Grieving is hard enough without being in the public eye. Our society has watched some of our most prominent leaders and role models grieve children. Leaders such as Joe Biden and Abraham Lincoln have experienced such losses, and have had to continue on with their role, as the public looks on. For many grieving people, it’s enough to just wake up and get through the day, let alone having others watch them mourn.

Clergy, while not necessarily in the public eye in a national space, are very much public figures in their communities. As Jack Bloom notes in his book *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar*, the rabbi is often held on a pedestal above their congregants. “For if the congregants were to treat the rabbi as simply human, as the rabbis might sometimes like them to, there would be no need to have a rabbi.” Therefore, clergy grief could also be held on this pedestal; Jews look to their rabbi for guidance in all situations so it follows that they would look to their rabbi to model the grieving process. Additionally, a rabbi’s kid, the status of which is elaborated upon below, is often seen as a child of the community; community members have watched this child grow up until this point. Therefore, the clergy person’s loss becomes the community’s loss.

**Grieving in the Family and Preserving Family Time**

Within the Jewish community a “Rabbi’s Kid” (often abbreviated RK) is a badge that children of rabbis carry with them their whole life. RKs have a special experience that few others have known, and therefore they have formed their own community. They have the unique experience of having the eyes of the whole community...
on them, only because of their parent’s role. This experience, for the clergy person and family, can feel like a fishbowl, but can also bring great comfort. As Rabbi Jordie Gerson points out, the experience can be compared to being a B-list celebrity. She writes, “Everyone knows who you are (though they can’t always remember your name), has an opinion about what you’re wearing, and cheerfully points out to you (and everyone else) every time you appear to have aged.”

On the other hand, Gerson describes that this phenomenon made her feel embraced by her father’s congregants as though they were her family. The interviews I conducted with clergy people who experienced the loss of a child reflect this double-edged sword of the closeness and entitlement that congregants felt to them and their families.

Clergy Family’s Internal Grief

Rabbi Dreskin’s main outlet after his son Jonah’s death was writing. When he started writing, he showed his family what he was doing, and while they supported his writing endeavor, they asked to not be included in it; they didn’t want to be shared with the world:

What I remember is, and I think Ellen and I reached this conclusion together, was that of four people living in this house, there are four very individual kinds of grieving going on, and that we are going to do everything we can to respect each individual’s choice of how we grieve. . . . Kids have a very different relationship to death and mourning than adults do . . . we didn’t want them to have to grieve either the way their parents did, or the way the rabbi of WCT had to.

Cantor Ellen Dreskin echoed this idea in regards to giving every member of their family permission to grieve in their own way, sharing, “Anything is okay . . . every answer was a good answer. We made it really clear to our children that there were no clergy family expectations here.” In the Dreskin family, they emphasized communication with one another, and truly allowed every person to grieve the way that felt most meaningful to them. In everything they shared, it was clear that they made space for both time together as a family and time apart to approach grief in their own way. The combination of both was healing for them.
Rabbi Rachel Hertzman\textsuperscript{11} shared a similar sentiment and expressed gratitude that her family is organically close and leaned on each other a lot throughout the grieving process:

Our nuclear family is amazingly in touch with each other’s stuff and supporting each other. Obviously, we’ve all had our own individual journeys, and [have been] helping each other through those journeys.\textsuperscript{12}

Both she and Rabbi Rex Perlmeter talked about the blessing of their very close nuclear family. At times, their different styles of grieving were in fact challenging for the family. Rabbi Perlmeter expressed his grief and sadness in many ways, and crying was one of them. “I had full permission to grieve. I didn’t even need to think about it. I was very clear that I had the right and the duty to wail and I did, a lot . . . The world will have to deal with my grief.”\textsuperscript{13} That made a member of his family uncomfortable and was different from their own way of grieving, so that was something they had to talk through.

