-masa el qeits ha-hizayon* [Kabbalah, mysticism and poetry: The journey to the end of vision], ed. Avi Elqayam and Shlomy Mualem (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), 121–241.

certainty that the situation is hopeless, since she will not get to class in time for her presentation. “I thought to myself: This is redemption! Comic redemption, absurd redemption, redemption that doesn’t smell nice, but redemption” (248).

By approaching the mountain, joining fully in the dance of the sanitation workers, and rummaging passionately through the trash, the narrator can finally return to Professor Zaftini and draw near to him, if only as an erotic fantasy based on the possibility of drawing near, and on the rose tattooed onto the professor’s ear: “I will search for him now. I will search for him and I will also find him. I will draw close to him, ever close to him. I will lead him to the thorny campus lawn. . . . I will sit close to him, so close that in the fragile darkness around us, the rose will gleam in its pallid whiteness on his ear” (255). The protagonist seeks to transform the unrealized yearnings of the Song of Songs—“I sought the one I love— / I sought, but found him not” (Song of Sol. 3:1)—into desire that is satisfied and fulfilled.

This story accommodates a variety of readings, but in the present context, what is most important is the aesthetic and erotic potential of garbage. Professor Zaftini symbolizes Western aesthetics: he is intelligent and sophisticated, yet one cannot approach his body, so he is always something of an abstraction; as a result, he inevitably disappoints up close. The gap between the perfection of the professor’s image and the tangible reality of his body ends time after time in breakdown, precluding intimacy and touch. The mountain of garbage, by contrast, offers a thoroughly inverted aesthetic, less dreamy but genuinely sensual; to be near it is to be aroused, irresistibly, with the desire to rummage and poke around. The dance, the odors, the inevitability of the situation, and perhaps also the hairy, comforting hand of the driver, have the potential to redeem the narrator. It is without question a trashy redemption, but a redemption nonetheless.

The rose peeking out of the trash and the rose peeking out of the professor’s ear seem to intertwine into a single image that functions like a mindfulness exercise on desire. To confront and restrain the sexual impulse, for example, Buddhist traditions promote the visualization of dead women’s corpses. A similar intention to avoid sin may underlie the Tannaitic teaching to picture human life as starting from “a putrid drop” and ending in “a place of worms and maggots” (Avot 3:1). Despite the differences between the two cultures, both assume that imagining decay and locating it within the coveted object will nullify erotic desire. Precisely the opposite results from the projection of the garbage dump onto the professor’s body by means of the two roses; the visualization of decay enables attachment and desire. In this way, Chalfi’s story suggests that the desire for trash can indeed be cultivated, and that the contemplation of garbage can prompt an aesthetic reversal. I propose reading the story as a kind of ecstatic revelation about garbage; instead of being cut short by the stench, this revelation arises from within it and by virtue of it.

Yet the eroticization of garbage, its transformation into a material that allures rather than repulses, carries the risk of blurring an extremely complex reality and repressing the problematic contexts of trash. The geography of waste is political, as Berger writes, and garbage is transported to areas that suffer legal neglect. When landfill fees were raised to encourage Israeli cities and towns to recycle and reduce their quantities of waste, enormous amounts of trash were shipped to the West Bank for disposal, even though the government had banned the practice in 2007.<sup>55</sup> Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, who has researched waste in the context of the

---

<sup>55</sup> Berger, *Ha-tsidah*, 53–54.

Israeli occupation, writes that if, according to Mary Douglas, dirt is “matter out of place,” then for Palestinians garbage is “matter with no place to go.”<sup>56</sup>

Ada Ushpiz and Shosh Shlam offer a glimpse of this issue in their 2012 documentary *Zewel tov* (Good garbage), which deals with garbage dumps in the South Hebron Hills. The movie presents the landfill realistically, with no presence of eros whatsoever. By contrast, in the film *Waste Land*, which I mention in note 47 at the end of this article, the Brazilian characters stir up affection and hope despite their extreme poverty. There is no such comfort in *Zewel tov*. The reason, it seems, is not just the physical proximity of the South Hebron Hills or the recognition, for Israelis, of a reality that is jarringly close. It is also not just the absence, among Palestinian sanitary workers, of the solidarity that binds the Brazilian ones, even though the Palestinian workers are indeed seen quarrelling and hitting one another in a struggle over scraps of refuse. I believe that *Zewel tov* fails to offer comfort because the film deliberately repudiates the cushioning and consolation that artistic representation can bring.

