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Of Garbage and Goats

What was the last thing you threw away? The last thing you put in the garbage can? Don't answer out loud, please.

There's something so satisfying about taking out the garbage and putting a clean bag in the can – it's a kind of fresh start. And since the bags we use in my house are white—it's like Yom Kippur every day!

But what do we mean when we say “we threw it away”? Where is “away”? What we, or maybe just I, imagine, is that there's some void, some portal, where we put the garbage and it goes away and never, ever comes back—it kind of vanishes.

But it doesn't. There is no away.¹

What there is is the Champ Landfill in Bridgeton, MO. That's where my trash goes. How do I know? I asked the trash collector. And last week, I drove to the Champ Landfill. While I couldn't actually go into it, it was a nice day, and I had my windows open, so I could smell it, and I more or less circumnavigated it. Per their website, “the landfill permitted footprint is 254 acres on the 523 acre site with a 129 million cubic yard capacity.” It has decades of capacity ahead of it, collects the trash of more than a million people, and accepts about 20% of all the waste generated in the state of Missouri.²

Well, what about recycling? Isn't that “away,” or at least still here in an ok way? Recycling is great for paper, cardboard, aluminum and glass. But plastic is iffy at best. You know those numbers in triangles on plastic containers? Numbers 1 and 2 are often recyclable, and sometimes number 5, but the others are rarely actually recycled, even if they are “accepted” for recycling.³ A Greenpeace study last year found that only 5-6% of plastic we used in 2021 was actually recycled,⁴ even if it was put in a recycling bin. The truth is, most plastic will never be recycled. And in 2019, there was almost 300 pounds of plastic waste per person generated in America. And plastic recycling rates are decreasing, not increasing.

A plastic bag may decompose in as little as a year when in a warm ocean. A plastic ketchup bottle or water bottle in a landfill may take as long as 450 years to decompose. But here's the really bad news: When plastic decomposes, it doesn't biodegrade. It just

¹ Quoted as a coinage of Barry Commoner in his *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1972, republished in 2020) by Mara Benjamin in <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c3694c4cc8feda148ec1e5b/t/63cf26635e2dbe02b923371a/1674520163228/Benjamin%2C+There+is+No+%27Away%2C%27+2022.pdf>. Commoner was a professor of plant physiology and environmental studies at Washington University in St. Louis from 1947-1981: <https://source.wustl.edu/2012/10/obituary-barry-commoner-founder-of-modern-ecology-and-former-wustl-biologist-95/>.

² <https://www.champlandfill.com/about/>

³ See <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/03/book-reviews-plastic-waste>.

⁴ <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/new-greenpeace-report-plastic-recycling-is-a-dead-end-street-year-after-year-plastic-recycling-declines-even-as-plastic-waste-increases/>. For the (shocking) full report, see https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GPUS_FinalReport_2022.pdf.

decomposes into smaller and smaller pieces of... plastic. All the plastic in the world that has been created since plastic was invented in 1907 is still here.⁵

But let me tell you about something that, when you throw it away, it's actually away. It's a goat.

In the Torah reading tomorrow morning, we'll read about two goats that the High Priest takes. By casting lots (that's Jewish for "randomly selecting"), one of the goats is designated to be sacrificed in the Temple, and the other is designated to be sent off into the wilderness, for Azazel. It's this second goat I want to think about now – this goat that gets sent away or, you could say, thrown away.

And there are lots of questions about it.

What is it for? Where does it go and what happens to it? And who or what or where is Azazel? Let's start with Azazel. Scholars think it was some kind of goat demon, but by the time the rabbis of the Mishnah are elaborating on this ritual, there's no goat demon element; Azazel is just a place.⁶

So what actually happens? In the Torah, it says, "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness... Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region, and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness." (Lev. 16:21-22).

We even have a "sins away" indicator! In the Mishnah (Yoma 6:7), Rabbi Yishmael teaches: **There was a strip of crimson tied to the entrance to the Sanctuary, and when the goat reached the wilderness and the mitzvah was fulfilled the strip would turn white, as it is stated: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they will become white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).**⁷

So, to recap, the High Priest puts the people Israel's sins on the goat, and sends the goat out into the wilderness, our red thread turns white, and we know it worked. There may be no "away" for our trash, but the idea here clearly is that the goat takes our sins and they are, just, gone.

This ritual results in the beautiful experience of a fresh start, of knowing and feeling like everything is really fresh and clean. It's like when after a good rain, the sun comes out and the world feels clean, and new.

My family will attest – I love—I really do love—opening the dishwasher in the morning and seeing all the clean (and properly loaded) dishes sparkling. It is so satisfying – the dirty became clean, through this invisible process overnight. Not to put too fine a point on it, but there is something bigger, at least for me, than just clean dishes. It's a fresh start, that sense that all is right in the world, or at least in my kitchen, for a moment. We know it won't stay that way, but it's a glimpse of Eden regained, of the primeval, pre-human "properly" ordered world we imagine. Clean is such a powerful state.