### Support from Congregants

When the clergy did grieve publicly, the support that they felt from their congregation and community was overwhelmingly warm and embracing. Every clergy person who was interviewed described how humbled they were by the outreach that they received, not only from other family and close friends, but from their synagogue community. Here is just a sampling of the memories that came up for clergy when they thought about their community showing up for them:

Temple Emanu El was unbelievable in their care for us, in every imaginable way. I literally disappeared. I was very involved, I was in the senior leadership of this place, and I just vanished and they understood. To their credit, they never once said “When are you thinking about coming back?” When it looked like the chemo was working, I went back for one day of work. I was like, “Oh yeah, maybe there’s a new normal and we’re just going to get through this.” And then the next day she had to go to the hospital because we thought she might have an infection.\textsuperscript{14}

It didn’t dawn on me that the community would take care of us . . . I was so used to being clergy, I was not used to being taken care of.\textsuperscript{15}
RABBI ARIEL MILAN-POLISAR

It was newsworthy, so it was on the news that the local rabbi’s son was dead and the congregation immediately went into a couple modalities to take care of us, and to make preparations for the funeral to be at Woodlands.16

These anecdotes reflect the support that the clergy received from all directions. People dropped everything to be present for these clergy who had just lost their child. It would be easy to argue that perhaps anyone who had experienced such a devastating loss would receive this kind of care. However, as Cantor Ellen Dreskin alludes to above, this kind of care felt above and beyond. There was a sense among the clergy that their congregants wanted to take care of their clergy in their time of loss in the same way that their clergy had taken care of them. Rabbi Rachel Hertzman talks about how their home congregation, which they had left a few years earlier when Rabbi Perlmeter had retired from the congregational rabbinate, showed up for them:

Tremendous support from our home congregation who basically swept into our home and set up shop, as well as our rabbi and very very dear friend Steve Kushner . . . who was very much involved. Very close friend, even more to Rex and also to our whole family. He taught Mitch in confirmation. The congregation was immediately present. Mitch’s friends who were devastated also were tremendous support. Wanting to help take care of Nate, were the first people to walk into our house with groceries . . . One of our primary supports, and still, is Camp Harlam and that community, which we all had been very involved in and still are . . . our house was filled with people from all of those different parts of life as well as our own friends.17

The way that Rabbi Hertzman describes her experience of being taken care of by the various communities to which her family has belonged is similar to experiences that other clergy described, in that their closest friends and their synagogues came together to take care of everything. Considering the numbness and lack of normal functioning that often happens in the wake of a loss as part of the grieving process, the clergy who experienced this care didn’t have to lift a finger. Rabbi Billy Dreskin speaks about how powerful and helpful this was:
There was no way on earth I was going to be able to lead this congregation during this time, nor was there any reason on earth that I needed to or needed to feel like I had to. They cleared everything from the moment they heard... There was no expectation on anyone’s part. My focus was on my family and me and this incredible sense of concern and care that emanated from the congregation. To walk in and to find the work that had been done, down to the details.18

Rabbi Dreskin remembers walking into his synagogue for the funeral and just being in awe at the transformation of the place in order to accommodate the large numbers of people who wanted to come to honor Jonah’s life. He was floored by all of the work that people did, without needing to consult him at all. And furthermore, that there was no expectation on him or his family to act or be any particular way. That was important to the Dreskin family—that they be able to grieve in the way they needed to as a family who had lost their loved one, not specifically as the rabbi’s family.

Not only did their congregations take care of everything, they also didn’t expect their clergy to return to work until they were ready. Rabbi Dreskin talks about the flexibility of his congregation—he shares that they didn’t ask him one time when he’d come back. They let him take his time, and he decided when he was ready.19

**Clergy Colleague Support**

A large part of this support that the clergy experienced came from clergy colleagues: the colleagues who they worked with every day at their institutions, other local clergy, and former classmates. Rabbi Dara Frimmer20 talks about how in the aftermath of her loss she was convinced she could deliver a sermon on the High Holy Days, yet her colleague convinced her to take more time:

> I just couldn’t hear it, the first six hours... And then there was me fighting, “I really can write my sermon for the High Holy Days” and her [senior rabbi] saying, “You really don’t have to; you don’t have to be there.”21

In retrospect, Rabbi Frimmer notes that this was her grief talking, and she was grateful for her colleague encouraging her to take
her time. Rabbi Frimmer was finally able to acknowledge that she wouldn’t be able to be on the bimah for the High Holy Days, which was a hard pill to swallow.