Since there is little representation of garbage in Hebrew literature, there is of course little treatment of the intersection between garbage and other political issues. This silence is no accident, since one of the problems of garbage, as I am trying to demonstrate in this article, is its removal from our field of vision. Rob Nixon proposes the notion of “slow violence” to describe the environmental harm that developed countries inflict on developing ones. We usually think of violence as a visible activity, but environmental violence, which suffers from its lack of representation, is itself slow and mostly invisible, with consequences that become apparent only after many years. Slow violence is no less harmful than the more familiar kind, and the poor, who lack the means to protect themselves, are always the first to pay the price for the depletion of natural resources and the hazards of pollution.<sup>57</sup>

In her 2016 novel *Gevulot* (Borders), Ronit Rapp takes the unusual step of returning distanced garbage to the field of vision. Shemi the painter, the protagonist’s lover, produces paintings that depict the construction waste that is dumped in the occupied territories. His exhibition provokes the following review:

Shemi Ben Baruch ignores the privilege that allows him to stand with his camera before piles of waste and ponder them in a cultivated manner, as someone who has enjoyed a bourgeois artistic education.... They, unlike him, have no leisure to contemplate their own backyards.... We Israelis dirty the territories but also know how to paint our dirt beautifully, and similarly, in Tel Aviv, we delight in the photogenic display.... For what is more beautiful than garbage that provides a painter with dramatic and narrative fodder?<sup>58</sup>

This text produces a double image: Shemi the painter’s engagement with waste, and criticism of the blurring that is inherent in his representation. This criticism brings us back to Laporte’s claim that representation transforms garbage into a sign and thereby cleanses it. And while it is indeed true that representation is more beautiful and pleasant than waste itself, it seems to me that in

<sup>56</sup> Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), x.

<sup>57</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 56. Of course, garbage is not quite “invisible,” as Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2020) points out; it is always present and can be seen and smelled. Stamatopoulou-Robbins provides a detailed discussion of garbage dumps in the context of the Israeli occupation.

<sup>58</sup> Ronit Rapp, *Gevulot* [Borders] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016), 137.

the journey toward concrete reality, literature and representation can at least serve as starting points. As Hamutal Tsamir wrote, even though *Gevulot* is ostensibly a bourgeois story about an affair between an art teacher and a married woman, Shemi's art functions "as a testimony to and an exposure of a hidden truth, as a 'conveyance' of the truth from there to here, from the occupied territories to the region of the state."<sup>59</sup> In other words, the painting and the written description are attempts to correct some of the distortion that occurs when the trucks sail out of sight with their reeking loads.

### THE LIFE OF AGING OBJECTS AND THEIR REDEMPTION

As I have mentioned, another story that deals with garbage in Chalfi's *Kaḥol neged 'ayin ha-ra* is "Zevel." The title refers to a dramatic piece that an aging dancer and choreographer tries to write. Unable to find an audience, he ultimately produces his work with the help of friends at the Municipal Center for Senior Citizens. The play moves among neglected and discarded objects in a garbage dump and describes their feelings, which echo the biblical verse, "do not cast me off in old age; when my strength fails, do not forsake me!" (Ps. 71:9). A symbolic and even faintly ludicrous analogy emerges between the discarded objects and the elderly—and absurdity is the core of the story, whose overall focus is a play that has been rejected for not being sophisticated enough. The text is a song of discarded objects, an exercise in unmistakable banality. Chalfi achieves a complicated maneuver: she writes a ridiculous text that is tinged with parody but inordinately simple-minded, and yet the blame falls on her narrator and seemingly not on herself. She, as the author, is free to craft the song of discarded objects however she pleases, and without incurring the reader's scorn, since that scorn, if it arises, will not be directed at the writer in the story, and not at herself.

