



Welcoming *Rosh HaShanah*/New Year in Time of Climate Catastrophe

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The State of the World as a New Year Dawns

The wind-down of summer and the emergence of autumn has always been a time of hope and renewal. I recall that as a young child, in the closing weeks of August we would go out to buy supplies for the new school year, and dress pants and shirts to wear at synagogue on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. As warm summer days gave way to chilly autumn evenings, and leaves began falling from the trees, there was always a sense of anticipation in the air. On the first days of school, the notebooks, pens and pencils were brand new, fresh and unused, representing a sense of hopeful optimism. It was exciting, filled with promise of what was yet to come.

As summer 2021 winds down and autumn slowly dawns, that inherent spirit of hopeful excitement and anticipation for what is to come is harder to access. Day after day, the news cycle has been terrible and seemingly getting worse. The freedom of movement without fear of COVID-19 has disappeared again with the Delta variant. Politically, life in this country, and in places like Afghanistan—to understate the case—is complex and problematic. And the condition of planet earth is outright hellish and dismal, almost apocalyptic: fires across the Pacific Northwest and Europe; drought in California and the Middle East; continental ice sheets breaking up in Antarctica and Greenland; an earthquake in Haiti; a rare Northeastern hurricane; and (even as I prepare to send this off via email) yet another hurricane is

devastating the Louisiana coast. All these events declare to us unequivocally that we are not only dealing with climate change—in reality, it's more like a climate emergency. Increasingly those I speak with—family and friends, clients and students, even occasional strangers I chat with while wearing my mask—are truly overwhelmed. People feel powerless, not in control of the unleashed furies of the environment, and frightened in the face of the unpredictable and unknown. We are living in a state of what has been termed “eco-anxiety”, a gnawing sense of existential angst and dread about the fragile future of human life on planet earth. Sometimes it's very difficult to be hopeful and upbeat about the coming New Year under such conditions.

Eco-Anxiety and Grief

No doubt we need creative and efficacious action plans to deal with rising sea levels and the collateral environmental devastation of climate change. But climate change is not only affecting the outer world: earth, air, water, the very cells of our bodies, mind, psyche—all are connected and interwoven. At this point in time and history, **internally and psychologically we need guidelines to help us understand, and develop strategies for encountering the sense of eco-anxiety that is insidiously permeating our psyches.**

Having spent decades companioning individuals wrestling with acute grief, I see that the tried-and-true functional approaches and strategies for dealing with the intensity of grief, can be directly applied to how we respond to eco-anxiety in our lives. As Leslie Davenport, author of *Emotional Resiliency the Era of Climate Change* writes: “Grief is a form of love: we grieve the loss of what made us feel deeply connected. With climate change grief, it may be the loss of a dream of a future for your grandchildren free of the challenges that are currently emerging. Perhaps it is a loss of innocence with respect to our country's local or national political structure. Whatever the scope, level or intensity of the loss, the process of grieving evokes the same emotional phases.” (p. 63)

No doubt this is an area of societal concern that will necessitate much more ongoing thought and reflection in the future. For now, what follows are a few guidelines applying a psychological understanding of the grief journey to the experience of eco-anxiety and climate grief. The outline is as follows:

- 1) Accept Reality As It Is**
 - 2) Aspire to Small Victories - Do Not Get Overwhelmed**
 - 3) Find a “Posse” of Those Who Can Support You**
 - 4) Find Your Forms for Self-Care**
 - 5) New Year is the Birthday of the World**
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1) Accept Reality As It Is

The task of the earliest phase of the grief journey is to overcome shock and denial particularly following a sudden death, and accept that a death has occurred. It is very common for those who have lost loved ones in a sudden or tragic death to say over and over “I can’t believe this is happening, it all seems like a dream!” Sometimes it takes a while to integrate the reality of a painful death. The ritual act of shoveling dirt at a Jewish funeral, and hearing the sound of earth hitting the coffin is, in fact, a powerful way of helping the bereaved recognize and accept the reality of death. And once we’ve acknowledged and accepted that death has taken place—that our loved one will not return home, will not show up at a holiday dinner or be with us on our birthday—it then becomes possible to deal with grief much more effectively.

In a similar way, the reality that we are being asked to accept right now is that **we are living in a time of climate catastrophe**. Greenhouse gases are warming up the planet, the polar caps are melting, we are witnessing crazy weather patterns all around the world. And the slowness to act on the part of governments and fossil fuel corporations has yielded what we are seeing with our eyes. And there is a lot more to come. Ecological, environmental life on planet

earth as we know it is rapidly changing for humans, animals and plant life and we have no idea where it's going. Inwardly and psychologically we need to accept the reality that we are now living in a time of climate catastrophe.

As in the response to grief, what this requires is that we do not deny the feelings we are experiencing. Looking around at the state of the earth, it is easy to feel disempowered, sad, depressed, confused, fearing the future, and angry at governments and multi-national corporations who ignored or perpetuated the environmental problems we are facing. All this and so much more is now our day-to-day emotional reality. And like grief, it can fluctuate, depending on what new chaotic weather event comes to us with each changing atmospheric reverberation.

As with the grief journey, we need to be very vigilant to not numb out our anxious feelings by substance abuse, too much television and internet surfing, and avoiding thinking about this situation. The task we are faced with at this point is to overcome the denial that this is going on, and accept that what we are experiencing is climate grief. Our fears, trepidation and sense of dread are all legitimate reactions to what is taking place in this second decade of the 21st century. There is an eco-anxiety of angst playing in the background of all that we do in daily life. As in the encounter with grief, once we fully accept and acknowledge the feelings that are there, only then we can discern how we want to act in the world, what we need as we go forward into the future.