In addition to support from their co-workers, the support from colleagues they knew and colleagues who they didn’t know felt overwhelmingly lovely:

It was amazing, the care that we were given. Everyone showing up—I was amazed at good friends, but good friends from far away. Not all clergy but some clergy. It never occurred to me that someone would get on a plane to come to shivah . . . I felt a little self-conscious because most people don’t get this kind of care, not like this.22

All of our close people, our rabbinical school classmates, who stood up at our wedding, the people that we love, our rabbinical school family, they were all together . . . It was announced at Saturday morning services at the Biennial . . . so everybody knew and many of our friends changed their flights to be in Chicago for the funeral on Monday.23

Mitch died on February 1 and it was kind of an ice storm, and Sarah [Mitch’s sister] was at school in Rochester and she had to get home. The educator at the Reform congregation there, none of us knew her, none of us had ever met her, she picked Sarah up at school with one of her best girlfriends, and she drove her five hours. Dropped her off, and drove back. That’s the kind of support that we had then.24

Clergy people know how to show up. For their colleagues, whether a close friend or a stranger, they showed up in droves and in whatever way was needed. This kind of support, as Cantor Dreskin pointed out, is not the kind of care that “most people” get. This clergy care was above and beyond.

**Challenges of a Grieving Clergy Person**

While the clergy experienced overwhelming love and care from their synagogues, communities, and colleagues, they certainly faced challenges that came with being a clergy person who was experiencing a loss. For the most part these challenges were internal and the clergy were able to work through them, but they did
complicate the grief process a bit. Rabbi Rich Agler\textsuperscript{25} writes about this in his book:

We received hundreds of communications containing thousands of words after Talia died. They came from near and far, from family and colleagues, from our friends, and from people we hadn’t heard from in years. So many of them tried—and failed—to express the “right words.” They did not fail because they were unskilled at speaking or writing. They failed because no such words exist.\textsuperscript{26}

He was able to acknowledge that all of these condolences that he received were well-meaning, and yet none were particularly comforting, because for him there were no words that could’ve helped.

Rabbi Agler is expressing a similar sentiment to that of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai when he lost his son. In \textit{Avot D’Rabbi Natan} 14, we read about his grieving process. One by one, his disciples come to console him. First, Rabbi Eliezer shares with him the story of Adam who lost his son and allowed himself to be comforted. Rabbi Eliezer then quotes a verse in \textit{Tanach} to support his claim. Rabban Yochanan responded, “Is it not sufficient for me to bear my own grief that you have to mention Adam’s grief?” Each Rabbi after him mentioned a different biblical character who suffered from grief and shared how they were consoled, and to each one Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had the same response.\textsuperscript{27}

Rabbi Rich Agler and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai both experienced the well-meaning support of loved ones who really wanted to say the right thing to be comforting, but the right thing did not exist. At the end of the story of Rabban Yochanan’s grief, there is one colleague who is finally able to offer him comfort with a parable. What is important here is not the parable that was comforting to him, but how he reacts. Rabban Yochanan responds and says “Eleazar my son, you have comforted me as men can comfort.”\textsuperscript{28}

In other words, as far as it lies within the power of human beings to comfort another in this situation, Rabban Yochanan feels comforted. Here, he acknowledges the limited power of human beings to comfort one another with words. Sometimes, there are no words, there is only the comfort of presence, and time.

A challenge of being a public figure, as Rabbi Rich Agler experienced, is that it would be considered rude for a rabbi to follow
Rabban Yochanan’s example and respond to congregants by letting them know that their attempts at comfort are unhelpful. Therefore, the rabbis are stuck having to graciously accept unhelpful and potentially hurtful comments.

Cantor Ellen Dreskin acknowledges that the pressure to role-model grief could have existed but they didn’t experience it. They committed to just doing what they needed to do, without the pressure of being clergy:

As a clergy person, there was no sense of “Oh crap, I’m this congregation’s cantor or my husband is this congregation’s rabbi and people are gonna watch—did we do this ritual right? Or did we observe this ritual fully?” There wasn’t a hint of that. I do think we modeled—we’re just going to do this and we’re just as in the dark as anybody else.29

That was echoed in their decisions about shivah. They only had shivah at their house and didn’t hold it at their synagogue at all. Cantor Dreskin notes that while it was very crowded at their house, with a line around the block at times, they wouldn’t have done it any other way. While some people might have been upset about this decision, they needed to make this choice and be able to be in their own home during this time.