Chalfi points to the need for a poetry of neglected objects, but she also signals the difficulty of writing such a poetry without lapsing into banality. Her text asks what this sort of writing might look like and explores how one might depict discarded objects, their feelings, and their relationship with their owners; by letting the objects speak through their personified voices, the text attempts to create the song of the dump. The pants, for instance, express the intensity and physical intimacy of the unrecognized relationship between a discarded object and its owner: "We still feel his balls inside us. Our buttons are dying to be opened-and-closed, opened-and-closed. Why did that schmuck have to die so suddenly? We're like a sudden widow. A premature widow" (Chalfi, 62). The forsaken necktie, still attractive by its own estimation, "wa—wa—want ter—ri—bly for someone to tie me. . . . I love feeling nervous fingers. Why don't they sell me again in a second-hand shop? What did I do wrong?" (61). At the end, all the objects gather together in the chorus and describe their state: "Clinging to one another, clinging to our pain, we embrace in the fellowship of the end. Now that you have cast a glance at us—now that you have looked at us, the invisible ones, now that you have seen our shadowy depths, our piles of yore, piles upon piles . . . , now you know that we have seen everything" (64). The granting of voice and character to these objects in the story is indeed somewhat ridiculous. This is an attempt that is fully aware of itself as an attempt.

A different attempt, not a parody at all, but far more theological, appears in Haviva Pedaya's *Be-'ein he-ḥatul* (Eye of the cat), published in 2008. The book, which focuses on marginal

<sup>59</sup> Hamutal Tsamir, "'Gevulot': Ha-ziqah bein omanut, emet ve-'alimut" ["Gevulot": The interrelation of art, truth, and violence], *Haaretz*, July 29, 2016.

characters and cats in the city of Beersheba, is essentially a collection of interwoven narratives that are punctuated by various midrashim and teachings—new and old (recycled), revealed and concealed, fictional and documentary. These interpolations are provided by a mysterious figure, Rabbeinu Peretz, who transmits secret doctrines known as the “Wisdom of the Cat.” The book is a major milestone in the representation of animals in Hebrew literature, as well as an important contribution to thinking about construction, destruction, and the integration of human activity with nature. Here I focus on a single story, one about R. Nahman’s chair, and I will show how the narrative reflects an alternative approach to garbage and production and waste, and also how it interweaves a critique of secularization with environmental concepts and concerns.<sup>60</sup>

My focus, to some degree, is an attempt to construct a literary biography of R. Nahman’s chair in order to understand the role of the chair in Pedaya’s work. In late capitalism, most objects have short lifespans. Objects are designed this way from the start, and they are priced accordingly—they are often inexpensive to purchase, but costly to the environment. We repair very little and discard a great deal. In other words, the deterioration of modern products and their disposal are neither natural nor free of outside interests. In her article about waste surveyors, Talia Fried expresses a different position, one that counters the standard and prevalent view that the West is a “throw-away society,” with our garbage full of perfectly good items that have been discarded for no reason. Fried reports that despite this view, she came across almost no “good items” in the waste surveys in which she participated. What she saw instead was chiefly “real” garbage—objects whose usefulness was already exhausted, and, above all, scraps and other worthless and potentially hazardous materials that were rightly removed from the public space for the common good.<sup>61</sup> But even if Fried’s claim is persuasive, the fact that she found no “good items” is already embedded in the stages of production and consumption. As Berger writes, “in the current economy, with products deliberately designed for obsolescence in order to drive constant repurchasing, it is no surprise that 59 million tons of polluting electronic waste are discarded each year.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise, as many have shown, disposal is essential to the maintenance of capitalist growth, which relies on overproduction.<sup>63</sup>

Within these mechanics of disposal, it is increasingly rare to find objects that have traversed expanses of time and space. The chair associated with R. Nahman, which is today located in the *beit midrash* (study hall) of the Breslov Hasidim in Jerusalem, is precisely such an object, and one that has traveled not just physically, but also narratively. We will begin with the moment of its birth. The following account appears in *Hayei Moharan* (The life of Rabbeinu Nahman), which was composed by R. Nahman’s disciple R. Natan:

What he related before Rosh Hashanah 5569 [1808], at the end of the summer of 5568:  
And at that time the *shohet* [ritual slaughterer] of the Teplyk community brought him a wondrous chair.

<sup>60</sup> For an ecologically-minded study of Pedaya’s book as a whole, see Tafat Hacoheh-Bick, “Ecocriticism, Theology, and the Environment in Haviva Pedaya’s *The Eye of the Cat*,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 26, nos. 1–2 (2021): 5–28.

