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PRE-CONFERENCE FORUM

Balancing Heartbreak and Hope at the Dawn of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT
Ecological crises are also spiritual ones, leading to profound heartbreak. By helping us to understand and value the nature of heartbreak, as well as helping to find a balance between heartbreak and hope, religious traditions can play a significant role in empowering people to address serious environmental problems. This paper discusses how reconnection and ritual can help people to strike that balance.

KEYWORDS
Climate change; extinction; environmental crisis; heartbreak; hope; Jewish tradition; community

Scientists have proposed a variety of markers for the dawn of the Anthropocene, a proposed new geological era that marks the world-wide impact of humanity upon the planet. Traces of plutonium from nuclear tests, microplastics, fertilizer runoff, and fly ash from burning fossil fuels are among the candidates. Though it is not traceable geologically, I'd like to propose a spiritual and emotional marker to add: ecological heartbreak. True, there have been heartbreaking ecological disasters dating back far before the proposed start of the Anthropocene in the 1950s. For example, the early 1900s saw the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the damming of Hetch Hetchy, an area near Yosemite replete with towering waterfalls and sheer granite cliffs. Before its damming, Hetch Hetchy was said to match or even surpass Yosemite Valley in beauty. Humans have even been implicated in environmental destruction and extinctions as far back as 12,000 years ago. But the severity, frequency, and diversity of ecological crises today are orders of magnitude worse—and so ecological heartbreak has become commonplace, no longer restricted to the prophets of the wild. Indeed, in my work as a rabbi, I've met people as old as 85 and as young as nine who regularly lose sleep over their anxiety and heartbreak about the environment. It is an emotional, psychological, and spiritual pandemic.

I believe that responding to such widespread heartbreak is one of the key tasks of religious education today. Indeed, without sufficient spiritual response, I don't think technological or political fixes will be sufficient to avert climate and extinction disasters. Furthermore, unaddressed heartbreak can be a huge obstacle to needed actions, as I will explain below. But within a variety of religious frameworks, heartbreak can be transformed from an obstacle to a key part of our path forward. Undoubtedly, many different religious traditions carry helpful resources in this regard. Personally, I have found that ideas from my faith, the diversity of Jewish traditions, can provide

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this framework. I hope these examples help illustrate some paths that religious education might take as we try to respond both to environmental crises and to the heartbreak they bring.

Step 1: Let the heartbreak in

It's difficult if not impossible to move forward when one is still in the midst of denial. When we don't acknowledge the depth of our ecological heartbreak, we end up in a state of passive overwhelm or avoid thinking about the environment at all—in which case, we obviously are in no position to take positive actions. So, as painful as it might be, the first step is to really feel the heartbreak. To do so, it might be helpful to take in some of the many classic religious texts that express broken-heartedness, such as Psalm 69: 2-4:

> Rescue me, God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
>
> I have sunk in the slime of the deep, and there is no place to stand.
>
> I have entered the watery depths, and the current has swept me away
>
> I am exhausted from my calling out.
>
> My throat is hoarse, my eyes fail, from hoping for my God…

Try to make space for all the dimensions of ecological heartbreak you are feeling: mourning for species already extinct and habitats already destroyed; worry for the conditions future generations will face; frustration at all the political, economic, and social obstacles blocking the world from taking critically needed actions.

Sometimes, just getting fully in touch with these feelings can create its own spiritual alchemy, its own path forward. Indeed, religious traditions have long recognized the potential value of a broken heart, especially in contrast to more common human arrogance. Psalm 34:19 speaks of God being close to the broken-hearted, while Psalm 51:19 speaks of a broken spirit being the true offering to God. The great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, taught that nothing is as whole as a broken heart. In his late song, "Anthem," Leonard Cohen wrote, "There is a crack in everything/ that's how the light comes in." When heartbreak doesn't carry its own inherent healing, however, it's time to turn to our second step, which helps us understand that there is more to life than despair.

Step 2: Understanding hope

In the face of global crises, having hope can feel impossible or even delusional. When I feel that way, I try to remind myself what the former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory, taught about the difference between optimism and hope:

> "Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a

> great deal of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope." *To Heal a Fractured World,* Schocken, 2007, pg 166

Viewed through this lens, we come to understand hope as a call for us to make the world better, which can be deeply empowering. But when facing a problem as daunting as climate change, sustaining hope from moment to moment can be challenging. To make hope sustainable, we need to reconnect.