Rabbi Allenberg30 expresses pain in making the opposite decision—in doing a shivah at the synagogue, which ended up being incredibly painful for him:

I think we did one shivah with the synagogue which was horrible . . . I was really in no state. I’ve never in my life felt this kind of grief and this kind of brokenness. I was their rabbi and I was just this mess. And I had religious school kids coming up to me saying they’re sorry and hugging me because they care for me but seeing these healthy children was the most painful thing.31

Rabbi Allenberg experienced a number of difficult factors here. They held one day of shivah at the synagogue so that congregants could offer support, but being in the building, and having to visit with so many people at once was really challenging. Additionally, he felt like a “mess” in front of his congregants and did not feel good about presenting that way. He also felt the pain of seeing young children after he himself just lost his young child. All
together, these created an emotionally painful situation for him in the wake of his daughter’s death.

The challenge that Rabbi Dara Frimmer felt was that she worried that she let down her community. She started as a single assistant rabbi at this congregation, and they had watched her become the senior rabbi, fall in love, and get married, and now they were highly anticipating the birth of her first child:

I created disappointment, which was hard to extricate . . . that’s the merging of all of the people who were cheering me on over all of the weeks in which it was obvious that I was pregnant. How many hours of conversation had been woven into every other meeting . . . It had taken up a lot of air time and it was part of my identity.32

Experiencing the stillbirth of a child is hard enough without having the expectations of your community riding on your pregnancy and potential child. For several months, because of the visibility of a pregnancy, this was the topic of conversation for Rabbi Frimmer. It’s logical that she would feel as though she somehow let the congregation down, by not producing a living child. She also felt some expectations that she and her husband, Michael, model Jewish burial and mourning:

As a rabbi, I will officiate at cremation and kind of feel like we shouldn’t be doing them . . . I didn’t know what I wanted for Baby Jack. Michael said, if we’re going to do this, I want to cremate him and spread his ashes in all the places we were going to take him camping. But in my head was this dialogue—but am I supposed to be modeling for the community burying a child? Somehow I got over it . . . I did not want a funeral; I think in part because I didn’t want to have to invite the community.33

Rabbi Frimmer was able to move past these thoughts of feeling like she needed to role-model her grief for the community, but it was an internal struggle. She chose to avoid the pressure and go with an option that allowed her to grieve privately. She didn’t feel as though she could tell the community that the funeral would be private and that this would be acceptable to them.

Each clergy person had to make their own decisions around these grieving rituals, taking their role into consideration. Each
clergy person experienced different amounts and kinds of pressure to grieve in a particular way, and each handled it differently, especially in the context of their nuclear family. All clergy felt extremely touched by the sheer amount and nature of support they received and chose to handle that support in different ways. The overwhelming support and outpouring of love from family, friends, colleagues, and congregants was striking and sends a message to clergy people that the care we offer can go both ways.

Notes

1. This article is an excerpt of Rabbi Milan-Polisar’s rabbinical student thesis, which is availability in its entirety via the HUC-JIR library.
5. Here, I use “rabbi” and “clergy” interchangeably to encompass the role of a clergy person, including both rabbis and cantors.
7. Jonah Maccabee Dreskin, son of Rabbi Billy Dreskin and Cantor Ellen Dreskin, died at age nineteen at University of Buffalo, the school that he was attending.
8. Woodlands Community Temple.
9. Rabbi Billy Dreskin, personal interview.
10. Cantor Ellen Dreskin, personal interview.
11. Mitch Perlmeter, son of Rabbi Rachel Hertzman and Rabbi Rex Perlmeter, died at age seventeen in his home in New Jersey.
12. Rabbi Rachel Hertzman, personal interview.
13. Rabbi Rex Perlmeter, personal interview.
14. Rabbi Adam Allenberg, personal interview.
15. Rabbi Michael Sommer, personal interview.
16. Rabbi Billy Dreskin, personal interview.
17. Rabbi Rachel Hertzman, personal interview.
18. Rabbi Billy Dreskin, personal interview.
19. Rabbi Billy Dreskin, personal interview.
20. Rabbi Dara Frimmer’s son Jack was born stillborn in 2014.
21. Rabbi Dara Frimmer, personal interview.
22. Cantor Ellen Dreskin, personal interview.
23. Rabbi Phyllis Sommer, personal interview.
24. Rabbi Rachel Hertzman, personal interview.
25. Rabbi Agler’s daughter Talia died in a bike accident at age twenty-six.
29. Cantor Ellen Dreskin, personal interview.
30. Rabbi Allenberg’s daughter Sophia died at one year old from a rare cancer.
31. Rabbi Adam Allenberg, personal interview.
32. Rabbi Dara Frimmer, personal interview.
33. Rabbi Dara Frimmer, personal interview.