The rabbis of the Mishnah (Mishnah Yoma, Chapter 6) take the barebones ritual of the Torah and elaborate and describe an entire public, theatrical spectacle. The Mishnah records

⁵ <https://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/everyday-myths/how-long-does-it-take-for-plastics-to-biodegrade.htm>

⁶ For much more on Azazel, see <https://www.thetorah.com/article/is-azazel-a-goat-place-demon-or-deity>.

⁷ For a careful analysis of this mishnah and related texts and issues, see Rabbi Joshua Kulp's recent article, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/crimson-to-white-yom-kippurs-miraculous-thread>.

the words the High Priest would say while confessing and placing sins on the goat, which we'll read as part of the service of the High Priest in *musaf* tomorrow. There would be ten stops for the person leading the goat, each at a hut where he would eat and drink and be taken care of, and along the way, people would want to touch and pull hair from the goat. And then, the goat is pushed off a cliff, and people would wave scarves from platforms they'd build, sending the signal all the way back to the Temple that the goat, and their sins, were gone.

There was a huge amount of effort put into this ritual, into getting it right, and people loved it—you can tell. For people for whom a God who rewards and punishes was a reality, a clean slate with God mattered, maybe even more than their teshuvah towards other people.

But is the goat really “away?” The Torah is silent about what happens to the goat. The Mishnah tell us that the goat is pushed off a cliff, but vague beyond that. You can use your imagination.

But Rabbi Eliezer's students in the Talmud (Yoma 66b) start asking more detailed questions about the ritual, and what happens if the goat gets sick, if the person leading the goat gets sick, and details about after the goat is pushed off the cliff. The Talmud does answer the questions, but Rabbi Eliezer doesn't want to talk about it. He knows, I think, that we really want to believe this ritual has a kind of magic to it, that our sins are gone, and he doesn't want to demystify the mystery, to pull the curtain back on the stage magic.⁸

Public ritual can be so important. Maimonides, in his Guide to the Perplexed, explains that this particular ritual is all about symbolism: “There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress people with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent; as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible” (Part 3, 46:20).

I think this ritual also taps into our human craving to believe that when we throw something away, it's away. Our decision to cast it off means it is gone, won't return to haunt us, that what's out of mind is truly out of sight for good. We like the feeling of cleanness, and I at least really don't want to think about what's inside the Champ Landfill in Bridgeton that I put there, that you put there. Because then I have to confront that what's out of mind is only out of my sight – not gone – and is actually very much still in the lives of the people who live much nearer to the landfill than I do.

We try as a society to preserve the veil of ignorance around the destination of our trash. It's darn hard to find anything that *says* where our garbage goes. They (whoever “they” are) don't tell you; because they know we don't really want to know. You can't even go see the landfill, ostensibly for safety reasons, but also because, I suspect, if we saw it, we'd be really upset. There's a good amount of effort invested in making sure we don't have to think about our trash once the garbage truck comes.

Earlier this week, I saw a Facebook post that said, “I went for a second day Rosh Hashanah swim at a nearby lake, and was minding my business when I swam directly into a chunk of challah. I was momentarily confused until I looked up and realized I had swum into someone's tashlich.”

⁸ The Talmud explains that Rabbi Eliezer only wanted to answer questions with regard to which he had a learned tradition from his teachers.

Even when we think we are symbolically throwing away our sins, they're still there, swimming around, whether for us or others to encounter. And by the way, it's usually the poor, the marginalized, who end up living with and near our trash, smelling it and breathing it every day.

Like trash in a landfill that may pollute the living space of other people, harm to another person can have negative ripple effects in the world. We can apologize, atone, and seek forgiveness. What can be created from that can be better, stronger, but it's still there, in some sense, although if we're lucky, transformed.

Like plastic, which effectively lasts forever, harm to another person is permanent. It can be forgiven, but rarely is it forgotten.

With our own qualities, habits and characteristics, there is no real "away" either—we cannot cut out or surgically excise parts of ourselves, even if we'd like to. But we can strengthen other parts of ourselves, leaning into who we want to be, leaning away from who we don't want to be anymore. In this context, having the sense of a fresh start can indeed be helpful, as long as we understand it metaphorically. Let's give ourselves permission and encouragement to try, yet again, to start fresh in our minds on our own selves.

The goal is to know when away is really away. Compost isn't really away, but it's close. Plastic will always be here. Our sins, our mistakes—we have to figure out when they are effectively atoned for or transformed into the building blocks for something healthier, and when they are still here, and still toxic.

But the real goal? The real goal is to generate less trash, literally, and metaphorically. To have less for which we need to atone, to need that fresh start even less, to make less of a mess in the world.

It's almost impossible to eliminate our use of plastic, to generate no garbage. People have tried, and been very frustrated.⁹ But being aware of our trash may slowly help us generate less.

These twenty-five sacred hours of Yom Kippur, doing so few of the regular activities of daily life, we will generate much less garbage than we do most other days. And we will also have fewer opportunities – if only because we're in shul for so many hours of the day – to generate as much of our own inner trash. If we're careful and mindful, we will have less to atone for today than we do other days.

May this be the fresh start we need.

Because there is no away.

⁹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/03/book-reviews-plastic-waste>.