<sup>61</sup> Talia Fried, “Le-hotsi pesolet me-ashpah: Reshamim entropologiyim mi-sqarei ashpah be-Itit be-Yisra’el” [Taking the waste out of the garbage: Anthropological impressions from household waste surveys in Israel], *Sotsiyologiyah yisra’elit* 18, no. 2 (2017): 49–72.

<sup>62</sup> Berger, *Ha-tsidah*, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Bar Yosef-Paz, “White Trash, Literary Trash,” 23–34.

And at around the same time, he recounted that he saw in a vision or a dream that he had been brought a chair, and there was fire surrounding it. And everyone—men, women, and children—went to see it. And when they returned, they immediately forged bonds with one another, and engagements to be married arose among them.<sup>64</sup>

The engagements are a metaphor for the completeness and proper placement of all things, for the discovery of suitable connections and the restoration of cosmological order. The chair is described as being similar to Solomon’s throne, which is said to have helped the king judge righteously and discern truth from falsehood. According to the midrash, when false witnesses appeared before the king, the beasts engraved upon the throne would move and cry out, terrifying the liars.<sup>65</sup>

R. Naḥman links the chair in his vision to another of his teachings, which he introduces with the following words: “This teaching was said on the Rosh Hashanah following this story, and the matter is exceedingly hidden and mysterious” (Mark, *Kol sipurei* 266). The teaching to which he refers is based on the biblical verse “blow the horn on the new moon [*ba-keseh*], on the full moon for our feast day” (Ps. 81:4). Because *keseh* (כסה) looks and sounds as though it is related to the root of the word “conceal,” (לכסות) the midrashic interpretation of the verse is “blow the horn at the concealed time for our feast day,” and this is what Rabbi Nahman takes as the text’s meaning. Drawing on the phonetic resemblance between *keseh* (concealment, כסה) and *kisei* (chair/throne, כסא), Rabbi Nahman focuses on Rosh Hashanah as the moment when souls are joined at their roots to their place of origin, the Throne of Glory:

“Blow the shofar *ba-keseh* for our feast day” . . . meaning by means of the Throne of Glory, the roots of the souls, through this is the place of the world, in the sense of “He placed the world upon them,” and therefore he can make Rosh Hashanah as already indicated (*Likutei Moharan, Tinyana* [part 2], 1).

According to the testimony of R. Natan, R. Naḥman recounted this vision shortly after he had received the actual chair:

Someone made a chair for our master, of blessed memory, and he asked him, “How long did it take you to make it?” He replied, “Half a year.” Our master, of blessed memory, asked him, “Did you work on it all day long?” And he answered, “No, I worked only one hour each day” (for it was a fine chair with beautiful carvings). And our master said to him, “So! You thought of me an hour each day!” (Mark, *Kol sipurei*, 67)

The chair, which is now in Jerusalem as I have already noted, has undergone many transformations over the years. According to most accounts, it was once in the possession of R. Naḥman’s grandson in the town of Chyhyryn, but there it was neglected and eventually left in pieces near a pile of firewood, until one of the Hasidim saved it and entrusted it to R. Moshe Ber. Then, as one might expect in such a story, when R. Ber set sail for the Land of Israel in 1936, a great storm arose, and nearly everything on board was thrown into the sea—except for the precious legs of the

<sup>64</sup> R. Pinḥas of Tiberias, Manuscript of *Hayei Moharan* [The life of Rabbeinu Naḥman] (pre-1874), cited in Zvi Mark, *Kol sipurei rabi Naḥman mi-Breslov* [Complete stories of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav] (Tel Aviv: Miskal—Yedioth Ahronot, Sifrei Hemed, 2015), 265. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>65</sup> Targum Sheni on the Book of Esther 4b. See also Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Va-yehi ha-yom: Divrei agadah* [And it was the day: Words of Aggadah] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1936), 85.

chair, which R. Ber guarded with the utmost devotion (Mark, *Kol sipurei*, 68, sections 6–7).<sup>66</sup> Even so—and here the various accounts differ slightly—the chair was missing three of its legs, which arrived only later. According to a 1957 notice in the *Ma'ariv* newspaper, “customs officials who recently inspected the cargo of several elderly immigrants arriving from the Soviet Union found something very strange inside: three pieces of wood, which seemed to be the legs of a chair.”<sup>67</sup>