Step 3: Reconnection

As a person whose environmental activism originates from and is strengthened by my faith, I find that reconnection is more central to my work than those more often quoted environmental "r"s—reduce, reuse, and recycle. There are many dimensions to reconnection, and not all will work for all people. But here are the ones I've found most important.

Reconnecting with faith: each day, my wife, also a rabbi, and I start our morning by chanting Genesis 2:10—"A river goes forth from Eden to water the garden." As Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed teaches, this verse, which at first glance seems like a toss-away piece of geographical information, is the most frequently quoted Bible verse in the Zohar, the central work of Jewish mysticism. Why? Because the Zohar understands this verse as making a theological rather than geographical statement. Note that the river flows *from* Eden to "*the garden.*" But isn't Eden the garden? And the verse is in the present tense, though tradition holds that Eden is no longer connected to our world. The Zohar interprets the river as the Divine flow, which is ever-present—and the garden is right here, right now. We may feel disconnected, but the Divine flow surrounds us wherever we are—we just have to step into the flow. The Divine flow calls to us to get in touch with the "garden-ness" of wherever we happen to be.

Reconnecting with gratitude

Traditionally, Jews are expected to recite at least 100 brachot, blessings, every day. Some of these are prayers from daily services, but many connect us directly and immediately with the world around us—blessings for seeing mountains or rainbows, for hearing thunder, for smelling fragrant herbs, for tasting different types of food. But to recite a blessing, you first have to pay attention, to notice the wonder all around. One of my favorite blessings is supposed to be recited whenever you see a beautiful creature or person: "Praised are You, Eternal our God, Who rules through time and space, that it is like *this* (i.e. filled with beauty) in Your world." In other words, if we are fully present, we can find beauty almost everywhere. Such awareness helps us to develop an ongoing sense of gratitude. Numerous studies have shown how powerfully gratitude shifts our way of thinking, helping us to become not only more caring, but also more courageous and creative.

Reconnecting with community

In the Jewish tradition, ten people are required to have a full prayer service. This tradition is a constant reminder that humans are meant to exist in community.

Yes, being in community requires effort, and no community is perfect. But the effort is deeply worthwhile, no matter the shortcomings of any particular community. Communities are especially invaluable when trying to avoid burnout and overwhelm. They are a key to making hope sustainable.

Step 4: Stillness practices and rituals

When addressing crises such as climate change, urgency can easily transform into panic. But no one is at their best when panicked. For thousands of years, religious traditions have taught the importance of stillness and developed practices to help us enter into stillness. Stillness takes us out of "flight or fight" mode, instead shifting us to creativity and community building. I try to have ten minutes of silent mindfulness meditation each morning for a small daily dose of stillness. Once a week, however, comes a much more sustained dose—Shabbat. I believe Shabbat and similar practices are key contributions faith traditions can make to activism in general and specifically to addressing ecological crises. It is a weekly reminder that work is something we do, not who we are, that the core of our existence is not the market, and that consumption doesn't have to consume us. It can also become an ideal time for all the various paths of reconnection mentioned above.

In addition to stillness practices, a wide variety of rituals can become helpful reminders of the power of seemingly small acts. When I recite a brachah, when I light candles on Shabbat, when I engage in the study of sacred texts, I create moments of meaning, bright threads in the tapestry of life. Over time, those tiny bright threads transform my view of the entire tapestry. None of these rituals have to have a direct connection to ecological awareness for them to nonetheless play important roles in our ability to sustain hope and action.

We live in a profoundly wounded world, in a time of great conflict and division. To properly address ecological crises, especially given the fractures in our society, we will need to draw on all the resources of the human spirit. The steps outlined above are some suggestions for how religious traditions and religious education might play a significant and positive role in not only bringing comfort and healing to broken hearts, but also in building powerful, sustainable hope.

Notes on contributor

Rabbi Daniel Swartz is the spiritual leader of Temple Hesed of Scranton. He has long been active in the field of faith-based environmentalism, including playing leadership roles with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Interfaith Power and Light, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, where he serves as Executive Director. His work in this area has appeared in a variety of publications, including op-eds in the *Washington Post* and on *CNN*, as well as articles in a number of anthologies. He was also the lead author and editor of *To Till and To Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action*. Email: rabbidaniel@comcast.net