2) Aspire to Small Victories - Do Not Get Overwhelmed

It is very common for people in acute grief to experience a sense of emotional overwhelm. The loss, missing someone one on a day-to-day basis, having to deal with their absence both functionally and emotionally, and the sense of identity re-formation that takes place after a death (e.g. if I was husband's wife, or my child's mother, and they are not alive, who am I?)

leave people totally emotionally flooded and overwhelmed. As waves of grief emerge, especially in the early phases of the loss, it feels as if it is way too much to handle.

The same thing is true with eco-anxiety. All those climatic phenomena before our eyes are simply overwhelming. We have gone from talking about global warming, to climate change, to realizing we are now in the middle of a conflagration of climate catastrophe. That is overwhelming. What's going on?

Grief work teaches us is that in times of bereavement one can best handle the demands of life by taking one step at a time. In the process of dealing with grief and loss, we aspire to “small victories”: having a day where one is not totally overwhelmed by feelings; being able to process a death certificate or an insurance claim; removing the clothing of our loved ones; making it though a birthday, an anniversary or a holy day without being paralyzed by the grief. All of these are examples of small victories, slow, subtle incremental behavioral changes, and the development of new coping strategies.

In responding to the climate catastrophe we need to be open to achieving small victories, previously untried ways of responding to the complexity of the situation in what might be a limited, or local way. Perhaps it is joining an organization that will allow us to begin to focus our activism; changing the means we use electricity and leave our carbon imprint; learning to live and consume in ways that are more environmentally friendly. These are examples of small victories; there are many more. In responding to the proliferation of throbbing eco-anxiety we have to evaluate our priorities, control what we can control and find alternatives that allow us to have some agency in the midst of all of this. If we get overwhelmed by powerful emotions, by fears of the impending unknown, we become frozen, impotent and unable to act.

Rabbi Tarfon, a Mishnaic Rabbi of the 1st-2nd cent. CE said: *“It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.”* (M. Avot 2:16). We need to

discern where we can act and how we can act, recognizing that we're not going to finish the entire task. But by accepting our small victories, one at a time without feeling we have to resolve the big picture right now, we will stay sane in the midst of the growing sense of impending doom.



3) Find a “Posse” of Those Who Can Support You

Grief can be a very lonely experience when one is cut off from a loved one who has died, and the surrounding world gives the message “get over your grief”. But what we know is that the bereaved need allies—friends, family, a therapist, a bereavement group, even a stranger—who can offer support, companionship, and can help one keep alive the memory of a loved one. In a sense, the traditional Kaddish minyan of people gathering together to recite a memorial Kaddish, day in, day out, serves that purpose of creating a group, a small “posse” of emotional support. But unfortunately, not everyone can create that kind of Kaddish support team in their lives.

When people in grief have others who understand what they might be going through and can offer empathy and companionship it helps people feel less alone, less alone in their grief.

Similarly, in dealing with climate anxiety we will need allies, partners, a small “posse” of others who can be part of our attempt to find a solution in the face of the proliferating complexity of our global climate change. Whether it be an activist group dedicated to a particular cause; religiously-based fellowships such as *Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action* (dayenu.org), or Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (coejl.org); eco-anxiety support groups (waterspirit.org, Climate Psychology Alliance North America), or newly-emerging Climate Cafés (based on the model of the death café (climateandmind.org/climate-cafe)). All these options for connection will become part of the new normal.

As Reb Zalman often said, “the way to get it together is together”. In the past year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned how interwoven human beings are on this planet. The climate catastrophe we are now living is not just a national or regional problem, it is global. And we are being challenged to find allies and companions to help us deal with what is coming up.

4) Find Your Forms for Self-Care

One thing people in grief need is a regimen of self-care. The bereavement process is very visceral, it is easy to feel tired, exhausted, and depleted when dealing with loss. Those in an intense period of grief need to be sure to get enough sleep, eat well, move the body, meditate, find healthy ways of self-care. This is essential for recovery from loss, yet difficult because the nature of grief is that it leaves one lethargic, sluggish, not caring about one’s self. But those who do cultivate healthy self-care manage their grief more gently, perhaps more wisely.

In a similar vein, this principle of self-care can be applied to our individual and collective responses to the climate grief now seeping into our awareness. We need to find ways to keep ourselves physically and mentally healthy so we do not get overwhelmed by each narrative of

bad climate news emerging from different corners of the planet. There is sickness in the water we drink, in the air we breathe. We are being called into a time of radical physical and spiritual self-care so that we can keep out of despair and become agents of healing and transformation.

No doubt that we are living in historical times; radical transformation of life on this planet is what we will be dealing with in the coming decades. This is the challenge of our lifetime—how will we respond to the call?

5) New Year is the Birthday of the World

We are on the cusp of Rosh HaShanah 5782. Every year Rosh HaShanah gives us a chance to return to ourselves, to renew our commitments to self, community and God. On Rosh Hashanah we say *HaYom Harat Olam*, “today is the birthday of the world”. Perhaps a new world is being born in our time; certainly, the old ways are dying off. As we welcome the New Year, this year we have to reach a little deeper to connect with our sense of hope, of joyous rebirth. But as the year 2020 and 2021 has shown us, we are all deeply interwoven and interconnected on this planet. Life is changing as we know it, and perhaps this year, this Rosh HaShanah, will help us to realize that if we collaborate with each other we can enter the unknown future with a sense of calling to become agents to serve the needs of the planet, without despair, without fear. We can each find our individual way to make the world a better place. This is my prayer for this year. And to this cause I dedicate my work through the **DA’AT INSTITUTE FOR DEATH AWARENESS ADVOCACY AND TRAINING.**

Shalom and Blessings!

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DA’AT INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER, 8.30.21***