Solomon’s throne also suffered from missing legs: “After many years came Alexander of Macedon. He took the throne to Egypt. When Antiochus Epiphanes destroyed Egypt he took the throne and brought it in a ship unto his own land. But a foot of the throne with its golden chain suffered injury, and though he brought all the smiths and all the craftsmen of his kingdom to mend the throne, they were not able. Behold, it is bereft of a leg unto this day.”<sup>68</sup> In the original midrash, the throne is repaired during the reign of Cyrus: “And in the merit of having allowed the building of the House of the Lord, he was worthy of ascending and sitting upon the throne of the king, of which the like was never made in any kingdom” (Targum Sheni 4b).

This tale, along with the parallels between the two chairs, provides the raw material from which Pedaya built her story: an object of significance that lies in the garbage and is rediscovered. In the chapter called “Ha-kisei shel R. Naḥman mi-Breslov” (The chair of R. Naḥman of Bratslav), Pedaya draws on the two earlier stories to tell a third, alternative one, about a king whose ancient and wondrous throne ensured that he never had to go to war. But the chair is nearly lost:

There was once a king who always lived in peace with all creatures and nations and never needed to wage war. . . . In the end of days, the whole world will be like one kingdom; people will swallow their neighbors alive, the king will die with neither nation nor glory, and his heirs will throw his broken throne from one storage place to another, until one day a truck will be summoned to clear out the warehouse and dispose of all its contents at one of the garbage dumps or the flea market. And there will be a garbage man, poor, downtrodden, ragged, and long tutored by suffering, and all will scorn the wisdom of this pitiable one. That pitiable one will come and take the chair to his home, marvel at its strange height, and begin to probe it. And he will look and study and understand.<sup>69</sup>

Pedaya portrays the situation of globalization, which is characterized by the erasure of tradition and the exile of rulers: the king dies without glory, and his heirs no longer know how to value his legacy. As in classical Jewish sources, the end of days is described as a reality in which “the whole world will be like one kingdom,” but here, the eschatological vision assumes a profoundly negative character: this is a tragic situation in which precious items are strewn around in neglect, and spiritual decay—a phenomenon of ignorance, erasure, and, above all, reckless disposal—threatens to destroy the throne. The material situation of disposal and industrial turnover brings about the loss of what previous generations treasured. The poor garbage man, however, begins to engage with the chair; he sees that it is unusual, and he tries to understand its nature. As a result of rummaging through the trash, he grasps the secret of the throne, as well as the secret of its hidden

<sup>66</sup> See also Oman Shalom, “Ha-kisei shel ha-ge’ulah: Sipuro ha-merateq mi-masa nedudei ha-kisei ha-qadosh shel rabi Naḥman mi-Breslov” [The chair of redemption: The fascinating story of the wanderings of the holy chair of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav], *Nitsotsot* (9 Iyar 5780 / May 1, 2020).

<sup>67</sup> M. Heshin, “Kis’o shel ha-rebi” [The rabbi’s chair], *Maariv*, June 14, 1957, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Bialik, *Va-yehi ha-yom*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Haviva Pedaya, *Be-ein he-hatul* [Eye of the cat] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), 330. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

mechanism: a rose activates a music box and animates the animals that are carved on the surface. The discarded object provides a concrete illustration of the verse that I have already mentioned in the context of Chalfi's work: "Do not cast me off in old age." That object will reveal its secret wisdom only to one who searches through the garbage and takes the time to contemplate what is found there; without this attention, the discarded item will remain forever silent. The garbage man in this story is a messianic figure, and the trash is a theological resource that preserves the knowledge of the past.

And what lesson is learned from returning the chair to use—the throne that made it possible for the king to avoid war, the throne that ensured that everything was in place and proceeding as it should? "Then everyone will understand that there is no evil in the world at all, just reversals of order" (Pedaya, 331). In other words, we learn from Rabbeinu Peretz—whose teachings, as I have already mentioned, are scattered throughout the book—that a well-functioning life demands neither disposal nor removal, but rather a return to the correct order, a restoration of the lost item to its proper place. In this worldview, scraps are not to be thrown away, and there is no absolute evil or utter garbage, only correct order, and it is possible to recover lost sparks and give them a new home. We learn this wisdom only from the one who is scorned, the man who rummages through the trash and sifts through it, who lives close to it and contemplates it.

Pedaya has adapted the messianic restoration to reflect engagement with actual, physical garbage. Disposal is too rapid in the industrial world, but one who wishes to receive the concealed wisdom of restoration and raise the trash from its lowly state can learn the secret of the rose and merit kingship, change from a garbage man into a monarch who brings peace. This recovery of peace is a mystical process: it appears in the story as the return of the object to its place, as a correction, as a reinstatement of lost honor. The *Sod ha-egoz* (Secret of the nut), the title of an ancient kabbalistic text as well as a frequent metaphor in the teaching of esoteric wisdom, refers to the *qlipah*, the shell or husk whose redemption through proper treatment enables access to the secret.<sup>70</sup> The theology of garbage that Pedaya presents in her story insists that today, the "secret" of *tiqun*, the cosmic repair of kabbalah, is learned by searching through actual trash. Her approach is extraordinary: she transfers the theological, esoteric, and metaphorical concept of the *qlipah* (and I make no claim about the physical reality of the *qlipah* in kabbalistic or Hasidic discourse) into the material and tangible world, where it becomes the scraps, discards, and garbage all around us.

We can move from this little story to further consideration of Pedaya's mythology of garbage. The Talmud compares the relationship between the created world and the secret wisdom on which it was founded to the relationship between a royal residence and the field of garbage on which it was built; in neither case is the foundation meant to be examined:

Whoever looks at four things, it would have been better had he never entered the world. . . . Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar both say: This can be demonstrated through a parable with regard to a flesh-and-blood king who said to his servants: Build for me large palaces on a garbage dump. They went and built them for him. Clearly, in that case, the king does not desire that they mention the garbage dump. (Ḥagigah 16a)

---

<sup>70</sup> Asi Farber-Ginat, "Tefisat ha-merkavah be-torat ha-sod be-me'ah ha-13: 'Sod ha-'egoz' ve-toldotav" [The concept of the Merkavah in thirteenth-century Jewish esotericism: "Sod ha-'egoz" and its development] (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987).

This midrash is surprising because it overturns the notion of the secret, which is transformed from hidden treasure to buried garbage; the secret is not precious but shameful. In Hasidism, the building of the palace on garbage becomes a general description of this world as a place of refuse and filth, but where there exists a scattering of precious jewels which the people who serve God collect and redeem. God's delight increases the more strenuously his children must labor to collect the jewels—that is, the more deeply his children are immersed in the world of temptation.

As it is written in the Zohar, this world is called “mud” . . . where the righteous grow, and there He cast holy sparks, and a person must gather them and elevate them. This can be compared to one who scattered precious stones in garbage and filth and commanded his son to gather them and cleanse them of the filth. Certainly, the more the child gathers and cleanses, the greater his reward.<sup>71</sup>

The process of *tiqun* is depicted through the metaphor of rummaging in the garbage, finding the sparks, and restoring them to their proper place. In *Be-'ein he-ḥatul*, Pedaya invokes this myth of the world's creation on a foundation of garbage: “At the beginning of creation, the God of awe-inspiring works established a palace for himself on a mountain of garbage” (48).

Pedaya distinguishes between different types of garbage—one could say, perhaps, between garbage that cannot be reprocessed and garbage that can be recycled and lived with. People dispose of garbage and send it far away, but God builds a structure and nurtures growth within the trash, without pushing it off to the margins:

God had a different approach when he created the world. He simply placed the world like a palace on top of the trash as a central point. He built a royal residence on the garbage, and from then on, it was not the king's wish for anyone to mention the word “garbage” before him. He was fully aware that people would eventually try to poke around and cast blame on his actions. God always places centralities on top of chaos. (32)

Chaos is fundamental to the act of creation; it is not banished to the margins or cast out of the story. Chaos is precisely the awe-inspiring work of “the God of awe-inspiring works,” the very pattern of things: “Trash is in the foundations, in the infrastructure, in the courage to live with trash at the center rather than to design margins exclusively for filth; it is divine. Only in this way is there a chance of remembering the state of emergency in which we live” (32). *Be-'ein he-ḥatul* constructs a doctrine of reparation rather than separation, of sublimation rather than repression. As Pedaya sees it, the solution is to work with the garbage, to process it, and to learn how to live with it.

Finally, this ecological position finds expression in the nature of the book's writing and construction. *Be-'ein he-ḥatul* is quite different from the modern novel, which is based on the sovereignty of the artistic genius and the prestige of fiction as a leisure pursuit. Pedaya operates instead as a collector, creating a literary style grounded in the reuse of ancient teachings, responsa, and stories. Her purpose is not to produce something new, but to return lost things to the living flow of literature, and in this sense, too, her work may be called ecological. The same literary ecology characterizes the lexical genre to which several eco-poetic works belong.<sup>72</sup> This

<sup>71</sup> R. Israel of Kozhnitz, *Avodat Yisra'el* [The service of Israel] (Jerusalem: Sifrei Or Ha-ḥayim, 2011), 303. See also R. David Solomon Eibeschutz, *Arvei naḥal* [Willows of the brook] (Warsaw: Y. Goldman, 1870), 24b.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Gorney, *Deyuqan zo'ologi*; Burstein, *'Olam qatan*.

genre is not a type of fiction but a gathering of informational items, observations, and documentation. Here, then, is a response to my earlier question about the new forms that literature might assume in the context of the climate crisis. Environmental poetics offers a type of writing that is not a linear bildungsroman focusing on a single protagonist, but a decentralized collection of diverse elements. This recycling erodes questions of ownership and supposed genius. Without attempting to produce something out of nothing, it brings an abundance of texts and objects back into public view, where people can appreciate their value.

In bringing together a number of Jewish and Israeli stories about garbage, I have tried to articulate some ideas about aesthetics and draw attention to marginalized materials. My assumption has been that the removal of garbage is not a solution but a deepening of the problem, and that we must think about garbage and situate it at the center of literature, culture, and politics. Garbage enables a shift in perspective, as Pedaya writes in her essay on Southernness; once again, as in *Be-'ein he-ḥatul*, she links the issues of garbage, pollution pushed out of sight, and Israel's underserved socio-geographic periphery: "What does it mean for me to look at things from here? From the Negev, from the lived reality of Be'er Sheva and the Mizrahi communities that function there? The neglected Negev, the Eastern communities who live and act in it? The neglected, populated, exploited Negev, bursting into desert bloom, collapsing under piles of construction waste. . . . Desert roads leading to official and unofficial Bedouin villages; groves and mountains of trash; the tall smokestack from which white smoke curls incessantly away from [the waste disposal site of] Ramat Hovav."<sup>73</sup>

*Be-'ein he-ḥatul* brings us back to the duality of garbage as problem and solution. Pedaya's endeavor—locating within the scorned and cast out something that can be used and summoned back to the center—has as its backdrop a work by Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Powers of horror: An essay on abjection).<sup>74</sup> Pedaya, however, politicizes and concretizes Kristeva's psychoanalytic thinking. Pedaya's approach to what has been shunted aside is different: she inverts the lining of the rejected material, examines its sacred character, its potential for *tiqun*. "The pushing away of garbage is the pushing away of what things have cost" (Pedaya, 32). The displacement of garbage and the urban decay and collapse that Pedaya describes are processes of repression and forgetting. Yet, if one thinks about them clearly and even politically, suffering, garbage, and illness carry potential for wisdom. As Pedaya puts it, "trash and suffering. Both force you to see things from the other side" (Pedaya, 58). In the introduction to her book, Hawkins writes that when people pay attention to garbage, something shifts in their everyday domestic habits.<sup>75</sup> And so the reading that I have proposed should amount to more than an aesthetic or intellectual diversion, even if it also brings pleasure in material discovered and recovered. A

<sup>73</sup> Haviva Pedaya, "Masah 'al ha-darom: Deromit-mizraḥit" [Essay on the south: Southeast], *Teoria uvikoret* 54 (2021): 115.

<sup>74</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* [Powers of horror: An essay on abjection], trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>75</sup> Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste*, 1.